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An exploration of parents' perception of Pupil Referral Units (PRUs) in the development of parent voice and authentic, productive and lasting partnerships

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An exploration of parents' perception of Pupil Referral Units (PRUs) in the development of parent voice and authentic, productive and lasting partnerships

A thesis submitted to Middlesex University in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Professional Studies in Education

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Abstract

This study explores experiences of parents of children excluded from schools and attending Pupil Referral Units (PRUs), which research shows is considered to be a stigmatising experience. Negative narratives around PRUs have been well documented; they are portrayed as schools to avoid. Working-class, minority ethnic and vulnerable pupils are overrepresented in PRUs, with little variation in this pattern since their introduction.

Conceived within a critical constructivist paradigm, informed by Freire, Kincheloe and Bourdieu, this ethnographic study fills a gap in how this issue is addressed by broadening the investigation to offer critical insights into historical, political and ideological factors impeding effective strategies for exclusion. Semi-structured interviews and a focus group were used to gather data from parents and key stakeholders. Reflexive thematic analysis and narrative inquiry were used for analysis purposes.

My study shows that PRUs remain peripheral to a fragmented education system, increasingly subject to neoliberal principles. Parents experience powerlessness in the process of exclusion, fear sending their children to PRUs and desire a quick return to mainstream. PRUs' and mainstream schools' conflicting priorities make reintegration problematic. Pupils stay in PRUs often for many years.

This study proposes giving PRUs a pivotal role, giving statutory weight to designing reintegration plans, including determining subsequent mainstream placements *at the point of exclusion*, with pupils' stay at a PRU time-limited. Acknowledging PRUs as operating in a liminal space with the practical wisdom (phronesis) needed to deal with complex needs, PRUs can become arbiters in determining pupils' readiness for reintegration. Trained in advocacy and non-behaviourist, relational approaches, staff can foster lasting partnerships with parents, often labelled hard to reach, advocating for them in challenging exclusion decisions and supporting them in navigating the education system, accessing other support services, to improve chances of a successful and sustainable reintegration.

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Glossary of terms

Pupil Referral Unit (PRU):

Section 19(1) of the Education Act 1996 defines a PRU as:

> *…any school … which is specially organised to provide education for those children of compulsory school age who, by reason of illness, exclusion from school or otherwise, may not for any period receive suitable education….*

Alternative Provision (AP):

Education arranged by local authorities for pupils who, because of exclusion, illness or other reasons, would not otherwise receive suitable education; education arranged by schools for pupils on a fixed period exclusion; and pupils being directed by schools to off-site provision to improve their behaviour (Department for Education, 2013, p. 3). This includes PRUs.

Mainstream school:

Schools that receive funding through the local authority or directly from the government. The most common are:

community schools, which are sometimes called local authority-maintained schools - they are not influenced by business or religious groups and follow the national curriculum.

foundation schools and voluntary schools, which are funded by the local authority but have more freedom to change the way they do things - sometimes they are supported by representatives from religious groups.

academies and free schools, which are run by not-for-profit academy trusts, are independent from the local authority - they have more freedom to change how they run things and can follow a different curriculum.

grammar schools, which can be run by the local authority, a foundation body or an academy trust - they select their pupils based on academic ability and there is a test to get in (Department for Education, 2023b).

Multi-academy Trust (MAT):

Multi-academy trusts (MATs) are not-for-profit companies that run more than one academy. Not all academies are part of a multi-academy trust.

Special school:

Special schools are those that provide an education for children with a special educational need or disability. ‘There are many different types of special school, but essentially, they all educate children whose needs cannot be met within a mainstream setting, and whose parents or carers have agreed to or requested a special school placement. (TheSchoolRun, 2023).

Permanent Exclusion (PEx):
Permanent exclusion means a child is expelled. The local council must arrange full-time education from the sixth school day (Department for Education, 2023a). Schools cannot force a parent to remove their child permanently from the school or to keep their child out of school for any period of time without formally excluding. The threat of exclusion must never be used to influence parents to remove their child from the school.

(Department for Education, 2017a).

Managed Move (MM):
Managed moves are agreements between schools, parents/ carers and a pupil, where that pupil moves to another school. A Managed move needs the agreement of everyone involved, including the parents and the admission authority for the new school.

Off-rolling:
Off-rolling is the practice of removing a pupil from the school roll without a formal, permanent exclusion or by encouraging a parent to remove their child from the school roll, when the removal is primarily in the interests of the school rather than in the best interests of the pupil.

(Ofsted, 2019)

Education and health care plan (EHCP):
An education, health and care (EHC) plan is for children and young people aged up to 25 who need more support than is available through special educational needs support. EHC plans identify educational, health and social needs and set out the additional support to meet those needs.

(GOV.UK, 2023)

1 Chapter 1 Introduction

Project Title: An exploration of parents' perception of Pupil Referral Units (PRUs) in the development of parent voice and authentic, productive and lasting partnerships

> *"Alternative provision is too often seen as a forgotten part of the education system, side-lined and stigmatised as somewhere only the very worst behaved pupils go."*
>
> (House of Commons Education Committee, 2018, p. 3)

I was motivated to undertake this study by my professional experiences as head of a PRU, working almost exclusively with families categorised as poor, vulnerable, or disproportionately of ethnic minority heritage (see reference to Gill, P14-15). I was compelled to investigate why it is that these groups are more likely to face exclusion from mainstream school, and why this has been the case for decades.

My study proposes an exploration of the experiences of parents of children excluded from mainstream school and who attend a PRU. I explore their experiences with a view to assessing how PRUs might be conceptualised differently and provide broader measures of support to both the pupils excluded and, in some cases, their families. Section 19(1) of the Education Act 1996 defines a PRU as:

> *…any school … which is specially organised to provide education for those children of compulsory school age who, by reason of illness, exclusion from school or otherwise, may not for any period receive suitable education….*
>
> (Department for Education, 1996 (19.1))

PRUs were first formally proposed in the Elton Report, Discipline in Schools, a response to concerns at the time that behaviour in schools was reaching crisis point (Department for Education and Skills, 1989, p. 58). Despite the definition offered by the Department for Education at the time of their introduction, PRUs have become seen as units, centres, academies or schools mainly for pupils permanently excluded from mainstream school for poor behaviour, as schools for "bad" pupils, or indeed as, *"nothing more than a breeding ground for gangs"* as reported in a documentary for ITV in July 2019 (Orchard, 2019). The negative narrative around PRUs is one which has been repeatedly explored and analysed in government sponsored and other reports (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2008; Department for

Education, 2012; Gill, 2017; Timpson, 2019). Alongside efforts to make them acceptable as places of education, there is often acknowledgement and appreciation of the work that goes on in PRUs working with the often very challenging young people who attend them. This paradoxical double narrative is now widely accepted within the education system; PRUs do very good work with the challenging young people who attend them, but it is the nature of these challenges that make them places most parents would prefer their own children not attend. The issue of permanent exclusion and attendance at a PRU is an area that warrants continued exploration, however, as attempts since 1993 to stem the rise of exclusions and to render PRUs acceptable as an alternative to mainstream school within the education system have not been successful.

In England, permanent exclusion of a pupil from mainstream school is considered to be the punishment of last resort. The pupil is removed from the school roll and, unless reinstated following an appeal, no longer has a right to attend that school.

> *Permanent exclusion means your child is no longer allowed to attend a school. Your local council must arrange full-time education from the sixth school day.*
>
> (Department for Education, 2020)

This is the definition of permanent exclusion on the Department for Education (DfE) "School discipline and exclusions" webpage (2020). Local authorities have a statutory obligation to provide an education for the pupil from the sixth day following the exclusion. This provision is usually in form of referral to a PRU.

Permanent exclusion involves a headteacher making a decision unilaterally to remove a child from the school roll as a result of a serious breach or repeated breaches of the school behaviour policy. It is a process that is open to appeal and must be scrutinised and agreed by the school governing body. Once the decision is made to permanently exclude a pupil, the headteacher must inform the parent in writing within three days, outlining the reasons for the exclusion (Department for Education, 2022e). An alternative measure, the managed move, was introduced under the Education Act (2002) in an effort to avoid what is recognised as the *stigma*

of permanent exclusion. A managed move is an arrangement agreed by all involved parties for a child to move to another school and start afresh, thus avoiding having a permanent exclusion on the child's record but this also means bypassing the process of appeals. In effect the parent agrees for the child to leave the school; a child can also be subject to a managed move to a PRU.

PRUs are subject to regular inspections by Ofsted within an Education Inspection Framework (EIF) that is designed for mainstream schools (Ofsted, 2022a), and is one which PRUs must adapt to, there being no specific framework for PRUs. As can be expected, PRUs' greater emphasis on relationships can often be at the expense of a drive for academic excellence and outcomes. This makes it inevitable that the narrative is negative, that PRUs are perceived as failed versions of mainstream schools, and this is the lens through which parents view them. It would be rare for parents to anticipate having to deal with the exclusion of their children and so they are not invested in trying to discover what a PRU is until confronted with the reality of exclusion. According to the Timpson Report just 0.1% of the pupil population was permanently excluded in 2016/17 (Timpson, 2019, p. 23).

1.1 My context as former head of a PRU

I began this study in 2015 while I was still head of a PRU, Stenview (not its real name - pseudonyms are used for all participants and institutions in this study) where I had originally intended to carry out the research. As headteacher of this inner-city PRU for nearly nine years, I interviewed hundreds of parents and their children, almost all of whom exhibited a range of emotions at the prospect of their children attending my school; rarely were these emotions positive. Having been through the difficult process of their children's exclusion, they were now discovering what the alternative education offer was for them. They were faced with the prospect of their children attending a type of school widely considered to be *peripheral* to the education system and *stigmatising* for those who attend them and for their families (Timpson, 2019).

My experience of who it is that is excluded and referred to a PRU reflects current research. Gill's report, Making the Difference, shows that these are children who are likely to have,

> *complex needs where different vulnerabilities intersect and compound one another. These include: child poverty; family problems including parental mental ill health, abuse and neglect; learning needs; mental ill health; and poor educational progress.*
>
> (Gill, 2017, p. 22).

Gill emphasises strongly the aspect of poverty in the exclusions figures, "*Overwhelmingly, excluded children are poorer children"* (Gill, 2017, p. 16). This judgement is arrived at since children entitled to free school meals (FSM) are almost 2.5 times more likely to be excluded than those without that entitlement (See table 1.1).

		2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22
Pupil referral unit	FSM - % of pupils	41.3	40.8	40.0	42.5	46.6	53.1	54.6
Total	FSM - % of pupils	14.3	14.0	13.6	15.4	17.3	20.8	22.5
Totals include state-funded nursery, primary, secondary and special schools, non-maintained special schools and PRUs. Does not include independent schools								

Table 1.1 'Pupil characteristics - Free school meals' for Pupil referral unit and known to be eligible for free school meals in England between 2015/16 and 2021/22 (Department for Education, 2022a)

She reports also that disproportionately exclusion from school and attendance in a PRU affects ethnic minority pupils, in particular those of Black African Caribbean (BAC) heritage (Gill, 2017, p. 18; House of Commons Education Committee, 2018, p. 11).

Overwhelmingly the parents I met with as a headteacher were working class; often had little social capital; many were single parent families with the mother as prime carer; and were disproportionately of minority ethnic heritage. Their children had intersecting vulnerabilities as identified by Gill, thus identifying as pupils with complex needs. Many had social, emotional and mental health (SEMH) needs, often undiagnosed. The parents were bewildered by what had befallen them and felt that

the education system was weighted heavily against them through their experiences with their children's mainstream schools, the process of exclusion itself and with the prospect of their children attending a PRU.

It struck me while meeting with these parents for the first time and listening to their stories of struggle with the school system that they had little influence in the process of the exclusion of their children. They may have merited exclusion within the constraints of schools' behaviour policies and expectations, but it was rare that there was not a context of deprivation or struggle within the family that over time contributed to their children's exclusion. They lacked, however, what Harris and Goodall describe as the *"culturally supportive social networks, … the vocabulary of teachers, (and the entitlement) to treat teachers as equals"* (Harris and Goodall, 2008, p. 280). They did not have the skills and confidence to engage effectively with their children's mainstream schools, thus they were at a disadvantage from the start.

By the time parents had arrived for their interview with me they had, usually for the first time, investigated what a PRU was. Their impressions of my school were rarely encouraging as they saw a school which was much smaller than a mainstream school, with fewer facilities and a more restricted curriculum; they often witnessed challenging behaviour managed in a manner they felt was not appropriate in that staff would be working to deescalate rather than to punish and their negative impressions would have been amplified by media headlines suggesting a definitive link between PRUs and crime,

> *(Experts) also called for the closure of pupil referral units, which they said stigmatised children and were regarded as training grounds for gangs.*
>
> (Evening Standard, 2019)

Initially many were either adamant that their children would not be attending my school, or they wanted a definite date as to when they would be leaving and returning to a mainstream, "*normal*" school, having somehow come to the understanding that their stay at my school would be limited in duration. They had no real understanding of the exclusion process, what it meant to be referred to a PRU, what sort of school a PRU was, and, critically, of the challenges involved in

reintegrating pupils back into mainstream school. This meant that there was often little buy-in to what the PRU had to offer in terms of education and support. They were concerned primarily with getting their children back into a mainstream school as quickly as possible.

Adding to this negative view of a PRU is the fact that reintegration back to mainstream is problematic; this is recorded in the House of Commons Education Committee (2018),

> *… a senior Her Majesty's Inspector at Ofsted told us: "Reintegration is crucial, but what we are often seeing is pupils who are in pupil referral units for the long term and are not going back into the mainstream. They can spend three, four or even more years in full-time alternative provision."*
>
> (House of Commons Education Committee, July 2018, P37)

Here, it is acknowledged not only that the primary aim of a PRU should be to prepare its pupils for reintegration back into mainstream school, but that this is often very difficult to achieve, and even that some pupils can end up spending their whole secondary education in a PRU. I felt I had a duty to these families to investigate the inherent injustice of this position, which, every year, sees the most vulnerable pupils and a disproportionate number of minority ethnic pupils excluded from school and referred to a PRU, with a high risk of being denied the possibility of reintegration. That this issue has been regularly addressed by governments of all persuasions since the introduction of PRUs in the early 1990s, without success, makes it all the more urgent that a fresh perspective is offered. This is the rationale for my study.

As head of a PRU I became aware of the tension between how PRUs and mainstream schools operate. My sense, having worked in both settings was that successful PRUs, in order to maintain control of the school without resorting to exclusions or punishments, so systematically in operation in mainstream schools, had to rely on *tacit* awareness of the individual needs of pupils and to respond in a non-escalatory manner. In this study I explore how this tension has created a gap between the two models which makes it hard to reconcile approaches. Where in mainstream schools there is a greater emphasis on systems to ensure the smooth

running of the organisation - rules are made more explicit and there is not much room for deviation - in PRUs relationships are paramount.

This study investigates the extent to which this difference in approach might impede successful reintegration from a PRU to mainstream schooling and in some cases makes it unthinkable. I want to explore how approaches adopted in PRU settings might be conceptualised as a model for the "rebranding" of PRUs as organisations that operate in a liminal space, with the freedom to call upon the range of professional services with the aim of identifying over time and meeting the complex individual needs of the young people attending PRUs.

Much has changed for me since I started this study, not least the fact that I retired in 2017, and having established myself with staff and parents at Stenview as a practitioner-researcher, I was prevented on my retirement from continuing my research there for reasons I can only speculate about. I will address this change of direction in chapter 3. As a result, this study is based both on my nine years' experience in Stenview, and on data gathered from parents, staff and stakeholders of another PRU, Trenbridge, both within the same Multi-Academy Trust (MAT), serving the same community but located in neighbouring local authorities (LA) within inner London. The LA heads of services and the headteacher of the mainstream school interviewed serve both PRUs and both local authorities, thus maintaining the integrity of the study. All of the data-gathering took place after I had retired as head of Stenview. Themes of inequality, power-imbalance, parent voice and exclusion are addressed.

1.2 An alternative narrative

One aim of this study is to investigate the viability of changing the negative perception of PRUs and the impact this could have both on the experience of the pupils who attend them and at the same time to allow their parents to have a greater voice in their children's education. Another is to look at whether transformational change in the lives of these pupils' families might be possible by exploring parent voice in the context of their lived experiences as parents of children attending a PRU. The narrative around PRUs is undeniably an overwhelmingly negative one as

seen from outside the education system, a view supported by a steady flow of news articles. A Guardian article by MP David Lammy, for example, points explicitly to the link between attendance at a PRU and the prospect of going to prison,

> *The relationship between pupil referral units….and the criminal justice system has become symbiotic, and the rise of exclusions is creating a pipeline of young people into our prison system.*
>
> (Lammy, 2017)

This was frustrating for me as a leader of a PRU as I was aware of the highly professional and safe environment successful PRUs provide for those not in a position to return to mainstream school. The overwhelmingly negative narrative is, however, supported by statistics which show that only 1% of pupils who attend PRUs achieve good examination results (Gill, 2017, p. 9).

Gill's report also makes clear the long-term effects of exclusion and referral to PRUs,

> *As mental ill health in young people rises, and more children are subject to interaction with social care services each year, more vulnerable children spill into the alternative provision (PRUs) sector. Too often this path leads them straight from school exclusion to social exclusion. Excluded young people are more likely to be unemployed, develop severe mental health problems and go to prison.*
>
> (Gill, 2017, p. 17)

She links exclusion from school with exclusion from wider society and with it the increased likelihood of imprisonment. Her report, however, presents an alternative narrative around PRUs, one that I consider in this study. It is a narrative that presents PRUs not as schools for bad or challenging pupils, but as schools supporting young people with very complex needs.

1.3 Research questions and products

My project proposes an exploration of parents' experiences (for the purposes of this study, the word 'parents' can be taken to mean parents or carers) of exclusion from the point of their children's exclusion to their being referred to, and ultimately attending a PRU. To this end I seek the views of parents, PRU staff, including the headteacher of a PRU, senior local authority professionals with responsibility for

vulnerable families, and local mainstream school leaders. I settled on the focus for my study following my experiences supporting the families of my pupils in a manner they were not accustomed to with mainstream schools, aware that they would much prefer that their children not attend my school. It was this paradoxical situation that I found difficult to overcome, and I wanted to explore how families could be more receptive to receiving the sort of support that we were offering, without them resisting so much the PRU as an institution.

The following research questions are posed:

- To what extent are the voices of the parents heard in the process of exclusion? What is the extent of their understanding of the exclusion process?
- How do parents of children excluded from school perceive their experience of their child attending a PRU?
- Can PRUs evolve as a school model that can support the wider family and facilitate a greater sense of agency in parents with more efficient and targeted access to support services?

I anticipate the following as products of this study:

- Critical insight into the historical, political and ideological factors that have impeded an effective strategy for school exclusion.
- Recommendations for a new model and framework for PRUs locating them at the heart of the education system.
- An extended code of practice focused on mainstream schools' obligations to excluded pupils and their families mediated by advocates from PRUs.
- Recommendations for policymakers, educators, parents and staff to develop a clear understanding of the implications of exclusion and referral to a PRU.

1.4 Report structure

I propose structuring this report to allow for an inductive approach to build upon the growing body of research that focuses on the effects of exclusion and its disproportionate impact on those pupils identified as working class, at risk and on different ethnicities, in particular pupils of Black African Caribbean (BAC) heritage.

In **chapter two** I set out my terms of reference and a review of the growing body of literature on exclusion, education, diversity, prejudice and school culture. I set out my methodological approaches in **chapter three** and also the ontological and epistemological positions in which my study has been carried out. In **chapter four** I explore the nature of the research undertaken with a discussion on my role as an outsider-researcher at the school where the study was carried out, while having an insider position within the community of practice due to my previous experience as head of a PRU in the same MAT and the implications this has on this kind of research. I will go into detail about the considerable ethical challenges of carrying out research with vulnerable families and the implications for the design and structure of the study. In **chapter five** I will present the findings from the study in terms of the analysis carried out on the data collected. In **chapter six** I will discuss the implications of my findings within the context of the wider debate about exclusion and the theoretical frameworks proposed by the literature. The discussion will look to locate the study within the broader perspectives offered by, for example, Evans and Girouxs' *"disposable communities"* (Evans and Giroux, 2015, p. 54). In **chapter seven** I will outline my conclusions and recommendations.

2 Chapter 2 Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

In this chapter I set out the terms of reference of my study and its objectives. I follow this with a comprehensive literature review structured against a series of key headings to allow me critically to analyse the research and present my findings in a systematic way. I see this study as an attempt to assess and evaluate the impact of exclusion on families who often present as not having a clear understanding of the exclusion process and who are confronted with parallel and conflicting narratives about PRUs; they are told on the one hand, often by the excluding school or their local authority, that PRUs are schools with the resources and expertise to meet the needs of pupils - their children - unable to cope in a mainstream schools for a range of reasons, including challenging behaviour, behaviour often resulting from undiagnosed special educational needs or disabilities (SEND); or, on the other hand, they are informed that they are not normal schools, they are “units” or “centres” that cater for “bad” children, often with links to criminality and, particularly in inner-city PRUs, gang culture, and where there is a sense that there is little prospect of pupils achieving good or even adequate examination results. This latter negative view is widely promoted and shared in the mainstream media or online with a cursory search on a search engine. I explore how parents’ lack of understanding of the education system adversely affects their children where decisions by mainstream schools to exclude pupils are made; and subsequently I make recommendations that might make a difference to other children at risk of exclusion.

2.2 Literature Search strategy

I was interested to see how PRUs have been perceived since their introduction in 1993, to what extent they are regarded as integral to the education system and how reintegration from a PRU back into mainstream is organised. I used a range of search engines available through the Middlesex University library, including RefWorks. I also used google scholar and google, and other search engines. I used the following key words: Pupil Referral Unit: alternative provision; off-site units in schools; permanent exclusion; managed move; off-rolling; reintegration to mainstream. Investigating who is more likely to be excluded, I used the following key

words: school exclusion statistics; who gets excluded?; SEND exclusion; exclusions of minority ethnic pupils; hard-to-reach parents. These key words were informed by the process of the research. Hard-to-reach parents for example arose in connection with many of the journal articles I had read for this study. It was a phrase that was being used in my time as head of Stenview and is one that the literature shows is embedded in the issue of school exclusion. Also useful was the Department for Education's (DfE) comprehensive website detailing the trends in exclusion from 1996.

2.3 From mainstream school to education in a PRU

> *Alternative provision (AP) is a broad term and imperfectly describes a wide variety of types of school or educational settings (including) Pupil Referral Units (PRUs); alternative provision academies and free schools; hospital schools; and alternative provision delivered by charities and other organisations as well as independent or un-registered schools.*
>
> (House of Commons Education Committee, 2018, p. 5)

The quote above from the House of Commons Education Committee gives an indication of how PRUs are just one component of an *"imperfectly"* defined and expanding *"alternative provision"* sector. PRUs are now also known as alternative provision (AP) academies following the Taylor report recommendations (2012, p. 21). Academisation is a strategy to draw schools, both mainstream and pupil referral units away from local authority oversight and into what I term as a quasi-business model, which focuses on value for money as much as academic outcomes. The overarching term alternative provision now incorporates PRUs, AP schools, hospital schools and independent alternative provision, the latter being private schools commissioned by local authorities to make up for shortfalls in provision. For the purposes of this study, I refer throughout to individual PRUs and AP schools as PRUs and the sector as defined in the quote above as the Alternative Provision (AP) sector.

According to the figures from 2022 the number of PRUs in the UK was 338. This shows a relatively small decline from the 2016 figure of 353. What is significant (see table 2.1) is the drop in the number of pupils attending PRUs in that time from 15,015

to 11,684. This can largely be attributed to the effects of the 2020-2021 pandemic and the fact that fewer pupils were attending school during this time.

Number of Pupil Referral Units and headcount in England between 2015/16 and 2021/22							
	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22
Headcount - Total	15,015	15,669	16,732	16,134	15,396	12,785	11,684
Number of PRUs	353	351	352	352	349	348	338

Table 2.1 Number of Pupil Referral Units and headcount in England between 2015/16 and 2021/22 (GOV.UK, 2023)

PRUs do not have the status of special schools that specialise in meeting the needs of pupils with specific special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). For the parents of excluded pupils, the navigation of the system following exclusion is often frustrating and highlights their lack of voice and agency within the education system.

The reasons for school exclusion are multiple and varied (see table 2.2). According to DfE figures for the year 2020, 30% of permanent exclusions fell under the category of persistent disruptive behaviour (PDB). PDB is a catch-all category and one that allows individual mainstream schools to interpret what may constitute a reason to exclude a pupil. This point was captured in the Timpson Review of School Exclusion (2019) citing a deposition from a teachers' union, arguing that schools permanently exclude dependent upon, *"the individual school's values and its behaviour policy"* (Timpson, 2019, p. 24), emphasising the unpredictable nature of exclusion. Other categories for exclusion make it clear what the exclusion is for, as, for example, physical assault, or threat of use of an offensive weapon. Table 2.2 lists the reasons given for exclusion for the year 2020-21.

		Total	%	State-funded primary	State-funded secondary	Special
	Permanent - All exclusions	5,146	100	695	4,385	66
1.	Persistent disruptive behaviour 30%	1,526	29.65	189	1,326	11
2.	Physical assault against a pupil 17%	878	17.06	95	776	7
3.	Physical assault against an adult 11%	568	11.04	203	339	26
4.	Verbal abuse or threatening behaviour against an adult 11%	564	10.96	92	466	6
5.	Use or threat of use of an offensive weapon or prohibited item 10.5%	541	10.51	26	510	5
6.	Drug and alcohol related	407	7.91	0	406	1
7.	Verbal abuse or threatening behaviour against a pupil	265	5.15	40	221	4
8.	Damage	109	2.12	31	77	1
9.	Wilful and repeated transgression of protective measures in place to protect public health	77	1.5	10	67	0
10.	Sexual misconduct	69	1.34	3	64	2
11.	Racist abuse	45	4	2	43	0
12.	Inappropriate use of social media or online technology	36	0.7	2	32	2
13.	Bullying	31	0.6	0	31	0
14.	Theft	19	0.37	1	18	0
15.	Abuse relating to disability	0	0	0	0	0

Table 2.2 Permanent exclusions and suspensions - including multiple reasons (2020-21 only)' for Special, State-funded primary and State-funded secondary in England for 2020/21 (Department for Education, 2022c)

A pivotal piece of literature in the introduction and regulation of PRUs was the Elton Report, Discipline in Schools (Department for Education and Skills, 1989) commissioned by the then Education Secretary, Kenneth Baker. It was published in 1989 and proposed, inter alia, addressing the,

> *…piecemeal development of alternative provision over the (previous) 10 to 15 years … (and) a need to help (local education authorities) to convert their often improvised provision into integrated and coherent support services.*
>
> (Department for Education and Skills, 1989, p. 157)

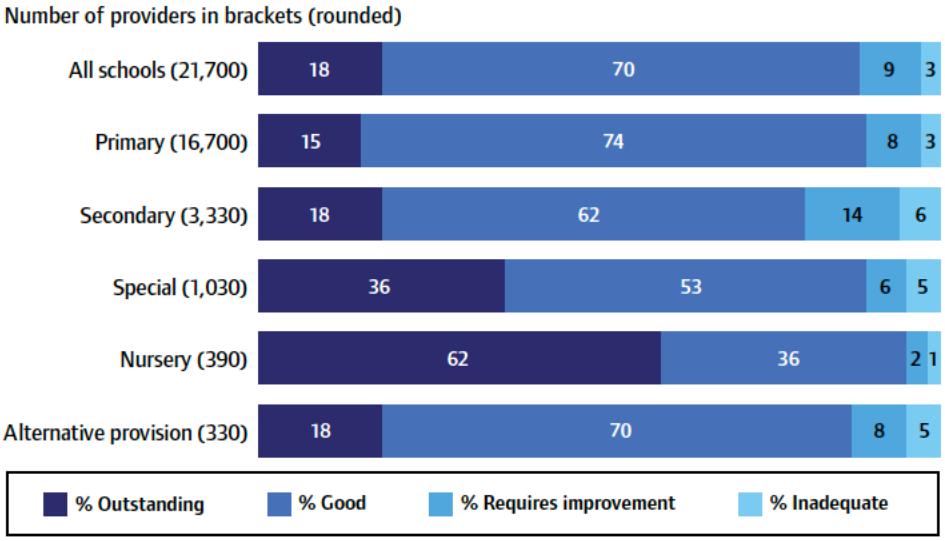
The report sought to address the "*more or less improvised response"* to alternative provision by local education authorities (LEAs) for the *"most difficult pupils"* (1989, p.

15). Elton was referring to the increased use of off-site provision for pupils whose challenging behaviour could not be managed in mainstream schools during the 1980s, and he found that those pupils that were moved from mainstream schools to offsite provision were often forgotten about, there being no statutory means to hold schools to account for their education, wellbeing or safeguarding once removed. He found that some pupils, *"never return to ordinary schools, but remain in limbo until the end of compulsory schooling."* (1989, p. 155).

Off-site units had already been growing in popularity in the UK from the 1970s as corporal punishment as a "*punishment of last resort"* was being phased out and schools were seeking a replacement. Slee (1995) argues that the abolition of corporal punishment in the UK in 1986 failed to bring about "*a paradigmatic shift in the conceptualisation of school discipline"* (Slee, 1995, p. 50). Rather than looking for alternatives to punishment as a means of maintaining control, schools looked for alternative punishments. The Elton report (1989) highlighted the inconsistent approach of what became the new punishment of last resort, noting that the number of off-site units had quadrupled between 1977 and 1989, while the evidence did not suggest that there had been a noticeable improvement in behaviour (p. 154). This is critical in my consideration of the effectiveness of PRUs as they are currently conceptualised. Both Slee and Elton, even before the introduction of PRUs, highlight a flaw in the use of offsite provision as a means to manage pupils with challenging behaviour. Without reconceptualising our understanding of how teachers respond to challenging behaviour, without giving thought to considering alternatives to "punishment", PRUs have merely become a failsafe for an education system that continues to operate in terms of a controlling and behaviourist model.

Despite the negative narrative that is attached to PRUs, they perform well in terms of Ofsted inspections. In December 2022 the head of Ofsted, in her annual report, reported that 88% of PRUs (alternative provision) had been judged good or outstanding in their most recent inspection, up from 82% in 2018. This compares favourably with a figure of 88% for all mainstream schools and 80% for mainstream

secondary schools (see table 2.3). In effect this is a resounding acknowledgement of the effectiveness of PRUs.



1. Includes inspections carried out by 31 August 2022 with a report published by 7 October 2022.
2. Percentages are rounded and may not add to 100.

Table 2.3 Overall Effectiveness of state-funded schools in England: August 2022 (Ofsted, 2022b, p. 31)

This is no consolation to parents who remain reluctant for their children to be educated in PRUs. And for good reason; exclusion from schools and referral to a PRU are signs that a child has fallen out of the mainstream education system and into a type of school widely seen as a "*peripheral adjunct"* to the education system as described in a Centre for Social Justice (CSJ) report, Providing the Alternative: How to Transform School exclusion and the Support that Exists Beyond (Centre for Social Justice, 2018a, p. 12). This sense of PRUs not being part of the mainstream school system proper is frequently cited, as captured in this quote by a popular website offering advice about schools in England, the Get the Right School website,

> *A Pupil Referral Unit - or PRU – is in itself a school but operates outside of normal schooling and is designed to help those children who might not fit in to the normal school regime for a variety of different reasons.*
>
> (Get the Right School, 2020)

The idea that PRUs are schools but operate "*outside of normal schooling"* and that they are for children who *"might not fit into the normal school regime*" accentuates

the sense of PRUs being schools for those who are seen as not *"normal",* in other words othering pupils who attend them.

2.4 Background to the introduction of PRUs – SEMH needs or "just disruptive pupils?"

While the date for the statutory introduction of PRUs is the 1993 Education Act, I needed to understand the background to their development. I reference the 1944 Education Act, a point in the history of education in England where a more progressive but also compassionate and thoughtful approach was taken to education, including taking into account the specific individual learning needs of young people, some with challenging behaviour, who could not manage within the mainstream school system, and many who needed specialist intervention, such as those who are deaf or blind. A senior school medical officer reflected at the time on what he thought this might mean for all young people in receipt of education in the England,

> *Whereas previously we had to try to fit children into the educational system, we must now fit our educational system to the needs of the less fit, the less intelligent, and of the less well-behaved as well as of the normal.*
>
> (Newth, 1946, p. 116)

This is a radical departure from the idea prevalent at the time, and which to a large extent still prevails, that children had to fit into the education system. I will address the problematic use of this idea of *"the less well-behaved, as well as of the normal"* in this study. Newth at the time was emphasising the need for an education system designed to meet the needs of a particular group of pupils that defied easy definition, those identified as "maladjusted". Maladjustment had already been identified in 1932, and this influenced the development of a child guidance service in the UK (Underwood, 1955, p. 9). By 1939 a number of schools and clinics for "maladjusted" children had been set up. Maladjustment was introduced formally as a special educational need in the 1944 Education Act and the literature for the development of the UK education system in the period since then charts the introduction of special schools to try to meet the needs of maladjusted pupils. The Underwood Report (1955) categorised maladjusted pupils as,

> *… pupils who show evidence of emotional instability or psychological disturbance and require special educational treatment in order to effect their personal, social or educational readjustment.*
>
> (Underwood, 1955, p. 159)

Given, in the present day, the range of factors attaching to pupils diagnosed as having Social, Emotional and Mental Health (SEMH) concerns, and thus more likely to face exclusion, the category of Special Educational Need identified in the 1944 Education Act that most closely compares with a description of these pupils today is that of "the maladjusted child" (Underwood, 1955, p. 12).

It was the experience of the Second World War children evacuated from cities and who found it difficult to adapt to their new, temporary homes and who presented with challenging behaviour that reinforced the view that provision for these so-called "*difficult children*" (Underwood, 1955, p. 11) be made. Interestingly, Underwood made the point that these were children who,

> *…had not previously been found difficult to manage in school. Some of these had been troublesome in their own homes; many others had appeared normal before both at home and school…*
>
> (Underwood, 1955, p. 12)

This suggests that at least one cause of "maladjustment" was experience of a traumatic event, the change in their environment caused by their being uprooted from their home away from parents and relocated to a strange new "home". This led to the expansion of provision for "maladjusted pupils". Prior to the second world war pupils who behaved in a challenging manner were often simply treated as delinquents and dealt with by juvenile courts. By December,1954, there were 32 boarding special schools, three day-special schools and 45 approved boarding homes. There were also about 300 child guidance clinics, most of which were part-time; 204 of these were provided by LEAs, some by voluntary bodies, regional hospital boards and teaching hospitals, which also supplied the services of the psychiatrist for 143 of the clinics provided by LEAs (Underwood, 1955, p. 13). The concept of maladjustment as a special educational need was established, but continued to present difficulties of definition,

> *The manifestations of maladjustment are in the realm of feeling and behaviour, so that precision is very difficult; moreover, observers in different ages and societies have looked on the same trait or mode of behaviour in different lights. Yet even if it proves impossible to define maladjustment at all closely, nobody can doubt that maladjustment exists, and it should at least be possible to identify it with sufficient precision for our purpose.*
>
> (Underwood, 1955, p. 6)

Lloyd-Smith reinforces the view that the vagueness of the concept of maladjustment left it open to interpretation,

> *…criteria for allocation to this category are wide ranging... (and that) theories about 'causes' and philosophies of treatment are likewise diverse.*
>
> (Lloyd-Smith, 1987, p. 49).

Lloyd-Smith and Dwyfor-Davies (1995) later lend support to the claim that being difficult to define left it open to interpretation in schools. Citing Howe (1993), they emphasise that at a time in the 1980s and 1990s when schools, following the recommendations of the Warnock Report (1978), were increasingly educating pupils with special educational needs within the mainstream sector, the exception was pupils with emotional and behavioural difficulties. They cite Barton and Tomlinson (1991) in making this point, suggesting that,

> *…the increase in the identification and placement of pupils on the grounds of emotional and behavioural difficulty has less to do with a growth in the prevalence of emotional disturbance and more with professional extension of that definition.*
>
> (Lloyd-Smith and Dwyfor Davies, 1995, p. 4)

They reflect the view that there is difficulty in creating a clear definition of this as a special need, again citing Howe (1993),

> *…it is particularly easy to (identify a child as having emotional and behavioural difficulties) due a lack of a standardised procedure for measuring the degree of disturbance in those so described.*
>
> (Lloyd-Smith and Dwyfor Davies, 1995, p. 4)

They argue that identifying pupils as maladjusted without *"standardised procedures"* became a device to remove pupils from mainstream education because of their disruptive behaviour.

The experiences of Rob Grunsell in the 1970s reflected this. In his role as a social worker, he set up an offsite unit in London for pupils who had become disaffected with mainstream school and were refusing to attend (Grunsell, 1980a). He had argued against the labelling of pupils as "disruptive", as this categorisation was allowing some schools to remove children without exploring what might be the cause of the behaviour. It is no surprise, therefore, that in the 2010s and 20s the term persistent disruptive behaviour (PDB), another vague, all-encompassing term, is the most frequently cited reason for permanent exclusion according to Ofsted figures in the last 10 years. (See table 2.2 above)

This point is important in the context of efforts over time to manage pupils with challenging behaviour who cannot be accommodated within a mainstream school setting and who are eventually excluded from school. It could be argued that the label 'maladjusted', introduced as a Special Educational Need in 1944, was a genuine attempt to see beyond the need for punishment and to understand, identify and meet the needs of those pupils falling through the cracks in the education system, who had often ended up in approved schools for young offenders. It came however with the unintended consequence of creating a ready-made label. It became a catch-all concept for those behaviours that often defy easy explanation, by merely observing that the child is *disruptive*, or badly behaved, but arguably is too broadly and vaguely articulated. Underwood (1955) had acknowledged this as a problem, listing the broad range of symptoms maladjustment covered,

> *(a) Nervous disorders, (ii) Habit disorders, (iii) Behaviour disorders, (iv) Organic disorders, (v) Psychotic behaviour, (vi) Educational and vocational difficulties.*
>
> (Underwood, 1955, p. 24)

Listing the symptoms and the influencing factors in such a broad manner only serves to highlight the complexity that is being addressed.

These arguments have echoes in the Timpson report (2019) in the context of high exclusion rates from mainstream schools and subsequent referral to PRUs, in the form of recommendations that schools be more prepared and willing to develop an understanding of the reasons behind the behaviour of those with SEMH needs,

> *… it is unsurprising that children with SEMH needs are more likely to be excluded, because this is often associated with challenging behaviour. …. If we know this can be the case, we must be better and smarter at knowing how to support these children towards a more positive outcome than exclusion.*
>
> (Timpson, 2019, p. 38)

As with the similarities between trying to understand and stem the high rates of exclusion in the 21st century (The Guardian, 2018; Schoolsweek, 2020), it is worth noting that in the 1970s and 1980s maladjustment as a label grew in popularity as a means to label pupils as disruptive. Although classed as a special need, referral to a school for maladjusted children did not require a statement of special needs for the child. Slee (1995) cites Newell (1980) who found that between 1960 and 1976 there had been a 683 per cent increase in the number of pupils receiving education in separate units for the maladjusted (p. 72). He cites Galloway (1982) who argues that,

> *…this tells us more about changes in designated categories for treatment and the availability of professionals than about changes in student behaviour.*
>
> (Slee, 1995, p. 72)

This literature thread from the 1970s to the early 2020s supports the view that in creating the category "maladjusted" and its subsequent adaptation as SEMH in the 2020s as a special education need, a means was created to remove from mainstream school pupils whose behaviour was a cause for concern, but who had no clearly discernible learning need, and whose behaviour might simply be identified as disruptive. In effect the behaviour of these children was problematized and supports Mongon's *"displacement model",* whereby the dominant approach to managing challenging behaviour in schools became one based on *"identifying and categorising individual pupils with a view to removing some of them from mainstream schools"* (Mongon, 1987, p. 92).

The Elton report recommendation that PRUs be set up was not an acknowledgement that this provision was effective in managing behaviour or contributing to improved behaviour in schools. If anything, Elton remained unconvinced of their effectiveness.

> *Our evidence does not suggest that (the increased use of offsite provision) has been accompanied by any noticeable improvement in standards of behaviour.*
>
> (Department of Education and Science, 1989, p. 154)

The arbitrariness of this approach is highlighted by Coulby and Harper who argue that what constituted a cause for removal or "suspension" of a pupil from one school in the 1970s would not necessarily warrant a suspension in another school. This is an argument that persists in the 2020s under the label PDB. The term "disruptive pupil" became familiar in the 1970s and 1980s,

> *…the word disruptive is now applied by educators to pupils as if it signified a well-known type of child. The category now has the authority of the familiar, of the educationally accepted.*
>
> (Coulby and Harper, 1985, p. 3)

Here Coulby and Harper are arguing that the application of this label to a pupil is a shorthand means to having a pupil removed from a class or even a school, without any need for an assessment of what might be behind the challenging behaviour. There is also an argument here that the use of this label inhibits teachers and schools from seeing the need to look inwardly to assess how they might make changes to their own practices; having such a loosely defined category allows schools to determine what constitutes a punishable offence and mitigates against taking preventative action. Slee goes on to quote Coulby and Harper (1985),

> *The existence of the category 'disruptive pupil' … in the mental set of educators, made them actually serve to inhibit methods of cutting down disruption in the mainstream primary and secondary schools*
>
> (Slee, 1995, p. 78)

And Coulby and Harper (1985) highlight the way in which this label had taken a hold in teachers' imaginations in dealing with challenging behaviour in the 70s and 80s. This is not to suggest that there is never a need to remove some pupils from schools

to be educated elsewhere as a result of challenging behaviour. It should, however, be determined following appropriate assessments that this is the right course of action. What appears to be the case however is that the labelling of pupils in this manner has created a ready-made categorisation to remove those who, in the absence of this category, might not have been excluded. Thus, the systemic nature of this approach to behaviour management is exposed in its arbitrary application from school to school.

Parsons makes the suggestion that the problem of exclusion from school was "*made*" (Parsons, 1999, p. 22). He makes the point that exclusions came as a surprise to governments in the early 1990s, but that they were, *"the direct outcome of Tory politics… marketisation, commodification, and deprofessionalisation of schooling"* (Parsons, 1999, p. 22). These pressures have if anything become more marked in the 2020s, and I take from Parsons's views that PRUs, by their very existence, "induce demand". The labels *"disruptive", "disruptive pupil" and "persistent disruptive behaviour"* allowing for easy categorisation in the mindset of teachers, there followed the need to create provision for those thus labelled; this became offsite provision and then PRUs, and the growth of this type of provision correlates with the increased marketisation of schools, with some pupils deemed as *"unmarketable"* (Wright, et al., 2000, p. 105) and this has created an increasing demand for their use.

This claim is developed in the current debate about exclusion in the 2020s. The category PDB permits schools to exclude pupils often for low-level behaviours that contravene its rules. As with the maladjusted child, the disruptive child may have a range of issues, or "*…evidence of emotional instability or psychological disturbance"* (Underwood, 1955) that limits the child's ability to cope in a mainstream school. Exclusion for PDB places no explicit responsibility on the school to explore what might be behind the behaviour that led to the exclusion.

For the purposes of this study, key pieces of literature are Grunsell's experiences running an offsite unit for truants in the 1970s (Grunsell, 1980a; Grunsell, 1980b).

Although his were not strictly speaking pupils that had been excluded from school, I argue that, finding school intolerable, they had in effect self-excluded. A theme that runs through his works is that of his unit not being perceived as a normal school. I found Grunsell's work particularly compelling, as he anticipates many of the issues confronting PRUs and AP schools right up until the early 2020s that have still to be resolved. Conspicuous by its absence from Grunsell's account of setting up his off-site unit is reference to similar off-site provision in England as a model of reference or comparison, or indeed to any other possible solutions, to the problems of truancy and exclusion from school. This suggests that prior to this time, off-site units were not widely used in England. He acknowledged himself this difficulty of exploring alternative models,

> *I had looked at what else had been written about suspension and disruption in school. There had been very little to be found.*
>
> (Grunsell, 1980b, p. 2)

This reflects my efforts in exploring the literature for this period in terms of the use of exclusion up until the late 1970s. A search of the literature on exclusions and off-site provision reveals very little material to suggest that this type of provision existed before the 70s. I am thus reliant on his accounts to get an understanding of how schools managed challenging behaviour prior to the Elton report (Department for Education and Skills, 1989). It appears that exclusion was rarely used as a punishment in the 1970s, or it was not considered worthy of the level of attention that it does nowadays. Parsons reports that exclusion was *"a rare occurrence at the beginning of the 1990s."* (Parsons, 1999, p. 23), thus supporting this view. Both Galloway (1982, p. 205) and Grunsell (1980b) write of the difficulty in the 1970s and early 1980s of obtaining reliable national data for exclusions. Some local authorities did not collect data at all and the numbers that both Grunsell and Galloway collected from individual authorities that did indicated that exclusions were low,

> *In a pilot project in Sheffield, Galloway (1976) noted that 34 pupils had been suspended indefinitely or excluded for at least a week in 12 months from May 1973-74.*
>
> (Galloway, 1982, p. 205)

It was not until 1993 that LAs were required to keep accurate data (Parsons, 1999, p. 23). (A request from me to the DfE for statistics on exclusions from the 1970s onwards referenced only existing websites, none of which provided this information – see appendix 3). One can but speculate that the use of corporal punishment, a lower school leaving age – 15 up until 1972 – as well as a less stringent focus on safeguarding, which did not place an onus on schools to track pupils once sent home or excluded, were considered sufficient to manage those pupils who could not cope in mainstream settings. In the 1970s it was easier for young people to work illegally; Grunsell describes the case of a pupil who was so determined to leave school as early as possible that his behaviour was purposely challenging so as to get himself regularly excluded until the school reached the point where it gave up on him. The pupil was 15 and,

> *…refused to consider any other educational offer. He did what he said he would always do – he became a lorry driver.*
>
> (Grunsell, 1980b, p. 17)

It may seem improbable that such a scenario could play out in the 2020s, however revelations that thousands of pupils who have been excluded from school remain unaccounted for, suggest that this is not an assumption that we can easily make. A Fisher Family Trust (FFT) DataLab report, "How do you lose 6,700 pupils?" (Nye and Thomson, 2019) suggests that this may still be a problem today. The report showed that between 6,700 and 9,200 pupils remained unaccounted for in England in 2018; either they did not take any qualifications in year 11 or, if they did, did not count in results anywhere. There may be clear explanations for this discrepancy in numbers, but it highlights the fact that every year there is a large number of children missing from education (CME), often the most vulnerable.

Grunsell's focus in the 1970s is more on how disruptive behaviour in lessons was managed by teachers at a time when alternatives to corporal punishment were being sought, and not specifically about the merits of exclusion or of off-site units per se. Indeed, he references occasions where pupils were required to leave his Centre, permanently, without explaining what provision was made for the pupil once left. "Jimmy" was the first to be removed and there appears to be no onus of

responsibility to track the pupil, nor concern for Jimmy once he left. In fact, the loss of this pupil, their first to have their placement *"terminated"*, is presented more in terms of what it meant for those running the Centre, what they could learn from it, once again underlining the unregulated nature of off-site units at that time for managing truants or those presenting challenging behaviours in mainstream school,

> *Throwing Jimmy out of the Centre seemed … the beginning of the end; proof that we would never be able to help any of the kids. We learnt from him not to be so vulnerable and arrogant.*
>
> (Grunsell, 1980a, p. 93)

Looking at this situation through the lens of school safeguarding requirements of the 2020s is perhaps unfair. At the time there was not such a requirement on schools to account for the whereabouts of pupils as there is in the 2000s onwards; this situation is no doubt influenced by high profile cases of children tortured and murdered at the hands of parents and carers, having been victim of sustained cruelty and abuse such as Victoria Climbie (2000), Peter Connolly (2007) and Daniel Pelka (2012). Grunsell gives a sense of a group of well-meaning teachers and other professionals aware that something different was needed for pupils for whom mainstream education was never going to meet their needs.

> *Yes, they were learning, we were learning, but in all the 'wrong places', at the wrong times and according to nothing that looked like a system.*
>
> (Grunsell, 1980a, p. 57)

Grunsell's comments are prescient on several fronts, however, accentuating the similarities and challenges between what was classed as an off-site unit then and a PRU in the 2020s. He queried the reasoning of some schools at the time behind the removal of certain pupils, suggesting it was for the convenience of the schools. This would be classified as off-rolling in the 2020s. He argued that schools were less inclined to look inwardly at their own practices to determine what they could have done to prevent a "suspension", as permanent exclusion was called at the time. Grunsell provides evidence of his being the model upon which PRUs sought to model themselves, but he was critical of the newer "centres" later opened by the Inner London Education Authority (ILEA) in 1978, arguing that, while adopting certain

aspects of his model such as small group setting and a less formal atmosphere, they did not retain what he considered the critical elements for success, such as

> *"…democratic organisation within the whole group … cooperative learning and group responsibility, and (an) educational program geared to the needs of children …*
>
> (Grunsell, 1980a, p. 105).

This of course was inevitable, as his Centre was created at a time when experimentation in education for those presenting with challenging behaviour was more permissible, as long as it remained out of sight of the mainstream school system, viz. on the *periphery*. There was little oversight; the pupils remained on the roll of their mainstream schools, but the schools viewed these pupils as having left for good. Grunsell reveals that the use of off-site units grew exponentially in the course of the 1970s, most having been set up by local authorities. He cites HMI's report on Behavioural Units in England (1978),

> *The total number of units extant in 1977 was 239… However 199 (83%) of the units had been established in the years 1973 to 1977.*
>
> (Grunsell, 1980b, p. 112)

This supports the view that there was little in terms of alternative provision for pupils whose behaviour presented a challenge to teachers during the 1950s and 1960s and that off-site units really came into their own during the 1970s and 1980s prior to the Elton Report at a time when corporal punishment was being phased out in schools.

2.5 PRUs at the "interface of SEND provision"

More and more, PRUs report on the number of pupils with SEMH needs, often undiagnosed and only identified and addressed at these schools. A report by ISOS Partnership report, Alternative Provision Market Analysis (2018), argues that PRUs are on the *"(t)he interface between AP (PRUs) and specialist provision for pupils with SEN"* (p. 7), highlighting the fact that local authorities with no specialist SEMH provision often refer pupils, particularly secondary school pupils, with SEMH needs to PRUs. This point is acknowledged in a report commissioned by the DfE, Investigative Research into Alternative Provision (2018),

> *(Some) pupils also arrived in an AP setting with an EHCP (education and health care plan) that stated a required need for specialist provision, which*

> *could not be accounted for in mainstream schooling … In these cases, evidence from the case studies found that lack of space in local special schools could be a reason why the pupil came into AP(PRUs) instead.*
>
> (Mills and Thomson, 2018, p. 123)

Here again is demonstrated the ambiguous role of PRUs within the wider education system. The ISOS report noted that 68% of 118 LAs said that would often use PRUs for SEMH provision as "*a last resort…or as a short term 'holding measure' while waiting for another (specialist) placement to become available"* (ISOS Partnership, 2018, p. 50). The survey found that those pupils identified with SEMH were less likely to be reintegrated into mainstream schools, thus remaining in their PRU schools due to lack of specialist SEMH provision in the area. This is the case even though the use of PRUs as specialist provision for pupils with SEMH is considered "*problematic…and does not represent good practice"* (Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council, 2021, p. 7). More evidence of PRUs stepping in to shore up the education system was reported in a CSJ report Alternative Provision Quality Toolkit (IntegratED, 2022). It was reported from heads of AP schools and PRUs that the needs profiles of their intake were greatly affected by the lack of specialist provision in some local authorities. An example was given whereby the head of a PRU requested extra funding in order to meet the needs of a particular pupil *"with significant SEND needs"* for whom no specialist provision was available and the only option was the PRU (IntegratED, 2022, p. 72). This highlights again just how important PRUs are within the framework of the education system, allowing it to function in the absence of appropriate provision for pupils with SEND.

It is estimated that one in two pupils in PRUs have SEMH needs (Gill, 2017, p. 16). As with the identification of "maladjustment" (Lloyd-Smith, 1987, p. 49) in pupils, the label SEMH is a broad, catch-all category and PRUs are in effect dealing with this need in a large proportion of their pupils, often while a diagnosis for SEMH is sought. Mills and Thomson (2018) provide further evidence of PRUs' ability to manage complex needs. They report on PRUs having pupils with autistic spectrum disorders (ASD) on roll who could probably manage academically in mainstream schools, "*but socially and emotionally absolutely not, the school would be too big and too*

stressful." (Mills and Thomson, 2018, p. 123). The website Living Autism describes pupils with SEMH needs often,

> *… having difficulties in managing their emotions or their behaviour. They can show inappropriate responses to their emotions. They can feel scared, anxious and misunderstood.*
>
> (Living Autism, 2020)

These "…*inappropriate responses*" can often be misinterpreted as simply defiance or disruptive behaviour and PRUs are better placed to manage disruptive behaviour than mainstream schools. They operate on the interface with specialist provision for SEND, and also with a range of professional services and provision, including mainstream schools and families, a position I argue is better described as a one of "liminality", that can be used to acknowledge the complexities of these young people's lives in pursuit of a more effective model of alternative provision, one that I will explore through this study and draw conclusions in chapter 7.

PRUs have regularly come under scrutiny as a result of negative perceptions of these schools, often amplified in the media, and their role in educating pupils excluded from mainstream school. The literature includes several government sponsored interventions (Steer, 2005; Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2008; Gill, 2017; Timpson, 2019; Department for Education, 2012) to improve them by ensuring they provide a good education and to break the perceived link between youth crime and attendance at a PRU. They are sometimes depicted in the media in contradictory fashion. They are seen on the one hand as overwhelmingly negative with a sharp focus on the links with crime and extremes of behaviour, or they are depicted as schools where extraordinary work goes on to help young people turn their lives around. A single headline reflective of this dual narrative is perhaps this, *"Are Pupil Referral Units Killing Our Children?"* (Dove, 2018). This headline appears seventh on the list of responses to the google search question, "What is a Pupil Referral Unit?" (as at 30th June 2019). The premise of the title implies a distinctly negative perception of PRUs and highlights the dilemma they face in trying to get across the message that they are schools and are supportive of

excluded young people. For a parent who may wish to explore for the first time what a PRU is, this is not reassuring even if the contents of the article are positive about PRUs. It goes on to conclude, that *"PRUs can be the saviour for children with little or no hope of an education future."* (Dove, 2018). PRUs in inner cities have the added pressure of having to deal with the strong perception that they are linked with gang culture,

> *As many as one child in every 30 is being educated in a pupil referral unit (PRUs) in some areas, despite the units being widely considered "fertile ground" for gang recruitment and knife crime, data has shown.*
>
> (The Times, 2019)
>
> *…children were particularly vulnerable (to being groomed as drug dealers) when they were sent to … (PRUs) after exclusion.*
>
> (The Guardian, 2018)

This focus by the media on links with gangs and violence is unhelpful in terms of the narrative that parents and carers have to consider if their children face the prospect of continuing their education in a PRU. There have been several attempts at rebranding over the years to improve their image and to remove the stigma attached to attendance at these schools. In 2008, the then Labour government sought to change the name to Short Stay Schools to promote the fact that their aim was to reintegrate pupils as quickly as possible back into mainstream schools. Previous attempts at rebranding had been unsuccessful in removing the perception that they are not "normal" schools. Even as early as 1993, when they were first introduced, they were known variously as Pupil Reintegration Units, Education Centres or Learning Centres. Since 2012 with the drive for academisation many have become known as Alternative Provision (AP) Academies. And in a recent report to address the concerns around the negative perceptions of PRUs there is yet another call to have the name changed,

> *Alongside measures to improve the quality of AP, PRUs should be renamed to reflect their role both as schools and places to support children to overcome barriers to engaging in their education.*
>
> (Timpson, 2019, p. 77)

As I will argue throughout this study, these schools need more than just a name change to improve the general perception of them within mainstream society. They have long been perceived as being on the "*periphery"* of the education system and as not providing a good enough education to their pupils. (DfES 2005, DfEa 2012, DfEb 2012, Gill et al 2017, CSJ 2018a, DfE 2019). I will argue that, of necessity, they do outstanding work, particularly when working directly with families, giving parents a stronger voice in the context of their children's education.

2.6 Texts that have influenced my position in education

I feel it is important to register from the outset some influential texts that have informed my outlook on education and which may explain the ideological basis for my study. Several key texts have influenced my thinking; Freire's *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1993), first published in 1970, compelled me to think critically about an education system I had taken for granted as more or less fair and as offering equal opportunity to all. Illich's *Deschooling Society* (2011) presents an interesting critique of both education as it is conceptualised and delivered worldwide, and the development of curriculum models as means of social control. Bourdieu's framing of the importance of schools within society as agents of symbolic violence in order to maintain power imbalances and structures is important in the context of this study. He argues that schools "*exert … power… to impose meanings and to impose them as legitimate by concealing the power relations"* (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990, p. 4). His concept of social capital helps to explain how membership of groups with influence, constitutes an inbuilt advantage that,

> *…provides each of its members with the backing of the collectivity-owned capital, a 'credential' which entitles them to credit, in the various senses of the word.*
>
> (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 249)

Thus, being middle class, with the knowledge, confidence and support to navigate an education system that has been constructed specifically to meet the needs of the middle classes, is exclusionary to the working class.

Carol Dweck's *Self-theories* (2000) and Alfie Kohn's *Punished by Rewards* (1993) provide interesting critiques on learning, the mindsets needed to be an effective

learner and how mindsets can become entrenched, or "*fixed*", due to teachers over-reliance on behaviourist strategies and approaches widely considered to be good practice, such as a misplaced overreliance on praise and rewards as extrinsic motivational tools. *Self-theories* was for me a highly influential text and shaped my outlook on how some young people, particularly working-class pupils, must experience learning in mainstream schools.

Other key texts include *Miseducation* (2017) by Diane Reay who, although she does not specifically address the issues pertaining to PRUs, a point I will address later on in this chapter, critiques the wider education system and argues coherently that the education system as it is currently structured favours white, middle-class children whose parents are better able to navigate the system in favour of their children, but at the expense of equally, if not more able, working class pupils. *Disposable Futures* (2015) by Evans and Giroux provides a strong critique of how neoliberalism has shaped society in such a way as to benefit those who are wealthy and privileged and who profit even further from globalisation, but at the expense of the poor. Neoliberalism, they argue, labels the latter as belonging to *"disposable communities"* as they are seen as collateral damage in the drive for growth and progress. Their argument parallels that of Reay but elevates the problem of built-in inequality in schools to one where these same communities suffer inequality and are hopelessly disadvantaged on a societal level.

In designing a theoretical framework for this study, I found Crotty's *The Foundations of Social Research* (1998) most useful. As a novice researcher coming to terms with research design, this was critical in helping me develop a deeper understanding of the nuances of research. Costley's *Doing Work Based Learning* (2010) has been very influential in articulating the challenges faced by researchers operating as insider researchers or, as in my case, operating on a continuum between insider and outsider research, how to navigate these in such a manner as to maintain the integrity of the research.

Both *Parents and Teachers, Power and Participation* (1996) by Carol Vincent and *Engaging Hard to Reach Parents* (2010) by Anthony Feiler provide strong arguments in favour of more open approaches to working with families of pupils who present as challenging, and as seeing these parents rather as without power within the education system. Feiler's view that, *"describing some parents as "hard to reach" … may stereotype and gloss over myriad differences among families"* (2010, p. 127) is an important point when it comes to working with the parents of challenging pupils and has informed my thinking for this study.

Non Violent Resistance (2004) and *The New Authority* (2011) by Haim Omer and *When the adults change everything changes* (2017) by Paul Dix have informed my outlook on behaviour management of young people who present as challenging while also developing more productive and lasting relationships with them and their parents. These three texts provide a powerful reminder that since the abolition of corporal punishment as a means of controlling pupils in school there is still a need to address the concept of punishment in schools.

2.7 The abolition of corporal punishment

Corporal punishment had been abolished in Britain in 1986 without legal consideration on how to respond to challenging behaviour,

> *…the legislation which removed corporal punishment from British state schools in 1986 was silent as to what should replace it…*
>
> (Parker-Jenkins, 1998, p. 2)

It is in fact permanent exclusion that has replaced corporal punishment as a punishment of last resort. Data for 1995/96 is deemed to be the first reliable year for exclusion statistics (Department for Education, 2017b, p. 14). The data shows that the number of pupils permanently excluded from schools in England had been steadily falling from the mid 1990s (see table 2.4), a period that correlates closely with labour governments between 1997 and 2010.

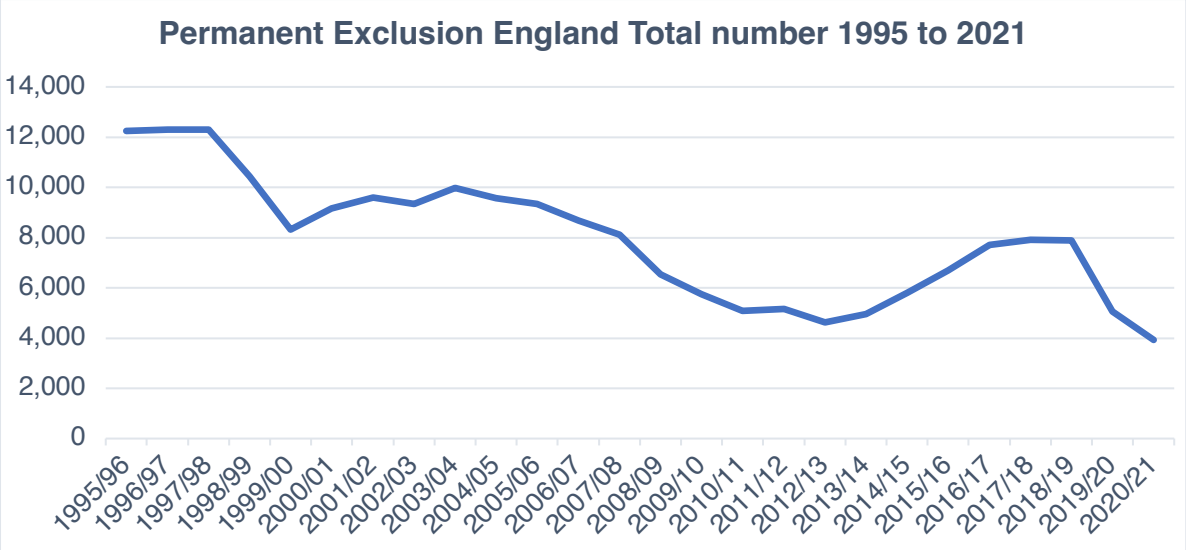


Table 2.4 Permanent exclusion England total number 1995-2021 (Department for Education, 2022a).

The table shows there has however been a stubborn and steady rise from 2012 until 2018/19. The drop in exclusions in the following two years can be accounted for by the non-attendance of most of the school population during the 2020-21 pandemic years. There is a clear correlation between the gradual phasing out of corporal punishment, eventually to be abolished in 1986 in the UK, and the increase in the number of off-site units in the period leading up to the Elton report (Department of Education and Science, 1989). Parker-Jenkins (1999) has explored this period as schools were adapting to this new reality, seeking alternatives to corporal punishment in schools. The argument around what would replace corporal punishment did not focus on what Parker-Jenkins calls a *philosophical shift* away from punishment altogether nor explore how schools could manage their pupils without recourse to punishment as a means of control,

> *The cane was cheap; its replacement is not. Alternatives to corporal punishment carry implications in terms of resourcing, staffing and training.*
>
> (Parker-Jenkins, 1999, p. 99)

While it is beyond the scope of this study to explore the concept of punishment and control as a means to maintain order in school settings, I feel it is worth referencing the debate around this issue. Parker-Jenkinson (1999, p. 84) argues that following the abolition of corporal punishment there was an opportunity to have a philosophical

discussion around punishment in schools per se. She argues that the shift away from corporal punishment signalled a shift in the way behaviour was conceived.

> *The movement away from corporal punishment to alternative disciplinary sanctions also signals a philosophical shift in the way we conceive of behaviour.*
>
> (Parker-Jenkins, 1999, p. 92)

This is debatable to say the least. The Elton report acknowledged and accepted the need for off-site alternatives, not as an effective means to help manage the most challenging behaviour by pupils, but simply to regulate their use by schools. Slee (1995) evidences off-site units' growth in popularity in the UK from the 1970s onwards as schools sought alternatives to corporal punishment as a "*punishment of last resort"* (Slee, 1995, p. 50). The "*birth*" of off-site units for the Inner London Education Authority (ILEA) was the Disruptive Pupils Scheme with schools in London urged to provide "*sanctuaries*" for pupils with behaviour problems. (1995, p. 79). Concerns, however, were raised at the time that these units were in fact nothing more than "*mechanisms of social control*" (Basini, 1981, p. 192), designed to alleviate pressure on mainstream schools by removing those pupils deemed to be "*disruptive*". The view at the time was that these units were *"of little benefit to those young people who attend them"* (Mongon, 1987, p. 194). I argue that mere consideration of the type of punishment needed to replace corporal punishment in order to maintain control in schools does not constitute a philosophical shift.

This begs the question as to what was and what is the purpose of PRUs. As I will argue during my study, efforts to conceptualise them to determine their function within the education system have failed and there is strong evidence that PRUs operate as a failsafe for the whole of the mainstream school system, existing only to mop up those pupils who for often unspecified reasons – hence the label "PDB" – cannot be managed in a mainstream school. This point was made succinctly at an ILEA conference in 1975 by Dr Briault of ILEA who argued that the use of these units allowed individual schools to say, *"…we will do our job with the majority of children, but with that little lot, well they are your problem not ours"* (Basini, 1981, p. 194). This continues to be the case in the 2020s.

That the philosophical shift in approaches to challenging behaviour in schools has not happened is evidenced by schools in England in general organising their approaches to maintaining control around behaviour policies with rewards and sanctions at their core. While many schools avoid use of the word "punishment" and refer instead to sanctions or consequences, the principle remains the same; the need for pupils to pay the price for rule infractions. Yes, schools no longer use corporal punishment, but all that has happened is that they have devised an alternative "punishment of last resort", permanent exclusion. Kohn (1993) makes an interesting point that explains why this is the case,

> *There is a time to admire the grace and persuasive power of an influential idea, and there is a time to fear its hold over us. The time to worry is when the idea is so widely shared that we no longer even notice it, when it is so deeply rooted that it feels to us like plain common sense. At the point when objections are not answered anymore because they are no longer even raised, we are not in control: we do not have the idea; it has us.*
>
> (Kohn, 1993, p. 3)

It is simply the case that schools cannot conceive of an alternative way of maintaining control of the learning environment so that learning can take place. In fact, all that is happening is that schools have become more creative in how punishment is defined and enacted. And I agree with Kohn's point that the idea of behaviourism *"has us".* Philosophically, we are hindered from considering anything other than addressing challenging behaviour by using punishment.

2.8 Structural inequalities – the "peripheral" status of PRUs

As my study concerns the exclusion of pupils from mainstream schools it necessitates an exploration of how PRUs are located within the wider education system. The Elton report is ambiguous and to some degrees conflicting about the aims and the role of PRUs.

> *We realise that there will always be a need for some forms of alternative provision for pupils who … cannot constructively be educated in ordinary schools, either because of their own difficulties or the difficulties they cause*

> *for other pupils… Reintegration into the mainstream may not always be a practical possibility, particularly in the case of older secondary pupils.*
>
> (Department of Education and Science, 1989, p. 154)

Elton is here acknowledging that for some pupils, offsite provision is necessary without being specific about what it is that would identify this archetypal PRU pupil. However, he later goes on to argue that the main purpose of PRUs should be *"to reintegrate pupils into the mainstream at the earliest possible stage or to begin procedures for statementing."* (p. 157). This is important in the context of PRUs in the 2020s as this ambiguity goes some way towards explaining the confusion parents feel about their children's exclusion. Elton's point about the *main purpose* of offsite provision being to reintegrate back into mainstream school or to *begin procedures for statementing* (see quote above) clearly sees attendance at a PRU as no more than a holding measure while the circumstances behind the exclusion are explored to determine possible underlying cognitive or behavioural needs to identify the next course of action for the pupil. This might be referral to a special school that can meet any identified needs on the one hand or, on the other hand, to assess following an unspecified period of time, but *"at the earliest possible stage"* when the child might be ready to return to a mainstream setting. This leaves a lot of scope for schools to put off or delay accepting a pupil from a PRU. This is the dilemma that PRUs face. The lack of clarity about their role and status is the inevitable result of being part of a school system that uses them as a safety valve so that mainstream schools, both individually and collectively, can continue to function. This, I believe is due to the way the education system has evolved since the 1970s. These problems were identified by Grunsell when he anticipated offsite units' inevitable statutory incorporation into the education system.

> *The fact that we were largely left alone and undirected to sort out and test our ideas was … a lucky bonus.*
>
> (Grunsell, 1980a, p. 7)

He was aware of the shortcomings in his model, such as the poor academic outcomes, and knew they would not be tolerated within the mainstream education structure. This point of definition and what success looks like in PRUs was raised in

the Back on Track (2010) report, another attempt at government level to resolve the contradictions inherent in PRUs as part of the education system. It called for *"enhanced efforts to ensure that alternative provision… is appropriately conceptualised, understood and promoted* (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2010, p. 134). This is an admission that PRUs' function within the education system is not understood. Their continued status as *"peripheral"* (Department for Education, 2012, p. 4) to the education system is evidence of this and leaves them vulnerable (See section 2.4). Several recommendations have been made to improve the quality of provision, some more successful than others. The Taylor Report's (Department for Education, 2012) recommendations, for example, that Initial Teacher Training (ITT) could be carried out at PRUs rated good or outstanding by Ofsted, was one such measure that allowed trainee teachers to carry out their training in PRUs, a measure that represented a move in the right direction, drawing as it did graduate teachers into PRUs.

The literature consistently emphasises PRUs' peripheral position in the education system. In his response to Back on Track (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2008), a government white paper designed to address the fundamental problems within the alternative education sector, the then Secretary of State for Education, Ed Balls, made this very point, arguing that,

> *(a)lternative provision has for too long operated on the edge of the schools system, not getting enough attention as a service, and only getting involved after a child has already been excluded.*
>
> (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2008, p. 1)

Implicit in this quote is a recognition of PRUs' precarious position on the periphery of the education system, where expectations parents and pupils might have had within a mainstream setting are diminished, but that PRUs' usefulness only becomes apparent when a child is in danger of exclusion, highlighting again its punishment of last resort aspect. Since that report, and in spite of a range of measures taken since then, (Department for Education, 2012; Gill, 2017) PRUs continue to be seen as marginal to the school system, reduced to performing a role of mopping up those

pupils squeezed out of mainstream schools and accepting pupils with SEMH for whom specialist provision might not be available. They are vulnerable to criticism and rejection as a viable alternative to mainstream education from wider society. This view of PRUs continues to undermine efforts to make them acceptable as legitimate providers of education. It must also be recognised that PRUs do not have the same status as special schools; parents cannot apply to send their children to a PRU and there is no statutory obligation on PRUs to provide a level of teaching and support that is markedly different to mainstream provision.

There is a growing tension between the needs of mainstream schools to perform and to undergo scrutiny at a very detailed and granular level, as measured by examination results, league table position and Ofsted grading, what Reay (2017) calls, *"a plethora of spectacular educational irrelevancies*" (2017, p. 185), and their meeting the individual needs of children exhibiting challenging behaviour, many of whom have one or a combination of, "*risk factors that increase the likelihood of a child being excluded*" (Gill, 2017, p. 16). I will explore this tension in sections 2.14 and 2.15.

2.9 PRUs – Pipeline to prison or … "normal school"

> *PRUs are a type of school that caters for children who aren't able to attend a mainstream school. Pupils are often referred there if they need greater care and support than their school can provide.*
>
> *Children who attend a PRU might be:*
>
> - *permanently excluded from their mainstream school for behaviour reasons, or at risk of permanent exclusion.*
> - *experiencing emotional or behavioural difficulties, including problems with anger, mental health issues, and school phobia/refusal.*
> - *experiencing severe bullying.*
> - *diagnosed with special educational needs (SEN), or in the process of getting a diagnosis.*

- *suffering from a short- or long-term illness that makes mainstream school unsuitable.*
- *a new starter who missed out on a school place.*
- *pregnant or young mothers.*

Some pupils will have all their lessons at a PRU, while others split their time between the mainstream school where they're registered and a PRU.

PRUs are not special schools, and pupils who have more severe special educational needs or disabilities should not be sent to a PRU as a long-term solution.

(TheSchoolRun.com, 2019)

This description of a PRU was the top hit when 'Pupil Referral Unit' was typed into the search engine, Google (as at August 2019). The range of reasons for their existence provided in the description is worth quoting in full if only to highlight a positive view of PRUs which suggests they exist purely in a supportive role with the resources, staff skill set and capacity to meet a wide range of needs of pupils who, for reasons including, but not exclusively, behavioural, cannot cope in mainstream schools.

This benign view of PRUs suggesting a high level of specialism, however, is often at odds with the reality of many PRUs and contrasts with an alternative perception, one popular in mainstream media that depicts them as exclusively for pupils excluded for challenging behaviour. This latter, negative, view is supported by a number of, often sensational, media articles, particularly in the popular press, which supports this alternative perception,

"Kids smuggle drugs up their bums, are forced to eat dog poo and girls are sexually assaulted by bins, says whistleblower teacher at pupil referral unit."

(The Sun, 2019)

In his report on school exclusion, Timpson reported that PRUs (AP) had been described to him as *"the underbelly of our education system"* (Timpson, 2019, p. 74), thus emphasising the negative narrative attaching to PRUs, particularly its link

with criminality – the Oxford English dictionary defines *"underbelly"* as *an unpleasant or criminal part of society that is usually hidden" (OED).* This highlights what the Elton report (1989) acknowledges as the '*stigma'* attached to attendance at these units as they existed in the 1980s, that pupils who came to them, *"often believe they have been treated badly by ordinary schools and feel rejected and resentful."* (Department for Education and Skills, 1989, p. 154). The literature on PRUs wrestles with the parallel but often conflicting narratives of these types of educational establishments, on the one hand presenting them as places that no parent would want their child to attend, and on the other hand, as places with highly trained staff equipped to manage the most challenging behaviour and able to adapt to meet the individual needs of the children who attend them. The negative view of PRUs persists for several reasons: they cannot offer what a mainstream school can in terms of curriculum; their school roll usually consists of a high proportion of pupils with a history of challenging behaviour meaning there is a concentration of such pupils; many of these pupils have unidentified special educational needs or disabilities (SEND); and, probably most importantly, they represent a move from the normal to the not normal, a disquieting position for both pupil and child to experience. The pupils are, as Coulby and Harper (1985) argue,

> *"…stigmatised in their own eyes, and in those of their families and peers. The stigma consists in feeling not only rejected, but that they are officially different from the rest of their age group, different to such a degree that they can no longer be allowed to keep company with them…"*
>
> (Coulby and Harper, 1985, p. 19)

This representation of excluded pupils as *"officially different"* within the education system means they are othered. They are outside the norms of the education system, a point made by Grunsell as he described the use of *"sin bins"* in the 1970s, implying the recognition *"of a new category … of abnormality"* (Grunsell, 1980b, p. 118). Attendance at a PRU continues to represent a stigmatising, othering experience which emphasises how little has changed in relation to alternative provision since they were first introduced. A House of Commons Education Committee report, *"Forgotten Children"* (2019) opens with a damning acknowledgement that this continues to be the case,

Alternative provision is too often seen as a forgotten part of the education system, side-lined and stigmatised as somewhere only the very worst behaved pupils go.

(Parliament, House of Commons Education Committee, 2019, p. 3)

My own experience of this sense of stigma or of feeling 'othered' can best be captured in my decision, when I started in the headship role of my school, to introduce a school uniform to Stenview. I had not thought of this as a priority but having set up a student council to give pupils a voice, this was one of the first requests pupils made; their rationale was straightforward, they wanted to be seen going to something approaching a "normal" school when travelling to and from the PRU; they wanted to share the same experience as other pupils attending school in England, to feel normal. Lacking the symbols of a "normal" school, such as school uniform, they felt othered. For many parents the experience of their child being excluded is a traumatic one and the prospect of their children attending a PRU becomes difficult to accept once it becomes clear to them how different it is to the school that their children had previously attended; it is not, in their eyes, a *'normal school'.* Their perceptions are then reinforced following the visit and once they have done some minimal research by way, say, of a google search of 'Pupil Referral Unit' and they arrived at a conclusion that PRUs are unfit to provide an adequate education and that their children will not be safe there.

Despite the many benefits of PRUs, there is a stigma to attending them, which children can find it hard to escape. The limited curriculum means that children can miss out on a broad education, and ***although staff are highly trained, disruptive behaviour is often the norm."*** (Bold as in original article)

(TheSchoolRun.com, 2020)

'…most were apprehensive or anxious about the AP and how their child would find it, due to the stigma attached to referral.

"The mainstream school told me they were sending him to naughty school. That's what they called it. I thought, once he gets sent there, that's the end for him.

Parent of boy in Year 11, AP Academy, South

(Mills and Thomson, 2018, p. 92)

That PRUs continue to have a negative reputation is hardly surprising. Describing his experiences of running his Centre in the 1970s, Grunsell commented, *"… (for parents) anything other than normal secondary education must be, in some respects…inferior, second-rate – a judgement on them as parents."* (Grunsell, 1980b, p. 111). As discussed above, there are obvious reasons why this is the case. A concept of a normal school is often held by parents of those pupils most likely to be excluded according to the categories identified by Gill (2017) (see page 17). They are the parents most likely to see this as "*a judgement on them as parents".* They are working-class parents least likely to understand how the education system works and without the social capital to challenge the schools.

> *Navigating the exclusions process can be difficult and parents and pupils can be left fighting a system that they do not understand and that they feel is stacked against them. In addition, we heard that parents often do not have the time or social capital to challenge schools.*
>
> (House of Commons Education Committee, 2018, p. 16)

Many of the issues besetting PRUs today, and which contribute to the negative narrative, were identified as significant at a time when offsite units were beginning to proliferate from the early 1970s and persist to current times:

- the overrepresentation of vulnerable pupils in offsite provision (Grunsell, 1980a; Gill, 2017; Timpson, 2019)
- the persistent overrepresentation of ethnic minority pupils, particularly Black-Caribbean, Irish Traveller and Roma Gypsy (Coard, 1971; Department for Education and Skills, 1989; Gill, 2017; Timpson, 2019)
- mainstream schools' reluctance to countenance reintegration of previously excluded pupils (Grunsell, 1980a; Timpson, 2019)
- mainstream school culture which promotes a reluctance to adjust practices to support pupils at risk of exclusion; (Grunsell, 1980a; Timpson, 2019)
- low attainment levels of those attending offsite units or PRUs. (Grunsell, 1980a; Gill, 2017; Timpson, 2019)

In addressing these points I want to question what I believe to be the systemic flaws in the wider education system that have been so regularly acknowledged, through governments of differing political persuasions and advocates for change

representing vulnerable and ethnic minority groups since the early 1970s, but to little effect (Coard, 1971; Grunsell, 1980b; Department for Education and Science, 1981; Department for Education and Skills, 1989; Department for Education, 1993; Slee, 1995; Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2008; Gill, 2017; Reay, 2017; Timpson, 2019).

The positive narrative sees these schools lauded for the work they do once pupils have adapted to their new setting and parents often find that their children's needs are being addressed and met, often for the first time; that the more tolerant, responsive and flexible regimes in these schools are more suited to how their children prefer to learn. Success stories, usually about individual pupils, are presented to demonstrate that the experience of pupils in PRUs need not be a negative one, such as *Khadija/Jenni's story* (Gill, 2017, p. 10). As with mainstream schools, there is variation in the quality of provision offered. Some PRUs provide an outstanding provision (Centre for Social Justice, 2020, p. 11) with access to a broad curriculum of educational and vocational qualifications, access to therapy for those most in need of it and of course a smaller, more intimate environment best suited to meet the needs of those young people who have been referred there.

There is no doubt PRUs have improved their practice over the years (see table 2.3 on page 27) since the Elton Report as judged within the paradigm of the existing UK education system. Many good and outstanding PRUs are equipped to manage and help modify very challenging behaviour of young people referred to them and support them academically to achieve. However, no matter how well PRUs fare during Ofsted inspections, parents are more likely to remain resistant to having their children educated in them.

> *Parents and pupils reported feelings of anxiety and stigma prior to starting in AP, particularly in cases of permanent exclusion. Parents generally felt they lacked information and support throughout the referrals process.*
>
> (Mills and Thomson, 2018, p. 67)

The negative view of PRUs to the effect that they are established merely to accommodate pupils who have been excluded from school because of their

behaviour persists. This is a view that is often propagated by mainstream schools themselves, when the spectre of attending a PRU is presented to a child and their parents in the form of a threat, an attempt to alter a child's behaviour,

> *…. Parents generally knew little about the AP in advance, and the information they were given came from the AP itself, usually through visits and tasters, rather than through the school.*
>
> *Parent of boy in Year 11, AP Academy, South"*
>
> (Department for Education, 2018, p92)

Such measures – *"visits and tasters"* – which are often shorthand for threatening a pupil with referral to a PRU, and are aimed at controlling pupils are not uncommon. This was something I experienced as a PRU head. Schools would ask if they could arrange a visit for a pupil and parent to show them how fortunate they were to be at their mainstream school and what would await them in terms of education and experience of school, should they continue to exhibit challenging behaviour. It supports Illich's (1971) contention that,

> *…school reserves instruction to those whose every step in learning fits previously approved measures of social control.*
>
> (Illich, 2011, p. 221)

The mere threat of the PRU as a means of social control, as Illich argues, locates the problem with the child and away from the school. It removes the onus on schools to consider their own practices in relation to the causes or the contextual issues that might lie behind a child's challenging behaviour. And, once again, this argument was raised by Grunsell in the 1970s in relation to his experiences with the former mainstream schools of his pupils. He argues that focusing on offsite provision as an answer to disruptive behaviour allows schools *"to distract attention from the causes of educational breakdown that lie within the schools"* (Grunsell, 1980a, p. 107). More recently, the Timpson Report (2019) highlighted the negative perception that PRUs endure,

> *PRUs… are too regularly perceived as being little more than what were described to me as low-quality dumping grounds or holding-pens for children that no one else wants.*
>
> (Timpson, 2019, p. 77)

The strong, negative discourse around PRUs focuses on their limitations and emphasises the potentially bleak prospects for those pupils who attend them, and is a view often amplified in mainstream media.

> *The general consensus is that PRUs offer second rate education compared to what you'd normally get. If you're a bright pupil who's doing well and you go to a PRU, suddenly you're just doing the basics, maybe three or four subjects.*
>
> (BBC Newsbeat, 2016)

The view of PRUs as offering pupils a second-rate education was taken further in an interview with David Lammy, MP for Tottenham, when he described the relationship between pupil referral units and the criminal justice system as *"symbiotic"* (see quote on page 19). His comments were made in response to the publication of the Gill report, "Making the Difference" (2017). Researchers for Gill's report had sought the views of leaders of 40 PRUs, AP Academies and free schools, representing 10% of the entire maintained AP sector. The report looked at alternative provision in the context of the steady rise in exclusions over the previous six years, a trend that has continued into the 2020s. and outlined the circumstances that make it more likely that a pupil would attend a PRU (see page 14-15). The PRU-to-prison pipeline referred to by Lammy is supported by stark statistics,

> *A longitudinal study of prisoners found that 63 per cent of prisoners reported being temporarily excluded when at school (MoJ 2012). Forty-two per cent had been permanently excluded, and these excluded prisoners were more likely to be repeat offenders than other prisoners.*
>
> (Gill, 2017, p. 22)

The long-term effects of receiving an education in a PRU is not within the scope of this study; it is nevertheless important to stress the correlation between exclusion and likelihood of going to prison later on in life as reported by Gill.

Gill's report also highlights the positive narrative, namely that *"the quality of provision in many maintained AP schools is strong"* (2017, p. 34). As argued previously, this does not mean, however, that parents are happy for their child to attend one. The subtext of Gill's report (2017) seems to be that, good as PRUs are, they will continue to struggle to meet the increasingly complex, often undefined needs of their pupils

(Gill 2017, Timpson 2019). This, I argue, is a result of their peripheral status in the education system; they are neither special schools nor mainstream schools but are required to be responsive to the societal concerns about young people that often find expression in the form of challenging behaviour in mainstream schools. An example of this is the focus on knife crime in schools with many, for reasons of security, adopting a *"zero-tolerance"* approach to this issue (TES, 2018). Those pupils who are excluded as a result of being found in possession of a knife are usually excluded and referred to PRUs. Thus, the negative discourse around PRUs is maintained as it becomes known that "dangerous" pupils are placed at these schools. This negative discourse is further amplified by poor attainment figures at the end of Key Stage 4 where just 1.4% of pupils nationally achieve five or more good GCSEs (DfE SFR 2017), a figure that has remained stable for many years.

Grunsell's (1980a) experience as a pioneer in this area is interesting and demonstrates an early understanding of the structural flaws within an education system that even in the 2020s lead to many pupils being unable to compete within it. His experiences of trying to coerce young people to attend school, young people who felt they no longer belonged in mainstream school, compelled him to look at what, at the time, was a radical alternative to mainstream schooling, an off-site unit. He acknowledged that for some pupils, those who would have been judged to be maladjusted previously, developing healthy relationships with them was a priority if they were not to drop out of education altogether. He recognised that the approach of displacing pupils from a mainstream school setting to one with a more relational focus like his not only ran counter to approaches taken in mainstream schools, but was actually leaving them ill-prepared for a return to mainstream school, in contradiction to the stated aim of the work they were doing with their pupils,

> *Having taught them to expect more from adults in terms of care and attention, we have made the impersonal atmosphere of ordinary school seem that much worse. We were, in unvarnished fact, teaching them to want what schools could never offer.*
>
> (Grunsell, 1980a, p. 66)

Grunsell is here pinpointing a deep flaw within the structure of the education system, and one which continues to affect those pupils most likely to be excluded. A mainstream school's choice to exclude a pupil, whether through permanent exclusion or managed move, to a PRU creates a dilemma for the pupil and their family. Following their initial reluctance to countenance attendance at a PRU, it is very often the case that once settled into the new environment both parent and child recognise the benefits of the new setting, one which is more suited to their needs. The smaller settings and a staff team, often including therapists, more accustomed to dealing with more challenging behaviour may come as a welcome surprise and they may make the choice, in consultation with their children, for them to remain in alternative provision rather than send them back to mainstream, even where the opportunity arises do so. There is a clear implication here that a PRU, once both the parent and child has experienced it, could offer an acceptable alternative and one that is able to meet the child needs.

> *In other cases though, pupils or parents/carers did not want a return to mainstream education, preferring the smaller class sizes and the child feeling more settled in the AP environment.*
>
> (Mills and Thomson, 2018, p. 120)

The key element promoting a more positive narrative around PRUs is relationships. Critically, PRUs are less likely to exclude a pupil for behaviours for which they almost certainly would be excluded in a mainstream school. This then is the PRU acting as a safety valve for the education system as a whole, absorbing those pupils deemed unfit for mainstream and not in need of a special school. PRUs contend with a peculiar tension between, on the one hand, developing trusting relationships with pupils who, in mainstream schools, had grown accustomed to regular trips down *"punishment road",* (Dix, 2017, p. 107), who have been conditioned to expect more and more elaborate punishments as schools attempt to find ways to manage their behaviour by controlling them; and, on the other hand, taking the time to create a level of trust between staff and these pupils, so as to avoid having to resort to punitive measures. Dix argues that,

> *(t)he school behaviour debate is fuelled with emotions and ignorance. It is framed by a system obsessed with control and punishment.*

(Dix, 2017, p. 107)

It is very often the case that pupils who have struggled with their behaviour in mainstream school thrive in PRUs. One overriding principle underpinning the running of a PRU is the need to avoid exclusion; this follows from permanent exclusion from mainstream schools *being the "punishment of last resort."* In spite of best intentions, however, a small number of pupils are excluded from PRUs every year. In 2019, 36 pupils were excluded from PRUs, AP Academies and AP free schools out of a total number of pupils attending these schools of 15,396 (see table 2.1 on page 24) or a rate of 0.22% (see table 2.5). Very low as these numbers are, they represent a steady increase of exclusions in line with national data for mainstream schools.

	2013/14	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19
Permanent exclusions (number)	13	17	21	21	27	36
Permanent exclusions (rate)	0.10	0.13	0.14	0.13	0.16	0.22

Table 2.5 Permanent exclusions from PRUs and AP schools, number and rate (Department for Education, 2022d)

This difference in approach of course has implications for reintegration. It is inevitable that, given their size, mainstream schools will find it less easy to develop the relationships necessary to support the most vulnerable pupils, those most likely to face exclusion. Gill (2017) articulates well the more complex role the PRU plays in the life of an excluded pupil, which she argues is,

> *…much more complex than simply imparting knowledge. It involves rebuilding the emotional damage of exclusion; developing trusting relationships often with young people who have had few trusted adults in their lives; and attempting to catch up learners who are often far behind their peers.*
>
> (Gill, 2017, p. 34)

This is a view echoed in the Timpson report (2019), citing research by Coram (Coram, 2019, p. 23), a children's charity in the UK supporting vulnerable young people, which found that their self-esteem improved as a result of approaches taken in PRUs. They were *"happier too and the increased self-esteem helped counteract*

some of the negative labels they have been given in the past" (Timpson, 2019, p. 52).

It should come as no surprise that PRUs provide a high level of expertise in managing challenging behaviour as described in this quote. It needs, however, to be noted that Timpson was acknowledging that it is the *"best"* PRUs offering the greatest expertise, with *"short-term placements"* recommended. This stating of the obvious hides the fact that many pupils throughout the country attend PRUs of poor quality as rated by Ofsted. A CSJ report, Warming the Cold Spots of Alternative Provision, found that there are 21 LAs in England where over half of pupils are educated in Inadequate or requires improvement (RI) provision. In eight of these, every single identified pupil is in Inadequate or RI provision (2020, p. 14). In other words, it is *good* PRUs that contributes to the positive narrative; a high percentage of PRUs throughout the country cannot offer a *good* educational experience. The report demonstrates this clearly by highlighting the disparity that pupils in mainstream schools are ten to one times more likely than their counterparts in PRUs to be taught in good or outstanding schools in certain areas of the UK (2020, p. 8).

2.10 Expertise of PRU staff – practical wisdom

> *(PRUs) tend to be staffed by highly qualified and experienced teachers, who have expertise in dealing with SEN, emotional and behavioural difficulties.*
>
> (TheSchoolRun.com, 2020)

> *The best AP offers some of the greatest expertise of working with children with challenging behaviour and additional needs, and is used not as a last resort but a 'first resort' – offering advice, outreach and short-term placements that help children get back on track and help divert them from the pathway to exclusion.*
>
> (Timpson, 2019, p. 74)

The various government reports recommending improvements in the quality of PRUs have referenced the expertise of staff in these schools and have recommended tighter partnerships with mainstream schools in order that the latter might benefit from this expertise. Approaches taken in PRUs are more or less what could be

described as practical wisdom or phronesis. PRU staff *of necessity* must develop a specific set of skills to support excluded pupils. Good quality alternative provision and PRUs have to operate in a manner that is difficult to frame and systematise and ultimately conceptualise. Ofsted's annual report (2022b) references as an issue the,

> *…lack of clarity about the purpose of AP and what constitutes good outcomes for children and young people in AP.*
>
> (Ofsted, 2022b, p. 125)

The literature over time shows that conceptualising PRUs has remained elusive and this is acknowledged by the Alternative Provision Quality Toolkit report (IntegratED, 2022) that cites eight separate reports since 2012 calling for *"a consistently used, universally applicable, comprehensive and systematic approach to evaluating and improving AP quality"* (IntegratED, 2022, p. 18).

Paradoxically, it is their tenuous position on the "*periphery*" of the education system as well as the *lack* of a clear conceptual framework determining how PRUs should operate, that allow some PRUs to be effective. The absence of rigid adherence to systems leaves staff free to respond in the moment. A particular skill set is needed in order to manage the inevitable tensions between educating young people with very challenging behaviour and giving them enough time and space to feel secure in their environment without resorting to punishment. Over time staff may develop a skill set which is highly responsive and alert to the myriad issues that arise. Van Manen describes this as the "*pedagogy of tact*"; it is, "*an active, intentional consciousness of thoughtful human interaction* (1995, p. 40) ". Van Manen articulates how this concept is used by good teachers to develop their relations with pupils and to show a deep understanding of what is actually going on in situations where a pupil might be exhibiting challenging behaviour.

> *A tactful teacher seems to have the ability of instantly sensing what is the appropriate, right or good thing to do on the basis of perceptive pedagogical understanding of children's individual nature and circumstances.*
>
> (Van Manen, 1995, p. 41)

Van Manen develops the concept of pedagogical tact in the context of the relationship between teachers and pupils. This is not to say that such approaches are not in evidence in mainstream schools, simply that they cannot be in effect to the same extent as in PRUs. Additionally, many schools have sought to systematise their approaches to behaviour management to such a degree that it becomes difficult for teachers to consider individual pupil contexts in the moment. This requirement to be able to think and act in the moment in a manner that does not undermine the effective functioning of the school is, I believe, a form of phronesis or practical wisdom and I think it worthwhile to explore some of the literature around this concept. Kinsella and Pitman (2012) define phronesis as,

> *… sometimes referred to as practical wisdom or practical rationality …. Phronesis emphasises reflection as a means to inform wise action, to assist one to navigate the variable contexts of practice, and as directed towards the end of practical wisdom.*
>
> (Kinsella and Pitman, 2012, p. 35)

This practical wisdom describes how PRU staff need to operate on a day-to-day basis with the pupils they work with whose circumstances have prevented them from functioning effectively in a mainstream school. PRUs are confronted by a range of pressures as I have already outlined, culminating in what can best be described as a negative narrative, one which given the nature of the schools is very difficult to dispel. Staff who work in these schools therefore have a choice about how they respond to this, and ultimately they are successful when they adopt a critical view of their role, eschewing strict adherence to systems and structures and developing an understanding of reflection and informal learning (Eraut, 2004) as a means to capture in-the-moment learning opportunities for pupils in PRUs wherever and whenever they may occur. I prefer the more prosaic definition of phronesis offered by McGill, a former teacher, (2019) as it applies directly to teaching. He describes phronesis as,

> *... the internal database that teachers use on their feet daily to calculate thousands and thousands of idiosyncratic decisions that are unobserved but*

> *make a huge difference to what happens in the classroom. This is phronesis or professional wisdom.*
>
> (McGill, 2019, p. 76)

Applying McGill's definition to all staff within a PRU, phronesis permits an explanation of why certain things work without the need to explain or justify one's actions, or indeed capture it on a spreadsheet. Kinsella (2012) makes the point that though Schön's, "*conception of reflection is important, it does not go far enough"* (p. 37) and argues that reflection as conceived by Schön can be extended to the concept of professional or practical wisdom. This is more than just experiential learning; it is a process in which the learning from experience is internalised and becomes part of PRU staff members' unconscious repertoire and *"tacit knowledge"* (Eraut, 2004), as a means to develop as reflective practitioners in order to avoid escalating situations unnecessarily.

Biesta (2013) argues that achieving phronesis in a school is not straightforward. It comes with experience, but it is not something that all staff, nor all leaders, can achieve. He argues that teachers that have all the competences they need are *"useless"* if they are unable to judge "*which competence needs to be deployed when"* (Biesta, 2013, p. 130). This is particularly the case in PRUs. Developing an understanding of phronesis permits a clear distinction between uninformed common-sense approaches and informed common-sense approaches. Bussu and Galanti (2018) portray this as *"leadership beyond leaders"*,

> *…leadership emerges as a complex and collective activity, rather than the actions or choices of individual leaders.*
>
> (Bussu and Galanti, 2018, p. 356)

This focus on leadership as a complex and collective activity is important in evaluating the effectiveness of PRUs as it requires an understanding of leadership at all levels. In a potentially volatile environment, such as a PRU, the leader is the person best placed to make a decision in the moment when there is disorder. Additionally, there is more pressure to achieve academically in a mainstream environment, and this is not suitable for some students with SEND needs, in particular SEMH. Alternative Provision (AP) schools that accommodate NHS

referrals, predominantly related to mental health issues, most commonly raised this issue.

> *Why not all? ...In terms of secondary: a cohort that needs a different curriculum and approach. They can't cope with more maths; more English etc. and they will fail in that environment. There is another cohort who will cope really well if the level of pastoral care is there but will not cope if this is not in place.*
>
> **Headteacher, AP academy, all-through, South**
>
> (Mills and Thomson, 2018, p. 124)

While this could be construed as having low expectations of pupils, a professional judgement often needs to be taken about what individual pupils can cope with. This can bring PRUs into conflict with parents as they want their children reintegrated back into a "normal" school, or at least getting more homework and more discipline.

2.11 Reintegration – another paradox

Uppermost in the minds of most parents whose children have been excluded from school is how soon their children will be returning to mainstream school. Reintegration back into a mainstream, *"normal"* school is important for the parents as they feel they understand how it works, what their children can realistically hope to achieve there and, most importantly, they are not perceived as different to the majority of schoolchildren; they belong in a mainstream school. They do not see themselves as othered.

The literature on reintegration is not plentiful. Mills and Thomson (2018) report that no large-scale comparative case study research focused on reintegration and very little longitudinal research are to be found on this issue (p. 43). A report for the Centre of Social Justice supports this view, arguing that *"(t)he evidence base on the reintegration … back into mainstream is relatively thin."* (IntegratED, 2022, p. 70).

Given the importance placed upon this aspect of referral to PRUs both by parents and by pupils themselves, this is a serious omission. This reflects my own experience with the DfE, who advised me that they do not keep data on the numbers of pupils who are successfully reintegrated back to mainstream school (See

appendix 2). This was in response to my query on the numbers successfully reintegrated back to mainstream from PRUs and how success or failure of reintegration is measured. Given the high risk of pupils' reintegration breaking down, often because they find it difficult to cope with the mainstream school's less personalised approach, it is reasonable that this be explored. PRUs see reintegration as a key indicator of success, as do parents.

The omission of reintegration as a criterion by which to judge the success of a PRU is nonetheless unsurprising as it requires a degree of uniformity and compliance among mainstream schools that is difficult to imagine, particularly given the fractured nature of the schools system in the UK in the 2020s. Mainstream schools' ability to determine, individually, just how inclusive they wish to be is a stumbling block towards allowing rate of reintegration to become a means to judge a PRU's effectiveness. This was acknowledged in a report for the CSJ, Alternative Provision Quality Toolkit, in which evidence for mainstream schools' unwillingness to adopt authentically inclusive approaches was cited,

> *…if a local school does not have an inclusive culture, with staff who are skilled at meeting the needs of our pupils then attempts at transitioning into mainstream are unlikely to be successful in the long term.*
>
> (IntegratED, 2022, p. 70)

This is quite an admission. It allows any mainstream school to determine whether or not it wants to be inclusive. It suggests that their approach might be "exclusive" and not to be challenged, as a Commons Select hearing reported on challenges of reintegration from a PRU,

> "*There are very few successful reintegrations back into mainstream from a PRU setting. The lack of an inclusion agenda, unrealistic expectations and poor differentiation and support are the norm*."
>
> Submission from Lancashire County Council to Commons Select Committee
>
> (House of Commons Education Committee, 2018)

This underlines the fact that for many already disadvantaged pupils, the majority of those excluded, exclusion from a mainstream school becomes a *state of permanent exclusion*. Systemically they are excluded from "normal" schools, their chances of a

successful reintegration back into mainstream are low. This situation has been acknowledged in the CSJ report cited above (IntegratED, 2022) that highlights these concerns. In the findings is reported that in some parts of the country decisions on whether to prepare a pupil for reintegration, or as the report calls it, *"transition"*, is linked to *"perceptions of local schools' practice around inclusion and SEND support and behaviour management"* (IntegratED, 2022, p. 70). The implication of this statement is that there are areas where there is no culture of inclusion, no willingness on the part of mainstream schools to work actively to reintegrate school pupils into their schools, and therefore there is no point in pursuing reintegration. The report does not suggest how this situation can be changed.

This needs to be addressed, particularly in the context of the discussion around developing success criteria for PRUs. The DfE have identified some common elements that alternative provision should aim to achieve, including,

- *good academic attainment on par with mainstream schools – particularly in English, maths and science (including IT) – with appropriate accreditation and qualifications;*
- *that the specific personal, social and academic needs of pupils are properly identified and met in order to help them to overcome any barriers to attainment;*
- *improved pupil motivation and self-confidence, attendance and engagement with education; and*
- *clearly defined objectives, including the next steps following the placement such as reintegration into mainstream education, further education, training or employment.*

(Department for Education, 2013, p. 10)

The vagueness of these criteria was addressed in another report for the CSJ, Warming the Cold Spots of Alternative Provision: A manifesto for system improvement. The report criticises the *"paucity of national data by which to judge AP."* (2020, p. 70). Of the four criteria outlined above, only the first, on academic attainment, is measurable and is unrealistic given the risk factors attaching to those

who are excluded from school. The fourth suggests that clear objectives must be defined, in particular regarding reintegration into mainstream education. My reason for raising the issue of reintegration figures with the DfE was that this is a reliable measure and one most likely to indicate success; part two of my question was in relation to what might constitute a successful reintegration given that pupils might not survive in a mainstream school setting, not necessarily because of harsh or restrictive policies, but because approaches in mainstream school may not align with those taken in a PRU with their more person-centred approach. Again, the DfE does not hold this information (see appendix 2). Research by Mills and Thomson indicates that there was a degree of consensus between PRUs and mainstream schools about what might constitute successful reintegration including,

> *…the pupil has remained in mainstream schooling for at least two terms; improvements in pupil behaviour, most often shown through behavioural data collected by the schools; and academic progress.*
>
> (Mills and Thomson, 2018, p. 130)

It is understandable that schools would be reluctant to adopt such a definition of successful reintegration as a means to judge their overall effectiveness. Such a measure would have to be weighed against a school's priority to maximise academic outcomes, and acceptance of such a measure would mean it being reported to parents. This could negatively impact parents' willingness to send their children to a school if it was known that it was successful in accepting pupils from a PRU. The issue of what to do with PRUs, how to conceptualise them remains a problem in 2023. In its annual report for 2021/22 Ofsted again raised as an issue the lack of clarity about

> *…the purpose of AP and what constitutes good outcomes for children and young people in AP. The Department for Education should consider this when developing national standards and a new performance framework for AP. It should analyse current patterns of use to ensure that performance measures reflect the best pathways in and out of AP.*
>
> (Ofsted, 2022b, p. 68)

This call for a new framework for AP (PRUs) is welcome. There is a danger, however, that creating a completely separate framework for PRUs could drive an

even greater wedge between mainstream schools and alternative provision; this is at the heart of failed attempts to conceptualise them properly (see section 2.12). There is a strong likelihood that the calls for greater clarity by Ofsted will also founder without addressing PRUs as an integral component of the wider education system.

Interestingly, while the Timpson report (2019) in the context of rising rates of exclusion, references the reintegration of pupils excluded from school hardly at all, it was an issue experienced by Grunsell in the 1970s when it became clear to him that once he had taken on the pupils who had self-excluded there was little appetite for schools to have these pupils returned to them

> *…they didn't want their truants back... If they couldn't be sent back totally cured, they shouldn't be sent back at all.*
>
> (Grunsell, 1980a, p. 68)

This is an interesting admission so early on in the development of off-site provision and one that continues to influence thinking around reintegration. Grunsell is explicit that the approaches and the offer at his Centre were not preparing his young people for a return to mainstream schooling. The statistics for reintegration since PRUs were first introduced are not encouraging. Parsons (1999) reports that the percentage of excluded secondary school pupils returning to mainstream in 1994 was 14.8% (Parsons, 1999, p. 29), just after PRUs were formalised as a statutory requirement in local authority provision. In comparison, a Fisher Family Trust (FFT) education DataLab analysis shows that of those pupils excluded in year 8 (aged 12) in 2018/19 just over a quarter (26%) were attending mainstream schools in January 2021 (Thomson, 2023). While this is an improvement on the situation in the 1990s, it means that for three quarters of secondary pupils who have been permanently excluded, this becomes a *state* of permanent exclusion; they cannot find their way back into the security and familiarity of a mainstream normative environment with the attendant risk that this will negatively affect their life trajectory.

There are a number of compelling reasons why schools in the 2020s are reluctant to be party to agreements whereby excluded pupils have an automatic right after a given period to a return to their former or any other mainstream school. As previously

argued, they are subject to accountability measures – exam performance, school league tables - that deem these pupils to be *"unmarketable"* (Wright, et al., 2000, p. 105) in an educational system driven by financial as much as by educational demands. This begs the question of how seriously this issue is being taken within the current schools model. Reintegration remains a problematic area with many schools reluctant to entertain the prospect of accepting pupils who have been excluded from schools.

2.12 Outcomes and future prospects for pupils who attend PRUs

Grunsell's account of the setting up and running of the Centre is important as it highlights the challenges attached to ensuring some pupils have access to an educational experience that does not conform to the mainstream view of education. That he and his team were allowed to develop it in the way that it did is instructive even for today's more regulated and more scrutinised approach to alternative provision. For this is an aspect of the raison d'être of PRUs that has yet to be resolved. It is often reported that pupils who attend PRUs do poorly in national examinations and the statistics bear this out. The 2020 CSJ report notes that over three years *"only 4 per cent of pupils educated in state-maintained AP have achieved a grade 9–4 in maths and English* (Centre for Social Justice, 2020, p. 21), compared with 64% in all state-funded schools. This is a damning indictment of PRUs on the face of it, however it fails to consider how well those pupils who continue their education in PRUs might have fared had they remained in their mainstream setting. Gill (2017) makes the point that those most likely to be excluded are those with intersecting vulnerabilities whose needs are not being met in mainstream schools,

> *Put simply: rising exclusions could be partially explained by rising numbers of children with complex needs.*
>
> (Gill, 2017, p. 19)

Indeed, one of the categories of pupils most likely to be excluded identified by Gill is "low prior attainment",

> *… the average number of exclusions for the lowest-attaining pupils (is) 15 times that of the highest-attaining pupils...*
>
> (Gill, 2017, p. 17)

Thus, making any comparison with mainstream school performance is meaningless. This then raises the question as to how progress in PRUs and AP schools can be measured, if at all. Parents, certainly at the start or early on in their children's time at a PRU want them to go back to a mainstream school to satisfy their need to have them in a "normal" school. This is not to argue that all schools refuse to take pupils who have been excluded from other schools and have spent time in a PRU. Far from it, many schools do, but overall, there is a reluctance to do so willingly, as accepting a pupil with a record of challenging behaviour may pose a risk to the receiving mainstream school's examination results.

The issue for PRUs is that they are focused on *"immeasurable progress"* (Grunsell, 1980a, p. 60), progress that is bespoke to pupils, given their individual needs and contexts. This may for example be improved attendance from a very low baseline, in other words pupils deemed as non-attenders or school-refusers. The CSJ report acknowledges the need to develop *"national benchmarks tailored to AP schools* (2020, p. 56)*".* This is an acknowledgement that these schools should be judged differently to mainstream school. Early in the report there is a suggestion that pupils who attend alternative provision should be expected to do better in academic terms than they would have done in their former mainstream school from where they came. This is contradictory as it conflicts with the later view that alternative means of measuring progress need to be found, that may not allow for direct comparison. The crux of the problem is captured by Mills and Thomson who argue that while the education in PRUs tends to be better suited to the needs of their pupils, they do not prepare them for a return to mainstream school,

> *… teaching pupils in small class sizes in the AP setting can lead to higher attainment and improved behaviour levels, but this does not necessarily mean that they will be able to maintain these levels when they are reintegrated into mainstream provision.*
>
> (Mills and Thomson, 2018, p. 124)

This view is an admission that PRUs and mainstream are to some extent incompatible. Pupils' chances of reintegration may not be enhanced by their

attendance at a PRU and in some cases, dependent upon some mainstream schools' culture and overreliance on punitive measures, are virtually nil.

2.13 "Making the Difference" – bridging the gap between AP and mainstream

Gill (2017) and Timpson (2019) have argued that having certain risk factors make it more likely that a pupil will face permanent exclusion – see quote on page 22 (Gill, 2017, p. 14). Gill's Making the Difference is an important report in the analysis of the ongoing concerns about the impact of exclusion on the most vulnerable in society. These are, however, concerns that have been acknowledged and addressed unsuccessfully in the past. Previous reports designed to improve alternative provision such as The Back on Track Alternative Provision Pilots Final report (White, et al., 2012) make this point, identifying a broad range of circumstances and characteristics of young people attending alternative provision (see table 2.6), in line with those identified by Gill.

• permanently excluded from school or being in danger of exclusion	• young people from disadvantaged or challenging family backgrounds
• persistent absence from school including anxious school refusers	• young carers
• long gaps in education	• teenage parents and pregnant teenagers
• young people with SEN (diagnosed or not, SEN statement or not)	• those with health problems, especially mental health problems
• receiving education other than at school	• alcohol or drug misusers
• not engaging with school and learning	• looked after children
• new arrivals without a school place • those with complex social and emotional needs	• young people at risk of, or engaging in, offending behaviours

Table 2.6 Identified circumstances and characteristics of young people attending alternative provision (White, Martin, and Jeffes, 2012, p. 9)

Thus, timely and important as it is to have updates about who is excluded (Gill, 2017; Timpson, 2019; Centre for Social Justice, 2020) it begs the question, "so what?". We know this already and not a lot is changing. In the wake of her report, Gill has developed an approach to addressing the issue of exclusion that is helpful in that it seeks to develop working links between mainstream schools and alternative

provision to allow staff and expertise to be shared between the sectors. Her programme, *"The Difference Model"* (Gill, 2017, p. 37) is designed to improve mainstream schools' ability to manage the most challenging behaviour without having to resort to exclusion and to improve outcomes for those pupils in PRUs who are already studying and preparing for examinations. This is to be achieved by recruiting "*exceptional*" teachers to work in PRUs, upskilling these by appointing them into leadership roles in these schools with high level training and then routing them back into mainstream having acquired the skills and experience to help stem the flow of exclusions (see figure 2.1).

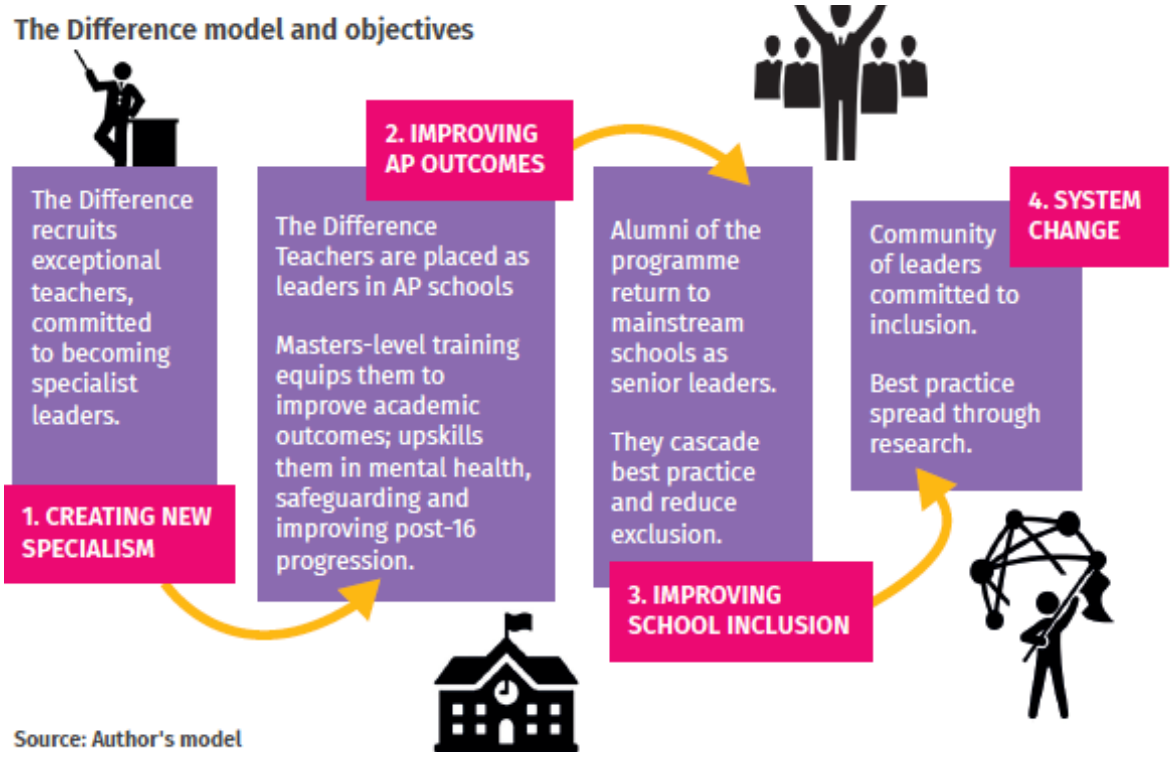


Figure 2. 1 The Difference model and objectives (Gill, 2017, p. 38)

While this is an ambitious and well considered programme that in practical terms seeks to address the persistent calls to make PRUs more acceptable as educational establishments (Timpson, 2019), there remains the issue of recruiting enough people with the calibre and the desire to make it work. An article in the Guardian in December 2022 reported as "catastrophic" a drop of 20% in the number of graduates in England (The Guardian, 2022).

More importantly however is the fact that Gill's is another programme that seeks to address the problems of exclusion of vulnerable and disadvantaged pupil within the paradigm of the existing education system. I argue that this is not enough as it is the whole education system needs restructuring to ensure mainstream schools accept responsibility for the iniquities in the system that lead to working class pupils being disproportionately excluded. Gill's model is at least seeking to locate the problem jointly with the mainstream school, not just the pupil. It follows on from the measures taken from the Taylor Report (2012) to permit Initial Teacher Training (ITT) to take place in PRUs and to allow these to become teaching schools, but the intervening years have seen the rate of exclusions increase as well as accusations of off-rolling by some schools. Off-rolling is the illegal removal of a pupil from the school roll in the interests of the school without a formal, permanent exclusion or by encouraging a parent to remove their child from the school roll. Gill's report (Gill, 2017) comprehensively lays bare the issues which point to an education system which continues to exclude those pupils deemed most vulnerable. What she fails to do is to locate the problem within the wider framework of an education system which is structured in such a way as to systematically disadvantage the vulnerable, the working classes and minority ethnic pupils. Reay broadens the debate to take up the wider issue of "*… the symbolic power of the private sector that continues to be held up as embodying all that is best in English education."* (2017, p. 176). I now go on to address the influence of private schools and grammar schools in the next section.

2.14 Class and ethnicity

There are no figures available for class representation in PRUs, it not being a protected characteristic, thus it is important to recognise as closely as possible what is meant by this category, given it is widely used (Reay, 2017; Brown, 2018). Although for the purposes of this study I use free school meals (FSM) as a proxy for working class (see section 1.1), I feel it is worth exploring the notion of class more closely. Class has become more difficult to define in line with the growing complexity of modern society. Draut (2018) makes the argument that working class can be defined by occupation, education or income and, citing Zweig, are people who have little power or authority in work or as citizens (Draut, 2018, p. 1). In terms of education, they might be assumed not to have qualifications much beyond that

expected of compulsory schooling, and incomes are volatile and close to the minimum wage. Such approaches to defining working class, however, are vague, and there are examples of people who regard themselves as working class who are in positions of power in their employment, earn well above the minimum wage and are educated beyond compulsory schooling.

Complicating this definition process is the issue of race and ethnicity. Snoussi and Mompelat (2019) acknowledge the difficulties and the dangers of defining working class too narrowly as this can lead to unnecessary divisions between, for example, *"white"* working class and *"ethnic or migrant"* working class in mainstream media and political discourse. I favour their 4P model - *power; precarity; prejudice; and place* - to represent what is the modern-day working class. The lives of working-class people, they argue, are defined by: a lack of *power* and voice; a shared sense of *precarity* with no safety net in the case of hardship; a shared experience of race and class *prejudice* from school to the labour market, including when navigating public services; a diminishing of *place* as a strong resource in people's lives, both in terms of identity and in terms of networks and relationships (Snoussi and Mompelat, 2019, p. 4). Their model more closely represents the "working class" of today and in relation to this study best describes the majority of parents whose children are excluded from school as identified by Gill (2017) and Timpson (2019). They are society's most vulnerable and disproportionately of minority ethnic heritage. Although referenced heavily in their report, 'We Are Ghosts' Race, Class and Institutional Prejudice (2019), it seems to me that poverty or risk of poverty is an omission, falling as it does under the heading of *precarity,*

> *…public policy has punished 'poverty' by pathologizing and blaming working-class families for their perceived lifestyles and social positions.*
>
> (Snoussi and Mompelat, 2019, p. 32)

Middle class parents, as well as having the confidence to engage with teachers because most teachers tend to be from a middle-class background, can also provide extra support for their children, thus widening the education gap between social classes even in the same school. This principle of middle-class privilege pervading the education system is supported by a literature review commissioned by the DfE

from 2019 which presents evidence of *"middle class privilege"* inherent in the education system as a contributory factor in the disproportionate exclusion figures. It cites a study by Kulz (2015, p. 7) who found evidence that,

> *… a slight majority of head teachers and exclusion officers felt class discrimination or middle class privilege were at least partly to blame for disproportionate exclusion numbers. … this was most commonly talked about in terms of middle class parents having an advantage in the education marketplace due to their accent, assumed knowledge of the education system and the ability to seek redress.*
>
> (Department for Education, 2019, p. 17)

This admission that class plays a role in the exclusion figures is important and validates the arguments of Harris and Goodall of working-class parents being disadvantaged because they lack the *"vocabulary of teachers"* (2008, p. 280)

Reay strangely neglects to discuss alternative provision, or PRUs. I found this omission odd given that this might be considered to be the rung beneath even what she describes as the *"bog-standard comprehensives"* or *"sink schools"* (Reay 2017, p61) where, she argues, most working-class pupils attend, and which would seem to offer the clearest evidence that the education system favours the middle classes. Reay's omission of PRUs from her critique of the British education system is one that I am seeking to address in this study. It highlights what I consider to be a gap in the literature about PRUs. While they are revisited regularly in terms of government sponsored reports, usually in the context of increasing rates of exclusion, there is a paucity of literature about PRUs within the context of the wider education system, how they serve to alleviate pressure on mainstream schools, allowing them to function in an environment more attuned to market philosophy than educational philosophy. This serves to underline the almost ephemeral nature of these schools, as if they could be wished away, not exist.

A series of reports since the Elton report (1989) repeatedly shows that those most likely to face exclusion and referral to a PRU are working-class pupils and those marginalised groups in society, those most likely to have complex needs, or those

who happen to be of Black African-Caribbean heritage, the latter at a ratio of between 3:1 and 5:1 since the early 70s (Coard, 1971; Gill, 2017; Timpson, 2019). Broadly speaking, Reay's contention is right, that education as it is currently conceived, *"exacerbates, rather than mitigates, social class inequalities in attainment outcomes"* (Reay, 2017, p. 74). Both Gill's and Reay's general analysis of the iniquities within the education system are compelling and reflect my own experience. The majority of pupils who attend PRUs are from working-class communities, often experience poverty and have complex social, emotional and mental health (SEMH) needs, and other complicating factors; with BAC pupils among the most heavily overrepresented. Reay in reporting working-class parent views, acknowledges the attitudes many of them had towards their own education,

> *Working-class parents, in particular mothers, regularly used words such as horrible, 'like a nightmare', scared, terrified, embarrassing, and petrified when talking about past and present experiences of education*.
>
> (Reay, 2017, p. 73)

Reay here is explaining the psychological barriers in place before the children of working-class parents even start school. She presents this situation as a product of the existing class-based system and shows how clearly the state education system systematically advantages middle-class pupils and perpetuates the inequalities inherent in it. Evans and Giroux (2015) locate the predicament of poor and vulnerable families within the wider framework of a society ideologically defined as neoliberal. Their categorisation of these families as belonging to "*disposable communities*" (p54) as a result of neoliberalist policies provides a more reliable framework within which to explore their plight. They see little hope for these families in a society which categorises the communities in which they live as "*disposable"*, where the priorities of the education offer, at one time offering hope, now have different, more sinister priorities,

> *Education in disposable communities now* often *involves as many police as teachers, for schools that once served as pathways to a better life* now *act as pipelines to prison.*
>
> (Evans and Giroux, 2015, p. 54)

Reay also sees fit to reference neoliberalism as a catalyst for unfairness and divisiveness,

> *… under contemporary neoliberalism, divisive and unfair perspectives have become enshrined in educational policy rather than being challenged and changed.*
>
> (Reay, 2017, p. 47)

The literature supports the view that the educational system as it is structured represents a long-term institutional failure to provide a high quality educational experience to all and it is the most vulnerable, working class and minority ethnic families that have over time been denied this experience (Grunsell, 1980b; Mills and Thomson, 2018; Gill, 2017; Timpson, 2019). Expanding upon the theme of poverty and vulnerability in a neoliberal society, Evans and Giroux go as far as to argue that ideologically neoliberalism is not compatible with supporting the disadvantaged,

> *…interventions that might benefit the disadvantaged are perversely deemed to be irresponsible acts that prevent individuals from learning to deal with their own suffering – even though…. the forces that condition their plight remain beyond their control, let alone their ability to influence them in any way.*
>
> (Evans and Giroux, 2015, p. 50)

They go on to argue that these "*disadvantaged*" also face possible punishment. They cite Garcia (2014),

> *People are not only poor, their poverty and suffering have literally been deemed crimes by the elite class of sociopaths running the place.* (p57)

Reay argues very powerfully that working class pupils' chances of succeeding are slim, citing a range of issues such as grammar schools and private schools, where working-class pupils are underrepresented, and where even those that do make it find it difficult to fit in,

> *Segregated education of all complexions, from private schools to grammar schools, does not allow for … mixing between the social classes. The very few working-class children in private schools...(and)… in the top sets of grammar schools, have to either fade into the background and become invisibly working class or reinvent themselves as middle class.*
>
> (Reay, 2017, p. 146)

She argues that even in good or outstanding *comprehensive* schools, working class pupils are at a disadvantage with middle class pupils as a rule finding themselves in top sets while working class pupils are in lower sets.

The clearest evidence of the advantages enjoyed by the middle classes to be had in private or grammar school education are to be found in a report by The Sutton Trust and the Social Mobility Commission (see figure 2.2). They looked at a wide range of professions, including individuals with the most political power and influence, those with the most wealth and the highest earnings, people working at the top of the country's key institutions and the individuals playing leading roles in our cultural life. Their findings clearly show the advantages built into the current system of schooling in the UK.

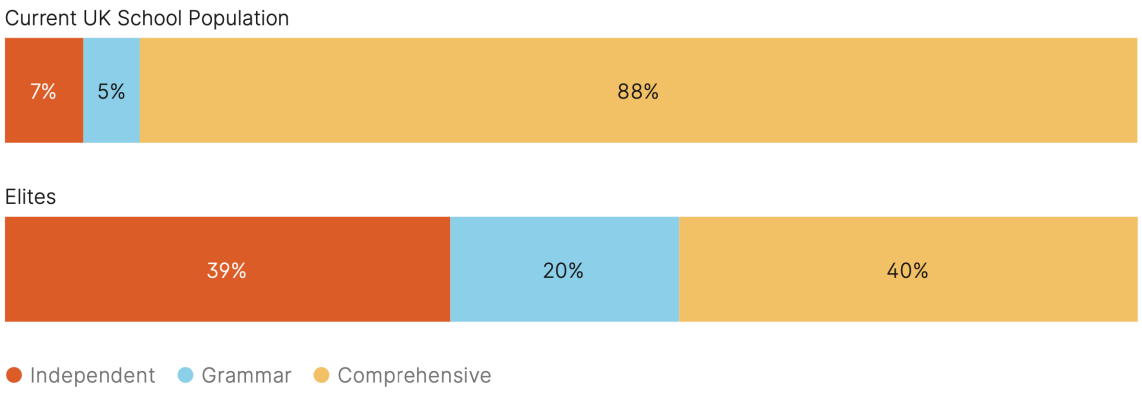


Figure 2. 2 School type, attended by the elite compared to the current UK school population (The Sutton Trust, Social Mobility Commission, 2019)

These figures highlight the inbuilt inequalities in the system with most working-class families unable to access education in either grammar schools or private schools. 7% of the current UK population attend private schools whereas 39% of those positions in society deemed to be elite are occupied by people who have in the past attended private schools. 5% of the population currently attend grammar schools while 20% of elite positions are occupied by people who have formerly attended grammar schools. This compares significantly with the fact that 88% of the current school population attend comprehensive schools with only 40% of elite positions occupied by people who have attended these schools. Thus, it is far more likely to

find judges, politicians or surgeons who have attended private school and to a lesser extent grammar schools than have attended comprehensive schools.

2.15 Disproportionate exclusion of pupils of ethnic minority heritage

Gill (2017) reports on the disproportionate representation of certain ethnic groups in PRUs. She echoes the findings of an Education Policy Institute (EPI) report that,

> *Black Caribbean pupils are educated in PRUs at nearly four times (3.9) the rate we would expect, given the proportion they make of the national pupil population (DFE 2017c)*
>
> (Gill, 2017, p. 18)

These are staggering findings; effectively those who are punished already by virtue of their vulnerable status, or who are of Black African-Caribbean heritage, are more likely to be excluded from school and find themselves in a PRU, a school often deemed as not a "normal" school. This however, is not a new issue. It interested me to see just how many of the concerns raised by Reay (2017) regarding exclusion and supported by Gill's analysis (2017) had been raised before. This was one of them. This was explored by Wright et al (1999) almost twenty years earlier. The overrepresentation of Black African-Caribbean pupils in the exclusion figures was almost identical, and they acknowledged at the time that it was not a new issue. They cite reports from Coard (1971), Tattum (1982) and the Centre for Racial Equality (1985) to support this view (Wright, et al., 2000, p. 7). The issue was raised in 1971 with the publication of How the West Indian Child is made Educationally Sub-normal in the British School System (1971) by Bernard Coard. Coard, a highly influential figure in the Black African-Caribbean community and an activist who had at one time been deputy prime minister of Grenada for three days following his involvement in a bloodless coup in 1979, was influenced by the likes of Fidel Castro and Daniel Ortega and drew attention to the discriminatory removal of BAC children from mainstream school and their placement in schools for the educationally subnormal (ESN),

> 1. *There are very large numbers of our West Indian children in schools for the Educationally Subnormal — which is what ESN means.*
> *2. Those children have been wrongly placed there.*

3. Once placed in these schools, the vast majority never get out and return to normal schools.

4. They suffer academically and in their job prospects for life because of being put in these schools.

5. The authorities are doing very little to stop this scandal.

(Coard, 1971, p. 5)

His pamphlet is far-reaching in its impact on the issue of BAC experiences in schools, particularly on the effects beyond school age. It is regularly referenced in the context of the consistently high rates of BAC exclusions that in the 2020s remain well above that of the norm. Although he references the high rates of attendance of BAC pupils in ESN schools, it remains the case that this ratio now applies to exclusions and attendance in PRUs in the 2020s. So, 50 years after its publication, the issue remains one that has not yet been resolved within the education system. This surely represents a clear case of discriminatory practice and institutional failure. The figures over time bear this out. The Elton report (1989) reported that in inner London,

> *…pupils of Afro-Caribbean origin are proportionately more likely to be excluded than whites or Asians…, in suburban schools where there were fewer Afro-Caribbean pupils as a proportion of the total, they were even more likely to be excluded than in inner-city…* (p158)

In 2004 a report by GHK Consulting et al The Reintegration of Children Absent, Excluded or Missing from School on behalf of the DCSF reported that, *"Black Caribbean, Black African and Black Other pupils are four times more likely to be excluded than White pupils…"* (2004, p. 79). Gill's report (2017) comprehensively reports the issues which point to an education system which systematically excludes pupils of African-Caribbean heritage at a consistently higher rate than white pupils with a concomitant risk of lifetime exclusion and possible imprisonment. Black African-Caribbean Boys being nearly four times more likely to be permanently excluded from school (Gill, P 18) leaves them more at risk of going to prison.

Lessons are not being learned. What we see is a pattern of exclusion affecting the same groups: the working-class; the most vulnerable; and certain ethnic minority

groups. The successive reports are clear that this must change and yet there is little evidence that anything has changed. This in itself is a clear indication that the education system, as it is currently constructed, is incapable of reforming itself and addressing these inequalities effectively.

2.16 The misuse of PRUs

In the context of the current debate about high rates of exclusion and the often inappropriate use of PRUs it is important to reference pupils' sense of injustice and the lack of clarity about their length of stay in these units. In his report, Elton found,

> *…they feel rejected and resentful.... They stay in the units for different lengths of time. Some of these pupils never return to ordinary schools, but remain in limbo until the end of compulsory schooling. We consider that the aim in almost every case should be to return the pupil to a mainstream school as soon as possible. We recognise, however, that this can be very difficult in practice, particularly in the case of pupils in off-site units.*
>
> (Department for Education and Skills, 1989, p. 154)

There are two conflicting points made in the second half of this quote, written in 1989, which the literature over time will show have still not been reconciled: firstly, an acknowledgement that some pupils staying in these 'units' *never return* to mainstream school and, secondly, the stated aim that almost every pupil in these units *should* return to mainstream school as soon as possible. This issue has been addressed by different governments over the last 30 years with little success (Department for Education and Skills, 1989; Steer, 2005; Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2008; Department for Education, 2012; Timpson, 2019; Department for Education, 2016). It was addressed by Grunsell (1980a) during the 1970s when we can, with a reasonable degree of confidence see the start of the development of off-site units as a means to manage and control challenging pupils. In taking on the pupils to the Centre, there was an initial expectation that they would return to their original schools within a year. This did not happen, *"We began to wonder … whether the schools really wanted their truants returned at all"* (Grunsell,

1980a, p. 63). Grunsell found that the schools did not want them back as they felt unable to control their behaviour in school. It was clear that his experimental approach was one that flew in the face of the approach taken in the schools at the time; schools felt unable to adapt their practice. It remains a problem in the 2020s. As I have argued in section 2.9, there was a clear expectation that PRUs, as schools, would be short term, diagnostic and focused on reintegration. As such this suggests that they have a rehabilitative function for pupils for whom reintegration back into a mainstream school was a realistic prospect, with a focus on addressing the behavioural concerns that led to the initial exclusion, or, following an assessment, a judgement made that mainstream school is not a viable option, in which case a specialist school would be sought to meet the identified, specific needs of each child,

> *They would offer a breathing space, specialist diagnosis and an individually tailored programme aimed at reintegration. In certain cases, pupils might be prepared for entry to a different school from the one they had previously attended.*
>
> (Department for Education and Skills, 1989, p. 157)

The Elton Report here envisages PRUs fulfilling an interim role to allow for processes to help pupils adjust their behaviour to help them manage in mainstream school or find alternative specialist placements. It is clear from this that PRUs were not seen as a long-term solution for pupils excluded from mainstream school. That in many cases they have become just that is a result of political expedience over the years since then as the mainstream school sector has struggled to manage behaviour while adapting to a range of policy changes and ideologically driven innovations over the years. Local Management of Schools (LMS) towards the end of the 1980s was one of these, and academisation and free schools programme following the election of a conservative-led government in 2010 another. Academisation removes many schools from local authority oversight and forces them to survive as Reay (2017) argues, *"…against a back-drop of ever increasing*

inequalities, the entrenchment of neoliberalism and class domination." (Reay, 2017, p. 185).

Elton's vision of short-term placement schools has not been realised in spite of the series of reports that have followed his. The reason for this and which is not addressed in any of the literature is that mainstream schools have struggled to adjust to policy changes – witness pressures of budget cuts (TES Magazine, 2022) – PRUs have had to adapt to the changes these schools have implemented which have often led to an increase in exclusions. PRUs continue to operate as pressure valves to allow schools to deal with these changes, often taking on pupils with special educational needs or disabilities (SEND), for which they might not be suited. The issue of the rationale for PRUs is visited regularly by various governments of the day. The Back on Track (2010) report argued there should be,

> *…enhanced efforts to ensure that alternative provision, in its many varied forms is appropriately conceptualised, understood and promoted…"*
>
> (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2010, p. 134)

> *"Well considered AP can be appropriate and transformational for pupils who, for a number of reasons, need specialist support; AP should be viewed as an integral component of the education system – not, as is still too often the case, a peripheral adjunct.*
>
> (Centre for Social Justice, 2018a, p. 12)

This repeated failure to conceptualise PRUs properly lies at the heart of the problem of school exclusions. It leaves these schools languishing on the periphery of the education system, often lauded for the excellent work they do, but too often regarded as a *"peripheral adjunct"* as reported by the CSJ.

2.17 Parent Voice

A study by Lareau (2014) compares how parents from middle class and from working class backgrounds generally respond differently to the institution of the school with regard to their children's schooling. The former present as confident in their dealings with the school, questioning decisions made by teachers, while

working class parents lack the confidence to do this, assuming a teacher-knows-best attitude. She argues that both may express similar beliefs about good parenting, but their behaviour is different. Comparing parent-child, paired beliefs and actions which she describes as a *"cultural logic"* (2014, p. 935) she posits that working class parents are more deferential in their dealings with the school; their voice is muted. She argues that it is important to focus on class in terms of how it shapes world views and access to economic and educational resources.

Martin and Vincent (1999) support this view, arguing that the expression of parent voice in schools is often heavily controlled and managed by the schools to limit the extent to which parents can engage in authentic "dialogue" with the schools. Their definition of *"parental voice"* focuses on the relationship between school and parents and the degree to which parents can intervene effectively. They contend that having a choice of schools for their children does not bring *"opportunities for voice",* the nature and extent of the relationship between home and school being determined by the school (Martin and Vincent, 1999, p. 136). The degree to which parent voice is controlled is heavily dependent on class.

The expectation of working-class parents, is that their child, once entered at a young age into the education system, be provided with "an education". As a headteacher I encountered many families whose understanding of an education was limited to the outcomes they might attain at the end of their time in secondary school. Their concept of education aligns with Freire's *"banking concept"* (Freire, 1993, p. 53)*;* their children attend school until compulsory leaving age having been *given* an education, but their understanding of what this means is restricted; they have a hope and sometimes an expectation that the education their children receive will prepare them for a successful future of meaningful employment, and for some families help their children escape a cycle of deprivation that may have dogged generations of that family (Reay, 2017). There are of course many individual success stories of working-class people making good in life, and often as a result of their talents being recognised and encouraged by a teacher combined with a determination to overcome the odds. Diane Reay herself is an example of this; before becoming a

Cambridge University professor, she had to develop an awareness as a young child from a working-class background of what she needed to do to become successful,

> *I learned as a small child I had to work at least twice as hard as the middle-class children to achieve the same result. When I did show ambition – to go to LSE [the London School of Economics and Political Science] to be a political researcher – I was told it wasn't appropriate.*
>
> (The Guardian, 2017)

Unlike the parents of middle-class pupils who have the confidence critically to engage with their children's education through access to greater resources allowing them to interact more effectively with schools (Reay, 2017, p. 147), many working-class families can only hope that by the time their children leave school they are equipped to join the workforce or specialise by going to college to take a vocational course or, less commonly, carry on with A-levels and possibly aim for a university placement. The range of expectations varies. Once the new reality of exclusion and referral to a PRU is thrust upon these parents, there comes a need to gain a clearer and fuller understanding of the system itself in order to get their children back on track within this system. For the first time many realise that the automatic assumption that their children be educated in a mainstream, or '*normal'* school, is questioned.

2.18 The Parents – are they hard to reach or are they also excluded?

A study carried out on behalf of the National College for School Leadership (NCSL) defined hard-to-reach parents as,

> *…those who have very low levels of engagement with school; do not attend school meetings nor respond to communications; and exhibit high levels of inertia in overcoming perceived barriers to participation.*

This is a highly subjective view which places the onus firmly on the families to comply with school expectations. The report goes on to include a quote from a deputy headteacher of a secondary school,

> *Our hard-to-reach parents are a mixture, the unemployed, the low income, [English as an additional language] parents, parents of poor attendees. They are non-responsive.*
>
> (Campbell, 2011, p. 10)

It fails to acknowledge the valid reasons that some families might have for not engaging with schools. It does not consider that the school itself might be hard to reach. A persistent theme throughout my time as head of a PRU was parents/carers either not having a clear understanding about the process of exclusion or feeling harshly or unjustly treated, or both. Their voices were marginalised. Many parents felt confused and aggrieved at how they had been treated and it often was left to PRU staff to explain in clear terms that their child would not be returning to the school from which they had been excluded, and nor was reintegration a straightforward process, that it would not be automatic, nor happen in a matter of weeks. Reay emphasises repeatedly the degree to which the voice of middle-class parents advocates on behalf of their children at the expense of working-class voice. This makes her omission of PRUs (see section 2.18) from her critique of the education system all the more puzzling and is a further indication of the voices of these parents being ignored or silenced.

Based on the characteristics of those pupils excluded from school (Gill, 2017), it is safe to argue that the majority are from working-class backgrounds. It is not safe however to argue that all are hard-to-reach families. Feiler (2010) references three main definitions of hard-to-reach families from a study carried out by Doherty et al (2004),

> ***Minority Groups**. The traditionally under-represented groups, the marginalized, disadvantaged or socially excluded; for example minority ethnic families, travellers and asylum seekers*
> ***Slipping through the net**. The overlooked, the invisible or individuals unable to articulate their needs. This conceptualization includes those who fall just outside the statutory or usual remit of a social provider, or those whose needs may not be sufficiently acute to warrant access to a service*
> ***The service resistant**. Those unwilling to engage with service providers, the disaffected or over-targeted. This definition includes families (known to agencies such as social services) that are distrustful of service providers.*
>
> (Feiler, 2010, p. 37)

These groups are heavily represented in PRU communities. They are marginalised, voiceless groups within society and this is reflected in the school system in which they find themselves at a loss to understand how their children come to be excluded and referred to alternative provision. Feiler's definitions align with Gill's (2017) findings about who gets excluded from school - the poor, those with SEND and family problems, those with poor mental health (2017, p. 16); Cole notes, "*the intransigent social problems that intertwine with school exclusion, (are) notably poverty, family breakdown, housing shortages and crime*" (Cole, 2015). These are not exclusively problems of working-class communities, but the families of excluded pupils are more likely have these problems and to fall into each of the categories of hard-to-reach as defined by Feiler.

Martinot (2003) posits that the label "minorities" for those families of minority ethnic status most likely to have a child excluded does a disservice to them. These are in fact families that have been "*minoritized*" (Martinot, 2003, p. 147), he argues; they are lacking in voice and power within an education system that is constructed according to the needs and wishes of the majoritarian white middle class population in the UK and discriminates systemically against them. He argues, in reference to the African-American civil rights movement,

> *… a minority is the effect of a process of minoritization by a majoritarian group that reconstitutes itself as the majority through its act of exclusion and minoritization. Within the institutionalisation of civil rights, the process of minoritization became a substitute for the process of racialisation…*
>
> (Martinot, 2003, p. 147)

Within the structure of the education system, the literature shows it is the white middle class *majoritarian* group that influences how it is organised and run. As referenced earlier, Reay (2017) convinces in her deconstruction of the education system as a whole and how it promotes the interests of the white middle classes. The casualties of that bias are those minoritised families and their children who fail to fit into the system and its broadly middle-class aspirations for them. That the education system in the UK is stacked against these minoritised families is something that they may be tacitly aware of, but they lack the power and voice to

adjust the system in their favour. Crozier (2000) and Reay (2017) articulate the different starting points and approaches taken by parents, dependent upon class,

> *Middle-class parents have been seen as more visible and overtly interventionist, whilst working class parents appear to be passive in educational matters, only making themselves visible at parents' evenings.*
>
> (Crozier, 2000, p. 47)

This is an unfair judgement of working-class or poorer families. Lareau's (2014, p. 936) notion of *"social logic"* in section 2.21 is useful here in recognising that working class parents may have the same beliefs about parenting as middle-class families, but lack the social capital and resources to engage with the school on an equal footing, so they then *appear* to be passive. While it is outside the scope of this study to research the development of critical consciousness, there is a need to reference Freire (1971) who argues in favour of a need to awaken critical consciousness in these families and to *"name (their) world, to change it"* (Freire, 1993, p. 96), that is to open a bold debate on behalf of and including these vulnerable families, so that they are allowed space and time to locate themselves within the education system and to understand the degree to which their voices are *not* being heard, and then begin to consider how they can best make it work for them. In the course of this study, I will explore how PRUs might exploit their unique position working with families to support them actively and explicitly to enhance their voice in a manner that allows them to *"name their world".* To begin with, it is important to assess how these families see themselves within the structure of the education system with little comprehension of their plight, to awaken them to the extent of these injustices and to allow them to give voice to the injustices, or as Freire (1970) argues,

> *Those who have been denied their primordial right to speak their word must first reclaim this right and prevent the continuation of this dehumanizing aggression.*
>
> (Freire, 1993, p. 69)

A study by Vulliamy and Webb (2010) explored the effects of placing social work trained support workers in secondary schools, that were experiencing relatively high rates of pupil disaffection and exclusions. This study sought the views of teachers, parents and pupils of having these support workers. The outcomes were generally

positive, a major factor being parents' perception of the support workers as independent and neutral. They were, *"perceived as knowing all about the school rules and expectations but not instrumental in upholding them."* (Vulliamy and Webb, 2010, p. 284). Thus, parents perceived as hard-to-reach had someone they could trust to mediate their involvement with the school, giving voice to their concerns in a manner they had not been accustomed to previously. Along similar lines, Day (2013) reports on "hard-to-reach" parents feeling outside the system and becoming dependent on "*the positive qualities of key individuals",* viz. individual members of staff with whom they can relate to help them navigate the institution of the school (Day, 2013, p. 46). In both cases, this sort of advocacy can be a powerful source of support and indeed this is one recommendation of both House of Commons Education Committee (House of Commons Education Committee, 2018, p. 5) and the Timpson Report (2019), the latter reporting that,

> *…schools and LAs (should) … should clarify the powers of LAs to act as advocates for vulnerable children… who are at risk of leaving their school, by exclusion or otherwise.*
>
> (Timpson, 2019, p. 63)

This would be an interesting development if it were accepted but remains dependent on schools' willingness to support such an approach. In the latter case, it is often dependent on the capacity of *"key individuals"* to bypass schools' systems and show compassion for pupils whose behaviour is deemed unacceptable. The power of mainstream schools to resist such developments is considerable, however, and it would remain to be seen just how effective they would be with schools now more detached from local authority influence than ever before.

A study by MacLeod et al (2013), exploring levels of school engagement of parents of children excluded from school, cites Gillies' (2005, P839) commentary on the *"pathologization of working class parenting"* (2005, 838). Gillies' argument is that, based on expectations about how to bring their children into line and to behave in school, the inevitable solution to disadvantage appears to lie in getting, *"working class parents….to raise middle class subjects"* (Macleod, et al., 2013, p. 391). It is evident from Feiler's definitions provided above that PRUs are overrepresented in

terms of parents labelled as “hard to reach”. From a PRU perspective I do not believe that this label, “hard to reach” defined the parents I met. In my professional experience many of these families, on coming to the PRU found, for the first time possibly, a welcoming, open approach which helped overcome the hard-to-reach label. As Day argues, we sought,

> …*to reframe “hard to reach” as “how to reach” …. shifting from a deficit view of parents’ difficulties towards parents and professionals shaping change together.*
>
> (Day, 2013, p. 37)

That they are mainly vulnerable families is well documented and Feiler’s categorisations of those families are useful in that they identify as groups who have traditionally been viewed as hard to reach when in fact these are minoritised groups, perceived to be beyond the reach schools because they lack the social capital to engage with the schools effectively. Harris and Goodall (2008) argue that these factors impact on parents’ willingness to engage with schools. They argue, for example, citing Crozier and Davies (2007) that,

> *…many parents from ethnic groupings know little about the education system. Such parents are often seen as indifferent or difficult and are considered by schools to be ‘hard to reach’”.*
>
> Single parents, they go on to argue,
>
> *feel very restricted …. and tend to be the least responsive to invitations and requests from school.*
>
> (Harris and Goodall, 2008, p. 280)

Many of the parents and pupils I interviewed expressed a sense of bewilderment and confusion about the process that led to the exclusion of the child. Whilst acknowledging that the behaviour of the child may in the end have warranted exclusion, they often felt the schools had been unwilling to help them as parents in managing the behaviour which they too were experiencing with their child at home. Many of these, “*‘hard to reach’ parents felt the school itself was hard to reach.’”* (Harris and Goodall, 2008, p. 284). Overall, these families were on the wrong side of a power-imbalance.

2.19 On the wrong side of a power-imbalance

When asked about pending appeals to their children's exclusions parents often say that there is no point, that the governors will "always back the school", a view reflected in the Timpson Report (2019),

> *…parents and carers do not always have the understanding or capability to engage fully. Many parents and carers reported that the (appeals) process felt difficult and weighted against their child, particularly given the time limits they have to challenge a head teacher's decision to exclude.*
>
> (Timpson, 2019, p. 89)

This is an example of how working-class voice is muted in a process that in theory should provide protection against unfair practice. It is often the case that statutory duties are overlooked, or the system is gamed as with, for example, the Fair Access Protocol (FAP). All LAs are required to have this in place under the School Admission Code in partnership with local schools, to ensure that, outside the normal end-of-year admissions round, unplaced children, especially the most vulnerable, including those excluded from school, are offered a school place as quickly as possible. However, the House of Commons Education Committee (2018) referenced concerns about their effectiveness, with evidence presented to the committee of the FAP being,

> *…set up … to protect schools and enable (schools) to put up barriers to taking children back, it becomes a way of keeping children in alternative provision.*
>
> (House of Commons Education Committee, 2018, p. 22)

This is a clear example of schools gaming the system. The distributed, fractured system of schools as exists in the UK today, with an increasing number removed from LA oversight, places the power over rejecting or accepting a pupil from a PRU firmly with the school. Lawrence (2011) outlines what needs to be in place for reintegration from a PRU to a mainstream school to be successful, including,

> *Inclusive ethos and approach in mainstream (and) close and effective working relationship between the PRU and mainstream*
>
> (Lawrence, 2011, p. 224)

She outlines a number of key elements that need to be in place to ensure reintegration is successful - see table 2.7.

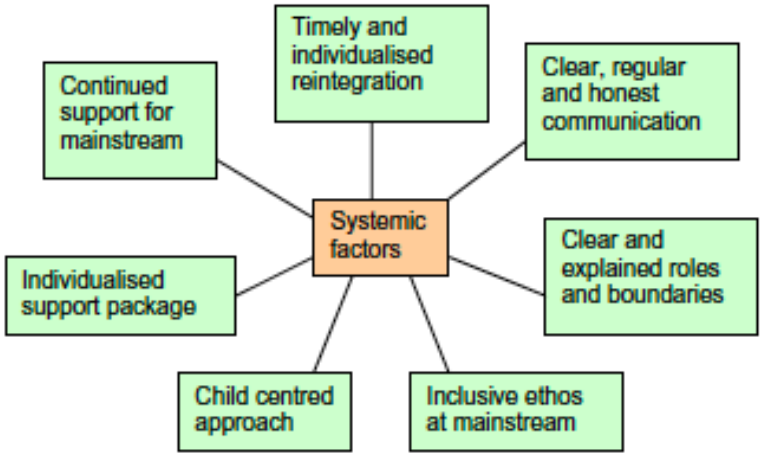


Table 2.7 Systemic factors supporting effective reintegration (Lawrence, 2011)

Her model calls for *"clear, regular and honest communication"* between PRUs and mainstream schools and requires mainstream schools to have an inclusive ethos which, as I have argued previously, is not always the case. Even supported by an advocate and backed for reintegration by the PRU, a school can avoid accepting a pupil from a PRU. An ISOS Partnership report, Alternative Provision Market Analysis (2018, p. 80) has identified what constitutes key elements of an effective fair access protocol system (see table 2.8) and there are clear overlaps with Lawrence's model. Both are calling for openness and honesty between the sectors in order to give pupils excluded from school a real chance.

Key elements of an effective fair access system

1. **Transparency** – processes informed by a regular flow of robust evidence, underpinned by clear documentation, with the right, holistic information about a child considered.
2. **Fairness** – so schools know that every school is taking their fair share and participating equally.
3. **Authority to take decisions** – those who represent schools have the power to make decisions at the meeting so that action can be taken swiftly.
4. **Regularity** – regular meetings, often between two and four weeks apart, but more frequently where necessary, to be in a position to act quickly.
5. **Area-based** – so schools have a collective responsibility for a "patch", especially within larger cities or shires.
6. **Peer support and challenge** – colleagues able to work with one another, to "look each other in the eye", and to be in a position to moderate each other's requests ("if that pupil were in my school …").
7. **No "back-doors"** – the panel is *the* decision-making process. There are not ways to circumvent or undermine the panel's decisions.
8. **Child-centred** – what is right for the child is the guiding principle, with a focus on finding the right immediate and long-term solution.
9. **Financial implications** – an understanding of the financial implications of failure.
10. **Removes barriers** – providing intensive support to schools during the initial transition period when a pupil joins the school so that issues can be addressed swiftly and reassure schools that they will be supported when reintegrating a pupil.
11. **Broader support** – a recognition that a child's needs may require support beyond education inclusion services – family support, early help, health services.
12. **Avoid "horse-trading" conversation** – impartial, independent arbiter for decisions that cannot be resolved.

Table 2.8 Key elements of an effective fair access protocol (Alternative provision market analysis, 2018, p. 80)

This requires a recognition of the challenges pupils will have in adapting to the less forgiving mainstream school environment. This is a useful basis for a code of practice but is predicated upon schools and MATs acting honourably and fairly, being willing to accept pupils from PRUs on an equal footing. Where schools see themselves under pressure in terms of examination results or problems with behaviour management, or at risk of a poor inspection outcome, it leaves scope for them to renege on commitments to accept pupils from a PRU they might consider too big a risk to accept.

There is also an issue around parents and children self-excluding from schools they feel are not for *"people like us".* The power imbalance between a mainstream school and working-class families is exacerbated by the drive for academic outcomes and maintenance of a high position in performance league tables.

> *Choice for the working classes involves either a process of finding out what you can't have, what is not up for negotiation and then looking for the few options left, or a process of self-exclusion that originates in a sense that selective and high-status schools are not places for 'people like us'*
>
> (Reay, 2017, p. 189)

This leads, as Reay argues, in many cases to families *self-excluding* by choosing in advance not to apply to go to certain schools in the first place. They come to know their place. Reay takes the issue of powerlessness beyond the school gates and locates the problem within the context of a traditional, class-based society. Analysis by Evans and Giroux (2015) of how society, driven by neoliberal values, has evolved provides a stark view of the families of PRU children purely because of their circumstances. It provokes the need for a wider perspective to develop a sense of realism about what can be achieved. The tension between meeting the needs of a small group of pupils exhibiting challenging behaviour and the orderly running of a school can lead to behaviour management approaches, such as zero-tolerance behaviour policies which have adverse consequences for working class, vulnerable and minority ethnic pupils, and which ultimately can lead to their exclusion, thus accentuating the imbalance of power. An article in the Independent (2018) reports from a National Education Union (NEU) conference,

> *Zero tolerance approach to bad behaviour in schools amounts to 'child abuse', teachers claim. Strict rules on pupil conduct 'is cruel, Victorian, Dickensian. And it punishes working class children the most.'*
>
> (The Independent, 2018)

This statement, coming from the more left-wing NEU is unsurprising, but does not reflect views of the teaching profession as a whole. Zero tolerance approaches are introduced as policy in many schools in urban areas as a means to manage and punish behaviour in order to maintain control. Punishment is often swift and disproportionate, the view being that this discourages further challenging behaviour.

2.20 The growth of managerialism

Wright et al see the growth of managerialism following the 1988 Education Reform Act as the point where the move towards equality in the education system slowed and eventually reversed with the introduction of local management of schools (LMS). It represented a decisive shift for schools away from local authority oversight to the become beholden to market forces,

> *The translation of market forces into human services, without regard to the needs of the most vulnerable was inevitably going to lead to a widening of the resource gap between the haves and the have-nots…*
>
> (Wright, et al., 2000, p. 119)

Their acknowledgement of this power imbalance being exacerbated by neoliberal ideas in the 1980s is important. Measures taken since then to hold schools to account include league tables and academisation, designed to further the idea of education as a market. They argue that this results in some pupils being labelled as '*unmarketable'*, while Evans and Giroux portray the families of these pupils as belonging to "*disposable communities*". There are a considerable number of studies (Brown, 2018; Mills and Thomson, 2018; No More Exclusions, 2021; Lareau, 2014; Cole, 2015) highlighting the obstacles working-class families and parents of vulnerable children face in an education system which appears to have been constructed to meet the needs of the middle classes. The literature supports the view that a more authentic engagement with parents labelled as "hard-to-reach" is needed that could have benefits for them in the long run, even in a neoliberal society that brands them as disposable.

A symptom of the pressures of market-led approach to education in England has been the increase in the use of off-rolling. This is the practice of removing pupils from the school roll illegally. A parent might be *advised* by the school that it is in their interests to take the child off roll to avoid having an exclusion on their record. Often, they are removed (off-rolled) because they risk adversely affecting exam results and league-table position for the school. Schools cannot exclude pupils because they might affect examination performance but manipulating parents into believing it is in

the best interests of the child to leave the school sometimes with no alternative placement organised amounts to off-rolling.

A 2019 YouGov survey for Ofsted highlighted that it is working-class and vulnerable pupils that are more likely to be off-rolled. 82% of teachers surveyed thought that *"pupils with behavioural issues"* were most likely to be off-rolled; followed by *"pupils with low academic attainment"* - 61%; *"pupils with SEND"* - 47%, *"pupils with a disruptive home life"* - 46%, *"pupils whose parents don't understand the education system/their legal rights"* - 37%; and *"pupils from economically deprived areas"* - 36%. Ethnicity is not reported, however 15% of those polled thought that *"pupils with English as a second language"* were more likely to be off-rolled (YouGov, 2019, p. 11). While Ofsted are reported to be taking this matter seriously, the nuances of the approach often mean it is difficult to detect. Schools are dependent upon parents not having an awareness of their rights, as identified in the YouGov survey above. An article in the Spectator magazine, "The dark art of 'off-rolling' unwanted pupils" (The Spectator, 2022), highlights incidences of schools being creative in how they off-roll pupils, often by convincing parents who are not fully aware of their rights that it is in their interests to remove the child from the school. *"They just hope that parents don't call their bluff"*. The article reports however on a school, previously judged as "outstanding" that was downgraded by Ofsted to "requires improvement", the second lowest grade, in 2019 after inspectors confirmed they were off-rolling pupils. It remains to be seen if this level of scrutiny will be sustained.

Many of the parents arriving for interview to my school, often with a sense of bewilderment about their and their children's predicament, had experienced off-rolling. Language barriers, lacking the vocabulary of teachers, lack of advocacy meant they were not fully aware about what they were agreeing to. Gill's proposal however to train "exceptional teachers" and place them in PRUs is admirable (see section 2.16). Its long-term success remains, however, dependent upon the priorities of the government of the day. What is needed to see this through is a long-term commitment to this project and most importantly buy-in from the mainstream sector. This issue is about addressing wider societal issues, namely poverty, racism and

inequality, and not about conforming to market-driven approaches to education. The literature supports this view from Wright et al (1999) to Reay (2017). Continuing to locate the problems with the pupil or the family, or as argued by Macleod et al., *"pathologizing working-class parenting"* (2013, p. 391) will only lead to pupils being excluded, legally or illegally because they are in effect "*unmarketable*".

The data appears to show that PRUs have made little progress; exclusions continue to rise, reintegration remains problematic. But these are issues with the education system as a whole. PRUs have moved with the times; they are responding to the increase in the number of exclusions. That the data does not reflect this suggests that the metrics for measuring the performance of PRUs are the wrong ones. I also feel that Gill (2017), in focusing on this group of pupils alone – those who have been excluded and who find themselves being educated in PRUs - and not as part of the wider systemic concerns of mainstream schools is problematic. While her programme has a greater chance of being taken seriously and is more palatable to the DfE within the current construct of education in England, it runs the risk of being of limited and temporary success. It can be successful within the existing paradigm, the existing education system, but does not address, let alone challenge the systemic flaws in the wider school system.

2.21 Conclusion

In his opening remarks to his report, "Taking Back on Track forward (2008)" the then education secretary, Ed Balls, acknowledged the precarious position of PRUs on the edge of the education system (see quote on page 49). This report was yet another acknowledgement of the need to bring alternative provision education in from the periphery of the education system in order for it to be effective or at least more palatable to pupils and parents. This view perpetuates still;

> *AP is too often seen as a peripheral adjunct of our education system.*
>
> (Centre for Social Justice, 2018a, p. 75)

The Taylor Report (2012) also addressed this theme,

> *The Government and the educational establishment cannot continue to hold these children in their peripheral vision.*
>
> (Department for Education, 2012, p. 4)

and argued that,

> *…where AP was found to be most effective it was positioned clearly as an integral part of the wider local education system. It was not seen as something peripheral….*
>
> (Department for Education, 2012, p. 6)

The phrases “on the periphery”, “peripheral”, “on the edge”, figure large in the literature around PRUs in describing their position in relation to the wider education system. And similarly, ever since the Elton report (1989), the words “stigma” and “stigmatizing” have characterised the sense parents feel about their children attending PRUs. Various governments of the day have sought, unsuccessfully, to remove this ‘*stigma’* (Timpson, 2019). The strongly negative view of these schools sees them as places to be avoided at all costs based on the challenges that the pupils who attend PRUs present. Parents have little choice as to whether or not to accept the offer of a place at a PRU. For most pupils referred to a PRU, the option of home schooling is not available, as parents simply do not have the resources.

The literature explored for this study has been extensive. I have taken into account the historical, ideological and political factors that have influenced the position and standing of PRUs as a component of the education system as it is structured in the 2020s. They continue to be peripheral to the education system and attendance in a PRU is still a stigmatising experience.

I have explored the history behind the creation of PRUs as a response to the need for a new punishment of last resort following the abolition of corporal punishment in the 1980s and the need to have something to replace it, rather than analyse the concept of punishment. Fundamentally, an opportunity has been missed for a philosophical shift in our understanding of behaviour management and control in schools. Added to this is PRUs’ ambiguous position vis-à-vis SEND pupils in particular those with SEMH needs.

I have addressed the arguments around PRUs within a political context, showing how political parties of all persuasions have failed to address the issue of exclusion

and referral to a PRU effectively. Political expedience has prevented this from happening, as there has not been the vision or courage to address either issue other than to respond with tried and tested approaches that have repeatedly been found wanting, and that continue to see vulnerable pupils excluded. Approaches taken have failed to take into account the need for the education system as a whole to be addressed.

Linked to the political context is an ideological one that since the 1980s has seen the education system become influenced and driven by neoliberal principles that has led to the fracturing of the schools system and to too many pupils being labelled unmarketable and consequently open and prey to exclusionary practices.

Overall, the literature suggests that without rethinking the concept of PRUs and alternative provision more creatively, as an essential component of the education system rather than peripherally placed simply to allow the schools system as a whole to function, exclusions will continue to rise. There will continue to be difficulties in reintegrating pupils back into mainstream schools because of the pressures mainstream schools experience faced with the high-stakes, highly regulated system that determines their future. And it will be the same groups of pupils that will suffer: the vulnerable, working-class and ethnic minority heritage pupils. This has been the pattern since the 1970s.

3 Chapter 3: Design and Methodology

In this chapter I set out the rationale for my research approach and research philosophy. I explain how this relates to my ontological and epistemological viewpoints and my chosen research methodology. I then explain the methods and approach taken to data collection. I report on the ethical considerations I needed to make as an ethnographic researcher. I outline the lengths I went to minimise my position as a researcher so as to maintain the integrity of the research findings.
I report under the following headings:

1. Research paradigm
2. My ontological position
3. My epistemological position
4. Ethics and issues of confidentiality
5. Reflexive leadership – my position as researcher
6. Research approach, design and management
7. Summary

In table 3.1 I present the conceptual components of my study and reference the main sources of influence for each component.

3.1 Research paradigm

My conceptual framing (see table 3.1) is designed to surface assumptions often made by individuals about how they see themselves within the structure of wider society, acceptant of the status quo and unaware of the invisible forces that are at play to ensure they have a *"sense of one's place"* (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 471), a process that leads to self-exclusion, whether by not sending a child to a particular school because of its predominately middle-class intake, or by parents avoiding engagement with the teachers of one's child. I see this as an attempt to articulate how education has become a tool in the maintenance of the existing structures and power imbalances in society; and the education system as it is currently constructed as a reflection of a society that seeks to maintain these structures and imbalances.

Research Paradigm	Critical Constructivism: *Freire, Kincheloe*
Methodology	Ethnographic study: *Crotty, Costley et al., Creswell*
Methods	Qualitative data using: Semi-structured 1-1 interviews: *Gray, Grix* Focus group *Kvale*
Analysis	Reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) for 1-1 interviews: *Braun and Clarke* Narrative Inquiry: *Chase, Plowright, Clandinin*
Contribution to body of knowledge	Effective engagement with parents Parental advocacy Rethinking and reimagining alternative educational provision
Implications linked to	School culture School exclusion Behaviour management

Table 3.1 Conceptual framework for study

My approach is an inductive one driven by what Braun and Clarke describe as "*a bottom-up"* approach (Braun and Clarke, 2012, p. 58) to the generation of themes.

Due to the exploratory nature of this project with its focus on the plight and apparent disadvantage experienced within the education system of vulnerable pupils and their families, it is conceived through a critical constructivist paradigm. Kincheloe (2005) argues that,

> *Critical constructivists are concerned with the exaggerated role power plays in these (teaching and learning) processes. Critical constructivists are particularly interested in the ways these processes help privilege some people and marginalise others.*
>
> (Kincheloe, 2005, p. 3)

Kincheloe argues this with reference to how *"others"* are affected by the process of teaching and learning, viz. how pedagogy, in terms of a restricted curriculum and a narrator-listener curriculum delivery, or *"the banking method"* (Freire, 1993, p. 53), is interpreted by a profession dominated by the middle classes. This imbalance in

power-relations is facilitated by the structure of the education system as it has evolved since the 1944 Education Act and is currently conceived in England. It is a system which favours pupils of an overwhelmingly white middle class which has the wherewithal to navigate, shape and make it work to its advantage. Systemic flaws that maintain the power imbalance are inevitable in an education system in which, *"schools reflect the wider society's attitudes and values and, crucially, its distribution of resources"* (Reay, 2017, p. 186).

A critical constructivist paradigm is appropriate to address these issues given the entrenched nature of the disadvantage that working-class families endure and have endured within the education system over a long period of time. Since the 1944 Education Act, it has been acknowledged (see section 2.16) that pupils with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) and those considered to be vulnerable have been disproportionately excluded from school and referred to alternative provision schools. Likewise, it has been recognised at least since the early 1970s (Coard, 1971) that minority ethnic pupils have been disproportionately excluded from school and placed in provision other than mainstream schooling. In spite of repeated investigation into this in the intervening period, the disproportionately high level of exclusion of Black African Caribbean pupils from mainstream school appears to be no nearer to being resolved (Rampton, 1981; MacPherson, 1999; Cabinet Office, 2017; Gill, 2017; Timpson, 2019)

Critical constructivism requires that those most negatively affected by the disparities in the system first develop a critical consciousness about where and how they are located within a system they have come to believe is a fixed, inflexible entity which they cannot change. Freire argues that a critical consciousness, "*conscientização*", is necessary in order that they begin '*to pose as a problem a real, concrete, historical situation'* (Freire, 1993, p. 210), namely their own predicament; to state categorically that their children are unfairly disadvantaged in a systemic manner; their children are more at risk of being excluded from school based on their social or ethnic status. They need to do this in order that they may effectively challenge and transform this state of affairs. Freire argues that they need to,

> *…develop their power to perceive critically the way they exist in the world…; they come to see the world not as a static reality, but as a reality in process, in transformation.*
>
> (Freire, 1993, p. 64)

Critical constructivism allows for this to be addressed by considering the nature of the educational system as a function of wider society and how it is fundamentally flawed in such a way as to disadvantage and isolate the same pupils from the same backgrounds and the same vulnerabilities. This is I believe a result of what Freire calls a failure to allow families to *"name their world"* and a denial of their right to a, *"praxis: the action and reflection of men upon their world in order to transform it."* (Freire, 1993, p. 60). In effect this creates a paradox that is at the root of the *"crisis"* of school exclusions (The Guardian, 2018) and which has a direct effect on PRUs. Families of those pupils excluded from school are often the beneficiaries of support provided in a manner which Freire would describe as non-dialogic; the source of that support, often the local authority, is limited in its approach and what it can offer. Families may become "*service-resistant …and …distrustful of service providers"* (Feiler, 2010, p. 37). The support might offer temporary respite but cannot address the inherent inequalities in the system itself; it cannot engage with the family in a manner that would allow the family to *"name their world"*. Freire acknowledges that there are risks in engaging dialogically with families arguing that, *"(c)ritical consciousness… is anarchic. Others add that critical consciousness may lead to disorder."* (Freire, 1993, p. 7). For local authorities to engage with families in a dialogic manner would amount tacitly to accepting the need to engage with them on the basis that theirs is a political struggle; to help them to understand the precariousness of their position within the wider education system and indeed within the broader structure of class politics. It would mean that families in need of support be given the space and time to be listened to and be supported in working through solutions to their own predicaments *on their own terms*, something which local authorities are not set up to facilitate, given a need to avoid politicising their work with families. Such an approach would risk having to admit to systemic inequalities within the education system itself. That is not to say that there is not good practice within these services, but often the source of best practice is individual professionals

who have the experience, confidence and skill to step outside of their professional remit to provide a degree of support beyond that allowed by their professional position.

Critical constructivism is concerned with enabling vulnerable or working-class families to, *"shape and reshape their own 'conceptual biographies'… thus developing a new relationship with knowledge"* (Bentley, 2003, p. 2). It requires them to consider their position within wider society and to develop the *intellectual* tools necessary to change their plight. Applying this to the families of excluded children means engaging with them in a highly personalised manner, allowing them the space to reflect on their experiences with the education system that has brought them to the point where their children have been excluded. The aim of such an approach is what Hannabus (2000) describes as making *"unconscious tacit knowledge … conscious tacit knowledge…the point at which awareness hits us that is the tacit meta-knowledge point."* (Hannabus, 2000, p. 404). This point, *"the critical moment of awareness"* is where parents incorporate this heightened self-awareness into their thinking and actions, allowing them scope to see themselves in the world and to think and act differently. They are free to express their discontent with their previously accepted position and see themselves as*, "persons who have been unjustly dealt with and deprived of their voice…"* (Freire, 1993, p. 24). It is only through engaging with families in a dialogic manner that tacit knowledge becomes conscious. Large, powerful organisations in positions of authority vis-à-vis vulnerable families, such as a local authority or mainstream school, and increasingly MATs are constrained from engaging in a dialogic manner. This is only understandable to the extent that they operate within a neoliberal framework, one that limits resources and operates in a highly systematic way. In the process certain families that do not adhere to these organisations' expectations are excluded. This highlights the systemic disadvantage vulnerable families face within wider society. The lack of authentic dialogue may mean that schools miss out on the *"tacit meta-knowledge point",* They do not become privy to important insights into individuals' unique circumstances.

It is the entrenched nature of the obstacles facing working-class families in an education system that is structurally unable to address these obstacles effectively, that requires an approach that takes as its starting point their lived experiences. This is a reversal of approaches that seek to maintain the existing educational paradigm, one based on a school system that is maintained often at the expense of these families (Gill, 2017; Evans and Giroux, 2015; Reay, 2017). Critical constructivism takes as a starting point the individual realities faced by these families, to help them locate themselves first of all within the education system, so that they understand how they are at a disadvantage within that system and then to support them to address these disadvantages,

> *… critical constructivism promotes modes of self-analysis that result in changes in attitudes and dispositions. The basis of this change rests on insight into the scars and traumas of the past – one's own and the pasts of others.*
>
> (Kincheloe, 2005, p. 82)

Kincheloe's arguing of the importance of self-analysis is acknowledging the extent to which vulnerable families need to be supported to achieve this level of awareness so that they can address the *"scars and traumas"* of the past. Such an approach is undoubtedly an overtly political one and inasmuch contains the seeds of its own demise and this, according to Kincheloe is one of the criticisms levelled at critical constructivism,

> *There is no doubt that our concept of critical constructivism will elicit charges of educational politicization and of tainted, unobjective teaching and research with predetermined outcomes.*
>
> (Kincheloe, 2005, p. 12)

This is undoubtedly the case. for as long as exclusion affects only a small percentage of the school population there is the continued risk that it will be ignored; it may be documented and reported upon regularly (Coard, 1971; Warnock, 1978; Rampton, 1981; Department for Education and Skills, 1989; MacPherson, 1999; Gill, 2017; Timpson, 2019), but not taken up as an issue to be challenged by wider society. By emphasising unfair exclusions as part of wider inequalities and power imbalance in society and framing it in the context of the neoliberalist ideology

favoured by current Conservative governments, it stands more of a chance of being addressed effectively and, consequently, there is a greater hope of change.

3.2 Ontological position

Critical constructivism adopts a stance contrary to that of positivism in that the knower and what is known are not separate (Kincheloe, 2005, p. 2). I take the critical constructivist view that the world is socially constructed, and that people's perception of the world and their individual realities differ markedly, dependent upon their social circumstances. Thus, it is the status as vulnerable, working-class or of ethnic minority that makes it more likely that a child from such a family will be excluded. According to the dominant narrative, once excluded and placed in a PRU their chances of academic success diminish (Timpson, 2019) and this is part of an extended narrative that argues that those pupils from working class families or deemed to be disadvantaged who complete their education in mainstream schools are still less likely to be successful in terms of examination outcomes, future employment prospects and advancement to university (Brown, 2018, p. 43; Reay, 2017).

My study seeks to explore this social world and to try to gain an understanding of how these families locate themselves within the system once they are forced by circumstances to confront it. Both Freire (1971) and Kincheloe (2005) see these families as *"oppressed".* They see them as in need of support first of all to awaken to the reality of this position, to perceive the extent of their disadvantaged position within wider society, to acknowledge the extent of the power imbalance which contrives to exclude their children from school, before engaging with them in order to help them transform their own lives.

For many of the parents whose children are excluded from school it has been my experience that their lack of understanding of the system, how to make it work in their favour, contributes to the likelihood of their children being excluded. They understand the importance *of an education* but lack the social capital to engage with the *education system* in a manner that is advantageous to them and their children. It would, however, be hard to convince them that they are, to use the language of

Freire, oppressed. This is however the position that many of the peasants with whom Freire worked, found themselves. In the same manner that working-class families with a limited understanding of the education system know no other reality and lack the "*intellectual tools and attitudes about the social basis of knowledge"* to critique the system (Bentley, 2003, p. 2), so these peasant communities also knew no other reality, nor that an alternative reality was theirs to claim. For the most vulnerable in society today, including those vulnerable families with whom I have worked, I argue that they too are fearful of even considering the possibility of a more equitable representation within wider society. Crotty takes up Freire's argument when he points out that,

> *The oppressed are submerged in their situation and, as long as they remain so submerged, they cannot be active Subjects intervening in reality; they cannot become engaged in the struggle for their own liberation.*
>
> (Crotty, 1998, p. 155)

It is the submersion in their own plight, even before their children have been excluded from school which forms a central plank of my study. These families see their position as part of what Mark Fisher (2009) describes as the *"natural order"*. He argues that,

> *…emancipatory politics must always destroy the appearance of a 'natural order', must reveal what is presented as necessary and inevitable to be a mere contingency, just as it must make what was previously deemed to be impossible seem attainable.*
>
> (Fisher, 2009, p. 17)

It is the approach of critical constructivism in supporting families to understand how it is they find themselves in their existing circumstances, effectively powerless within the existing societal paradigm, and then to address this by awakening them to an understanding that this need not continue, that renders it necessary. As Kincheloe argues, it is about awakening these families to the fact that,

> *(p)ower typically operates here as "common sense", as the unconscious inscription of dominant cultural norms and values onto the nature of psychological knowledge production.*
>
> (Kincheloe, 2005, p. 61)

Many parents are tacitly aware that this is not the case, but immersed in "*cultural norms and values"* that reflect what is presented as *"common sense"*, they lack the social capital to redress the balance on behalf of their children. They come up against embedded systemic flaws in the system which prevent this from happening. This becomes their reality, and they lack the tools necessary to alter that position. As I have found, they accept this up until they are confronted with their children's exclusion from mainstream school and the prospect of attending a PRU at which point their lack of understanding of the system becomes apparent,

> *They did not know what powers/responsibilities the school had and what the process should be in terms of their own rights as parents, and as a result the process often felt beyond their influence, intimidating and sometimes appeared very sudden.*
>
> (Mills and Thomson, 2018, p. 91).

Critical constructivism addresses this power imbalance, firstly by exploring their predicament in a dialogic manner, whereby their reality is seen as something that can be changed, but this requires an understanding of how they are oppressed both within the education system and in wider society. This position is reinforced by the very nature of a PRU, a school of last resort, one that is seen as *not normal*. This brings into stark relief their reality and it becomes, I argue, a point where, in order to address their predicament, they must push back against the system. Supporting families to develop this understanding of the social production of knowledge becomes essential to developing productive and lasting relationships and helping them find their authentic voice. I will now go on to consider my epistemological position.

3.3 Epistemological position

Critical constructivism has its roots in critical theory. For critical theorists it is not enough merely to reflect reality as presented by the dominant classes. Crotty argues that critical theory,

> *…regards reality as being shaped over time by a wide range of social and cultural values, with knowledge subject to individual and cultural construction*
>
> (Crotty, 1998, p. 84)

Knowledge is constructed from an individual perspective considering the person's own context, how she experiences the world based on her own unique history and environment. Critical theory rejects the objectivist idea that, *"… existing outside of time and space, knowers could know the world objectively"* (Kincheloe, 2005, p. 17). It is arguable that the education system in the UK is established within an objectivist paradigm with its privileging of curricula that do not reflect the lived experiences of disadvantaged pupils and their families nor of pupils of ethnic minority heritage, leading, for example, to calls to decolonise the curriculum in the 2020s (Johnson and Mouthaan, 2021). Knowledge thus acquired is what Brown (2018) calls the *knowledge of the powerful*, and inasmuch bears little relevance to the lives of working-class pupils who may have to endure learning experiences without having a critical awareness of the purpose of such learning other than that it might be coming up in an examination. I remember my own experience of the knowledge of the powerful as a teacher of French contextualising various scenarios about being on holiday with one's family in France to practise role-plays. It struck me only much later that this was irrelevant to many in my classes, particularly for those in lower sets, mostly from working class backgrounds, but this was part of the curriculum and the GCSE examination. It was more appropriate for many middle-class children in top sets, not all, for whom travelling to and from the continent would be the norm. Brown (2018) makes the distinction between,

> *…powerful knowledge and knowledge of the powerful … powerful, disciplinary knowledge provides a basis for emancipation, whereas knowledge of the powerful is that by which control is imposed.*
>
> (Brown, 2018, p. 54)

This is an important point. For the pupils in lower sets from mainly working-class backgrounds whom I taught, the teaching and curriculum structure was set up to maintain control. For them, the prize was of possibly doing well in an examination. For the middle-class children, however, the curriculum related directly to their own lived experiences *in addition to* the possibility of them doing well in the same examination, thus it offered more relevance to these pupils. It is only with hindsight that I came to understood this as my thinking developed to accept that knowledge is not a positivist construct; is not absolute and static, designed to be imparted in the

"banking" method (Freire, 1993). I agree with Edwards that for disadvantaged children an education system that reflects middle class values may be at odds with the values and lifestyle they have grown up with to such an extent that,

> *…the differences between home and school (are) so marked as to render the difficulty encountered by disadvantaged children one of acculturation.*
>
> (Edwards, 1974, p. 49)

Edwards' view is that education for working class children amounts to a process of socialisation. I now understand how my present understanding of knowledge as an interpretation of the world created contextually is at odds with my understanding of knowledge as a French teacher in the classroom early in my career. I would go as far as to say that the approach taken to teaching languages to the top set, mainly middle-class pupils, was constructivist, certainly in terms of contextualising the language in a dialogue with the pupils, but also, tacitly, with their parents, as I was fully aware I would be held accountable to them, during parents' evenings, through homework, and in terms of examination outcomes; they possessed the *"vocabulary of teachers."* For lower set, mainly working-class pupils, for whom a foreign language represented just another subject without context, I believe I took a positivist approach; this was Freire's "banking method". It represented for disadvantaged children a "*discontinuity with the values and lifestyle they have grown up with"* (Edwards, 1974, p. 49). It was the knowledge of the powerful by which control was imposed that allowed some of these pupils and their parents to trust that it would contribute to their children having a better life than their parents.

This is emphasised through schools' accountability structure which in effect pitches a school into a competitive, business-focused approach which determines funding, pupil numbers and ultimately their existence. School league tables, the academisation/free school movement whereby schools are removed from local authority oversight and can fall prey to takeovers and mergers by MATs, and an inspection regime geared towards measuring the effectiveness of schools based on academic outcomes, disadvantage schools in deprived communities. From an epistemological point of view this restricts the ability of schools to go beyond what is safe in terms of curriculum offer and pedagogy and allowing time to explore

subjugated knowledge in a meaningful way, thus limiting themselves to models of learning that are safe, responsive to these accountability measures and the privileging of knowledge that corresponds to the wishes of the middle classes (Freire, 1993; Reay, 2017). It is as an ethnographer exploring and developing an understanding of the social and cultural norms that inform how vulnerable families might develop knowledge around an object of enquiry, different to the middle classes, that a sense of emancipation can be achieved with a greater possibility of developing a more powerful voice, not only within the education system but in the world.

The critical constructivist epistemology champions subjugated knowledge, rejecting, *"… mechanistic objectivism (wherein consciousness is considered to be merely a copy of objective reality)"* (Crotty, 1998, p. 151). This is important in the context of working with minoritised and working-class families, those that Freire would classify as oppressed families, as it is in acknowledging the value of what is implicitly important to these families that authentic relationships are formed, on their terms, and provide for a richer research experience, one which is more likely to generate more relevant and meaningful data,

> *Emerging from a respect for subjugated knowledge, such an epistemological position not only boasts ethical assets but holds scientific benefits as well.*
>
> (Kincheloe, 2005, p. 14)

Critical constructivism is appropriate in supporting working-class and vulnerable families to construct alternative knowledge in the process of emancipation. This argument is developed further by Bourdieu, who sees schools as social and cultural constructs reflecting and perpetuating the power imbalances in society. Thus, working class children and their families are at an immediate disadvantage, lacking the social capital needed to effect real change within an education system constructed around the needs of the middle-classes. They maintain a belief that their children will somehow succeed on merit, break out of the cycle of being dominated, in a system they believe is fundamentally fair and meritocratic. Bourdieu and Passeron argue that,

> *In any given social formation, because the (pedagogic work) through which the dominant (pedagogic action) is founded on tends to impose recognition of the legitimacy of the dominant culture on the members of the dominated groups or classes, it tends at the same time to impose on them, by inculcation or exclusion. recognition of the illegitimacy of their own cultural arbitrary.*
>
> (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990, p. 41)

By *cultural arbitrary*, they posit the idea that society is arbitrarily constructed and based upon a set of beliefs existing in the unconscious of individuals about the natural order of things in that society, but that this is necessarily hidden from the dominated working classes to prevent them from seeking their rightful place in terms of equality within that system. Thus, they remain dominated, accepting that their position in society is unalterable, except, perhaps, through school and that by working hard within what they perceive to be a meritocratic system, their children may become part of the dominant class. This however is nigh on impossible given that the education system is inherently designed to maintain the existing class and power imbalance and structures.

3.4 Methodology: positionality on insider - outsider researcher continuum

When I began the study, I was the head of the PRU where I had expected to complete my research. This defined me unequivocally as an ethnographic, insider-researcher. This changed with my decision to take early retirement; I left my school and needed to find another to carry out the data gathering. The school in which I eventually carried out the study is in the same MAT and is geographically close to my previous school in an inner-city area that shares the same types of challenges; some of the staff, pupils and parents of that school are known to me; and the local authority (LA) professionals operate on behalf of both schools and are well known to me. I see this as my being part of the wider ecological environment of the parents whose experiences I have undertaken to study. My long experience in the role of PRU headteacher provides valuable insights into the lived experiences of the families of excluded pupils. Whilst strictly, from an ethnographic point of view, having to carry out my study as a non-member of the school defined me as an outsider-researcher, I maintained a position as an insider within the wider community of practice. Fleming (2018) describes insider-research in simple terms as, *"… research*

which is undertaken within an organisation, group or community where the researcher is also a member." (2018, p. 311). She goes on to cite Hellawell to make the case that,

> *(t)he position of the (insider-)researcher may not be static, and in some situations, it is possible for the researcher to move along the continuum during the course of their research.*
>
> (Fleming, 2018, p. 312)

This idea of the insider-researcher continuum has been helpful in assessing my researcher position as I progressed from a "pure" insider-researcher when I started this study to being on the outside following my retirement, but inside the community of practice. Considering the range of advantages outlined by Costley et al (2010) in terms of *"insider knowledge... (and) easy access to people and information that can further enhance that knowledge"* (Costley, et al., 2010, p. 3), when weighed against the challenges of moving my study to a new school, I feel it is fair to say that I maintained many of these advantages. Critically, however, it was the difficulty in recruiting parents, the key focus of this study, as an outsider to the school that defined me as an outsider-researcher. Although I was granted permission to carry on my study within another school in the MAT, it remained important that I maintained a high degree of reflexivity and awareness of my position, and the power-imbalance inherent in that position as a former head teacher. Having engaged critically and reflectively with my past learning and gained insights into how I have developed as a learner, it became essential, as Ahern (1999) argues, to "*bracket*" my own biases, values and any ethical issues which may arise as a result of the research. As a researcher-participant this becomes all the more important as it is,

> *.... not possible for qualitative researchers to be totally objective, because total objectivity is not humanly possible.*" and she makes a critical distinction between being objective and being reflexive, *"the ability to put aside personal feelings and preconceptions is more a function of how reflexive one is rather than how objective one is.*
>
> (Ahern, 1999, p. 407)

I have come to understand that being reflexive is an effortful exercise in critical reflection of, *"how I am experienced and perceived by others"* (Bolton, 2010, p. 14).

Unearthing and becoming aware of my own biases has been essential in my efforts to develop my own epistemological and ontological standpoints. Ethnography as a methodology is open to criticism for several reasons. There is the concern, as Creswell argues, that the researcher will *"go native"* (Creswell, 2013, p. 96), become compromised by being part of the wider community of practice within which those being researched are situated. This is a valid concern and is countered by a heightened awareness of this closeness. The researcher must at all times remain sensitive to the needs of the individuals being studied and remain conscious of his or her impact on them (Creswell, 2013, p. 96).

Briggs et al raise the issue of "*pretend*" ethnography (Briggs, et al., 2012, p. 210). This is a concern that a *thick description* (Geertz, 2016) will not be obtained, that a full understanding of the culture of the PRU will be lacking, and that the researcher will focus on the views from single perspectives, those being interviewed, and a lack of depth of engagement. To counter this claim, the approach I have taken is multi-faceted in that I sought a range of perspectives, not only those of the parents being researched. I saw this as a challenge to triangulate the parents' views against a range of participant perspectives.

The authors also address the matter of "*representation*" in ethnographic research as a potential "*controversy*" in its claim to represent "*the "nature" of social reality"* (Briggs, et al., 2012, p. 210). Such a view is naïve or misguided, they argue, if critics fail to recognise the role of the ethnographer in interpreting that "nature". My role as representing the "nature" of the experiences of these families required me to become a reflexive agent in the process, to become aware of myself as operating in a number of roles according to whom I engage with in the data-gathering process. With parents I needed to be conscious of the power imbalance my role as former headteacher brought to the proceedings; the power imbalance applied to meetings with staff also, from a different perspective; with the head of the PRU and the LA professionals the perspective was one of peers and colleagues; with the head of the mainstream school, arguably the power imbalance was reversed in favour the headteacher. Thus, my overall aim in representing all of these views from multiple

perspectives to interpret faithfully the experiences of the families required considerable skill in my central role as a researcher.

A small scale study such as this raises another "*controversy*" - *"generalizability"* (Briggs, et al., 2012, p. 211). It is not my contention that this study in and of itself will provoke widespread or wholesale change within the education system. This then begs the question, *"So what?"* (Briggs, et al., 2012, p. 211); what is the point of doing this? I see this study as generalizable as a contribution to a wider discussion around school exclusions and use of alternative provisions in the UK, an attempt to inform policy and practice. Briggs et al argue, that claims to generalizability might be improved when "*ethnographers (assess) their own findings in relation to wider sets of research about the same phenomena…"* (Briggs, et al., 2012, p. 211). I argue that I have met this criterion in my exploration of previous literature and research into exclusions and the use of PRUs and alternative provision in chapter 2.

3.5 Research approach, design and management

Data were collected from a range of sources for this study in order to construct a multi-faceted approach to the research questions. This was to allow me to create a *"thick description"* (Geertz, 2016, p. 10) of the lived experiences of these families. The ethnographer is confronted with,

> …*a multiplicity of complex conceptual structures… which are at once strange, irregular, and inexplicit, and which he must contrive somehow first to grasp and then to render*.
>
> (Geertz, 2016, p. 10)

Geertz is making the point that my aim is to manage complexity in a manner that demonstrates mastery of the data gathered and that I can then tell my story. My task as an ethnographer was to explore a broad range of contextual factors and people that constitute the cultural ecology of the families I was studying. My goal was to ensure, *"the voices, feelings, actions, and meanings of interacting individuals (were) heard"* (Creswell, 2013, p. 235), to experience as closely as possible their world and to support them in representing that world while recognising I cannot fully experience it as they do. To that end, I sought the views not only of the parents themselves, but also of teaching and support staff in the PRU, the headteacher of the PRU, a

headteacher of a mainstream school with close links to the PRU and LA heads of services. These represented the *interacting individuals* (Creswell, 2013, p. 90) within this community, the triangulation of whose views constitute the thick description needed to provide legitimacy to my thesis.

3.6 The methods of data gathering and data analysis

I gave careful consideration to the methods of data gathering to be used for this study, aware that the focus of my research was the experiences of vulnerable families. This presented challenges in recruitment of parents to participate in the research, a problem I believe I would not have had had I been allowed to continue my research at my former school, Stenview, where I had built up a strong reservoir of trust and good will among the parents of my pupils (see section 1.2). My intention had been to interview 10-12 parents, representative of the gender, cultural and ethnic make-up of PRUs in London. I was looking to interview as close as is practical a 3:1 boy to girl ratio and an ethnic mix of approximately half white British and half minority ethnic pupils' parents (DfE SFR28_2017_National_Tables).

While the views of the parents were central to this study, I wanted to get a broad perspective on their experiences from a range of stakeholders connected to the PRU. These included local authority support professionals working directly with families of PRU pupils; a cross section of staff at the PRU, including the head of the PRU and teaching and non-teaching staff; a police liaison officer and a youth worker; and senior leaders of mainstream school with links to the PRU. My intention was to pilot the interviews with parents, choosing one or two parents initially in order to refine the interviewing process and to ensure my lines of enquiry with the parents were valid and provide the data I need to support the study.

3.6.1 Semi-structured interview

I chose the semi structured interview as a method to explore the lived experiences of the families. This was to allow me to explore in depth their experiences and take into account unanticipated themes that might emerge in the course of the study. My aim when working with the families was to make them feel comfortable and build a sense of trust between us. I created a questionnaire for the families that allowed for

deviation from a set, structured approach that I submitted to Middlesex University Ethics Sub-Committee (MUEC) for approval (see appendix 4). Gray (2004) makes the point that the semi-structured interview is useful for, *"…(the) probing of views and opinions where it is desirable for respondents to expand on their answers"* (Gray, 2004, p. 217). Using the semi structured interview was to allow me to probe deeply into the experiences of the families and to allow them to explain on their terms aspects of their experience that they believe is important. Gray (2004) also makes the point that this approach helps me to, *"…know whom I have interviewed"* (Gray, 2004, p. 216). In the case of interviewees not having English as their first language, this was very important, as it allowed me to call upon my experience as a head teacher interviewing families for whom English was not their first language. Language is intertwined with the many invisible barriers for working-class people who did not have the vocabulary of teachers, and it is an even greater barrier for those with English as an additional language (EAL). As head of a PRU, it was often the case that we could not rely on interpreting services, so relied on strategies developed over time to overcome this. Key to this was trust and an ability to listen intently, paraphrase and repeat key points to ensure understanding. We drew on the resource of staff and pupil *"language brokering"* (University College London and the Thomas Coram Research Unit, 2014, p. 4) in order to support this process whereby staff and pupils conversant in the language of the parent with EAL were called upon to help the process. Where a pupil was involved, great care had to be taken to ensure confidentiality was maintained. Over time, parents became more confident and were not intimidated by having to interact with the school. This experience taught me to listen for and differentiate between answers based on a clear understanding of the question and those where the families were giving the answer they thought I wanted from them. I created a different version of the semi-structured interview for the local authority heads of service and the head teacher of the PRU and mainstream head teacher I also anticipated interviewing (see appendix 5).

3.6.2 PRU staff focus group

I chose to gather data from the staff of the PRU using a focus group. My intention was to involve up to six members of staff in the process to explore their perspective

and to triangulate with those of the parents. Time restrictions prevented me from interviewing them on a one-to-one basis. I devised a semi-structured questionnaire to provide structure to the process (see appendix 6). Focus groups as a form of interview present challenges different to those of the semi-structured interview. Kvale (1996) emphasises the need for the interviewer to be strong in maintaining control over the group to avoid chaos and difficulties in "*analysis of intermingling voices."* (p. 101) He argues also that the strength of the focus group lies in the *"... spontaneous and emotional statements about the topic being discussed"* (Kvale, 1996, p. 101). I anticipated a spontaneous and possibly emotional session, with disagreement among the participants. It was important for me to hear their genuine thoughts and for them to express their feelings about the difficult job they do managing young people who have been excluded from mainstream school and who present with a range of challenges, challenges that would not be accepted in mainstream schools. Kamberelis and Dimitriadis (2005) make the point that focus groups,

> *…facilitate the exploration of collective memories and shared stocks of knowledge that might seem trivial and unimportant to individuals but that come to the fore as crucial when like-minded groups begin to revel in the everyday.*
>
> (Kamberelis and Dimitriadis, 2005, p. 903)

The group was to be a mixture of up to six members of staff both teaching and non-teaching so offering a range of views from within the school. I aimed to have a broad representation of gender and ethnicity (See table 3.2).

Group	Methodology	Methods	Numbers/ ethnicity / gender
Parents	Reflexive Thematic Analysis, Narrative Inquiry / vignettes	Semi-structured questionnaire	Up to 10 families, 3:1 boy to girl ratio, range of ethnicities – Black African Caribbean / White British / Black African
PRU staff	Reflexive Thematic Analysis	Focus Group	Up to 6 members of staff, teaching and non-teaching, 50:50 gender split and range of ethnicities
External Professionals	Reflexive Thematic Analysis	Semi-structured questionnaire	Up to 4 including senior LA professionals, police and youth worker.
Headteacher of PRU and headteacher or senior leader of mainstream school	Reflexive Thematic Analysis	Semi-structured questionnaire	Headteacher of Trenbridge and headteacher of local mainstream school

Table 3.2 Methods and methodology chosen for interviewees and focus group

I had considered using a focus group with the parents, but a number of factors dissuaded me from this. The staff at the PRU already had a relationship with each other and to some extent with me. Thus, I anticipated a degree of openness that I would not expect to find in a group of parents who were unknown to each other. In addition, the fact that English might not have been the first language of some parents meant that there was a risk of those with the strongest English dominating the session, or more likely a risk that discussion would be stilted and of little value. Certainly, there would not be the synergy in the group of parents to allow what Kamberelis and *Dimitriadis* (2005) describe as the, *"kinds of social interactional dynamics that produce particular memories, positions, ideologies, practices, and desires among specific groups of people"* (2005, p. 904). Focus groups are suited to the kind of *"problem-posing"* and *"problem-solving"* pedagogies highlighted by Freire and Kozol. They argue that, *"'Real-world' problems... require rich and complex funds of communal knowledge and practise."* (Kamberelis and Dimitriadis, 2005, p. 903). I agree that a focus group approach might have elicited a powerful response from parents, but this can only happen once the researcher has spent considerable time with the group being researched, so that they build up a level of trust that allows those being researched to feel secure enough to talk openly in the company of others.

3.6.3 Analysis

As can be seen from Table 3.2 I planned to approach all of the data-gathering by subjecting the interviews with parents and professionals and the focus group meeting with staff to a process of reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) in order to identify obvious themes that might emerge in the process. As it is the parents' views that I was mainly interested in, I saw their interviews as the main determinant of which themes to promote and explore, while seeing the views of other stakeholders as critical in developing the wider perspective on exclusions and the experiences of their children in the PRU setting.

RTA requires the, "*researcher's reflective and thoughtful engagement with their data and their reflexive and thoughtful engagement with the analytic process"* (Braun and Clarke, 2019). It is a systematic approach to identifying, organising and understanding patterns of meaning within a data set. RTA emphasises strongly the researcher's reflexivity. This involved acknowledging and considering my own biases and preconceptions during the process of analysis. Throughout the course of my study, I have been careful to engage in a process of reflexivity and being aware of myself as an influential actor in the process of gathering the data.

RTA is a flexible means to deconstruct the text of an interview transcription, but for the parents' interviews this was not enough. I agree with Chase (Chase, 2005), that using this approach alone risks almost trivialising the "story" being told by the main participants, the parents, because there is a risk of omitting key details of their personal narratives. Thus, I was drawn to narrative inquiry (NI) to provide a deeper level of analysis to draw out the real essence of their experiences. She argues that NI moves away from a traditional theme-oriented analysis of qualitative data, and *"rather than locating distinct themes across interviews, narrative researchers listen first to the voices within each narrative"* (Chase, 2005, p. 663). Floyd (2012) argues further that,

> *… (narrative inquiry) is particularly suited to studies whose research questions are based around exploring perceived, subjective experiences of individuals*

or groups of individuals.

(Floyd, 2012, p. 224)

These *subjective experiences* are presented as narratives, or stories, that often transcend the systematic RTA approach. Chase breaks down these narratives into three categories; a short topical story about a particular event, such as an encounter with a friend; an extended story about a significant aspect of one's life such as schooling; or they might be a narrative of one's entire life (Chase, 2005, p. 665). I see the narratives as related by the parents for this study as falling into the extended story category. Their experiences with the education system over time that have led to their child being excluded and attending a PRU determine this.

Adopting NI allowed for people's experiences to be expressed and understood in a manner that might be missed by a systematic and to some degree impersonal scouring of the interviews for themes. It allowed for the, *"intimate study of individuals' experiences over time and in context."* (Clandinin and Caine, 2008, p. 542)

Kvale (1996) cites Mishler's experience of initially dismissing a section of an interview between a doctor and a patient as merely a lengthy digression. A closer look from a narrative inquiry perspective revealed essential insight into doctor-patient relationships (Kvale, 1996, p. 200). Similarly, I have taken the view that merely separating out themes from interviewing the parents in the study would not afford me the material I need to analyse fully the data. My experience interviewing parents in my role as head of a PRU and listening hard to their stories, the context of both the children's and their parents' lives, led me to believe there was more to be had from the interviews than was afforded by using RTA alone. There was a need to allow the interviewee to do what Chase (2005) describes as, *"…breaking through the structure of the questioning"* (Chase, 2005, p. 662). This afforded the interviewer-interviewee relationship the opportunity to shift into one of narrator-listener and a richer conversation became possible as interviewees took control and expanded into greater detail about the context in a manner that is not a "*formula story*".

3.7 Ethics and issues of confidentiality

My retirement in 2017 created considerable challenges and delays and I was not permitted to carry on with my research at my former school, Stenview. I secured consent from the head of another of the schools within the MAT, Trenbridge, to which my old school belonged, to interview staff and parents attached to that school. The letter of approval to access and collect research data is in appendix 7. Approval access letters for the Director of Children Services (FCS) (appendix 8) and Head of the Youth Offending Service (YOS) (appendix 9) are also attached. No letter of approval was necessary for the head of the mainstream school that I interviewed. I contacted him on the recommendation of the head of the Trenbridge where I carried out my study. I explained in detail what I was exploring and provided a detailed participant information sheet (PIS) (see appendix 10).

I sought ethical approval from the MUEC, and this took a considerable amount of time given the vulnerable nature of the children and families I was working with. In terms of protecting identity, all participants and institutions referred to were given pseudonyms and every attempt was made to avoid including details which point to their identity. The recordings of interviews were stored on an MU OneDrive folder and will be deleted once the study has been completed. I am conscious of the level of concern the participants, especially the families, might have in relation to anonymity and the effects their views becoming public knowledge might have on their children's chances of securing a mainstream placement. To that end, I spent some time at the beginning of each interview going through their PIS.

The vulnerable nature of the pupils involved in the study meant the passage through the MUEC was not straightforward. I had to make a convincing case that I would be sensitive to the context of the pupils and their families. This raised the "level of risk" in my application to "more than minimal risk". Having to relocate the research to another school also gave rise to further delays as I was required to return to MUEC. I will outline the details of this change of context in chapter 4. The ethical concerns around my role as a researcher were considered very carefully, particularly in

relationship to the power imbalance inherent in my role as headteacher both before *and after* my retirement.

3.8 Conclusion to chapter 3

Developing an understanding of the tools of research has been interesting for me in terms of locating where I sit within the educational world. Having been influenced by Freire's "Pedagogy of the Oppressed" (1993) before I undertook this study placed me firmly within the critical constructivist paradigm and I have found it useful to explore how and why I have come to the conclusions I have with what appears to be an alternative paradigm for education. This growing understanding of myself as a reflexive practitioner and leader has also contributed to a view of how I interact with the families of the pupils I served. While it is inevitable that the perception of these vulnerable families of my position as a (former) head of the school reflects a power imbalance, I believe that I was able to allay these fears or concerns. I conducted the process of gathering data in a manner that was reflexive, by taking account, prior to meeting with parents and their children, how they feel vis-à-vis the educational system as a whole.

4 Chapter 4 – Project Activity

4.1 Introduction

The views and experiences of the parents form the central focus of my study. In addition, I sought the views of a range of PRU staff, a head of a mainstream school and local authority heads of service who provided a highly relevant input and insight into the project. This range of sources has provided an interesting array of views as well as a means to triangulate views. I had also arranged to interview a police sergeant who was our school liaison officer. She was linked to both schools and we had a very good working relationship in terms of our engagement with many young people and their families. She was willing to be interviewed for the study but was refused permission from doing so by the borough commander. Similarly, I had arranged to interview the leader of a local youth club where many of our pupils attended and with whom the school had an excellent relationship. For medical reasons he had to withdraw.

4.2 Participants

As anticipated, some participants for the study were known to me in my former head teacher role of Stenview and I declare this (see table 4.1). The head of Trenbridge, Mr Smith, for example was my former deputy and some members of staff in the focus group also worked with me at Stenview. Two of the parents interviewed, Mr El-Mehdi and Mr Talbi (see table 4.2) were also known to me, their children having attended Stenview during my time as headteacher there prior to their moving to Trenbridge.

Participants	Number of participants	Number of participants known to me?	Nature of relationship with me
Parents (interview)	5	2	Pupils of two parents had attended Stenview in my time as head
Staff (focus group)	4	4	Two members of staff at Trenbridge had been employed at Stenview, the others known to me through MAT
Head of PRU (interview)	1	1	The head of the PRU had been a deputy on my team at Trenbridge
Head of mainstream school (interview)	1	0	Unknown to me prior to interview
LA professionals (interview)	2	2	Two LA professionals known to me in my role as head of Stenview working with vulnerable families

Table 4.1 Participants of study and relationship to researcher

The insider - outsider researcher continuum was important when considering the parents I have interviewed, particularly the two that were known to me as their children had previously attended my former school, I remained aware of my privileged position both in terms of the power imbalance between these parents and myself as representative of the very institution, the education system, they struggle to navigate. I am aware that as an ethnographer I am making an interpretation of their lived experiences, of their reality. As such, I acknowledge it is not complete, nor can it ever be. I have neither sought to persuade nor dissuade any of the participants from a particular line of argument; I have however challenged some of their thinking.

4.2.1 Parent participants

Parent participants (pseudonyms used) and heritage	Child (pseudonyms used), year group	Managed Move (MM) or Permanent Exclusion (PEx)	Links with Stenview
Mr Idrissi – Moroccan Muslim heritage	Boy, year 11, Habib	MM in year 9	None
Ms Sardinha - Portuguese / Angolan Catholic	Girl, year 11, Andrea	MM to PRU in year 8	None
Ms Walker – African Caribbean heritage	Boy, John year 11;	PEx to PRU in Year 8	None
Mr El Mehdi – Somalian Muslim heritage	Boy, Hassan year 11	MM to PRU in year 9	Son had previously attended Stenview
Mr Talbi – Moroccan Muslim heritage	Boy, Ashraf year 11	MM to PRU in year 9	Son had previously attended Stenview

Table 4.2 Demographic information of parent participants

The rationale for choosing the parents as my focus is explained in chapter 3. Unfortunately, finding parents to engage with me in this study presented the biggest challenge. This was a result of having, following my retirement, to move the location of my research from Stenview, the school where I had worked for nine years, to Trenbridge, a PRU within the same MAT and locality and faced with the same concerns and challenges as Stenview.

I had originally planned to interview up to 10 parents and had identified a number of parents of varying ethnic backgrounds, including white British, Black African Caribbean and North African Muslim families to represent the demographic of the inner-city area where the study was based. The reality of engaging this number of parents in a such a selective manner became apparent almost immediately. Out of 10 Participant Information Sheets (PIS) sent out there was a nil return. Fortunately, the school was extremely accommodating and allowed me to attend a parents' evening and address a meeting of parents in the school to explain the aims of my research and to ask for people to volunteer to be interviewed about their experiences of the exclusion process and of having their children educated in a PRU. Although I met with four sets of parents and secured tacit agreement from two of them to

engage with the research, none responded to my invitation to be interviewed. I adhered to MUEC ethical guidelines to follow up with one phone call and one text message to inform all of the families merely that the PIS had been sent to them, being careful with the wording to avoid any sense of pressurising; again, this resulted in a nil return. It was only by persisting and basing myself in the school one day per week, in a sense becoming an insider-researcher over a period of four weeks that I managed to secure the agreement of six parents to participate. Of these six parents one repeatedly failed to show up and I never got to interview him.

Although for only one of the parents English was their first language, I believe that I managed the interviews well, falling back on my extensive experience interviewing parents with English as a second language, ensuring the integrity of the interviews and that their views are genuinely represented in my findings. (See section 3.6.1)

It took me over 18 months to finally arrange and carry out these interviews to the satisfaction of MUEC (see table 4.2). I reneged on my intention to pilot my first interviews for two reasons: the lower-than-expected number of parents that eventually participated; and the compelling story told by this parent that contributed considerably to the overall research. Although the number of parent participants was small, I felt this allowed me to spend more time analysing their individual experiences in much more nuanced detail. Hence, my decision to apply a narrative inquiry approach after I had subjected the interviews to a reflexive thematic analysis. Additionally, I had already by then had some very powerful and interesting conversations with the local authority heads of service and in the focus group with the staff of the PRU. This gave me a sharper focus during the interviews with the parents.

4.2.2 External professional participants and headteachers interviewed

Local Authority Professional (pseudonyms used)	Relevance to study	Links with Stenview
LA Director of family services, Mr Graham	Close links with PRU in role supporting vulnerable families	Role encompasses both Stenview and Trenbridge
LA head of Youth Offending Service, Ms Reece	Close links to PRU in role supporting young people engaged in criminal activity and their families	Role encompasses both Stenview and Trenbridge

Table 4.3 Local Authority Heads of Service interviewed

I was fortunate that Trenbridge was represented by the same local authority as Stenview, meaning the LA professionals I interviewed were known to me (see table 4.3). They were very willing to give of their time and they offered a very powerful perspective of working with and supporting many of the same vulnerable families as I had been working with in their key roles as, respectively, Director of Family Services and Head of the Youth Offending Service (YOS), both significant roles within the LA in terms of policy-making and strategic interventions, and with whom I had liaised extensively in my time as head of Stenview. This provided a means by which to explore the experiences of many of these families from an alternative and supportive perspective.

4.2.3 PRU staff participants

Name (pseudonyms used)	Role	Links with Stenview
Ms Bellamy	Administration lead and receptionist	Previously worked at Stenview
Ms Evans	Pastoral lead including attendance	Known to researcher through MAT
Ms Harris	Teacher - science	Known to researcher through MAT
Mr Glynn	Teacher – PE and humanities	Previously worked at Stenview

Table 4.4 PRU Staff Participants in focus group discussion

Once again, I was fortunate that many of the staff in Trenbridge were known to me. This was due to both schools' close location and membership of the same MAT with staff often moving between the two schools; plus, there was regular contact at conferences and other events. I engaged four members of PRU staff in total in the

focus group, fewer than anticipated: two members of the teaching staff, Ms Harris, science teacher, and Mr Glynn, humanities and PE teacher, the latter having worked with me previously in Stenview; a member of the pastoral team, Ms Evans, pastoral lead and responsible for parental engagement and pupil wellbeing; and the senior administrator, Ms Bellamy, also known to me having had the same position at Stenview (see table 4.4). The focus group session resulted in a very lively and interesting discussion and offered yet another perspective on the experiences of families of excluded pupils.

4.2.4 Head of PRU and head of mainstream school

Headteacher (pseudonyms used)	Relevance to study	Links with Stenview
Headteacher of Trenbridge, (PRU), Mr Smith	Head of PRU where study based	Former deputy of Stenview
Headteacher of Balliston, (local mainstream school), Mr Arnold	Head of local school with close links to PRU	None

Table 4.5 Head of PRU and head of mainstream school interviewed for this study

Finally, I interviewed, separately, the head of Trenbridge, Mr Smith, a former colleague of mine at Stenview, and Mr Arnold, a headteacher of a mainstream secondary school (see table 4.5). They provided strategic and operative perspectives into how schools and PRUs can work together and powerful insights into the tensions that exist between mainstream schools and PRUs in matters of exclusion and reintegration. The relationship between these two headteachers is very insightful in terms of how the system could be made to work in the interests of the most vulnerable pupils.

4.3 Gathering the data

4.3.1 Semi-structured interviews

I devised three separate versions of a questionnaire for the parent and LA professionals' interviews, and for the staff focus group (see appendices 4, 5 and 6. For the two headteacher interviews, I used the staff focus group questionnaire but only as a structure to fall back on if the conversation stalled and as a means to

ensure I covered as broad a range of issues as possible. The foci of each questionnaire were different in order to capture personal experiences, and in the case of LA professionals and staff, also professional experiences. See table 4.6.

Participant	Foci
Parents/carers	• Child's experiences through school over time • Parental engagement with school over time • Own experiences in education • Perceptions of PRU as an education provider for their children • How parents see their child's future
PRU staff	• Priorities from staff perspective – academic v social/emotional needs • Views on negative perception of PRUs and how to change this view • Parents: hard-to-reach or how-to-reach?
LA professionals	• Experiences with families of children referred to PRU • Their position vis-à-vis mainstream referring schools • Their perceptions of the work they do
Headteachers	• PRUs and schools working together • Reintegration • Inclusion

Table 4.6 Foci of interviews and focus group according to role or status

My aim was to get as broad and as deep a view of the experiences of parents as possible as they navigate an education system many struggled to comprehend (Reay, 2017). The questionnaires were designed to maintain momentum through the interviews, particularly with those parents for whom English was not their first language. Designing these with different foci also provided a range of talking points for the interviews with all participants.

The disadvantages of this type of data gathering is that they are, as Gray argues, expensive in terms of interviewer time and travelling (Gray, 2004, p. 111). This certainly proved to be the case; on several occasions I made a fruitless journey to the school only for the parents not to show up. Ultimately, I believe it was worthwhile

as these interviews required my personal presence to elicit data that was meaningful and of relevance to the study. The face-to-face interviews with the five parents proved to be challenging, particularly where English was a barrier, requiring me to probe gently to ensure the information offered was clear and that I was not leading the interviewee. Gray argues that structured interviews, "*allow for the use of probing questions in response to unclear or incomplete answers.* (Gray, 2004, p. 111) This was essential also to create an atmosphere of trust. As I have indicated in section 4.2.1 the response to my posting out the Participant Information Sheets (PIS) was a nil return. This even after I had sent reminder text messages and reminder phone calls. In the end, it required my presence and an ability to relate to the parents of excluded pupils in a manner that stripped away any sense of a power-imbalance between them and me. Although it would have been preferable to have more parents involved in the study, I believe that I managed the interviews well and obtained a rich data set. In support of this view is the strong congruence of views among the participants – parents, staff members and other professionals.

4.3.2 Interviews with parents

Due to the additional safeguards required by MUEC as a result of my having to change schools and the difficulties I had in securing commitment from parents to be interviewed, it was not until February 2019 that interviews with parents took place. A number of other factors affected the process; I had originally agreed with the school that up to ten families would be approached. The families selected to be approached reflected the diversity of the school population. Participant Information Sheets (PIS) were sent to these families inviting them to take part in my study. I had agreed with the Ethics Committee that participants would be anonymised and there would be a measured follow-up in order not to be perceived as unduly pressing families to participate. As I have explained in section 4.2.1, I managed eventually to interview five parents out of the hoped-for 10. Some had already received the PIS, but as became clear in my conversations with them, none had read it. I made sure that in my conversations with them prior to being interviewed that I outlined the key points, particularly around confidentiality and the fact that participation in the study would not have an adverse effect on their children's education.

The five parents interviewed did not represent the ethnic mix of the school; there were three fathers of North African heritage; one mother of Black African Caribbean heritage and one mother of African heritage, born in Angola and raised in Portugal. There was represented one girl and four boys; all were parents of year 11 pupils in their final year of compulsory education (see table 4.2 on page 127). As is evident from the interviews, in some cases there was a language barrier. I believe my experience as a headteacher, regularly interviewing parents whose first language was not English and mindful of the disadvantage the parent may perceive, has helped here as has my experience as a reflexive practitioner, aware of how I am perceived and the need to factor this into the requirements for an authentic discussion, helped.

In order to ensure the data I got from the interviews was authentic and not *"as a curiosity to be reported"* (Kincheloe, 2005, p. 15), I needed to locate myself in their reality as much as I could within the context of the interview process aware of myself as a white, educated, middle-class, headteacher speaking fluent English. To gain the confidence of the families it was necessary tacitly to acknowledge the power imbalance that existed and to seek to mitigate this by lending an authentic and non-judgemental ear to their story. An example of this was the success in my time as headteacher with the Irish traveller community when I was head of Stenview. We were successful in encouraging a far higher-than-average number of pupils from this community to attend. Partially, I believe this success stemmed originally from my being Irish and the parents recognising and being willing to engage with an accent they could relate to on introduction; it was one small invisible barrier between us removed and allowed for a building of a trusting relationship over time, as I found on my numerous home visits.

Of the five parents eventually interviewed, two were known to me as their children had attended my school and had transferred to Trenbridge for reasons linked to gang-related activities, and one of these interviews provided a strong test of my ability to maintain as detached a position as possible within the framework of the research. This was a parent with whom I had had a lot of contact during my time at

Stenview and with whom I had a good relationship. Although friendly in the interview, he was highly critical of the time his son spent at my school. His criticisms were strong and though he was at pains to thank me for my personal leadership of the school, I felt responsible for the points he had made. I saw this as a test of resolve to be true to the study itself and it allowed him to tell his story. It was a powerful exercise in *"bracketing"* (Ahern, 1999) and in *"unmittelbare Sehen"* or direct seeing (Tufford and Newman, 2010, p. 82), one of looking beyond my own constructions and assumptions in order to gain an understanding of how Mr Talbi had experienced the exclusion of his son.

4.3.3 Semi structured interviews with heads of professional agencies

I interviewed the professionals in 2018, some months after I had retired. Arranging and carrying out these interviews was straightforward. These interviews yielded some very rich data. They were relaxed, open and very frank. I attribute this to the strong relationship I had with the two individual participants built up over years of working together with vulnerable families. Although the conversations were semi-structured based on the questions I had submitted to the Ethics Committee these interviews were less formal than might have been the case had I not had good relationships with both interviewees. I was familiar with their views in a broad sense and to some extent I had to keep reminding myself of this. This is where I felt I was putting into practice all that I had learnt from my study of being a reflexive practitioner. I believe I had developed the insight necessary to maintain the integrity of my research in situations like this where being fully objective as a researcher was not possible, but where it was also necessary to capitalise on the strength of the relationships constructed over years of collaborative working to capture a data-rich experience.

4.3.4 Focus group meeting with staff

I chose to solicit the views of a cross section of staff at Trenbridge. Organising this did not present great difficulties. I knew some the staff involved, two having previously worked in my school under my leadership. I wanted to hear their experiences in working with both the pupils at the school and their families. Four members of staff took part in the focus group – two teachers, the senior

administrator and the pastoral lead for the school. Ms Evans, the pastoral lead, has a particularly relevant role to play as liaison officer with social services, the Youth Offending Service (YOS) and police. She also has responsibility for attendance and safeguarding in which capacity she has daily contact with parents of the pupils. Ms Bellamy, the senior administrator and receptionist, plays a pivotal role as the "face" of the PRU, the first point of contact with the school and who maintains excellent relations with the families when they visit or call in. This was a very lively and informative meeting which also surfaced a number of differences of opinions about how the pupils were treated within the education system and how they should be managed within the PRU. This provided challenges different to those of the one-to-one interviews, firstly in managing a very interested group with strong opinions about PRUs and their position within the education system, secondly in managing myself in trying to refrain from contributing in a manner that did not influence their views nor what they said. While there were times when I became "involved" in the exchange of views I am satisfied that I did not *impose* any particular views or outcomes on the meeting itself. I believe the integrity of the data from that meeting has been maintained.

4.3.5 Semi-structured interviews with head of PRU and head of mainstream school

The final two interviews were with, Mr Smith, the head of the Trenbridge and with Mr Arnold, the head of a mainstream school, Balliston Academy. Both interviews were provided a rich dataset. I must declare here again that the head of the PRU is a former deputy of mine, who is also a friend, and this allowed for a very relaxed conversation as much as it was an interview. The interview with the head of Balliston Academy, whom I had not met before, was surprisingly relaxed, open and frank, also providing an interesting and rich dataset. For both interviews I was more flexible in the questioning, having both the indicative questions for staff and for professionals (see appendices 4, 5 and 6) to hand. My rationale for this was that I wanted the interviews to be as informative as possible. These were the final interviews of the process of data gathering and having had by then experience of

interviewing in my role as a researcher I needed to allow the interviews to develop in whichever direction was likely to provide the best data.

4.4 Analysis

RTA provided the systematic approach needed to help unearth the main themes for enquiry. I applied a second tier of analysis, NI, to the parent interviews to ensure their voice is presented in a manner that is authentic and amplifies the reality of their experiences. From the initial thematic analysis of the data, I compiled 65 codes, which I narrowed down to three themes. An outline of the process is presented in table 4.7.

Phase	Experience of this stage
1. Familiarisation with the data	Immersion in the data, transcribing them myself, repeatedly listening to the recordings and poring over transcripts. I was aware I had harvested a rich dataset but was unsure how to construct meaningful themes.
2. Generating initial codes	This was a laborious process using a spreadsheet as I sought to code the data across all the interviews and focus group meeting. I did not use software for this. At this stage I felt I was becoming more familiar with the data and the areas of congruity between them. I generated 65 codes which did not dispel the sense of being overwhelmed (See appendix 11).
3. Searching for themes	The process of generating overarching themes required another trawl of the data and the construction of main themes by exploring the individual codes and assessing how they might be merged into a theme (See appendix 12). Critical in this phase was referencing my original research question and sub-questions
4. Reviewing potential themes	This became an exhaustive process of eliminating interesting lines of enquiry, such as disproportionality in exclusion figures – "Who gets excluded?" because the data I had amassed was not sufficient to add anything more to the research already in the public domain, although I reference this frequently particularly in chapter 2 in my literature review. Similarly, "leadership", while relevant in the context of PRUs in the wider education system, does not relate directly my overarching research questions. Again, however, I reference leadership repeatedly through the study.
5. Defining and naming themes	See chapter 5 for themes
6. Producing the report	In Progress

Table 4.7 Thematic Analysis of interviews and focus group

Braun and Clarke argue, *"In analyzing the data, you use it to tell a story of the data. Data do not speak for themselves"* (Braun and Clarke, 2012, p. 67). The interviews with the parents were of a very personal nature and delivered a lot of information which I felt then needed an approach which told their *story*, to present their individual

narrative to offer a more rounded and fuller view of their individual experiences. The themes that were generated from the data reflect the overall contributions of all participants and have been chosen based on universal or near universal sentiment with regard to each of them. Obviously where any of the participants dissented from the main view that is reported.

4.5 Conclusion to chapter 4

My intention was to use the parents' experiences as the main source of data and to use the data from the staff, the LA professionals and the headteachers to support my findings. That remained the case, however the difficulty in getting parents to participate has meant the views from other participants in a position to offer a broader perspective have taken on more importance. This does not affect the integrity of the findings as they all provided a very rich dataset. I still see the views and experiences of the parents as having the most weight in the study.

It is also important to acknowledge how the importance of the issue of exclusions and particularly in relation to the disproportionate exclusion of pupils from vulnerable families and of pupils from certain ethnic backgrounds has grown since I started this study. The Gill report was published in 2017 and the Timpson review in 2019. Both address many of the areas of concern around exclusion and attendance at a PRU I have identified. I believe however that my contribution is a valid one in recognising that these areas, particularly the disproportionality in exclusions and the status of PRUs within the education system, have been explored and reported on repeatedly before, but with little sign of positive change.

In the next chapter I will report on the findings of my research.

5 Chapter 5 – Findings

5.1 Introduction

In this chapter I present and discuss the findings of this study. I explore the experiences of parents of vulnerable children attending a PRU; how their lack of understanding of, and of agency within the education system influences the likelihood of their children being excluded; how it affects their chances of a successful return to mainstream school; and leaves them having to accept the PRU as their children's substantive school. Parallel to this I explore the barriers to PRUs being seen as a positive alternative to mainstream school in the lives of these children and their families, why they continue to be seen as peripheral to the education system and how, by taking a more enlightened approach, this position might be reframed as a "liminal" position within the education system. I see the differentiation between peripheral and liminal as essential to addressing their needs. I will explore this difference in depth in chapter 7.

I will discuss the findings of this research study and explore how the parents' thoughts and questions begin to reveal a parallel narrative paradox. On the one hand PRUs serve a necessary and highly effective role within the education system as it is currently conceptualised providing necessary support for many young people who attend them; this is the positive narrative, while on the other hand, parents, for valid reasons already explored in chapter 2, struggle to accept them as viable alternatives to their children's former mainstream schools. Consequently, they resist their children's attendance at these schools. I also explore the experiences of families during the process of exclusion of their children and attending a PRU; the extent to which their voice is heard as the prospect of exclusion arises; and how these families, often for the first time, develop an awareness of their location and status within the education system on referral to a PRU.

5.2 Identification of themes

From the combination of interviews with parents and stakeholders and the staff focus group I decided on the following themes:

1. Seeking normalcy

2. Navigating a power-imbalance.
3. Structural incompatibility

5.3 Theme 1: Seeking normalcy "What is this place? I want my child to go to a "normal" school."

5.3.1 Parents

> *…the day they told me … she has to start (at Trenbridge), believe me, for me was like I lost everything."*
>
> (Ms Sardinha, mother of Andrea, age 16)
>
> *Oh gosh, I don't know, I was angry, I was distraught, I was not happy at all … (upon referral to Trenbridge)*
>
> (Ms Walker, mother of John, age 16)
>
> *I'm not happy because this is not a normal school.*
>
> Mr El Mehdi father of Hassan, age 16)

The theme "seeking normalcy" was strongly represented in the five parent interviews. It became clear very early on that they had strong reservations about the educational provision for their children at Trenbridge. All bar one would have preferred to have had their children in a "*normal*" school. By normal was meant a mainstream school, or one similar to the school their children had been excluded from, one accompanied by symbols and artefacts of school life they could readily relate to, such as those referred to by Mr El Mehdi, father of Hassan, "*homework, school bag and schoolbooks"*. The parents often had an assumption that the time spent at the PRU would be of limited duration with an expectation of another opportunity to make good in a mainstream school, arranged by the PRU, once an improvement in the child's behaviour could be demonstrated. One parent took the view for example that the PRU would *"correct"* his child (Mr Talbi, father of Ashraf) in readiness for an automatic return to mainstream school, a not unreasonable assumption, but one based on a very simplistic understanding of a structurally flawed educational system where PRUs have limited influence. I will address these flaws and particularly the challenges around reintegration in section 5.4.

Two parents had prior experience of the PRU. Prior to his exclusion, Ms Walker and her son, John, were taken on a visit there to give them a flavour of the alternative to mainstream school. It left her feeling distraught when her son was eventually excluded and referred there. "Her sense of what might await her son had been compounded by the words of a mentor working with her son who told her, *"…that school (Trenbridge) is … not the place for John. I wouldn't want him to come here"* (Ms Walker, mother of John, age 16). The other parent with experience of Trenbridge, Mr Idrissi, was the only one of the parents who was reasonably happy with his son attending Trenbridge. This was because his son was doing a part-time mechanics course arranged by the PRU. It also emerged late in the interview that he had had another son attend at Trenbridge previously. It came as no surprise that the theme, seeking normalcy, emerged from the interviews, given the acknowledged stigma attached to attending these schools,

The implication of this is that attendance at Trenbridge for these parents brings with it a label; of being a failure. This was a bitter pill for them to swallow as became evident in the interviews. The effects of exclusion and the dilemma it presented to the pupils excluded and their parents featured heavily in the conversations with all the professionals and most of the parents I interviewed. It was also the case that, once the child had settled into the PRU, some of the parents were appreciative of the work done there and came to realise that the PRU represented a positive move for their child, as in the case of Ms Sardinha and her daughter, Andrea. Ms Sardinha thought the PRU was *"amazing".* For her, it provided her daughter with the security she needed to work through her trauma, *"I'm happy because here in this school they support her"* and in the end her daughter took the decision to forego efforts of reintegration into a mainstream school, and to remain at the PRU, because "*they understand me. I know sometimes I'm a mess and rude to the teacher. I know it's wrong, but I feel confident in school*." And even Ms Walker, mother of John, concluded, *"(the PRU) does work for him"*, regretting however that her son's educational needs had not been diagnosed earlier in his school life.

The crux of the dilemma facing parents in terms of a narrative is that a pupil has to "*fail*" mainstream school in order to access the sort of support that might benefit them in a PRU. For Mr Idrissi, Ms Walker and Ms Sardinha, their acceptance of Trenbridge as their children's school represented an acceptance of a new conceptualisation of normalcy.

Ms Walker's negative view of PRUs had already been primed when she visited Trenbridge with her son while he was in year 7 as part of a misguided attempt to force him to mend his ways.

> *…they were taking…the kids…into prisons … so hopefully they won't go down that road and I think that's probably one of the reasons why they decided to bring him here (to Trenbridge) …*
>
> (Ms Walker, parent of John, age 16)

The view of PRUs as not being normal was amplified for Ms Walker by the fact that this visit to Trenbridge was part of a programme that included taking young people into prisons, again to show them how they might turn out if they did not mend their ways. The obvious message from this is one that promotes the idea of the *"PRU to prison pipeline"* (Perera, 2021, p. 4). Perera describes this as a *"trajectory"* of the criminalisation of young Black people inherent in the education system. Once they had amassed enough information about the type of school a PRU was, all of the parents, bar Mr Idrissi, expressed unhappiness at the fact that their children had been referred to a school of this sort; there was a belief as expressed by Mr El Mehdi, that this was not a *"normal school"*.

Mr Talbi was explicit and relentless in his belief that these types of schools should not exist, *"I'm against this type of school"* and feels his son was *"dumped"* first in Stenview and then in Trenbridge simply to keep him "*off the streets*". These views accord with a number of studies where parents and children were unhappy, anxious and suspicious about their children's referral to a PRU and highlights the stigma attached to attending these schools. The views of the parents are analysed in greater depth in section 5.4 using a narrative inquiry approach.

5.3.2 LA professionals

Both LA heads of service interviewed for this study, Ms Reece, head of youth offending service (YOS), and Mr Graham, director of family services, acknowledged the negative discourse surrounding attendance at a PRU. There was at times a sense of unease in our discussions about how to overcome this negative image in order that pupils in PRUs could benefit more from the acknowledged expertise offered by teachers and support staff there. Mr Graham acknowledged parent anxieties about attendance at a PRU and also the reasons why they might have preconceived ideas about them,

> *I think that they are anxious about what (attending a PRU) might mean for their child; … who their child might be associating with, so I think that they have a lot of preconceived ideas about what the PRU actually is, and I think that that is a hurdle which the PRU has to overcome.*
>
> (Mr Graham, Director of family services)

This is an interesting view taken within the scope of the wider education system. Mr Graham saw it as a "*hurdle"*, viz. the preconceived ideas of a PRU – the negative narrative – that the PRU had somehow to work to "*overcome"*, in order to be seen as acceptable to parents. My understanding of this statement was that this was something that the PRU somehow had to deal with, do something to make itself more acceptable to parents. This locates the problem with the PRUs to somehow try harder to make themselves an a priori attractive prospect not just for parents, but for all stakeholders including the LA professionals; this emphasises the isolated position these schools have within the education system as they struggle to overcome the negative narrative that accompanies the sector.

The head of the YOS, Ms Reece, said that she was unclear what exactly went on in a PRU, *"…but we wouldn't necessarily be aware of what's taught there"*. She expressed her unease by acknowledging on the one hand the expertise of PRU staff - describing the teachers as *"hardcore teachers"* - in managing the often challenging behaviour of the pupils with whom she often worked directly in her position as head of the YOS, while on the other hand questioning whether she would want her own child to go there. She had witnessed the challenging behaviour demonstrated by

pupils in PRUs on her regular visits there. In her role working directly with young offenders, she was more aware than most of the backgrounds of some of the people attending both Stenview and Trenbridge referred to in this study, and their involvement in crime. She made a significant point when she acknowledged that she felt unable unequivocally to recommend to parents that attendance in either PRU, Stenview or Trenbridge, was a positive prospect,

> *…different parents have said, once they're (in the PRU), they're not moving on anywhere else. And so, the concerns are around safety, education, and I suppose we've (asked), well, what's our position, because we need to support a parent to encourage their child to attend education. … the professional network's opinion then of the parent is that they're seen as holding a child out of school, when actually, I suppose, if it was my child, I would probably share that anxiety and think that (keeping them at home) is potentially a valid option.*
>
> (Ms Reece, Head of YOS)

This is a frank admission that the reality for professional networks when assessing how to engage with parents where a referral to a PRU is concerned is not straightforward. The anxiety she referred to included a concern for the *safety* of the child and having sympathy for a parent who might refuse to send their child to a PRU; also, there is the view that once a pupil attends a PRU, there is a strong likelihood they might not move back to mainstream. This concern is something I will address in chapter 6, as it raises the ethical question about whether professional support services working with vulnerable families and involved in a pupil's referral to a PRU are to a certain degree complicit in an arrangement whereby pupils are placed in an *abnormal* situation; they are at risk on a number of levels: of receiving a substandard education; having their safety compromised; and, possibly, are at risk of involvement in criminality or being drawn into gang culture.

5.3.3 Staff focus group

It was my familiarity with the members of the staff focus group that led me to go straight into the discussion with a provocative opening question, namely, *"from experience, parents have a negative conception of PRUs and how they work: 1. Do you agree with that and 2. Why is this?"*. The group was unanimous in accepting the

narrative around PRUs as negative. All recognised that the starting point for parents accepting a place at a PRU for their children was one of apprehension as Ms Evans, pastoral lead, argued,

> *… I think generally, or historically …, people have the idea that a PRU is a negative place to be, a place full of bad kids; (that) nothing good can come from a PRU.*

Mr Glynn, humanities and PE teacher, explained this in terms of interactions he has had with friends who, when he explains where it is he teaches, encounters automatic assumptions that it must be *"tough",*

> *…even my friends or whoever, people I meet. Oh, what do you do? I explain it and it's, oh that's got to be tough, that's hard, isn't it?*

Ms Harris, science teacher, expanded on the fact that parents have a negative conception of PRUs by referencing the poor academic outcomes of PRUs and the fact that fewer pupils make it into further education or university,

> *…to a certain extent (parents' negative conception of PRUs) is justified because …. a lot of the kids that come to PRUs don't end up actually going into further education (or) going to university.*

Ms Bellamy, administrator and receptionist y articulated the sense of despair and confusion parents feel on arrival for interview at a PRU. This view underpins the views of all staff members in the discussion and captures the negative narrative surrounding PRUs,

> *It (has) that kind of reputation of that's where the bad kids go. … I think in mainstream school, they said that …, you better, … behave or you'll be … going to PRU, you know. So, it came even from there. It's used as a threat*.

They each offered a view of their role as going beyond that of teachers and support staff in a mainstream school. They recognised the negative narrative and provided an interesting angle, as Ms Bellamy says above, "*behave or you'll be … going to PRU"*, that it often was fuelled by the pupils' and their parents' experiences with the mainstream school from which they had been excluded and which was then carried by the young person and parents into the PRU, a view supported by the experience of Ms Walker and her son being taken to visit the PRU as a deterrent (See section

5.3.2). This view is strongly evidenced in the exchange in table 5.1 from the discussion.

Ms Bellamy. …so I get a lot of the brunt of it before they get even through the door, on the phone or even just showing up or whatever. I have to have those really initial conversations, kind of, you know, and then get the message filtered through to whoever it is, whether it be the headteacher or teacher or senior staff or whoever, but I think generally I find that it's quite, they come in, almost, like let's say a new kid coming in for an interview, they come in almost solemn or disappointed, or they're like, "what are we doing here?" *Mr Glynn. Some come in angry as well; they're annoyed that they've been kicked out.* *Ms Evans. Some of them come in and don't know why they've been kicked out. It's very unfinished business for the mainstream school in the way their exclusion or managed move was handled, in the way in the process that was undertaken. Parents are still baffled and that's when you get...* *Ms Bellamy. … that's kind of on the flip side, that they come in annoyed with the mainstream school.* *Ms Evans. So, they can come in without any clarity, and we don't have that much information either, so sometimes we're dealing with a lot of emotions or anger and confusion from these families who still don't really understand why they've ended up here. And within my position I spend a lot of time explaining, reassuring, just being an ear to listen.*

Table 5.1 PRU staff views on pupil/parent perspectives of PRUs

This exchange is quoted in full as it captures the experience of the parents from the initial encounters with the PRU through to the efforts of teaching staff to engage the pupils in learning. Both parents and children are moving from their "normal" situation, an idea of school that conforms with societal norms, to a situation that deviates from those norms. Thus, from Ms Bellamy, in her role as receptionist in the school dealing with the initial engagement with the parents inviting them in for an initial meeting and *"getting the brunt of it*", immediately signalling an adversarial position taken by the parents, through to Ms Evans, in her role as pastoral lead receiving the parents and child for the first time, and then, with Mr Glynn and Ms Harris engaging them in learning within the classroom, there is what Ms Evans calls "*unfinished business"*, a carry-over from their mainstream schools, a lack of clarity and understanding of how it is that the child has been displaced from a mainstream school and ended up in a PRU - "…*what are we doing here?"*. Parents are *"baffled"* both by the process of exclusion and also what this means for their child. And then neither the parents nor the child is prepared for the experience of being in a school of the nature of a PRU.

5.3.4 Headteachers

The head of Balliston Academy, Mr Arnold, made a telling contribution in our interview; while acknowledging that the PRU, which he had visited on a number of occasions, was well run, when asked what could be done to change the narrative, there was a ponderous 15-second pause, before acknowledging he did not have the answer to this, *"I don't really know"*. This was a powerful moment in the context of this study. Although he had made a strong case for inclusion and the measures taken to be inclusive in his own school – he had not excluded a pupil in seven years - it felt that our conversation brought home the reality of moving pupils from a mainstream school considered an acceptable pathway for a child in education, to a school deemed unacceptable as an alternative educational establishment and where there are acknowledged risks.

Parents' misapprehensions about a quick return to mainstream school for their children was raised by the head of Trenbridge, Mr Smith, who echoed the view of his staff that parents and pupils are often unclear about their position vis-à-vis their original school once they are excluded and referred to a PRU. He described an occasion where, in a meeting with parents of a pupil referred to his school on a managed move, he had to disabuse them of the understanding that their child would be returning to their former school and had to reference the paperwork attaching to their case to show where they had signed the managed move agreement to the effect that their child was no longer on roll at that school. He said they believed it was a "*trial placement or respite or some mechanism by which they will return back to the same school"* (Mr Smith). And he added that it was often the case that LA support professionals were also not clear.

This raises the concern that parents often do not get a clear understanding of what was happening with regards to their child's placement at their former school, particularly where the child has been subject to a managed move; they often do not understand that they are agreeing to their child being removed permanently from the school roll, but also that the prospects of them moving on to another mainstream school are less straightforward than they imagined. Mr Smith referenced this point

arguing that it might not be a case of malpractice, but perhaps of middle leaders in mainstream schools, those liaising directly with parents, *"saying things off the cuff",* softening the message to parents about the prospect of attending a PRU, about what it is like, in order to expedite the move. This can be done by presenting the positive aspects of PRUs but leaving parents unclear about the realities both of the educational offer PRUs have and of the challenges they face in reintegrating pupils into mainstream schools. Here again is demonstrated that parents and their children are finding themselves venturing into the unknown. They are moving away from the relative security of a mainstream school into one that does not fit their understanding of what a *normal* school looks like. I will address the issue of reintegration in section 5.5.4 of this chapter.

5.3.5 Measuring progress in a PRU

> *They don't really teach you properly, so I feel I'm not happy, I'm not happy…*
>
> (Ms Walker, mother of John)

> *…you're still explaining, this is a school, you can still get your GCSEs, you can still achieve in this place, but some will come in with the attitude… it's not a school, but I just try to use some of the odd examples of (name of former pupil) and students like that who got 10 GCSEs in this place.*
>
> (Mr Glynn, PE and humanities teacher)

The two quotes above, the first from Ms Walker, one of the parents interviewed, and the second from Mr Glynn, one of the teachers who took part in the focus group, capture the contradictory perspectives of PRUs that each of the groups has, and which, as argued by the director of family services, Mr Graham, the PRU somehow needs to overcome (See quote in section 5.3.4). PRUs are schools, and yet struggle to be accepted as such and this is captured in the discussion around assessment. Most parents of children in PRUs are concerned about reintegration back into mainstream; the focus on education in the PRU is a secondary matter.

Among all of the professionals I interviewed there was considerable agreement about the often inappropriate and inaccessible curricula offered by mainstream

schools which leads to disengagement among some pupils, sometimes contributing to their exclusion. Added to this is narrowing of the assessment measures for all pupils over the last 10 years or so. Mr Smith, the head of Trenbridge expressed it thus,

> *I think part of it is the data, …sometimes because we've pigeonholed them and obviously the progress isn't EBacc or, so we're not getting the GCSEs in history and French or whatever, so data is skewed …… well actually the progress they've made when they come here is a reduction in any serious acts of whatever and the progress they made is they've completed five years of school or three years of schooling whatever it might be here, and achieve GCSEs whether it's GCSEs or BTECs or vocational qualifications and are ready to embark on a college or apprenticeship or something that they really want to do and will come back and tell us all about it…*
>
> (Mr Smith)

This point was made passionately by him. For him and his team, working with young people for whom mainstream education has not worked, a more bespoke approach to measuring progress is needed. Given the challenges faced by many of these young people, this is not unreasonable. What emerged in our discussion was frustration that progress as measured in PRUs does not fit neatly into this universal model of assessment in the form of examinations, GCSEs, at the age of 16. For him as head of a PRU, progress is measured in myriad different ways dependent upon the context of each pupil and their family. Often, as he argues, it is improved attendance or merely sitting an examination regardless of the outcome, or better engagement in class and improved relationships, that do not fit into an existing reductionist understanding of progress, that is important, yet difficult to quantify systematically.

LA heads of service recognised this also. Both Ms Reece and Mr Graham were agreed that for many pupils, it is often the case that the narrowing of the curriculum in mainstream schools into one which is more heavily focused on academic outcomes has alienated them. Frustration was also expressed in the focus group that they continue to be assessed as a school in terms of academic outcomes and

curriculum delivery, there being no Ofsted inspection framework specifically to measure progress in PRUs and AP schools,

> *Ofsted … (and) the government need to rethink the way that they assess how PRUs are run, because … we're still dealing with PRUs like they are mainstream because it's still about their progress, the teaching and learning and all that…*
>
> (Ms Harris)

There was recognition in the staff focus group and among the professionals interviewed that the existing Ofsted framework designed with mainstream schools in mind cannot capture what progress looks like in PRUs. They recognised that PRUs of necessity measure success in a bespoke manner, by supporting young people engage better with learning within a less pressured environment than mainstream school along with a range of other measures tailored to individual pupils' needs; increased attendance, usually from a very low level while at their mainstream school; or sitting just one examination constituted evidence of success for individual pupils. As referenced earlier, the staff group was concerned to emphasise that pupils can also achieve success in traditional examination in PRUs, pointing out examples of pupils who had attained several GCSEs. Of the parents interviewed, it was Mr Idrissi, arguably the parent who, from the evidence of the interview, least understood how the education system worked for him and his children, who was the most satisfied with the outcome of his son's attendance at the PRU. His son was doing a mechanics course organised by the PRU at a local college one day per week, something the child had shown an express interest in. Year in, year out, academic results for pupils attending PRUs are poor (Gill, 2017; Timpson, 2019), highlighting if anything the specialised nature of these schools and the need to think creatively about how to measure progress for their pupils.

The conversation among all of the professionals particularly, and the staff of the PRU around what constitutes success in a PRU reflects an ongoing debate and discussion in the wider society (IntegratED, 2022). Most parents depend upon three measures to help them define how good a school is for their children: examination results; league table placing; and Ofsted ratings, all numerical measures that are

published and providing easily accessed headline figures for parents when looking for a school for their children. What these indicators cannot do is capture the nuanced and often highly contextualised work going on in PRUs throughout the country that are responding to the particular areas of challenge in *mainstream* schools concerning young people in any given local authority in the country, whether it be knife crime, county lines or persistent disruptive behaviour (PDB), for which the PRUs operate as a backstop taking on those pupils that mainstream schools judge are risking their outcomes.

5.3.6 PRU to prison pipeline or PRU as the right provision

While I did not raise the connection between attendance at the PRU and the potential to become involved in criminality and possibly end up in prison, it emerged in many of the interviews and the staff focus group. All of the professionals interviewed referenced this connection. Particularly interesting was the view of Mr Arnold, head of Balliston Academy who, without prompting and in defence of PRUs, argued strongly that it is not a case of causation but one of correlation,

> *What I get really annoyed about (when referring a pupil to a PRU) is when they sort of say …., you're fast tracking them into gang involvement … and it really confuses cause-and-effect in most cases because actually the type of student and the type of issues that they have that lead to them ending up in a PRU are pre-existing.*
>
> (Mr Arnold)

This was, I felt, a clear acknowledgement of the negative narrative around PRUs, particularly in the manner the point was made, and the extent to which attendance at a PRU is perceived as an automatic entry into gang involvement. This point was echoed by Mr Graham, director of family services who referenced the range of social factors that often lie behind certain pupils becoming disengaged from mainstream school, getting excluded, attending a PRU and possibly ending up in prison. It is not within the scope of this study to assess this link, but merely to point out that nearly all of the discussions at some stage referenced the increased possibility of involvement in criminality while attending a PRU, thus contributing to the negative narrative around PRUs. This of course accords with a range of reports publicising this point,

…there is no evidence that formal exclusion is a direct cause for a child becoming involved with crime. However, we do know that there is a correlation.

(Timpson, 2019, p. 103)

Two of the parents interviewed raised the link with prison and criminality and attendance at a PRU. Ms Sardinha, unprompted, repudiated the view that the PRU was like a prison, based on what she had been told about it prior to her daughter attending Trenbridge. Overall, she considered the experience of her child there to have been a positive one,

…the people talk about (Trenbridge) like it's a prison, but I think not…

(Ms Sardinha)

Mr Talbi was the most troubled by this connection. He was more aware of the potential connection between PRUs and criminality,

…we had some bad news about Trenbridge with some criminality or whatever…

(Mr Talbi)

I'd rather my son stay indoors, no schooling rather than, you know, be a potential criminal with these people…

(Mr Talbi)

Mr Talbi was describing a situation whereby his son had become involved with pupils known to be implicated in gang-related activity who had attended Stenview, the PRU at which I had been a headteacher at the same time as his son. He eventually chose to remove his child from Stenview to protect him from this involvement with gangs. Mr Talbi liaised with the local authority telling them he would rather keep his son at home than continue sending him to Stenview, agreeing later to send his son to Trenbridge, which he considered safer than Stenview. What was interesting about this is that Mr Talbi had originally refused to send his child to Trenbridge, based on what he had heard about that school, and had only agreed to a place at Stenview believing it to be a safer option.

Based on national statistics, Mr Talbi's concerns are valid; a DfE/MoJ report from 2022, Education, Children's Social Care and Offending, found that children who had been cautioned or sentenced for a criminal offence were more likely to have

previously attended a PRU or AP school. The report's findings show that approximately 3% of pupils attend these schools but 26% of pupils who had been cautioned or sentenced for any offence had attended such a school compared with just 4.7% of all pupils. Of those pupils who had been cautioned or sentenced for a serious violence offence, the figures are 37% compared to 1.1% and for those whose offending had been considered prolific, the figures are even more stark, 57% of pupils having attended a PRU compared to under 1% of all pupils. (Department for Education; Ministry of Justice, 2022, p. 26) (See Figure 5.1)

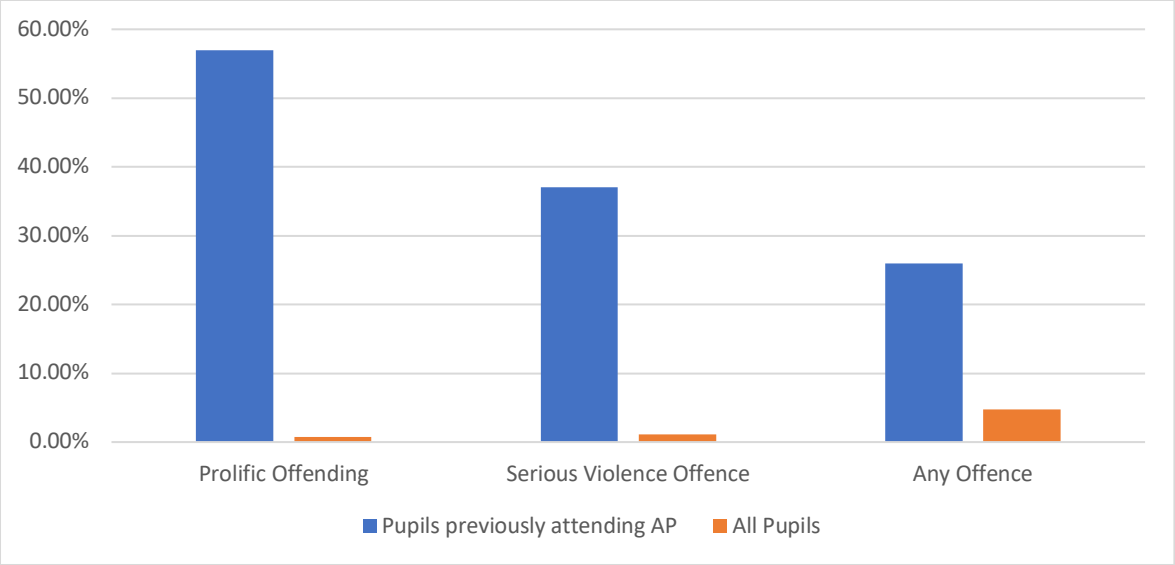


Figure 5. 1 The proportion of all pupils who had ever attended alternative provision by offending and pupil group, compared with all pupils, for pupils matched to KS4 academic years, 2012/13, 2013/14 and 2014/15 (Department for Education; Ministry of Justice, 2022, tables 1.1.1 and 1.6.1)

From my interviews with the families, it is evident that they had little intimation of what sort of school the PRU was at the time their children were first referred there. For Mr El Mehdi fears about the potential for his son to become involved in criminality were threaded throughout the interview.

> *"…students going to a normal school and students coming here are different because all (in the PRU are) bad kids or was using (sic) some drugs, or was very naughty, or very difficult to communicate with, they all come here.*
>
> (Mr El Mehdi)

The pupils, he argued, in the PRU were *"different"* and *"bad kids"*; he would prefer his son were going to a *'normal'* school. The connection with prison had already been raised for Ms Walker prior to her son attending the PRU when he with his mother had visited Trenbridge as part of a programme for pupils at risk of exclusion. This programme involved visits both to PRUs and prisons, thus reinforcing the PRU to prison pipeline narrative.

> *…because their perception of the PRU unfortunately is that …the mass isolation unit with scores and scores of unruly, disruptive individuals who can't be managed and the doors, or the way that the rooms are organized, the way the school is organized, (that) it's like a prison system and that's another perception, parents come here and say we've heard this, we've heard that …*
>
> (Mr Smith)

For Mr Smith, the connection between attending a PRU and criminality was all too clear and was something he saw he had to live with. It was part of the narrative around PRUs and one which he saw needs to change.

5.3.7 Changing the narrative

> *We've one child asking for five years for somebody to do something to help, and it took us 20 or 21 weeks with the support of the services to get him an EHCP and* ***that's the narrative, isn't it?*** *They've come here, the parent didn't want the child to come here, why would it be any different here…?*

This powerful response from the Mr Smith articulates again the two sides of the narrative about PRUs. On the one hand he outlines how with considerable effort, and ability PRU staff focus more on the child and their context; he outlines how they managed to secure an Education and Health Care Plan (EHCP) in a matter of weeks for a child who had, up until their arrival at the PRU, waited five years. On the other hand, the reality for him and his staff is having to navigate the pre-existing negative assumptions about PRUs – "*the parent didn't want the child to come here"* - before they are able to support pupils who need it. Part of this negative perception is that parents feel, *"it's like a prison system".* And, as argued by the director of family services, Mr Graham, these are the hurdles (see section 5.3.3) that PRUs have to

overcome in order to be deemed acceptable to parents and to be in a better position to support excluded young people.

Among almost all the participants in the study there was appreciation for the work that goes on in PRUs, Mr Talbi being the exception; he remained steadfast in his criticism, that his son was probably "*worsened by… these types of schools".* All of the professionals interviewed recognised the difficult position PRUs are in working with pupils' mainstream schools cannot accommodate. Of the parents interviewed, opinions ranged from highly positive about their child's experience at the PRU to highly negative (See table 5.2).

Parent	Attitude to attendance in PRU immediately following exclusion	Quote	Attitude about child's experience at the PRU at time of interview	Quote
Mr Idrissi	Relieved (that child still has a school to go to)	"…you know better than me, you are the teacher…I say, send them to different schools, no problem."	Positive	"It's good because Habib say, I like it because they let me go to (a) mechanic (course)"
Ms Sardinha	Very negative	"…the day they told me I have to, she has to start here, believe me, for me was like I lost everything"	Very positive	"For me, yeah, I don't know other parents, for me (the PRU is) amazing."
Ms Walker	Very negative	"…when he actually started. Oh gosh, I don't know, I was angry, I was distraught, I was not happy at all?"	Positive	"Do you know I've realised that it does work for him (at the PRU)"
Mr El Mehdi	Negative	"I'll be honest, (I was) not happy because this is not a normal school. Okay? (I was) not really happy."	Satisfied	"I'm happy because there's no other school will accept him"
Mr Talbi	Very negative	"…and when (they), sorry…, dumped him, I'm sorry to use this word in such schools …"	Very negative	"The way I perceived it, it's just like a school that is guarding them to be out of the streets, but not helping them out"

Table 5.2 Parent attitudes to child attending a PRU prior to referral and after

A strongly positive view, that PRUs provide the opportunity for young people to overcome the personal challenges they face having been excluded from mainstream school, is also acknowledged by reports over the years as captured by the Timpson Report,

> *… there is plenty of excellent practice and positive outcomes… One parent … said: "[our son] was placed in a PRU which was a fantastic move as he gained almost 3 years education in just the first three months.*
>
> (Timpson, 2019, p. 77)

Nevertheless, there is a dilemma that these parents confront, and it is a stark one - how will I know that my child will be ok in a PRU? Will my child survive? This was a point agreed upon by all of the parent participants bar one. It came as a shock to all except Mr Idrissi that their children were being sent to a school of this nature. Mr Idrissi also, nevertheless, had wanted his son to remain in mainstream school and I infer from my interview with him that his initial understanding from the discussion with the headteacher of his son's former mainstream school was that he was powerless to prevent this move and asked simply that his son and two other children not be moved to schools too far from home, a situation he would not have been able to manage given the fact that he was caring for his disabled wife. It came as a relief, then, that his son was being referred to Trenbridge and the relationship with the PRU improved his situation, because it acknowledged the child's desire to do something different to what he was experiencing in mainstream school. So, from early on Mr Idrissi professed himself satisfied with his son's attendance at Trenbridge.

Three of the remaining four parents acknowledged the positive work going on in the PRU (see table 5.2) and, of these, two recognised that it had been a positive move for them given the challenging nature of their children's behaviour and the ability of the PRU to engage with and support them. Mr Talbi, however, gave no indication that he accepted the work done in the PRU as positive. His view simply was that these schools should not exist, that they were a systemic mistake offering no hope for his child.

In discussing the work going on in PRUs, those parents who expressed a positive view, Ms Walker and Ms Sardinha, acknowledged that the PRU provided a positive learning experience for their children. Ms Walker found for the first time since her child was in primary school that the staff were better able to respond to his behaviour and she was not plagued by regular, negative communications from the school regarding her son's behaviour. Ms Sardinha's daughter chose eventually to remain at Trenbridge rather than pursue reintegration to a mainstream school. Mr El Mehdi, while not directly positive about his son's experience at the PRU, nevertheless acknowledged positive aspects of the PRU; he proffered the view that he was happy that his son had a school of any kind and happier with the relationships between staff and pupils at the PRU which he described as more *"friendly"*. Mr Talbi, as advised had nothing positive to say.

The LA professionals acknowledged the paradoxical situation whereby one has to demonstrate negative and challenging behaviour*,* be *'branded a failure'* (Department for Education, 2019, p. 63)*,* in order to access the expertise and resources of a PRU. It places PRUs in a deficit starting position. The head of Balliston Academy, Mr Arnold, the director of family services, Mr Graham, and the head of the Youth Offending Service, Ms Reece made reference to this. They acknowledged that attendance at a PRU, based on the evidence of the positive work going on there, in an ideal world, should be seen as a positive option within the wider education system. The conundrum is how to achieve this, how to convince parents that a school set up to manage *"bad"* children is the right place for their children.

When asked what can be done to change the narrative around PRUs, to make the prospect of attending a PRU a positive rather than a negative one for parents, the LA professionals and head of mainstream school offered a range of suggestions, many of which reflect how PRUs already operate (see table 5.3). The Head of YOS, Ms Reece, for example suggested changing the name and "*rebranding"* and this aligns with a Timpson report recommendation (Timpson, 2019, p. 77). I pointed out to the interviewees that this has been done many times since schools of this type were introduced in 1993 (See section 2.6). In my discussions with participants some

interesting points were made about attendance at a PRU that might make it a positive prospect for both pupils and parents. Mr Smith, the head of Trenbridge saw the role of the PRU as needing to be brought more securely into the fold of the education system, but with access to a range of *"fantastic services"*, an idea also mooted by the director of family services, Mr Graham, who suggested co-locating support services on the same site as a PRU in acknowledgement of the fact that it is the most vulnerable children from the most vulnerable families that will be more likely to attend a PRU. This is not an idea without challenges, as it risks cementing PRUs' position on the periphery of the education system and redefining it as a centre of support for families and not just for their children who have been excluded from school. Mr Graham also made a strong case for better family engagement. He saw the PRU as part of the wider community and envisaged parents of pupils who had a previously attended the PRU advocating on its behalf to parents who faced the prospect of having their children referred there.

The head of the Youth Offending Service, Ms Reece, also proffered advocacy for children at risk of exclusion, suggesting that parents of pupils excluded from school should have access to an advocate to support them through the process of exclusion and during their time in a PRU. An interesting extension of this idea was the advocate's role being to work with the families when a child is *at risk* of exclusion, to persuade families to take up the option of a move to a PRU as in the best interests of the child, with the role of the PRU focused on what might be behind the challenging behaviour. There is much to consider about this idea as it would enhance the standing of PRUs within the wider education system, offering the possibility of them being drawn more securely into the wider education system. This idea of advocacy framed in such a way and the PRU having as its function to explore the context of the child's behaviour, while drawing on and coordinating a range of support, merits further exploration. I will come back to this in chapter 7.

The head of Balliston Academy, Mr Arnold, took the view that there is a role for PRUs to promote themselves, given the negative narrative that surrounds them. He

suggested using case studies to convince parents that their child can be successful in a PRU. (See table 5.3)

Mr Smith, Head of PRU	"I think we got to partly accept …and agree what we're about … and that means accept what the outcomes are going to be… and not worry about tables and numbers … but actually accept that there is a problem here of these children leaving PRUs … and becoming NEET (not in education, employment or training) and then everything else that happens as a result of that, or leading to that is secondary, so the gangs and the knife crime, and the antisocial behaviour, unemployment and all of that, yes it will happen and it will happen throughout life, and the mental health needs and the counselling that's needed, and the drug addiction and alcohol addiction; all of those things are going to happen, but it doesn't happen because they came to a PRU, … in my own reflections, it happens, because you can see it when they're eight, (or) nine years old, because the cycle is there, the patterns are there. The family situation is what it is and we're not able to put in, we're not able to get the additional support in early because we have to meet certain thresholds, we get to a certain point. And we're trying, we can only do so much which is fine, you know, we get them where we get them but if we focus on the fact that they're going to be NEET, everything else I think falls into place"
Mr Arnold, Head of mainstream school	"…if you're the PRU, (the answer) is actually having some really good case studies be able to show parents and say that, look, here's an example of a student just like your child. This is what happened to them, this is what they achieved, this is where they went."
Ms Reece, Head of YOS	"I think there's something around starting almost with the rebranding" "…so […] you have the parent able to meet with the advocate before, they understand the process, … but you also have the school sort of talking about… the concern that X's behaviour does have an impact, and […] we're wondering…maybe what's behind that or do you think that the support (of a PRU placement) that … he/she would benefit from"
Mr Graham, Director of family services	"(S)ome of the initiatives I know that have been undertaken before, the kind of parent group events etc. where families are able to draw upon their strengths as adults with children that are challenging are the types of things that I think will resonate within the communities, because communities are influenced by experience aren't they, so if you've got one parent in amongst saying, actually they were brilliant, what they did for my child was X, Y and Z, then that begins to change the narrative."

Table 5.3 Suggestions from LA heads of service and headteacher of mainstream school and of Trenbridge on how to change the narrative around PRUs

The interviews with the LA professionals and the head of Balliston Academy, demonstrated the degree to which the work that goes on in PRUs is appreciated, but also misunderstood to some degree, about their purpose, their lack of status and their location on the periphery of a wider education system that needs to change in order for many of the ideas to have a meaningful effect. There was agreement that the narrative is a negative one and that this makes it problematic when referring a

child to a PRU. There were a range of suggestions, all with merit and I will explore these in greater depth in chapter 7 in the context of the flaws within the whole education system. It was the head of the PRU, Mr Smith, who offered the broad view needing to *"acknowledge the reality"* and develop a model that is able to access a range of support measures for families. This point suggests to me a need to reconfigure the whole education system so that in fact PRUs can redefine themselves in more expansive terms supporting schools to manage even the most challenging pupils.

All of the staff of the PRU and its head teacher recognised and acknowledged the dilemma faced by parents of a child excluded from school, removed from that school's roll and placed, without choice, in a school effectively deemed to be inferior, for *"bad"* people (Mr El Mehdi). They expressed frustration with the fact that on arrival at the PRU, both pupils and parents are on the defensive. The decision to refer them to this school, not a *"normal"* school, was not theirs; it was taken on their behalf and the only other choice they had was elective home education (EHE) - more commonly known as home-schooling - which was not a realistic option for any of the parents I interviewed given their working-class status and being already marginalised. As a result, they are more than likely to be resistant to having their children educated in a PRU.

An interesting point emerged during the parent interviews that speaks to the search for *"normalcy"*: the conflicting views about behaviour management. All of the parents, bar Mr Idrissi, expressed the view that the PRU should be firmer in their dealings with the children; Mr Talbi for instance stated that it should *"correct (his son* and should be *"stricter".* Ms Sardinha also expressed this view, *"I think (they should) be more strict".* She also compared the PRU approach to how her daughter's behaviour would have been dealt with in Portugal, where her daughter had been born, intimating that she would have been dealt with more harshly. Mr El Mehdi also felt the PRU needs to *"be more strict".* The clearest case of this was Mr Talbi, who felt that the role of the PRU should have been to "*correct*" his child with a view to getting

him back into mainstream school, as captured in the following short exchange in table 5.4,

Mr Talbi: correction, like he is misbehaving, his main problem is the behaviour, so I think we need some experts who deal with pedagogical or psychological issues, so should be more concerned about that, rather than filling out the curriculum … *Researcher: so, really, instead of focusing on the academic side as much…* *Mr Talbi: yes* *Mr Talbi: …What I mean support, like one-to-one counselling like you know…* *Researcher: yes, yes* *Mr Talbi: what's wrong, what's happening? How we can get him away from that misbehaviour, getting out of track, bringing him back to track.* *Researcher: so, it's not necessarily … that you are looking for harsh punishment, you're looking for some sort of support…* *Mr Talbi: yes* *Researcher: … and help and you don't feel that that's there?* *Mr Talbi: it didn't happen there…* (Mr Talbi, parent of Ashraf, age 16)

Table 5.4 Suggestions from LA heads of service and headteacher of mainstream school and of Trenbridge on how to change the narrative around PRUs

His responses in this exchange are interesting in that it required me to be clear about what he meant by *"correction"*. As with Mr El Mehdi, I nevertheless inferred from this part of the interview that Mr Talbi felt more could be done with the pupils to correct their behaviour directly in the form of a range of interventions of a psychological nature, but *not excluding* punishment, that would somehow fix his son, that would support pupils to change their behaviour and get back into mainstream school.

In spite of their experiences in the mainstream schools where the children had been subjected to a range of behaviour management approaches and strategies, highly attuned to behaviourist philosophy, and having failed to navigate schools' approaches to behaviour, they still felt there should be a stricter, viz. more punitive, approach to pupils at the PRU, including their own. This I saw was a desire for a *normal* school response, one that would demonstrate that their children belonged to a normal school. Their children having been displaced from the mainstream sector into the alternative provision sector, they seek to retain the very aspects of their mainstream school experiences that they could not manage, and which ultimately resulted in their exclusion.

The PRU staff, on the other hand, felt they were building alliances with the families of these children in a manner the families had been unused to with the mainstream schools. It was clear that they were taking a more pragmatic approach to managing behaviour. So, while the families were positive, in some cases enthusiastic, about the experience the child had of the PRU *a posteriori*, they could not relinquish their own beliefs about behaviour management.

All of the professionals, all of the teaching staff and most of the parents acknowledged that PRUs carry out excellent work for the young people referred to them. They appreciate the strong emphasis on relationships and acknowledge that the staff at PRUs are highly skilled in working with the most challenging pupils, that they are more flexible with regards to managing and modifying behaviour. As Mr Smith put it,

> *"…there are sometimes (pupils) who come here, want to leave from day one, by day two they never want to leave again."*

Unfortunately, however, several factors impact on the perception people have of PRUs, which in the structure of the education system as it currently stands appear intractable. These are: the belief they are for *"bad"* pupils; the higher risk of associating with other young people who may be involved in gangs or criminality; the poor year-on-year academic outcomes as published by the DfE. As has been reported over the years, this sector is regularly perceived as being on the periphery of the education system and I will argue in section 3 of this chapter that this is a structural flaw within the education system itself. Parents, like Mr Talbi will, as a result of this flaw, continue to take the view that their children are *"dumped"* in PRUs. They will continue to be seen as schools for pupils that mainstream schools cannot cope with, while often these are pupils who fall foul of draconian and narrowly defined behaviour policies that exclude young people who present as challenging but without taking into account their individual contexts. That PRUs do this on behalf of the education system is laudable, but it leaves them in a place where no matter how hard they try, no matter how often they are renamed or rebranded, they will continue to be seen as an abnormality of the system.

5.3.8 Summary theme 1

All of the parents had a view of what education looks like for their children when they are in a mainstream setting. Once, however, this normative situation had altered and they found themselves referred to a school that is other than what they had come to expect, there came a need to explore this in order to come to terms with it. As is evident, some of the families, Mr idrissi, possibly because he had previous experience of having a child in the PRU, and Ms Sardinha in particular, had come to terms with this new arrangement early on in their children's attendance at the PRU and had seen the benefits. Ms Walker, while she was accepting of the fact that her son had not attended a mainstream school in many years, regretted the time wasted while trying to get her son a diagnosis which would have secured for him a possible place in a special school,

> *"…I think being in mainstream school it did not work and I only wish that primary could have looked into it more"*.

Mr El Mehdi was ambivalent, *"I am happy, but I am also not happy",* because he would still prefer his son to have attended a mainstream, *"normal"* school. Mr Talbi on the other hand has never accepted that his son should be in a PRU, a school where he says his son was *"dumped"* merely to keep him off the streets.

The PRU staff and all of the professionals interviewed had a clearer picture of the reality of attendance at a PRU. All could identify the conflicting narratives that surround a PRU. There was acknowledgment of the skill set that staff at these schools have and the manner in which they face and cope with the extremes of behaviour. This point was made most clearly by the head of YOS,

> *"(the PRU has) got the hardcore teachers… You've got to have a lot more skills around being able to educate in (such) an environment…".*

There was an understanding of the difficulties of how to manage this within a restrictive inspection framework that measures success in terms of academic outcomes, and in which reintegration to mainstream schools is becoming more and more difficult.

There is a clear belief among the professionals interviewed that the positive narrative needs somehow to be promoted more effectively. Proposals made to change the narrative focused on changing the image, getting the message out about what PRUs have to offer, greater efforts to reach out to the mainstream sector, use of case studies, developing as a community-based organisation and placing emphasis on advocacy as a means to support pupils at risk of exclusion. I will explore these in the course of the rest of this study. My conclusion from these discussions around this point is that PRUs are seen as abnormal because they are PRUs, schools set up on, and remaining on "*the periphery"* of the education system to "mop up" the pupils mainstream schools cannot deal with.

5.4 Theme 2: Navigating a power-imbalance: the parents' view – their experience of their children's exclusion and referral to a PRU

> *…when he actually started. Oh gosh, I don't know, I was angry, I was distraught, I was not happy at all.*
>
> (Ms Walker, mother of John, 16)

This theme was chosen following analysis of the data that highlights the struggles the parents experienced in their dealings with their children's mainstream schools up to and during the process of exclusion. I felt it was necessary to explore these experiences and how and to what extent and with how much success they engaged with the schools from which their children had been excluded. I wanted to find out if these were hard-to-reach parents, or as Day (2013) argues, is it the case that the schools were hard to reach?

Of the five pupils involved in the study four were subject to a managed move, one was permanently excluded. The struggle for all of them really began when confronted with the reality of what education in a PRU meant and having to navigate the system to try to get them back into a mainstream *"normal"* school. In the process they have little power in the face of the mainstream schools' decisions, are not listened to and they feel they are viewed as "difficult" or hard-to-reach parents a point that could call into question the validity of the agreement to the managed move. Ms Walker's challenges, for example, started long before her son's exclusion, and she articulates this powerlessness when recounting an incident from her son's time in primary school,

> *…so, I wasn't happy and I went to speak to the … headmistress as well at the time, and it's like they sort of dismissed it, 'oh that's in the past now', but obviously John got into trouble for something that apparently didn't happen.*

Ms Walker's son had been accused of punching another boy at sports day and she intervened with staff as they were pulling him away from the other pupils. The member of staff possibly not realising she was the mother of the child *"waved her hands in my face"* and told her the situation was being dealt with. Her son was sobbing and denying anything had happened, but Ms Walker's attempts to intervene were *"dismissed".* She was later told the other boy had a bruise on his back. Ms

Walker knew the other boy's mother and approached her about the matter sometime after to find that the mother knew nothing about what happened and there was apparently no bruise. Ms Walker's efforts to follow up to try to rectify what she perceived to be an injustice were dismissed and the matter simply left unaddressed.

None of the five parents I interviewed could be classified as hard to reach given their reported efforts to engage with their children's schools over time. Their participation in this study is in itself a strong indicator of their willingness to engage with the education system on behalf of their children. The exclusion of their children was, for four of them, a result of behaviour that was known about well in advance of their exclusion, but arguably not managed properly, certainly from the perspective of the parents. The exception, Mr El Mehdi, saw his child excluded for involvement in drug-related activity on two separate occasions and accepted this decision as justified. All of the parents interviewed, while demonstrating a willingness to work with the respective schools were to varying degrees unsuccessful in engaging *effectively*.

I don't know…

(Ms Walker 37 times in interview)

This summary of people's attitudes before and during their children's attendance at the PRU does not do justice to the individual narratives that accompanied these interviews. The interviews were semi-structured, but each had an individual quality which told a unique story of the parents' and children's experiences in mainstream school and at a PRU that deserved to be heard. Narrative inquiry provided the opportunity to develop the personal stories of each of these families to provide a deeper and richer account of their experiences. My aim was to develop my arguments about powerlessness or lack of voice in the process of exclusion and referral to a type of school unfamiliar to them. All of the children were in year 11 when the interviews took place. All five parent interviewees told individual and personal stories (see table 5.5); I found that they *"(broke) through"* (Chase, 2005, p. 660) the structure of my questioning to tell their story. This caused considerable reflection on my part as I considered to what extent I had remained impartial. I

believe the case of Mr Talbi, whose son had attended Stenview during my time there, supports my view that I did (see section 4.3.2).

5.4.1 Parent stories

Parent	Stories
Ms Walker	This was a story of relentless exclusion from this child's early school days. Exclusion took place not just within the school day, but also exclusion from friends' parties, school trips and school plays. This is also a story of undiagnosed SEND, a child labelled as naughty in nursery and this continuing into secondary education. An example of powerlessness was the placement of her son directly into an onsite unit on transition from primary to secondary school, without consultation with her and with no diagnosed SEND and no attempts to assess his needs.
Mr Idrissi	This parent had four children in the school at the same time and was told by the school headteacher that he would have to move three on a managed move basis, one to the PRU, two others to other mainstream schools. Mr Idrissi reluctantly agreed but felt he had little choice. From this interview, there is evidence of off-rolling.
Ms Sardinha	This parent's daughter changed "overnight" from a happy, "very good" pupil to one who was challenging and distrusting of teachers. Ms Sardinha feels there was a clear context for this, the imprisonment of her son who was very close to her daughter, his sister. The school appeared to have mishandled the information shared with them about the context for her behaviour, breaching the child's trust and moving her to another school against the parent's wishes
Mr El Mehdi	This story is one that concerns a pupil who was a follower and who has gotten himself into trouble, excluded twice and a sense of little expectation of a return to mainstream school. Mr El Mehdi was concerned about the power of the system, in the form of policies, namely behaviour policies, to keep his son out of mainstream school.
Mr Talbi	the stories Mr Talbi recounted are those of his struggles to do the best for his son as he sees it but finding himself unable to navigate a "system" that in his view is designed not to give his son a good education but to put his son at risk both physically and in terms of his future educational and career prospects.

Table 5.5 Parents' "stories" from narrative inquiry with focus on power imbalance

Parent	Indicators of powerlessness
Ms Walker	*"I am lost, I'm stuck, I'm confused…"* *"I went to speak to the headmistress as well at the time, and it's like they sort of dismissed it,"*
Mr Idrissi	*"…you are the teacher, you know best".* *"Exclude him? For what? He is going to the toilet to wash his hands."*
Ms Sardinha	*"I didn't like headteacher because the head teacher's so rude to me, like my child is nothing."*
Mr El Mehdi	*"I have to accept (exclusion of son), and I have accepted it."* *"…that was the policy, I had to accept it."* *"(My son) might realise his mistakes…but because of the (school) policy I can do nothing."*
Mr Talbi	*"…eventually, well according to them, they couldn't do anything else to help him out, so they told me at that stage that that's his last resort." "Well, I said if all the chances have been tried and nothing worked with him, obviously what can I do if that's the system, if these are your rules, I have to accept them, so I had to sign that he is referred to these kinds of schools."*

Table 5.6 Power imbalance - Indicators of powerlessness

All of the parents had rich stories of their lived experiences to tell, which narrative inquiry brought to the fore. Their stories highlight however a strong sense of powerlessness felt by them in relation to the mainstream schools' handling of their children's removal from their respective school and in the cases of Mr Idrissi and Ms Walker long before their children were excluded. While this sense of powerlessness is *explicit* in three of the families, Mr Idrissi, Ms Walker and Ms Sardinha, an analysis of the interviews with Mr El Mehdi and Mr Talbi reveals an *implicit* sense of powerlessness (See figure 5.6). I now present each of their stories. (See appendix 1 for extended summary of interviews with parents).

Mr Idrissi, father of Habib, year 11 – managed move/possibly off-rolled

Mr Idrissi's son was subject to a managed move. His story is compelling and I feel a strong case could be made that at least two of his children, possibly three, had been off-rolled from their mainstream school. Mr Idrissi was confronted with a situation where the head teacher was proposing to split up his four children, so that ultimately three were moved from the school on managed moves, two to other mainstream schools and the other to Trenbridge, with one remaining in their mainstream school.

His case represents a strong example of his being disadvantaged by the power imbalance between him and his children's school.

In the interview with Mr Idrissi, it is evident he was concerned mainly that his children would be moved to *"far school(s)"* (sic), signalling his lack of understanding of the process he was agreeing to. He interrupted my questioning early in the interview with the words *"…you know what happened..."* to tell his story his way. This was a powerful moment in the interview. Mr Idrissi took control of a faltering interview to give a powerful insight into his experiences navigating an education system in which he was arguably minoritised. In the interview Mr Idrissi makes it clear he did not want any of his four children to be moved at all, but they were moved against his wishes, *"And (the headteacher) do it, he do It. he put everyone in a different school*". His tone when recounting this to me was one of incredulity. There is a hint in the interview that there might have been challenges presented by the siblings being together, when he talked about having four children together at the same school,

> *"…you know they help each other… and talk too much to each other and the school make problems … and the teacher doesn't like Habib (his son) …. you know. He (the teacher) make(s) big problems"*.

Three of his four children were being subjected to a managed move, and for this to have happened, Mr Idrissi would have had to sign documentation agreeing to the moves, but possibly did so without having a clear understanding of what he was agreeing to, what his rights were and without support. From the discussion I had with him, this appears to be a case of off-rolling, a process whereby a school persuades a parent it is in the best interests of the child to leave the school, when in fact it is the interests of the school that are served. Off-rolling is illegal.

In addition, there is evidence that his son may have had SEND or mental health needs overlooked by the mainstream school. Mr Idrissi recounts in detail how his son had had fixed term exclusions previously from school. These were for repeatedly going to the toilet to wash his hands and refusing to follow instructions when denied permission. Mr Idrissi discussed how his son had an obsession about cleanliness, not opening doors with his hands for example. When he took it upon himself in the

interview to *"…(break) through the structure of the questioning"* (Chase, 2005, p. 662) and explain in his terms what happened, he became more fluent. What emerged was a story that would not have emerged had I simply followed my questionnaire. It was of a school determining that his child should be excluded via a managed move to the PRU and two more of his children subject to a managed move to other mainstream schools. From my interview with him, it is evident that several factors which would warrant exploration had been overlooked by the school. Mr Idrissi repeatedly talks about his son being *"too clean";* he talked about his child's fussiness and obsession about having his clothes washed at home on their own, not mixed with anybody else's.

> *(My son) is too clean…if I tell him open the door, he doesn't open by hands… he (likes) quiet, (and) clean…clothes. He doesn't like I (wash his clothes together) with his brother's clothes, with my clothes, no, I need (to wash them separately).*

Thus, when his child defied a member of staff by going to the toilet to wash his hands, there appears to be a case of an overlooked mental health need undiagnosed and left unmet. Mr Idrissi is clear the school knew about this condition, *"Yeah, they know about this".* Mr Idrissi said this in a resigned tone. There is also mention of his son's need to have somewhere to fast in the school, again possible cultural and religious issues overlooked by the school. His son was eventually moved to Trenbridge, without Mr Idrissi being accepting of it, *"Exclude him? For what? He is going to the toilet to wash his hands."* This highlights not only the power imbalance in the relationship between him and the school, but also that he may have been taken advantage of, persuaded to agree to a managed move for three of his children without having a full understanding of the process. This would amount to a drastic move by the school. I was unable to probe deeper into the circumstances of these moves, as he ended the interview early. What is clear is that he felt he had more of a voice in his relationship with the PRU. He appreciated the fact that he was called regularly by the school and informed what sort of day his son had had, whether good or bad. He was appreciative of the fact that his son, via the PRU, was doing a mechanics course one day per week.

Ms Sardinha, mother of Andrea, year 11 – managed move/possibly off-rolled

Ms Sardinha's daughter was subject to a managed move. As with Mr Idrissi, Ms Sardinha became more confident and fluent as the interview progressed. She describes a major family trauma, the imprisonment of her son, as having a severe and sudden effect on her daughter, who prior to this event was, in her view, a well-behaved and happy pupil in school. There appears to have been a breakdown of trust when the child confided in a member of staff what had happened in the family and the member of staff may have passed that on to other staff members, possibly in an appropriate manner from a point of view of safeguarding. Ms Sardinha, nevertheless, is left with the view that the child felt betrayed, and it was this that triggered a deterioration in her behaviour. As with Mr Idrissi, the school opted to move the child to a different school, one within the same MAT, on a trial, managed move, quite far from where they lived, but where the child was happier. This was a decision over which Ms Sardinha had little control and she saw this in itself as an exclusion, *"No, really, really, she was excluded. They change that for the other school. They move her…"*. As with Mr Idrissi, there is an argument to be made that the child was subject to off-rolling, based on the lack of influence Ms Sardinha had over the process that led ultimately to her daughter being moved to the PRU. She would have had to agree to the move and sign paperwork to that effect. Ultimately, this arrangement did not last and she was returned to her original school, where her behaviour continued to deteriorate. From Ms Sardinha's account there is a sense that she had little say in any of these arrangements and it is clear that the relationship between her and the school broke down as a result.

Ms Sardinha describes having been supportive of the school, keen to emphasise that she was always *"polite",* regularly going to meetings and, interestingly, bringing her sister, in order to help her understand what was going on, as she was not confident that her English was good enough to allow her a clear understanding of proceedings, a factor that clearly had a bearing on her level of power and influence in the process.

All the time polite, all the time agree with the things, sometimes …(bringing) my sister because I don't understand some rules in the school but never aggressive…

Here there is a degree of deference towards the school, emphasising again the power differential between her and the school.

She is happier with the relationship she has with the PRU, feeling she is more able to communicate effectively with staff, and she can contemplate a brighter future for her daughter, who had already chosen courses of a vocational nature once she left school. She remained concerned about the way pupils, including her daughter, speak to staff at the PRU – *"she's rude",* but overall, she feels she is in a better position in terms of her daughter's education and future as a result of her time there,

they're very nice. They (PRU staff) talk to me, they helped me to find (a parent support group) …when I said I need help because now is very hard, she is 16 and now they start a course here on Tuesday, straightaway they invite me to participate.

Ms Sardinha here provides evidence of a more dialogic relationship with the PRU, *"they talk to me… I said I need help…"* refers to the PRU offering her access to a support network run at the PRU for families struggling with the behaviour of their teenage children. It is this engagement with broader family concerns that enable PRUs to have a better chance of success due to the nature of the deeper relationships between the PRU and the family.

Ms Walker, mother of John, year 11 – permanent exclusion

I'm lost, I'm stuck', I'm confused…

Ms Walker's son was permanently excluded. Her experiences stem from her child's behaviour being challenging from nursery school. Her account is one of feeling overwhelmed by the refusal of the schools, from nursery through to mainstream secondary school, at every stage to acknowledge her son's behaviour problems as having a context, in this case a special educational need that was undiagnosed. As with all the parents interviewed there is a sense of authenticity both in how she presented and in her story. She was transparent, for example, in acknowledging that

she was "*speculating* " about what may have been behind the schools' responses to her child's behaviour, for example in her suggestion that there may have been collusion between her child's SEND coordinator in his new secondary school and his former teacher in primary school,

> *She said to my son, I've heard a lot about you. You know my daughter used to be your teacher and she told me a lot about you.*

Nevertheless, it is her strongly felt belief that her child had been "*labelled*" as a naughty child from early on in his schooling. He experienced exclusion in a broader sense from nursery onwards, banned regularly from trips and other school events, and not just from school, but from social events connected to the school, from parties organised by fellow pupils, for example. She recounts how a staff member at his primary school intervened to *"uninvite him"* to that member of staff's son's party to which he had been invited by the child. Her son regularly missed out on school trips and was omitted from school events. At one point, she says she felt the headteacher *"dismissed"* a matter where her son was wrongly accused of assaulting another pupil. Her frustration is evident when she describes that on her child's first day at secondary school, he was placed in a special off-site unit without ever having had the experience of belonging to that mainstream school as it was. None of this had been discussed with her in advance and no diagnosis was made of a special need until she pursued the matter herself with her GP, and he was finally diagnosed with ADHD and ODD when he was 12. She expressed frustration and anger that it took all that time to get this diagnosis and it had not been investigated in school.

When pushed about the support the schools offered, she was adamant that the schools were not helpful, *"No, no support …because they were just fobbing me off. They (SENDCos) just didn't want to do what they were supposed to do".* Ms Walker felt there were issues with her child that should have been identified from nursery but she felt unable to be heard,

> *… we then found out that there was an issue (with) my child that could have been rectified a long time ago and maybe he wouldn't have been like how he is now, because in that sense (the schools) failed him dramatically, even nursery as well.*

Her opinion of Trenbridge had already been primed by her and her son's visit there prior to his exclusion (See section 5.3.2). She took from this a negative view and this was amplified when she bumped into a former pupil of Trenbridge who advised her it was *"not the place for John"* an example of the persistent negative narrative around PRUs. Her view was somewhat more positive when invited to reflect on her son's experience at the PRU in the run up to his GCSE final examinations. She was critical of aspects of the school, but felt better able to communicate this to the staff; she recounted how she could approach a member of staff who had not returned a call and told him, *"you're in my bad books"* and she was pleased that relationships between pupils and staff were strong, *"…the staff seem to be more friendly with the kids, so they're almost on their page"* Clearly her relationship with the PRU is a more open and she was anticipating support from the PRU with regard to her son's increased use of cannabis.

Mr El Mehdi, father of Hassan, Year 11 – managed move

> *…students coming here are different because all (are) bad kids or was using some drugs, or was very naughty, or very difficult to communicate with, they all come here...doing drugs...which in a way I really don't like it but this is, whether I like it or not, I have to accept it.*

Mr El Mehdi son was subject to a managed move. He acknowledges his son's wrongdoing, and it seems clear that he transgressed school behaviour policies quite seriously on two occasions. The first involved the possession of drugs, *"weed"*, for which he was subject to a managed move to another mainstream school. The second occasion was for possession of drug paraphernalia, for which a managed move to Trenbridge was the outcome. There is a great sadness about what has befallen his son and a ready acceptance that no school would have him once they had checked his background, so he was *"happy"* on one level in that he was attending a school, any school, and receiving an education, but *"not happy"* that the school he was attending, a PRU was not a *"normal school"*. Where I detect a sense of powerlessness is in his subdued tone and ready acceptance – *"I have to accept it"* - that this is the fate of his child, that the fact that the child breached schools'

behaviour "*policies"* merited his *continued* exclusion from mainstream school and placement in a school he evidently sees as unsuitable for his son.

…so, if he breaks that policy so then the exclusion.

There was no sense however that he should challenge and continue to challenge schools' perceptions of his son, seek appropriate support or that he should pursue a path of reintegration on behalf of his son. This was evidenced by his repeated assertion that once school "*policy"* is breached, that's it, *"no school will accept him, once they check his background".* Mr El Mehdi's pessimism vis-à-vis his child's chances within the education system resonates with Bourdieu's concept of "*habitus*". For him it was *"…the social order (becoming) progressively inscribed in people's minds"* with Mr El Mehdi acquiring *a "sense of one's place which leads one to exclude oneself from the goods, persons, places and so forth from which one is excluded."* (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 471). It is his focus on school behaviour policies as strongly fixed entities, that cannot be challenged, that lends weight to this argument. From his description of what his son did to be excluded from school, it would be difficult, within the existing educational framework and approaches to behaviour, to challenge the decisions to exclude him. He is convinced that even when his son leaves the PRU to go to college, this will follow him and will affect his son's prospects in college and he will have no power to do anything to change that.

Mr Talbi, father of Ashraf, Year 11 – managed move

Mr Talbi's son was subject to a managed move. Of the five parents interviewed, Mr Talbi was the most articulate in outlining his fears for his son while he was attending the PRU. In his view his son was "*dumped"* there simply to keep him *"(off) the streets"* and that PRUs were not fit for purpose as educational institutions. Mr Talbi was emphatic that as a parent he was doing everything he could on behalf of his son. As with Mr El Mehdi he was accepting of his child's transgressions, but here too there was an acceptance, possibly too ready an acceptance, that this is where his son has ended up and that it was the fault of the system. He saw it as a systemic inevitability of an education system that is flawed and which needs to be changed. The first aim of the change in the system, he argued, should be to get rid of schools like PRUs. *"I'm against this type of school."*

His sense of powerlessness was more nuanced than that of the other parents. At one stage he points out that his son's mainstream school had done everything they could to help him. What he described however was a range of punitive measures – reporting cards, detentions, offsite provision and eventually a move to another school. So, while not overtly blaming the school, at one stage in the interview when he had again acknowledged that the school had done everything it could, he added almost as an afterthought,

> *…eventually, well according to them, they couldn't do anything else to help him out, … so I had to sign that he is referred to these kinds of schools.*
> (see full quote in table 5.6)

The nuance of this comment, *"well, according to them"* and its significance might have been missed without the use of the narrative inquiry. This was an indication to me that he was not wholly convinced that the school had done everything they could have done, but also an acceptance that there was little he could have done about it, "*...if that's the system, if these are your rules, I have to accept them."*

5.4.2 Parents

All of the interviews with the parents were powerful. Mr Idrissi's decision to interrupt my questioning while struggling to make his point in English was a key moment in my interview with him. His cutting through my questioning allowed him to explain in his terms a complex story that my original line of questioning would not have allowed to emerge. He became more confident and fluent as the conversation proceeded in this manner. His decision to cut short the interview also meant I was unable to explore more thoroughly some of the issues that emerged in the interview.
As mentioned earlier, all of the families that I interviewed for this study where from minority ethnic backgrounds. The inclusion of all minority ethnic families in the research turned the focus on how they are often portrayed and treated within society and how labelling them as hard-to-reach risks minoritising them.

> *…I didn't like headteacher because the headteacher's so rude to me, like my child is nothing. It was a mess, really, meetings and meetings and meetings and meetings.*

Ms Sardinha is here expressing her frustration at her experience trying to work with her daughter's school following the deterioration in her behaviour, in the process of which she felt increasingly powerless. For Ms Sardinha it was the imprisonment of her son that led to her daughter's sudden change of behaviour for which the school appeared unwilling to assess the context and put support measures in place. She describes her child changing suddenly causing Ms Sardinha to lose confidence in herself as a parent and school being very rigid in its approach towards the child's challenging behaviour. She had little say in the decisions by the school to move her in the first instance to another school within the MAT to which the school belonged, but quite a distance away, and then, when that arrangement did not last, to Trenbridge.

Both Mr El Mehdi and Mr Talbi were also regularly engaged with the school but ultimately this did not prevent their children being excluded. In both cases there is acceptance that the managed moves to the PRU were deserved. Their sense of powerlessness arises from the predicament of their sons having to attend a PRU, a pale version of a school with considerable risks attached to being there. In both these interviews I sensed a heightened respect for the mainstream school as an institution, possibly based on a cultural view of education from their countries of birth, that overrode their willingness to challenge the system that ultimately determined their children be excluded from mainstream school. Both parents referenced the school "system" –- Mr El Mehdi did this referencing the school *policies*, which he determined were not to be challenged, while Mr Talbi mentioned having to comply with the *"rules"* (see table 5.3) and a ready acceptance of the of the sanctity of the *"system",* that I picked up from the tone of both parents.

Similarly, Both Ms Walker and Ms Sardinha engaged regularly with the school. The former had struggled since her son was in nursery to have her son's needs identified, but felt he was simply labelled as *"being naughty, a difficult child"*. She reported that her son was placed immediately in an onsite unit on his first day of secondary school, without consultation, and spent 92% of his time in year 7 there. No diagnosis of SEND was made. This lack of consultation with her over her son's

move directly to an onsite unit on transition from primary to secondary school indicates rather that the schools were hard to reach. Throughout her interview, she advised that she was dependent upon the school to know what to do with regard to her son's behaviour.

> *They've got experience of knowing what can help each child … help me, because I'm a parent, I don't know, that's your job, … I'm stuck, I haven't got anywhere, so I don't know.*

It might be argued that Ms Walker could have taken this issue up more forcefully with the schools to push for her an assessment for her son's needs earlier in his education but then Ms Walker appears to have been herself labelled as a challenging parent (See quote in section 5.4.1), her son having had a series of exclusions in primary school and this may have contributed to her lack of confidence in engaging more assertively. From her interview it is clear she had sought to engage regularly with the schools but found herself continually at odds with them over her son's challenging behaviour, coming herself to the view that her child was simply naughty, before eventually seeking help with her GP and getting a diagnosis of ADHD for her child's condition. Up until then, she had convinced herself that this was how her child was, and she simply had to accept this fact.

The accounts of all of the parents reveal a high willingness to engage with their children's mainstream schools. All, however, lacked a true voice in influencing how their children were treated by the schools. They all had a stronger voice when engaging with the PRU; unfortunately, as in the case of Mr Talbi and Mr El Mehdi this did not compensate for the fact that their children were not attending a mainstream – "*normal*" – school.

5.4.3 Staff focus group

While it cannot be directly deduced from the interviews of the five parents, that they are hard to reach, the concept of hard-to-reach parents was immediately recognised and acknowledged by the staff of the PRU as valid, "*They are definitely hard to reach…."* (Ms Evans, pastoral lead). One of the reasons that parents engage less, is, in fact, the exclusion of the child in itself. This created the paradox of parents being

perceived as engaging less with the PRU than they did with mainstream school for the very reason that their children attend a PRU, as Mr Glynn explained it,

> *They know we're the end of the line, they can't really go anywhere else, so I (referring to the parent) don't really have to engage with (the PRU), it's done now.*

There was no dissent from this view. They felt that arrival at the PRU communicated a sense of despair on the part of the parents, *"it's done now".* All saw it as a critical part of their role to re-engage parents on behalf of their children, in such a manner that the parents might not have engaged with their previous mainstream school. This was about building trust and alliances with the parents. One of the key people in this process was the school receptionist and administration lead, Ms Bellamy, who was tasked with the daily duty of making initial calls to parents when something serious had happened and in which their child was involved. All the staff felt they had become skilled in talking through such events with parents in a non-judgmental way, even where a serious event, such as a violent altercation, needed to be addressed. There was also acknowledgement around how they were adept at providing positive news, often to the delight of the parents, who had not been accustomed to receiving such news. This point was acknowledged by some of the parents; Mr Idrissi acknowledged that the school rang him regularly to tell him if his son had had a positive day as well as when concerns about his behaviour needed to be shared. He was encouraged by this.

Mr Smith took another view about hard-to-reach parents, one that aligns with that of Crozier and Davies (2007) that often it is the case for some parents that it is the school that is hard to reach. For him, home visits are an integral part of his role,

> *…it's so important that you know, to see them in their own home and … every single one of them has been so welcoming whatever the circumstances of … my visit…, you know, and I don't think they are, I don't think necessarily it's them being hard to reach.*

He took the view that as a PRU head he and his staff were in a position to communicate more effectively with the families of the children referred to his school. Often, he found that families feel for the first time that they are listened to properly

and this is something that is needed for these vulnerable families. This is reflected in the view of Ms Sardinha when her daughter explained why she chose to stay at the PRU, rather than pursue a return to mainstream school (See section 5.3.1). Ms Sardinha was greatly reassured by her daughter's decision; this example highlights the powerful effects of family and school working together, communicating in a dialogical manner where all options can be considered and the school is not limited by a need to pursue a purely academic route for the pupil, nor to respond in a traditional behaviourist manner.

5.4.4 LA professionals

Both LA heads of service were familiar with the label hard to reach and how it is applied to many of the families with whom they work, many of whom also have children attending the PRU. Their view is however that for many of these families, navigating the professional network of support in place for them is something they often struggle with and in which they have little power. Thus, the label hard-to-reach families is a familiar one but is unfairly applied. The director of family services, Mr Graham echoed this view; the families can be described as hard to reach, but this is, he argues, more about professional services not doing enough to reach families in complex circumstances,

> *I think it's a bit of a label really, because it kind of apportions blame on the families as if they're putting up barriers for us; it may be that we're just not offering these families the right type of services.*

This then is about hard-to-reach services. He acknowledged that trust is lacking in services and how to overcome this and work with them effectively is key. This raises the paradox of parents being perceived as harder to reach as more professional agencies become involved in order to support them; they become *"the over-targeted"* (Feiler, 2010, p. 37), particularly if support from the various agencies is uncoordinated. Both saw the PRU as a possibility to develop more effective relationships and engagement with those unfairly labelled as hard-to-reach parents. Mr Graham suggested even that services might be co-located on or near the site of the PRU.

Why not actually co-locate some other services that would be able to meet their needs and that could be CAMHS services, that could be our (YOS) workers etc.

This becomes a whole-family, whole-pupil approach based around the fact that the child, who might be the focus of attention, is attending the PRU for the school week, and is a recognition that it is the most vulnerable pupils that are excluded and whose families might need support. Ms Reece, head of YOS, suggested that there is a need for pupils and their families to have advocacy representation. Both proposals are interesting in that they signify a recognition of the potential to enhance the status of the PRU to offer families of pupils attending a PRU a stronger voice not just in relation to their children's education, but also more generally with the PRU operating as a central arbiter of how and which services to access. This resonates with the view of the head of the PRU who saw his role as head of a PRU as one of *"brokering…fantastic services"* because the PRU of necessity has to navigate the whole-family dynamics in a manner that a mainstream school cannot, reaching into the family network to assess where support is needed in order to enhance the life chances of the child.

5.4.5 Headteachers

As with the PRU staff, there was immediate recognition of the concept of the hard-to-reach parents by both headteachers. They emphasised the responsibility they had to reach out as much as they possibly could to engage with all families. For the head of Balliston Academy, Mr Arnold, it was a clear case of identifying "*how*" to reach all families, while admitting that this was not always possible, that some families simply refused to engage, albeit these were few and far between. He distinguished these from parents who might be classified as "*difficult*", but with whom the school was adept at engaging productively and had systems in place to do so.

Mr Smith, the head of the PRU was adamant that parental engagement was essential not only to the development of the child's education, but also in supporting the families. He saw his role as going beyond what a mainstream school has the resources to do, doing home visits to families of his pupils, spending, *"as long as you*

need to spend to really understand the timeline really… what (went wrong), where did it go wrong?" This diagnostic approach can only be done by engaging parents in authentic dialogue, ensuring parents have a clear understanding of their position within the education system, explaining the reality of their predicament and engaging with them in a dialogic manner that gives more power to their voice.

5.4.6 Marginalisation and minoritisation

As indicated previously, all of the families who eventually agreed to participate in this study were of minority ethnic background. As Feiler (2010, p. 37) argues, minority groups are among those who are traditionally under-represented, marginalised, disadvantaged or socially excluded. None of those interviewed mentioned ethnicity as a possible factor in their child's exclusion from school and I was reluctant to bring this up for fear of contaminating the interviews. Their experiences were theirs alone and for this reason I chose to use narrative inquiry to dig deeper into their experiences as related by them, in order to raise pertinent questions rather than arrive at hard-edged conclusions. Whether or not it was about ethnicity, there is a strong argument that Mr Idrissi, Ms Walker and Ms Sardinha experienced marginalisation (See section 2.2). All of the parents interviewed for this study were lacking in power within an education system that is constructed according to the needs and wishes of the majoritarian white middle class population in the UK (Reay 2017). The experience of Ms Walker, mother of John, through from nursery until her son's leaving mainstream secondary to go to a PRU in year 8, has considerable evidence to make a case for her being institutionally minoritised. She recognised from her child's time at nursery school that there might have been a special educational need and she appealed repeatedly for help. She felt let down by the fact that the school did not explore what his need might be, choosing, in her words instead, to label him,

> *… as a naughty child, misbehaving, then he was excluded from numerous trips due to safety reasons because one minute he's there, the next minute he's off.*

Her son was eventually diagnosed with ADHD and ODD at the end of year 7, when he was 12. What struck me about this interview was the parent's reliance upon the

school to detect any unmet special educational needs. Ms Walker feels let down by a system that allowed her child to remain labelled as a naughty child rather than explore what might be behind the behaviour. Ultimately his behaviour led to his exclusion and referral to a PRU. Throughout the interview she expressed disappointment that the school did not address these issues, and I think this highlights the difficulty for families who do not or who cannot navigate the education system if they don't know what they don't know, they do not know what questions to ask and how to proceed. Miss Walker accepted for many years that she simply had a naughty child, *"I felt like it was normal because you know he's grown up with me".*

Of the five parents, only Ms Walker was a native English speaker, but was frank about her lack of understanding of the education system. In the course of the interview she said, *"I don't know"* 37 times. She lacked the vocabulary of teachers. All of the others had English as their second language, another invisible obstacle contributing to the power-imbalance between them and the schools. It was clear that they valued the opportunity of gaining an education in the UK and in some cases were explicit about the opportunities they thought this gave their children. Mr Idrissi was relieved that his son had the opportunity to do a course in mechanics, even after his son had been excluded from school on a managed move to the PRU. The views on education of some of the parents were to some degree influenced by their own experiences in their countries of heritage; Ms Sardinha – born in Angola, but raised in Portugal; Mr El Mehdi – immigrated from Somalia, and Mr Talbi - immigrated from Morocco (see table 5.1); all expressed a degree of frustration with the wider school system, and the PRU in particular, that a *stricter* approach could not be taken with their children, believing this was what was needed for their children. Both Ms Sardinha and Mr Talbi made reference to how their children would have been dealt with in the countries where they grew up. These views compounded their broader lack of understanding of education in the UK.

All of the parents interviewed, with the exception of Mr Talbi, commented on the positive aspects of their day-to-day dealings with the staff at the PRU. All remarked that staff were more accessible and communicated with them more effectively. Mr

Idrissi volunteered the information that his wife was disabled. I found this interesting in the context of the interviews and how they ran, for it told me more about the struggles he is facing on a day-to-day basis and which his son's mainstream school more than likely would have been unable to make allowances for.

In all of the interviews with parents, their powerlessness in the face of an education system intent on keeping their children out of a *"normal"* mainstream school and in a type of school repeatedly deemed unfit for learning was expressed clearly in their stories (see table 5.5). All apart from Ms Walker's son had been subject to managed moves, and there is evidence to suggest they had been subject to off-rolling given their lack of understanding of the system and agency in the process they were attempting to navigate.

5.4.7 Summary theme 2

From the interviews with the parent participants of this study I find that they are not hard to reach. I have made a strong case that in fact it is the school as an institution that is hard to reach, and the parents' sense of powerlessness prevents them from engaging effectively. I feel however that the views of the PRU staff, the head of mainstream school and those of the LA heads of service on the subject are clear indicators of this being a phenomenon that deserves attention; all recognised the term as valid. Mr Smith, the head teacher of the PRU talked about the long-term costs of not engaging with the families and the children more effectively, in a manner designed to overcome the barriers to engaging with parents. There is potential to give parents of pupils excluded from school a stronger voice, focusing particularly on those identified as vulnerable (Gill, 2017; Timpson, 2019). This is based on the qualitatively different nature of the relationship that PRUs develop with families, as was the case with Trenbridge and the families of the children being educated there.

The limitations to this relational approach, and the obstacles to developing parental agency, in the form of helping parents gain a greater understanding of their position within an education system that is biased against them (Freire, 1993; Reay, 2017; Tippet, 2020), are to be found in the *"peripheral"* location of PRUs within the

education system as a whole which serve to diminish its potential impact as parents look simply to get their children out of PRUs and back to a *normal* school. I will address the findings from my interviews in relation to the structural flaws in the education system in the next section of this chapter.

5.5 Theme 3: structural incompatibility - addressing flaws in the education system

5.5.1 Introduction

This theme relates to how PRUs are represented and located within the structure of the education system. During the discussion with PRU staff, Ms Bellamy described the sense of confusion and disappointment that pupils, and their parents, often experience on arrival, *"(the parents and child) come in almost solemn or disappointed, or they're like, 'what are we doing here?'"* All members of the focus group empathised with this view, and it was acknowledged by the LA professionals and both headteachers. Having gone through the process of exclusion, whether by permanent exclusion or by managed move, none of the parents were fully prepared for the alternative being offered to them. A sense of dislocation pervaded four of the five interviews with parents, the exception again being Mr idrissi for reasons already explored and explained in section 1. The best example from the interviews with parents is probably Mr El Mehdi repeated assertion that the PRU was not a "*normal*" school. This is unsurprising given that the history of PRUs repeatedly suggests that they remain on the "*periphery*" of the education system. A House of Commons Education Committee reported that many of the proposals from a 2016 White paper, Educational Excellence Everywhere, were not taken forward*, "further pushing alternative provision to the periphery of education policy."* (2019, p. 6) The role of PRUs is seen mainly as supporting mainstream schools by removing pupils they find most challenging to a PRU.

5.5.2 Reintegration - exposing PRUs' peripheral status

All of the pupils whose parents I interviewed for this study were in year 11, their final year of compulsory Key Stage 4 schooling. Consideration for reintegration back into mainstream school since their enrolment at the PRU had long been forgotten. All had spent at least 30 months at the PRU with one of them, Ms Walker's son, John,

having spent almost his entire secondary schooling there. As they were all in year 11, their main priority was preparation for their final GCSE examinations. It is widely accepted in alternative provision that only in rare cases will a pupil return to mainstream school in year 11; this is for fear of distorting schools' examination results (Thomson, 2023). I have documented the challenges of reintegrating a child back into mainstream school from a PRU following exclusion in section 2.13. Exploring reintegration as a concept is useful for demonstrating how wide the gap is between mainstream schools and PRUs. It is acknowledged that not every pupil is suitable for return to mainstream (Timpson, 2019; IntegratED, 2022) but, when deemed appropriate, particularly for younger pupils, efforts are usually made to prepare a pupil for this. Reintegration becomes increasingly difficult as pupils get older and the longer they stay in a PRU (Thomson, 2023). The contradictions that lie in PRUs' attempts to prepare pupils for a return to mainstream were voiced by both Mr Smith, head of Trenbridge, in our interview, and within the PRU staff focus group. Mr Smith spoke of his frustration at a process designed, on the surface, to give a pupil a second chance in a mainstream school, but where, as he said, the interview between the pupil and mainstream school is, *"…not an interview, it's a grilling"*. The pupil is warned, they have three chances and then*, "you will be out"*. All of the staff in the focus group agreed emphatically with this characterisation of the reintegration process and highlighted the sometimes insurmountable hurdles that pupils have to overcome to return to mainstream. Mr Glynn related how he has,

> *some learners that should have gone back a long time ago, but they've been here so long and now their behaviours are so bad it would be very difficult to get them back now.*

Ms Bellamy described an example,

> *… of us reintegrating a learner and they were sent back to us not because of behaviour, because of attendance… he was consistently late so that's bad behaviour, so he was in a cycle of getting detentions, you know, not showing up to the detentions, and he was just sent back to us, but not because he was behaving badly…*

The above examples highlight not just the difficulties in reintegrating a pupil, but also the conflicting priorities that a PRU has when compared to mainstream schools. Managing the most challenging pupils means adopting different processes and approaches; there is more listening, a focus on therapeutic intervention, and an avoidance of going down what Paul Dix calls *"punishment road"* (Dix, 2017, p. 107), in other words less focus on behaviour management systems, a point the parents found difficult to accept, and structurally this raises a concern about PRUs fitting into the framework of the education system as it is presently conceived.

The place and status of PRUs within the education system was addressed by Mr Smith, who agreed fully with the depiction of PRUs in the Timpson Report as being the *"underbelly of our education system"* (Timpson, 2019, p. 74). He articulated just how much people outside of PRUs fail to understand the work that goes on in them.

> *… parents don't quite understand and actually information they get from schools is sometimes skewed. The information they get from the media is sometimes skewed …*

His stories of working with families directly, in a manner which he acknowledges a mainstream headteacher could not, with a focus on individuals and their families, were very powerful. His point was made that when schools exclude pupils without having regard for what might be going on in a child's life it means that it is often those pupils who most need support who are punished by exclusion. As head of a PRU he believed he had a responsibility to explore the context of the child's life. He makes the point about the need to visit families in their homes and work with them more closely than a mainstream school could.

Mr Talbi, the parent most critical of PRUs, articulated the misconceptions parents have about PRUs. He thought a PRU would be a half-way house between a mainstream school and the PRU, *"like somewhere in between mainstream and these kind of referral schools".* This reinforces the view of the peripheral nature of PRUs. Mr Talbi missed aspects of mainstream, such as a focus on "*correction*". Here, he is highlighting the unanticipated structural gap between mainstream and PRUs. The reality of his son attending a PRU was far from his expectations; his son became

involved in gang-related activity at Stenview at a time when I was still headteacher there and eventually he liaised with the local authority to have his son sent to Trenbridge in spite of his original misgivings about the school,

> *… (at Stenview), he was mingling with certain (pupils involved in gang-related activity), he was pushed by some gangs to help them or go with them or whatever.*
>
> *I expected that these kinds of schools would be tighter then mainstream to correct him rather than worsen him, so I'm against this type of school, particularly this element of correction. I couldn't see the correction happening. The way I perceived it, it's just like a school that is guarding them to be out of the streets, but not helping them out to, but not correcting them to be back to the track, back to the mainstream.*

Here he is clear that he is *"against this type of school".* Nothing about the PRU was acceptable to him. He witnessed his child's behaviour deteriorate so withdrew him from Stenview and saw little evidence of measures being taken to *"correct"* him in readiness for reintegration. It was outside any expectation he had of what normal schooling should entail and highlights the structural positioning of PRUs on the "*periphery"* of the education system, out of the way, like an embarrassing secret, that is perceived as hindering the chances of pupils desiring a return to mainstream school.

For the parents of the pupils I interviewed there came a realisation not only that the school in which their children were placed following exclusion was *"not a normal school",* but that,

> *"…the system is dictating that these are the kind of schools that they should be in, and these schools shouldn't be (in existence) because they should be correcting …"*

but that the route back into mainstream school was not automatic and nor was it straightforward.

The heads of professional agencies and the head of the mainstream school interviewed acknowledged the situation of PRUs finding themselves on the periphery of the education system, doing a necessary job working with children with complex needs, but with limited influence in the matter of reintegration. All were particularly aware of the paradoxical situation of PRUs' approach to supporting excluded pupils, ostensibly to get them back into mainstream schools, but not necessarily readying them to cope with the less personalised environment of a large school, more reliant on systems than a PRU, and focused on academic outcomes. Mr Arnold, the head of mainstream school recognised that PRUs of necessity adopted a more nurturing and tolerant attitude to their pupils, often identifying and addressing unmet special educational needs, the provision being,

> *…far more intensive … far more tailored to the needs of students so typically obviously class sizes would be much smaller, sort of 8 to 10 and far better … therapeutic intervention.*

This view was echoed by Mr Graham, the director of family services for the borough and Ms Reece, the head of the YOS. Mr Arnold agreed that reintegration was problematic and that many schools resist taking pupils who have been excluded from other schools, leaving those schools that have a more inclusive ethos, such as his, to accept more than its fair share of previously excluded pupils. In the course of the interviews with the LA heads of service and the mainstream headteacher, Mr Arnold, it became clear that strong reservations were held about the effectiveness of PRUs, not for the work that they do but because of the quandary about what is required of them, assembling in one place the pupils exhibiting highly challenging behaviour where there was a risk of behaviour worsening, as in the case of Mr Talbi's son, and a higher risk of becoming involved in criminal activity, while having an explicit aim of readying these pupils for a return to a mainstream school.

Their reactions are understandable, given what I would argue is the difficulty PRUs have in defining their roles so as to manage the complex range of issues they are confronted with and the liminal space that they occupy between: the families of the excluded children; the mainstream schools that they serve; the local authority support services they liaise with; and the wider society from which the families, given

their vulnerable status, also find themselves cut off. A good example of this was provided by Ms Reece, head of the Youth Offending Service. In our discussion we discussed the fact that as part of a young person's conditions to avoid prison, they are often subject to Intensive Surveillance and Supervision (ISS) orders. She described these as, *"the direct alternative to incarceration"*. This often involves young people who might otherwise go to prison having their movements monitored with tight restrictions on where they can go. The education component of this is something that is not supervised but the young person is still monitored for attendance, meaning pupils subject to an ISS order but who attend a PRU have no incentive to engage in education. All that matters is that the young person is present at the location of the PRU.

From my interviews with all participants a picture emerges of an institution, the PRU, that is defined more by the mainstream schools' lack of capacity to deal with certain behaviours, what their culture permits or deems unacceptable. As a result, PRUs need to be highly adaptable and nimble, as the bottom line is that there is nowhere else for these young people to go. This fuels the negative narrative that they are for *"bad"* children and they are *"not normal"* schools. They provide a simple response to the complexities of the lived experiences of mainly vulnerable families, often plagued by poverty and subject to discrimination at multiple levels. The culture and leadership of these types of schools plays a significant part in determining how best to respond to the *"complex patterns of negative, self-destructive behaviour (which is) not easy or formulaic."* (Department for Education, 2012, p. 4)

The head of the PRU put it thus,

> *…I think it has to be us and I think if we try and pretend we're going to change lives or we're going to turn children, individual children around without exploring the dynamics at home without exploring family relationships, family dynamics then it's just not going to happen and actually if it's going to be sustainable then we've got to have access and real open access to some fantastic services within the local authority that will allow us to be in a part, part of those*

discussions to sort of facilitate, broker, facilitate these children, the parents of these children into support networks.

This echoes the view of his staff who also see their role as going above and beyond what could be expected of mainstream school staff. It highlights their view that in order to function effectively, simply replicating what mainstream schools do is not enough. This then takes them into an area of seeing the child within the context both of their immediate family and their wider community and engaging with them on those terms.

5.5.3 Flipping the narrative

In a similar vein, all of the professionals, while acknowledging the very skilled and caring approach taken by PRU staff, struggled to see how these schools could be presented in a such a way to make a move to a PRU positive choice. The parents interviewed had mixed experiences of their child attending Trenbridge; three had positive experiences, one had a satisfactory experience and one was completely dissatisfied. For those three parents who had positive experiences, would they have chosen to send the child to a PRU, to move them out of a mainstream school into a type of school, of which they had had little or no prior knowledge, that accepts pupils with a range of challenging behaviours and an approach to teaching and learning that is less "*strict*" than that in most mainstream schools? From the interviews and their reactions to their children's *initial* referral to a PRU, it is safe to say that they would not have made that choice willingly. Apart from Mr Idrissi for reasons discussed earlier, all expressed a range of negative responses to the prospect of their children attending Trenbridge (see table 5.7).

Parent	Reaction to child starting at a PRU
Mr Idrissi	*"I think this school is good"*
Ms Sardinha	*The day they told me … she has to start here… for me was like I lost everything.*
Ms Walker	*Oh gosh, I don't know, I was angry, I was distraught, I was not happy at all.*
Mr El Mehdi	*I didn't like it…because I want him to go to normal school.*
Mr Talbi	*… I thought oh God, plus we had some bad news about Trenbridge with some criminality or whatever, so I was scared.*

Table 5.7 Parents' initial reaction to child attending a PRU

5.5.4 PRUs' and schools' conflicting priorities

A key moment in my research for this study was when nothing was said. The lengthy pause, the silence, when I asked Mr Arnold, the headteacher of the mainstream school interviewed for this study how do we change the narrative around PRUs (See section 5.3.5). The director of family Services, Mr Graham, offered a more philosophical take on the dilemma:

> *… whilst having to think about attendance and attainment of those pupils, (the PRU) also has to think about a philosophy that enables young people to find a space so they can trust and feel safe enough to explore their learning and therefore it needs to be an environment that has a whole host of structures and support within it that can contain some very challenging young people, but at the same time can contain and challenge, I guess; it is challenging those young people to conform to some standards and behaviours and sense of identity and sense of belonging, all of those things they perhaps have not felt previously…*

This is a very useful summary highlighting the complexity about what is required to draw many pupils exhibiting challenging behaviour into the wider society. But this level of awareness about what needs to happen also raises ethical questions about the possible complicity of all the professionals involved in the process of exclusion and referral of pupils to a PRU. In agreeing to placements in an institution that they are all aware poses greater risks to young people, are they also not open to the accusation of wilful blindness? The risks involved include increased involvement in criminality; engaging with, and therefore being at risk of, being influenced by other young people on the edge of gang culture or crime; health and safety risks; increased likelihood of lower than might be expected examination results. There are other risks. Ethically this needs to be looked at. All of the professionals involved acknowledged the shortcomings of PRUs, particularly located as they are seen on the edge of the education system.

5.5.5 Leadership

Leadership of a PRU presents different challenges to that faced by the leadership of a mainstream school. The differing priorities were articulated in the interviews with

respectively the head of the PRU, Mr Smith, and the head of Balliston Academy, Mr Arnold. What became clear however was the commitment by Mr Arnold to developing a shared understanding of the work that PRUs do, while acknowledging that priorities are different and indeed conflicting. Mr Smith saw his role as representative of his pupils *and* of their families, seeing it as vital that he engages with and supports *the whole family* in order to develop the trust and allegiance needed to promote the interests of the excluded child. He also sees it essential to represent PRUs on equal terms in headteachers' forums for example, in order to establish and maintain a foothold within the wider education system, *"I'm not backwards at coming forwards you know*" (Mr Smith). For this, strong leadership is essential.

He makes a strong comment about culture in individual mainstream schools being very important in determining how schools and PRUs can work together,

> *It's the culture of schools, it's I suppose individual heads… so the culture is very dependent on the leadership of the school and the direction the school is going in. … you know how much time and effort you put into one individual child who is persistently disruptive and unpicking the life of that child, the timeline, that child is now going through a traumatic experience, of being in care. Is it the right thing at that moment to manage move that child, for example? These are real case studies, this is from last week, you know and that is how sad it is.*

It is this leadership approach that means that PRU leaders need to articulate very compellingly how they operate, and he was clear that it cannot be the case of mainstream schools detaching themselves from responsibility for all pupils.

> *1% (of pupils) won't cope in schools… because of policies, behaviour policies… the drive for progress 8, the drive for data that tells they're in the top 1% in the country you know, for outstanding OFSTED, outstanding whatever that looks like or means, that means that nobody really has the time or the resources or the money to put the time into the 1% when the 99% are doing as they're told…and that 1% is costing us £2.9 billion through a lifetime, through their lifetime.*

This quote encapsulates well the arguments I have made about the education system, driven as it is by a raft of accountability measures, accepting the "1%" of pupils as collateral damage, an acceptable price to pay in the short term, but overlooking the fact that young people who are excluded from school may face a lifetime of exclusion and place a heavy burden on society in the long term. From the discussion with both headteachers, it became clear that they saw the need for a centralised, local authority oversight of the exclusion process in order that all state schools in a particular area do their fair share, regardless of their status – LA maintained, free school or academy. Without this oversight, the implication is that some schools will abuse the process of exclusions, by excluding more and sending a disproportionate number of pupils to the PRU, whether by exclusion or managed move, while blocking reintegration of pupils from the PRU to the same school, a point summed up by Mr Arnold,

> *…if you send more students to the PRU then you should expect to receive more back and to be fair, we have done that.*

The view that the local authority in which this study took place was operating a fair and transparent Fair Access Protocol was shared by both headteachers. Within this process of oversight, this shared understanding and shared commitment to use exclusion fairly and evenly had benefits for all of the schools in the local authorities it served. For example, leadership and parity of leadership with other head teachers in the local authority meant Mr Smith was a voice to be reckoned with within headteachers' forums. This is a process of holding all pupils in mind and ensuring the flawed system of exclusions and referral to a PRU remains accountable for all. The differing priorities between mainstream sector and PRUs persist and were highlighted very effectively by the staff focus group who argued that their roles are different to mainstream staff but less well defined; they have to prepare young people either for a prolonged stay at the PRU – as in the case of the children of all five parents interviewed - and consequently focus on maximising their potential in later examinations; or they prepare pupils for reintegration, with the inherent risk of this not happening at all; none of the five were reintegrated. As I have argued, reintegration is a cornerstone of a PRU's effectiveness. It was recognised by the focus group as problematic (see quotes from Ms Bellamy and Mr Glynn p205 section

5.5.2). Staff were clear that PRUs occupy a peculiar and distinct position, what I have referred to previously in this chapter as a liminal position within the education system, expected to deal with the challenges that mainstream school cannot deal with, and then rehabilitate and prepare them to go back into the mainstream environment. From a PRU perspective reintegration requires strong input by the headteacher into the wider headteacher community in order to influence attitudes towards exclusion, so that pupils stand a fair chance of success when they are considered for reintegration. This was referenced by the LA professionals, who also acknowledged the pressures that mainstream schools are under, in a highly competitive and often unforgiving school system where a fall in league table position, a drop in exam results, might impact on their intake and ability financially to survive into the future.

5.5.6 Arms-length engagement or genuine collaboration?

A running theme throughout all of the interviews with the professionals and with staff at the school was the need to work more collaboratively, so that the message of hope could become the dominant narrative, rather than the negative narrative promoted by sections of the media, which thrive on negative headlines such as those often surrounding PRUs. Mr Smith characterised it as

> *"…great journalism … they'll pick a story and then they'll run with it and they'll pick whatever they need to pick out of the story and that's the problem"*.

By *"great journalism"* he was being ironic, as PRUs, being on the periphery of the education system and educating those pupils deemed to be most challenging, often provide opportunities to provide eye-catching headlines. All of the professionals agreed this was something that needed to be worked on and not taken for granted, given the fact that, however one may look at it, PRUs absorb those pupils that mainstream schools deem beyond their ability to teach. This highlights the delicacy with which one must operate in alternative provision, and it requires approaches that cannot be borrowed from mainstream schools that may typically implement a strict attitude towards day-to-day school issues, such as having the correct school uniform, shoes or hair style.

5.5.7 Summary theme 3

Based on the testimonies of all of the participants, with the exception of the parent, Mr Talbi, there is agreement that the work that goes on in PRUs is laudable and I argue is best described as practical wisdom, or phronesis. It is agreed also that the work that goes on in these schools is different to that which goes on in a mainstream school and to a large degree the approach taken in PRUs does not prepare pupils for a return to mainstream given their focus on individual attention, tolerance and nurture. There is no agreement on how to measure the effectiveness of the work that goes on in PRUs. Structurally, there is an argument to be made that PRUs are incompatible with the education system as it is currently conceived. I will address this point in chapter 7.

5.6 Conclusion to chapter 5

From the interviews with all participants, my findings show that PRUs serve to enhance the voice of parents; they do so however out of necessity, not by design, in order to support and manage the most challenging pupils in difficult circumstances. Without recourse to traditional rewards and punishment approaches so prevalent in mainstream schools, PRUs develop relationships with parents and pupils that are stronger and more intimate than would be the case in mainstream schools. What is evident is that parents had a stronger voice in their children's development and education, albeit in adverse circumstances, and felt able to communicate more effectively with the PRU.

All but one of the parents recognised that staff in PRUs do a very difficult job and most, in hindsight, appreciated the efforts staff took to engage more positively with them. The staff and the headteacher of the PRU talked about positive relationships, visiting homes and getting to know the families well. All of the parents were clear that they would have preferred their children went to a mainstream school; they felt the PRU was not a "*normal*" school. This is understandable given their perceived lack of influence and raises the conundrum for those responsible for educating pupils once excluded from school and referred to a PRU: how to convince parents to send their children to a school that has been regularly described as being on the *"periphery"* of

the education system, where there is a concentration of pupils who exhibit the most challenging behaviour, where the curriculum is more likely to be limited, where it is widely reported there is a stigma attached to attending them and where academic outcomes are so pitiful. For these reasons it is no wonder the parents baulked at the prospect of their children attending such a school.

All the parents were left feeling bewildered and powerless in the face of an education system that sees their children referred to a school that none of them would have chosen for their children and from where reintegration back to a mainstream school is not guaranteed. There is evidence that some of the parents were minoritised based on their reported interactions with the mainstream schools and the cultural and language barriers that impeded greater understanding of the contexts of the children. There was an absence of curiosity on the part of the schools to explore further what they might have done to support the parents. Initial reactions to the prospect of a move to the PRU were despair, sadness and anger. Unfortunately, in the initial stages of a child's attendance at a PRU, this sense of resentment is often taken out on staff of the PRU, as parents remain in frustration, particularly as the prospect of a return to mainstream school, as in the case of all of the parents I interviewed, recedes.

Gradually, then, a better relationship may develop, as parents adapt to their new lived reality. They learn to engage productively with the PRU in order to make best of the situation they find themselves in. The benefits of this are seen with some parents and pupils, but certainly not all. Mr Idrissi, Ms Sardinha, and Ms Walker all settled into productive levels of communication and they learned to appreciate the school's more thoughtful approach. They felt heard. Informally, there is a dialogic relationship between PRU and home, as relationships develop. Staff are informally more forthright in giving advice to parents about taking matters into their own hands and applying for schools independently of advice from the local authority. The head teacher talked about *"doing whatever it takes"* to support families, often by engaging with services to have special educational needs diagnosed and the necessary

support put in place. This is achieved by developing trusting relationships where parents feel they are heard and able to voice their concerns; this is advocacy.

The heads of service, Ms Reece and Mr Graham, and the head of Balliston Academy, Mr Arnold, acknowledged the paradox PRUs face where they are lauded for the good work they do in challenging circumstances, but these challenges automatically mean parents resist having their children there. There is a need, they argue, perhaps for PRUs to communicate more effectively the work they do and for pupils at risk of exclusion to receive more advocacy support that would continue even after a child has been excluded. There is no easy answer to this as evidenced by Mr Arnold's 15-second pause when asked what could be done to change the narrative. It remains a conundrum and only by focusing minds on the whole education system can this be overcome. Part of the answer comes in defining PRUs or alternative provision, or whatever the new name might be suggested in the future for these schools, in a more creative and structured manner with better defined, but necessarily bespoke success measures. This is possible when one takes into account the skill set required to manage and teach challenging young people in groups. Within the staff focus group, it became evident that they feel their skills are under-appreciated; they are more responsive to the individual needs of each pupil. As I have said earlier, the parents come to appreciate the way this impacts positively on the wider family.

The staff group saw themselves caught between the families and the pupils' former mainstream schools and it was widely agreed within the group, a point also echoed by the head, that parents are left feeling uncertain about the process that has led them to exclusion; there was "*unfinished business".* Because the skill set of staff in PRUs is so flexible, it becomes difficult to define. I argue that a kind of practical wisdom, or phronesis, is best to describe this. I will address this in detail chapter 7 as I propose a model of alternative provision that could be seen as an a priori acceptable option without the stigma of attendance at a PRU.

This is not to suggest that malpractice is widespread within schools, although the growing issue of off-rolling suggests some underhand practice does occur. There was certainly a belief that before pupils and the parents could accept their new reality as a pupil in a PRU, in many cases there was a need to unpack what has happened to get them there. Mr Smith's example where he had to show the paper to parents authorising a managed move to the PRU for their child, that they had signed, but were unaware that this meant their child would not be returning to his former mainstream school, highlights this need.

There are examples of good practice in mainstream schools relating to exclusions. Mr Arnold, the head of Balliston Academy described an approach which was inclusive. It had been many years since he had permanently excluded a pupil. He described the model that operated within the local authority with LA oversight of the process of both permanent exclusions and reintegration for all schools in the area, including academies, as fair and equitable. This point was echoed by Mr Smith. This helps dispel the notion of permanent exclusion being a lottery, based on schools' individual interpretation of PDB, the reason most cited for exclusions. It gives hope to pupils and parents alike that theirs does not become a "state" of permanent exclusion.

Although originally, I had intended only to dip into the views of the LA professionals, I found their contributions very powerful in relation to their experiences of PRUs and how they operate. Both LA professionals saw the opportunity to develop wider access to services with the PRU at the centre of a support network, *"brokering… fantastic services"*, as the head of the PRU put it. This would make sense from a practical perspective, given the amount of time pupils spend in school each week, the relationships and trust developed at a much deeper level than that in mainstream school and, therefore, the more ready access to these vulnerable families. This model provides an opportunity to support families to develop greater agency, rather than being the recipient of different strands of support that is often unconnected and involves duplication. Defining the role of the PRU becomes one of recognising its liminal state and mediating support, resources and services with an aim of

developing parent agency. I will now move into chapter 6 to discuss the implications of these findings for the realisation of an alternative model of AP schools/PRUs.

6 Chapter 6: Discussion

6.1 Introduction

It has been my intention to show that PRUs occupy a unique position within the wider education system, but one that is not appreciated nor taken advantage of due to the negative narrative that adheres to it through how they are perceived by and within wider society. I have, in addition, drawn upon my own experiences as a former head of a PRU to attempt to frame these schools differently, to recognise their unacknowledged role not just as a failsafe to absorb those pupils deemed unfit to be educated in mainstream schools, but for the positive contribution to the wider education system and society they make. They do this by offering, in adverse circumstances, a solid educational experience to these pupils, while also picking up on and addressing previously unidentified special educational needs in many pupils and, significantly, going beyond their education remit to provide support to the families of these pupils, often recognised as vulnerable or at risk.

In the literature review I explored how PRUs, and, prior to their introduction, offsite units, have been perceived both by pupils who attended them and their parents as unacceptable as providers of education. The narrative around these schools has been relentlessly negative and this has been amplified by media reports that often portray them as a sure route to prison and trumpet the poor academic results of these schools (Perera, 2021; No More Exclusions, 2021). In chapter 1 I presented anticipated products of this study:

- Critical insight into the historical, political and ideological factors that have impeded an effective strategy for school exclusion.

I have outlined comprehensively the barriers to an effective strategy for addressing the issue of permanent exclusion from school. Only by seeing this in the context of wider societal disadvantages and inequality is this possible. Ultimately, this study is a critique of the education system as it is currently structured. The issues are not new, and I am making the case for new thinking, for a theory of change that sees PRUs as a liminal rather than peripheral component of a fractured education system that is predicated upon neoliberal ideas of competition. Without this acknowledgement, I argue exclusions from school will continue to be a pressing issue, visited from time

to time by various government of the day, but with no real hope of addressing the issue effectively.

- Recommendations for a new model and framework for PRUs locating them at the heart of the education system.

In my conclusion, I make recommendations as to how PRUs can be conceptualised in a manner that ensures they become short term placements, with bespoke pupil assessment determining progress with a view to moving pupils back to mainstream or to special schools where appropriate and avoid the risk of pupils getting *"stuck"* there.

- An extended code of practice focused on mainstream schools' obligations to excluded pupils and their families mediated by advocates from PRUs.

I see Lawrence's (2011) recommendations for the Fair Access Protocol as a useful starting point for schools to sign up to a charter of fair play and openness with regards to accepting pupils who have previously been excluded from school. This requires a cohesive oversight of the education system as a whole, so that all state-funded schools, regardless of their status, commit to giving these pupils a fair and equal chance not only of being offered a mainstream school placement but of sustaining it following reintegration.

- Recommendations for policymakers, educators, parents and staff to develop a clear understanding of the implications of exclusion, referral to a PRU.

I provide clear recommendations for a wide range of stakeholders to make this happen. I will go into greater detail in my conclusion. See Chapter 7.

6.2 Parents' perceptions of PRUs: navigating the contradictory narratives

Successive reports commissioned by governments portray PRUs as being on the *periphery* of the education system. The Timpson Report, for example, urged the government, *"… to recognise the importance of AP as an integral part of the education system and drive up standards in AP."* (Timpson, 2019, p. 75). So, Timpson is here referring to the perception of PRUs as somehow separate or "other" from the rest of the education system. This has been the message for many years now and it will continue to be a forlorn request as long as the education system remains as fractured as it is in the UK with its emphasis on competition between schools. I argue that PRUs serve the education system as somewhere to offload its

"unmarketable pupils" (Wright, et al., 2000, p. 105) so that its mainstream schools can remain economically viable, and this will continue to be the role of PRUs if the wider education system continues to evolve in this manner. There remains a *"stigma"* to being educated in a PRU (Timpson, 2019, p. 77). And of course, it follows that being educated in an institution considered as being on the "*periphery"* of the whole education system one would feel stigmatised, cast to the margins.

In general, the perception of the parents I interviewed for this study reflected this view. All bar one were unhappy initially with the alternative educational provision on offer at the PRU. They saw an environment that was only marginally comparable to a mainstream school. More importantly, however, was the fact that this type of school brought together many of the most challenging pupils in the locality. Then, once they had made further inquiries about what a PRU was, or where they had this some knowledge prior to their child starting at the PRU, as in the case of Ms Walker interviewed for this study, their fears rose as to what lay ahead for their children. Thus, the negative narrative around the PRUs took hold. And yet, as I have argued above, many of them came to understand and appreciate the nature of the work that was going on there, as we saw in the case of Ms Sardinha's daughter, who in collaboration with her mother, took the decision to stay at the PRU and not pursue reintegration to a mainstream school. Over and above initial perceptions, and once they had settled into their new reality, it was often the case that families came to appreciate the work that was done at the PRU. This emergence of a positive narrative reflects my own experiences as head of a PRU; it is referenced in many of the reports commissioned to explore the issue of exclusion (Gill, 2017; Timpson, 2019); and it emerged during the conversations I had with parents, local authority heads of service and PRU and mainstream school staff.

It was clear in discussion with the families that a qualitatively different relationship developed with the PRU, where they, the parents, permitted it. The much more intimate relationship with pupils' families and the focus on understanding the child and seeking to meet their needs eventually overrode their initial misgivings. So, perceptions changed over time, but as I have argued, and is evidenced by reports

commissioned by successive governments, the reality is they would not have chosen to go to a PRU from the start. The positive narrative that attaches to PRUs very often is provided to parents of children facing the prospect of exclusion by the mainstream schools themselves or local authorities who have a duty to ensure the child continues their education, the PRU often being the only alternative. There is a degree of disingenuity about this and this was raised by both heads of local authority services, both of whom expressed reservations about what goes on in a PRU, what the environment is. They are aware of the shortcomings and risks attached to attending these types of schools in comparison to mainstream schools with whom they cannot compete in terms of curriculum offer, environment and academic outcomes. The reality for LAs is that there is no other choice.

Many of the reports referred to above describe success stories in PRUs, but these are presented as the exceptions to the rule, individual cases that have triumphed against the odds. Generally, there is an understanding that going to a PRU is to be avoided at all costs and the literature reflects this view since PRUs were first introduced. As pupils settle into their new reality, there may develop a level of appreciation as they adapt to a regime that is more flexible and responsive to individual needs, often overlooked in pupils' former mainstream schools. By needs, I mean more than likely social, emotional and mental health (SEMH) needs that often fall short of warranting a specialist school placement and can be misinterpreted in mainstream schools as just disruptive behaviour.

6.3 PRUs – sharing expertise with mainstream schools

The literature supports the view that, in spite of stated aims, many pupils spend too long in PRUs. Grunsell's views on off-site provision in the 1970s bring the current debate around the use of PRUs sharply into focus. At that time, he was sceptical about the argument put forward by many that moving pupils with challenging behaviour to offsite, separate provision would allow staff to develop a greater skill set in mainstream schools to anticipate and manage challenging behaviour effectively in the future. The argument was that once staff had become more skilled in dealing with challenging behaviour, these centres would no longer be necessary.

> *Relieved of the demoralizing and time-consuming pressure exerted by their most 'hopeless' cases, school should have more energy to give to the task of solving problems of disruption before they become hopeless. If the skills and insights gained by teachers in off-site units are fully available to teachers in schools, there should be greater expertise in the schools. The needs of those most likely to become involved in dynamics of escalating violence may be met before the negative roles become irreversible.*
>
> (Grunsell, 1980b, p. 117)

This is an argument that has been repeated in one shape or form at various junctures in the years since Grunsell made these observations, that these schools, by taking in the most challenging pupils, allow teachers to sharpen their expertise to the point where they can avoid excluding pupils in the future. Once again, we see here thinking that suggests these are temporary schools, which will one day no longer be necessary. I see in this thinking similarities to what Kohn refers to as *"bait and switch"* (1993, p. 164), the belief in which extrinsic motivators, in the form of rewards and punishment, are used early and heavily so as to allow intrinsic interest to develop. This type of thinking is evident in schools in England where zero-tolerance policies are introduced to ensure compliance. The use of punishment in these cases often involves exclusion as a punishment, meaning some pupils are removed from the school as a result of this thinking and approach. That schools should take advantage of the existence of PRUs to sharpen their expertise and learn from the experiences of alternative approaches to managing challenging behaviour is an argument that has been around for the last 50 years or so. It regularly emerges in the series of reports into alternative provision since PRUs were introduced. The Timpson Report recommends promoting the role of PRUs to support schools *"to deliver effective intervention ... and facilitate the sharing of expertise between AP and the wider school system"* (Timpson, 2019, p. 76). Timpson also suggests that PRUs can become teaching schools as a means to support early career teachers (ECTs) to develop this broader skill set in managing highly challenging behaviour. The Taylor Report (2012) also promoted the view that PRUs would share their expertise with mainstream schools (Department for Education, 2012, p. 22).

That this issue of collaboration between PRUs and mainstream schools continues to be recommended on such a regular basis is not surprising. There is an implication that PRUs are temporary schools and are needed on a just-in-case basis, to give time for staff to develop the right skill set to be in a position to manage and teach all pupils, except for those who have specific and identified learning difficulties. And yet, there is no prospect of PRUs or AP schools, under the current system of education, being done away with. During this study, I have shown that it is even less likely because it has come under significant pressure to adapt to new financial constraints and accountability measures, effectively developing as businesses as opposed to educational establishments. The corollary of the education system developing along these lines over the last 50 years has meant that exclusions continue to rise, regardless of the degree of collaboration between mainstream and alternative provision.

The literature suggests that framing the development of alternative provision as a "*peripheral adjunct"* (Centre for Social Justice, 2018a, p. 75) to the mainstream school sector continues to repeat the mistakes of the past. It repeatedly places the emphasis on the AP sector to change without taking into account the need for change within the education system as a whole. Grunsell referenced how offsite units became a "resource" that schools became more willing to use, to expand the reasons for children to be excluded, thus preventing schools from having to reflect on their own practices. Then, as in the late 2010s and early 2020s, those pupils identified for exclusion, or "suspension" as it was then called, fell into the same categories as those identified by Gill. They were society's most vulnerable.

In the course of this study, I have shown how SEMH has become shorthand for disruption or disruptive pupil or persistent disruptive behaviour (PDB) (Grunsell, 1980b; Slee, 1995; Gill, 2017) and consequently excludable without any need to consider what sort of SEND support might be required. My argument is that PRUs should not exist other than as short-term intervention placements and any pupil deemed unready to return to mainstream school needs to be classified as having a special educational need and entitled to consideration for a placement at a special

school. I argue also that in light of this and the fact that SEMH, in the same manner as maladjustment in the 1960s and 1970s, is difficult to define, that PRUs, if they are to operate as permanent features of the educational system, should be afforded the same or similar status as special schools, thus drawing them away from the periphery of the educational system and to be seen as an integral and important part of that system.

6.4 Strengthening parent voice: engagement with families at a deeper level

I had many difficult conversations with parents of new pupils in my role as head teacher of a PRU, particularly regarding assumptions, and expectations, of an automatic return to mainstream schooling once they had been "*corrected*", a point made coherently by parents interviewed for this study. Mr Talbi was incredulous that such schools even existed, let alone that his child was destined to remain there until the end of his statutory schooling age in key stage four. For him and for the other parents this was not what was expected. They had not anticipated that their children would complete their schooling in a PRU.

On the other hand, PRU staff and, to a lesser extent, other professionals were fully aware of the reality, not just of what education in a PRU meant, but also that a return to mainstream school was problematic and certainly not automatic. As one member of staff put it, it was often the case that behaviour got worse when the child arrived, and this was often simply to fit in. Mr Glynn, the PE and humanities teacher at Stenview, put it thus,

> *… you've got all these kids with behavioural issues, even ones who come in for really minor things, eventually they're going to conform to everyone else… And they'll turn into a kid with behaviours which they never had*.

This paradoxical situation is what Mr Talbi was referring to. He could not accept a situation that brought together all of the children in a local authority whose behaviour merited exclusion from mainstream schools. For him it made no sense.

The limited opportunities for reintegration back into mainstream from a PRU featured more in the interviews with the LA professionals, all of the PRU staff and the head of the mainstream school, than with the parents interviewed. The parents had accepted

by then the reality of their situation and, all having children in their final examination year, their focus was on getting them through this chapter in their school life. Reintegration back into mainstream school following an exclusion is an arbitrary process, one which is highly dependent upon individual school, MAT and even LA cultures, and where, in some cases, schools' restrictive behaviour policies make it almost impossible for a young person to succeed following a reintegration. This was raised vociferously by PRU staff team and the head of the PRU. They recognised the challenges of adopting differing approaches to managing young people with challenging behaviour and then, where possible, syphoning them back into the mainstream school system where they are at risk of getting lost.

For the parents, they find themselves suddenly excluded from a wider conversation, with little influence about their children's education. The discussion had shifted away from mainstream norms and expectations and became restricted to how their children were going to navigate a new reality, one they had not contemplated previously. Their voice having been further weakened in the process of navigating the exclusions process, they now needed to readjust and find voice effectively to ensure their children's safety and security within the new environment. All bar one of the parents interviewed expressed the view that they had gained a stronger voice within the boundaries of the new reality, engaging in their children's best interests with the PRU. This is to be expected given the nature of the new school and the need to work closely with them while wishing for a return to the mainstream school.

6.5 Understanding the education system – a middle class privilege

The literature I explored, my experiences as a researcher within the community of practice and the data gathered for this study, show there is an inherent power-imbalance in favour of the schools in relation to families deemed to be vulnerable that leaves these parents at a serious disadvantage. Reay's (2017) arguments that unless the education system as a whole is addressed, this imbalance will remain as middle-class families move to different areas to access high performing schools, become better at manoeuvring the appeals system or employ tutors to ensure their children are better prepared for grammar school examinations are compelling. Parents with little social capital are inevitably at a disadvantage in a school system

that has, since the 1980s adopted increased standardisation of teaching and learning, decentralisation of education management away from local authority oversight, reduced teacher autonomy and marketisation of school systems.

The reality of this power-imbalance became evident in my interviews with all five of the parents and was acknowledged also as an issue with the professionals interviewed. The parents' accounts of the of their experiences with schools over time clearly suggests a strong willingness to cooperate fully with their children's schools. All were of minority ethnic status and conform with Feiler's first definition of hard-to-reach, minority groups, *"… the marginalized, disadvantaged or socially excluded; for example minority ethnic families…"* (Feiler, 2010, p. 37). Their personal narratives however revealed a high degree of engagement and involvement with their children's respective schools over time. They were not the hard-to-reach parents. They presented as being willing to cooperate with the schools and believed they were doing right by their children and by the schools. When problems arose in the form of behaviour by their children deemed unacceptable in the school, they lacked the wherewithal to engage with the schools effectively. They lacked a clear understanding of how they were located within the wider education system; they were acting as good parents, as they saw it, however all expressed a sense of powerlessness once the prospect of their children being excluded became a reality. They all, without exception, were willing to attend meetings and engage with the school in the interests, as they understood it, of their children. Their lack of voice, of real influence with the school was apparent. They were minoritised (Martinot, 2003, p. 147) as they struggled to have an effective voice in support of their children at a point when they most needed it. The most egregious example of this was Mr Idrissi. He was the least confident of the parents I interviewed in his use of English, which would have placed him at a serious disadvantage in his dealings with the school. Nevertheless, in my interview with him he became animated and more fluent, as when he interrupted my questioning to tell me what had happened in his words - *"…you know what happened..."* - when describing the managed moves of three of his four children. On the face of it, what took place for this family was legal, except

Mr Idrissi was clearly agreeing to something over which he had limited, if any, understanding. This, in my view, was a clear case of off-rolling; this is illegal.

I argue the families became subject also to a process of othering; Ms Walker's repeated, ignored requests since her son was in nursery to have his behavioural needs looked at by the school led to her feeling unheard by staff as she sought to intervene on his behalf to have him assessed. Her recounting of an episode at her son's sports day while in primary school where a member of staff waved her hand in her face dismissively following an alleged incident between her son and another boy is instructive as to how she feels she was treated throughout her son's schooling. That this happened while her son was in primary school, several years prior to our interview highlights for me the sense of frustration and powerlessness she has felt throughout her son's schooling. She was not heard, and the inevitability of her child being excluded from schools was foretold when he was taken on a day-visit in year 7 to the PRU as a means to encourage a change in his behaviour.

It is evident from the interviews with the parents that they feel comfortable when they trust the professionals they are dealing with. This is something that became increasingly evident to me in my role as head of a PRU, where families gained confidence in the knowledge that their voice was heard. As articulated by Mr Smith, head of Trenbridge, he considers he has a greater responsibility to the families once they engage with his school; this is because there is little alternative to education in a PRU once a child has been excluded, so engaging with the family to build trust and continue to do whatever is needed to build that trust is essential. For many of these families, there is regular contact with professional services who are tasked with supporting them. Unfortunately, the limitations of each service's remit may prevent the sort of partnership-building that can often lead to effective use of this support.

6.6 Structural flaws

The Elton Report (Department for Education and Skills, 1989) emphasised the need to introduce a statutory framework for off-site provision as their proliferation increased through the 1970s and 1980s as corporal punishment was phased out. Elton was cautious about the statutory introduction of PRUs, arguing that, "*the*

relationship between the availability of unit places and general standards of behaviour in schools is obscure." (Department for Education and Skills, 1989, p. 154). Elton was right to be cautious. The literature shows that since their introduction in 1993, PRUs have fulfilled a role of, in effect, mopping up those pupils that mainstream schools cannot cope with, for reasons that may vary according to the prevailing political climate or from school to school, whose behaviour is deemed unacceptably disruptive to the orderly running of the school, and which prevents them from functioning effectively within that school. More importantly, however, is the fact that PRUs have had to adapt according to the prevailing educational philosophy as determined by successive governments, usually when there is a focus on strengthening mainstream headteachers' powers to exclude, "*Cameron: Give head teachers more control on discipline*" (BBC, 2010).

In exploring the role of PRUs within the education system, it needs also to be borne in mind that the educational landscape has changed dramatically since the 1980s. This period represents a time of significant flux for mainstream schools, starting with the introduction of the Education Reform Act in 1988, a move that diminished teacher autonomy. Schools shifted towards greater financial autonomy and responsibility via Local Management of Schools (LMS). This was a period during which the education system fell prey to neoliberal ideas of marketisation and financial rigour and correlated with an increase in exclusion from school.

> *The 'market' philosophy within education is based upon a need to improve efficiency, cost consciousness and adequate utilization of resources.*
>
> (Wright, et al., 2000, p. 5)

Amongst the biggest losers in this "market" philosophy are those families of vulnerable, working-class and minority ethnic backgrounds who figure disproportionately in the exclusion figures. Thus, applying what are in effect funding cuts in the guise of financial rigour to schools has been felt mostly by the most vulnerable as schools have become more willing to see pupils in terms of what each pupil is worth in monetary terms to the school, euphemistically known as "bums on seats". Each pupil in a school attracts the same amount under the National Funding Formula, before other factors such as pupil premium are considered, so it is

important that the school has and retains a full school roll to maintain levels of funding.

The introduction of PRUs needs also to be set against this background of turbulence within the wider education system and supports Reay's view that the system is designed to accommodate the majoritarian middle-class parents' wishes for their children, those parents who are most vocal and articulate in advocating on behalf of their children, at the expense of working-class children. This argument is echoed repeatedly since the 1970s and throughout the intervening period (Coard, 1971; Grunsell, 1980a); the reality for young people excluded from school is that they disproportionally fall into the categories of risk outlined by Gill (2017) or of minority-ethnic background. It is hard to imagine this situation being acceptable to white middle-class families.

And the repeated references to PRUs being on the periphery of the education system (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2008; Department for Education, 2012; Centre for Social Justice, 2018a) chimes with my experiences in education, especially as head of a PRU. The process of exclusion was handled by the local authority, as was the process of reintegration; this was handled by the local authority through the Fair Access Panel (FAP) (See section 2.20) thus eliminating the need for mainstream schools to become directly involved with my school. In effect, the local authority provided a buffer discouraging direct formal interaction between PRUs and schools.

The findings from this study indicate that there is a clear sense that PRUs continue to be in existence as a failsafe for an education system predicated upon a need to problematise pupils and their families. This represents a failure to see this problem where it originates, namely in an education system that has lost its way and has developed an unhealthy focus on competition with a need for ready-made, just-in-time solutions for those pupils deemed *unmarketable*. Added to this has been the years of austerity that have seen many vulnerable families struggling to cope within wider society and often whose children struggle in school as a result (Just for Kids

Law, 4in10 London's Child Poverty Network, 2021, p. 11; Gill, 2017). This vulnerable range of pupils continues to be seen as a problem in the context of the diminishing financial viability of taking a long-term view and working with those children to support them within existing resources.

> *…exclusion has been implemented as a form of regulation and selection where 'the difficult pupil must either be seen as an object of punishment or a drain on resources' (Cohen et al. 1994: 2).*
>
> (Wright, et al., 2000, p. 5)

The view that pupils need to be "*marketable",* suggesting that they need to earn their place in a mainstream school is now well established. It clearly applies to those pupils deemed unable to conform to the existing model of schooling due to their "vulnerable" status, or who are of minority ethnic status, exacerbated by a raft of accountability measures imposed on schools in the period since the late 1980s as I have discussed in my literature review in chapter 2. As Wright et al (2000) argue they are seen as a *"drain on resources"* (p. 5). These accountability measures have placed pressures on mainstream schools to operate in a more efficient manner in terms of resources and finance. This means that schools in more affluent areas with a low proportion of pupils on free school meals (FSM), the most widely used measure to determine levels of poverty in schools, attract increased levels of funding while those that operate in less affluent areas are less well funded. This is evidenced by an analysis by the Education Policy Institute (EPI) (Reay, 2020) of the government school funding formula for 2021-22. Reay shows that, comparing per-pupil funding in 2020-21 to that in 2017-18, pupils in receipt of free school meals will have received increases of around two-thirds of the rate of pupils not in receipt of free school meals (Reay, 2020; Education policy Institute, 2020). PRUs' location on the periphery of the education system coupled with greater pressure on mainstream schools to perform increases pressure on the alternative education sector. These pressures inevitably lead to increased exclusion rates as mainstream schools seek to offload those pupils that risk affecting adversely their performance; or those pupils deemed to be *unmarketable*.

6.7 Reintegration – a reality check

Of those pupils already attending offsite provision at the time of his report, Elton (Department for Education and Skills, 1989) was concerned about those pupils that got stuck there (See quote in section 2.20). My findings show that this situation has not changed. All of the pupils of the parents interviewed for this study had spent more than 18 months at Trenbridge and were preparing for final school examinations. That there are difficulties in reintegrating pupils back into mainstream schools following exclusion and in some parts of the country, impossible, has been conclusively shown in this study and in the literature, for example, the House of Commons Education Committee Report in 2019 expressing concern about pupils, *"who can spend three, four or even more years in full-time alternative probation."* (Parliament, House of Commons Education Committee, 2019, p. 37) (See full quote in section 1.2). In my experience as head of a PRU, it became something to celebrate, when we did manage to reintegrate a pupil back into mainstream school. I think it is significant in the context of this research to note that no data are kept by the DfE (see appendix 2) in respect of successful reintegration from PRUs and AP schools back into mainstream schools.

6.8 Developing parental partnerships with a shared conception of the education system

As a researcher in my role as a (now-retired) head of a PRU, I have argued throughout this study that the work that goes on in PRUs and other alternative schools is often exceptional; but it is substantially different to that of the mainstream education sector. PRUs' *"peripheral"* status leads them to operate as if in a liminal space between families, mainstream schools and a range of professional services with no clear mandate other than to offer an educational experience to pupils without a placement in a mainstream or special school. I contrast this to the position of schools designated as "special" schools whose status is determined by the range of specific SEND that they are established to address. Pupils attending special schools usually have an Education and Health Care Plan (EHCP), which determines very specifically their needs, how these needs should be met, what support the child should have, is costed and has statutory force. Additionally, there is provision for an

advocate, a named person in the LA, to ensure these needs are being met. I think it is useful to juxtapose PRUs with special schools in England as it highlights the unique nature of PRUs as, in effect, mopping up those pupils whose needs are not specific enough to be referred to a special school. PRUs do, however, take pupils with specific or moderate learning needs "as a last resort" or where no suitable provision is available in the locality. This then begs the question, how would the mainstream education system cope without PRUs? As it is currently conceptualised, my findings indicate that without them, there would be a need to recreate them in some form. But this only serves to highlight the fact that many pupils are deemed *unmarketable* or, as articulated by Evans and Giroux, "*disposable*". This is not a healthy position, particularly given the fact that exclusions continue to rise. This is a clear indication of an education system under pressure and, given the trend towards academisation - a drive towards a quasi-private education system - this does not bode well for a decrease in the numbers of exclusions. There is a greater likelihood of exclusions continuing to rise.

6.9 Who gets excluded?

PRUs remain marginalised domains of education. My findings show that it is those families who are classified sometimes as working class, vulnerable or of minority ethnic origin are more likely to be excluded. I have traced the development of the education system from prior to the 1944 Education Act and shown that, though there has been an emphasis over the years since then on addressing the needs of those pupils deemed to have special educational needs and disabilities, there has been a group of pupils, those with SEMH or classified as "disruptive", that seems, beyond the education mainstream systems, due to the nature of their challenging behaviour.

It is not within the scope of this study to explore in depth the reality of how certain groups are more affected by exclusion from school than others. That work has already been done and continues to be monitored and analysed (Gill, 2017; Centre for Social Justice, 2018a; Timpson, 2019). My contribution to this discussion is an exploration of the experiences of individual families of the exclusion process, their perceptions of how the process of exclusion has worked for them and how much influence they had in that process. There is a persistency in the narrative about who

gets excluded from school that predates the introduction of PRUs. I have referenced Grunsell's (1980) experiences of setting up an off-site unit for school refusers; while, arguably, these were pupils who, for various reasons, could not fit into the existing model of schooling and who could thus be classed as having self-excluded, I take Grunsell's view that they were let down by a school system that was unable to meet their needs at the time. They were the *"unmarketable"* pupils of his time.

6.10 Minority ethnic pupils

The narrative around the exclusion of Black and African Caribbean (BAC) pupils has persisted since the early 1970s (Slee, 1995, p. 57) when pupils from this ethnic group were disproportionately selected to be placed in schools for the educationally subnormal (ESN) under the pretence that this was for their own good, that they would receive "*intensive and highly specialized help so that they can then be returned to normal schools"* (Coard, 1971, p. 9). Coard reported that many West Indian parents were led to believe that they were *"especially good"* and would boost their children's educational chances to prepare them for a return to mainstream schools. This narrative of BAC pupils' overrepresentation in ESN schools reported by Coard in 1971 is an important reference point when discussing their continued overrepresentation in the exclusion figures and in PRUs in the 2020s.

6.11 Intersectionality of risk factors

I found Reay's (2017) case that mainstream schools are constructed to favour the wishes and needs of the middle classes compelling. She argues convincingly of the working-class experience of education as being,

> *…not just one of being positioned as educational losers to middle-class educational successes but also one of being completely eclipsed by the 'shining stars' of the private schools.*
>
> (Reay, 2017, p. 154)

Hers is a comprehensive and compelling deconstruction of the English education system that portrays it as it reflects my own experiences as a teacher, senior leader and headteacher in that system and reflects the experiences of the families interviewed for this study. it was only when I became head of a PRU that I could acknowledge the extent to which the voice of the parents of my pupils had been

muted; there was no expectation on their part that they should have a real say about their child's progress within their mainstream school. They simply did not have the vocabulary of teachers that permitted them to advocate effectively on behalf of their children. Reay's own arguments stop short of including PRUs and other alternative provision schools in her argument. It is an interesting omission and one that, for me, further emphasises the sense of PRUs being on the *"periphery"* of the education system given the strength of Reay's own arguments that the education system is stacked in favour of the middle classes. Gill (2017, pp. 17-18) presents clear evidence of PRUs being populated overwhelmingly by pupils from families classed as vulnerable and working class with disproportionately high numbers of minority ethnic pupils. She highlights the intersectional nature of the problem by cross referencing a range of factors that indicate vulnerability (see Figure 6.1). From my interviews with the five parents, I found that all fall into the intersection of vulnerabilities as defined by Gill. All were of minority ethnic background and there was evidence for example of poor mental health in at least three of the pupils involved. I was not able to ascertain definitively their socio-economic status, but the tenor of our discussions led me to believe that they could all be classified as working class.

Interestingly, although she addresses separately the issue of ethnicity comprehensively, Gill avoids mixing vulnerability factors and ethnicity in her graphic (see figure 6.1). Whereas Reay would simply argue that these are pupils overwhelmingly from working class families, I believe Gill opted to leave ethnicity to one side as this would be too complex to pull together in one table. My point in this is that the range of factors influencing a child's exclusion is hugely complex and there is too much of a tendency to simplify our approaches to exclusion, hence the category PDB cited as the most common reason for permanent exclusion (see table 1.1 on page 15). This leaves PRUs in a position where they are dealing with a level of complexity that is not acknowledged when PRUs are being assessed so as to make them acceptable to the wider education system.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN VULNERABILITIES				
	POVERTY	**FAMILY PROBLEMS**	**SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS**	**POOR MENTAL HEALTH**
FAMILY PROBLEMS	There is a causal link between family poverty, parental mental ill health, and negative and damaging parenting behaviour (Cooper and Stewart 2013). Children in the most deprived neighbourhoods are 11 times more likely to be subject to a child protection plan than those in the most affluent neighbourhoods (Bywaters et al 2017).			
SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS	The above impact of poverty can affect a child's social, emotional and cognitive development (Cooper and Stewart 2013). One in four pupils on free school meals also has special educational needs; at twice the rate of wealthier peers (DfE 2017e).	Abuse and neglect damage children's behavioural and cognitive development. Looked-after children (LAC) are 10 times more likely to have a recognised special educational needs (DfE 2017d).		
POOR MENTAL HEALTH	Mental ill health among children is strongly linked to familial mental health, which is in turn linked to family poverty. In families with weekly incomes of less than £200, 20 per cent of young people have a mental disorder, compared with just 6 per cent of children from families with incomes over £600 a week (ONS 2005).	Maternal mental health and major adverse life effects (such as bereavement, serious illness and injury) are significant predictors of mental ill health (Johnston et al 2014). Almost 40 per cent of looked-after children and those on child protection and safeguarding registers have a conduct disorder mental health problem.	Pupils with special needs are unhappier at school, and at greater risk of conduct problems, hyperactivity problems, struggles with peer relationships and mental ill health (Barnes and Harrison 2017).	
LOW PRIOR ATTAINMENT	Family poverty has a knock-on impact on attainment (Cooper and Stewart 2013): 65 per cent of pupils with free school meals do not achieve the expected standards aged 11, compared to 43 per cent of other children (DfE 2017f).	Children who experience neglect or abuse can struggle to learn at the same rate as peers: 75 per cent of children in care or classified as 'in need' by social services do not achieve the expected standards aged 11, compared to 46 per cent of other children (DfE 2017d).	Children with learning needs can fall behind their peers: 86 per cent of children with special educational needs do not meet attainment expectations aged 11, compared to 38 per cent of other children (DfE 2017f).	Child mental health has a large effect on educational progress (Johnston et al 2014). The more abnormal a child's mental health state, the greater the predicted losses in educational progress.

Figure 6. 1 **Intersecting risk factors giving rise to complex needs (Gill, 2017, p. 17)**

6.12 Limitations of research

Finding parents to take part in the study was, unsurprisingly, difficult and ultimately left me with fewer parents than I would have liked. It would have been helpful also to

have had a wider range of participants in terms of diversity. Nevertheless, their individual stories, once they had settled into the conversations with me and when a degree of trust had been established were compelling and my questioning helped to explore with them their overall impressions of their experiences of exclusion and provide an accurate depiction of the concerns attending to PRUs and AP schools. I believe I captured very real and authentic voices that provided a clear picture of how it must feel to have their children banished to the margins of the school system. Their views were supported by a considerable body of literature that repeatedly made this point by emphasising the peripheral location of these schools within the education system. I also feel that subjecting the parent interviews to a narrative inquiry lens helped draw out their stories in a real and authentic manner, as happened with Mr Idrissi, who, in the shortest interview revealed a situation that would not have emerged had I persisted with a rigid line of questioning.

Although I was prevented from carrying out my study in my former school, my position within the community of practice and personally knowing the non-parent participants, bar Mr Arnold, meant I could engage in an open discussion with people with whom I felt comfortable, challenging their views and collecting a very rich dataset along the way. As the interviews and the focus group progressed, I found that my semi-structured questionnaires provided a useful prompt sheet, so that I could ensure I was covering as wide as possibly the experiences of all involved. As my study progressed, the views of the schools - the PRU, Trenbridge where the study took place, and the local mainstream school, Balliston Academy – and those of the local authority professionals took on greater significance, providing important insights into the range of views and perspectives on PRUs and alternative provision in general that are held at professional level.

6.13 Conclusion to chapter 6

Real change within the AP sector of education is necessary but will remain elusive or superficial at best without recognising the need for change within the wider education system on the one hand, and, on the other hand, considering how the education system reflects the inequalities of wider society. All attempts that have been made to reform the AP sector have resulted in little real change. In the previous chapters I

make the case that it is more likely that pupils identified as the most vulnerable, working class and those from certain ethnic backgrounds will continue to be excluded disproportionately as a result of mainstream schools needing to conform to a business model, where these pupils refuse to fit into the model of education offered to them and are deemed *"unmarketable"* (Wright, et al., 2000, p. 105). My overarching aim is to explore the potential for change within the education system as a whole that allows for the increasing exclusions from schools in England to be located as an issue that reflects the broader inequalities in society rather than presenting it as a simple problem exclusively of a relatively small but increasing number of children who are simply refusing, viz. making a choice, not to comply with, the requirements to assimilate into the mainstream schooling system. This analysis ignores the complexity of many of these young peoples' lives.

With the broader education system in flux, it is impossible to see how PRUs can become more effective as long as they remain on its periphery no matter what changes are made to them. Timpson articulates this well when he acknowledges on the one hand, without being specific, that much AP is excellent, while on the other hand bemoaning their shortfalls as perceived from the perspective of mainstream standards. This is typical of the view taken of AP.

> *Although much AP is excellent, too often children in these settings do not do as well, academically, as their peers. Overall, the quality is too unreliable and outcomes are poor. Not only must AP be improved so it consistently offers expertise to the wider system, it must also do better at reliably delivering high-quality education. We will never achieve the high standards we expect for all children if there is a part of the education system where children facing some of the greatest challenges are allowed to tread water, left unable to acquire the knowledge and skills needed to thrive in the modern world.*
>
> (Timpson, 2019, pp. 74-75)

The above quote from the Timpson report, 2019 is not acknowledging the complexity faced in PRUs; it is simply a clarion call to PRUs to improve and meet the standards, and with it, the needs of mainstream schools. Interestingly, however, buried in this

quotation is a call for PRUs to offer *"expertise to the wider system"*, a welcome call, I argue, but one that would have more weight were PRUs to be seen, as Timpson also argues (Timpson, 2019, p. 75), as an integral part of the education system, and not simply there to absorb those children mainstream school sector cannot cope with.

I will go on in chapter 7 for my conclusions and to articulate my vision for a new model of PRU/alternative provision that incorporates my arguments from this study.

7 Chapter 7: Conclusion and recommendations

7.1 Introduction

In my conclusion I address the contribution to knowledge of this study and I make recommendations to stakeholders, including policy makers, educationalists and local and national government policy makers.

7.2 Research questions

I structured my study to gain a broad understanding of the implications of exclusion from school and attendance at a PRU. I sought the views of parents of excluded pupils, PRU staff, local authority professionals and the head of a mainstream school. The views of the parents are paramount; they and their children find themselves in a predicament they had not anticipated as they struggle to navigate a system that seems designed to make it as difficult as possible to reintegrate their children back into mainstream school. Instead, they find their children are to be educated in a school that is widely perceived to be on the margins of the same education system, attendance at which carries a stigma due to the widely held perception that they are schools for “bad” children. I will make suggestions designed to explore the issue through a new lens and from this I will make proposals for change. I will address each research question in turn and make recommendations to the stakeholders involved in these schools. I have presented my arguments in chapter 6, and in this chapter, I evaluate the extent to which my research has addressed these questions.

7.2.1 To what extent are the voices of the parents heard in the process of exclusion? What is the extent of their understanding of the exclusion process?

I posed this question with a view to gaining insight into how much agency, influence and voice parents had in the process of their children’s exclusion. My research data indicate:

- Working-class parent voices are not heard in the process of exclusion. All parents interviewed reported dissatisfaction with the experience of the exclusion process and in the lead up to the exclusion itself.

- A power-imbalance is evident in the cases of all parents interviewed leaving them having to accept decisions of the mainstream schools with little hope that they could change these decisions.
- There was evidence both of minoritising of parents who had regularly engaged in good faith with their children's mainstream schools, and evidence that some of the pupils were off-rolled by their mainstream schools.
- The experience of their children attending a PRU, considered not a "normal" school, with ultimately little prospect of reintegration back into mainstream school, highlights their powerlessness.
- It was often only at the point of referral to the PRU that the implications of permanent exclusion became apparent, in terms of a diminished curriculum offer; diminished academic expectations; fewer facilities; increased safety risks; increased risks of involvement in criminality or gang-culture; and no straightforward path back to mainstream school.
- The parents interviewed were not hard to reach. All provided evidence of regular engagement with their children's schools. They also provided evidence of being frustrated by that engagement; they felt they were not being listened to.
- The term hard-to-reach parents was recognised by all other participants in the study - teachers, support staff, LA professionals and the heads of both schools. There was general acknowledgment that many parents were perceived as hard to reach as a result of approaches taken by schools and the LA's inability to communicate effectively with them. There was acceptance that a "how-to-reach parents" approach was needed.

7.2.2 How did these parents perceive their experience of their child attending a PRU?

This question was designed to gain an insight into parents' experiences of having a child attending a PRU, and to triangulate these views with those of other participants, and with the extensive range of reports and literature since and prior to the Elton report (1989), My research data indicates:

- Following their children's exclusion and prior to attending the PRU, parents became deeply concerned about their children's referral there once they become aware of the nature of a PRU school.
- Only one of the five parents expressed complete satisfaction with his child being at the PRU mainly because his child could access a part-time vocational course outside of the PRU that had not been available to him in his mainstream school.
- With one exception, there was qualified satisfaction with their children's experience at the PRU. Parents appreciated the greater communication with the PRU and the sense that they had more control over their children's education.
- Parents felt they had no choice in the matter of their children attending the PRU. The option of home-schooling was not one available to any of the families.
- None of the parents would have chosen to send their children to a PRU and two parents felt their children would be stigmatised as a result; there remained concerns about how the experience of being educated in a PRU would affect examination performance and their prospects later in life.
- Concerns were raised in interviews with four of the parents and all of the remaining participants about the links between attendance at a PRU and increased risk of involvement in criminality and going to prison. This contributed to the stigma attached to their children attending a PRU.
- Overall, their experiences of their child being in a PRU and their relationship with the PRU left them feeling more listened to than had been the case with their children's mainstream school.
- The PRU offered a qualitatively different relationship, more personal, more regular communication with the parents than had been the case with their mainstream school.
- Parents nevertheless missed the comforting attributes and artefacts of mainstream school - stricter discipline, school bags, regular homework.

- The issue of reintegration was not one that parents focused on during interviews. This was because all of the pupils were in their final year of secondary education and focusing on their final examinations.
- Reintegration was however a subject broached by all other participants. There was widespread agreement that reintegration was problematic and that the prospects for pupils to be reintegrated were low.
- It was recognised that there was a tension between mainstream school priorities and the priorities of the PRU which did not allow for a straightforward transition from one to the other.

7.2.3 Can PRUs evolve as a school model that can support the wider family and facilitate a greater sense of agency in parents with more efficient and targeted access to support services?

This question was asked with a view to exploring the possibility of reframing PRUs as institutions that might serve a more expansive role in recognition of the fact that it is pupils from families most in need of support that are more often excluded (Gill, 2017). Could this reframing involve an acknowledgement that they are dealing with complex needs, rather than being seen as a *"dumping ground"* (Timpson, 2019, p. 77)? Could PRUs move from a position on the *periphery* of the education system to one of liminality, thus occupying a pivotal position at the nexus of a range of support services with the PRU staff acting as advocates for these young people?

- There was agreement among all of the professionals and staff that PRUs, *of necessity*, rather than by design, already provide a more holistic approach with the pupils and their families. There was agreement particularly among the professionals that this relationship could be developed to provide more effective support.
- The focus on relationships in PRUs is a recognition that behaviourist approaches cannot work with pupils with complex needs, who may have experienced trauma or have SEMH needs. All of the families interviewed for this study fell under the labels, *vulnerable* or *minoritised.* They were complex cases.

- There is an opportunity to recognise and develop the concept of practical wisdom, or phronesis, conceptualising PRUs around the relational, tolerant and sophisticated approach to working with children with complex needs.
- There is a need to recognise that PRUs are adept at dealing with complexity, both by the wider education community and by local and national governments.
- Efforts to rehabilitate PRUs and to make them more integral to the education system require addressing structural flaws in the wider schools' system.
- Part of this process would include engaging with parents in a dialogic manner to support them to become educated about the precariousness of their situation within the education system and wider society.

My research data indicates that PRUs offer the opportunity for families of vulnerable pupils to gain a greater voice in the context of their children's education and that the development of a more intimate and authentic relationship with families is welcomed by them. PRUs are essential to the maintenance of the school system as it is currently structured, often as a result of individual schools' draconian approaches to challenging behaviour that may lead to exclusion and make reintegration unthinkable. In the following sections I will set out my reasons for this and will make recommendations about how these schools, PRUs, might be reframed and the expertise of staff capitalised upon to support vulnerable pupils to gain a secure foothold in wider society.

7.2.4 Who gets excluded?

I had not sought directly to address the factors that might influence the likelihood of exclusion, however in the light of my findings I feel it important to add something to such an important and seemingly intractable issue. The factors that make it likely that a pupil will be excluded are well established. Since offsite units became more popular in the 1970s the categories into which pupils at risk of exclusion fall has changed little. These are:

- Pupils identified as having a range of risk factors or vulnerabilities – poverty, special education needs and disabilities, family problems, poor mental health and low attainment.

- Pupils who are more likely to have an intersecting range of these risk factors meaning they have complex needs.
- Pupils who are working class as defined by free school meals and the 4P model, *power; precarity; prejudice; and place* (see section 2.1.15).
- Pupils of minority ethnic heritage, particularly pupils of Black African Caribbean, Irish traveller and Roma Gypsy heritage.

These families are disadvantaged by the imbalance of power in relation to a mainstream school system heavily influenced by a majoritarian white middle class. Repeated efforts by successive governments since the 1970s to address this issue have not been successful and there is little likelihood of real change happening without considering the nature of a mainstream school system that has become fractured and beholden to neoliberal thinking that requires the removal of *unmarketable* pupils.

Mitigation of the issue of who gets excluded must ultimately be done on a societal level. This also requires an acknowledgement that education deserves to be treated as an issue not to be left to the vagaries of neoliberal ideas. It is inevitable that it is the most vulnerable that will suffer in a system that reduces education to a competition, where those who don't fit into a majoritarian white middle-class formulation of education by reason of vulnerabilities, class status or minority ethnic status, will find themselves squeezed out. This is the state of the education system as it is currently constructed. My proposals, however, go some way towards addressing this by drawing schools into a more balanced symbiotic relationship with PRUs, into a more responsible mindset by making exclusion a non–permanent state, where the assumption is that there is a place in a mainstream or special school for every pupil who has been excluded once due process has been followed and their needs assessed. This goes some way towards drawing mainstream schools into the orbit of PRUs and permitting PRUs to have a pivotal rather than peripheral position in the whole education system.

7.3 Implications and recommendations

7.3.1 Parents

The views and experiences of the parents interviewed are paramount and have provided the main source of data for this study. Their powerful stories, generously shared with me, gave me insight into their struggles within an education system that saw their children placed in a school deemed as not normal, and have informed my findings and the recommendations I make. They were not prepared for the reality of their children attending a PRU. Their negative responses made it clear that however well their children ultimately adapted to life in a PRU, their preference would have been to have their children in a mainstream *"normal"* school. They had, however, no choice in the matter. Their experiences with the mainstream schools demonstrated very clearly just how little power they had. There was evidence of minoritising and offrolling, and an inability to have their voices heard in the process of schooling that, in some cases, was a prolonged exclusion process, as in the case of Ms Walker whose child had experienced exclusion both in school and socially since his nursery and early primary school years; there was an inevitability about the outcome once the slide began.

All of the parents demonstrated a high willingness to engage with their children's mainstream schools but were on the wrong side of a power imbalance. They lacked the vocabulary of teachers and they lacked influence in the competition of education. They were not happy about the placement of their children at the PRU but almost all recognised that they had a more balanced relationship with staff there, even when they were not happy with staff, as with Ms Walker for whom a member of staff was in her *"bad books"* for not getting back to her over support she had requested with her son's use of cannabis, or Ms Sardinha receiving support from the PRU in managing her teenage daughter at home. This was a paradox they needed to come to terms with. For these parents, I argue there is a case to be made for some form of advocacy with clear deadlines about how long their children should remain in a PRU, but that this be no longer than two terms. I will address this later in this chapter.

Ultimately, there is a need for schools to engage with all parents early on in their children's schooling in a dialogic manner so that the most vulnerable understand the inbuilt disadvantages that they face within the education system. There is an ideological aspect to my proposals; the findings from this study indicate that it is the education *system* that needs to be fairer, one in which all pupils who are excluded have a fair chance of reintegration back into a mainstream school wherever they are in the country, so that permanent exclusion does not become a *state of permanent exclusion*, denying them access to opportunities and affecting their life-chances because of their exclusion and attendance at a PRU. The mere empowering of parents to have a clear understanding of where they are located within the education system will provide them with a clearer basis upon which to challenge decisions adverse to their children's interests.

Where parents face the prospect of their children being excluded from school, I make recommendations for their next mainstream school placement to be identified and nominated as early as possible following the exclusion and no later than on referral to a PRU. To support the parents, I recommend they receive the support of an advocate, ideally a representative of the PRU, trained in advocacy whose role is to facilitate a process of constructive dialogue between all parties – the parents and the children, their future prenominated school and the PRU itself (see table 7.1). The aim of this process is a successful reintegration into the new school after a limited time at the PRU that is sustainable. Access to an advocate provides the means to mediate between the home and school on equal terms. It is a move towards ensuring that exclusion from school does not lead to a state of permanent exclusion. Pupils have an expectation of a return to mainstream following a predetermined period. My recommendations offer a more hopeful process for parents in engaging with a new school from the point of exclusion from the former school.

Recommendations for parents
• Parents of children excluded from school engage with advocate in transition process between PRU and newly identified mainstream school upon referral to PRU. • Parents receive support from advocate with clear understanding of their rights and responsibilities within the structure of the education system and supported with the aim of a return to mainstream school or appropriate specialist provision. • Exclusion to precipitate dialogue with parents and if appropriate wider family to explore wider context and needs. • Parents receive statutory assurance that attendance at PRU will be of no longer than two terms leading to move to mainstream school or specialist provision.

Table 7.1 Recommendations for parents

7.3.2 Educators and policy makers

My findings, based on the qualitative data gathered and a comprehensive literature review suggest that there is a need to reframe pupil referral units emphatically as schools to allay parental fears that their children are being *dumped*. PRUs can be defined as schools with a greater capacity to develop understanding of the *complexity* of individual pupils' contexts and to offer an opportunity to address their needs, and, where appropriate, to take account of the families' needs, by offering a gateway to a range of professional services that might otherwise be missed by these families. The emphasis on the label "school" cannot be overstated. This is already a recommendation of the Timpson (Timpson, 2019, p. 77). Any attempt however to label these as anything other than "*normal*" schools runs the risk of perpetuating the current situation whereby the stigma remains. These findings were most relevant to the time and context in which this study was carried out. However, the broader issues of exclusion from school and subsequent referral to a PRU as an alternative, but unsatisfactory, source of education continue to be live today and show no signs of abating.

Critical to the effective redesigning of PRUs is engaging all stakeholders, including policy-makers, educators, mainstream school senior leadership teams and headteachers in a shared and collective understanding of what they do. As my study

shows there is a lack of clarity by stakeholders about their function. They need to consider the long-term effects of exclusion and how attendance at a PRU affects not just the child but also that child's family. Repeatedly, since the Elton Report (1989) it has been acknowledged that they are not considered as integral to the education system; that there is a *stigma* attached to attending a PRU; attendance at a PRU involves a greater risk of pupils becoming involved in criminal activity; the academic outcomes for PRU pupils are low; and there is no guarantee that they will be reintegrated back into mainstream school. Repeatedly the focus of government interventions has been to conceptualise them in line with the requirements of mainstream schools, to no avail. This is primarily because they are seen as having to be modelled on mainstream schools. PRUs as a *punishment of last resort* primarily meet the needs of mainstream schools by accepting excluded pupils for a wide range of reasons, including those for who might have an undiagnosed SEND. This requires PRUs to develop an expertise above and beyond that required in mainstream schools in managing the unpredictable, responding to the unknown while the needs of young people with highly challenging behaviour are assessed. PRUs are adept at developing relationships with families in order to gain an understanding of the wider context contributing to the challenging behaviour. Staff have, of necessity, to cultivate a wider set of soft skills to engage pupils, skills that may not however prepare a young person for the less personalised environment of a mainstream school, and yet reintegration remains the main objective of PRUs for their pupils. It is in capturing PRUs' capacity to deal with the unknown, managing pupils with complex behaviours, and removing mainstream school pressures that will allow a more fitting conceptualisation. PRUs' avoidance of punishment as a means to control pupils is necessary but is something that has not yet been explored comprehensively within the education system. This is something that parents find difficult to accept believing that they should be stricter so that their children can be made ready for a return to mainstream school. This view is reflective of the fact that a *"philosophical shift"* (Parker-Jenkins, 1999, p. 93) in mainstream school attitudes towards the concept of punishment has not happened. As I have argued, this acknowledgment of a need to revisit mainstream school approaches to managing challenging behaviour becomes central to addressing the issue of exclusions.

I have made parallels in this study with the work of Grunsell (1980a, 1980b) in the 1970s to show that these concerns were prevalent even before PRUs were introduced following the 1993 Education Act. Grounded in the data I have collected from my interviews with professionals, there is perhaps a degree of wilful blindness by the wider education community about how PRUs function; my data shows that they serve to cater for pupils removed from mainstream in order to allow these schools to grapple with the existential challenges brought about by our current education system, one that accords with neoliberal principles of individualism and competition. The pupils and families most at risk of exclusion and attendance at a PRU are the losers in this. I make recommendations for educators and policy makers in table 7.2.

Recommendations for educators and policy makers

- Strengthen mainstream schools' accountability to local authorities for the purpose of managing exclusions and determining mainstream school placement following an exclusion.
- Conceptualise PRUs as schools with a focus on short-term placements and develop a framework around them that recognises and focuses on their ability to deal with complexity.
- Establish practice of nominating a new mainstream school at the point of exclusion or referral to a PRU and appoint advocate to support child and family in transition phase while attending PRU.
- Establish underlying principle that permanent exclusion not become a *state* of permanent exclusion. Attendance at a PRU should not damage life chances.
- Explore placing permanent exclusion on a similar statutory footing as SEND model of EHCPs with the understanding that attendance at a PRU is not permanent.
- Make it a statutory requirement that mainstream schools have link roles with PRUs to support the transition at an early stage of exclusion from previous school.
- Acknowledge the need for an exploration of alternatives to behaviourist approaches to managing behaviour in schools.
- Develop training for PRU teachers in non-behaviourist approaches to managing challenging behaviour to be shared ultimately with mainstream schools.
- Expand Fair Access Protocol (FAP) guidelines to take into account the need for mainstream schools to be identified early and for liaison with PRUs to begin on referral to PRU (See table 7.4).
- Explore a model of PRU as recognised hub for a range of services including social services, CAMHs and YOS to identify where support is most needed and to use the school as a means to engage more effectively with families.
- PRU head and SENDCO to have coordinating function and agency to determine necessary actions to ensure reintegration is successful.
- Statutory reviews to take place half-termly to monitor progress while attending a PRU.
- Panel, including representatives from other services, to monitor progress and readiness for reintegration, and to address reasons why this might not be the case.

Table 7.2 Recommendation for educators and policy makers

7.3.3 PRU staff

The staff at Trenbridge articulated the challenges they faced working in a PRU; they were seen by outsiders as working in a *tough* environment where expectations were low, both in terms of behaviour and academic outcomes. This is not the view of the

staff members themselves. They know their role is challenging but they are aware also of the challenges that their pupils and the families experience every day. They do what they can to mitigate those challenges, developing good relationships with pupils and families in a manner mainstream schools cannot. Their frustration was in not having their expertise recognised within the wider education system. This, I believe, is important to acknowledge and to capitalise upon. Thus, it was that the staff of Trenbridge were frustrated more with how their bespoke approaches with pupils were at odds with the those of mainstream schools, and consequently their inability to reintegrate pupils back into mainstream. They see there is a paradox to be overcome, namely, how to prove a child is ready for mainstream school when that child is mixing with and potentially influenced by other challenging pupils in a smaller school environment. An approach that upon referral to a PRU maps out a pathway back to mainstream *from the start of a permanent exclusion*, within a limited period of time – two terms maximum - with support and advocacy provided, would benefit pupils excluded from school and their families more than the current unclear, unfair system, whereby schools can push back and frustrate aspirations of a return to "normal" school. Such an approach would benefit also PRU staff as well, as they would offer both pupils and families a sense of hope as well as support in a process whereby reintegration becomes a realistic prospect from the first day of attendance at a PRU. (See table 7.3).

Recommendations for PRU and mainstream school staff
• PRU staff to receive training in non-behaviourist approaches to managing behaviour. • They have the opportunity to share this expertise with mainstream schools. • They receive training in advocacy for pupils and parents in navigating the path back to mainstream school. • PRUs have trained social worker on staff to support engagement with families. • Recognition and an understanding of their role in dealing with complexity with enhanced training to account for their role as being at the interface with SEND.

Table 7.3 Recommendations for PRU and mainstream school staff

7.3.4 An alternative view – understanding complexity

As the education system is currently constructed, PRUs fulfil a role distinct from that of mainstream schools with a different ethos and approach, more able to focus on addressing the complexities of individual children's lives, dealing with the here and now of the child, and often the family. This approach ostensibly is to try to plot a route either back into mainstream or, where appropriate, a special school. What has gone wrong is that this symbiotic relationship is unhealthily tipped in favour of the mainstream sector, with PRUs having little influence on the reintegration process. This derives from the fact that the approach taken by PRUs is, of necessity, designed to address the complexities that inform the context of the children, that often prevent them from functioning effectively within the less forgiving mainstream school environment. This requires a highly relational focus that does not necessarily prepare pupils for reintegration and the challenges of mainstream school life. Reintegration is not straightforward and in many areas of England there is one-way traffic from mainstream into PRUs, often determining that pupils end up stuck there; it becomes a permanent arrangement.

The vehicle for this is the catch-all label, Persistent Disruptive Behaviour, which allows schools to exclude pupils permanently for relatively minor offences, which escalate over time as pupils resist the effects of sanctions. This label can also be a disguise for SEMH in pupils, that is often undiagnosed, and for which a special school might be appropriate, but where none might be available. This leaves the PRU to accommodate a wide range of pupils with complex needs with little prospect of a return to mainstream school.

The evidence from the literature shows repeated reference to PRUs' peripheral status in the education system; of the continued difficulties of reintegration, with mainstream schools often unwilling to accept excluded pupils; a resistance by parents to having their children educated in PRUs; year-on-year poor academic outcomes; and parents' incredulity at and resistance to the prospect of their children having to complete their schooling in a school often deemed not "normal". Some consolation for parents might be taken when they find a staff team with the practical

and professional wisdom to support their pupils. Overwhelmingly there is a desire however to have their children back in a mainstream, “normal” school. It is recognised by staff and professionals connected with schools and PRUs that PRUs must do things differently, and often in a manner that does not prepare them for a return to mainstream school.

This research is timely in that it seeks to break the cycle whereby PRUs are periodically investigated and evaluated in isolation from the mainstream education system, usually following a change of government or the appointment of a new secretary of state for education. My data shows that very little has changed in over fifty years with regard to who gets excluded and why.

It is the education system as a whole that needs to be reconceptualised in the long run to address the flaws in it. In the short to medium term there is a way to incorporate PRUs firmly within its boundaries in a manner that renders them more acceptable to parents. The expertise that PRUs develop to manage the complex behaviours of their pupils is a form of experiential learning and does not sit well with an education system that is highly systematised, as it is not easily measurable. Currently, PRUs offer to mainstream schools a simple solution for pupils it cannot manage in the form of a punishment of last resort - banishment. Focusing on the complexity of the pupils they receive allows PRUs to do exceptional work which can often lead to successful reintegration into mainstream school. It is still too often the case that they languish in PRUs for years, in many cases spending their entire secondary schooling there. This is unacceptable; PRUs do not have special school status, they are not set up to deal with specific learning needs.

Paradoxically, PRUs are already in a privileged position in terms of the relationships they have developed with families in general. Central to these relationships is trust, something that is useful when it comes to engaging other support agencies. Locating PRUs as hubs for a range of *“fantastic services*” as the head of Trenbridge interviewed for this study explained, makes sense. The design of this new look alternative provision still has as its central focus a strong emphasis on education.

This is essential for it to be considered as part of the education system. What is lacking, however, is the usual mainstream school focus on narrowly defined academic outcomes; the aims for the children are connected to the support for the whole family; in other words the overt aim is to pursue academic qualifications as is the case in a mainstream school, but this is a just part of a process that seeks to address the wider complex needs both of the excluded child and, where appropriate, their family. The PRU, because of the relationships with the family, advocates on its behalf but in a manner that is dialogic ensuring that the real interests of the family and child are identified and represented. A process of inclusion of the family within wider society is initiated.

To some degree, many PRUs have taken the decision to operate in this manner, of necessity. This was made clear in my interviews with the Mr Smith, head of Trenbridge and the LA professionals. All envisage PRUs in a role that emphasises their status as schools, so as to ensure pupils have a sense of belonging to a norm experienced by other young people. Added to this is access to a wide range of support services for the whole family. His approach coheres to some degree with the model I am proposing.

Mr Smith makes a convincing argument for this model. The issue here is that this will not be the practice in many PRUs as it would not always be permitted by LAs or MATs. My findings show that it requires people on the ground in such schools to take a determined leadership role that allows them to survey their respective social landscapes and to use their social capital to determine what is needed for the children in their care.

7.3.5 Referral and monitoring panel

To ensure that no child spends more than a maximum of two terms in a PRU, a process of reviews and involvement of a panel drawn from the various professional services could meet to devise a reintegration plan. As with pupils with an EHCP, the task of the panel is to determine the correct pathway and long-term provision for each child and that provision should *not* be a PRU. This defines PRUs as operating

in a liminal state as distinct from being on the periphery of the education system. This draws in multiple agencies with a view to ensuring no child is left languishing in a PRU. This allows the head teacher of a PRU to ensure no child gets stuck there. This requires strong, imaginative leadership to manage the various, and often competing agencies, operating on a principle that no child should spend their entire school life following an exclusion in a PRU. Such an acknowledgement allows them more freedom to respond to the needs of the whole family not just the child.

A similar panel model is already to some degree a requisite of local authority provision in the form of the Fair Access Protocols (FAP) for pupils without a school placement. The ISOS Partnership report (2018) identifies best practice in terms of how FAPs are run, and Lawrence (2011) likewise catalogues a range of factors that need to be in place to facilitate effective reintegration (see tables 2.7 and 2.8). Key to both is the call for openness and transparency in the process with schools being required to act honourably in their intentions around accepting and reintegrating pupils. Such a model appears on the face of it to be comprehensive and to offer a pathway back into mainstream school for those pupils who are deemed ready for reintegration.

7.3.6 Developing a new model

Unquestionably this approach would encounter resistance from wide sections of the education community: many mainstream schools because their cultures and ethos are less inclusive; teachers and parents of pupils at mainstream schools concerned about the prospect of deteriorating behaviour and effects on academic standards, for example. This ultimately requires a more cohesive schools system than the current fragmented model allows. As my evidence shows, there are examples where the FAP is run in a manner that prohibits reintegration. There is evidence of schools in some local authorities effectively blocking access for excluded pupils from returning to mainstream schools, arguing the FAP is in fact used *"to keep children in alternative provision"* (Parliament, House of Commons Education Committee, 2019, p. 23). Nevertheless, the ISOS Partnership best practice list in chapter 2 (Table 2.7) is a useful starting point to begin a process of change. As with the existing FAP

process it is important that mainstream schools do not shy away from their responsibilities towards those excluded pupils, the most vulnerable in society. I propose the following additions to enhance the ISOS model (see table 7.4).

7.3.7 Recommendations for an extended Fair Access Protocol

Recommendations for extended fair access protocol

- Determine the reintegration pathway for those excluded from school at the point of exclusion and referral to a PRU, and ensure a school is nominated at this point.
- Pupils stay for a predetermined amount of time at a PRU – a minimum of one term with a maximum of two terms – and an advocate from the PRU is appointed to support family.
- In that period the pre-nominated school engages regularly to prepare the pupil for reintegration with reciprocal visits by parents and staff of both schools and the pupil.
- Pupils and their families receive targeted and coordinated support from a wide range of services, including social services, child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS), therapeutic support and mentoring, where necessary.
- A decision as to whether a special school placement might be more appropriate is made. PRU advocate engages with LA and family around this.
- Police and YOS support around criminality and gang involvement is provided where necessary, and with other services where appropriate, housing for example, coordinated by PRU staff trained in social work.

Table 7.4 Recommendations for extended fair access protocol

Findings from this study suggest PRUs are ideal to coordinate this, with PRU staff, trained in advocacy, becoming advocates for an excluded child; their role is then to engage with the home, the services and the pre-nominated mainstream school on a regular basis to ensure the child remains on track for reintegration, and sustains the placement. Such an approach also considers the needs of the wider family and may bring their needs into sharper focus.

This research has highlighted the need to address the issue of exclusion and referral to PRUs within the context of a review of the whole education system. Without a more cohesive approach, we will continue periodically to address this growing problem *ineffectively*. A situation whereby mainstream schools become increasingly dependent on the use of exclusions to allow them to function viably and to maintain their position within school league tables without taking account of their responsibility

to give those pupils excluded from school a fair chance of continuing their education in a mainstream school cannot continue. Consideration needs also to be given to how the fragmentation of the schools system in England is allowing the same pupils to be excluded on a regular basis.

The contribution of this study to educational research theory and practice is to move towards a more ethical, fair and compassionate approach to school exclusion and one that sees exclusion not in punitive terms, but as an opportunity to assess what has gone wrong for each pupil excluded from school. This is not a complete plan; it is designed to establish the principles around PRUs as short-term, rehabilitative schools with the authority and influence needed to determine the direction of education for excluded pupils and to ensure they are given a realistic chance of returning to mainstream schools as quickly as possible, or that a specialist school placement is sought. I see this as a means to begin to address the shortcomings of a flawed education system that has become beholden to market rules, where in order to survive it is essential to offload "unmarketable" stock – in this case human beings, pupils. It is important that this ideological approach is confronted and that the school system as a whole considers the needs of its most vulnerable first. The model I propose is not beyond imagination and draws upon existing know-how. It involves clarification around the conceptualisation of PRUs that capitalises on PRUs' expertise but sees them as decidedly short-term placements. This is managed by determining what the next placement will be on referral to the PRU, with PRU staff operating as advocates for the child, liaising with the prenominated school and the family, to ensure there is a greater chance of success. To some degree this is already happening in PRUs like Trenbridge where a strong and imaginative headteacher has made inroads into the mainstream schools in his area. The parents of his pupils are more able to articulate their sense of frustration about where they find themselves within the education system; they are clear they see themselves at the bottom of the pile, but it took the referral of their children to the PRU to see this clearly. They have a voice and they feel supported. They would still, however, prefer their children had remained in mainstream school. I have not costed this approach, but PRUs and AP schools are already costly in terms of staff to pupil ratios, and the

long-term costs of pupils falling out of the education system in terms of the “PRU-to-prison pipeline” have been well documented.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 Summaries of parents' views for Narrative Inquiry approach

Name: Mr Idrissi	PEx/MM: MM	M/F: M	Year 11	

I don't really know why my son was excluded. He was "fighting" all the time with a teacher for nothing. I asked him why he was excluded. He says, "I don't know. I was late, I'm going to wash my hands, I asked him for the toilet, he excluded me." He likes to wash his hands. The school called me, I told him don't go and wash your hands. The teacher said don't go. He said "I am going". And he goes, I said to them do you what you want to do, exclude him, for what? He's going to the toilet wash his hands. It's up to you, you are the teacher.

He is too clean. If I ask him to open the door he doesn't open by hands. He doesn't like that I wash his clothes with his brother's clothes, with my clothes, no. He says, I need to separate. The school knew about this. He was excluded before, he be late, he be late, and sometimes eating and the teacher tell him don't eat.

He likes mechanics… He says the teacher said to him the school does not have the money to send to you to mechanics. And he had to stay in normal lessons. He has been excluded before, all the time for wanting to wash his hands. There were no problems in primary school; the problems started at that school AA.

You know what happened, I have four children at the same school. They talked to each other, they help each other and talk too much to each other and the school (made) problem for (another son and daughter) and the teacher doesn't like A. He make big problems. And he do it, he do it. he put everyone in a different school. He leave AY in the same school because AY big.

The headteacher said to me, it is better I do this, he knows better for my children, then do it…, But don't put them (out of school). There were no fights, no violence. He had no problem in primary school the problem started in this school (mainstream), in year eight and year nine the problem started. I was not happy but I said to him, you know better than me, you are the teacher, you know about the school, I say, send them to different schools, no problem. I don't need this… my wife is disabled. He sent the first to HR school for three weeks and then put him in BB, he was with his sister but then he said, no he doesn't have place for two. And he sent them here.

This is the second child I have had here at this school. This is a good school because he says I can do the mechanic (course). The (mainstream) school (had) no money. The school said yes, no, yes, no, yes, no. I said okay, you have to find a job at the school. You have to work, he apply for some jobs when it is holiday. Here a little bit better for me because he doesn't have friends, not too many friends and because it's smaller. He likes it, but he still late from the bus. I wake him early, he still be late. My wife is disabled but they're all big and and help themselves. They can make their own meals for example. I like it because any problems, they ring me straight away, they look after the children here, They also ring sometimes to tell me he has had a good week.

I talk to all of the staff here. I am happy with this school because they help him to be a mechanic and in five years he will be a mechanic. I want (him) to be a mechanic, Mercedes company.

Ms Sardinha	PEx/MM: MM	M/F: F	Year 11	

Slowly, because English is not….

Before they moved her she went to H, catholic school. After, they sent me a letter they sent me a letter to go to L. the problem was, a big problem, when (describes traumatic family event). She felt like she lost everything and the real problem was one day she told a teacher in school. She trust the

teacher and she told everything that happened to her, and the teacher goes round. She said it was confidential, don't worry. Instead, the teacher goes round and tells oher teachers and when she went to the class of another teacher, I don't know if I call it bullying or not but he started to play with Melissa. I don't really want to describe things because I don't remember, it was a long time ago but like she was laughing in the class. She told me she dropped a pen, when she tried to catch it the teacher said something she didn't like. I don't know if the teacher did wrong. I'm not, you know how it is, kids sometimes when they are upset, anything is too much.

He said, I don't want to go to school. She started or I don't feel well. It was a mess, really; meetings and meetings and meetings and meetings. One teacher called me to help. Maybe if you change, and the headteacher straight away. Headteacher was so rude to me, like my child was nothing, and explain to her she had no problems in primary school, she was a nice girl. She said okay, okay, but they change and after they decided to move her to H it's a small school. The right name was managed move. I felt sad. I think she had a breakdown because of (event). This was in year seven and she is now in year 11. We were all the time polite with the school sometimes with my sister because I don't understand some rules in the school but never aggressive.

I thought oh my God, what's wrong with my daughter, you started thinking what's wrong? Where was I wrong? The day they told me she has to start here believe me it was like I lost everything, with my niece was with me, people talk about be like it's a present, but I think it's not. It's a new school. And she came here.

Sometimes she is a trouble maker, I know. I recognise my daughter, she is a very high personality but I am happy because here in the school they supporter, the teachers. Is the reason I feel, I know he/she is safe because they treat the situation like they like her. They understand her, I'm happy with B. She changed when she came to secondary school, because the (event) happened at the end of June, just before she started secondary school. She was happy. I like the teachers in her secondary schools, they were amazing, but I did not like the headteacher. Here, I think they could be more strict for the kids, but for me I say thank you because if not for me I don't know what would happen to my daughter. I think she can't be in big school because she felt, one day I asked her, so you deciding to stay in bed and she said yes, but why? Because they know me, they understand me. I know sometimes I'm a mess and rude to the teacher. I know it's wrong but I feel confident in school.

I studied in my country to year 11. I would like to have studied more but you have to pay for everything and I didn't have the books. I want her to do well. She has to study but she says I get bored in school. I don't understand this. I think she wants your apprenticeship and the school will support her with that. All of my family have supported us with this situation. Her family want her to do well. If it wasn't for Bailey I think she would be in more trouble, because she likes to do what she wants. Sometimes she's rude, but they know her. I feel comfortable. *I know PRU is not the best for our kids*, but about the situation is better she stay here and goes around. About the staff, oh my God, for me I don't know about other pair parents for me it's amazing. They talk to me, they help me to find… She is 16 and now they start a course here and invite me to participate but I couldn't because of my granddaughter.

She complains because she's bored is the reason she sometimes doesn't want to come to school and blah, blah, blah but she never talks about the teachers. If something wrong happens straightaway should go to the teachers, or the tutor and, she's got a good relationship with the teachers. She is a teenager and sometimes she tries to play with the teachers and they don't like it, but I think she's got good relationships. It's the support they give the kids. They are human beings, because if not sometimes it to cater so rude, if they are not patient and that they haven't got a heart, they never would deal with the kids. I think they could be more strict, because here in England education is totally different and in my country, where it is more strict. Oh my God, I don't have to say that but sometimes, I don't know if the school, I don't know if the government takes power I can say we can't educate the kids like we want. I mean, they think they can do everything because they got 16 years, they are like babies, is the way, I'm sorry the way I think that sometimes you are tired, I said oh no I can't do this because if I do this they called the police, the police come and then you get in trouble. She hasn't got more levels because she's lazy. She doesn't like to study. I say it's not because of the school, she says it's so boring, they are lazy. She told me last week she wants to do

apprenticeship and the school can help her if she takes the opportunities she could be she likes hairdressing, nails, massage,…

I know my daughter is a hard worker. She had two jobs working at the weekends but now because her GCSEs are coming up and have said she has to stop. She does not want to go to college, she wants to go to do an apprenticeship and the school is helping her to do this. My daughter understands about work and she is very happy about this idea of an apprenticeship. She visit my country every year, and she's different. She had two jobs, but I have stopped these because her GCSEs are coming up. She understands the reason for this. She likes responsibility all the time she was on time

Ms Walker	PEx/MM: MM	M/F: F	Year 11	

I've known since he was a baby that there was an issue with my child, Because he couldn't focus, couldn't sit still, he was always hyper. He'd always had lots of problems in primary school as well, it run around the school, again in nursery this used to happen as well. They labelled him in primary school as a naughty child andhe was excluded from numerous trips. The really difficult time in primary school where he got blamed for things he didn't do. I member at sports day once him being held by a member of staff had been led away and he was crying. When I approached a member of staff I felt I was dismissed. He was accused of punching another pupil and causing a bruise, but they didn't want to hear his side of the story. And it turns out it didn't happen. When I spoke to the other parent she didn't know anything about it. This was in year four. Was even excluded from the four night trip away at the end of year six he was excluded also from the production play and also on the prom, so he ended on a bad note to be honest and it was all because of this labelling. I feel it was their duty to realise something is not quite right, especially you know child could have dyslexia and they're supposed to pinpoint… I don't know if it's the teachers and members of staff, each of them I like different, where there are more passionate. I can see what's going on with the child and others are like dismissive, that I'm not bothered. They're just there to learn and teach the children.

There was an incident at school where he was invited to another child's birthday party by a boy whom he had befriended; he was so excited and told me, but the mother worked at the school and decided he wasn't to be invited, so he was uninvited to the party. He was heartbroken about this, sobbing and I felt so sorry for him. This happened again the following year where his mother said he is a bad role model. I felt like this member of staff was picking on my child. He has got ADHD and ODD. I've known since he was a child that something wasn't right. When we were out I could never take my eyes off him.

On starting secondary school he was put into a little unit, it was a little cabin across the road from the school he was there for children who misbehave. So he hardly got a chance to attend proper mainstream secondary school. It was only at the end of year seven they said to me he's got ADHD and ODD

The Senco lady at the school had said that there was something not right with my son, so they provided some support it was an English teacher but this English teacher was the mother of one of my Child's teachers in primary school, I think probably year 2, and she told my son that she, I've heard a lot about you. You know my daughter used to be your teacher. I'm only speculating, but she's probably thinking, okay, he could've been because when my daughter left the school, you know why she would like that, he is one of the kids that probably was a bit too much for my daughter, because her daughter was not able to manage the class and she left. I'm not saying she didn't support him, but I don't think she gave him the right support.

There were exclusions; in the beginning he was at home then after a while when he was getting excluded they were sending them to the sisters go quite far and obviously I said to them I'm not kind taken to another school because I'm thinking of you she's going through. I'm thinking that as a child knows what you're feeling like you know, a sense of abandonment, you know his primary school, so shoving him off to another school, but he doesn't know anyone, there is no any kids and you know,

when you go to that school, what sort of classes is going to be in? Is he going to be in a normal class? So I said no, I'm not going to do that obviously it's me that's going to be taking him. I think they wanted to get him out. They needed an excuse. There was an incident after school where he and some friends were play fighting and a member of the public intervened and my son and the boys started giving her verbal abuse and she filmed them my son pushed the phone away. They contacted me and told me after two days that they were going to permanently exclude them.

I knew what it was like, because we were taken on a visit here to show what it was like and to try to encourage him to behave. So when he was excluded, I was angry I was distraught, I was not happy at all. They were taking kids who were getting into trouble to visit prisons I think it was part of the program, to take them to show what it was like to persuade them not to go down that road. I didn't like it and one of the guys involved said that he felt some of the teachers couldn't cope with the children the way they were acting, so when I went to see it I was so upset.

I realise now that it does work for him, I don't think mainstream work for him I wish to have done more in primary. The teachers are obviously there to teach but also to see if they are struggling. What are your issues? Is it something to do with learning difficulties and not just blame the parent. and say oh it's down to the parent. Something is going on at home. That's why the child behaving like that. I remember even in nursery school where I had to speak to a teacher because of the way she was trying to get his attention by prodding on his temple and saying focus. They agreed that they shouldn't have done this, but then their attitude towards me just changed. She was not happy she just went funny with me, even with him as well.

I'm lost now I've had a conversation with a few of the staff here and I feel more could've been done and I have spoken to other children that have been to the school, older children. One said to me mum trust me I think you should keep him at home because the school is not good. He said to me that school is not for him. Another said to me they don't really teach you properly, so I feel I'm not happy.

He is now struggling to go in though. I've spoken to the school notice, he's always had this problem from when he was young I initially thought it was the medication, but I stopped it because when he went on a school trip here, the school forgot to take his medication, I felt they were a bit laid-back. They promised they would organise a late timetable for him with a late finish, but then they said they couldn't accommodate him. I've come in for meetings to discuss his attendance and they say things to sound very promising and nothing gets done, so it's been escalating to the point where it's got worse… I was disheartened. He enjoys it here. The staff seem to be more friendly, they are you know, on their page, not like in mainstream where I don't believe they have good relationships with children.

I don't really know what success is going to look like for him. I just want to be told by the staff what needs to happen because they know their job. With social services and other professionals it has been difficult because one team got involved, when they shouldn't have and passed it on and we have to start again. They should have known that from the start, not to get involved. Because I saw a guy called Z. He seems fine, t we got on well. I saw him about three or four times, but I wasted my time because he was not supposed to get involved because it was another department.

He wants to go to college, whether he is serious I don't know. I said to him, go to college? You can't even get up to go to school, how are you going to go to college? But you know I just don't know the education side of things. I don't know what you guys can do because I'm not in that sort of category. I'm just a parent, you know so, I don't know. For instance, I had a recent interview with CAMHS manager but they said it was the school's fault. I don't know what to do, what can I do. I'm lost, I'm stuck, I'm confused. No one is doing what they're supposed to do. When it comes to education I'm assuming the school, they've gone through it all, dealt with so many different types of children with different problems along the years. They've got experiencing of knowing what can help each child, or we've had a child like this one and we know what sort of help to give. I'm stuck, I haven't got anywhere, so I don't know what else to suggest I don't know what we I don't know what can you do. I don't know.

In five years time? That's the sad thing, I really don't know. I'm thinking to stop doing anything, that's how it feels, and he's not stupid. I mean even the primary school headmistress used to say the same thing, she goes he's just he's so smart, he can go onto big things. I've asked for help. I've come to them, because no one is doing what you're supposed to do. When it comes to education, I'm assuming the school, they've gone through it all, dealt with so many different types of children different problems along the years. They've got experiencing of knowing what can help his child. I'm stuck, I haven't got anywhere, so I don't know, I don't know what else to suggest. What can you do I don't know. There was a parents meeting a few weeks ago, to discuss the mock exam. I think because of what he's been through, in nursery, school, what's going through his head?

I'm concerned now, I've spoken to staff here because he's been caught with weed and smoking it as well I've spoken to staff here and asked them to help me get back to me about his weed smoking. I hope there is something they can do about it, when I found out they're opening a primary school here he broke my heart. I was thinking I was tiny little kids as young as five going to approve. I just didn't know we had the patience, most of the teachers are probably just there to get paid, they're not putting the effort in because, apart from teaching a child with that nurture the child as well. I need a lot of training in different aspects especially when the child is labelled, there is a reason behind it, don't assume it's something going on in the house. And I think they need to sort that out asap, because it's going to be a lot of children like my son that's been failed and I education has failed and totally and I know that for a fact.

Mr El Mehdi	PEx/MM: PEx	M/F: F	Year 11	

If I don't understand I'll need you to repeat. English is not my first language.

My son was a very naughty boy, do you understand? He was excluded for carrying weed in his pocket. He was given another chance in another normal school but lost this chance *again*, this time he had (drugs paraphernalia) on him and he was caught. There had been other exclusions for doing something not allowed, somethings against the school policies. So if he breaks that policy so then the exclusion. I think the exclusions were fair because it was his silly behaviour, which is unacceptable for schools. He is making progress here at the moment; one assumes they will grow up, they will think for the future. He was excluded in year 10, but in years seven, eight and nine he was becoming very, very naughty. He is like a copycat. If you see something like what the kids are doing, he wants to do it. Primary school was okay.

The school gave a statement and I asked them to give him a second chance, but they didn't because of the policy of the school I can't do anything. I feel a bit bad but in the end I have to accept whether I like it or not. My education finished in secondary school I didn't go to university because of my country circumstances. I wanted my children to have the opportunity because in this country there is a lot of opportunity which I did not have. I want him to be good you know. All of my family have been supporting me with this, my brother, my sister all my family here. We are all trying to help him. We had a family meeting. We told him you need to get a good education for your future, but what ever you say they have a different mentality.

I didn't like it when I heard he was going to a pupil referral unit, because I want him to go to a normal school. In the end I realise no school will except him only for L. I realised all the schools would look at his background and I have to accept it whether I like it or not. *And I accept it.*

He's at the PRU now. And although he plays games he's going on. Every day we speak to him, don't let us down as a family don't let yourself down, be good. We don't give up, I'm still fighting for him. I started to take him to the gym, swimming and sometimes he goes. He likes it here for some reason. Staff are friendly, to let me know even if it's late, to call me or text me to let me know if he has a fight in a way it's very good. I like the communication. I'll be honest, I'm not happy that he's at approve because this is not a normal school. Okay? I'm not really happy. I'm happy because there is no all the school will accept it. Do you understand? In a way I'm happy, in the way I'm not happy, do you understand? I feel bad that note was the school will take him, because this school is limited. Many people think that pupils in the school about kids, and doing drugs or were very naughty or difficult to communicate with that they'll come here. Whether I like it or not I have to accept it.

I think this school could be more strict. I'm sure at L it was a different policy it was strict there. There are things you are allowed to do here which you are not allowed to do at L. I'm disappointed that he doesn't have any homework. When I say more strict I would like him to have more homework. I feel a big disappointment they come here with no books, no bag, nothing. They should have something I can see that he is learning in. I spoke to Teachers about this and I hope they listened. *There is no evidence* that they are learning. No evidence I can see, feel like, at least feel like, even if it's just like in like in school you know I don't feel like it is at school at the moment because they come here with no bags…with no pen or paper. I mean I'm very disappointed.

The behaviour, it's good. Although they have friend relationships with the kids,… they have to show them they are teachers, but sometimes you say that the kids are coming out of school before time. I've witnessed this year banging to get out early before the end of the day.

I am happy with the way they talk to the kids it is very good but I want him to be a little bit strict because if they give them more freedom they will do more things, more bad things.

I do think that being in approve of the fact and what he does when he leaves, because every college they have a different policy. They want the kids to go to college not to influence on other children. For him to be successful he has to go to college to finish university and get a good job and that is a lot to me if he does that. I'm working, I mean I can support him, but the choice is his at the moment it's his choice if he wants to be good, if you want to be bad but I don't give up, do you understand?

I'm very happy with the staff at the school especially tea, the receptionist I like her, she give me updates school is very open and including the headteacher I can approach them I can talk to him if I want need to. I'm grateful also to you for your support at L.

Mr Talbi	PEx/MM: MM	M/F: F	Year 11	

What is a pru?

The problem with my son is his behaviour. He is a brilliant student as per his teachers but the problem is his behaviour. He can be disruptive, defensive and just mingle with stuff that has nothing to do with him. if there is a fight – nothing to do with him, he will be there. The school have tried many things, detention, special training school or whatever (isolation units). His school did everything to help him out, gave him warnings told him look you're a bright child, you have to behave. Somehow, he just wouldn't listen. And, well, *according to them*, they just couldn't do anything else to help him. Well, what can I do if that's the system, if these are your rules, I have to accept them, so I had to sign that he is referred to these kinds of schools. They say it was a managed move but for me it was an exclusion because they tried all the channels that didn't work. I have a feeling the way they explained to me that they tried everything, but obviously I don't know much about the rules, there could be something they didn't try, but eventually thought okay that's it we've had enough because they even tried to place him in (mainstream) school. The trial was for six weeks but after four weeks the school said no we're not going to take him.

I find they were too harsh on him I was thinking like somewhere between mainstream and these kind of referrals schools but after the experience with L and you remember my concerns, security, no tight security, these things really annoy and I thought no, it was more like penalising him rather than trying to help him out. At L behaviour even worse when if he had come straight here he would be less damaged. At L he was pushed by gangs to help them or go with them. So I said I'd rather my son stay indoors, no school than go to these kinds of skills which I suspect would be tighter than mainstream, to correct him rather than watching him, so I am against this type of school. I couldn't see the correction happening it's just like the keeping of the street, but not helping them out to get back to mainstream, back on track. Here there is a slight difference security is tighter. But the problem is he only came with that baggage.

Whenever there was a meeting in the schools I would attend and the relationships with the schools were good with teachers. They talked to him and say look you don't want to end up in B. we had heard bad news about being with criminality, so I was scared and that's why they sent us to L we thought it would be better today. But as it turned out the lack of security at L meant they could get out, jumped the wall. Steak you are saying as long as they don't cause too much trouble in school, you are free to do whatever and that's probably the message he got. His behaviour wasn't, would you remember my relationship with you your school, you saw me I came to meetings and in mainstream that's what I used to do I would attend, I will talk to him, I will talk to Teachers and then unfortunately that's what happened.

I did not have much dealings with the local Authority because for me the school represented the LA, I met with social workers and police officers at school and I would attend all of the meetings, she was happy that I was doing my best to help my child, so it was a brilliant relationship. I was getting support, but he never got a chance to get back it was as if he was a big burden and they were happy that he's out of mainstream and then decide to school, where his behaviour even got worsened.

Even here there was an incident where he was alleged to have smoked cannabis, that's true or not, because he's denying it. Do you know if they gave him a chance to go back to mainstream give me the fails that last chance, give him a chance, like you tried before with other channels. You can't say no we want you to be perfect before we take you back to mainstream. Say we're going to keep you for a month in mainstream to see how you're getting on, then obviously it would probably have worked I believe. *(so you're unhappy about the way it works they have to reach a particular level of behaviour here before they excepted in mainstream and yet is very difficult. Behaviour is more likely to get worse, is that what you're saying? Before it gets better, we don't wait until they reach a level of perfection, give him a go?)* Yes

I wouldn't say it's fair, system is penalising these kind of student. Rather than looking to get him reinstated, the mainstream takes to view, so this is a troublesome boy, we don't want to because he's like a bad apple in a tree, we don't want it, get rid of it that's my feeling, and when you, sorry…, Dumped him, I'm sorry to use this word in such schools. It even helped him get back onto the streets, because they were jumping the wall, there was no security, allow him to intermingled with whoever. The system is dictating that these are the kind of schools that they should be in, and these because they should be correcting, there was no correction work.

I'm not saying all the students in the schools are bad because some managed to get back to mainstream but because of that behaviour he wanted more freedom and he's kind of rebellious and probably you could find the right people that he could go with. So in fact these kind of schools helped him to get the environment *he* thinks is right for him. It should be stricter no mingling with say year 10 and year 11 because of bad influence because of age difference and also the security. There's only a few of them and they should be managed compare to mainstream.

I did my postgraduate studies here but I don't know much about the education system, but the way I see it the system is fine for well-behaved students, but if the student gets out of track, the system doesn't help much. That freedom should be there, because they would've use it they will get even worse and we have tangible evidence of what had happened to him. He got worse instead of being helped out. My son is evidence of how the system does not work, there is a loophole when it comes to correction; you haven't got a principle of correcting, you have to be tough or secure. By correction I mean his problem is the behaviour, what I mean is support like one-to-one counselling, find out what's wrong, what's happening. How can we get an away from that misbehaviour and bring him back on track. .At L he was mingling with some people who had knives and hid them and pushes her in the park so we were concerned and he said that, and the police also backed us, they said look yes because it is always mentioned to them, there is a lack of security in the school there. The kids climb the walls and there's really nothing to stop them. It's hard to talk to them wisely.

If someone is hyperactive you don't use the same system in mainstream: we talked to you, we are being harsh, call the parents, what's the Point of calling me while I'm at work, no it's not about me coming. What am I going to do to you to professional to find a way to bring him back on track to tackle the behaviour issues first and make sure he knows he's wrong and this is how you behave to be back on track. There was an incident in school where he tried to grab something and the chef prevent it was preventing him within doing so thought told him to go away or I'll chop your head off. What is he going to think they are using this language with me, then I could use it I could do even worse I complain to the head teacher and she said she would speak to him, the member of staff. If you work in a school like this you have to know how to deal with them, at least don't use that language. He could stop him, hold him, yeah he physically stop him or whatever. Don't say I'm going to chop your head off fingers off or something like that. His mum came to a point that any call from the school would just put her off, trigger her, just get her upset. I couldn't understand you know, because as a woman she's too emotional compare to a man, I could contain myself, I could tackle it came to a point when I said look, call me never call her…His mum came to a point that any call from the school would just put her off, trigger her, just get her upset. I couldn't understand you know, because as a woman she's too emotional compare to a man, I could contain myself, I could tackle it came to a point when I said look, call me never call her… being from Morocco we don't get that. This Google doesn't call you, they deal with it they deal with it and that's it, not every single, silly incident, small ones calling. One stage I was called to the school or something it transpired he had done and no one apologised. When the parents have done their best to correct that child and they eventually come to the conclusion that school didn't help, but even Washington these types of schools? When you called them, what else can they do? Kick him out of the house? It's just going to have some more and more eventually he's going to just give up are used to say to you.I've given up what can I do what more can I do? Still is better here than L. There are still more incidents but I'm happy with that there is more security. I feel we were misled when we were told that B was worse than L. Here is the area it's not like it was there where people can hide. There is a park there there are estates around, then

obviously bad boys around the area, because of the council estate et cetera. Environment encourages them. Environment is maybe contaminated, you see these are the issues. Here at B he has managed to get into more activities than when at L. here, be turned into a boxing club, which he failed to go to, just like a week or 10 days ago. I went to collect him and he told me he was there. I said, you're a bloody liar. I was there. Eventually he he admitted he was with some kids, they said they were playing football, it was smoking but I didn't smoke anything. I couldn't smell anything on him anyway and at least they managed to get him some other activities. The headteacher is trying to get him into six form and I keep telling him, it's your future. Look at your brothers both of them in universities. Keep quiet about this. I was trying to get him to compete with them, the brothers are doing well, and they never causes trouble, they are now in university I said to him you don't want to end up in a silly college what are you going to probably be a DIY man or something. Remember your teacher told you, you could be a lawyer or a doctor, you could be anything, just behave, just behave, social behaviour. Now you've only got a few weeks left.

He doesn't really talk much about school. Sometimes he will come and say that they praised him, but I say my son keep it up don't be fooled I would've paid you today, but a few positives does not mean you're good, that you're back on track doing well. But if you don't do it, then that's your future, your future is calm, most of the time when I talk to him, he puts his head down, he didn't really like it I don't know if he's absorbing that or ignoring but that's my role as a parent I have to tell him…

Extreme and to prove the difference between mainstream and the PRU in terms of relationships I don't see a difference to be honest. When I attended parental meetings there when I was teacher was praising him saying he's fantastic, he's alright but other teachers were saying different things and it was the recurrence of events and the incidents and the complaints that put me off, because I always compare with his older brothers, they never gave us this trouble. Where I could see the difference, in mainstream any misbehaviour, detention, detention. In the PRU there is no such element. And I think he believes I've got this freedom, I don't get detained, I don't get delayed, so maybe he thought I can do whatever. So detention there that used to refrain him a bit, but the PRU no detention, just call the parents. He knew it didn't have a direct impact on him so he thought I'll carry on my misbehaviour. That's what I felt.

At least when he goes back to this school (6th form), he could focus say look, it's not a pro, either I study or I'm out and hopefully that will change the way he's thinking, no more playing. The problem is I was with him, his behaviour and so on, not listening et cetera. Now is the next day I would expect that will teach him a lesson. Now I'm really in a more respectable school. It's about building a future. I'm hoping he will realise because I can see now he is slightly improving. He said recently he wants to go and revise in the library. I said go, but sometimes you suspect him. You think he's trying to plan an excuse to get out and God knows where he mingles with and I could see he is taking it a bit seriously, but obviously he's not going to change 100%. He's building trust in himself and he now sees the end of the tunnel more clearly.

Being in a pro will affect him if he doesn't do well in the next school. If things go wrong there, that's it, he will always think about these girls that didn't help him, also by what the parents were saying and others, what other professionals were telling him about his behaviour, then it is too late to correct it, what can you do?

But he would always be, pretty sure, pondering on what he had done in the past. Success for him would be getting degrees or certificates or even getting to university. University is one of the aims, but polytechnics, something decent like sciences, computer science things like that, anything that will, you know contain him. Now I'm looking at my future, no more silliness, no more misbehaviour, now it's either seize the opportunity or lose it all.

Appendix 2 Request to DfE on rates of reintegration

CRM:0515018

AU

ACCOUNT, Unmonitored <Unmonitored.ACCOUNT@education.gov.uk>
Mon 11/11/2019 13:40

To:

- You

Dear Mr Meehan,

Thank you for your request for information, received on 4 November 2019. You requested the following:

"I am carrying out research on exclusions from school and need to know:

1. Can you provide me with data/trends etc. for rates of reintegration from PRUs/AP schools back into mainstream schools of PRU/AP school pupils who had been excluded from mainstream school?

2. Given that reintegration back into mainstream schools fro PRUs/AP schools often break down in the course of a dual registration trial period, how do you assess the success or otherwise of a placement? "

The Department does not hold this information.

You may find the National Statistics release on exclusions useful

https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/permanent-and-fixed-period-exclusions-in-england-2017-to-2018

Yours sincerely,

School census statistics team

Data insight and statistics division

Appendix 3 Request to DfE re exclusion rates from 1970s onwards

Thank you for getting in touch. We can confirm that we have received the information you submitted.

A copy of your submission is below.

Question:
I am trying to establish permanent exclusion trends since the 1970s until the present day, but can only find data dating back to 2008 on the DfE website. I am also looking at what provision there was before PRUs came into being following 1996 education act.

When did the department begin to record permanent exclusions data?

Does the department have any data for permanent exclusion dating back as far as 1970, and where can I find it?

Have there been changes over the years as to how permanent exclusions are recorded that would affect how data across the decades is compared?

Has any analysis been done comparing exclusions data on a decade by decade basis?

Were offsite units operated by local authorities or schools prior to the introduction of PRUs following 1996 Education Act?

What provision was made for permanently excluded pupils prior to 1996?

Thank you

Contact details
Name: Mr Tony Meehan
Role: student
Prefer telephone/SMS response: no
Telephone number: 07818023843
Email address: tonyjmeehan@me.com

Regards,
Department for Education
www.gov.uk/dfe

Department for Education

Received 30th March 2021
Dear Mr Meehan

Thank you for your email of 11 February about your permanent exclusions.

Due to the Covid-19 crisis, we are dealing with a large volume of correspondence. Please therefore accept my apologies for the delay in replying to your email.

As I am sure you can appreciate, the Department for Education receives a large number of requests similar to yours. Unfortunately, we are unable to provide individually tailored replies and can only point you to online sources of information.

Exclusion data can be found at:

https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/statistics-exclusions

All general policy information can be found on the department's website at:

https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/department-for-education.

Occasionally, other organisations publish our work online. While I am unable to provide any specific recommendations, you may be able to locate the information you require through a general internet search or in The National Archives at:

http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/webarchive/.

Thank you for writing and I hope that you are able to find the information you require.

Your correspondence has been allocated reference number 2021-0012195. If you need to respond to us, please visit https://www.education.gov.uk/contactus and quote your reference number

As part of our commitment to improving the service we provide to our customers, we are interested in hearing your views and would welcome your comments via our website at:https://form.education.gov.uk/service/PCTfeedback.

Yours sincerely

M DHOKIA

Ministerial and Public Communications Division

Web: https://www.education.gov.uk
Twitter: https://www.twitter.com/educationgovuk
Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/educationgovuk

Appendix 4 Indicative questions for the interviews with parents/carers Version 1

1. Describe your child's experience in mainstream school, both primary and secondary?
2. Describe the circumstances which led to your child's exclusion?
3. What was your experience like working with your child's mainstream school during the process of exclusion? And with the local authority?
    a. How involved were you with the school(s)?
        i. Parents' evenings/fêtes/forums/governing bodies
        ii. What was communication like? How were you kept informed of your child's progress – reports, assessments, progress, behaviour?
    b. How were your relations with teachers?
    c. Was there a difference between primary and mainstream?
    d. How confident have you felt about approaching the schools over matters that have concerned you about your child's progress?
4. I'd like to talk a little about your own experiences of education and how this may have shaped your views about the education of your child.
5. How extensive is your support network – family/friends etc? (social and cultural capital) (P15-16 Feiler, 2010)
6. What were your views about your child attending a PRU? And now?
7. What does your child tell you about the PRU? How do you feel about this?
8. What do you feel are the strengths of the PRU, and the weaknesses?

I will want to touch on the themes above within this part of the discussion

Relationships
Teaching and learning
Behaviour
Expectations
Preparedness for employment/post-16 education/wider society

9. What would it look like for your child to be successful? What needs to happen to achieve this and what are the obstacles? What do you expect your child to achieve, both in school (PRU) and after – mainstream/college/employment etc?

10. What do you feel the PRU can do to support you and your child through the remainder of their education?

The interviews with professional agency workers and the staff forum will follow these interviews and the aim is to dip into their views against the same set of themes.

Appendix 5 Indicative questions for the interviews with professional agency workers Version 2

1. How would you describe your experiences working with the families of those pupils who come to your attention and who attend the PRU?
2. What, from your perspective, leads to these families finding themselves in the predicament where they have a child referred to a PRU because of exclusion?
3. Many of these families might be described as hard to reach? What is your view on this? (How might they be reached?)(P16 Feiler, 2010)
4. What are the aims of the work you do with the pupils and the families?

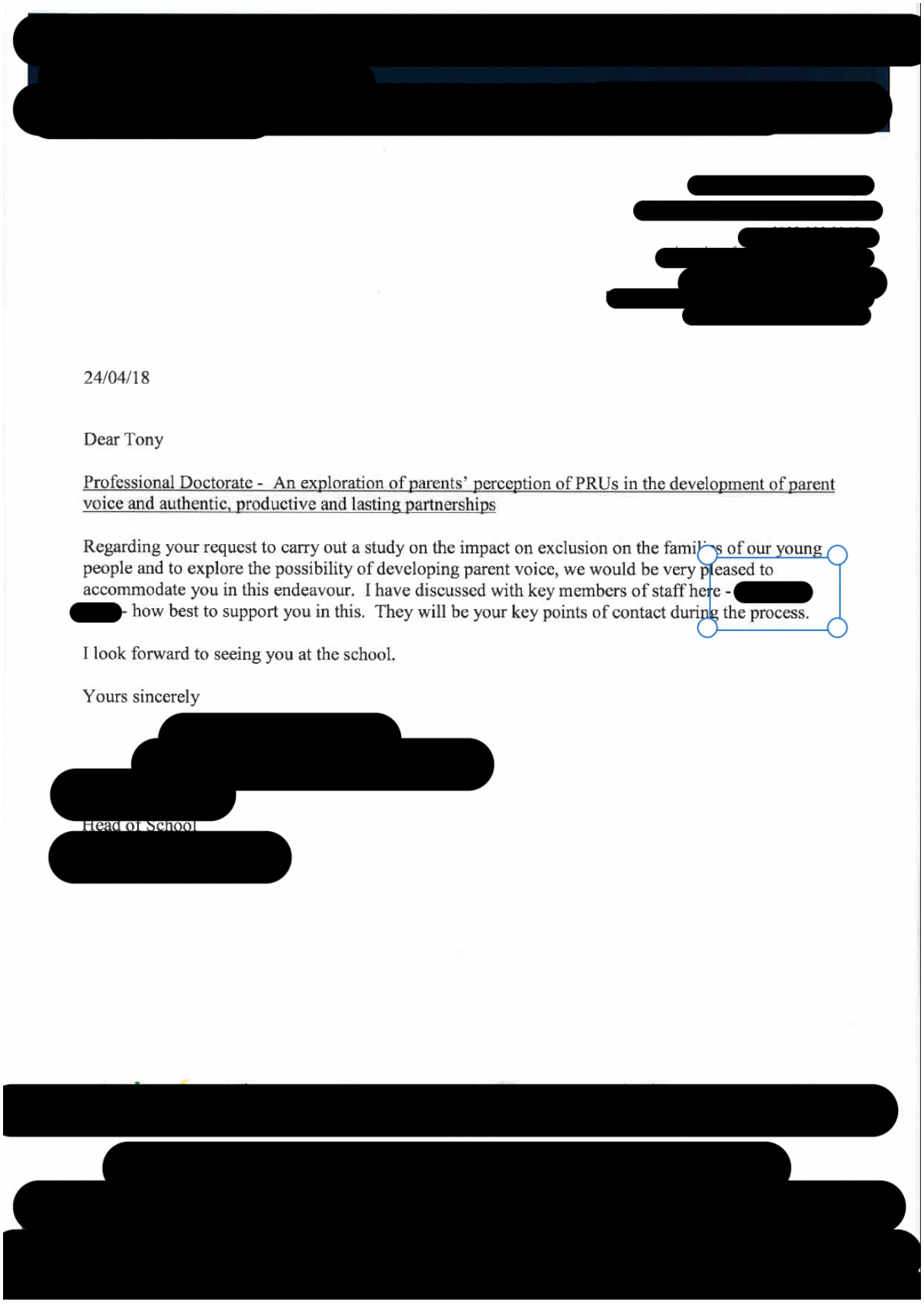
5. You have been working with some of the PRU's pupils for XX years now, what is your overall perception of how the PRU operates?

6. How would you describe the work done there?
7. How has this perception changed, if at all?
8. What explains this change of view? (if any)
9. How might services cooperate better together to ensure these pupils are successful?
10. What in your view does success look like for these pupils and their families?
11. What else can be done to shift parents'/carers' perceptions more quickly?

Appendix 6 Indicative questions for the staff focus group Version 3

1. From experience parents have a negative conception of PRUs and how they work? Why is this?
2. Is this view justified?
3. What impact does this have on the work you do with these pupils?
4. As staff members, both teaching and support, in a PRU, what are your main priorities for the pupils you serve?
5. Describe how pupils' experiences and expectations of them are different here to mainstream school? Why is this the case?
6. Many of the parents here would be described by mainstream schools as hard to reach. (Feiler P37, 2010) Is this an issue to be addressed here at the PRU? Is this a priority?
7. How successful is the PRU in supporting parents whose children have been referred to the PRU?
8. What do you do to support them?
9. What do parents think about their children being referred to a PRU? What is your response to this?
10. How do their views change over time? Why is this? What changes their views?
11. What else can be done to shift parents'/carers' perceptions more quickly?
12. Who else needs to be involved?

Appendix 7 Permission to interview Head of Trenbridge



[redacted]

[redacted]

24/04/18

Dear Tony

Professional Doctorate - An exploration of parents' perception of PRUs in the development of parent voice and authentic, productive and lasting partnerships

Regarding your request to carry out a study on the impact on exclusion on the fami[redacted]s of our young people and to explore the possibility of developing parent voice, we would be very pleased to accommodate you in this endeavour. I have discussed with key members of staff here - [redacted] - how best to support you in this. They will be your key points of contact during the process.

I look forward to seeing you at the school.

Yours sincerely

[redacted]

Head of School

[redacted]

Appendix 8 Agreement from Head of YOS to be interviewed

[redacted]
Subject: RE: Research
Date: 1 December 2017 at 12:28:27 GMT
To: Tony Meehan[redacted]

Dear Tony,

I am sorry to hear that you are leaving but delighted for you that you are moving on to something so interesting. I'm also sorry it has taken me so long to get back to you but I must admit, it has felt particularly busy and chaotic recently, in no small part due to the YOT transformation starting to take its effect. I shall be happy to meet with you/to be interviewed and I can raise this at next week's team meeting to see if there are colleagues who are also happy to be interviewed.

The next two weeks continue to look a bit hectic and I am out of the office on a few days with Court, training and leave but the week before Christmas looks a little calmer. Alternatively, I would be happy to arrange a time after the new year so do just let me know which date and time suits you.

In the meantime, I hope you are keeping well?

With best wishes

[redacted]

From: Tony Meehan[redacted]
Sent: 12 November 2017 16:44
[redacted]
Cc: Meehan, Tony:[redacted]
Subject: Research

Dear[redacted]

Appendix 9 Agreement from Director of Family Services to be interviewed

[redacted]

Children's Services
[redacted]
[redacted] Executive Director of Children's Services
[redacted]
Director of Family Services
[redacted]

[redacted]

Dear Tony,

Further to our email correspondence, I formally agree to participation in your research into *The Impact of Exclusion on Learners and their Families.*

I am happy to be interviewed, and refer you to [redacted] date.

Thank you for considering my involvement in this important piece of research as being beneficial and I look forward to taking part.

Yours sincerely

[redacted]

[redacted]
Director for Family Services

[redacted]
Web: [redacted]

Appendix 10 Participant Information Sheet

Date: 5th August 2020 Version: 1e
(Parent/carer)

Study title**:** An exploration of parents'/carers' perception of PRUs in the development of parent voice and authentic, productive and lasting partnerships

Invitation paragraph

I am inviting you to take part in a research study. Before you decide, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask me if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time over your decision about taking part or not in the research.

Thank you for reading this.

What is the purpose of the study?

This study proposes an exploration of the experiences of parents/carers whose children are pupils at a Pupil Referral Unit (PRU) through permanent exclusion from mainstream school, or transfer to a PRU by managed move. I wish to hear about your experiences within the education system; your relationships with your child's primary and secondary mainstream schools; your own experiences of education; and explore the circumstances which has led to your child's attending a PRU; how this has affected you as parent/carer; and what you believe this will mean for the future prospects of your child. In doing this I wish also to explore your perceptions of PRUs, how these perceptions may affect the progress of children referred to PRUs.

Exclusion from school often leaves parents/carers with a sense of dislocation as they deal with an education system they struggle to understand, as they go through a process of appeals and a search for an alternative placement. The prospect of their child having to attend a PRU is not something they readily accept. This often leads them not to accept PRUs as "real schools", leading to an initial unwillingness to develop a proper relationship with the PRU; their main aim is to have their child returned to a normal, i.e. mainstream, school. In taking this view, they often overlook the positive

aspects of their new provision such as the curriculum offer and teaching expertise provided by good and outstanding PRUs, in addition to the very comprehensive range of support measures they would not have access to in mainstream schools. In exploring these perceptions with you I want to see if the perception of PRUs might be altered so that any perceived stigma of exclusion is quickly overcome, and that parents/carers might quickly come to view their child's new school, the PRU, with a sense of optimism from the outset.

The study will last for between one year and two years.

Why have I been chosen?

I am asking you to participate in this research as you are a parent/carer whose child has been a pupil in the PRU for six months or more and with whom a good working relationship has developed. Your child engages or has engaged in the last year with at least one other professional agency.

Do I have to take part?

It is up to you to decide to take part or not. If you do decide to take part you will be given this information sheet to keep and be asked to sign a consent form. If you decide to take part you are still free to withdraw at any time and without giving a reason. Data from interviews in which you participate will be removed from the research up to one month from the date of data collection; this will be one month from the date of the interview. After this time, the data will have been amalgamated into the wider research and can no longer be removed. A decision to take part or not to take part will not affect your child's education in any way.

What will happen to me if I take part?

Your involvement as a **parent/carer** in the research will take the form of one interview of approximately 60 minutes in duration with possible follow-up calls for clarification and this will finish by 1st September 2020.

This interview will take place at a time and location suitable to you, either face to face, by phone or via video-conferencing platform, e.g. Zoom.

There will then follow a period of analysing and writing up of the data which I believe will take the whole process up until July 2021.

The research method will take the form of semi structured interviews designed to explore the following themes:

Relationships
Teaching and learning
Behaviour
Expectations
Preparedness for employment/post-16 education
while allowing scope for other themes that may emerge during the interviews.

What do I have to do?

Parents/carers will be asked to take part in interviews of up to one hour to explore these themes. The interviews will be audio-recorded and transcribed to allow for analysis. The recordings will be stored in a locked cabinet until analysis is complete and will then be securely destroyed.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?

There is no known risk in participating in this project, although you may consider the time to give up for the research a disadvantage.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

I hope that participating in the study will help you. However, this cannot be guaranteed. The information I hope to get from this study may help PRUs to develop a better working relationship with parents/carers of pupils who have been referred to PRUs and help support them to secure a better understanding of the education system.

Will my taking part in this study be kept confidential?

Any information about you and your child which is used will have your and your child's name and address and other personal details removed so that you cannot be recognised from it. All information that is collected about you during the course of the research will be kept strictly confidential. The

exception to this is where information may come to light in the course of the research where a person may be at risk of serious harm.

All data will be stored, analysed and reported in compliance with the Data Protection Legislation of the UK.

The University has a Safeguarding policy and the research team are guided by professional codes of conduct which require us to report any information where a person may be at risk of serious harm. We will always endeavour to discuss this with you first.

What will happen to the results of the research study?

This research will be published as part of a postgraduate dissertation. Results are likely to be published in December 2021 and participants will be sent a summary of the findings. Participants can contact me should they require a copy of the dissertation. You will not be identified in any report/publication.

Who has reviewed the study?

This study has been reviewed by the Middlesex University, Faculty of Health, Social Care and Education Ethics Sub-committee

Contact for further information
Tony Meehan (researcher)
Email address:

Supervisors (Middlesex University)

FG17 Fenella HEN	TG69 Town Hall Annexe HEN
Middlesex University Hendon campus	Middlesex University Hendon campus
The Burroughs	The Burroughs
London	London
NW4 4BT	NW4 2BT

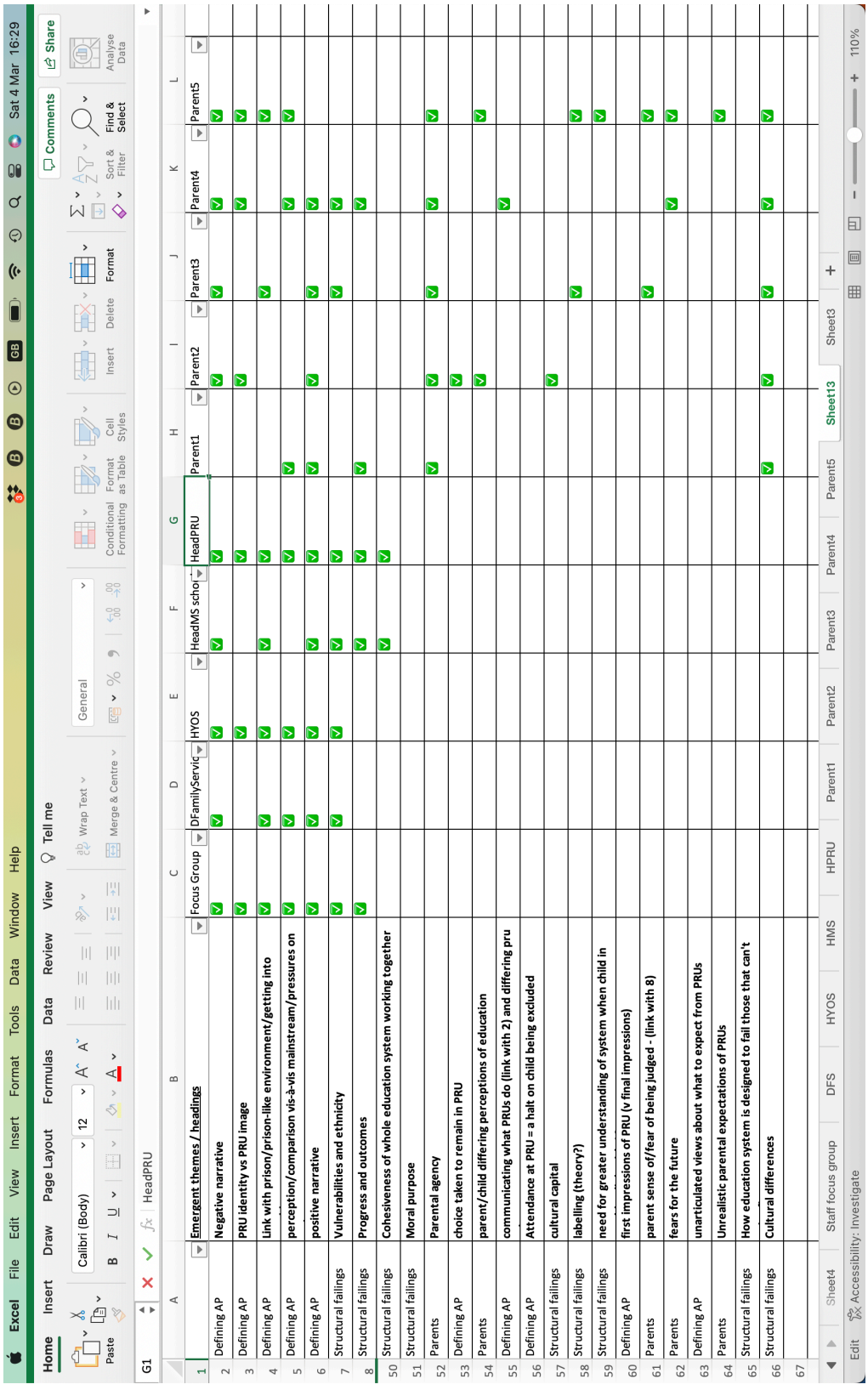
What to do next

If you are willing to participate in the research please complete the consent form which is enclosed also and return to me either in person or in the enclosed stamped, addressed envelope.

Thank you for taking the time to read through this Personal Information Sheet (PIS).

You will be given a copy of this information sheet and a signed consent form to keep.

Appendix 11 Coding Spreadsheet



	Emergent themes / headings	Focus Group	DFamilyServic	HYOS	HeadMS schoo	HeadPRU	Parent1	Parent2	Parent3	Parent4	Parent5
Defining AP	Negative narrative	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
Defining AP	PRU identity vs PRU image	✓		✓		✓		✓		✓	✓
Defining AP	Link with prison/prison-like environment/getting into	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓		✓
Defining AP	perception/comparison vis-à-vis mainstream/pressures on	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓			✓	✓
Defining AP	positive narrative	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Structural failings	Vulnerabilities and ethnicity	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	
Structural failings	Progress and outcomes	✓			✓	✓	✓			✓	
Structural failings	Cohesiveness of whole education system working together				✓	✓					
Structural failings	Moral purpose										
Parents	Parental agency						✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Defining AP	choice taken to remain in PRU							✓			
Parents	parent/child differing perceptions of education							✓			✓
Defining AP	communicating what PRUs do (link with 2) and differing pru									✓	
Defining AP	Attendance at PRU = a halt on child being excluded										
Structural failings	cultural capital							✓			
Structural failings	labelling (theory?)								✓		✓
Structural failings	need for greater understanding of system when child in										✓
Defining AP	first impressions of PRU (v final impressions)										
Parents	parent sense of/fear of being judged - (link with 8)								✓		✓
Parents	fears for the future									✓	✓
Defining AP	unarticulated views about what to expect from PRUs										
Parents	Unrealistic parental expectations of PRUs										✓
Structural failings	How education system is designed to fail those that can't										
Structural failings	Cultural differences						✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Appendix 12 Thematic Analysis: Phase 3 Searching for themes