# The politics of school-based psychotherapy

Health Education and Behaviour Change (HEBC)

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# Referral

A fourteen-year-old boy named **Josh** is referred to you by the pastoral worker because he has been punching other children and becoming angry and violent towards staff members. Josh is 14 and lives with his sister Ruby (9) and mother Danielle after social workers removed him and his sister from their father due to heavy drug use and neglect. Josh is described as unable to follow instructions and a "nightmare" to work with in class. He has few friends and requires constant supervision, and the school would like you to help him behave more appropriately in class.

What considerations do you have before arranging to meet with Josh?

2

**Please add comments:** what considerations do we have about the referral?

3

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"Many times therapy cannot begin because the clinician becomes immobilised by issues stemming from the referral" (Bergman 1985, p.30)

Issues to Consider:

- Referrer Definition of Problem
- Family or Contextual Issues
- Safeguarding
- Learning Needs
- Who wants the treatment?
- Is the school not meeting certain needs?
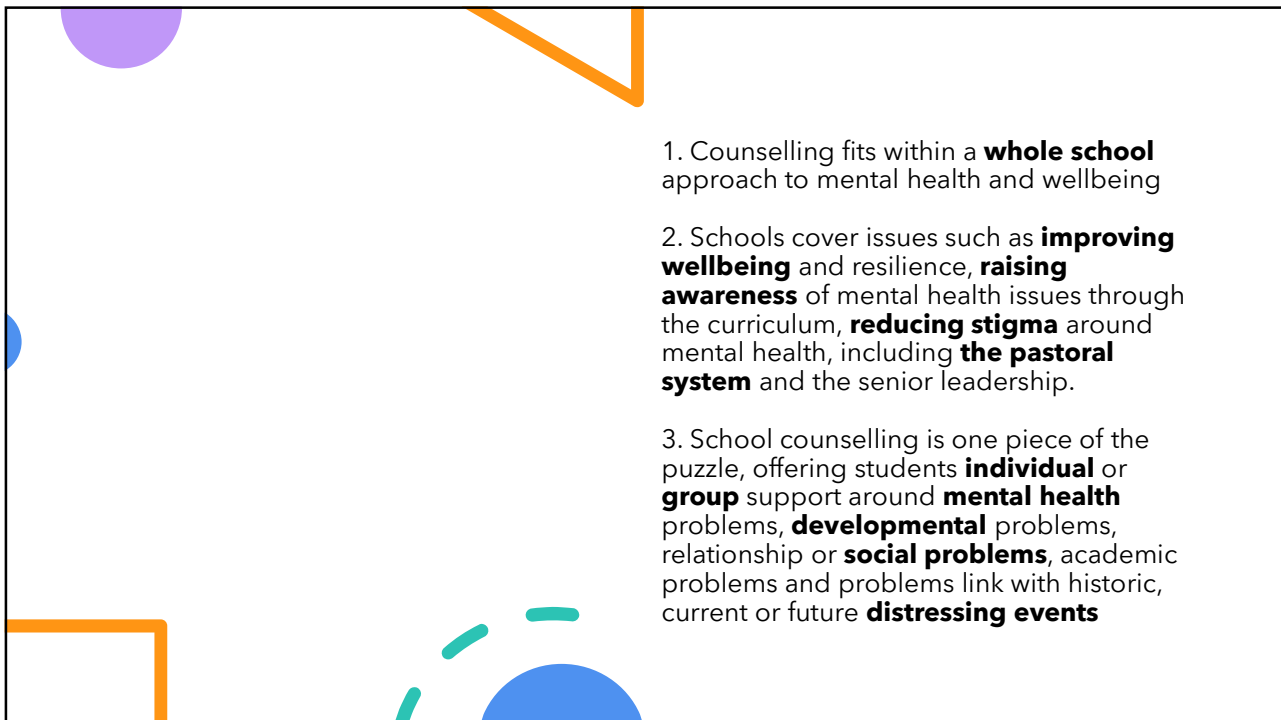- What's your initial formulation?
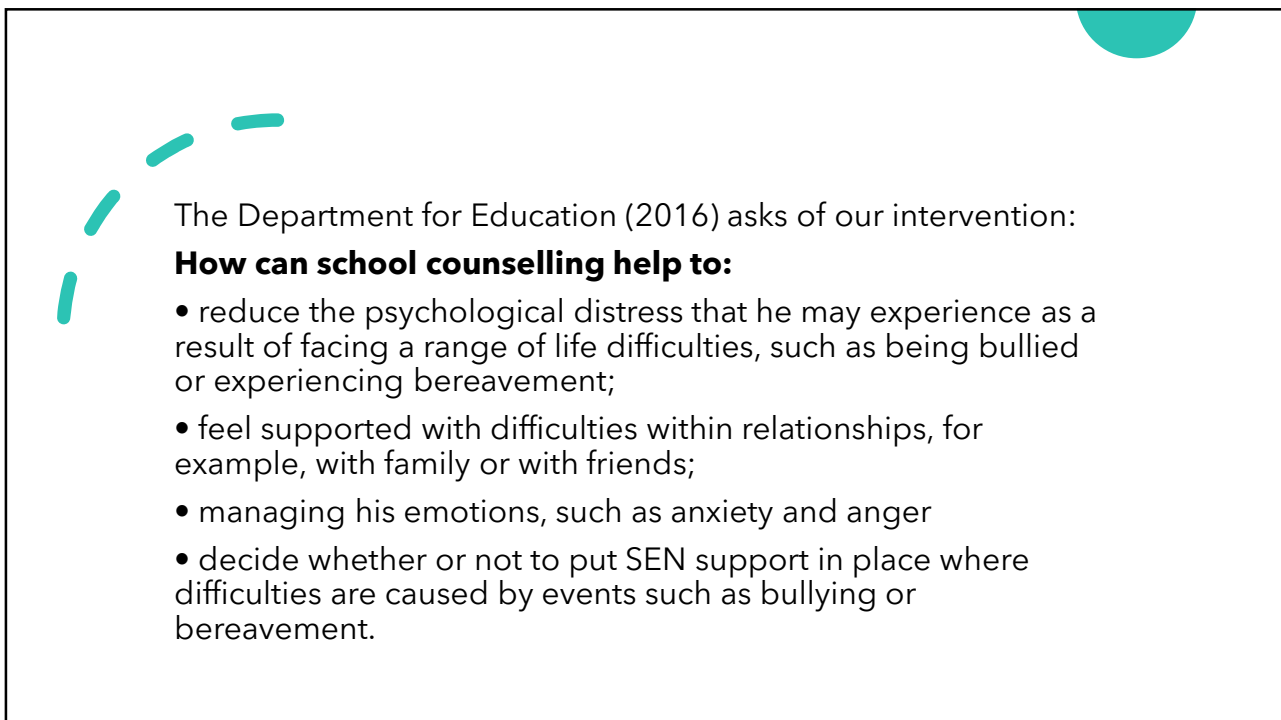
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**Why have counsellors in schools?**

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**Please add comments:** how can school counselling be helpful for Chloe?

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1. Counselling fits within a **whole school** approach to mental health and wellbeing

2. Schools cover issues such as **improving wellbeing** and resilience, **raising awareness** of mental health issues through the curriculum, **reducing stigma** around mental health, including **the pastoral system** and the senior leadership.

3. School counselling is one piece of the puzzle, offering students **individual** or **group** support around **mental health** problems, **developmental** problems, relationship or **social problems**, academic problems and problems link with historic, current or future **distressing events**

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The Department for Education (2016) asks of our intervention:

**How can school counselling help to:**

• reduce the psychological distress that he may experience as a result of facing a range of life difficulties, such as being bullied or experiencing bereavement;

• feel supported with difficulties within relationships, for example, with family or with friends;

• managing his emotions, such as anxiety and anger

• decide whether or not to put SEN support in place where difficulties are caused by events such as bullying or bereavement.
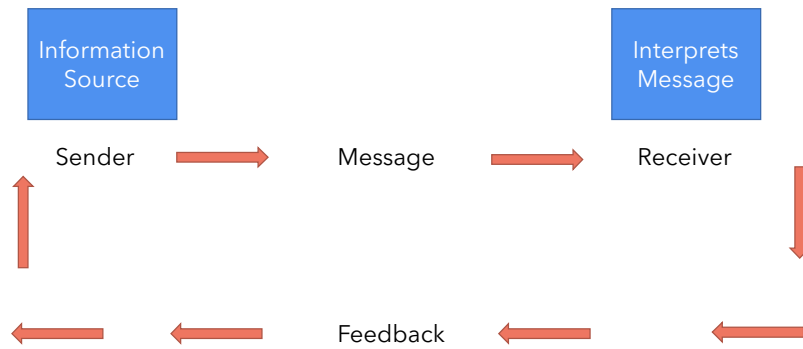
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**All behaviour is communication and we can use the invitation in the child's behaviour to understand the difficulty**

9

**Please add comments: what is Josh's behaviour communicating?**

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# Communication Theory (Shannon and Weaver, 1998)

| Information Source | | Interprets Message |
|---|---|---|
| Sender → | Message → | Receiver |

Feedback

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# Communication Theory (Shannon and Weaver, 1998)

| Information Source | | Interprets Message |
|---|---|---|
| Teacher → | Message → | Receiver |

Feedback

12

# Communication Theory (Shannon and Weaver, 1998)

| Information Source | | Interprets Message |
|---|---|---|
| Teacher → | "Take your coat off" → | Receiver ↓ |
| ← ← | Feedback ← | ← |

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# Communication Theory (Shannon and Weaver, 1998)

| Information Source | | Interprets Message |
|---|---|---|
| Teacher → | "Take your coat off" → | Josh ↓ |
| ← ← | Feedback ← | ← |

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# Communication Theory (Shannon and Weaver, 1998)

| Authority Figure | | Treating me unfairly |
|---|---|---|
| Teacher → | "Take your coat off" → | Josh |
| ← ← | Feedback ← | ← |

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# Communication Theory (Shannon and Weaver, 1998)

| Authority Figure | | Treating me unfairly |
|---|---|---|
| Teacher → | "Take your coat off" → | Josh |
| ← ← | "F##K Off" ← | ← |

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# Communication Theory (Shannon and Weaver, 1998)

| Authority Figure | | Respect |
|---|---|---|

Teacher → "Take your coat off" → Chloe

↑ ← ← "Absolutely, sir!" ← ←

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# Communication Theory (Shannon and Weaver, 1998)

| Information Source | | Interprets Message |
|---|---|---|

Sender → Message → Receiver

↑ ← ← Feedback ← ←
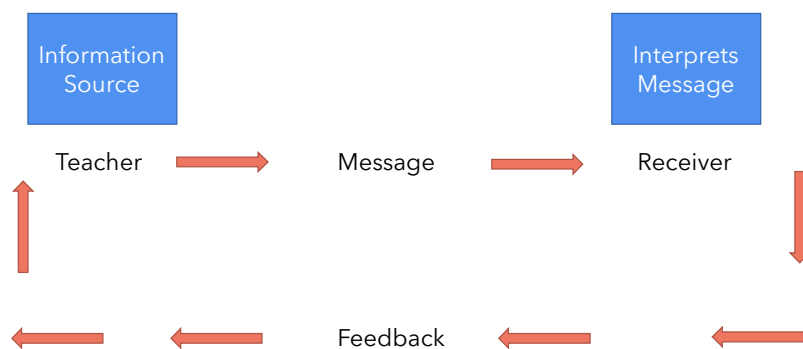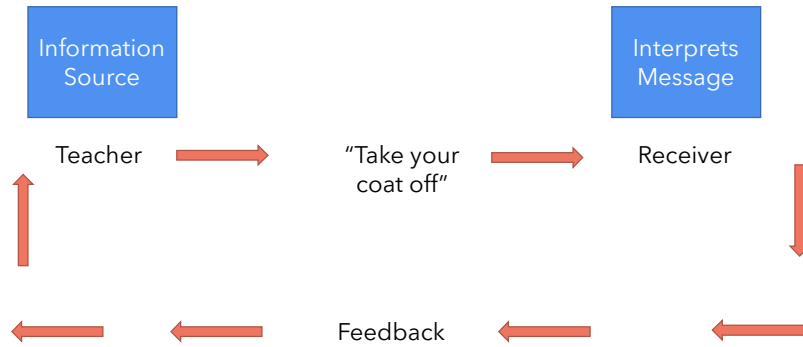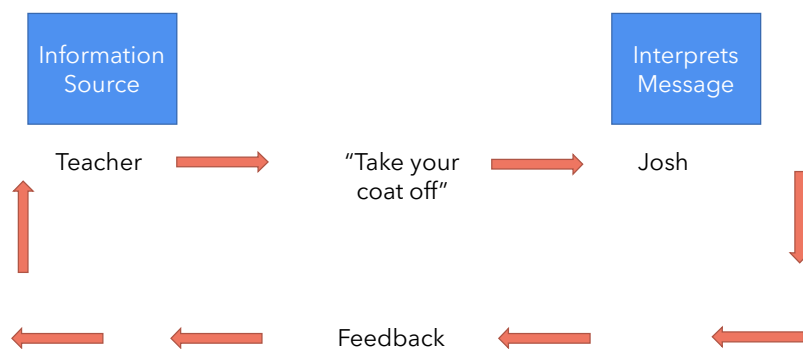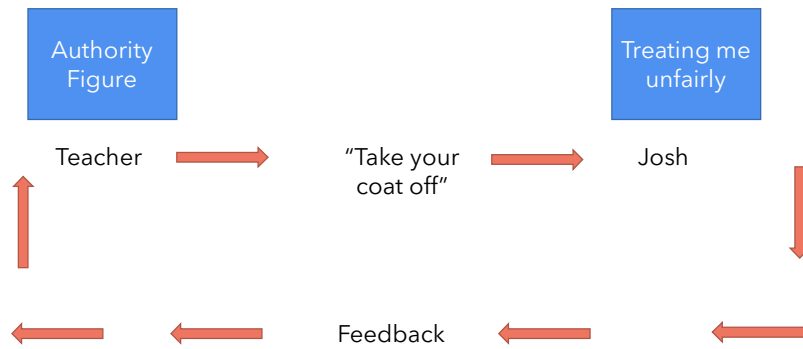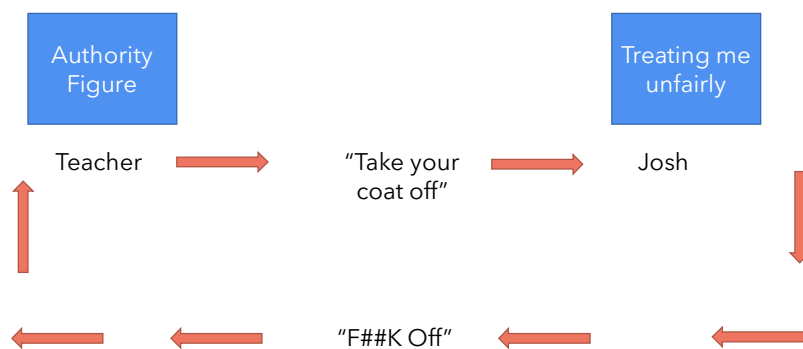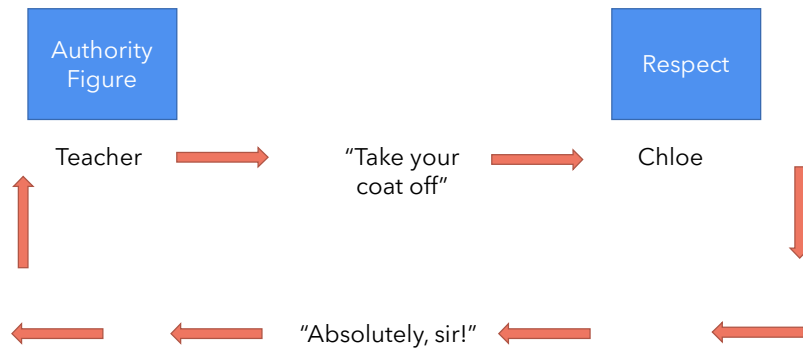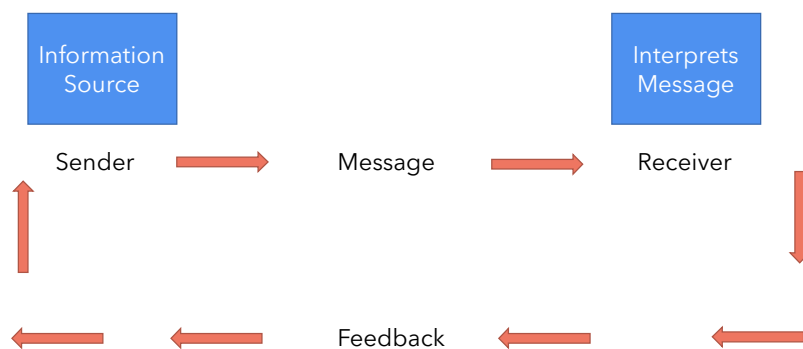
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## Factors in Exclusion

Social factors such as **race** and **poverty**, as well as genetic factors such as **learning** and **physical disabilities**, significantly influence the likelihood of a child receiving a permanent exclusion (Majors et al., 1998; Osler and Hill, 1999; Osler et al. 2001, ONS, 2019).

Boys are three times more likely to be permanently excluded, poor children are four times more likely to be excluded, black Caribbean children are five times more likely to be excluded and SEN children are 7 times more likely to be excluded (ONS, 2019; Cole, 2015).

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## Identity is Multi-Layered

The effect of **gendered** positioning in UK education is that English males are limited to expressing a narrow range of emotions (Fox, 2004, p.243). Negative social feedback inhibits males from expressing emotions that arise out of struggles within the school, such as academic demands and social relationships (Harré & Langenhove, 1999, Fox 2004, Cole 2015, Stein et al. 1990).

English males have **lower emotional vocabulary**, have **higher stigma** against accessing mental health support, and compared with English females, are **three times more likely** to commit suicide (Simms, 2018; Mental Health Analysis Team 2020).

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## Identity is Multi-Layered

Constructions such as race are multifaceted in the sense that Black African boys are excluded less than average, suggesting that the poverty that Black Caribbean boys are exposed to, coupled with the historical relationship between Britain and the Caribbean, should be understood as social layers to the exclusion. Additionally, black British males, are more likely to receive mental health support through the judicial system than through the national health service (Keating, 2009).

There is a connection between the lower emotional vocabulary of boys and the gendered disproportionality of school exclusions (Parker and Ford 2013, Cole 2015). This is because exclusion is mostly attributed to the behaviour of an individual student and the school does not see its role in the dysregulation of the student, nor are cultural factors considered (Parker and Ford 2013).

From a systemic analysis, exclusion is a broader societal issue and can be evaluated as a mental-health problem (Gergen and Gill, 2020). That is, the cultural practice of school exclusion is an action of silencing the social injustices that disadvantaged children express through behaviour (Liddon et al. 2017, Parker and Ford 2013, Cole 2015).

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## What is a PRU?

A PRU is a type of school established and maintained by a local authority to provide suitable education for children and young people who, by reason of physical or mental illness (e.g. an anxiety disorder) but mostly by exclusion, do not receive such education (section 19 of the Education Act 1996).

PRU entry requirements can be linked to age group (e.g 5-11), year group (e.g. year 10-11) location, and need (e.g. behavioural, therapeutic, or learning needs). Certain PRUs, usually in bigger localities, are managed by the same head teacher and board of governors.

Some PRUs are short-term (e.g. mostly reintegration following 4 week exclusions) and some are long-term (e.g. expected to educate children for the whole of secondary school).

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# Headline facts and figures - 2019/20 (UK Government, 2020)

Summary

**Permanent exclusions (rate)**
## 0.06
Down from 0.10 in 2018/19

▶ What is permanent exclusion rate?

**Permanent exclusions**
## 5,057
Decrease from 7,894 in 2018/19

▶ What is this?

**Suspension (rate)**
## 3.76
Decrease from 5.36 in 2018/19

▶ What is the suspension rate?

**Suspensions**
## 310,733
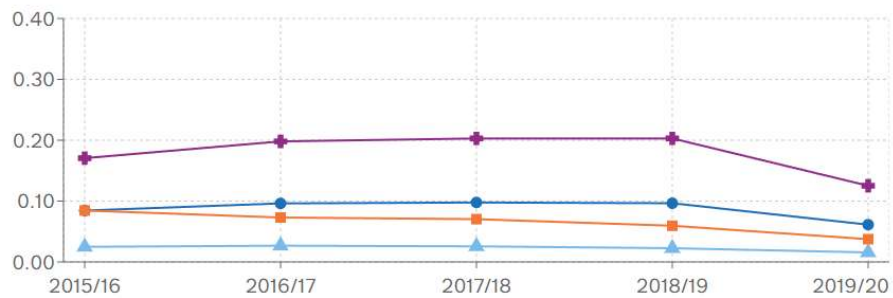Decrease from 438,265 in 2018/19

▶ What is this?

**Headline fact and figures from the 2019/20 academic year**

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Permanent exclusion rates, by school type, National, 2015/16 to 2019/20



● Permanent exclusions (rate) (England)
▲ Permanent exclusions (rate) (state-funded primary, England)
✚ Permanent exclusions (rate) (state-funded secondary, England)
■ Permanent exclusions (rate) (special, England)

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**Permanent exclusion by reason - 14/15 to 19/20 - National**

|  | 2014/15 | 2015/16 | 2016/17 | 2017/18 | 2018/19 | 2019/20 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Permanent - All exclusions** | 5,795 | 6,682 | 7,719 | 7,905 | 7,894 | 5,057 |
| **Permanent - Bullying** | 27 | 42 | 25 | 32 | 30 | 18 |
| **Permanent - Damage** | 59 | 88 | 95 | 77 | 68 | 65 |
| **Permanent - Drug and alcohol related** | 486 | 525 | 567 | 643 | 688 | 513 |
| **Permanent - Other** | 978 | 1,123 | 1,355 | 1,442 | 1,371 | 794 |
| **Permanent - Persistent disruptive behaviour** | 1,899 | 2,312 | 2,754 | 2,686 | 2,781 | 1,744 |
| **Permanent - Physical assault against a pupil** | 784 | 824 | 1,025 | 1,037 | 1,050 | 639 |
| **Permanent - Physical assault against an adult** | 609 | 729 | 745 | 845 | 817 | 632 |

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**My study:** **I wanted to find out if children and young people connected social injustice to their exclusion**

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## Social Layers are Hidden from the Child's Experience of Exclusion

6   R. MURPHY

**Table 2.** Themes from the experiences of excluded children.

| Theme | Subtheme | Description |
|---|---|---|
| Personal Problems | (a) Special Education Needs<br>(b) Child Abuse<br>(c) Bullying | Children reported multiple personal problems that were signalling distress in school. |
| The School's Response | (a) Misinterpreting the problem<br>(b) Lack of Empathy<br>(c) Lack of Quality Support | Children reported multiple responses to their personal problems that amplified the difficulties. |
| The Impact of the Exclusion | (a) Managing the Exclusion<br>(b) Social Isolation, Mental Health and Academic Performance | Children reported issues with how the exclusion experience impacted their personal, social, emotional and educational wellbeing. |

Taken from Murphy, R. (2021). How children make sense of their permanent exclusion: a thematic analysis from semi-structured interviews, Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties, DOI: 10.1080/13632752.2021.2012962. Click here to read.

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The abuse had a significant impact on the students' emotional wellbeing and engagement with school. Elijah (14) said, 'As soon as I got to school, I got excluded after three hours for getting into a fight'. It was clear from the interviews that the students did not always link their abuse to their angry or violent behaviour, 'I kept getting angry, and getting into fights, but I didn't know why': this statement was also taken from Elijah, a 14-year-old boy who was in foster care, and he was repeatedly abused in his family home. Violence or externalising behaviours, which are outward behaviours that express inner feelings, are instrumental in communication issues with domestic abuse victims (Parker et al. 2016). One student, Ella, a 16-year-old victim of domestic abuse, began to

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special educational needs. Commonly, those with a learning difficulty interpreted the school as boring rather than challenging, 'I got bored, I started to mess about and argue with the teacher' (Jack, 14). This indicates that the disability was not experienced as the central concern, the problem was experienced within the teaching rather than their ability to learn (Clegg et al. 2009). This is significant because the record shows that the individual child is named as responsible for the exclusion (Office for National Statistics 2019), yet many with a diagnosed learning disability made the connection between the behaviour they showed and the school's lack of sensitivity towards their needs: 'School was rubbish. There was too much work and I stopped going in as it was difficult' (Jess, 14). This shows the circularity involved in how some children make sense of their exclusion, in t... the school is factored into or even thought of as the cause of their exclusion.

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# Systemic Psychotherapist: Conny Kerman



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### Theme 2. The school's response

A key finding in this study was that most students labelled responses from schools as negative turning points in their permanent exclusion. It is possible that interviews consisted of higher proportions of schools that 'got it wrong', and as such schools may be better at responding to student needs generally, but what is clear from this research is that permanently excluded students experience inadequate support from mainstream schools once a problem is identified.

### Misinterpreting the problem

The first common issue that most students experienced was that schools misinterpreted the signs of abuse, ill-mental-health, learning difficulties and bullying. 'They thought I was trying to show off. My head of year told me I was trying to show off.' 'The teacher blamed me and didn't listen.' 'My teacher didn't understand there was a deeper problem. He kept me in classes with the people who bullied me. When I got angry, I got put in isolation.' These are all quotes from Jess, Abi and Keira who were victims of bullying around the time of their exclusion.

Teachers tended to view the emotional effects of abuse and family problems as intrinsic to the child and not a way of coping: 'They saw anger not frustration' (Becky, 13). 'I got labelled as a bad kid' (Oliver, 15). 'I got into trouble but didn't get help' (Abi, 8). Most students reported that teachers did not notice their problem
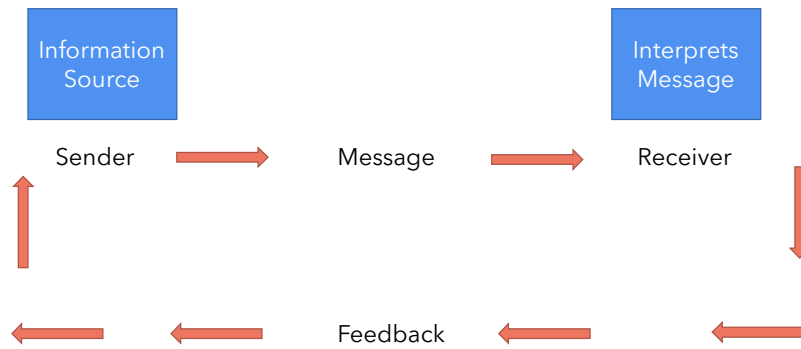
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school'. Jess (14) said that she is angrier after her exclusion because now 'everyone makes a big issue and says I've got problems.' Becky (13) went on to say that, 'Being around PRU people made me worse, your behaviour gets worse.' Libby, also 13, said, 'it's a big deal ... I have more anger and get into more fights with family and friends'. No boys reported increased mental health concerns, which may indicate that exclusions negatively impact girls more than boys. Equally, this could indicate that girls are more reflective or attuned to their mental health or that boys hide or do not recognise this impact (Cole 2015; Parker and Ford 2013).

# The Impact of Exclusion

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# Communication Theory (Shannon and Weaver, 1998)

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    ┌──────────────┐                           ┌──────────────┐
    │ Information  │                           │  Interprets  │
    │   Source     │                           │   Message    │
    └──────────────┘                           └──────────────┘

      Sender    ──────▶    Message    ──────▶    Receiver
         ▲                                            │
         │                                            ▼
         ◀──────  ◀──────   Feedback   ◀──────  ◀──────
```

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# Mental Health and Exclusion Behaviours

Researchers have made an important step in conceptualising school exclusion as a **mental health problem** by linking exclusion data with mental health research (Bannerjee, 2010; Beecham et al., 2011; Parker and Ford, 2013; Cole, 2015).

That is, most children are excluded for persistent disruptive, aggressive, and dysregulated behaviour (ONS, 2019), and each of these behaviours is shown to indicate a mental health problem in young people (Parker and Ford, 2013).

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## Social Layers are Hidden from the Child's Experience of Exclusion

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### Discussion

The findings in this study show that children experience exclusion through the lens of multiple personal problems such as abuse, bullying, mental health difficulties, and special educational needs. Children storied exclusions as occurring when schools misinterpret signs of personal problems as misbehaviour and disruptiveness, leading to punitive educational practices that escalate smaller problems into significant and persistent disruptive behaviours. This paper has theorised that schools non-consciously support the national government to maintain symbolic power by removing social disadvantage from reports on exclusions, and, one effect of this, is that students appear to lack an insight into the link between their disruptive behaviour and their social disadvantages.

The hidden aspect of power and influence that social contexts have over children mean that excluded children are not aware of how structural problems such as institutional racism, ableism, and classism feed into the behaviours they exhibit. In this study, for example, none of the children mentioned poverty or disability discrimination though the majority of the children were below the

(Murphy, 2021)

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# Recommendations for working in PRUs

- Hold in mind the children's themes: bullying, abuse, school inequality/lack of empathy, the impact of exclusion
- Hold in mind the research themes: disability, racism, poverty, gender, class (Cole, 2015)
- Engage with children to off-balance power, authority and pressure in the session e.g. Significantly "warm the context" (Burnham, 2005)
- Remember, the social disadvantage in the room will test your relationship skills (Murphy, 2021)
- Problem behaviours are communications and can be outmanoeuvred when **meaning** is explored
- Offer different forms of regulatory activity
- Work within the school system, and avoid aligning with the school or the young person – communication can force us to take sides

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# Communication Theory (Shannon and Weaver, 1998)



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Information Source

Interprets Message

Sender → Message → Receiver

Feedback
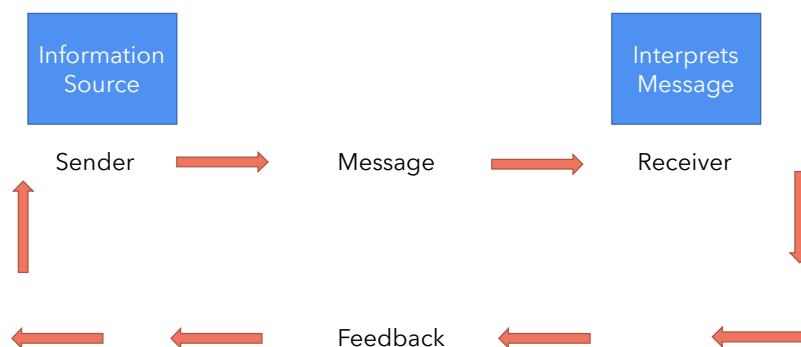
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