‘We're finding ways to include everybody. Even if they sit badly on our data’: Insights into a School’s Non-Exclusion Approach

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I declare that the research contained herein was granted approval by the SPAIS Ethics Committee.

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Introduction

Rates of school exclusions have gradually increased over the past 10 years and are currently at their highest levels, with secondary schools seeing a 42% increase in permanent exclusions from 2021/22 to 2023/2024 (DfE 2024a). Whilst these statistics demonstrate the increasing prevalence of exclusion, they do not reflect the scale and extent of the issue. Pressures on schools to reduce official levels of exclusion have led to a rise in internal or 'hidden' exclusions, meaning official statistics are likely an underestimation (McCluskey 2008; Power and Taylor 2018). Although school exclusion exists on a continuum, ranging from detentions and internal exclusions to fixed and permanent exclusions (Gill et al. 2024), this paper focuses primarily on the latter forms of exclusion. Official school exclusions refer to the removal of a child from school, on either a fixed-term or permanent basis (DofE 2024b). Exclusions are disproportionately experienced by disadvantaged groups and those who have been excluded face negative long-term impacts, creating a cycle of disadvantage (Gill et al. 2024). It is therefore a social justice issue which must be considered sociologically and understood in relation to wider social structures.

Indeed, sociological literature has extensively criticised exclusions within education for placing blame on the child and perpetuating inequalities, rather than looking at the social and environmental barriers a child may be facing (Munn et al. 2001). It is widely agreed there is a need for inclusion, but how this might be achieved is debated (Lalvani 2012). A growing number of sociological studies have looked at the different ways schools have attempted to reduce levels of exclusion (Preece and Timmins 2004; Greenstein 2013). This research seeks to build on existing literature by focusing on a school with a non-exclusion approach supported by an onsite alternative provision (AP) and aims address the following research questions: a) how do school practices, understandings and ethos underpin a non-exclusion approach? and b) what are the challenges, benefits and outcomes of a non-exclusion approach?

The first section of this paper discusses key issues and debates within existing literature in relation to the social context of school exclusions, differing approaches to behaviour, and debates around the use of AP. This section concludes the need for this research project which uses a socioecological analytical framework to understand a non-exclusion approach. This framework allows for the analysis of wider social systems in relation to the school's approach and how these systems interact. The following section outlines the methodological

approach and discusses the rationale for the use of semi-structured interviews with senior leaders and members of staff at the school. This section also involves a discussion of ethical considerations, in particular regarding the importance of anonymity for this research. The discussion and analysis section presents the key themes identified using thematic analysis, the first being the school's approach in relation to connections between socioecological levels, and the second being the challenges of non-exclusion in relation to disconnections across socioecological levels. Finally, the conclusion discusses the implications of this research, questions raised by the findings, and areas which could be developed by future research.

Literature Review

Overall, this review highlights the need for further research into the relationship between school ethos and practices, the use of AP to support non-exclusion, and the benefits and challenges of a non-exclusion approach.

Social Context and Issues

As mentioned in the introduction, rates of school exclusions are higher than ever. The prevalence of this issue is concerning given that extensive literature has demonstrated that children who experience exclusion face negative long-term consequences, including increased risk of custodial sentences, involvement in crime, unemployment and social exclusion (Gill et al. 2024; Valdebenito et al. 2018).

Additionally, previous literature has demonstrated that school exclusions reflect and reproduce wider social and economic disadvantage (Murphy 2021; Cassen and Kingdon 2007; Parsons 2005). Exclusion is disproportionately experienced by students from low-income backgrounds, with special educational needs, mental health issues, those who experience racism, are in contact with social services, and on child protection plans (DfE 2024a; Gill et al. 2024). Given that '[s]ocial inequalities and educational inequalities are reciprocally linked', exclusions within education must be understood in reference to wider social structures (Greenstein 2013: 389). Therefore, school exclusions are an important sociological issue which can only be fully addressed by considering the roles of social institutions, systems and inequalities. Although solutions must extend beyond the educational domain (Blyth and Milner 1994; Greenstein 2013; Pirrie et al. 2011), education plays a significant role in shaping the wider picture, making it an important area of focus.

Deficit and Punitive Approaches

Within sociological literature, there has been extensive criticism of deficit models of behaviour and the use of punitive approaches. School exclusions involve the removal of the disruptive child from the classroom or school, locating the problem within the child, rather than looking at the social barriers the child may be facing (Munn et al. 2001; Murphy 2021). Sociological concepts such as the social model of disability (Oliver 1990) have been used to criticise individualistic approaches which interpret the child, rather than the social environment, as the problem (Greenstein 2013). Approaches which criminalise, blame and punish children with behavioural difficulties have been criticised for negatively labelling and

'othering' individuals, rather than addressing exclusion through social support, prevention and restoration (Parsons 2005). Categorising children as 'troublesome' or 'badly behaved' may legitimise the reproduction of certain groups as stigmatised and inferior (Blyth and Milner 1994; Thomas 2024). Schools who identify more categories of 'troublesome' or 'unworthy' students have been found to have higher levels of exclusion, demonstrating the exclusionary consequences of stigmatising labels (Munn et al. 2001).

Previous sociological literature has highlighted that exclusionary processes within schools may be a symptom of wider public discourses and political pressures (Parsons 2005; Barker et al. 2010). Guidance and messaging (such as the national exclusions policy guidance in England) from educational bodies such as the Department of Education (DfE) and Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) have been criticised for failing to incentivise inclusive practices in schools (Billingham and Gillon 2023). School value-added measures such as 'Progress 8'[1] are used to measure pupil attainment, however these measures do not consider student background and are biased in favour of schools with a higher intake of advantaged students (Leckie and Goldstein 2019). Therefore, schools may be incentivised to avoid admitting or finding ways of excluding disadvantaged pupils (Billingham and Gillon 2023; Leckie and Goldstein 2019; Blyth and Milner 1994). This literature demonstrates where punitive approaches to behaviour may stem from, and the exclusionary impacts of such approaches.

Inclusive Approaches

Within sociological literature, exclusionary practices have been extensively criticised. It is widely agreed there is a need for inclusion within education, however there are differing arguments about what constitutes as inclusion and how to achieve inclusion, particularly given the conceptual imprecision and lack of clarity of the term (Artiles et al. 2006). Although the idea of inclusive education initially focused on the integration of children with special educational needs into mainstream education, the concept is now understood to encompass a diverse range of identities, including children from all socio-economic backgrounds, ethnic origins, religions, genders and sexualities (Badescu 2012).

Literature has highlighted the importance of school ethos in facilitating inclusive education (Riley 2022; Lalvani 2012; Cooper 2008). Scholars agree that in schools where leaders

[1] Progress 8 is a value-added measure capturing pupil progress from the end of primary school to the end of secondary school.

promote an ethos of inclusion, this has a positive impact on the inclusive practices and attitudes of individual teachers (Clark et al.1999; Lalvani 2012). Additionally, where teachers and schools take responsibility for the child, rather than shifting the blame or perceived problem elsewhere, there is increasing likelihood of inclusive practice (Fletcher-Cambell 2001). Scholarship has demonstrated that children who feel a sense of belonging (Riley 2022), have meaningful attachments to school (Cooper 2008), and positive relationships with teachers (Reynolds 2021), are more engaged and included.

Inclusive education has often been used interchangeably with 'mainstreaming', however there is disagreement on the conceptual distinctions between the two (Clark 1999; Lalvani 2012; Badescu 2012). Whilst mainstreaming refers to increasing diversity in mainstream classrooms, inclusion extends beyond this, highlighting the need for the restructuring and adaptation of schools to meet the educational needs of all students (Lalvani 2012). However, others argue that simply having access to mainstream education does not necessarily equate to meaningful inclusion (Cooper 2008). Whilst some scholars argue spatial segregation through separate units, schools or classes may be exclusionary (Tomlinson et al. 2021; Barker et al. 2010), others argue alternative provisions are necessary to ensure children are in the setting which best meets their needs (Cooper et al. 2007). For this reason, some scholars suggest that inclusion cannot always be achieved through expanding mainstream education, rather that inclusion should mean delivering alternative specialised sites of provision where necessary (Rodgers 2007).

So, whilst previous literature has highlighted the importance of school ethos, questions remain as to how leadership may facilitate school ethos, the type of ethos which underpins a non-exclusion approach and how this ethos informs the use of AP.

Alternatives to Exclusion

This section discusses the existing literature on AP, highlighting examples of where AP has previously been used to reduce exclusions and facilitate inclusion. However, given that these examples maintain the use of exclusions alongside the use of AP, this section reiterates the need to look at a school with a non-exclusion approach to understand how AP is used in this context. Additionally, given the wide variation in the ethos and practices of different AP sites, further research is needed to understand how a non-exclusion ethos influences AP practices.

AP refers to education arranged by schools or local authorities for children unable to attend mainstream school (due to exclusion, behaviour or health reasons) and includes pupil referral units (PRUs), alternative provision academies, hospital schools, and a variety of independent, registered, unregistered and further education institutions (DfE 2024b). Although some literature has argued that inclusion means ensuring children are in mainstream classrooms, others have argued that meaningful inclusion is about providing the best possible education for every child, which may involve temporary time in AP with the view to reengaging in the mainstream (Rodgers 2007; Cooper et al. 2007). Children may be placed in alternative provision (AP) to prevent permanent exclusion. Some mainstream schools have introduced bases or units to provide students with additional support, smaller learning environments and respite from mainstream classes (Munn et al. 2001). Literature has demonstrated that smaller learning environments can help students at risk of exclusion, where teachers can be more attentive to student needs (Preece and Timmins 2004; Thompson and Russell 2007; Greenstein 2013). Literature has also showed the importance of holistic approaches to student learning which consider educational, social, health and emotional needs (De Jong and Griffiths 2006; Tucker 2013). Where successful, AP has been shown to improve attendance, attainment, behaviour, and reduce exclusions (Ofsted and CQC 2024).

Whilst literature has suggested AP attached to a mainstream school can successfully be used as part of school systems to support students at risk of exclusion (Preece and Timmins 2004; Greenstein 2013; De Jong and Griffiths 2006), there are wide variations in approach depending on the individual site, making it difficult to compare success across provisions (Reynolds 2021). Some literature suggests AP would benefit from more comprehensive and widely agreed upon measures of success, providing insights into which strategies and practices are most effective (Preece and Timmins 2004). Official bodies have suggested a need for national standards, regulatory framework, better commissioning and oversight of AP (Ofsted and CQC 2024). This is due to concern over unethical, punitive practices taking place at some sites, leading to student isolation and poor mental health (Barker et al. 2010; Munn et al. 2001). For example, in Reynold's (2021) research into a provision with a primarily punitive ethos, the unit was overseen by a manager with no formal teacher training or teaching experience, and operated under exam conditions (e.g., silence). Whilst some scholars are critical of the punitive nature of some AP sites, AP is a diverse and widespread sector in which there are better and worse sites, just as there are better and worse

mainstream schools (Cooper et al. 2008). Therefore, further research into AP underpinned by a non-exclusion ethos would allow for a more complex, in-depth understanding of successful models. Specific variations within AP remain largely unexplored, including the impacts of spatial segregation, stigma, perceptions of teachers and students, physical environment, daily routines and practices (Reynolds 2021). The extent to which variations impact inclusion is an area in need of further investigation.

There has been a limited number of studies focused on units attached to mainstream schools underpinned by a supportive/pastoral ethos rather than a punitive/deficit approach. Previous qualitative research has explored student perceptions of inclusion units; students highlighted the positive impacts of the centre and indicated that the unit helped them to reengage in mainstream education (Preece and Timmins 2004; Greenstein 2013). This suggests the potential benefits of an inclusion unit based in a mainstream school with the aim of supporting and reintegrating students. Whilst these studies emphasised how the units allowed for educational engagement, this was with the aim to reduce exclusions, rather than to support a non-exclusion approach. Therefore, further research is necessary to understand how an onsite unit may support the latter approach. Indeed, whole school approaches which focus on meeting unmet needs and developing positive attachments can allow for successful reintegration (McCluskey et al. 2019). However, further research is needed into the types of whole school approaches which enable this. Additionally, further research is needed to understand how school ethos impacts the practices within onsite APs, how APs may be used to support non-exclusion rather than just as a measure to reduce exclusions, and the benefits and challenges of onsite AP attached to a mainstream school.

Challenges of Inclusion

The previous section emphasises the need for further research into the use of AP to support a non-exclusion approach and more inclusive practices. However, literature has highlighted how inclusive practice in education is made increasingly difficult given cuts in funding and resources, cuts which disproportionately affect the most disadvantaged pupils (McCluskey et al. 2019). The UK government promotes inclusion, yet this is contradicted by policies and practices: school success is based on exam results, league tables may incentivise the non-admission of disadvantaged students and there is insufficient funding and resources to support students at risk of exclusion (Rodgers 2007; Greenstein 2013; McCluskey et al. 2024). Whilst there is debate about how inclusion in education can be best achieved, there

is agreement that inclusive education requires adequate funding (McCluskey et al. 2019; McCluskey 2019; Clough and Cobett 2001; Blyth and Milner 1994). As sociological literature has emphasised, inclusion within education cannot be achieved without large-scale social reform which extends beyond education (Pirrie et al. 2011). Social exclusion may be as impactful as disciplinary exclusion, suggesting inclusion can only be achieved through reducing exclusion in multiple areas to allow the child to fully engage in education (McCluskey 2008). Further research is needed to understand how school policies and practices can support students who face exclusion in other areas, and how schools can prevent these students from being excluded from school. Further, through research into a school with a non-exclusion approach, there is an opportunity to understand more about how school ethos informs practices, how AP is used in relation to non-exclusion, the challenges faced by school leaders and how challenges these are addressed.

The Socioecological Model

In order to understand the issue of exclusion within education, it is necessary to understand the wider social factors which may enable or constrain inclusion and the complex interactions between stakeholders and actors in their various roles. For this reason, Bronfenbrenner's (1979) socio-ecological model of human development provides a useful framework of analysis. The model, which has been influential across sociological and educational literature and research, suggests there are different levels of environmental systems, each of which interact with and influence one another, ranging from the immediate environment to wider social structures: the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem and macrosystem (Bronfenbrenner 1979). Previously, the model has been utilised within research to understand inclusive practices in education across ecological levels (Anderson et al. 2014), to explore systemic factors influencing school belonging (Allen et al. 2016), and to understand student behaviour in relation to interdependent ecological systems (De Jong and Griffiths 2006). The socio-ecological model provides a useful analytical framework for this project because, in line with sociological perspectives of inclusion/exclusion within education, it emphasises the importance of systemic and environmental factors and their interactions.

Previous research has explicitly indicated why a project like this one, investigating inclusive practices within education using a socio-ecological approach, is needed:

'A case study would refine the understanding of how context affects: (a) what practices are implemented, (b) how the practices are implemented, and (c) the success of the practices. A deeper understanding of the evidence-based socio-ecological framework and accompanying school practices would be gained by investigating the experiences, values, and preferences of school leaders.' (Allen et al. 2016: 113)

Drawing the socio-ecological model of school belonging by Allen et al. (2016), I have developed my own socio-ecological model specific to my research and my focus on the rationale, benefits and challenges of non-exclusion. See Figure 1:

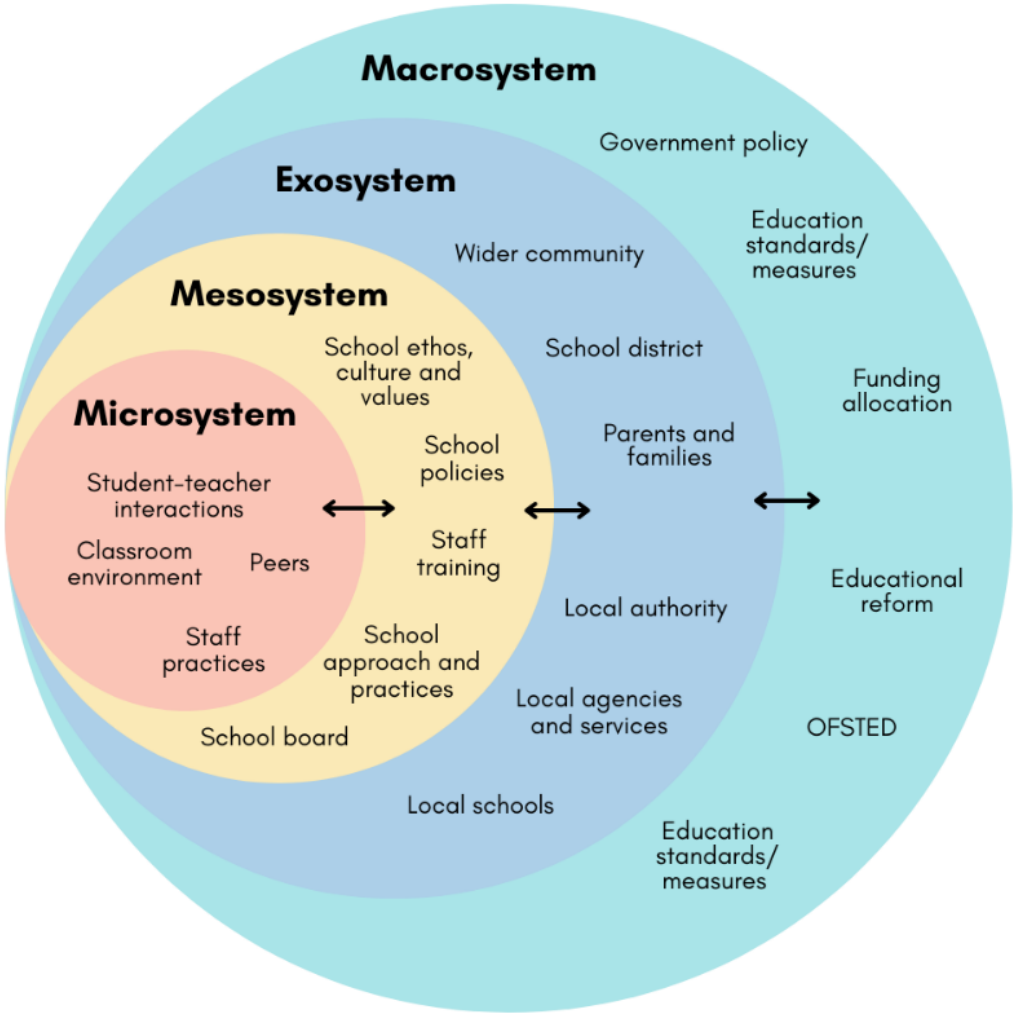

Figure 1: Socioecological Model

Methodology:

This research focuses on an average-sized, mixed, non-selective state secondary school located in the South of England. The school has a non-exclusion approach and has not excluded in a significant number of years. The non-exclusion approach was not a 'zero exclusions policy' as the school maintained the option to use exclusion as a last resort should the need arise. This qualitative research aimed to understand the rationale for non-exclusion, as well as the benefits and challenges of this approach. The methodology involved semi-structured interviews with staff at the school and this data was interpreted using thematic analysis.

This particular school was chosen as the basis for this study due to its non-exclusion approach. The student demographic of the school is as follows: the percentage of students on free school meals is consistent with the local average (and slightly lower than the national average), the percentage of students whose first language is not English is lower than the national average but in line with the local average and the percentage of pupils with special educational needs (SEN) is higher than the local average and nearly double the national average. It is important to highlight the high proportion SEN students given that this group is typically nearly 3x more likely to be excluded than their non-SEN peers (Gill et al. 2024).

The sample consisted of eight members of staff (later referred to by the initials of their role): the Headteacher (HT), both Deputy Headteachers (DH1 and DH2), the Assistant Head (AH), Director of Student Support (DSS), Lead Learning Mentor (LLM), Learning Mentor (LM) and Classroom Teacher (CT). The range of staff roles and areas of expertise within the sample allowed for a greater range of perspectives on non-exclusion. Senior leaders provided an overview of the school, the wider level issues and connections, and insights into the rationale for non-exclusion at a management level, whereas learning mentors and classroom teachers provided a more detailed account of the day-to-day challenges, as well as personal experiences, understandings and approaches. Indeed, educational professionals have been shown to provide valuable insights for educational research given their ability to draw on multidisciplinary knowledge and experiences in a range of educational contexts (Gazeley 2010). Although this research may have benefited from a larger sample, given the time limitations of this project, the existing sample provided the relevant perspectives to answer the research question and explore key issues. Additionally, given that this research aimed to find out about the rationale behind the non-

exclusion approach, the representation of senior leaders allowed this area to be well explored.

Although it has been argued that interviewing school leaders within education may mean the voices of other stakeholders are not heard, this can be avoided through taking a critical and reflexive approach which considers other perspectives (Coleman 2012). The use of the socioecological model in the analysis stage will enable connections between different stakeholders to be explored. However, to answer my research question about the school rationale, challenges and benefits of the non-exclusion approach, talking to staff at the school is most appropriate to explore these topics. Educational research has illustrated the strengths of interviewing teachers as they have the best understanding of the realities of education (Leko 2014).

This research used purposive sampling, 'where the researcher deliberately chooses to interview individuals who have particular expertise or hold a particular office' (Coleman 2012: 259). Participants were asked if they would be willing to take part based on their role within the school, for example, it was essential to talk to senior leaders and the Headteacher for the purpose of my research. Access to the school was provided via a gatekeeper. Gatekeepers play an important role in social research, dictating what information is available to the researcher, such as who is interviewed and for how long (Bailey 2018). Through my gatekeeper and familiarity with the school, I was able to gain access to contact potential participants and organise interviews. After obtaining my sample, the interviews were arranged to take place face-to-face in private meeting rooms within the school. Interview lasted between 45-60 minutes. The interviews were voice recorded and later transcribed.

This research used semi-structured interviews with the aim to understand staff perspectives of the rationale for non-exclusion, perceptions of the benefits and challenges of this approach, and staff understandings of behaviour. The interviews covered three main areas: the rationale for non-exclusion, the benefits and the challenges of the approach. Two sets of interview questions were developed (see Appendix 2 and 3): one aimed at senior leaders, focusing more on the rationale and whole school approach/policies, and the other aimed at learning mentors and teaching staff, focusing more on day-to-day challenges and experiences. Within these areas, a number of prompts and questions were used to guide the interviews where necessary. A semi-structured approach was adopted to allow for

flexibility and to uncover unanticipated issues, themes and insights (Atkins and Wallace 2015). Typical of semi-structured interviews, follow up questions and probes were used where necessary to provide clarification and further detail (Kvale 2007). The use of semi-structured interviews allowed for the collection of 'different types of information, including factual data, views and opinions, personal narratives and histories' (Atkins and Wallace 2015: 86). This methodological approach was favourable in answering my research question as it allowed for in-depth qualitative accounts of staff perspectives on non-exclusion. Given that educational research often involves looking at the distinct context of a school and asking questions specific to the case study, the flexibility of a semi-structured approach was necessary in this research to understand the unique issues, challenges and perspectives of participants (Bush 2012).

After transcription, the data was interpreted using thematic analysis. This involved codifying the data through noting key points, links and connections (Burton and Bartlett 2009). These codes were used to identify patterns and meanings within the dataset and used to devise themes cohering around central ideas and concepts (Braun and Clarke 2006). Thematic analysis is considered a flexible method which involves 'discovering, interpreting and reporting patterns and clusters of meanings within data' (Ritchie et al. 2014: 370). Narratives and ideas were connected across interviews to develop an overall picture of the school's approach. Themes were developed by looking at the emerging meanings, assumptions, implications, and narratives (Braun and Clarke 2006), allowing data to be organised whilst maintaining depth and meaning.

This research was conducted in line with university ethical guidelines and the BSA (2017) statement of ethical practice. Participants were provided with an information sheet prior to interviews outlining what participation would involve, the aims of the research, and details regarding confidentiality and the right to withdraw. Participants had the opportunity to ask questions about the research before the interviews commenced and were reminded of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without having to give a reason. Participants provided written consent agreeing to take part.

The BSA (2017) states that appropriate measures should be taken to ensure anonymity is maintained to prevent the identification of participants. Given that the school in this research takes a unique approach to non-exclusion, anonymity was particularly important. The approach was not a known feature of the school, it was not published on the school

website or promoted to parents, meaning the approach would not necessarily make the school easily identifiable. Further, practical measures were taken to ensure anonymity was maintained: participants were anonymised through the use of code names and identifying features of the school were anonymised (such as the school name, specific location and school specific statistics). Although interview questions focused on staff understandings and experiences, these were often explained in relation to the experiences with students, so identifying information and narratives were anonymised. All data was stored was stored securely on a password protected computer and in compliance with the Data Protection Act (2018), this data will be destroyed after degree completion.

Given the status disparity between myself, a university student, and those being interviewed, senior leaders in an educational institution, it was important to be aware of this dynamic in the interviews (Coleman 2012). In saying this, my position as a researcher was respected, the participants answered questions openly and these status differences did not undermine the quality of the interviews.

Data Analysis

Two key thematic categories were identified: a) the school's approach in relation to connections across socioecological levels and b) the challenges of non-exclusion in relation to disconnections across socioecological levels. The first discusses how the school's rationale, use of AP, wider ethos and approach were underpinned by understandings of socio-ecological connections. The second focuses on the challenges of non-exclusion in relation to tensions between socioecological levels, in particular, the disconnections between macro-level policies and the meso-level school approach.

The School's Approach: Connections Across Socioecological Levels

This section focuses on the school's approach and how this was underpinned by understandings of connected issues across socioecological levels.

The Rationale for Non-Exclusion

Prior to the introduction of the non-exclusion approach, senior leaders began to identify key issues indicating that exclusions were not working. The deputy head noted that exclusions were 'not actually solving the problem' and failed to 'change patterns of behaviour' (DH1). The recognition of these unproductive patterns was the starting point for questioning the role and purpose of exclusion within the school, prompting leadership to 'move away' from the 'default system' (HT).

A key point raised by staff was concern over where students were when they were not in school. Although these issues had existed previously, the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent closure of schools brought this to the forefront.

> 'I think COVID was a bit of a realisation that when students were not in the vicinity of the school building, we did not really know where they were… we began to realise that for no reason should a student be sent home because at least then we knew where they were' DH2

Post pandemic, the school experienced an 'influx of need for mental health services', particularly where 'young people had spent time in not very nice conditions in potentially unsafe environments' (DSS). Literature has illustrated how the 'vulnerability gap' within education was exacerbated by the pandemic, worsening difficult situations for children, such

as increased exposure to abuse, mental health problems and financial deprivation (Gill and Quilter-Pinner 2020). For senior leaders, the pandemic highlighted these issues and the importance of being in school for the wellbeing and safety of many students. Those at risk of exclusion were often those who needed the safety and consistency of school the most:

> 'It was a realization that often the excluded students were the most vulnerable students. And we were putting them actually in more harm… we weren't safeguarding them essentially by sending them out. They were often going out to families that were dysfunctional or into situations where it's not conducive to moderating or improving behaviour.' DH1

This perspective illustrates an understanding of connections between a child's wider social environment (exo-level) and their behaviour at school (meso-level). Given that exclusion is disproportionately experienced by children in contact with social services who may have complex home lives (Gill et al. 2024), these connections were important to better understand why and how external factors may influence a child's ability to engage in a school environment. Whilst non-exclusion was not necessarily viewed as a solution, it was viewed as the duty of the school to provide a safe environment for students.

> 'That is why we feel so strongly about the non-exclusion…We can be making sure that they have got a place that they can come every day that is safe… whereas if they have been excluded, we don't know where they would be, we don't know what they would be doing and how quickly they might escalate themselves on that trajectory' DSS

This illustrates how the approach was viewed as a way for the school to continue supporting and safeguarding students with complex needs. Overall, the rationale for non-exclusion came down to a number of key points: the recognition that exclusion was not changing behaviour, the connections made between exo and meso levels to understand behaviour, and subsequently changing the school's approach to reflect these understandings. This process was not linear but was the result of many different conversations between senior leaders, reflections on specific situations within the school and the shifting landscape of education post-pandemic.

The Role of Alternative Provision

The school's AP was located in a separate building on the school site and had been running for several years. The unit existed before the non-exclusion approach was introduced, but the provision played a vital role in being able to realise this approach:

> 'I don't think it would be possible without a facility… that's got special staff in there. You've got space to explore, you know what, what these students need.' DH2

The unit was led by the Assistant Head and teaching was facilitated by learning mentors. Students were referred to the unit when an intervention was needed beyond what could be provided in the mainstream school. Behaviour was the reason most students were allocated to the unit, but it was stressed that being sent there was not a sanction. With an emphasis on providing support, the aim of the unit was to reengage students with the curriculum and gradually reintegrate them back into the mainstream school.

> 'the ideal situation is they come to us they get high levels of support, that support is slowly slowly slowly removed and then when they're having a day of dysregulation they know how to access that support' (AH)

The reintegration process was tailored to each child and their individual needs, with the amount of time spent at the unit ranging from weeks to years. Students were given a level of control over the reintegration process, returning first to lessons they enjoyed and were most successful in. The unit allowed the school to provide more flexible support, with students able to move between sites based on their needs.

> 'there are case studies in the school of young people who have spent time at [the unit], significant amounts of time in key stage three who are now key stage four students that have nothing at [the unit]… and are going to sit a full set of GCSE so it does work, if you just were an offsite provision they'd have none of that safety net of being able to return and come back' AH

Whilst onsite/offsite debates remain largely unexplored in the literature (Reynolds 2021), these findings suggest the benefits of an onsite AP attached to a mainstream school. This adds empirical evidence to the argument that APs are more successful when they are complementary to a mainstream school rather than a 'repair and return' service (Pennacchia & Thomson 2016). In contrast to those underpinned by a punitive ethos and criticised for criminalising young people (Thomas 2024), the school's AP was thought to allow for

continuity between sites, maintain familiarity with the mainstream school, allow relationships with staff to be sustained, and enable easier reintegration. Although the successes of the unit were significant, not all students were reintegrated into the main school.

> 'it doesn't work for all students, some students have had longer periods of time in the [unit] than we ever thought… but they obviously still need that kind of space on their curriculum.' DH2

Although not all students were reintegrated, these students continued to attend the unit, meaning they remained on roll at the school and continued to access the support provided. Whilst staff recognised this was not a perfect solution, the unit was ultimately characterised as a place which could better meet the needs of some children.

> 'we have started to do case studies for all our Year 11 leavers and you know if we look at their contexts we are able to see on an individual basis that intervention in alternative provision onsite connected to a mainstream school had a massive impact on them' AH

Whilst some scholars have criticised AP for creating exclusion through spatial separation (Tomlinson 2021; Barker et al. 2010), others have argued that APs are necessary to ensure students are in the setting which best supports their learning (Rodgers 2007; Cooper et al. 2007). The latter perspective was echoed by staff who suggested that the smaller environment, increased flexibility and more personalised support provided by the unit was required by some students.

> 'they might need a break, or they might be masking or they might be going through some crisis they haven't disclosed and that's why the behaviour is coming out. So it just gives them a space to feel safer to be in a less overwhelming environment.' LLM

This adds empirical evidence to arguments about the benefits of AP, particularly for vulnerable students (Preece and Timmins 2004). Further, addressing the issue of spatial separation, one teacher noted that whilst the unit 'initially felt quite separate', it had become well integrated to the wider school. For example, students at the unit participated in the school's extracurricular activities, attended lessons they enjoyed in the mainstream school, and had the same lunch and break times as the rest of the school.

Overall, the onsite AP allowed the school to maintain the non-exclusion approach. Through connecting issues across exo and meso levels, the AP allowed the school to provide the

necessary support for students, both academically and pastorally. Although debates around spatial separation and exclusion raise important questions, these findings illustrate how an onsite AP is essential for a school with this approach on a day-to-day basis in order to meet the needs of vulnerable students.

School Culture, Ethos and Values

A strong ethos is vital for school success (Munn et al 2001). In this research, non-exclusion was a central part of the school ethos and non-exclusion went beyond a set of systems and practices. It was said that non-exclusion became 'a kind of a philosophy or a culture across the school' (DH2). This was a gradual process which involved senior leaders actively working to change preexisting understandings of exclusion.

> 'We had to have long conversations with staff. We invested a lot of time whether it was speaking to groups of staff or having individual conversations, working with governors, working with parents just to kind of shift their mindset about what inclusion meant.' HT

Previous literature suggests senior leaders must persuade all staff of the rationale and benefits of inclusion if this is to be successful (Munn et al. 2001). For a school with a non-exclusion approach, staff understanding was particularly important. According to the Headteacher, convincing staff of the approach was one of the biggest challenges but noted that now, most staff had 'gone beyond accepting that, they're quite proud'. Those in different roles also expressed similar views about exclusion and its impacts.

> 'you need everybody in your school to champion the belief that we don't want children out of education, we understand what that leads to… I don't think it's a school you would work in if you don't believe in non-exclusion. I think it's so central to what we do.' CT

This illustrates how 'believing' in the ethos was an essential aspect of working at the school. This was reflected in recruitment practices, for example, prospective candidates were asked about their understandings of non-exclusion and the school's approach was explained. The rationale for the approach was strongly linked with concepts of social justice and a moral imperative for non-exclusion.

> ‘A lot of it is down to the kind of collective beliefs of the school and I suppose my particular beliefs as a school leader. I believe in social justice and that's something that’s kind of driven me to become a teacher in the first place.’ HT

These ideas were echoed elsewhere, where education was described as a ‘change maker’ (AH), particularly for vulnerable students. These perspectives reiterate the connections made across socio-ecological levels in relation to the rationale for non-exclusion and illustrate how these ideas connect to the school ethos which ultimately underpinned the approach. The school ethos was developed by linking exclusions at the meso level to macro level issues, such as wider social inequalities. Staff seemed to view the school as part of a wider system, stressing the importance of their role and responsibility as teachers within this system:

> ‘We also look at the bigger picture… we are a microcosm of society and if we don't do our bit with these young people now, they go out into the world when they finish here and they cause the same upset, the same disruption’ DSS

This quote suggests the motivation for non-exclusion stems from a moral imperative to intervene and support students in the hope to prevent challenges later in their lives. Indeed, having a ‘moral imagination’ has been identified as an important aspect of positive school culture (Louis and Murphy 2018). Given that the school’s ethos is about ‘the betterment of society as a whole’ (DSS), it is evident that this moral imagination is central to what they are trying to achieve.

Understanding and Addressing Behaviour

In an effort to foster belonging for students who would typically be excluded, the school’s approach to behaviour emphasised the importance of building positive teacher-student relationships. Whilst literature has highlighted the benefits of relational practice in schools (Greenstein 2013; Pirrie et al. 2011; DDC 2025), this research illustrates how it is implemented in the context of a school with a non-exclusion approach.

> ‘We've done a lot of work on relational practice. Staff are far better equipped to deal with children in an approach that is more trauma informed based on relationships, not adversarial and trying to find a solution other than thinking that the best way out this is to show the child the door.’ HT

Relational practice therefore played an important role in establishing and maintaining the school ethos, which connects socioecological levels and understands behaviour as an 'indicator of need' (AH), rather than as a problem located within the child (Munn et al. 2001). The school's approach to behaviour focused on attaching students to school who were at risk of disengaging.

> 'if you build that kind of trusting relationship… that builds up a way of attaching them back to school and keeps them in a mainstream setting.' DH2

This proved successful and the school was recognised as having one of the best attendance scores in its city. In particular, the school's AP had enabled vulnerable students to develop relationships with staff in a smaller environment.

> 'they have formed really good relationships with staff as well which I don't think they've previously had… Even like showing them that they can do it in the future. Like they can go and rebuild relationships with teachers that they haven't got on with.' LM

Previous research suggests AP may enable students to more easily build relationships with teachers, improving attachment to school and building confidence (Cooper 2008; Fletcher-Campbell 2001). However, this research suggests there may be additional benefits to an AP attached to a mainstream school because students have the opportunity to repair existing relationships with teachers in mainstream classes after building confidence in a smaller environment. This illustrates the benefits of a connected approach in which the school (at a meso level) facilitated continuity between micro level settings (the AP and mainstream classroom), allowing relationships to be rebuilt.

The non-exclusion approach to some extent meant there was no other option but to repair relationships. In some ways, this forced staff to change how they thought about and dealt with behaviour.

> 'If staff think that students can be excluded, then staff ask for students to be excluded… if there's not going to be exclusion, then you have to reframe how they think about incidents and how they think about students.' DH2

This illustrates how the school's position on non-exclusion involved framing behaviour and students in a different way, particularly through the use of language:

> ‘it was a conscious decision basically to remove naughty or you know, ‘that child is difficult’….to kind of create space between the child and the behaviours… We all talk all the time about behaviour being communication of need. AH

Language can be a powerful tool and labels such as ‘bad’, ‘naughty’ or ‘disruptive’ may give rise to stigma and blame and have tangible consequences on levels of school exclusion (Parsons 2005; Munn et al. 2001). However, rather than focusing on school practices (such as exclusion) and understandings of behaviour (expressed through language) as separate issues, this research suggests that school ethos, practices and understandings of behaviour are very much connected. Indeed, the rationale for non-exclusion, which originated with senior leaders at a meso-level, was translated into a wider school ethos shifting staff understandings of and approaches to behaviour at a micro-level.

Challenges of Non-Exclusion: Disconnections Across Socioecological Levels

As established above, the rationale for non-exclusion, the school ethos and approaches to behaviour were underpinned by understandings of connections across socio-ecological levels. This section develops by looking at the challenges of a non-exclusion approach in relation to disconnections between socio-ecological levels, in particular, highlighting the tensions between the school’s approach and macro-level policies.

Within the School and Classroom

At a micro-level, the non-exclusion approach was thought to amplify the existing challenges typical of mainstream schools and classrooms. By not excluding children with complex needs, challenging behaviours were at times more visible within the school.

Although the behavioural systems in place at a meso-level mitigated the extent to which other students in the classroom were impacted by disruptive behaviours, at a micro level, these challenges were described as ‘tensions’ which had to be carefully balanced by teachers to ensure learning and inclusion took place.

> ‘It's that constant navigation of, is this relational practice? is this good teaching? is there a bottom line in my classroom? do students know where that bottom line is? do I have high enough expectations? am I pushing students to where they need to get to, or are the low-level behaviours getting in the way? … I think there were always

> tensions in a classroom, but you can feel like it's manifested itself a bit more because you're thinking we don't exclude.' DH2

This demonstrates how, whilst not directly attributed to non-exclusion, the approach was thought to amplify the awareness of tensions and challenges within the classroom. Previous literature has described how schools must balance the rights of disaffected students displaying disruptive behaviours with the rights of classmates to a disruption free education (Vincent et al. 2007). This research demonstrates how these tensions are heightened in a school with a non-exclusion approach.

Navigating tensions between the needs of individual students at a micro-level, and the wider school at a meso-level, was challenging for staff on a professional and personal level.

> 'sometimes the students are very angry, and they're challenging, and we bear the brunt of it…So first and foremost, it makes working here challenging in terms of how we are on the day to day.' DH1

Another interview highlighted how these challenges sometimes felt more acute when staff were aware that other local schools were excluding for the similar behaviours, demonstrating tensions between meso-level and exo-level approaches.

> 'if you've got teacher friends that work sort of elsewhere in the city when you're dealing with behaviour that other schools exclude for… I think staff feel it's demoralising and it's sacrificing the well-being of the staff for the student' DSS

Senior leaders highlighted how, despite that most staff were on board with the approach, sometimes staff would struggle with what they perceived as a lack of punishment. However, it was thought that if staff were aware of where these behaviours were stemming from, that they would perhaps understand these behaviours in a different way.

> 'when they're alone with their equals they might be more critical of the approach, I think sometimes they feel out of the loop of the whole picture and sometimes that is true because the safeguarding content is personal to that child… so you can't share everything that's happening with that child that would explain away a lot of the behaviours' AH

This point illustrates the importance of making these connections, supporting the argument that heightening staff awareness of the causes of behaviour creates a more tolerant school

environment (Vulliamy and Webb 2003). However, this research highlights how developing staff awareness may be challenging where there are issues of confidentiality, making it difficult for staff to connect exo-meso-micro levels to understand behaviours.

Parents and carers

Parents and carers had differing levels of awareness of the school's non-exclusion approach. Due to the fact it is not a policy, many were said to be unaware of the non-exclusion approach. Those who were aware were those of children with behavioural difficulties who would typically be at risk of exclusion. Of these, some were described as appreciative of the approach.

> 'The parents who are aware of it…They're grateful that their child is getting a second chance.' HT

Whilst most parents were either unaware or supportive, this was not always the case. Interactions with families were often more complex than this, and parents/carers did not always appreciate the school's support or involvement. As the headteacher described:

> 'the irony is that those children that perhaps we're doing a great deal for, sometimes the families aren't necessarily appreciative or probably sometimes a little bit resentful… We're creating an environment where things are coming to the surface that perhaps some families don't want to come to the surface. And so, there's been occasions when there's been a backlash about that.' HT

With the increase in safeguarding disclosures following the introduction of the non-exclusion approach, complex situations, often involving families, had come to the surface more frequently. Although this was a 'positive indicator' that children feel safe at school (HT), it sometimes created tensions between families and the school. In contrast to previous literature which has highlighted parental criticisms of exclusion, these findings illustrate a much more complex picture. In saying this, the potential negative reactions to non-exclusion could be linked to previous findings around parent's fear of judgement and criticism in relation to their child's behaviour (McDonald and Thomas 2003).

Another situation where parents were sometimes critical of the school's approach was in the context of conflict between students. For example, parents wanting the school to punish (by exclusion) the student in conflict with their child. Parents' perceptions could be changeable:

> ‘if [their child had] been the victim of something in that sort of situation then they're like 'why is that child still here' but then two weeks later you could be in another meeting with a very different context and they're like 'yeah I'm not so worried about you excluding that child now' because they don't want their child being excluded.’ AH

Whilst the school's approach involved looking at exclusion in relation to wider issues and making connections across macro-exo-meso levels, parents were sometimes looking at the approach in relation to their individual child. This created challenges where there was a lack of understanding from parents about the reasons for the school's non-exclusion approach. As one member of staff suggested:

> ‘I think if parents were much more aware of the things that we were putting in place and why, morally, they would be much more on board… I think there would be benefit to sharing that more widely with parents.’ CT

From this perspective, it is argued that visibility could improve parental understanding. Although as previously noted, it is difficult to share this with parents given the important reasons why this approach is not a ‘zero exclusions’ policy.

Wider Community and School District

On a practical level, being the only school in the local area with this approach was challenging, creating tensions between meso and exo levels. With the local authority's awareness of the school's non-exclusion approach, the school was said to receive a high number of allocations of students who had been excluded elsewhere.

> ‘because we don't exclude, we are seen as an attractive option for vulnerable children and particularly the local authority, perhaps with their allocations.’ DH1

Literature suggests managed moves can be an effective community wide approach to reducing exclusions by offering students at risk of exclusion a place in a different local school (Vincent et al. 2007). However, this research suggests a more complex picture, illustrating how allocations may lead to the uneven distribution of children with high levels of support needs. Where excluding schools pass students on to non-excluding schools, an unsustainable model, which involves shifting the responsibility elsewhere, is created. Therefore, these findings demonstrate that non-exclusion cannot be the responsibility of individual schools.

Further, because exclusion was the norm in other local schools, this at times undermined what this school was trying to achieve. For example, one child's negative experiences of being excluded and sent to a PRU from a previous school continued to impact them when they arrived at the school.

> 'the school that he was at chose to send him to the PRU and that instilled in him an anger against institutions… ultimately we are an education institution and he was already so against us.' DSS

That exclusion has a negative impact on students is well-documented, and not a new finding. However, these interviews highlight how the negative impacts of exclusion are not mitigated by the decision of an individual school to not exclude. This is why a socioecological approach is necessary to understand how government policy shapes local communities and school districts, in turn shaping the practices of individual schools. Without an exo-level, and ultimately macro-level commitment to non-exclusion within education, the detrimental impacts of exclusion cannot be fully addressed.

Government, Policy, Education Standards

One of the key challenges was the disconnect between the school's (meso-level) approach and macro-level educational policies and practices. The lack of funding and resourcing within education is a well-documented challenge. However, for a school with a non-exclusion approach, this challenge was even more pronounced. The school's AP was a major financial burden as it involved the cost of the physical building, as well as the wages of 3-4 mentors.

> 'we're in massive deficit… our deficit is basically the cost of the [unit] and that is hugely expensive but the only way to do the approach is if the [unit] exists' AH

Literature has highlighted how cuts in funding and resourcing have put increasing pressure on schools (McCluskey et al. 2019). However, the school's non-exclusion approach, reliant on the AP, meant these financial pressures were felt acutely.

Further, literature has highlighted how cuts to external agencies, such as social services and mental health services, has put increasing pressure on schools to 'plug the gaps' in social support (Tucker 2013). In this research, the exo and macro level issue of stretched services was a heightened challenge given that the school made 'far more referrals into the police and social care than other schools' as part of the 'rigorous safeguarding' required for a non-exclusion approach (AH).

The lack of macro-level policies, practices and funding to support a non-exclusion approach perhaps suggests why more schools do not implement an approach like this. Another reason being that there is a lack of incentive for schools to reduce their levels of exclusion:

> 'the way that the school performance is judged is problematic for our culture… our progress score has just sunk like a stone. Because we're being judged on a full suite of GCSEs but they're not doing a full suite of GCSEs.' DH1

The deputy head, referring to the school's Progress 8 score, illustrates the disconnect between the school's approach at a meso-level and macro-level measures of educational success. Previous literature has criticised this measure for encouraging the exclusion of disadvantaged pupils who may bring down the school's overall average (Liu et al. 2020; Power and Taylor 2018). Despite that non-exclusion was said to have a positive impact on the outcomes (academically and personally) of students who attended the AP and were previously at risk of exclusion, this was in no way acknowledged in macro-level judgements of the school. As the assistant head argued, 'there are a lack of pathways that allow for success to look something different… and it is a middle-class centric educational ambition that has led us to that point' (AH). Whilst previous research has criticised the emphasis on academic attainment as a measure of school success, this research raises further questions about who is served by these definitions and measures of success and whether these are conducive to incentivising non-exclusion, and ultimately inclusion within education.

The challenges in realising the school's non-exclusion approach comes back to disconnections between socioecological levels. Tensions occurred between micro-meso levels when staff failed to make the same connections as senior leaders between meso level issues (behaviour and exclusions) and wider macro/exo level issues (social inequalities and wider social experiences). Tensions arose between the meso and exo levels when the school made unwanted connections between a child's behaviour and their wider social context. These tensions also became apparent in interactions with other schools in the area where approaches diverged.

Finally, the disconnections which most impacted the possibility of the success of the approach were between the macro and meso levels. Government policies, measures of success and lack of funding and resourcing, made non-exclusion a very challenging approach and one which very few schools attempt.

Conclusion

This research provides insights into the practices, understandings and ethos which underpin a non-exclusion approach and the associated challenges and outcomes. Previous research has stressed the importance of inclusive education and despite various arguments about how to achieve this, it has been widely agreed that the concerning levels of school exclusions must be reduced. Using a socio-ecological framework of analysis, this paper highlights the complex interactions between environmental social systems, focusing on connections (supporting non-exclusion) and disconnections (posing challenges to non-exclusion), as well as the implications of these.

The findings suggest that the rationale for non-exclusion was rooted in understandings of socioecological connections, illustrating how pupils and schools are sociologically located. Senior leaders identified patterns in the vulnerabilities of students with behavioural difficulties, informing the school ethos based on ideas of social justice and the moral imperative to support these students. Whilst previous research has suggested the importance of school ethos in facilitating inclusion, this research adds empirical evidence to suggest the type of ethos required to achieve this. Namely, one which connects socioecological levels to understand behaviour. This ethos informed subsequent practices within the school, such as behaviour systems with an emphasis on support, the use of AP with the view to reintegrate and reengage students and staff training with an emphasis on relational approaches to behaviour.

This research also highlights how the use of AP, informed by an understanding of socioecological connections, can support a non-exclusion approach. Although a limited number of studies have looked at how AP may be used to reduce exclusions, these have primarily focused on offsite provisions separate from a mainstream school (e.g. PRUs). This dissertation provides valuable insights into how an onsite AP attached to a mainstream school is utilised as part of a non-exclusion approach, providing students with additional support and facilitating reintegration into the mainstream school.

Further, the findings indicate the challenges of a non-exclusion approach, primarily in relation to the tensions across socioecological levels, particularly between the macro and meso levels where the approach was unsupported and undermined at local and national government levels. Whilst previous research has highlighted various challenges within the education sector, the findings suggest these challenges are heightened in an

approach like this one. Here, the findings illustrate how government policies, educational priorities and measures of school success were in direct tension with the school's non-exclusion approach.

Just last month (as this research project was being finalised) a report by the IPPR proposed revisions to school accountability systems. The recommended revisions include: considering longer-term child outcomes (such as employment and further education), ensuring a broad range of subjects are valued alongside core subjects (such as arts and technology) and developing additional metrics (alongside headline measures like Progress 8) which recognise student characteristics to highlight 'the extra lengths schools go to in order to help vulnerable children succeed' (Harris et al. 2025: 21). This dissertation, focused on a school going to these 'extra lengths', adds empirical evidence to arguments in support of such changes. For example, considering long-term child outcomes would give recognition to the school's high rates of student progression, including for students attending the AP, who were the first in the school to receive support with securing post year 11 placements and college places. Additionally, developing metrics which recognised student characteristics would highlight the school's high proportion of students with SEN (roughly double the national average), giving recognition to the additional support provided by the school. When the school data was interpreted by governors, who understood the school's approach and contextual factors, academic attainment was not looked at in isolation, but rather with an understanding of these socioecological connections:

> [the school governors] they're supportive… they believe in it… they understand why we are doing this. And if they didn't think like that, then things like our data in terms of our progress, they would be asking lots of questions…. they would not be happy with where we're at. Because they wouldn't understand how it's offset by this approach. HT

Where school outcomes are contextualised and the commitment to non-exclusion is valued, there was an understanding by school governors of the positive impacts the school is having, despite how this may affect their overall outcomes. Given this, further research is needed to investigate how the introduction of inclusion as an Ofsted measure, which recognises how a socioecological approach to education can improve outcomes for vulnerable pupils, may impact a school like this one.

Whilst the sample size may be a limitation of this research, this case study has allowed an in-depth representation of school leaders and still allowed for a good overview of the rationale, benefits and challenges of the approach. This research, with its emphasis on connections and disconnections across socio-ecological levels, could also usefully be developed further by exploring the perspectives of different stakeholders across socio-ecological levels, including parents, governors, collaborative agencies, and students. This would allow for a deeper and more nuanced understanding of the connections and disconnections between socio-ecological levels and provide further empirical evidence to inform how schools can better meet the needs of disaffected students. This paper illustrates the challenges posed by disconnections and thus, the importance of a connected approach. Ultimately, if inclusive practices in schools are to be incentivised, schools who go to 'extra lengths' must be recognised and supported at a local and national government level.

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Appendix 1: Transcript

I: how does the non-exclusion approach, how does that aspect of it come into what you do?

R: So in terms of attendance the non-exclusion is really key because attendance can be a real sore point with families in that if they don't have the means to get a student to school or if they didn't have a particularly positive experience with education themselves then school is not seen as a priority and so having conversations with families about that can be quite difficult particularly if there are things like there are another schools like exclusions because we are giving mixed messages essentially so we're saying on one hand we want them to be in school but if we were to be excluding the child we would be saying actually we don't want them in school so by being a non-exclusion school from an attendance point of view gives us a bit of a clear run at supporting students and their families with attendance because we are then never in a position where we have said we actually don't want the child here we always want them here and that is our bottom line as far as attendance goes.

I: And what kind of impact does this have on like behaviour and engagement and attendance?

R: So it has a positive effect on attendance anecdotally there isn't a lot of data to support it but students want to be here and I suppose the only data that we would have to support that is that the students that would typically be at risk of exclusion are here, they turn up every day and they might not be doing the right thing and they might not be going to lessons but they're here so that gives us a basis for you know building a relationship with those students that again we want them here and they know that and they feel safe and they obviously want to be here to some extent otherwise they wouldn't turn up even if some of them are just using it as you know kind of their base at least it is a place that they recognise there's somewhere that they will be welcomed and you know not turned away and you know not face other kinds of you know abuse or exploitation or you know just risky situations in general.

I: Do you think there's kind of a difference… what do you think a non-exclusion approach means and is there a difference between inclusion and non-exclusion?

R: There's definitely a difference between inclusion and non-exclusion. In that I wouldn't say although it is you know something we are striving for I wouldn't say that every student feels like they belong and we do still have instances where we do have to move a child along that you know remaining at [this school] just isn't viable for them or potentially for other

students that they are impacting. So from an inclusion perspective I think there is still, there are still some gaps. But the non-exclusion part of it is just our commitment that we won't give up on any child. It doesn't mean that we are necessarily reaching all of them but that is our starting point that we are going to try to and you know we are committed to doing what we can but that does mean sometimes some students don't feel included because they feel like they are being sacrificed for the students that would be excluded otherwise.

I: What do you mean by that?

R: So some students feel that their education in the classroom or their sense of safety or their well-being is being overlooked in favour of not excluding children that are impacting that and some parents have voiced that as well and that is really challenging because it is really difficult quite rightly I think to get other parents to care about other children. They care about theirs and they want their children to have the best experience and to be as academically successful as possible and if they feel that our non-exclusion approach compromises that that's a really difficult conversation to have.

I: And from your perspective do you feel that it compromises?

R: I can see why some people would feel that way but we also look at the bigger picture in that in the immediacy yes it might feel like there are sacrifices to those that are doing the right thing and do want to be here but we are a microcosm of society and if we don't do out a bit with these young people now they go out into the world when they finish here and they cause the same upset the same disruption which could impact these young people further down the line anyway so it is difficult because you're working with hypotheticals you know hypothetically speaking if we keep this student here then they will be less likely to be antisocial that'll be less likely to you know do all of those things out in the wider world but we don't know that we are working on the assumption that that is what may well happen to this young person if we were to exclude them so yes it might seem you know like we are sacrificing the many for the few in the moment but our wider ethos is about the betterment of society as a whole anyway we are trying to keep the young people that in other schools may well be excluded that would literally be in the school to prison pipeline otherwise we are trying to reduce their impact when they are young adults and there are no institutions like a school that is looking out for them, that is responsible for them so we're doing sort of what we can for the future rather than go immediate

I: I guess like can you measure the impact of that?

R: um no because it is hypothetical the only thing that we know are the statistics of how many students that are excluded end up in prison yeah and so we just work with trying to reduce that number in the present to hopefully reduce the number in the future

I: Yeah and do you know sort of what like teachers perspectives on this are and within the classroom how it impacts that?

R: I think on the whole the behaviour for learning in classrooms is really strong and it's really positive and our relational practice ethos has I think empowered staff more than they thought that it would um in terms of building relationships with young people that allow for good teaching and learning to take place in the classroom um but as is I think natural you know for any human the immediate reaction when something goes wrong can be well this young person needs to be excluded and this is why being a non-exclusion school doesn't work but across the year when you look at how many of these incidents actually take place and how um how and where they occur it is very rare and there will be behaviour incidents in the school that happened nobody else knows about yeah so the wider impact of those incidents is actually very minimal um unless that member of staff chooses to sort of start telling people about it. But in terms of the actual real-time impact yeah it is minimal um so I think the attitude that staff have is in theory they would all say that they agree with a non-exclusion school and I think for the most part when it feels like it's working they genuinely do believe it believe it and you know they do want what's best for children um but then sometimes when it's personal I think that flips a little bit yeah

I: How do you manage that?

R: it's just about you know talking to the member of staff and you know allowing them their platform to talk through how they feel and what has happened and how it's impacted them and what we can do to support them but ultimately they are teaching in a non-exclusion school and that has to be you know what they yeah what they sort of sign up for really

I: Is that the same for staff who have worked here for longer than the kind of non-exclusion approach has been in place?

R: I think there are staff that have worked here longer because and they were perhaps the ones that struggled to adapt yeah um there were members of staff that worked here when I went here and yeah they felt quite strongly against it um but it's about being consistent and

it's about having that bottom line and ultimately it is for the member of staff to decide whether or not it is for them or not because it's hard it is hard yeah when you are um dealing with a behaviour that particularly if you've got teacher friends that work sort of elsewhere in the city yeah when you're dealing with behaviour that you know other schools exclude for yeah that can be quite I think staff feel it's demoralizing and it's again it's sacrificing the well-being of the staff for the student but ultimately we are the adults and we have autonomy over our lives that the young people that we work with do not and sometimes it is a little bit about you know recognizing that you're in a much more privileged position that you can go home and feel safe and have all of your needs met where some of these young people do not have that and if some may seem it being sort of unfair in the moment but again in the grand scheme of things we ask you know I've had conversations with staff or I say who would you rather be would you rather be you tonight going home having had this happen to you or would you rather be this young person yeah and they almost always say oh yeah now I think I'd rather be me

I: Wow yeah no that's really that's really interesting. Do you notice those patterns in the students who are who would like typically be at risk of exclusion do you notice the patterns of you know their home lives and that kind of thing?

R: Yeah absolutely and in my role I have become quite adept at noticing a particular pattern and how it starts yeah and generally speaking I can predict what the trajectory of that young person is going to be unfortunately there are not enough resources at my disposal to do everything about it that I would like to and sometimes and I'm sure [the AH] will say the same thing working from the safeguard in perspective sometimes you are literally in a position where you have to sit and watch it and it just unfolds in front of you in real time and you feel powerless because there's nothing you can do about it because you know that the other um uh agencies and professionals and um you know resources that are in the city we know how stretched they are as well um and so we are in a position where we you know we have to work to thresholds so we are watching a student and we know what's going to happen and we have to wait until they get to a certain threshold before we can refer them on yeah even though we've identified it early and we have put what we can in place but you know some things that we cannot fix you know we are ultimately at the end of the day we are a school um and so that can be quite difficult it can be quite frustrating to see these patterns starting to emerge and knowing the likelihood of the outcomes yeah yeah and not being able to do anything about it but that is why we feel so strongly about the non-

exclusion because at the very least we can be doing that we can be not excluding the young people we can be making sure that they have got a place that they can come every day that is safe they have access to food they have access to water we've had students that you know come in and sleep because they need to sleep and that's what they need in that moment whereas if they have been excluded we don't know where they would be we don't know what they would be doing and how quickly they might escalate themselves on that trajectory at least we can sort of slow it down and we can sort of try something yeah before it gets to threshold level

Appendix 2: Interview questions for teachers and mentors

Rationale/policy:

- When was this approach introduced and why? What is your opinion on the school's non-exclusion approach?
- Is there a difference between inclusion and non-exclusion? What does a non-exclusion approach mean?
- How does this approach inform how you deal with student behaviours? And has this approach made a difference to behaviour?
- Staff training? Aims for students at the unit? Support offered?

Benefits:

- Has the approach improved things like behaviour, attainment, engagement in learning?
- Why/why not?

Challenges:

- What are the day to day challenges of having a non-exclusion approach?
- Teaching, learning, lessons? Benefits/challenges of having onsite provision?
- What do teachers/students/parents think? Are there benefits/challenges for them?
- Why do you think they think this?

Appendix 3: Interview questions for senior leaders

Rationale/policy:

- When was this approach introduced and why?
- Where did the idea come from? Has it changed over time? What's worked/not worked?
- Is there a difference between inclusion and non-exclusion? What does a non-exclusion approach mean? What is the best language to use- approach, policy?
- Why it is unofficial? How is inclusion measured beyond non-exclusion? How is inclusion measured beyond non-exclusion?
- How does this approach inform how you deal with student behaviours? And has this approach made a difference to behaviour?
- Staff training? Aims for students at the unit? Support offered? Has this changed since introducing this approach?

Benefits:

- Has the approach improved things like behaviour, attainment, engagement in learning? And for who?
- Why/why not? We know the benefits…why don't more schools adopt this policy?

Challenges:

- What are the day to day challenges of having a non-exclusion approach?
- Teaching, learning, lessons, for teachers, students?
- What do teachers/students/parents think? Are there benefits/challenges for them?
- Why do you think they think this?
- Are there any challenges in terms of resourcing a non-exclusion approach?
- Funding, staffing, school budget? How far this stretches?