VOICES FROM BEYOND THE SCHOOL GATES: STUDENTS' AND THEIR PARENTS' LIVED EXPERIENCE OF SCHOOL EXCLUSION

Simon Edwards*, Yusef Bakkali**, Natalie Walls, Vicky Kimmins, Claire Cobb, Alison Kirk and Beau Salanson

ABSTRACT

There have been growing concerns in England about increasing numbers of students, many of whom have Special Education Needs and Disabilities (SEND) or come from disadvantaged backgrounds, who experience education disaffection and failure (Farouk 2017; DfE 2017; Perraudin and McIntyre 2018; Edwards 2018). Moreover, there have been increasing calls for research that works collaboratively with students and other stakeholders (ie parents and school leaders) to address these issues (see Edwards and Brown 2020). This article explores students' and their parents' experiences in relation to school exclusion. Drawing on participant action research methods three former excluded students and their parents who successfully re-engaged their education were trained to carry out interviews with five recently excluded secondary school students and their parents. Findings from the interviews stand juxtaposed to political discourses that view exclusion as being influenced by poor parenting or student deviance. Rather, our findings illustrate a spiral of disillusionment, educational disengagement, fractured relationships between students, parents and teachers that emerges as our participants encountered a series of life events that coincided with the educational processes in schools. We consider these findings and, in line with Freire (1972; 2005), we propose a dialogic and relational intervention that enables excluded students to collaborate with their parents and school leaders to make meaningful changes to their own and their schools' practices in order to help them re-engage with their education.
Key words: *Students, Education, Exclusion, Voice, Participant, Action*

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* Corresponding and lead author: Dr Simon Edwards, School of Education and Sociology, University of Portsmouth.

** Co-author: Dr Yusef Bakkali, Stephen Lawrence Research Centre, Demontford University, Leicester.

Participant Action Researchers and co-authors:
Alison Kirk; Beau Salanson; Vicky Kimmins; Claire Cobb; Natalie Walls.

INTRODUCTION: GROWING CONCERNS ABOUT RISING SCHOOL EXCLUSION RATES

Despite attempts by successive governments in England to engage some students with their learning in the last 20 years there has been a substantial increase in formal and informal exclusions from secondary schools. Between 2000 and 2014 the number of school exclusions more than doubled (DfE 2015). Moreover, students with an Education Health Care Plan and / or Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) have the highest permanent and fixed term exclusion rates (DfE 2017). Disengagement with secondary education is also linked to mental health issues (The Children Society, 2014; Paul and Moser, 2009), poor educational outcomes, and an increased likelihood of not being in employment, educational or training (DfE, 2018). Moreover, a turn towards zero tolerance behaviour policies that correspond with a narrow academic curriculum supported by more traditional pedagogies has had little effect on exclusions, which continue to rise (DfE 2017). There is an urgent need for interventions that help educationally disengaged students in secondary schools re-engage with their education.

In response to this trend and coinciding with growing media interest (for example McIntyre 2018) and wider academic research that explores students' lived experiences of education issues they face (for example Farouk, 2017), in 2018 the Department for Education announced a review of school exclusions in England. Led by Edward Timpson, the review called for research evidence that explored head teachers' use of exclusion in practice and asked why some students are more likely to be excluded than others. Specifically, it aimed to explore practices and processes of exclusion. Students who had SEND, were from ethnic minority groups and / or who were on free school meals became central to the review alongside their parents.

In this article we present a study carried out in 2018–2019 that, although not a direct response to this call for evidence, also aimed to address these concerns. The study draws on participatory action research that aims to listen to students' and their parents' lived experiences of issues they faced and collaborate with them to develop interventions that addressed these issues. Specifically, our study aimed to create a dialogic space in which excluded students' and their parents' voices might be heard and acted upon through a participatory and collaborative approach. Here, the authors aimed to listen to students' and their parents' voices in relation to their lived experiences of exclusion in order to co-develop (with the students and their parents) an intervention that would help the students re-engage their education.

BACKGROUND: LISTENING TO VOICES AT THE MARGINS

There is a growing interest in notions of participant voice that coincides with the recent focus on students' and their parents' perceptions of exclusion and the government's call for their involvement in the research processes that attempt to address this. In particular, there has been a growth in research and practitioner approaches that purport to empower young people. Although central to youth work provision over the last fifty years (Lifelong Learning UK 2007/2015/2020) the notion of student voice has extended to become commonplace in mainstream schools across England (Sellman 2009). This has largely been in response to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNICEF 1989), which led to "an emphasis on exploring children's perceptions of their lives, their interests, priorities and concerns" (Clarke 2005, 12). However, student voice is often limited to having a say about the issues they face and responses to these issues rather than extending this to their participation in the development of interventions that aim to address their concerns or making meaningful changes to the institutions they attend. Indeed, much intervention and organisational change that responds to research with students remains adult led.

Action research studies have attempted to address this issue to some extent by creating communicative spaces (Habermas 1996) in which the "co-participants join one another in the struggle to remake the practices in which they interact" (Kemmis and McTaggart 2007, 277) and as such enact Aristotle's practical reasoning but they largely limit exploration and participatory action to classroom-based relationships and activities. Moreover, in England and other jurisdictions world-wide, there has also been a growth in research that extends beyond the classroom to inform school leadership and teaching (Whitty and Wisby 2017). Specifically, close to practice research (CtPR) has gained traction where, according to BERA's website, researchers work in partnership with practitioners to address problems in practice to support the application of critical thinking, and the use of evidence in practice (See Brown and Flood 2018; Mincu 2014). Yet, as with action research, although enabling a form of student voice and participatory action with practitioners and researchers CtPR is limited to exploring practices managed within the localised context of the school or classroom and interpreted through the lens of organisational discourses. Student voice and participatory action consequently becomes decontextualized and dis-embedded from their wider social and familial practices and relationships. Moreover, parental voice and their perspectives of issues that impact their children have been increasingly marginalised from these research – perhaps a reflection of political discourses that underpin English political debates (Cameron 2016) in education and social policy

(CSJ 2013) that view and respond to issues related to exclusion through a deficit and reductionist lens. That is, they view exclusion as influenced by specific causal events largely located in lack of parenting skills that extends to perceived moral or developmental deficit in the students.

Moreover, although extending their reach beyond the school gates to family and community sites government approaches to education policy changes have largely been limited to exploring students' perspectives in response to proposals that have already been set out (Edwards and Brown 2020). Indeed, Edward Timpson's call for evidence made it clear that the review of the processes for exclusions would not "seek to examine the powers head teachers have to exclude" (DfE 2018, 1). Rather, it stated that the next stage of the review would focus on addressing the range and quality of alternative provisions, which avoided examining or addressing the quality of provision or exclusion processes involved in mainstream schools. The call for excluded students' and their parents' perspectives of exclusion by Edward Timpson threatened therefore to become a token gesture that would undermine any meaningful review of exclusions by: i. limiting the participants voices to having a say about issues related to exclusion and, ii. limiting any subsequent participation in meaningful changes that would enable their position in the organisation to be altered.

However, in line with Arendt's (1958) discussion on the conditions in which humans flourish, we view voice as speech and action. It is dialogue in action (Biesta 2004; Freire 2005) - a transactional process (Sellman 2009). Moreover, we understand voice as authentically representing participants' perceptions (in the Husserlian sense) of their realities. Here, participants' perceptions of their lived experiences of school exclusion are taken as reliable and valid evidence of their realities. We therefore reject the notion of students' and their parents' voices as a distorted perspective (as opposed to perception) of a fixed reality located in the organisational and political discourses and power structures underpinned by education policy.

With this in mind, this article presents the methodological approach and findings from the first stage of a two-part study called Beyond the School Gates (funded by SLN: COP[1] March-September 2018). The first stage involved research, analysis of data and the development of a theoretical framework that would contextualise the participants' lived experiences within their own concrete realities. The second stage, to be published in a further article, aimed to draw on this theoretical framework in order to guide the students' and their parents' participation in the development of an intervention. Thus, enabling their voice to be acted upon as a process of speech and participatory action that would extend to addressing their concerns by meaningful changes to organisations that the students attend.

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[1] Sussex Learning Network: Community Outreach Programme

METHODOLOGY

This study followed a renewed interest in PAR approaches that seek to explore marginalised groups' voices (See Kemmis, MacTaggart and Nixon 2014; Bakkali 2017; Payne 2007) and address the limitations of action research and CtPR by taking into account a broader view of education and social change. Participants' voices are understood in relation to actions, beliefs and values that emerge historically and within wider social contexts (Kemmis and MacTaggart 2007).

PAR is not a new concept but there has been a renewed interest in its processes and critical emancipatory ideals (see Freire 1971) in England and internationally (Kemmis and MacTaggart 2007; Payne 2008), particularly among adults and young people from minority or marginalised groups. More recently, the use of PAR to research social justice issues among young people (YPAR) has gained traction (Powers and Allaman 2012; Youth Activism Project 2018). Here, participants' lived experiences emerge from dialogic spaces managed within complex and intersecting family and social relational sites providing a rich source of evidence that forms a platform from which to orientate transformation and change. Hence, PAR methods were employed because it stresses active involvement and intervention by stakeholder groups in a problem or set of practices that extend beyond the school gates. Furthermore, it is often conceptualised as a cyclical process involving reflexive planning, observing, reflecting and acting (Kemmis, McTaggart and Nixon 2014). In this way PAR works to create a participatory forum in which members of a community, in this case the excluded students and their parents, could collaborate to (re) conceptualise issues or practices embedded in their social world, with a view to intervening and improving the situation.

However, as stated earlier this study was PAR in nature and did not extend at this stage to specifically involving the excluded students or their parents in the processes of designing and carrying out the study. This was due to having no prior established relationships with the students who we anticipated working with. The study was developed in partnership with a community organisation who had a good relationship with these students and their parents and who would signpost them to the study via their website. Hence, their participation would become increasingly collaborative as the study progressed.

Rather, at this stage of the study the focus of our participant action research drew on the longstanding relationships between the lead author and three former excluded students and two of their parents with whom he had previously supported as youth worker and secondary school teacher. They were trained in qualitative research methods, reflective thinking and writing skills that would enable them to draw on their own lived experiences of exclusion in order to sensitise themselves to the voices of our student and parent participants.

The praxis underpinning the research approach allowed the PAR team to reflect on their own experiences of school exclusion and successful interventions that the author had facilitated in their trajectories. In this way the researchers had been involved in the development of this study long before the project's formal inception. In this sense the study was PAR in nature and beyond this the PAR team collaborated with both authors at every stage of the research process from research design to analysis, although these contributions were structured and assisted by the authors. This PAR approach was more fully developed to involve the excluded students and their parents at the focus of this study in the final dissemination stage that included them developing the intervention that would help the students to re-engage their education.

Research aims and tools

The aims of the study were to

1. Draw on the lived experiences of former excluded students and their parents to listen to the experiences and perceived needs of current excluded secondary school students and their parents
2. Respond to the findings from stage one to develop an intervention that helps current excluded students and their parents to draw on their own and wider resources to meet their developmental, wellbeing and education needs and re-engage education

For the purposes of this study, exclusion referred to students who had either experienced repeated fixed term exclusions over the year leading to the study or who had been permanently excluded from mainstream secondary schools and who now attended alternative provisions / FE colleges but who still experienced fixed term exclusions. Some of these students had also self-excluded ie refused to return to school following formal exclusions.

The first aim (stage one) drew on the notion that students' and their parents' perceptions of a meaningful education and the processes of exclusion would be located within wider familial and community discourses and aspirations that formed future orientated and collaboratively produced self-projects (Edwards 2018; Farouk 2017). It asked

How do excluded students and their parents understand education and the processes of exclusion in relation to their future aspirations and educational goals?

To answer this question the PAR team used semi-structured focus groups followed by interviews. Focus groups enabled a number of people to be interviewed

simultaneously and the responses of individuals in groups could be used to stimulate the responses of others. The focus groups involved placing a range pictures on A1 sheets of paper and asking the participants to write on post-it notes and discuss thoughts that came to mind when they saw these. The pictures represented sites in which the self-narrative and formal education coincided and explored students' and parents' aspirations in relation to these. These were i) a secondary school, ii) a classroom with a teacher teaching, iii) academic study books and the word *Education,* iv) a student standing in front of a painted wall with the words '*The good life (now)*', v) a student standing in front of a painted wall with the words '*The good life (future)*'. Each student and their parents were then invited to attend a semi-structured interview with a PAR team member (individually or students with parents) that would explore each theme in more depth and in relation to their personal circumstances.

PARTICIPANT SELECTION CRITERIA AND PROFILES

The aims, rationale and outline of the study were then forwarded to the gatekeeper of our community partner organisation, which was a parent carer forum. This person acted as the project safeguarding officer who also designed a poster that outlined the purpose of the study and invited parents and excluded students to attend focus groups and interviews at one of the organisation's designated sites. The organisation is a non-political central hub validated by the local authority Children's Services with whom parents and excluded students are put in contact with through local support organisations following exclusion, particularly if the excluded student has SEND. The lead author then created a short video to explain the aims of the study, which the community partner gatekeeper uploaded to YouTube and added a hyperlink to the poster. They then advertised the poster on their website and forwarded the web address to the local authority Children's Services for wider public dissemination.

Five families responded to the poster and each attended focus groups. Participants included five males aged 13–17 years and one female aged 14 years. Five of these students' mothers and two of their fathers also participated in the focus groups and interviews. Two parents attended focus groups and interviews without the students, as the students did not want to participate initially. However, the parents attended focus groups because they were keen to access support so they could help the students at home and when we carried out interviews at home the students wanted to participate. The contexts of each student's educational exclusion and family circumstances were that all of the students had an Education Health Care Plan (EHCP), which made them eligible for the highest tariff of funding for additional support (ie Education psychologist, specialist alternative

provision). All the students also had one or more forms of Special Education Need
or Disability (SEND) and had been excluded from mainstream school provisions
and were either now refusing to attend any provision or had also been excluded on
fixed term or permanently from their alternative provision at the time of the study
and also over the previous year. Two male students had become involved in drugs
misuse and concerns had been raised by their parents about involvement in county
lines drugs trafficking for which the police had become involved. Three male
students had been bullied at school and had become reclusive and the female
student had become reclusive following exclusion. All the parents had either full
or part time employment except one, who had had a brain haemorrhage and could
no longer work. Employments ranged from former micro-biologist with PhD in
micro-biology, police support workers, early years practitioner, small business
owners. Two of the parents had experienced break up with their partners and the
other parents were married or co-habiting with partners. All of the students and
parents were white British other than one male student who was of mixed race and
lived with his aunt (who was now his legal guardian) and her husband.

Four focus groups were carried out and two parents and one student attended
two focus groups. The community partner gatekeeper (or designated member of
staff) remained in the building for the duration of each focus group. Each
participant was then invited to attend a further interview and provided with an
information sheet that outlined the rationale for the interview. All the students and
parents agreed to attend an interview and asked for these to be carried out at their
homes. Interviews were carried out approximately three weeks after each focus
group but communication between parents and the authors was maintained during
this time via email or telephone in order to make arrangements and to follow up
with any further queries or lines of inquiry the parents or students had. After the
interviews the participants were offered the opportunity to participate in the
development of an intervention that would be informed by the findings and would
aim to support them to meet their developmental and education needs at the next
stage of the project. Thus enabling them to become participant action researchers
themselves and to collaborate in the processes of making meaningful changes to
issues that affected their lives.

LISTENING TO VOICES: SENSITIZING THE PAR TEAM TO STUDENTS' AND THEIR PARENTS' EXPERIENCES

Following the focus groups and interviews two of the research team transcribed
the audio recordings and printed them ready for dissemination at a data presenta-
tion and analysis training event carried out by the lead authors at the end of May
2018. At this event the authors helped the research team to develop their reflective

and critical thinking skills and to understand sensitizing processes that would enable them to identify and analyse key findings.

This process involved each researcher reading a chapter from Hooks (2010) that explored notions of reflective and critical thinking and how they could apply these to data analysis. They then considered Bourdieu's (1993) habitus and Freire's 2005 concientization in order to become sensitized (Blumer 1954) to the conditions in which participants' responses were grounded and also their own assumptions related to their own lived experiences that might bias their analysis of this data. The researchers were then asked to draw on this knowledge and analyse the contexts from which each participant's responses in the transcripts emerged. This included family relationships, type of exclusion experienced (permanent or fixed / informal or informal), gender of participants, educational interests and individual and family aspirations. They then read these transcripts and highlighted sections that stood out to them (see photo 1 below). They were then asked to summarise these highlighted sections in one or two words and write them down on post-it notes. Now they were becoming sensitised to each participants' experiences in the transcripts. The key words, once written on post-it notes by each team member, were then placed on a large table in groups based on similarity (see photo 2 below) in order to identify themes. The key words and themes were then analysed to develop a theoretical framework.

KEY FINDINGS

The findings are presented under three headings; *sensitising words*, *themes*, and *theoretical framework*. These summarise the findings from each stage of the data analysis process carried out by the researchers[2].

Sensitising words

A range of key words and phrases stood out that related directly to the students' and their parents' experiences of educational exclusion that also coincided with the construction and maintenance of a future orientated self-narrative. Below are examples of key words that stood out to Alison and Vicky who were members of the PAR team (photos 1 and 2)

Some of the words above were listed by both Alison and Vicky even though the transcripts they had been analysing were different and neither researcher had

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[2] N.b. Beau had found full time employment during the research period and remained in contact but was unavailable to attend the analysis day. One of the authors therefore took Beau's place in order to analyse his transcripts.
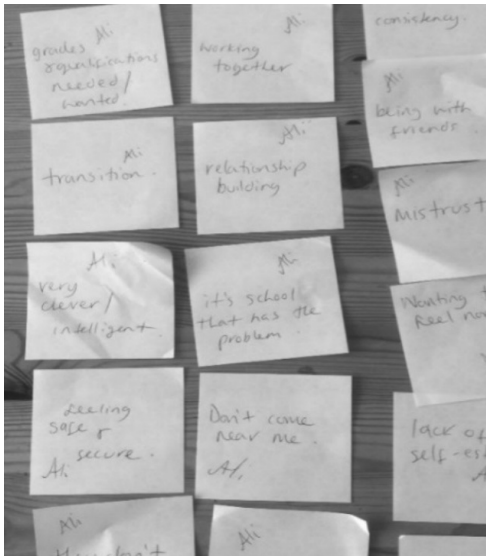
Photo 1: Alison's key words

Photo 2. Vicky's key words

read the other's transcripts. For example Alison noted 'Being with friends' and 'Relationship building'. Vicky also noted 'Doesn't like being separated from his friends'. Alison noted 'Grades / qualifications needed and wanted' and 'Very clever / intelligent' and Vicky noted 'likes to teach himself' and very intelligent, enjoys learning.' Alison noted 'Barrier to learning' and punishment' and Vicky also noted 'looked on as a naughty kid' and school polices not meeting needs'. These correlations were also repeated by Claire, Natalie and one of the author's in their own key word analysis For example the words 'stuck – future' (author) and 'Wants a positive future' (Natalie) correlated with 'Unsure of future' (Claire).

Themes

Similar key words were then identified by each PAR team member and placed in thematic groups (see photographs 3 and 4 below).

Eight themes emerged, which are presented below with the key words:

1. School
    As long as he's happy, Not sat at home on benefits, Reduced timetable, Not positive at school any more, Behaviour got worse, Results of exclusion, Lowering Aspirations, Own goals, Don't have high expectations, Thrives on saying "Well done", Pushed to the side, Size of classroom, Isolation, Governor

Photo 3   **Photo 4**

meetings, Stupidity (of school), Low level disruption, School policies not meeting needs, Looked on as naughty child, Got behind, Expelled, Them and us, Referrals, Policies, Discipline / Small rules, Likes school structure despite all the issues, Rules, Punishment, Detention, No proof If a teacher believes that, it is likely that the child has done it, Educational Health Care Plan

2. Relationships

Team building, Detachment issues, Parent and child – Try to be friends, Relationship building, No friends, Being left out by teachers and peers, Let down at school, Doesn't like being segregated from friends, Doesn't fit in, Lack of trust, value - Being the cool kid, Locked in, Working together, Peer pressure, How children behave nowadays, Mistrust, Beings with friends, Bullying in school and continuing outside of school – family relocated

3. SEND support

SEND late diagnosis, Lack of ASD understanding from teachers and tutors, Lack of support in the classroom, School can't handle his needs, CAMHS, Autism, Support stopped, Fighting for support, Barrier to learning, Goals, Diagnosed, Didn't get the support, Didn't understand.

4. Misunderstanding

No faith in the school system, It's the school that has the problem, Can't cope with her, Always got the blame, Thoughts about going back into College,

You only realise at a later date, Failed him, School let him down, They don't understand, Pushed from pillar to post, Misunderstood, Not being listened to or taken seriously, Repeated many times, Not being told things, Multiple exclusions for misunderstanding.

5. Emotions and feelings

     Can't sit still, Inquisitive the bored, Happiness, Wanting to feel normal, Bored very quickly, Feeling safe and secure, Doesn't like talking, Lack of self esteem, Fear of failure, Needs to feel control, Don't come near me

6. Future aspirations

     Wants to learn, Looking for acceptance in society and fitting in, Doesn't absorb stuff, Choices, Grades, qualifications needed, Transition, wants a positive future, Wants to get qualifications, Concerns for finishing current course, Needing to achieve, Very intelligent, Enjoys learning, Likes to teach himself, Very clever / intelligent, Consistency

7. Struggles

     Won't put their hands up, Couldn't write, Labelled, Too embarrassed to put hand up and ask for help, Distracted, Struggles to talk to people, Struggles to stick with anything, Struggling, Not good at sitting still

8. Diversion

     Consistency, Lots of things impacting, Good with his hands, Hands on person, Not academic, Stuck, Future choices, fixing bikes.

DATA ANALYSIS

The PAR team then analysed these themes in order to identify a unifying theoretical framework. Here, the team explored correlations between key words in each theme by moving word clusters around each other and then each person calling out words that best reflected (or signified) these clusters in relation to each other. Words included 'Parenting responsibility', 'The old Frankie back' (Claire was reminded of Frankie's mother saying this in her transcript), 'Hard work', 'Spiral', 'acknowledge and openness and blame'. The key word that stood out to Vicky was SPIRAL, which she wrote down and placed in the centre of each word cluster (see photos 4 and 5). She then explained that the word clusters reminded her of her own experiences of exclusion, which felt like she was spiralling out of control with no particular trajectory. She explained that each time she had encountered professionals who had attempted to identify causes of exclusion, her behaviour, low attainment and psychological or social and developmental issues this increased her feeling of spiralling out of control. Her experiences had been such that increased input from professionals had speeded up this process for which there was no

centrally identifiable causal effect or defined trajectory. She then placed the thematic groups in various positions around this word to demonstrate her point. Whichever position she placed the cluster of words in they still corresponded with the theoretical idea of a 'spiral'. A word search was entered into each transcript by using ctrl/f and entering the word 'spiral' in the search bar. One of the authors then noted his reflections and notes made on his transcript that corresponded with this theoretical idea. The section below was taken from an interview with Tasmin, Jake's mother

> *Simon – It does sound as though, feels like he has got himself in a hole and he knows that and he ain't gonna get himself out of it*
> *Vicky – I don't think he can see a different way forward, I think he's just stuck in a <u>spiral</u> and it could go down whereas we need to help him see something*
> *Tasmin – And I think if you tried speaking about it, that's where he'd start shouting over you because he knows it but he doesn't want to acknowledge it because that's hard work*

Here, Jake's actions appeared to be avoiding contact with organisations and the world outside his family. For example Tasmin explained that since becoming excluded from mainstream school in December 2017 and attending an alternative provision on a part time timetable from January 2018 he had started to become involved in crime with other students who also attended the provision. He had gradually lowered his aspirations to the point that he was happy to be a builder rather than a construction engineer, which he had previously aspired to. Tasmin had also explained that more recently Jake had started refusing to leave his bedroom and had not wanted to meet institutional representatives related to education or Children's Services. Actually, Jake had refused to attend any focus groups or interviews and it was only during a later visit to meet Tasmin at home with Simon and Alison on 8th June that he had asked to discuss his issues and experiences. Jake's actions were not in isolation though.

Further analysis of all the transcripts was carried out by reviewing them through the theoretical sensitising lens of 'spiral'. On analysis of Maddy and Jo's transcripts it was noticeable that they too had become withdrawn since experiencing school exclusion and also remained indoors playing on computer games in their bedrooms. They too had refused to talk to any professionals related to school or education or Children's Services. Furthermore, Neil's transcript also showed that following an incident with a teacher in a cookery class, which had been unresolved, this had also led to a spiral of exclusion and gradual educational disengagement. Moreover, these experiences had speeded up a spiral of internal (to the student)

conflict, frustration, misunderstanding that had culminated in the parents explaining that their child was crashing and falling apart – spiralling out of control

> *Tasmin: I probably couldn't get him (Jake) into a school uniform now… whereas he wouldn't get the support because his learning was good but now its slipped, he was able to maintain it on of his natural intelligence, but now its crashed*
>
> *Julia: I've just called my child (Maddy) a F***ing dole dosser(…). She thinks she's being attacked by certain teachers, even if you just talk to her in a normal voice but says you haven't written enough on that page, she hears you shouting, she can't handle it and then the defiant rudeness*
>
> *Tina: Neil was at cooking college it didn't go well because he er walks quite fast then when he was moving the knives he was moving too quick so he kept on getting suspended … the pastoral care was horrible, the SENCO was disgusting, they just you know it culminated in in fact Neil's younger brother, we've been moved a year now, I just took him out of the school cause it got too bad*

This spiral had unfortunately sometimes led to much needed support being withdrawn from the student, as Julia explained

> *Julia: We get funding from adoption support but that's been pulled because Maddy won't engage*

Some parents and students had subsequently lowered their employment aspirations in response to these issues, as the spiral continued. Tasmin pointed this out

> *Tasmin: he used to be a very good speller and a very neat writer but something, you can see now in all his books he just rushes and its scribbles because he doesn't care…he (Jake) did say he wanted to be a mechanic before, you know like normal scooters, he took them apart, take all the parts and then get old parts from his mates, put them together and sell them, like he's always been doing stuff like that, so he can always make money can Jake, so I know that he's able to do these things*

Yet, all the students wanted to learn, as Jo explained

> *Simon: So if you didn't go to school would you want to go to school?*
> *Jo: Yes*

Simon: So what would you want to learn?
Jo: Science, English, erm physics.,,, I want to make my life better and go back to mainstream

Neil reflected these thoughts when Simon asked him to summarise his hopes for the future

Neil: Just to get the grades and qualifications you need.'

Julia spoke on Maddy's behalf in Maddy's absence about her future aspirations, which Maddy confirmed in writing, as she preferred to write on the interview question sheet for the perceived safety of her bedroom

Julia: she knows she has to get the grades, she wants the grades

Students were also perceived by their parents to be intelligent and capable of learning, as can be seen in Tasmin's comments about Jake and also Saskia's comments about Jo

Saskia: Jo is really bright and an amazing learner but he's missed years of school – four years out of eight
Julia: She (Maddy) is very intelligent

Interestingly, Jo, Jake and Maddy had all started teaching themselves new skills since being excluded from school. Jake had started taking scooters apart and putting them together to sell them and Jo explained that he took games controllers apart at home and transferred internal processors to make them bespoke to his needs. He had also searched the internet with his mother Saskia to read about Albert Einstein. Maddy had started to develop her appearance by experimenting with clothing designs, hair and makeup. The findings show that the students' desire to learn had not diminished with exclusion, neither had their aspirations. Rather, self-education (re-building computer consoles, scooters, design / hair & Beauty etc) within perceived safe spaces (bedroom or with peers in town) helped the students reduce their anxiety related to exclusion and disaffection and the external pressures to conform to untenable expectations in school or at home. This mitigated the effects of this spiral of disaffection and confusion by attempting to find a way forward on their own terms in order to meet their aspirations. This process had been encouraged by the parents who seemed pleased that their child was trying to learn - any learning and education (whether online or self-led) was better than none.

Moreover, in addition to having to manage issues related to SEND each student was also attempting to manage the transitional processes of adolescence. Being cool in relation to peers, as Tasmin and Julie explained about Jake and Maddy's behaviours, was becoming increasingly important to them. However, adolescence is a transitional stage in which students move away from parental input towards the influence of peers as a process rather than a defined step (Farouk 2017). Hence, the findings also showed some students, although rejecting some of their parental input, had also attempted to maintain this relationship and the ontological safety and security this had previously provided. For example, Julie explained that although their relationship was fractured Maddy had recently mentioned to her that they had not been shopping together for a long time and had subsequently asked Julie to go shopping with her. However, Julie said she had dismissed this request as she thought Maddy had needed to re-engage her education first. The implication here was that Maddy would be allowed to go shopping as a reward for compliance rather than as part of their family relationship building activities.

DISCUSSION: A SPIRAL OF COMPETING DISCOURSES

The data findings and analysis show these students' had an innate creativity, a desire to learn (Arendt 1958; Freire 2005) and future aspirations (Giddens 1991; Edwards 2018). However, each of these attributes had diminished but not been extinguished as they experienced continued educational exclusion. New pathways and opportunities for becoming and achieving these aspirations were being explored by the students although tentatively and largely in isolation from external support, parents and peers. For example, Tasmin explained that Jake rarely discussed his personal issues with her and that their relationship had started to become strained due to his educational exclusion from mainstream school and being placed in an alternative provision on a reduced timetable. Julia and Kira's experiences were similar with their relationships with Maddy and Frankie respectively. However, these parents had tried to support each student in their personal, social and academic development and to meet school expectations by supporting professionals as they became involved the students' re-engagement with education following their exclusion. Yet, the students had each withdrawn further and 'crashed' as Tasmin pointed out. Subsequently, relationships between students and their parents, students and the school and students and their peers had become fractured and their behaviours and educational trajectory had spiralled out of control leading to subsequent and ongoing exclusions and educational disaffection. Hence, their individual trajectories were significantly influenced by these processes and external factors rather than their rational choice. Subsequent

interventions, albeit by professional organisations, parents, peers[3] or self-interventions such as withdrawing into bedrooms had the effect of speeding up this spiral of confusion, extreme emotions and behaviours. This spiral was further compounded the debilitating effects of, and lack of support for each student's special educational needs and or disabilities (SEND). A process that had served to increase the parents' and students' disorientation in time and space – that is in relation to the self-narrative story and the home, school, and community relational sites / spaces. Consequently, a culture of blame developed that led to increasingly fractured relationships between students, parents and school staff and organisational representatives.

To identify and address specific causal influences for students' educational disengagement is an untenable and unfruitful approach, as this had increased the spiral effect, which led to the withdrawing of the little remaining support the parents and parents had (as seen with Maddy). However, it is evident from the findings that the students were using their critical faculties to negotiate school, organisational structures and obstacles they encountered as they attempted to access and re-engage their education and future aspirations. Yet, as opportunity diminished this may well have impacted their motivation to access their education in terms of school curricular learning. Nonetheless, their creativity, desire to learn and develop socially and academically and to achieve their aspirations remained - albeit expressed in more holistic forms. Individual agency was being exercised in the form of ascriptions made to the self through exaggerated makeup, hairstyles and design or in the form of taking apart and re-assembling consoles and scooters.

In line with DfE (2016) the students were indeed taking responsibility for their own determination either through attempting to rebuild relationships with parents (Maddy) or developing relationships with new peers (Frankie and Jake) although sometimes in relationships that might be perceived as detrimental to their wellbeing. However, in line with Giddens (1991) the findings show these students were attempting to re-establish Umwelt (a trust cocoon) within routines of normalcy – that is within every day relationships that they had once deemed normal. They were creating pathways to maintain these processes under the conditions of restricted personal agency, which in turn limited their ability to achieve the good life found in a good job and personal happiness. Hence, alternative pathways were being explored via the use of more holistic skill sets but this process of developing agency was bounded by a spiral of conflicting external (organisational

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[3] For example, Jake was enticed towards criminal acts by other excluded students that may in itself be seen as a peer intervention – see Farouk (2017).

and relational) and internal (emotional and psychological) discourses and limited learning opportunities. Consequentially, the students' and their parents' aspirations decreased as the spiral of conflicting influences and discourses increased.

This suggests that, in response to personal, social and institutional factors leading to and influencing students' school exclusion and subsequent spiral of disaffection and educational disengagement each student and their parents had been attempting, through various means, to re-establish a sense of Umwelt (Giddens 1991). That is, a sense of ontological security (sense of knowing who I am) in relational sites. Giddens claims that is within routines of normalcy, relationships that we encounter in our daily routines, that a sense of ontological wellbeing or 'Umwelt' is established and maintained. These routines form a framework from within which their future self-narrative is orientated. If fractured extreme existential anxiety and ontological insecurity can be encountered (Giddens 1991; Edwards 2018). Re-establishing this sense of ontological security and maintaining the routines of normalcy in order for the individual to re-negotiate their self-narrative and future orientated goals becomes a primary concern. Hence, the students' desire to learn had not diminished but access to education that enabled them to reach their future aspirations was significantly restricted.

Hence, the lowering of students' and their parents' aspirations for their future employment and educational outcomes but the maintaining of educational engagement was managed by any means that might work. Yet, the students and their parents approached this goal from different perspectives. The parents had attempted to engage the support provided by educational psychologists, school leaders, social services and SEND specialist support groups. Where this had not made significant impact on the student's educational engagement the parents had lowered their aspirations for their child and, as with Julie and Tasmin, focused blame for lower aspirations on the student's laziness or other SEND, which they believed had not been adequately addressed. Although there may well be some validity in these claims, what stands out from the findings is that each approach by parents, students and professionals had been counter to their intended ends resulting in a spiral of further educational disengagement and relational conflict between students, parents and school staff. However well-meaning and intentioned, subsequent interventions had actually increased rather than decreased the spiral of conflict and disengagement.

NEXT STEPS: CREATING SAFE, FAMILY SPACES TO RE-ORIENTATE THE SELF-PROJECT

This theoretical framework was summarised by the lead author and presented to the PAR team. They were asked to discuss appropriate responses that might support the students and parents at the next stage of the study. They pointed out that any

intervention that attempted to guide these excluded students and their parents towards predetermined educational or developmental outcomes or goals would be counter-productive and would increase the spiral of confusion and disorientation. However, Vicky and Claire considered their own lived experiences and explained that when they had encountered this spiral of disengagement and confusion Vicky had tried to create safe relational spaces that she called 'shelters' in order to inoculate her from external input that was unintentionally speeding up the spiral. She explained that discussing and expressing her experiences and concerns with her mum, Claire, and the lead author at home had enabled them both to re-establish a positive relationship and subsequently enabled them to define a good life they wanted both at the time and over the following two years. Considering these thoughts and reflecting on the theoretical idea of 'spiral' and their own experiences the other research team members agreed that further intervention would require a similar approach in which they would be trained as mentors to create these 'safe' relational spaces. Essentially, mentors would join the excluded students and their parents in the co-creation of a relational shelter and to help them remain within this relational space until they had re-established a strong family relationship, felt safe and had started to collaboratively re-orientate their future self-narratives and goals. Focusing on these processes, the team agreed, would slow down the spiral of disorientation thus allowing the students and their parents to identify, source and access the resources available to them in order for to re-engage their education and achieve their goals.

Theoretically, this approach would support the maintenance of a future orientated and collaboratively produced (Giddens 1991; Edwards 2018) self-narrative by re-establishing routines of normalcy. Once re-established the students' and their parents' sense of ontological security would be re-asserted and in turn would enable the collaborative re-orientation of personal goals and aspirations.

CONCLUSIONS: ENABLING EXCLUDED STUDENTS' AND THEIR PARENTS' VOICES TO BE HEARD

The excluded students and their parents who participated in this study were then contacted and invited to meet with the PAR team to discuss these findings and develop an intervention. The PAR team, students and parents agreed a mentoring project in which members of the PAR team would work in pairs alongside a student and their parents. The mentoring project would be based on youthwork principles of developing informal and relational activities that created a space in which students would consider their educational goals. The PAR team mentors would then draw on their own lived experiences to guide and support the students and their parents to develop the skills and confidence to access resources in order to meet these goals. This would extend to supporting them to meet MPs, disseminate

and share their experiences in conferences, attend school meetings to address their concerns such that organisational changes could be made to meet their needs. In this way these students' and their parents' voices were being heard *and* acted upon in a collaborative and participatory process.

However, we recognise the processes used in this study require further consideration if the voices of excluded students and their parents are to be listened to at senior leadership level in schools and in policy. At the beginning of this study we understood there was no guarantee that the findings would enable our students and their parents to make meaningful changes to education policy or the processes of exclusion in the institutions they attend. With this in mind we developed a study that took a positive (rather than deficit) view of excluded students and their parents that recognised the capability of each participant to access the resources to access their development and education needs. This process, we argued, involves a democratisation of academic inquiry across social space, where those who occupy share social worlds become the investigators in shared issues and practices.

Yet, although this process has led to a theoretical framework to guide subsequent participatory work with excluded students and their parents, this process may prove limited in its ability to make meaningful changes (ie through participatory action) in policy or organisational practices that create the contexts for exclusion. Nonetheless, although a small scale and localised study, it has enabled community members with shared experiences of exclusion to participate in academic inquiry that has provided emancipatory opportunities for themselves and the students and parents in this study to voice their experiences and address the issues related to exclusion within the family context.

The study has since progressed and a further article is being developed that outlines and presents the findings from the subsequent mentoring intervention that extended to a further five families and has since been established as a youth charity called Beyond the School Gates. Having a voice is indeed a process of speech *and* action - a work in progress.

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