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Department of Education, University of Oxford

What is in a Form?

**The Variation between English Local
Authorities' Exclusion Rates and their
Organizational Artifacts**

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St Hilda's College

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Abstract

School exclusion, which is the practice of removing a student from school for a fixed or indefinite period of time, has become an increasingly researched and analyzed topic. This is unsurprising given the significant rise in its use in certain countries. There are increased efforts to understand the phenomenon more comprehensively, and in particular, what drives some areas to exclude more than others.

The following thesis is a comparative paper that examined school exclusion variation in England, specifically at the local authority level. The research included two phases of data collection—1) Document Review and 2) Secondary Data Review—on 10 different local authorities.

Phase 1 was driven by the document review. Local authority documents—specifically, exclusion forms and exclusion parent notification letters—were evaluated to determine how authorities vary in the way they interpret and present information about school exclusion. Additionally, local authority documents were analyzed to determine how closely they aligned with national exclusion guidance and what, if anything, they could reveal about the local authority's ethos regarding exclusion.

Phase 2 was driven by the secondary data review. The exclusion rates of the 10 local authorities were analyzed to determine what relationship, if any, exists between the way a local authority presents information about school exclusion in documents and the actual rate of exclusion in that authority. Specifically, do authorities with more punitive language in documents have higher rates of exclusion, and vice versa if the language appears less punitive?

The findings from Phase 1 demonstrated that there was significant variation in the way local authorities presented and interpreted exclusion information and the degree to which documents aligned with national guidance. However, detecting ethos was complex. Documents are one element of an organization's culture, and thus need to be further contextualized. The findings from Phase 2 showed that local authorities at extreme ends of the spectrum—i.e., with incredibly high or incredibly low rates of exclusion—did seem to demonstrate significantly more punitive and less punitive language in documents respectively. However, there is no apparent pattern if one moves away from the extremes and evaluates authorities in the middle of the spectrum. This suggests the need for continued investigation into the multitude of factors that drive local variation in exclusion rates.

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List of Abbreviations

AP	Alternative Education Provision
BSP	Behavioral Support Plan
CAF	Common Assessment Framework
DCSF	Department for Children, Schools, and Families
DfE	Department for Education
LA	Local Authority
SEN	Special Education Needs
UK	United Kingdom

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What is in a Form? The Variation between English Local Authorities' Exclusion Rates and their Organizational Artifacts

Chapter One: Introduction

1.1 Background

According to recent guidance from England's Department for Education (DfE), "good discipline in schools is essential to ensure that all pupils can benefit from the opportunities provided by education" (Department for Education [DfE], 2017, p. 6). And within English schools, a common disciplinary practice is school exclusion, or the act of removing a student from school grounds for a specified amount of time due to behavioral misconduct (DfE, 2022). Thousands of students are excluded in England each year—more so than in any other country within the United Kingdom (UK)—but there is still debate around how equitable or effective the practice even is in the first place (Parsons, 2008; Parsons & Castle, 1998). In the field of exclusion research, there is extensive literature that showcases how it can have negative short-term and long-term effects on a student's mental health, educational outcomes, job opportunities, etc. (Cole et al., 2019; Daniels, 2011; Martin-Denham, 2020; Parsons & Castle, 1998; Puckett et al., 2019). Additional research highlights how the practice often disproportionately affects marginalized and disadvantaged children (Ashurst & Venn, 2014).

Despite these widely-documented and researched consequences, exclusion remains the "principle means" for dealing with disruptive behavior in England (Ashurst & Venn, 2014, p. 1). Several scholars attribute this to national factors, like England's culture, politics, and the general history of punitive practices within the country (Ashurst & Venn, 2014; Parsons, 2005). However, what about the nuances in cultural attitudes, policies, and practices towards school exclusion at the *local* level? Are there significant variations in the ways that local authorities (LAs) present exclusion information to the community, communicate about it with parents, and record it in forms? How much do rates of exclusion actually vary between LAs? These are some of the primary questions explored in the following research study. Through document review and secondary data

review of 10 LAs, this study seeks to understand the ways in which exclusion is conceptualized, discussed, and practiced at a local level.

Before outlining the specific research questions that drive this study, the following section provides a more detailed account of what exclusion entails and the specific ways that exclusion was conceptualized within this research investigation.

1.2 Defining and Conceptualizing School Exclusion

1.2.1 What is School Exclusion?

The definition of school exclusion and the criteria used to exclude students can vary across the world. In the following dissertation, I leverage the general definition used in the UK. As previously mentioned, school exclusion in the UK refers to the practice of removing a student from school grounds in response to certain behavioral misconduct (DfE, 2022). Overall, there are two types of school exclusion: fixed period and permanent. A fixed period exclusion is fundamentally a form of suspension, where the student is allowed to return to school after a pre-determined amount of time. This amount of time can range from part of a day to multiple days, depending on the infraction (DfE, 2022). On the other hand, permanent exclusion is equivalent to expulsion. This means the student is *not* allowed to return to school unless they are reinstated by the appropriate processes (i.e., school review meetings and independent review panels) (GOV.UK, 2015). In the UK, the criteria for a permanent exclusion are as follows. It should only be employed:

- 1) “In response to a serious breach or persistent breaches of the school's behaviour policy” (DfE, 2022, p. 13).
- 2) “Where allowing the pupil to remain in school would seriously harm the education or welfare of the pupil or others such as staff or pupils in the school” (DfE, 2022, p. 13).

Additionally, examples of the types of behavior that warrant a permanent exclusion include, but are not limited to, physical assault, verbal abuse, and bullying. With the definition of school exclusion established, the next two sections describe the specific ways school exclusion was conceptualized in this study.

1.2.2 Conceptualizing School Exclusion as Punitive

In this research investigation, there are two distinct ways that I chose to conceptualize school exclusion. Firstly, I conceptualized school exclusion as a highly punitive practice. In other words, exclusion is ultimately a form of punishment or a “sanction” in reaction to certain types of student behavior (DfE, 2017, p. 6). It is a method for dealing with “challenging children” and disruptive behavior in a way that places blame and punishment on the child (Parsons, 2005, p. 188). Even though, as the DfE states, sometimes challenging behavior is the result of the “unmet needs” of the student (DfE, 2017, p. 6). And although there are regulations in place to ensure excluded students get alternative provision (AP) or an alternative option for receiving education during their sanction period, it is questionable whether the exclusion process is able to, or even meant to, address those “unmet student needs”. Therefore, throughout this study, school exclusion is conceptualized as a distinctly punitive action.

1.2.3 Conceptualizing School Exclusion as Multi-Level

In addition to seeing exclusion as a highly punitive practice, I also conceptualized school exclusion as a complex, multi-level, systems-based phenomenon. Therefore, a systems theory framework was applied to investigate it, specifically, Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory.

Bronfenbrenner’s theory states that there are varying levels of environmental factors that can influence a child’s development (Guy-Evans, 2020). These levels include the chronosystem, which deals with the historical and life-spanning factors that influence children; the macrosystem, which includes the influence of cultural, political, and economic factors; the exosystem, which includes agencies, school boards, and the extended communities that can affect a child; the mesosystem, which are the relationships between the exosystem and a child’s inner circle (e.g., The way a child’s family interacts with their community is part of the mesosystem); and lastly, the microsystem, which are the intimate factors, like family, peers, and teachers, that directly influence the child (Guy-Evans, 2020). Additionally, a core element of Bronfenbrenner’s theory is that these levels are porous. In other words, there are active relationships between them, and a change within one level or system can have reverberating effects

throughout all of them (Guy-Evans, 2020; Khalid, 2021). In essence, there is a complex, multi-level ecosystem at play.

It is through this “Bronfenbrenner-systems-theory-lens” that I chose to view exclusion. This is because the way that school exclusion operates—the people and agencies involved, the effects it can have, and the factors that drive it—involves various levels of the Bronfenbrenner system. From the interactions between students and teachers and the behavior management styles used in classrooms (microsystem), to the national attitudes and legislative policies that shape exclusion (macrosystem), to the historical affinity a country may have to exclude students (chronosystem)—it is an incredibly systems-based phenomenon. To illustrate this even more definitively, I will provide a few examples of how exclusion operates in a systems-based way in the UK specifically.

As mentioned above, the macrosystem deals with the political and cultural factors that can affect exclusion. In the UK, this would mean looking at how specific policies and legislation affect exclusion. For example, one major piece of UK legislation that significantly impacted exclusion guidance was the Educational Act of 2011. The act stipulated important exclusion regulations, like the overarching legal requirements that English schools and school officials must follow regarding how exclusion occurs, who has the power to exclude, and how exclusion can be overturned (The National Archives, n.d.). Then, at the exosystem level, departments like the DfE interpret the law and produce documents to guide local actors—e.g., schools, headteachers, and LAs—about their role in exclusions, the rules they should follow, their responsibilities, legal requirements, levels of accountability, etc. (DfE, 2022). Moving to the mesosystem level, there are the LAs or local units of government that are responsible for providing education services and maintaining the schools in their designated community (Local Government Association, n.d.). Additionally, LAs are entitled to create their own methods for sharing exclusion guidance with the schools in their purview. This includes, but is not limited to, providing exclusion FAQs, exclusion informational webpages, parent leaflets, forms for the schools to record exclusions, etc. Finally, there is the microsystem level, which includes the interactions between teachers and students. Ultimately, this is the level at which the actual exclusion process begins, since teachers interpret what behavior is and is not worthy of raising up for disciplinary actions, and the

headteacher is the only one who has the power to exclude a child (DfE, 2022). Moreover, at the microsystem level, there are all the intimate factors, like racial background, level of income, and home life, that can affect whether a student is more or less likely to get excluded. For instance, Black, Caribbean students and economically disadvantaged students are significantly more likely to be excluded (McCluskey et al., 2019). Overall, what the above examples demonstrate is that exclusion is the interaction of a set of complex forces: political, social, organizational, and cultural.

With base conceptualizations established, the next section will outline the overall trends in school exclusion, first looking at the UK more broadly, and then focusing on England. Following this, a rationale will be given for why this study chooses to focus on England specifically.

1.3 School Exclusion Trends in the UK and England as the Outlier

Trends in school exclusion rates have become an increasingly researched and investigated topic, especially within the UK (Duffy et al., 2021; Gazeley et al., 2015; McCluskey et al., 2019; Power & Taylor, 2021). This is unsurprising given the fact that school exclusion rates have generally been on the rise in the UK since about 2011, causing widespread concern and inquiry (McCluskey et al., 2019). However, despite the almost universal increases in school exclusion in the UK, there is still a great deal of variation in exclusion rates between the different jurisdictions. For example, in Northern Ireland, in the 2018/19 school year, “30 [students] were permanently excluded”, in Scotland, that number was just 3, and in Wales, “246...were permanently excluded” (DfE, 2020, as cited in Duffy et al., 2021, pp. 4-5). In comparison, over 7,000 students were permanently excluded in England (DfE, 2020, as cited in Duffy et al., 2021).

Before going into the significance of the above trends and the blatant disparity between England and the rest of the UK, it is important to note that doing cross-country comparisons can often be a tricky and complex venture. This is because international comparisons do not always present the most accurate picture. Different jurisdictions can have different rules around what constitutes a permanent exclusion, how to record them, or how much leeway is given to illegal or unofficial forms of exclusion (i.e., Off-rolling students or moving them to different schools) (Cole et al., 2019). With that being said, it

is evident from the most recent national statistics that England is an outlier in school exclusion rates. In fact, according to the above 2018/19 data, “97% of all permanent exclusions in the UK were from schools in England” (Duffy et al., 2021, p. 5). Given this, the question becomes, why is there such a significant gap? What makes England so different? Researchers and scholars have previously investigated this question and hypothesized that perhaps the high levels of exclusion within England are the result of bigger factors at play (Parsons, 2005; Rustique-Forrester, 2003; Tawell & McCluskey, 2022). This includes macro-level influences—i.e., politics and history—that have supported and continue to support a culture of punitiveness that makes it easier to exclude students.

For example, some argue that England’s outlier status is due to the fact that “school exclusion has become enshrined in and legitimised through national policy” (Rustique-Forrester, 2003, p. 14). In essence, England’s high level of exclusion is enabled by a particular political climate that constantly validates the practice. Scholars argue that England’s climate—which is characterized by neoliberalism and conservatism—emphasizes less welfare and investment of the state, and more individualization of systemic issues (Parsons, 2005). In other words, if a person is not doing well or acting out, this is the result of personal failure rather than a response to systemic failures they have experienced. Researchers argue this type of thinking and this type of political climate allow for disadvantaged people to be demonized, and it further legitimizes punitive practices, like school exclusion (Parsons, 2005). In essence, they argue that England’s politics make it a breeding ground for school exclusion to thrive. Researchers also point to the fact that with other policy regimes in the UK, like Scotland, the thinking and legislative tone is much more inclusive, and noticeably, rates of exclusion are significantly lower (Tawell & McCluskey, 2022).

Additionally, other scholars claim that England excludes at such high rates in the present day because the country has an extensive history of excluding students. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, English students with behavioral challenges were often called “educationally sub-normal”, removed from the school, and sent to “off-site units” or “sin bins” (Rustique-Forrester, 2003, pp. 14-15). Thus, scholars assert that the tendency to exclude students today stems from a tradition of doing so for several decades.

Moreover, this idea that England has a well-established history of exclusion—and that it affects the way students today are treated and excluded—is not a new one. *Inequality, Poverty, Education: A Political Economy of School Exclusion* (Ashurst & Venn, 2014) discusses this idea at length, even taking it a step further by arguing that in general, England has a history of ostracizing and sending away “disaffected” members of society. For instance, in the 1800s, poor and orphaned children were sent away to the British colonies in an effort to supposedly lower levels of crime and destitution at home (Ashurst & Venn, 2014). Ashurst and Venn go on to argue that education systems ultimately reproduce the broader systems of oppression within a society. Thus, when societies exclude, send away, criminalize, and hide marginalized and impoverished peoples, these types of behaviors will also show up in the education system in the form of criminalizing and excluding marginalized students. Moreover, Ashurst and Venn also point out that this history of punitiveness and exclusion in England is not necessarily shared by other European countries. Specifically, they claim that:

The historical work, besides, shows that there were significant differences in the policy and practice of exclusion which was developed in England compared to what was being established in other European countries, the most important of which was the tendency in Europe to prefer rehabilitation whilst the balance in England has been weighted towards retribution and punishment. This...has had clear and lasting implications...for the way that cultural and societal attitudes have been shaped. (Ashurst & Venn, 2014, p. 156)

In essence, England’s uniquely punitive history has influenced cultural attitudes towards the practice of exclusion, making it seem like a normal, and therefore, preferred method for dealing with deviance. Thus, England became the outlier in comparison to other European countries.

Overall, the argument could be made that it is both the politics of England and the history of punitiveness within the country that have contributed to the high numbers of excluded students over the years. Regardless though, England’s unique dynamic is the reason why it is the focal point of this exclusion study. So many of the previously mentioned scholars have highlighted the fact that the country has such strong relationships between the macrosystem (policy and culture) and the microsystem (school

exclusion rates). Therefore, England is an incredibly strong case study to explore the multi-level, systems-based nature of exclusion.

With the background information, definitions, conceptual framework, and rationale for the context established, the next section will now outline the specific research questions that drive this study.

1.4 Research Questions and Aims

As previously mentioned, the overarching topic of this study is school exclusion, and I conceptualize it as: 1) An inherently punitive practice and 2) A systems-based phenomenon, and thus, influenced by culture, politics, history, community, etc. Furthermore, the chosen context is England, which is ultimately a country that makes it easier to explore how exclusion operates in a systems-based way. Some of the systems-based queries that inspired this study included questions like, “How does existing national guidance influence the kind of exclusion information and guidelines that LAs pass on to schools in their jurisdiction?” In other words, what is the influence of the macrosystem at the local level? Additionally, “Is there significant variation in the ways that authorities record and present exclusion information in documents?” “Do some presentations of information suggest a more punitive culture in the authority, and if so, are the rates of exclusion actually higher in those LAs?” In essence, what is happening at the mesosystem level and how does it impact the microsystem? These are just some of the research inquiries that were the catalyst for this investigation. Ultimately, the overall aim of this study is to explore the systems-based nature of exclusion, while specifically focusing on how it is conceptualized, documented, and practiced at the local level. Therefore, the primary research questions are as follows:

Research Question 1 (Phase 1)

- 1) How do different local authorities in England vary in the way they interpret and present information about school exclusion in documents?
 - 1.1) Are these interpretations and presentations closely aligned with national guidance and policy about school exclusion?

- 1.2) What might these interpretations and presentations reveal about the ethos a local authority has regarding the practice of school exclusion?

Research Question 2 (Phase 2)

- 2) What relationship, if any, exists between the way that a local authority interprets and presents information about school exclusion in documents and the actual rate of exclusion in that authority relative to others?
 - 2.1) Do local authorities with more punitive language in documents also have a higher rate of exclusion when compared to all authorities nationally, and vice versa if the language appears less punitive?

1.5 Outline of the Dissertation

There are six chapters in the following dissertation. Chapter 1 was about providing background on the overarching topic, listing the conceptual framework and base assumptions, providing a rationale for the chosen research context, and outlining the two main research questions. Chapter 2 will consist of a literature review to highlight what the current discourse is within school exclusion literature, where the current academic gap is, and how this study explores that gap through the aforementioned research questions. Chapter 3 will outline the research aims once more and the subsequent methodology used to explore those questions. Within this chapter, I will also discuss theoretical underpinnings, the strategies used for data analysis, the benefits and limitations of these strategies, and how I conceptualized validity. Chapter 4 will be a presentation of findings. Chapter 5 will be a discussion of how these findings tie into the greater literature regarding exclusion. And lastly, Chapter 6 will contain a summary of what was discussed, as well as concluding thoughts.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

2.1 Introduction and Literature Review Methodology

Given the extensive amount of school exclusion literature that exists, I approached my literature review in a precise and methodical way. This was both to ensure comprehensiveness and to confirm that the topic I aimed to explore had not already thoroughly been investigated. Specifically, I performed a systematic search of the literature by using four databases: Google Scholar, EBSCO Host, Taylor and Francis Online, and Oxford's SOLO Library. Two searches were conducted within each database. The first search included the keywords: "School Exclusion" AND "Variation" AND "Region". And the second search included the keywords: "School Exclusion" AND "Variation" AND "Local Authority". Given that this study was going to explore the various ways that LAs conceptualize and present information about school exclusion, and how these variations may relate to actual differences in exclusion rates, I selected key search terms meant to find literature about school exclusion on a smaller scale (i.e., the regional or LA level). For each of the two rounds of keyword searches, I looked at the first ten pages of results. I briefly examined the abstracts for all papers that came up in the results and made a note of ones relevant to the research topic at hand. From that overall list, I deleted duplicates, and then more thoroughly read through the papers that I had identified.

Ultimately, two patterns emerged after reading through the studies. Firstly, almost all the literature within the results was comparative in nature. Secondly, different researchers prioritized vastly different units of comparison for evaluating school exclusion. For instance, some papers were internationally comparative studies on exclusion, where the primary unit of comparison was countries—although the LA level might be mentioned briefly. Other papers would be a comparative study on a singular LA, and the unit of comparison would be the schools within the authority. Overall, there were three main categories or themes of exclusion papers: internationally comparative studies, within-country comparative studies, and locally comparative studies. In the following section, I summarize the main findings from each level of comparative literature. Additionally, for each level, I discuss the smaller themes I identified between

papers, including things like methods of analysis and arguments for the type of factors that drive exclusion variation.

2.2 Literature Review Findings

2.2.1 School Exclusion: Internationally Comparative Literature

An extensive number of comparative studies have been done at the international level that explore how exclusion policies and practices vary between countries. Studies like these tend to emphasize the macro-factors—i.e., the political and cultural factors—that might explain trends in school exclusion (Cole et al., 2019; Duffy et al., 2021; Parsons, 2005; Tawell & McCluskey, 2022).

School Exclusion: The Will To Punish (Parsons, 2005) is a notable example of a comparative paper that explored school exclusion variation at an international level. In this paper, Parsons made the argument that to understand school exclusion trends within a country, it is important to understand the country’s broader attitude towards punitiveness or its “will to punish” (2005). Parsons attempted to measure the “will to punish” of several OECD countries by examining their rates of youth incarceration and their respective ages of criminal responsibility. The implication of this analysis was that if a country had an incredibly high rate of youth incarceration and low age of criminal responsibility, it could be a sign that the country has a climate of punitiveness that also readily legitimizes practices like school exclusion. Moreover, much like the scholars discussed in Chapter 1.3, Parsons’ specifically highlighted England as a country with an incredibly punitive culture in comparison to others, and he asserted that this shows up within the country’s education system (2005). In particular, he argued that even discussions about England’s pastoral support plans for students were about “confronting and diverting the unwanted behaviour”, instead of being about trying to “meet unmet needs” (Parsons, 2005, p. 188).

Unsurprisingly, England being singled out as an outlier in an internationally comparative study on exclusion was not uncommon in the literature, and was a finding supported by another paper—*Factors associated with high and low levels of school exclusions: comparing the English and wider UK experience* (Cole et al., 2019). However, what differed in this cross-national comparison was that Cole et al. pointed to

multiple levels of factors, not just macro-level ones—e.g., national attitudes towards punitiveness—to examine country-level exclusion variation. The researchers conducted interviews with specialist and inclusion officers in various LAs and found that all levels of factors—“national, local, and school-level”—can “help to explain the upward trajectory in exclusions in England” in comparison to other countries in the UK (Cole et al., 2019, p. 375). In essence, they embraced a systems-based framework in explaining what drives exclusion. And applying this systems-based approach to understand exclusion trends is something that has been done in other internationally comparative studies, like *School exclusion disparities in the UK: a view from Northern Ireland* (Duffy et al., 2021). In this study, researchers focused on how Irish legislation and practice might explain why there are lower rates of permanent exclusion in the country compared to the rest of the UK. Specifically, they tried to isolate the strategies that can be used to keep exclusion rates down. However, what the researchers uncovered is how complex it can be to promote more inclusive practices in school and reduce school exclusion if there is no alignment and support across different systems. For instance, a teacher can strive to decrease the use of exclusion and promote more inclusive practices in the classroom, but it may be unsuccessful if: 1) They lack the necessary training and resources; 2) The school is slow to support such efforts; or 3) There is an absence in leadership at the national level to hold schools accountable to being more inclusive (Duffy et al., 2021). In other words, exclusion is a systems-based phenomenon; thus, it must be addressed in a systems-based way.

Overall, what the above literature demonstrates is that there is a wide variety of international exclusion literature—ranging in methodology, geographical context, and conceptualization of exclusion. Now, the next section will introduce the comparative studies that centered on a single country.

2.2.2 School Exclusion: Single-Country Comparative Literature

In the field of exclusion research, there is also a vast amount of literature that evaluates school exclusion variation at a single-country or intra-country level (Chambers, 2021; Gazeley et al., 2015; Power & Taylor, 2021; Smith, 2009). For instance, *What can secondary data analysis tell us about school exclusions in England* (Smith, 2009), which

was a quantitative study that focused on analyzing national permanent exclusion statistics in England. Specifically, Smith leveraged the national statistics to evaluate how variables like pupil background and school type, can correlate with exclusion outcomes. A somewhat similar study was also done that looked at national data in England (Strand & Fletcher, 2014). However, it was a regression-based, longitudinal study that followed a large cohort of students across several years. Overall, the researchers concluded that socio-cultural, pupil-level, and school-level factors can play a significant role in explaining “differential rates of exclusion” (Strand & Fletcher, 2014, p. 3).

Additionally, there have also been single-country studies that have taken a more qualitative approach, like *Contextualising inequalities in rates of school exclusion in English schools: Beneath the ‘Tip of the Ice-Berg’* (Gazeley et al., 2015). In this paper, researchers acknowledged that the variation in exclusion rates within England can be contextualized by the type of decision-making that happens at the local, school level. They explored this by conducting school case studies, setting up interviews, and examining the cultural artifacts of English schools, including the behavior policies and things posted on the school website (Gazeley et al., 2015). In coming to a conclusion about what drives variation in England, the researchers also embraced an ecological, systems-based mindset. They stated that “schools and societies interact in ways that are hard to disentangle” and there is a need to examine the phenomenon at a within-school, between-school, and at a wider society level, because “rates of school exclusion are powerfully shaped by the interplay of policy and practice across these three levels” (Gazeley et al., 2015, p. 490).

However, though England is a popular case study, there were also intra-country comparative studies that have focused on other contexts. A notable example would be the Welsh exclusion study done by Power and Taylor (2021). Much like Gazeley et al., the researchers of this paper also took an ecological approach to exploring exclusion. They argued that “one explanation for Wales' lower rates might lie in the very different values which underpin its education policies”, but ultimately, “prevailing policy discourse can only be part of the explanation and cannot account for the high levels of variation in rates of 'official' school exclusions across Wales” (Power & Taylor, 2021, p. 20). They drew on interview data with policy-makers and practitioners to come to this conclusion and

emphasized the need to explore how policy is enacted at the local level. In other words, they emphasized the importance of looking at the interaction between the macrosystem and the mesosystem and microsystem.

Another relatively recent exclusion study that was completely outside of the UK context was conducted by Puckett et al. (2019). This study evaluated suspension and punitive policies within the United States. In particular, the researchers compared several states' legislative policies on school discipline. They also evaluated how different states attempted to combat the negative consequences of exclusion, like the disproportionate amount of minority students who face disciplinary action. Hirschfield (2008) completed similar US-based work but focused on how the criminalization of students not only varies geographically, but by class as well.

Once again, the above literature showcases the level of breadth of comparative research on exclusion and the differences in the theories that researchers have regarding what causes variation in exclusion rates. With the diversity of single-country studies explored, the next section discusses the final category of comparative exclusion research: locally comparative studies.

2.2.3 School Exclusion: Locally Comparative Literature

In addition to internationally and nationally-focused exclusion studies, there is a considerable amount of literature that focuses on the local and school level (Garner 2000; Hayden, 1996; Rustique-Forrester, 2003). This includes *Exclusion from school: a view from Scotland of policy and practice* (Munn et al, 2001). Researchers in this study conducted a comparison across several LAs and schools. They held interviews with senior education officers and surveyed headteachers to examine how variation in school ethos—i.e., the organizational beliefs that underpin school culture, staff views, and curriculum—can explain variation in exclusion rates between demographically similar schools (Munn et al., 2001).

A few years after Munn et al., a similar exclusion study was published that also focused on doing school-level comparisons (Vulliamy & Webb, 2003). In this paper, researchers evaluated a government-funded project that tried to reduce exclusion rates by placing social workers in schools. Once the support services were deployed, the research

team compared schools in various authorities to uncover the most effective strategies being used to lower rates of exclusion (Vulliamy & Webb, 2003). They measured the progress of schools through interviews, observations, questionnaires, and analysis of school documents, like “prospectuses, student handbooks, and behaviour and discipline policies” (Vulliamy & Webb, 2003, p. 38). Additionally, throughout the locally-comparative literature, document review was a common methodology that was used. Other studies employed document analysis as a way to examine exclusion policy, and not just at the school level, but at the authority level as well (Garner, 2000; Parsons, 2008). For instance, Parsons (2008) used document analysis to evaluate the race equality policies of 12 LAs. Specifically, Parsons wanted to determine how compliant different LAs were with racially equitable exclusion practices and the requirements of the Race Relations (Amendment) Act of 2000 (2008). He ultimately discovered that despite the passing of the act, there was still a disproportionate amount of minority students being excluded across authorities. Thus, Parsons’ (2008) paper demonstrates not only the use of document analysis, but how document analysis can help researchers examine the interaction between national policy and local outcomes.

In addition to the studies above, which compared across multiple LAs, there were also papers that looked at school exclusion within a single local area or authority. (Bagley & Hallam, 2015; Collins, 2013; Eastwood, 2000; Rustique-Forrester, 2003). *Who is 'out of school'?* (Eastwood, 2000) is one example, where one “Education and Library Board” in Northern Ireland was the entire focus of analysis. Eastwood used a combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches—analyzing statistics and conducting interviews with students, parents, and staff—to evaluate exclusion locally. *Toward a Contextual Theory of School Exclusion: A Multi-Layered View of the Interaction Between National Policies and Local School Practices* (Rustique-Forrester, 2003) is another notable example of exclusion research done within a single authority. Rustique-Forrester, much like several previously mentioned researchers, examined exclusions with a systems theory approach and focused on how variation in school exclusion rates can be influenced by both macrosystem factors (e.g., policy) and microsystem factors (e.g., school ethos and teacher practices) (2003). And similar to several other studies—namely Garner (2000), Parsons (2008), and Vulliamy and Webb (2003)—Rustique-Forrester also

reviewed school documents, such as “curriculum materials, written policies, staff minutes, and school newsletters”, as part of the methodology process (2003, p. 125).

Overall, the previous three sections represent the landscape of school exclusion research and the variety of ways the topic has been dissected and analyzed. The next section will discuss the current “gaps” in the literature, or the areas in exclusion research that have been less explored. Following this, there will be a discussion about how this study aims to fill those academic gaps.

2.3 A New Frontier

The above systematic literature review demonstrates that exclusion research has been conducted at various geographic levels. In these studies, researchers employed a variety of quantitative and qualitative methodologies and endorsed various theories regarding what drives exclusion variation. Despite this level of breadth, there are still areas in the field that have yet to be explored, especially with regard to locally-comparative studies.

The first gap that exists in locally-comparative literature has to do with the lack of recently conducted studies. Several of the local and school-level studies mentioned previously were published in the early 2000s (Eastwood, 2000; Garner, 2000; Munn et al, 2001; Vulliamy & Webb, 2003). The landscape of exclusions and exclusion guidance has changed significantly since this period. For instance, the Education and Inspections Act of 2006, the Provision of Full-Time Education for Excluded Pupils (England) Regulations passed in 2007, and the *Improving behaviour and attendance: guidance on exclusion from schools and Pupil Referral Units* document published in 2008 were all significant legislation and exclusions guidance milestones (DfE, 2022).

These documents directly impacted regulations around the exclusion process and influenced the way that schools and authorities were meant to think about exclusion. Given these changes to guidance and legislation, there is a gap—a need to re-evaluate local exclusion, so that these new influences in the macrosystem can be considered. Therefore, in this study, exclusion at the LA level is evaluated in a more recent time period. (The exact details of the study design and methodology will be provided in Chapter 3.)

The second gap in locally comparative literature has to do with methodology. As previously mentioned, a significant number of researchers used document analysis in their exclusion studies. And although document analysis has been a well-utilized tool, there are some versions of the methodology that remain less explored. Specifically, I am referring to the types of documents used in analysis. Previously mentioned studies have evaluated newsletters, behavior policies, student handbooks, curriculum, etc. What has been less examined are the actual documents directly involved in the exclusions process. For instance, the actual forms headteachers must fill out to permanently exclude a student or the letter given to parents to notify them that their child has been excluded. These are the types of new data sources that are analyzed in this investigation. (The exact details of the study's methodology will be provided in Chapter 3.) Ultimately, the purpose of this study is to explore a new frontier in locally-focused exclusions research and in the way school exclusion is investigated.

The following chapter will now discuss the main research inquiries of the study and the exact methodologies used to evaluate them.

Chapter Three: Methodology

3.1 Introduction

The following chapter provides a detailed account of the methodology used in this dissertation. Specifically, the chapter discusses the broad research design and framework, the theoretical stances and positionality that underpin the research, the methods for data collection and analysis, the benefits and limitations of these methods, and the validity of the research.

3.2 Research Design

This research study had a two-phase, mixed methods design. Phase 1 was the qualitative investigation, followed by Phase 2, a quantitative investigation. The two phases were driven by the two main research questions, which are re-stated below as follows:

Research Question 1 (Phase 1)

- 1) How do different local authorities in England vary in the way they interpret and present information about school exclusion in documents?
 - 1.1) Are these interpretations and presentations closely aligned with national guidance and policy about school exclusion?
 - 1.2) What might these interpretations and presentations reveal about the ethos a local authority has regarding the practice of school exclusion?

Research Question 2 (Phase 2)

- 2) What relationship, if any, exists between the way that a local authority interprets and presents information about school exclusion in documents and the actual rate of exclusion in that authority relative to others?
 - 2.1) Do local authorities with more punitive language in documents also have a higher rate of exclusion when compared to all authorities nationally, and vice versa if the language appears less punitive?

In the following table, the overarching framework of the research is outlined, including the type of methodology used to address each question within each phase, the levels of the Bronfenbrenner system that were explored in each question, the types of sources that were used to access data, and the methods for data collection (This type of research framework table was adapted from Rustique-Forrester (2003)).

Table 1

Research Framework

Research Question	Phase	Bronfenbrenner Systems Involved	Type of Research Methodology	Data Source	Method for Data Collection
How do different local authorities in England vary in the way they interpret and present information about school exclusion in documents?	1	Exosystem (The Local Authority) and Mesosystem (The Local Authority's communication with schools and the wider community)	Qualitative	UK Government Web Archive	Document Review: Search through archived webpages of local authorities. Examine exclusion forms, exclusion parent letter templates, and exclusion information on the authority webpage. (See above.)
Are these interpretations and presentations closely aligned with national guidance and policy about school exclusion?	1	Exosystem (The Local Authority) and Macrosystem (Influence of national policy and guidance)	Qualitative	UK Government Web Archive	(See above.)
What might these interpretations and presentations reveal about the ethos a local authority has regarding the practice of school exclusion?	1	Exosystem (The Local Authority)	Qualitative	UK Government Web Archive	(See above.)
What relationship, if any, exists between the way that a local authority interprets and presents information about school exclusion in documents and the actual rate of exclusion in that authority relative to others?	2	Exosystem (The Local Authority) and Microsystem (How often are headteachers excluding students)	Quantitative	The DfE's Permanent Exclusions Statistics	Secondary Data Review: Aggregate permanent exclusion statistics by local authority. Examine the rate of permanent exclusion of the local authorities relative to others.

Do local authorities with more punitive language in documents also have a higher rate of exclusion when compared to all authorities nationally, and vice versa if the language appears less punitive?	2	Exosystem (The Local Authority) and Microsystem (How often are headteachers excluding students)	Quantitative	The DfE's Permanent Exclusions Statistics	(See above.)
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3.3 Theoretical Underpinnings

I acknowledge that as a researcher, my decisions regarding methodology are grounded in my personal beliefs and theories that I embrace about the world. Thus, in the following sections, I outline the theoretical stances that are foundational to this study.

3.3.1 *Social Constructionism*

The first theoretical stance that is embraced throughout this study is social constructionism. Social constructionism is characterized by a few key traits. Firstly, there is the belief that one must always question and be critical of long-held beliefs about the world (Burr, 1995, as cited in Rustique-Forrester, 2003). In this thesis, I embraced a critical stance in the way that I conceptualized exclusion. In section 1.2.2, I stated that I recognized it as a punitive action, and that despite its lengthy history and widespread use, I questioned its ability to even address the unmet needs that excluded children may have. I also embraced a critical stance regarding elements of the research process itself, but that will be described in greater detail in Chapter 3.9 when I discuss validity.

A second core tenet of social constructionism is the belief that “the concepts and categories we use to think and communicate with are socially constructed rather than ‘natural’ features of the world” (Burr & Dick, 2017, p. 77). For instance, rather than viewing school exclusion as a “natural feature” of all authorities, I view it as something that is dynamically constructed by authorities in the way it is discussed, presented, recorded, and practiced. This is why Phase 1 of the study involved reviewing and analyzing documents. The aim was to examine them in the hopes of further understanding how school exclusion is “constructed” differently across authorities and to compare these “constructions”.

Lastly, a third core element of social constructionism is about acknowledging that all knowledge is constructed from “historically and culturally specific” processes (Burr & Dick, 2017, p. 77). In other words, to study a phenomenon, one must be mindful of the context in which the phenomenon occurs, because context matters deeply. This is especially true with regard to school exclusion. The way exclusion is discussed, how it is viewed, and how it operates changes drastically depending on things like policy, geography, culture, current national attitudes, time period, etc. I discussed the importance of context both in Chapter 1.3, where I stated the significance of choosing England as the geographical setting, and in Chapter 2.3, where I discussed the importance of studying local exclusion variation in a more recent time period. The importance of context is also why I chose a Bronfenbrenner-based framework to examine exclusion, because I wanted to acknowledge and explore the impact of national contexts (e.g., national policy) at the local level.

3.3.2 Pragmatism

As mentioned in the above section, I embrace the social constructionist stance of critically evaluating the world. Moreover, I argue that in research, critical evaluation cannot happen unless any and all research methodologies are considered. In this sense, while my epistemology is social constructionism, my methodological approach embraces pragmatism or the belief that “all necessary approaches should be used to understand a research problem” (Moon & Blackman, 2014, p. 1169). This belief is tempered by the caveat that all approaches should be considered, as long as the approach is appropriate to the question being asked. In other words, a researcher’s focus should shift from the need to use a certain methodology, to the need to appropriately address the question (Evans et al., 2011). With Phase 1 of this study, the research questions are about exploring the variation in LA documents and working inductively to discover potentially latent themes and patterns. Therefore, I employed a qualitative approach for data collection, specifically documentary review. This is the appropriate methodology because qualitative approaches are known for often emphasizing a “gradual”, “inductive”, and “iterative” way of gaining information and uncovering themes (Hollstein, 2011, p. 406). (The full

details of the data collection and analysis processes for Phase 1 will be outlined in Chapter 3.6).

With Phase 2 of this study, the research questions focus on trying to contextualize the findings from Phase 1 by looking at exclusion statistics, ranking LAs by rates of school exclusion, and considering potential correlations between rankings and the way information is presented in LA documents. Therefore, I employed a quantitative approach for data collection, specifically reviewing secondary exclusion statistics from the DfE. (The full details of the data collection and analysis processes for Phase 2 will be outlined in Chapter 3.7). A quantitative approach in Phase 2 is appropriate given that I wanted to analyze numerical data, and additionally, I wanted to further engage with the findings from Phase 1. In research, one advantage of a quantitative study is that it can often be leveraged as a way to test, investigate, or contextualize the themes and patterns discovered from an initial qualitative study (Hollstein, 2011, p. 406). Therefore, as a pragmatist, I ultimately chose a two-phase, mixed-methods design, because it allowed me to explore the particular aims of each research phase with the appropriate tools.

3.4 Positionality

In addition to acknowledging my epistemological and methodological beliefs, I also want to acknowledge my positionality within this research. In this study, I am conducting comparative research from the perspective of an “outsider”. In other words, I have a bias in that I have not experienced the British schooling system. However, I am also biased in the sense that I grew up in a geographic context where suspension and exclusion were normalized and heralded. I tried to be aware of these biases throughout the research process, but I acknowledge that they likely impacted what I deemed significant in my analyses.

Now, before detailing the entire data collection and analysis processes for Phase 1 and Phase 2, the next section will discuss limitations in the scope of the data and the rationale for intentionally setting these limitations.

3.5 Limitations in Data Scope and the Rationale

Firstly, in terms of limitations, I only used data that related to permanent exclusions in this study. This means when conducting the documentary review in Phase

1, I only examined permanent exclusion forms and the templates for permanent exclusion parent notification letters. Additionally, in terms of the secondary data review, I only looked at permanent exclusion statistics. I chose not to look at fixed period exclusion forms, parent letters, or data for a variety of reasons. First and foremost, there is a great deal of variation in what fixed period exclusion data means. Fixed period exclusions can range from a lunch period exclusion—which is half a day—to several days, with multiple reasons why students may be excluded for a fixed period of time depending on the school’s behavior policy (DfE, 2022). Thus, fixed period exclusions are not as singularly defined as permanent exclusions. Additionally, there are fewer administrative processes and there is less LA accountability associated with fixed period exclusions. For instance, for a fixed period exclusion of less than five days, national guidance says there is no mandatory deadline for when the governing board of the school must meet with parents to review the fixed period exclusion and consider reinstatement (DfE, 2022). Furthermore, for a fixed period exclusion of less than five days, LAs are not required to set up alternative education provision (AP) for the student (DfE, 2022). However, with permanent exclusions, the national guidance states that LAs must “arrange suitable full-time education” for the student, and that the governing board must meet with parents within 15 days of the notice of exclusion (DfE, 2022, p. 32). Ultimately then, with permanent exclusions, it is easier to observe the interaction between the macrosystem (national policy and guidance) and the exosystem (the LA).

Secondly, regarding scope limitations, I limited the qualitative investigation (Phase 1) to 2011. This means I only evaluated LA documents from that year. This is why—as is shown in Table 1—the data source for Phase 1 is the UK Government Web Archive. I used the national archives to retroactively retrieve authority documents— i.e., webpages, forms, and letters—from 2011. Additionally, because my quantitative investigation (Phase 2), builds off of Phase 1, I largely only examined permanent exclusion statistics from 2011.

I chose to limit the investigation to this period for two main reasons. The first reason has to do with the prevalence and availability of archival data. In the UK Government Web Archive, the year with the most data or archived LA webpages on exclusion is 2011. There was also the option of using present-day authority webpages,

forms, and letter templates, but this specific investigation is not about untangling the complex interaction between COVID-19 and school exclusion. The second reason I chose 2011 is because it is a pivotal time regarding exclusion trends in England. Specifically, 2011 is right before exclusion rates in England began to rise significantly. Researchers described this late 1990s to 2010s era as a “period of enlightenment”, where the government “actively promoted inclusive practice through the ‘Every Child Matters’ agenda and national strategies for behaviour and attendance” (Cole et al., 2019, p. 376). Moreover, the prevailing national guidance at the time, which was initially published in 2008, promoted restorative practices to authorities and stated that they should only use exclusion as a “last resort” (Department for Children, Schools, and Families [DCSF], 2008, p. 7). Shortly after 2011, national guidance would change to a more restrictive, punitive tone, and unsurprisingly, this change would coincide with an upward trend in exclusion rates. Therefore, studying exclusion during 2011 can allow for deeper insight into this culturally significant period characterized by inclusivity and historically low levels of exclusion in England.

With the overarching limitations in the data established, the next sections discuss the data collection and analysis strategies for each phase of the study, beginning with Phase 1.

3.6 Phase 1

3.6.1 Methodology for Data Collection

For Phase 1 of the research investigation, the primary method of data collection was document review. This meant evaluating the documents or “organizational artifacts” found on the archived LA webpages. Overall, there were two main types of documents:

- An authority’s **permanent school exclusion form**. This is a form that LAs provide to all the schools within their jurisdiction. The headteacher of the school must fill out this form to officially submit a permanent exclusion. This form is customizable and at the discretion of the authority. (An example of one permanent school exclusion form reviewed in this study is in Appendix B.)

- An authority's **permanent school exclusion parent notification letter template**. This is a document that LAs provide to all the schools within their jurisdiction. This document is not a finalized parent notification letter, but rather a template or script that has designated fill-in-the-blank areas for certain types of information that the headteacher should fill in. After the headteacher fills in the appropriate information about the exclusion into this letter template, the document is sent to parents to notify them that their child has been permanently excluded. This letter template is customizable and at the discretion of the authority. However, the DfE created a model template for all authorities across England to use in their jurisdiction. (The DfE's model template for the parent notification letter is in Appendix A.)

Additionally, the following artifact was used as a secondary source of information to contextualize findings from the forms and letters:

- An authority's **informational webpage(s)** about school exclusion. This is the authority's webpage(s) where general exclusion guidance and information are located. This is also where authority exclusion documents can be viewed and downloaded (i.e., forms and letters).

To find the archived authority webpages, which would contain links to download forms and parent letter templates, three rounds of key searches were conducted on the UK Government Web Archive. All search results were limited to only show webpages archived in 2011. The first search used the keywords "exclusion" AND "form". In the results, all archived authority webpages with downloadable forms were noted and recorded. The second search used the keywords "exclusion" AND "letter". All authority webpages with downloadable letter templates were noted and recorded. The third round of searching used the keywords "exclusion" and "[Insert LA Name]". This last round of searching was designed to get any archived webpage about exclusion that could potentially have the relevant LA forms and letter templates available for download.

In total 8 LA webpages with downloadable forms were identified, and 6 LA webpages with downloadable letter templates were identified. Some LA webpages appear

on both lists, so the total amount of unique LA webpages collected was 10. There are approximately 300+ LAs in England, so roughly 3% of the population is represented in the sample (GOV.UK, 2016). I recognize the potential limitations of this sample, both in size and lack of randomization. However, I do not hold the postpositivist stance that sampling must adhere to strict criteria—e.g., a sample must be a certain size and must be randomly selected—to necessarily increase the “validity” of research. Instead, as a social constructionist, I prioritize being able to explore the data deeply and critically, regardless of sample size or characteristics. Moreover, in Chapter 3.9, I discuss further why I fundamentally challenge concepts such as validity.

Ultimately, after the sample of authority webpages was identified and the documents were collected, the next step was to conduct analysis.

3.6.2 Methodology for Analysis

In Phase 1, three methods of analysis were used: document analysis, inductive template analysis, and matrix analysis. The following three sections are dedicated to outlining each of these processes, starting first with document analysis.

3.6.2a Document Analysis

For Phase 1, the first method used to analyze data was document analysis. Document analysis refers to the process of systematically “reviewing or evaluating documents (both printed and electronic)”, to “elicit meaning, gain understanding, and develop empirical knowledge” (Bowen, 2009, p. 27). The term “documents” can refer to any number of sources, including historical texts, government documents, media, personal communication, surveys, etc. (Bowen, 2009; O’Leary, 2004). (In this study, the term “documents” refers to the parent notification letter templates and the exclusion forms of the authorities.) Additionally, depending on the type of document, it can serve multiple different purposes within a research investigation. In this study, I used the documents as a way of providing important context and gaining insight into the respective LAs (Bowen, 2009, p. 29).

The first step in the document analysis was to review and interrogate the letter templates and forms by evaluating their authenticity and intended audience (O’Leary, 2004). Since the data was collected directly from the UK Government National Web

Archive, I had little concern over the authenticity of the LA webpages I reviewed. In terms of audience, I noted that each type of document had a distinct set of intended viewers. For the LA parent notification letter templates, the intended audience was the parent or guardian of the child that was being excluded by the headteacher. For the LA permanent exclusion forms, these were documents the headteacher had to fill out and submit to various people or systems depending on the authority. For instance, on some forms, it stated that they had to be submitted to the “Inclusion or Reintegration Officer” in the authority, and on others, it stated that submission was to an online secure file transfer system.

After considering authenticity and audience, I then looked over the corresponding LA websites that the documents were downloaded from. This step was done to get additional context and background information on the authority. The webpages contained general school exclusion information, which often included definitions and rules related to the exclusion process, but the depth of information presented on the sites varied greatly—ranging from incredibly detailed to incredibly sparse. Additionally, some exclusion webpages appeared to be informational pages for headteachers and staff, while others seemed geared towards presenting exclusion information to parents and families. This varied depending on the LA.

With this initial phase of the analysis complete, I then moved on to the next step in the process: critically analyzing the actual content of the documents to uncover deeper themes. The method used to do this was inductive template analysis.

3.6.2b Inductive Template Analysis

Fundamentally, template analysis is a way of analyzing themes and patterns in qualitative data (King & Brooks, 2021). It “involves the development of a coding template, often based on a subset of data, which is then applied to further data and revised and refined” (King & Brooks, 2021, p. 225). Additionally, though the development of some “codes” or thematic categories can be done prior to evaluating any data, I chose to use template analysis inductively (King & Brooks, 2021). This means I examined documents first, and then, from reading the documents, identified codes.

For example, when evaluating the permanent exclusion forms for LAs, I read through the entirety of the first LA's form. After reading the document, I created codes or categories for specific information on the form (e.g., "Form has a space for stating a student's previous disciplinary infractions" or "Form has a space for listing a student's Special Education Needs (SEN) status"). Following this, I took all the codes and put them as column headers in an excel spreadsheet. Under these headers, I filled in the information about the form in the first row (e.g., "Yes, the form has a space for listing SEN status. There is a check box and a fill-in-the-blank space to record detailed SEN information"). I pulled explicit quotes from the forms when necessary and made note of the nuance I saw in the structure and presentations of information.

After all the information from the form for "LA 1" was coded, I used the same categories or codes I had just created to then evaluate the form for "LA 2". In essence, I applied my inductively-created "template" to analyze the new form. If the coding process for LA 2's form led to the creation of new codes or categories, I would add new columns to the excel sheet. Then, at the end of my analysis of LA 2, I would go back and evaluate LA 1's form in the context of that new category. I then repeated this coding process for all authorities and both documents—forms and letters. At the end of preliminary coding, I had created two databases of information with two different sets of coding templates, one for each document.

After the preliminary coding was complete, I moved on to "clustering", or grouping my initial codes into emerging themes (e.g., The code: "Form has a space for planning the AP the student will receive while excluded" and the code: "Form has a space for listing strategies used prior to exclusion" were consolidated into the theme of "LA Accountability Measures") (King & Brooks, 2021, p. 226). After clustering was complete, I refined the template, and made these new, consolidated themes into the column headers for a new spreadsheet. I then went through and evaluated all the LA forms and letter templates again based on these larger themes. To do this, I made use of all the information, notes, and nuance I had gathered through preliminary coding. Then, depending on how the LA was evaluated on the preliminary codes, it would inform my assessment of how they should be evaluated under the new clustered themes (e.g., If an exclusion form did not have a space for listing strategies used prior to exclusion or a

space for planning the academic support a child will receive while excluded, then under the new template and column of “LA Accountability Measures”, I would make a note summarizing these specific absences.) It is important to note that some of the preliminary codes contributed to two or more of the larger, “clustered” themes, but the details of this and the overall findings of the analysis will be explained further and presented in Chapter 4.

Ultimately, at the end of the thematic identification and clustering, I had finalized two coding templates—one for the letter templates and one for the forms—that led to the construction of two matrices of information about each type of document. Therefore, the next step in the process was to conduct matrix analysis.

3.6.2c Matrix Analysis

The main purpose of matrix analysis is to make “complex data more understandable by reducing it to its component parts” and allowing for meaningful analysis, interpretation, and comparison (Nadin & Cassell, 2004, p. 271). Additionally, several types of matrices exist, but most typically they have one of the following two functions—to be explanatory or to be descriptive (Nadin & Cassell, 2004). The matrices I had created were the latter, because the information in them focused on accurately and comprehensively describing the LA parent letter templates and exclusion forms. To then conduct the matrix analysis, I looked at all the descriptive data and compared across and within authorities. I identified important variations and patterns, that allowed me to address the Phase 1 research questions. For example, I was able to clearly see the distinct levels of variation in how LAs wanted to present exclusion information to parents through the notification letter templates. Ultimately, the complete findings from this matrix analysis will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 4.

After completing all stages of data collection and analysis for Phase 1, I then moved on to Phase 2.

3.7 Phase 2

3.7.1 Methodology for Data Collection

For Phase 2 of the research investigation, the primary method of data collection was secondary data review. In order to address the main research questions in the second

phase of this study, I needed access to official permanent exclusion statistics by LA. Therefore, I chose to use statistical data published by the DfE for the 2011/2012 academic year. For this data, the permanent exclusion rate was calculated by the following formula:

Figure 1

The figure originally presented here cannot be made freely available via ORA because of copyright. The figure was sourced at Department for Education (DfE). (2017). A guide to exclusion statistics.

(DfE, 2017, p. 10)

Overall, this means that the permanent exclusion rate variable is: 1) A percentage variable, and 2) Based on school census data (DfE, 2017). Due to the latter point, the data used in this study “does not include data which has been submitted by local authorities or schools outside of the school census” (DfE, 2017, p. 22). Additionally, within the DfE dataset, there are four different types of LAs: Metropolitan Districts, London Boroughs, Unitary Authorities, and County Councils. (A total of 152 LAs were represented in the 2011/2012 data.) Some LAs within the dataset did not have an official headcount recorded, thus they did not have an official permanent exclusion rate. After collecting and reviewing this data, I then moved on to analysis.

3.7.2 Methodology for Analysis

In Phase 2, two methods were used for analysis: secondary data analysis and matrix analysis. The following two sections outline these processes, starting first with secondary data analysis.

3.7.2a Secondary Data Analysis

For Phase 2 of the research investigation, I leveraged a more quantitative approach, driven by secondary data analysis of national exclusion statistics. As previously mentioned, I used the data published by the DfE to get England’s 2011/2012 permanent exclusion statistics by LA. I utilized the permanent exclusion rates of all 152

LAs in the dataset and calculated the standard deviation and average for the entire group. Then, I subtracted the mean permanent exclusion rate from each LA's 2011/2012 exclusion rate and divided it by the standard deviation. This was done to see how many deviations away from the mean, or how significantly far from the average exclusion rate each authority was. I then ranked the authorities from most to least exclusionary based on this calculated variable. The higher the rank, the higher the average exclusion rate. Following this, I recorded where the 10 LAs from Phase 1 sat in the rankings in a separate table. Additionally, to provide more historical context to the data, I also calculated the average permanent exclusion rate for each LA from the 2006/2007 academic year to the 2011/2012 academic year. Adding in this statistic, which captured an extended, five-year time frame, allowed me to see if certain authorities were trending upwards or downwards in their exclusion rate prior to 2011. It also allowed me to see if the 2011 exclusion rate for an authority was comparable to the average rate of exclusion in that authority for the past five years. In the end, I had constructed a table with ten rows (one row for each LA), and three columns (one column for recording the 2011/2012 average permanent exclusion rate, one for the ranking, and one for the five-year average permanent exclusion rate from 2006/2007 to 2011/2012). I then appended these statistics to each of the prior matrices I had created in Phase 1. With these two comprehensive matrices constructed, I once again employed matrix analysis.

3.7.2b Matrix Analysis

To conduct the matrix analysis, I looked at all the descriptive and statistical data together, and I compared across authorities. I identified important variations, patterns, and relationships that allowed me to address the Phase 2 research questions. For example, I evaluated whether or not LAs with parent letter templates that had less punitive language and practices also had lower rates of exclusion comparatively. The complete findings from this analysis will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 4.

3.8 Benefits and Challenges of Analysis

The following section outlines the benefits and challenges of the analytical methods described above. Firstly, one clear benefit of document, template, and matrix analysis is the flexibility of all these approaches and the general lack of strong ties to any

one epistemological camp (King & Brooks, 2021; Nadin & Cassell, 2004). This flexibility allowed me to tailor these methodologies to answer the particular questions in this investigation.

Regarding document analysis specifically, it is often characterized as a cost-effective and accessible analysis methodology (Bowen, 2009). It could also be argued that “documents are more stable, more reflective of social organization, activities, meanings, and social rules than most other forms of data used by social scientists” (Altheide et al., 2008, p.132). However, this is tempered by the fact that sometimes documents are incomplete, contain insufficient detail, or may be blocked and not easily found or downloaded through public domain (Bowen, 2009).

With template analysis, it is often advantageous when trying to analyze large quantities of qualitative data and can be less “prescriptive” and time-consuming than other thematic analysis strategies (Nadin & Cassell, 2004, p. 257). However, there is the risk of producing a template that is overwhelming if one creates an extensive and complicated coding hierarchy (Burton & Galvin, 2018). This can be counterbalanced though if one uses template analysis in conjunction with matrix analysis. This is because the strength of matrix analysis is its ability to provide easy visibility to information and allow researchers to efficiently see meaningful connections across data (Burton & Galvin, 2018; Nadin & Cassell, 2004). The challenge though is not to make the data in the matrix “too reductionist”, which will cause important detail and nuance to be lost. (Nadin & Cassell, 2004, p. 281).

Lastly, with secondary data analysis, the obvious benefit is in saving precious resources, like time and money. Researchers can have access to comprehensive, often large-scale datasets without needing to hire a team (Miller & Brewer, 2003). However, the challenge comes in taking the time to understand the dataset and any limitations, missing information, or biases it might have.

3.9 Validity

Within both quantitative and qualitative research, there are widely-known standards that researchers have embraced to ensure that the research conducted is “quality” and “trustworthy”. The quantitative, positivist and post-positivist tradition

typically measures “quality” through concepts like “validity, generalizability, reliability, and objectivity” (Korstjens & Moser, 2018, p. 121; Mohamed Anuar, 2021). These concepts refer to ideas like: Does the research method measure what it is supposed to? Is the measurement accurate? Can the research claims be applied to a greater population? These are all important questions to consider when the aim of the research is to understand “objective” truths in the world. However, *qualitative* research and its associated paradigms do not necessarily subscribe to the idea of “objective truth” or to these kinds of measures of “quality research”. Instead, the criteria used to assess qualitative research often includes concepts like “credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability” (Korstjens & Moser, 2018, p. 120). Still though, some researchers have argued that these latter concepts represent how qualitative research is simply repackaging quantitative standards and ideals (Aguinaldo, 2004). They argue that upholding “validity” in any form can be perceived as promoting a “positivist” agenda (Cohen et al., 2011, p. 180).

As a social constructionist, I embrace this fundamental questioning of ideas like “credibility” and “transferability”. And overall, I embrace the fundamental questioning of validity in both the quantitative and qualitative traditions. This is because, as previously mentioned, social constructionism requires critical questioning of all things. This includes elements of the research process itself. Social constructionism also means recognizing that research findings are always “partial”, constructed, and “situated” (Aguinaldo, 2004, p. 128). Thus, to say one claim is more “valid” than another is a form of gatekeeping and ultimately protects existing power structures in academia (Aguinaldo, 2004). Instead, validity should be seen through a process of “interrogation” (Aguinaldo, 2004, p. 130). This means that while I do not recommend a complete divestment from validity, I believe that the key to it lies in constantly asking things like, “What is the purpose of the research?” “How are the findings intimately affected by contextual factors?” “What really is ‘quality research’, and who gets to decide?” In essence, interrogation means asking these questions, finding answers, and then investigating the answers themselves. Thus, validity is an exercise, not a checklist, and this type of interrogation is what I tried to do throughout this thesis.

Chapter Four: Findings

4.1 Introduction

The following chapter presents the overall research findings from this study. In the first section, the final research products from the Phase 1 and Phase 2 analyses are presented—namely, the final coding template structures developed from the inductive template analysis and the final matrices used in the matrix analyses. Following the presentation of these research products, the specific findings for Phase 1 and Phase 2 are outlined respectively.

4.2 Research Products from Phase 1 and Phase 2

4.2.1 Finalized Templates

From the analyses conducted in Phase 1 and Phase 2 of the study, two main research products were created. The first were the coding templates developed during Phase 1. These templates were constructed inductively from data and finalized after iteration and thematic grouping. In total, two final coding templates were made, one for evaluating the parent notification letter templates and one for evaluating the exclusion forms.

Starting with the coding templates for the parent notification letters, this template was created to evaluate the model parent letter that each LA provides to the schools within their jurisdiction. (Once again, an example of what this document looks like is provided in Appendix A, with the DfE’s model.) Ultimately, after conducting inductive template analysis on the parent letters, three major themes or “codes” were uncovered:

1. Parental Rights and/or Child Rights in the Exclusion Process
2. Parent Relationship-Building and Support
3. Accountability Measures

These larger themes were inductively identified from the smaller codes and themes initially found in the letters (e.g., A smaller code might be: “The notification letter template mentions that the parent can appeal the exclusion decision.” This smaller code would then fit into the larger theme of “Parental Rights and/or Child Rights in the

Exclusion Process”). The finalized coding template for evaluating the parent notification letters is shown below with the themes identified in a hierarchical structure. (It is important to note that some smaller codes or sub-themes belong to two or more larger themes.):

1. Parental Rights and/or Child Rights in the Exclusion Process

- 1.1. The letter mentions that the parent has the right to appeal permanent exclusions.
- 1.2. The letter mentions that a parent has a right to representation at the Governors’ Discipline Review Meeting. (As mentioned in Chapter 3.5, this is the meeting that occurs between members of the school’s governing body and the parents of the excluded child. The purpose of the meeting is to review the exclusion, and this could potentially lead to the reinstatement of the child.)
- 1.3. The letter mentions that a parent has a right to disability accommodations at the Governors’ Discipline Review Meeting.
- 1.4. The letter mentions that a parent has a right to see their child’s school record.
- 1.5. The letter mentions that the child being permanently excluded also has a right to attend the Governors’ Discipline Review Meeting.

2. Parent Relationship-Building and Support

- 2.1. The letter mentions that the parent has to help uphold the permanent exclusion by ensuring that their child is not in a public space during school hours for the first five days of the exclusion.
- 2.2. The letter mentions that if the parent fails to keep their child away from public spaces during the first five days of exclusion, they may face a penalty, or even prosecution.

- 2.3. The letter lets the parent know of additional support services available to them to help with navigating the exclusion process.
- 2.4. The letter offers the parent a chance to meet informally with the headteacher to discuss the exclusion.

3. Accountability Measures

- 3.1. The letter has a place where headteachers list the reasons for the permanent exclusion.
- 3.2. The letter mentions the responsibility the LA has to provide education support (i.e., Alternative Provision or AP) starting from the 6th day of exclusion.
- 3.3. The letter mentions that the parent has the right to appeal permanent exclusions. (Also 1.1)
- 3.4. The letter has a place for the headteacher to list the strategies the school used prior to excluding the student.
- 3.5. The letter offers the parent a chance to meet informally with the headteacher to discuss the exclusion. (Also 2.4)
- 3.6. The letter tells the parent that if they suspect disability discrimination has occurred in relation to the exclusion, they can bring it up with the discipline committee.

After completing the above coding template, the process was repeated to create a finalized coding template for evaluating exclusion forms. From the inductive template analysis of the forms, five major themes were uncovered:

1. Parent Relationship and Communication
2. Context and Student Background
3. Accountability Practices and Procedures

4. Information to Support Student-Centered Planning
5. Potential Criminalization of the Student

The finalized coding template for evaluating the forms is shown below with the themes identified in a hierarchical structure. (It is important to note that some smaller codes or sub-themes belong to two or more larger themes.):

1. Parent Relationship and Communication

- 1.1. Form asks the headteacher to list the parents' names.
- 1.2. Form has a space to list whether the parents have been contacted or not regarding the exclusion.
- 1.3. Form asks about the language spoken at home.
- 1.4. Form asks about family background.
- 1.5. Form asks about the history of parent involvement.

2. Context and Student Background

- 2.1. Form has a place for listing a student's SEN details.
- 2.2. Form has a place for specifying "Looked After" status or whether the student is "in care" and involved with social services.
- 2.3. Form has a place for listing the agencies involved with the student (e.g., Education Welfare, Police, Youth Offender Team, etc.).
- 2.4. Form has a place for noting if a Common Framework Assessment (CAF) has been completed (i.e., An assessment for uncovering unmet learning needs (Thurrock Council, n.d.)).
- 2.5. Form has a place for noting the student's educational profile (e.g., Attendance, attainment and scores, strengths, interactions with other peers, etc.).
- 2.6. Form asks about student's medical history.

2.7. Form asks about student's work experience.

3. Accountability Practices and Procedures

- 3.1. Form has a separate area to include additional details about the incident that led to the permanent exclusion.
- 3.2. Form has a place to plan the AP the student will receive while being excluded. (The LA has an obligation to provide a student with AP starting on the 6th day of exclusion and onwards.)
- 3.3. Form asks the headteacher if there is a need to conduct a risk assessment, and if so, also asks if one has been done.
- 3.4. Form has a space for listing the support strategies the school used prior to exclusion.
- 3.5. Form has a space for listing past intervention strategies that worked well with the student.

4. Information to Support Student-Centered Planning

- 4.1. Form has a place for listing the inclusion officer in the LA and their contact information.
- 4.2. Form has a place to plan the AP the student will receive while being excluded. (The LA has an obligation to provide a student with AP starting on the 6th day of exclusion and onwards.) (Also 3.2)
- 4.3. Form has a place for listing the agencies involved with the child (e.g., Education Welfare, Police, Youth Offender Team, etc.). (Also 2.3)
- 4.4. Form has a place for stating whether a student will miss an exam due to the exclusion.
- 4.5. Form asks the headteacher if there is a need to conduct a risk assessment, and if so, also asks if one has been done. (Also 3.3)

- 4.6. Form has a place for noting if a Common Framework Assessment (CAF) has been completed (i.e., An assessment for uncovering unmet learning needs). (Also 2.4)
- 4.7. Form has a space for listing past intervention strategies that have worked well with the student. (Also 3.5)

5. Potential Criminalization of the Student

- 5.1. Form has a space for listing past behavioral incidents or infractions of the student.
- 5.2. Form has a space for specifically listing any drug or alcohol details related to the incident that led to the permanent exclusion.

4.2.2 Finalized Matrices

As mentioned in Chapter 3, after the coding templates were finalized, the parent letters and forms were once again analyzed. The information from that template analysis was then put into two separate tables or matrices. Doing this allowed for matrix analysis to occur and for the Phase 1 research questions to be answered. (The findings from this matrix analysis are discussed in Chapter 4.3).

After concluding Phase 1, Phase 2 began with the secondary data analysis. Three key permanent exclusion statistics were calculated for each LA: 1) The 2011/2012 average permanent exclusion rate; 2) The 2011/2012 permanent exclusion ranking of the LA compared to 152 other authorities nationally (The higher the ranking, the higher the permanent exclusion rate); and 3) The five-year average permanent exclusion rate from 2006/2007 to 2011/2012. This set of statistics was then appended to the matrices constructed in Phase 1. Matrix analysis was then again conducted to assist with answering the research questions in Phase 2. (The findings from this matrix analysis are discussed in Chapter 4.4).

The final, comprehensive matrices, with both qualitative and quantitative information, are shown below. Table 2 showcases the finalized matrix for the evaluation of the permanent exclusion parent letter templates. Table 3 showcases the finalized matrix for the evaluation of the permanent exclusion forms.

Table 2*Matrix for Permanent Exclusion Parent Notification Letter Templates, by LA*

Local Authority	2011/ 2012 Ranking (Out of 152)	Parental Rights and/or Child Rights in the Exclusion Process	Parent Relationship-Building and Support	Accountability Measures	2011 /2012 Perm. Excl. Rate	2006/2007- 2011/2012 Avg. Perm. Excl. Rate
Derby	#6	-No mention of the appeal process at all or of the child's rights in the letter template. -Does mention the parents' right to have representation and to see the child's school record.	-No mention of the parents' duty to keep children at home for five days. -Does provide parents with some contact information for support services to navigate the exclusion process.	-Limited details about the LA's responsibility to provide AP. -No mention of the potential for disability discrimination to have occurred. -No mention of the prior strategies the school used to avoid exclusion.	0.157 %*	0.130 %
Haringey	#62	-Lists all the same parental rights outlined in the DfE model letter, namely the parents' right to appeal, have representation, see the child's school record, etc.	-Mentions the parents' responsibility to keep children at home (No mention of prosecution if failure to comply). -Some contact information for support services is listed.	-Discusses the appeal process in detail. -Brings up the potential for disability discrimination to have occurred. -Does not mention the strategies the school used prior to exclusion.	0.074 %	0.092 %
Staffordshire	#84	-Closely follows DfE guidance provided in the model letter and lists the parents' right to appeal, have representation, see the child's school record, etc.	-Provides parents with the contact information of multiple support services, including legal support. -Mentions the parents' responsibility to keep children at home and the possibility of prosecution if failure to comply.	-Template prompts headteacher to provide more information about student history when listing the reason for exclusion. -Appeal process is mentioned, as well as AP, and the possibility for disability discrimination to have occurred. -No mention of the strategies used to avoid exclusion.	0.060 %	0.084 %
Swindon	#93	-Closely follows DfE guidance provided in the model letter and lists the parents' right to appeal, have representation, see the child's school record, etc.	-Provides information for legal support. -Mentions the parents' responsibility to keep the child at home for 5 days and mentions the possibility of prosecution if failure to comply.	-Discusses the LA's responsibility to provide AP. -Mentions both the appeal process and possibility of disability discrimination. - No mention of the strategies used to avoid exclusion.	0.053 %	0.088 %
Manchester	#116	-Does not closely follow DfE guidelines in the model letter. -Does not mention the appeal process at all.	-No mention of parents' duty to keep children at home for 5 days or of potential prosecution. -Minimal support resources are listed.	-Limited and incorrect details about the LA's responsibility to provide AP. -No mention of the appeal process, parents' ability to flag disability discrimination, or alternative strategies used to avoid exclusion.	0.037 %	0.116 %
Kirklees	#145	-Closely follows the DfE model letter and lists the parents' right to appeal, have representation, see the child's school record, etc. -Only authority to mention the child's right to attend the disciplinary review meeting.	-Lists support resources for parents. -Offers to set up an informal meeting with parents to discuss the decision. -Mentions the parents' responsibility to keep children at home and the possibility of prosecution if failure to comply.	-Discusses the appeal process. -Prompts headteacher to provide all the details in listing the reason for exclusion. -Detailed language around the AP the LA will provide for the student. -Lists strategies used to avoid exclusion. -No mention of disability discrimination.	0.005 %	0.035 %

Table 3*Matrix for Permanent Exclusion Forms, by LA*

Local Authority	2011/2012 Ranking (Out of 152)	Parent Relationship and Communication	Context and Student Background	Accountability Practices and Procedures	Information to Support Student-Centered Planning	Potential Criminalization of the Student	2011/2012 Perm. Excl. Rate	2006/2007-2011/2012 Avg. Perm. Excl. Rate
Central Bedfordshire	#4	-Does not ask about the parents' names, if they were informed about the exclusion, or about family history.	-Space for recording SEN status, looked after status, and agencies involved.	-Space for listing more details about the incident and AP planning. -No space for listing intervention strategies.	-Space for listing inclusion support officer, AP planning, agencies involved, and whether a student will miss an exam.	-Space for listing previous behavioral incidents. - No place for listing drug/alcohol details specifically.	0.174 %*	N/A ^a
Derby	#6	-Space for listing parents' names and if they were contacted. -No space for family history/background.	-Space for recording SEN status and looked after details, but not agencies involved.	-No place for additional incident details, AP planning, prior intervention strategies, etc.	-No place for listing inclusion support officer, AP planning, or agencies involved. -Space for exam info.	-No place for listing previous behavioral incidents or drug/alcohol details.	0.157 %*	0.130 %
Northamptonshire	#59	-Asks for parents' names, contact confirmation, history of parent involvement, family background, native language, etc.	-Place to record SEN details, looked after status, CAF details, medical history, education profile, and work experience.	-Place for listing additional details about the incident, AP planning, prior support strategies, and past effective interventions.	-No place for listing inclusion support officer or exam info. -Space for AP planning, agencies involved, CAF, etc.	-Space for listing previous behavioral incidents. - No place for listing drug/alcohol details specifically.	0.075 %	0.106 %
Haringey	#62	-Space for recording parents' names. -No space for family history/background.	-Space on form for listing SEN details and looked after status, but not agencies involved.	-Place for describing AP Planning. -No place for incident details or prior support.	-Space for recording whether a student will miss an exam and AP planning.	-No place for listing previous behavioral infractions or drug/alcohol details.	0.074 %	0.092 %
Staffordshire	#84	-Space for recording parents' names. -No place for family history/background.	-Space for recording SEN status, looked after details, and agencies involved.	-Space for providing additional details about the incident. -No AP planning.	-Space for recording whether a student will miss an exam. -No AP Planning.	-Space for past behavioral incidents. -No place for drug/alcohol details.	0.060 %	0.084 %
Wokingham	#91	-No place for listing parents' names, contact confirmation, family history, etc.	-Space for recording SEN status, looked after details, and agencies involved.	-No place for additional details, AP planning, or prior intervention strategies.	- No place for listing inclusion support/reintegration officer or exam status.	-Asks about past behavioral incidents and drug/alcohol details specifically.	0.054 %	0.094 %
Swindon	#93	-Space for recording parents' names. -No place for family history/background.	-Space for recording SEN status, looked after details, and agencies involved.	-Limited space for AP planning and support strategies. -No place for listing incident details.	-Space for AP planning, reintegration support, exam status, prior intervention strategies, etc.	-Asks about drug/alcohol details specifically. -No place for past behavioral incidents.	0.053 %	0.088 %
Kirklees	#145	-Space for parents' names, contact confirmation, and their preferences for their child's AP.	-Space for SEN details, looked after status, attendance, attainment, interactions with peers and staff, etc.	-Space for additional incident details, AP Planning, risk assessment, and prior support strategies.	-Space for AP planning, reintegration support, CAF, and strategies that worked well in the past.	-Asks about drug/alcohol details specifically. -No place for past behavioral incidents.	0.005 %	0.035 %

Note. The LAs are sorted in the above tables by ranking, from most exclusionary to least exclusionary. Additionally, “Perm. Excl. Rate” stands for Permanent Exclusion Rate, and “Avg. Perm. Excl. Rate” stands for Average Permanent Exclusion Rate.

^a N/A = Not enough data was present to calculate a five-year average rate of permanent exclusion for the LA.

* The 2011/2012 permanent exclusion rate is at least two standard deviations above the average rate of exclusion.

4.3 Phase 1 Findings

4.3.1 Variation in the Interpretation and Presentation of Exclusion Information

For Phase 1 of this study, the primary research question was to investigate how different authorities in England vary in the way they interpret and present information about exclusion in documents. With the parent notification letter templates, this variation was examined by conducting matrix analysis on Table 2.

The first finding the matrix analysis revealed was that when comparing across rows or within a singular authority, there was a great deal of consistency. Specifically, LAs tended to have consistency in the amount of detail they provided for each topic or “theme”. For instance, Derby and Manchester’s letters presented a relatively limited number of details about the rights of the child and the parent in the exclusion process. This sparseness was also present in the limited information given about accountability measures and support resources in the document. When comparing within columns or across authorities though, there was indeed a noticeable amount of variation in the presentation of information. Within the overarching theme of “Parent Relationship-building and Support”, authorities like Staffordshire and Swindon were very clear about wanting parents to be engaged in the process. The language in both documents specifically refers to the responsibility that parents have to help uphold the exclusion and keep their child away from public spaces, or else potentially face prosecution. Mentioning this to parents, in the first communication after an exclusion, could make them feel accountable and engaged in the exclusion process, or it could serve to intimidate and alienate them from the school. Regardless, it is important to note that this

strong language was not shared across all authorities' parent letter templates. Authorities like Derby do not mention the parents' responsibilities at all—omitting this information from the letter entirely. This way of presenting information could serve to be less intimidating to parents, but it could also be less effective in communicating the seriousness of the situation. Overall, when comparing across authorities, there were very clear differences in what the authorities interpreted as important information to share with parents and what was not.

A similarly high degree of variation was also seen when conducting matrix analysis on Table 3, which provides information about the authorities' permanent exclusion forms. The specific fields that an LA chose to include on their form can be seen as the LA's interpretation of what information is most crucial to collect. For instance, Northamptonshire seemed to place great emphasis on student background, and this can be observed in the number of questions about student background on the permanent exclusion form. This includes questions to record information about a student's medical history and work experience, which were not included as fields on any other LA's form. However, some fields were consistently included on forms for multiple LAs, including SEN status and "looked after" status, which suggests some level of consistency in the presentation and structuring of information across authorities.

4.3.2 Variation in Alignment with National Guidance

One of the secondary research questions from Phase 1 was about investigating how closely the LA's presentations of information align with national guidance. And as previously mentioned, the DfE released national guidance in 2008, which provided all authorities with a model template to use for the parent notification letter. Therefore, in this study, alignment with national guidance was deduced by comparing the LA's parent letter template directly with the model template the DfE provided. For instance, Swindon, Staffordshire, and Haringey all closely aligned with the DfE when discussing parental rights. This is because, as summarized in Table 2, they included the same key language and information as provided in the national model letter. Conversely, Manchester and Derby represent deviations since they excluded key information, like the fact that parents have the right to appeal and the right to raise concerns if they think disability

discrimination has occurred with the exclusion of their child. (Both pieces of information, which are integral to parents understanding their full rights in the exclusion process, were present within the model letter the DfE distributed.) Additionally, Manchester’s letter even goes as far as to have incorrect information about exclusions, which suggests a fair degree of misalignment between the LA and national standards. It is important to note that by 2011, which is when these letter templates were circulating, the DfE guidance had already been in place for three years. This means a failure to include certain types of information is less likely due to a lack of familiarity with national standards or newly changed national guidelines, and more likely due to deliberate omission.

Additionally, the authorities’ general exclusion information websites were also reviewed to further investigate alignment with national guidance. For instance, the Kirklees website provided a direct link to the 2008 DfE guidance, which not all LA webpages did, and suggests a certain level of awareness of the guidelines. And unsurprisingly, the Kirklees parent letter template does not greatly deviate from the language in the DfE’s template. However, being closely aligned with national guidance did not preclude an LA like Kirklees from *adding* new language to the template. In other words, while no information from the DfE template was omitted, the Kirklees letter template did, for instance, include additional language about offering to meet informally with parents to discuss the exclusion.

Overall, the matrix analysis showed that LAs varied greatly in how closely authority documents aligned with national guidance, with strategic choices to both omit and add on certain information.

4.3.3 Relationship between LA Documents and Ethos

The last research question from Phase 1 was about investigating if the presentation of information in the LA documents could reveal anything about the ethos a LA has regarding the practice of school exclusion. Overall, ethos is known for being an abstract and hard-to-define concept, but it generally refers to “the guiding beliefs, standards or ideals that characterise or pervade a group, a community, a people” and “the spirit that motivates the ideas, customs or practices...” (Websters, 1986, as cited in Munn et al., 2001). Moreover, as mentioned in Chapter 2, evaluating documents can sometimes

be a proxy or a way to surmise the customs, practices, and beliefs of an organization. In this study, the findings from analyzing authority documents can potentially provide context or hint at the guiding beliefs that authorities have towards exclusion and punitive measures. For instance, with the authority permanent exclusion forms, there is no requirement from the DfE for the LA to record additional details about a behavioral infraction if drugs and alcohol were involved. However, some LAs chose to prioritize capturing that information on forms, which could potentially hint at a larger theme or culture of criminalizing students through the process of exclusion. This assumption is even more likely if the authority prioritized capturing drug and alcohol information over having a field on the form to record the names of a student's parents or their family background, which was the case with Wokingham.

Another example of potential variation in authority ethos would be the presence—or lack thereof—of fields to record support-related efforts on the exclusion form. Some authorities, like Northamptonshire and Kirklees, required headteachers to list the support strategies the school used prior to excluding a student. Some forms also had spaces to record the contact information of inclusion support officers within the LA, which are individuals responsible for ensuring students are supported and integrated into the school community (Surrey County Council, n.d.). Authorities like Swindon also required headteachers to check off if a pastoral support plan was in place for the student. These types of fields and requirements allude to a culture or school ethos that is less punitive in nature. There is a sense that exclusion is seen as more of a last resort. Additionally, forms like these, which tended to ask very detailed, context-based questions, are also more extensive in length. This means the administrative hurdles the headteacher must go through to exclude a student are higher, and the potential likelihood of flippantly embracing the practice and its punitive nature is lower.

Clues about an LA's ethos can also potentially be surmised through the parent letter templates, and Kirklees is a prime example. In the Kirklees template, where headteachers are prompted to fill in all the details of exclusion, the document explicitly stated that the headteacher cannot “later supplement the reasons for the permanent exclusion”—all details and context for the exclusion must be included in the parent letter (Kirklees Council, 2011, p. 1). This type of language was not present in any other

authority's template and could potentially hint at a culture or ethos of administrative accountability, transparency, and a refusal to exclude without due process or justification. However, it should be acknowledged that documents are not the sole indicator of how an organization or people operate daily (Atkinson & Coffey, 1997, as cited in Bowen, 2009). There are other factors to consider in determining ethos, including leadership and curriculum (Munn et al., 2001). Thus, while there are important variations in the language and structure of authority documents, no definitive statements can be made about the fundamental ethos that characterizes the authorities.

4.4 Phase 2 Findings

4.4.1 Relationship between LA Documents and Exclusion Rates

For Phase 2, the primary research question was about investigating what relationship, if any, exists between the way that an authority interprets and presents information about school exclusion and the actual rate of exclusion in that authority relative to others. Specifically, do authorities with more punitive language in documents also have higher rates of exclusion and vice versa if the language appears less punitive?

Starting with the parent notification letters, if one compares Derby, the LA with the highest average rate of exclusion in the table (0.16%), and Kirklees, the LA with the lowest average rate (0.01%), there are clear differences in the language and presentation of information in their respective documents. Kirklees' exclusion form included space for recording AP planning, reintegration support, and risk assessment, and the notification letters provided a great deal of information to parents, as well as offering them an opportunity to informally meet with the headteacher to discuss the exclusion. Overall, this language and structuring could be interpreted as less punitive than other authorities. Conversely, Derby's parent letter template provides no details about the appeals process, the school's prior intervention strategies, parental responsibilities in the exclusion process, or the potential for disability discrimination to have occurred with the exclusion. This structuring—with its lack of transparency, accountability, and opportunity to reverse the exclusion—could be interpreted as having a more punitive tone. And once again, when looking at the data, Derby excluded students at more than 10 times the rate of Kirklees in the 2011/2012 academic year.

However, this apparent pattern between the exclusion rate and the level of punitiveness presented in LA documents seems less present if one moves away from the extreme ends of the table. In other words, the authorities that are not at the very bottom or very top of the exclusion rate rankings.

For instance, Manchester has a parent notification letter that is very similar to Derby. In Manchester's document, there is a lack of transparency and a lack of following national guidance, which again suggests a more punitive tone. However, Manchester (0.04%) did not exclude at nearly the same rate as Derby (0.16%) in the 2011/2012 academic year. (On the other hand, it is important to note that Manchester's five-year average permanent exclusion rate does suggest relatively higher levels of exclusion in the past.) This lack of a clear pattern seems even more apparent when evaluating Table 3, which relates to the authorities' exclusion forms. Northamptonshire (0.08%), which has a higher rate of exclusion than most of the other LAs, counterintuitively, has one of the most nuanced, thoughtful permanent exclusion forms in the sample. It is ten pages long, contains multiple detailed, context-building questions, and asks about things like parent involvement and family background. These are all things that created a less punitive tone in the document, but Northamptonshire still excluded students at relatively high rates in 2011.

Overall, there is a great amount of variation in the language and structuring of the LA documents, and this variation does not relate to exclusion rates or rankings in a linear way. What these non-linear findings do support is the notion that 1) exclusion is indeed a complex, multi-level phenomenon, and 2) organizational artifacts, while an important piece of the puzzle, cannot encapsulate the entire picture of what goes on within an authority. Thus, there is a need for continued, multi-dimensional research of exclusion and exclusion rate variation at the local level.

Chapter 5: Discussion

5.1 Introduction

In the following chapter, the findings from this study are discussed in the context of existing literature on exclusion. The first three sections will discuss how the themes and findings from Phase 1 relate to findings from prior exclusion studies. Specifically, other studies that utilized document review and analysis as a primary methodology. Then, the last section will cover how the themes and findings from Phase 2 relate to findings from other papers that investigated exclusion rate variation at the local level.

5.2 Discussing Variation in Organizational Artifacts

As discussed in Chapter 2, using document analysis to investigate how different LAs present exclusion information has been thoroughly explored (Garner, 2000; Munn et al., 2001; Parsons, 2008). Within the specific exclusion study that Munn et al. (2001) conducted, researchers used “documentary analysis of authority policies on exclusion” to investigate the potential differences in exclusion practices between LAs in Scotland. Researchers discovered that LA policy and practices regarding exclusion did indeed vary greatly. Some authorities had policies that emphasized “the need for accurate record keeping” and “adherence to the authority’s procedures” during the exclusion process, while others had policies that did not even require the authority to be notified in some cases of exclusion (Munn et al., 2001, p. 26). This level of unevenness, variation, and general lack of standardization is what was also observed in this study. However, the findings in this study derive from documents directly involved in the exclusion process, rather than overarching local policy guidelines. Thus, this investigation provides a deeper look into the level of variation that occurs between authorities, not just in a policy-sense, but also in the literal structure of organizational artifacts related to exclusion.

5.3 Discussing the Level of Alignment between Local and National Contexts

Using document analysis to measure an LA’s level of alignment with national guidance is also not new (Parsons, 2008; Garner, 2000). In *The Range and Impact of LEA Behaviour Support Plans*, Garner (2000) explored how authorities varied in the degree to which they complied with national guidance on exclusion and behavior management.

Specifically, Garner investigated the way different authorities constructed their behavior support plans (BSPs). (BSPs are essentially documents that outline the “arrangements” or plans for supporting children experiencing “behavioral difficulties” (Garner, 2000, p. 3)). After analysis of the BSPs, Garner concluded that there was indeed a great degree of variety across LAs, even though the government had provided the LAs with national guidelines on what a BSP had to include. There was still variation in what authorities chose to include or omit from this plan structure. This finding is similar to the results seen in this investigation—namely with the analysis of authority parent letter templates. There was significant variation in how much of the DfE’s model letter authorities chose to change, append, or omit. However, it is important to note that in Garner’s study, LAs were not given an explicit template for creating support plans. Instead, they were given a list of criteria that they then had to interpret and create a BSP from. In this study, LAs were specifically given a template by the DfE, and the existence of this national template allowed me to directly compare the language in the LA document with the language in the national document and quite literally measure alignment between the two.

5.4 Discussing Variation in Organizational Artifacts and Local Ethos

When trying to understand why exclusion policies and practices vary at the local and school level, the importance of examining local and school ethos cannot be understated. In prior studies, there are many ways that researchers have tried to uncover ethos—from interviewing staff, using questionnaires, looking at the curriculum, and examining the relationship between parents and the school (Ann Hatton, 2013; Munn et al., 2001). What has been less explored though is the way that document language and structure can potentially be a way to uncover local or school-level ethos. However, the connection between document language and ethos has been explored at the *national* level. For instance, Tawell and McCluskey (2022) published a study in which they evaluated the national school exclusion policies of England and Scotland. They argued that analyzing the language in these policy documents is a way of uncovering the “deep seated” assumptions and beliefs that England and Scotland have towards the practice of school exclusion (Tawell & McCluskey, 2022, p.149). For instance, Scotland’s exclusion policy had language that emphasized the need to meet challenging behavior with

“welfare-based intervention”, while England’s policy stated that challenging behavior “requires punishment” (Tawell & McCluskey, 2022, p. 141). This vast difference in tone—punitive versus restorative—was also observed in the language of the LA documents, suggesting significant differences in LA ethos. However, as was acknowledged in Chapter 4, ethos is an incredibly multi-faceted concept, and documents are only one part of an organization’s culture, beliefs, and practices. Thus, there is a need to continue to explore the ways that various factors, including documentation, can together paint a fuller, more comprehensive picture of local ethos.

5.5 Discussing the Relationship between Organizational Artifacts, Ethos, and Exclusion Rate Data

As discussed above, ethos can be a powerful explanatory factor when trying to understand the variation in how exclusion is enacted at a local level. Researchers have also specifically turned to ethos when trying to understand the variation in actual rates of exclusion at the local level (Collins, 2013; Munn et al., 2001). In the study that Munn et al. (2001) conducted, researchers compared demographically similar schools with remarkably different rates of exclusion to understand the role that school culture and ethos played in affecting exclusion statistics. From their investigation, they discovered key characteristics of “high-excluding” schools versus “low-excluding” schools. For instance, the researchers asserted that organizations where parents are unquestioningly expected to support the school and the exclusion process tended to be organizations that excluded students at higher rates (Munn et al., 2001). This finding coincides with some of the results from this study. For instance, Derby, an authority with an incredibly high exclusion rate, had no mention of the parents’ responsibilities in the exclusion process or of the parents’ right to appeal in the parent letter template. It could be suggested that this absence of transparency and lack of information available to fight the exclusion is one way that Derby expects “unquestioning support” from parents. Therefore, this study furthered exclusion research by offering a way to further corroborate the relationship that can exist between language in documents, ethos, and exclusion rate data at the local level. However, as previously mentioned in Chapter 4, once one moves away from the authorities at the extreme ends of the spectrum—i.e., those that have incredibly high rates

of exclusion and those that have incredibly low rates—the pattern between language in documents, perceived ethos, and exclusion rates becomes less clear. This once again suggests the need to further contextualize local organizational artifacts and documents with the actual practices and people within the authority.

Chapter Six: Concluding Thoughts

The purpose of this dissertation was to further explore an increasingly relevant and consequential phenomenon: school exclusion. To investigate this topic, I chose to examine school exclusion at the LA level. However, central to this investigation was the understanding that school exclusion is a multi-dimensional, systems-based phenomenon that is affected by a variety of macro-level and micro-level factors.

At the core of this research was the desire to explore two primary questions: Firstly, how do authorities vary in the way they structure, present, and interpret information about exclusion in organizational documents; and secondly, how might these different presentations relate to local ethos and the actual rates of exclusion in the authorities? In doing document review and secondary data review of 10 LAs in England, I was able to address these questions. Ultimately, findings from the study showed that while there is significant variation in authority documents—both in presentation and in the level of alignment with national guidance—it is hard to make conclusive statements about ethos. It is important to acknowledge that documents are only one element of organizational practices, and thus, need to be contextualized by other elements of the organization. This was further confirmed when looking at exclusion rate data and seeing the lack of an explicit pattern between exclusion rates and variation in document structure and language. Overall, these findings suggest the need for continued exploration of school exclusion as a multi-dimensional, multi-level, systems-based phenomenon. It also suggests the need to further explore the structure and language of documents in conjunction with the processes, practices, and people surrounding them.

However, while it is true that documents alone cannot encompass the entirety of an organization, they can be catalysts for change within that organization. The right tweaks in the language of a parent letter can signal to a wary parent or guardian that they are not alone in the exclusion process and that their child will be supported instead of just sanctioned. A couple of edits to an exclusion form can indicate to a headteacher that the priority should be determining a plan of support for an excluded child, rather than just determining if drugs were involved in an incident. Ultimately, school exclusion is an incredibly complex, nuanced process that documents alone cannot fully unpack, but

documents can be a starting place for countering the inherent punitiveness in the practice. Therefore, if one asks, “what is in a letter?”, “what is in a form?”, the answer is the ability to either reinforce the status quo or fundamentally upend it.

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Appendix A

DfE's Parent Notification Letter Template

Model letter 4

From the headteacher of a primary, secondary or special school (or the teacher in charge of a PRU) notifying the parent(s) of that pupil's permanent exclusion (paragraph 103b).

Dear [Parent's name] I regret to inform you of my decision to permanently exclude [Child's Name] with effect from [date]. This means that [Child's Name] will not be allowed in this school/this PRU unless he/she is reinstated by the governing body/the discipline committee (management committee in case of a PRU) or by an appeal panel.

I realise that this exclusion may well be upsetting for you and your family, but the decision to permanently exclude [Child's Name] has not been taken lightly. [Child's Name] has been excluded because [reasons for the exclusion – include any other relevant previous history].

[For pupils of compulsory school age]

You have a duty to ensure that your child is not present in a public place in school hours during the first 5 school days of this exclusion, i.e. on [specify the precise dates] unless there is reasonable justification. You could be prosecuted or receive a penalty notice if your child is present in a public place during school hours on those dates. It will be for you to show reasonable justification.

[For pupils of compulsory school age]

Alternative arrangements for [Child's Name]'s education to continue will be made. For the first five school days of the exclusion we will set work for [Child's Name] and would ask you to ensure this work is completed and returned promptly to school for marking [this may be different if supervised education is being provided earlier than the sixth day]. From the sixth school day of the exclusion onwards – i.e. from [specify the date] the local authority [give the name of the authority] will provide suitable full-time education. [set out the arrangements if known at time of writing, if not known say that the arrangements will be notified shortly by a further letter.]

[For pupils of compulsory school age]

[Where pupil lives in a local authority other than the excluding school's local authority] I have also today informed [name of officer] at [name of local authority] of your child's exclusion and they will be in touch with you about arrangements for [his/her] education from the sixth school day of exclusion. You can contact them at [give contact details].

As this is a permanent exclusion the governing body (or management committee in case of a PRU) must meet to consider it. At the review meeting you may make representations to the governing body/PRU management committee if you wish and ask them to reinstate your child in school. The governing body/ PRU management committee have the power to reinstate your child immediately or from a specified date, or, alternatively, they have the power to uphold the exclusion in which case you may appeal against their decision to an Independent Appeal Panel. The latest date by which the governing body/ PRU management committee must meet is [specify the date – the 15th school day after the date on which the governing body/PRU management committee was notified of the exclusion]. If you wish to make representations to the governing body/PRU management committee and wish to be accompanied by a friend or representative please contact [Name of Contact] on/at [contact details – address, phone number, email], as soon as possible. You will, whether you choose to make representations or not, be notified by the Clerk to the governing body/PRU management committee of the time, date and location of the meeting. Please let us know if you have a disability or special needs which would affect your ability to attend the meeting. Also, please inform [contact] if it would be helpful for you to have an interpreter present at the meeting.

[If you think this exclusion relates to a disability your child has, and you think discrimination has occurred, you may raise the issue with the governing body/PRU management committee.]

You have the right to see a copy of [Name of Child]’s school record. Due to confidentiality restrictions, you must notify me in writing if you wish to be supplied with a copy of [Name of Child]’s school record. I will be happy to supply you with a copy if you request it. There may be a charge for photocopying. You may also wish to contact [Name] at [LA name] on/at [contact details – address, phone number, email], who can provide advice on what options are available to you. Additionally, you may find it useful to contact the Advisory Centre for Education (ACE)– an independent national advice centre for parents of children in state schools. They offer information and support on state education in England and Wales, including on exclusion from school. They can be contacted on 020 7704 9822 or text ‘AskACE’ to 68808. [Insert reference to sources of local independent advice if known.]

Yours sincerely [Name]

Headteacher (teacher in charge in case of a PRU)

Appendix B

Example of a Local Authority Exclusion Form

STAFFORDSHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL NOTIFICATION OF EXCLUSION FROM SCHOOL

FIXED TERM EXCLUSION

16 days or more or
totalling 16 days or more
in a term

From
to
No. of School days
Total days so far this term for this pupil
Total days so far this school year for this pupil

Or
PERMANENT EXCLUSION

Date of exclusion

SCHOOL

DfE No.

NAME OF PUPIL

Male/Female

**DATE OF BIRTH
GROUP**

NAT.
CURRICULUM
YR.

HOME ADDRESS

TEL NO

NAME OF PARENTS/CARERS

ETHNICITY OF PUPIL

SEN STATUS

(one of:) None; School Action; School Action Plus; Under Assessment; Statement

Other relevant SEN information: (e.g. current level of support provided, identified learning needs etc)

--

PUPIL IN CARE?

YES or NO

If yes, name of social worker and contact no.

--

WILL THE PUPIL MISS A PUBLIC EXAMINATION?

YES or NO

DATE/TIME/VENUE OF GOVERNORS' MEETING

--

REASON FOR THE EXCLUSION

(Please place X in ONE box only)

- PP** (Physical assault against a pupil)
- PA** (Physical assault against an adult)
- VP** (Verbal abuse/threatening behaviour against a pupil)
- VA** (Verbal abuse/threatening behaviour against an adult)
- BU** (Bullying)
- RA** (Racist abuse)
- SM** (Sexual misconduct)
- DA** (Drug and alcohol related)
- DM** (Damage)
- TH** (Theft)
- DB** (Persistent disruptive behaviour)

Other professionals/agencies involved? If yes please give details

ATTACHED TO THIS FORM: (If applicable/available)

Details of any previous exclusions

Copy of PSP, IEP etc.

Further details of the incident

Copy of letter to parents

Any other relevant information

(Headteacher Name)

date

**Please complete and return this form to: Ann Lander,
Education Inclusion, Tipping Street, Stafford. ST16 2DH**