Changing the Exclusionary Practices of Mainstream Secondary Schools: the experience of Girls with SEND: "I have some quirky bits about me that I mostly hide from the world"

J. Porter a b and J.Ingram a

a.Department of Education, University of Oxford, Oxford, UK; b.Institute of Education, University of Reading, Reading, UK

Corresponding Author

*jill.porter@education.ox.ac.uk, (0000-0002-8507-6260)

Department of Education, 15 Norham Gardens, Oxford OX2 6PY

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Abstract

Pupils with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) are disproportionately over-represented in official statistics on exclusion suggesting that mainstream schools are failing to meet their needs. Official reviews have focused on procedural aspects of the SEND system and the creation of perverse incentives. Safeguards at an individual level however have done little to improve provision. Instead, it is argued we need to look at cultures of schooling and systemic responses that foster a sense of school belonging. School belonging (or connectedness) has been widely associated with a raft of positive outcomes although there is relatively little research that has focused on pupils with SEND. This paper contributes to that gap in literature through research with girls who identify as having SEND. Their needs can be more difficult to discern, their strategies for coping effectively masking their difficulties. Here we present questionnaire data collected on the barriers and supports to inclusion and girls' feelings of belonging in school. The data reveal that the girls in the study with self-disclosed SEND feel less connected to school than other girls. Their scores for their sense of belonging were significantly associated with the barriers and supports they encounter across a range of school contexts. In contrast to other literature, the study reveals that it is the relational aspects of schooling that are most important for girls with SEND. Feeling you belong means that you feel safe to be yourself, that you don't need to hide your "quirky bits," with the attendant demands on mental health.

Keywords: exclusion, school belonging, gender, special educational needs,

Introduction

Government statistics for England have consistently shown that children with special educational needs and disability (SEND) are significantly more likely to experience both fixed and permanent exclusion (DfE 2019a). Current figures suggest that this is particularly true for permanent exclusion of children on SEN support who are five times more likely to be excluded than other students; and those whose needs have been formally recognized as requiring an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) are four times more likely to be given a fixed term exclusion (DfE 2020). Government statistics however provide a partial picture. Exclusion can take many forms and there has been a growth in informal or unofficial exclusion which has impacted disproportionally on some groups of young people. Children with SEN are more likely for example to be sent home to "cool off" or calm down" or when there are no staff to support them (Ofsted/CQC 2017); be placed on part-time timetables (OCC 2017); and to experience isolation rooms (OCC 2019a). They are disproportionally represented amongst those

who leave the system prematurely (Hunter 2019); and more likely to be encouraged to move schools, and be subject to off-rolling (Ofsted 2019).

The failure to meet pupils' needs is a major factor in the over-representation of pupils with SEND amongst those who are home educated (Ofsted 2019; OCC 2019b). Those who have been excluded are more likely to go on to be recognized as having SEND (DfE 2019b). A corollary to this is a higher proportion of pupils with EHCPs in special schools (Black 2019). Taken together, these data are indicative of a prevailing level of unmet need in mainstream schools, with the highest rates of exclusion for pupils with Social Emotional and Mental Health (SEMH) and additional needs, reflecting the significant challenges encountered by school staff in identifying and meeting their needs (Graham et al. 2019). Mainstream schools are becoming increasingly exclusive.

The focus in this paper lies with girls who disclose SEND, who when it comes to exclusion have received little attention. Indeed, DfE statistics pay little attention to the nexus of gender and other pupil characteristics (such as SEND) with regard to exclusion. While figures of formal exclusion suggest that schools are far less likely to exclude girls, there is evidence to suggest that girls are more likely to self-exclude or experience informal exclusion (Osler et al. 2002). Girls are also more at risk of early exits and school moves than boys (Social Finance 2020). This is particularly concerning as such processes fall below the radar for monitoring and therefore lack accountability mechanisms (Social Finance 2020).

A number of recent official reviews (e.g. National Audit Office 2019; Select Committee House of Commons 2019, Justice 2019) reveal high levels of concern about provision for pupils with SEND. These have largely focused on procedural aspects suggesting new protocols put in place for improving the existing system for identifying and responding to need. The Select Committee for SEND provided a damning assessment of the *implementation* of the Code of Practice (2014) which had:

> *resulted in confusion and at times unlawful practice, bureaucratic nightmares, buck-passing and a lack of accountability, strained resources and adversarial experiences, and ultimately dashed the hopes of many (House of Commons 2019 3)*

This report emphasizes a central problem in the lack of accountability for SEND at all levels – schools, LAs and the DfE, which has resulted in unintended but nevertheless severe consequences with significant gaps in provision. The National Audit Office (2019) also identified a central problem with funding that has not kept pace with need, due to a failure to fully assess the financial consequences of the reforms. This has been compounded by hard pressed LAs diverting resources to the "high needs block" that is funding for children with the most complex needs, and with less therefore available for mainstream schools. In effect this has created perverse incentives to both over identify need, making more young people eligible for ECHPs, and at the same time under identify the needs of young people that would have to be met by schools' existing budgets (Hunter 2019). It is likely that this has a particular impact on young people who are on the threshold borderline, those with less visible difficulties, and those not accompanied by a specific diagnosis.

Certainly, safeguards at the individual level in practice do little to improve the position for parents and their children fighting for access to limited resources. Formal systems set up through reference to the Equality Act have singularly failed to bring about change (Porter 2016). Policing the system, regulating it, making it more accountable introduces perverse incentives, and decreases the likelihood of children with SEND being made welcome in mainstream schools. As Timpson (DfE 2019b) suggested what is needed instead is a culture change: "It is essential that schools work towards the progressive removal of barriers to education for children with SEND." (DfE 2019b 39).

Rather than focusing on *processes* of exclusion, a more helpful response is to encourage schools to consider how they can foster a sense of belonging or connectedness to school for all students, and identify the systemic barriers and supports to participation. Key attributes of belonging include feeling a sense of pride, feeling useful, respected, supported and enabled, feeling known and accepted, as well as a sense of safety and security (Craggs and Kelly 2018; St Armand, Girard and Smith 2017). A sense of belonging is associated with a raft of positive outcomes for young people, academic (Niehaus, et al. 2012), health and social risk factors (Loukas, Suzuki and Horton 2006), and mental health (Millings et al 2012).

There is limited evidence with respect to gender and school belonging, with only ten of 45 studies in Allen and Kern's 2017 meta-analysis including gender as a variable. These studies provide mixed evidence of differences between boys and girls on who feels the greater sense of school belonging making it difficult for the authors to draw any conclusions. OECD (2018) figures however suggest a gradual decline in students' sense of belonging at school over the past 15 years with more countries (30) showing gender differences in favour of boys. Despite the wealth of empirical work with mainstream pupils, there has also been limited attention paid to a sense of belonging for pupils with SEND (Cumming, Marsh & Higgins 2017; Prince and Hadwin 2013). This is a significant gap given that it has been argued to be a protective factor (Shochet et al. 2016; Loukas et al. 2006; Prince and Hadwin 2013) and data from a small number of studies with young people with SEMH/Social Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties (SEBD) suggest that a feeling of belonging is a key factor that contributes to positive educational experiences (Nind, Boorman and Clarke 2012; Tellis-James and Fox 2016; Jalali and Morgan 2018). Young people with SEND who experience difficulties in relationships are most at risk from feeling disconnected to school (Cumming Marsh and Higgins2017). Arculi and Emerson (2020) provides one of the few studies to look at the intersection of disability and gender. They examined self-reported school satisfaction in an analysis of data taken from the millennium cohort study and found that girls with disabilities were at a particular risk of low school satisfaction at age 14, which was associated with mental health difficulties.

Osler et al. (2002) refer to the invisibility of girls, their difficulties overshadowed by those of boys. While boys are more likely to externalize their distress, girls are more likely to avoid confrontation with teachers, withdraw and self-harm (Gazeley et al. 2013, Hunter 2019). Indeed, figures for the incidence of mental health reveal that this is a growing issue for girls especially with respect to emotional difficulties (NHS Digital 2018; DoH/DfE 2017) which leads to disruptions in their education, including exclusion.

There is concern that this often goes under the radar of teachers (DoH/DfE 2017). Taking a phrase from Dean, Harwood, and Kasari (2017 686) it would appear that "the male landscape makes it easier to detect the challenges [some] individuals face," with some evidence to suggest that schools recognize girls' difficulties later than boys or not at all (Wilkinson 2008; Moyse 2021) and are less likely to receive help (Daniels, Leonard, and Smith 1999; Cummings et al. 2017). Carlile (2009) argues that girls at risk of exclusion are seen differently, as not conforming to the expected norms, or as manipulative.

The predominance of a male landscape is well illustrated with respect to research with girls on the autistic spectrum and girls with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) who have historically been underdiagnosed due to the largely male centric understanding of the externalizing behavior. Discrepancies in the ratio of ADHD in boys to girls owe much to the processes of referral and assessment (Quinn & Madhoo, 2014) with ratios varying across European countries from 3 :1to 16:1 (Novik et al. 2006) indicating that rather than viewing boys' numbers as a result of genetic vulnerability, we need a rather more comprehensive assessment that recognizes compensatory strategies in girls (Young et al 2020). Girls with ADHD internalise their responses manifested through for example inattentiveness, rather than externalising them through being hyperactive and impulsive (Quinn & Madhoo 2014). In this way girls' masking contributes to a lack of awareness by others and results in less support or concern from adults.

A similar analysis can be made with respect to the identification of Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in girls, where estimated gender ratios have varied as much as from 8:1 to 2:1 (Loomes, et al. (2017). As with ADHD, girls with ASD may present differently to boys as they develop a range of compensatory strategies or coping mechanisms (Dean, Harwood and Kasari 2017; Tierney et al. 2016) which in effect reduce the visibility of the challenges they face. Moyse (2021) provides interesting secondary data analysis to evidence how, although the proportion of autistic girls in secondary schools is increasing, their identification is still under-represented. Her analysis also surfaces the extent to which a postcode lottery operates with considerable variation between clinical commissioning groups in the wait time between referral and assessment that is more pronounced for girls than boys, in consequence delaying their access to support. Schools were less likely to be the referring agent (than GPs), although when they did they were likely to refer the girl at a younger age. Males were more likely to be referred while they were in primary school (and therefore had the benefit of better transition planning). As we have already seen exclusion can take many forms and children with SEND, including girls with ASD are particularly likely to be persistent absentees (Moyse 2021).

Here we draw on some preliminary research with mainstream secondary schools undertaken to identify the barriers to participation, and feelings of being connected to school. Insufficient attention has been given to young pupils' views with respect to decisions around exclusion (Ofsted 2019; Justice 2019) and limited empirical data on the views of young people with SEBD (Cosma and Soni 2019) who are amongst the least likely to be listened to. The lack of a clear definition, compounded by the fact that pupils may be unaware of the label attached to them (Sheffield and Morgan 2017) has led

investigators to focus on the views of young people in specialist SEBD provision. We focus on girls in mainstream secondary schools who disclose a difficulty or disability, in line with Equality Act (2010) definitions.

Methodology

Following approval from the University Ethics Committee, four schools, recruited through a University-Local Authority Liaison group, volunteered to take part in a collaborative project which aimed to investigate pupils' experiences of barriers and supports in their school and look at the relationship between these and pupils' sense of belonging or being connected to school. The study used a questionnaire described in detail elsewhere (McDermott et al. 2020) to capture pupils' sense of belonging and the school structures or systems that support or hinder this sense of belonging. In short the questionnaire included rating items for how pupils felt both generally "At different times and places" within the school, and more specifically "In lessons." Each set of rating questions was followed by two open questions that sought to understand the barriers and supports through asking "What helps?" and "What makes things more difficult?" The second half of the questionnaire included 11 items drawn from the Goodenow (1993) scale "The Psychological Sense of School Membership among Adolescents," and two additional questions concerning the sense of feeling safe. Again, the research team added open questions (3) to gain insight into "what helped (if anything)" and what prevented (if anything)" them from feeling part of the school, and if they could tell us more about their feelings of being safe. These additional open questions were prompted by feedback from the first school and subsequently included in the questionnaire for the other three schools. In line with the Equality Act 2010 definition, the questionnaire also asked pupils if they had a disability or difficulty (with a number of examples), which had gone on for a year or more and which impacted on their daily life. It did not ask them to specifically identify the disability but focussed instead on impact. A final open question asked them what three things they would change about school if they could. Questionnaires were anonymous and administered online in school. Here we report on the disaggregated data from the girls with SEND.

Participants

A total of 108 Year 8 -9 girls (age 12-14 years) with self-disclosed SEND completed the questionnaire. They formed between 23% and 37% of the girls in each of the schools for this year group. Details are provided below in Table 1 for each of the schools.

Insert table 1

The cohort were equally distributed with respect to the impact of their difficulty or disability as shown in Table 2.

Insert table 2 Data Analysis

Qualitative data were analysed using an iterative approach to the analysis of content of the entire data set adopting both an inductive and deductive approach (Schreider 2013) informed by broader analysis of previous data collected using the barriers and supports questions (Porter 2015) and by theoretical frameworks on School Belonging (Craggs

and Kelly 2018; St Armand et al. 2012). Consistency was examined through calculating the degree of agreement between two independent coders of between 20-27% of responses with agreement levels of 82-95% and an average agreement level of 88%.

The quantitative data was initially analysed using descriptive statistics. Then, following an examination of the quantitative data for skewedness and kurtosis, nonparametric tests were used to compare ratings of girls who disclosed SEND and those who did not, and the association between ratings of belonging and experience in different contexts, using SPSS 26 (IBM Corp 2019).

Results

1. *Ratings Across Contexts*

Looking first at the ratings girls gave for how they generally felt across 13 different settings with options ranging from 1 (indicating Very Good) to 6 (indicating Very Bad). Mean scores for the girls with disclosed SEND varied between 2.15, (2 indicating Good); and 4.41 (a score that lies between 4 Not OK and 5 being Bad.). No student gave the lowest possible rating for practical subjects and no student gave the highest possible rating for tests and assessments. Table 3 reveals the differences between different settings for both girls with and without disclosed SEND. Girls without disclosed SEND gave ratings that indicated they felt better across contexts with a statistically significant difference between the two groups [U= 8360, $p < .001$ Df1 N=344].

Insert table 3

2. Barriers and Supports

Between two thirds and three quarters of girls wrote about the barriers and supports they encountered in school. The coding of these answers of girls with disclosed SEND are set out in Table 4 and reveal the overriding prominence for girls of their interactions with other people in their responses to what helps, and what makes things more difficult, both in response to the general question of what helps at different times and places and to the more specific question about lessons. Responses that referred to aspects of teaching and learning were also prominent. The following sections review what girls revealed in these responses to each of the open questions.

What helps at different times and places?

By far the largest category of responses referred to other people (responses from 46 girls). Most notably specific reference was made to “friends” (30) and what kinds of support they provided: “if you forget what lesson it is you can ask them”; “knowing where to go”; “If I was unsure of finding a place.” Additionally, reference was made to other people who they felt “comfortable with.” Many fewer references were made to staff (9) whether teachers or teaching assistants, but teachers and staff were mentioned as go-to people in relation to: “feeling overwhelmed or really upset”; “for people like me who panic.” They were seen by some respondents as “a trusted teacher to talk to,” or someone who can “help with problems.”

In second place with respect to frequency (with comments from 12 girls) was reference to Facilities and the Environment. Girls liked more quiet places, when "people are not shouting." It helped by reducing anxiety: "If I am in a quiet place I feel more relaxed and calm. Busy places make me feel really stressed"; "Being with friends in a quiet place to talk about what's worrying you during break and lunch." They liked having time between lessons so that "you can go to the loo" and not "feel worried about being late."

In third place but with similar frequency to Facilities and Environment were comments that related to aspects of Teaching and Learning (11 comments). These largely referred to including "fun" aspects such as "listening to music and talking" and "teachers being enthusiastic about what we are doing" and "not having to write a lot" and "no homework".

What makes things more difficult at different times and places?
Again, it was relationships with others that featured most commonly with just under half the responses (47) falling within this category with respect to what made things difficult. Some girls just referred to "all the people" and "big crowds" being difficult. Others referred to people "shoving", "pushing", "messing around", being "mean", "rude", "annoying", and the rather more subtle behaviours of "giving you looks that are uncalled for" and having to sit with or near "someone you don't like or know", "being without friends" and being "alone". Given that this was a broad question about times and places it was interesting how often the classroom and aspects of teaching and learning featured with 22 responses making reference to some aspect of classroom provision. A prime issue involved communication by and with the teacher with examples of teachers talking too fast, not explaining things properly and asking questions "in front of the whole class" which "they know I can't answer," and the "stress of not knowing the answer," with staff getting "annoyed when I ask for help."

Eighteen girls also referred to aspects of the Facilities and the Environment, most notably moving around school between lessons which "can be a bit worrying if you are on your own" with corridors being crowded "there must have been about ten times when someone has pushed me into the wall or pushed me into someone else." In total 12 girls suggested that they found the crowded nature of schools problematic. In addition to the impact of moving around was the impact of noise, it "gets very loud very fast" and results in "big queues."

What helps in lessons?
As shown in Table 4 two categories of response dominated: Teaching and Learning was referred to by 51 of the 75 girls, and Other People were referred to by 36 of the 75 girls.

Responses that made reference to aspects of Teaching and Learning largely divided into three main themes: working in pairs or groups; how adults differentiate to meet the needs of different pupils "different options for different abilities;" and the provision of explanations. On the issue of grouping, girls wrote that they liked working in groups, or in pairs, with someone. Very rarely did they say they preferred working independently and even then they included caveats: "I find I get more work done by myself but in

practicals I much prefer to be in a group." Underpinning the comments was a concern about understanding: "knowing what to do." The requirement for differentiation was implicit in the comments with some girls finding it helps "when the work is more challenging because if it's too easy it is boring," others "like it when the teachers help you… and tell you what to do clearly," and even "exams are good when the teacher fully explains what to do."

The emphasis within the Other People category lay with being with people you felt comfortable with in lessons, particularly friends, people you could talk to and discuss the work with. Girls often wrote about this in conjunction with preferring to work with others in groups or pairs "so it is easier to understand", "to help you with the question you're stuck on." Trust formed an important part of these relationships, and for some provided confidence "to ask questions." "Sitting with people you feel comfortable with... but if its someone you don't like it can be really hard to take part in lessons."

In other categories of response the numbers were too low to identify common themes.

What makes things more difficult in lessons?

Again girls' responses predominantly made reference to aspects of teaching and learning and to other people. In the former the now familiar themes arose within this group of responses: not understanding, working on ones own, particularly in the context of homework, with the teacher not explaining and "going too fast." The girls also wrote about how this made them feel: "When I feel like you're failing but I feel like you can't ask for help. I'm sometimes scared to put up my hand or answer a question in front of the class;" "being alone and rushed because I need to not be stressed because I have anxiety." They also wrote about the pressure, of people making fun of them, and feeling picked on by the teacher.

In this sense there was a clear link between responses falling into the category of Teaching and Learning and that of Other People. It was particularly difficult when girls were put with people they didn't like, or someone who can't help or "distracts me," and "if we don't get on well… it can make it harder to communicate and get the work done." Conversely, from the perspective of others "if the person next to you is of a lower ability they can keep asking you how to do it and what the answer is and can be really disturbing." Teachers also come in for some criticism for being "nasty," making "you feel dumb or SAY you're dumb" and for failing to support "the students so they become a lot less confident and withdraw."

What 3 things would you like to change in your school if you could?

Responses to this question were interesting in that the balance of comments shifted to give more focus on the systems and structures (a third of responses) within school and facilities and the environment (over 1 in 5 responses).

Where girls made reference to Systems and Structures, two main themes dominated- first with respect to (less) homework (7) and secondly the desire for choice, including to wear what you wanted/not have a uniform (6), but also to be able to opt out, for example from assembly and other events "if you feel you cannot participate", "to choose what order your lessons go in" and shorter days, or ones that start later, or simply time off or timeout: "I feel I'm never good enough. I have been working towards feeling better, but sometimes lessons are too much and I need time off."

Where reference was made to Facilities and Resources, some (9) referred to "more places to hang out" usually also referring to lunch and break time and in one instance for "when you are not feeling happy and stressed out." The toilets were also listed as needing attention (8) with some detailing exactly what aspects needed changing: "add a door and get new locks so the doors and walls don't have holes in them," "have soap and toilet paper in them," "change the bins in the girls' toilet". Issues that largely concerned privacy and safety. The third recurrent theme was food (5) with girls asking for more and healthier options.

Turning to look broadly across categories that were not well represented by comments to individual questions sheds further light on the barriers and supports encountered by girls with disclosed SEND.

Values. Most of the comments in relation to values were written in response to being asked what three things they would change. These included some powerful statements: "I'd like to change how closed we are. It's as if only a certain thing is allowed here and if you're not that thing, you're nothing." Another girl wrote: "I wish everyone could be who they are without having to be scared. (LGBT+)." Another asked for respect from her classmates, another "people not to be mean or judge you for who you are or what you do." There were complaints about favouritism, sexism and stereotyping, sentiments that are consistent with wanting to feel that you can be yourself, and be valued.

Curriculum. The girls had relatively little they wanted to say about the curriculum. Active subjects featured in their comments of what helps and what they would change, such as Physical Education and sports activities, art, drama, Design Technology and food technology and a valuing of "being out of the classroom" on school trips or special days, and what were portrayed as practical activities including learning "about taxes, mortgages and politics for when we leave school." Assessments and exams featured in what made things difficult in relation to the curriculum: "assessments make me quite nervous and anxious."

Other. Comments that fell within the Other category included very individual comments about themselves. For example, "being in a bad mood" and a sense of the personal challenges that some girls face: "home life is always a struggle and I'm not a very confident person. Teachers don't tend to help with those sort of feelings, and I don't like talking to people about how I feel. Everything's a bit of a struggle;" "My mind normally wonders off and I think about things that I don't want to, like the stuff that is happening at home." What helps is "going running it puts my mind at comfort and make me relaxed."

3. Experiences of Belonging to School

The girls rated their feelings of different aspects of belonging to school, with scores ranging from 1 indicating a negative agreement with the statement – it was not at all true and 5 indicating it was completely true. Therefore, lower scores here indicate less connectedness. Girls who disclosed SEND had an overall mean of 3.27 indicating that the statements were sometimes true. Table 5 reveals the girls with disclosed SEND's mean scores for individual items ranged from 2.72 and 3.7, and, with the exception of one item

(There are lots of places to be with my friends in this school), girls who disclosed SEND showed a lower level of positive feelings than girls with no disclosed SEND.

Insert table 5

A Mann-Whitney U test indicated significant differences between the mean connectedness scores of girls who disclosed SEND and those who did not [U= 16478.5 p<.001]. The distribution of average connectedness is also not the same for the two groups; those girls who disclose a SEND and those who do not [U= 16478.5 p<.001 Df1, N=344].

Mean connectedness scores were negatively correlated for all girls with mean scores for barriers and supports [r=-.675 p<.001]; and this was particularly true for those with SEND [r=-.757 p<.001]. Girls who felt less good across the range of school settings had lower connectedness scores than girls who felt good. Feeling part of the school

The two open questions on feeling part of the school were only administered in three of the four schools and were answered by fewer girls, as shown in Table 6. Overall the theme of feeling supported was identified by more girls as important for what helped and what prevented you feeling part of the school, followed by social friendship activities.

Insert table 6

What things (if any) help you feel part of the school?
The largest category of responses for what helps you feel part of the school was "extracurricular," being part of sports teams, clubs and events. Feeling supported and respected was also important whether from teachers giving praise and who "know things about you and are interested in your life outside school" or "simply come over and say how was your day", or friends who "accept me for who I am," people who are "there for me if I'm not feeling good."

The girls also wrote about feeling part of the school through engaging in social activities with valued others: "being in a big friendship group also being included," working with others, being involved or simply "hanging out." Achieving "something good" and being told "I did a good job" raised their sense of belonging as did "having a go at new things independently, and not always relying on others." "Wearing uniform and taking part in things representing the school" was also written about. However notably five girls said nothing would help them feel part of the school and a further three didn't know what would help.

What things (if any) prevent you feeling part of the school?
Relatively few girls were able to say what things prevented them from feeling part of the school and of the 37 respondents (out of a possible 89) six did not know and a further two said "nothing." The top category here were aspects related to not feeling supported and respected. A number of these related to the behaviour of their peers and students being rude, unkind and mean, both verbally and physically: "I have been called a number of names," "I get pushed, knocked and kicked in the corridors." Some felt teachers "don't understand,"

"don't like you," and are "quite intimidating." The importance of these responses was reinforced by statements about how they impact on the girls: "when you are on your own and you do not have the feeling, the feeling of joy and happiness. The feeling you feel when you're on your own or bullied is the feeling of sadness and disregard, sometimes anger."

Safety

Girls in three of the four schools were asked if they could tell us a bit more about feeling safe in school and 31/89 girls responded and the distribution of their comments across codes are set out in table 7.

Insert table 7 about here

Five girls wrote positively about feeling safe/comfortable/included: "that is all I wanted at school." Others gave some caveats: "sometimes I feel safe at school but sometimes don't." The remainder wrote most about relationships with peers, feeling "threatened by older students" and other "bullies" and again reference was made to friends: "I don't feel like I can be open and be myself. It is only when I am alone with my friends is when I can be really open. I have some quirky bits about me that I mostly hide from the world." This message was reinforced by responses that fell within the category of individual identity about not being able to be different: "There is this teenage stereotype and if you don't follow it people don't like you;" "we can't express ourselves through looks and actions;" "At lunchtime or break time I am myself but people don't always respect who I am."

Discussion

Looking first at the quantitative data, the girls with self-disclosed SEND were significantly more likely to rate their experiences across settings as worse than other girls. Taking the average, all settings were rated more poorly by the SEND group, and the widest discrepancies were found for contexts that all girls rated worst – tests and assessments, homework and lessons. These rating scores also suggested that when girls were working individually their experiences were worse. Girls generally felt better working in pairs or small groups. Both groups felt best in practical classes, with mean ratings lying between feeling good and very good. In these settings there was little difference in the ratings of girls with and without disclosed SEND.

Ratings of how the girls felt across these settings were significantly associated with their mean connectedness scores, the lower they rated their experiences across the range of contexts, the lower their feelings of belonging to school. This indicates that these girls with self-disclosed SEND are therefore particularly vulnerable to feeling disconnected from school. There was a significant difference between the mean scores of the girls with and without disclosed SEND on their feelings of being connected to school. Girls with disclosed SEND had lower scores on feeling part of the school, feeling respected, feeling proud, and feeling safe. The greatest discrepancies in mean scores were in relation to: "I can really be myself at this school" and "I can have time on my own in this school," the two lowest scoring items for both groups of girls.

We turn now to the qualitative comments from the girls with disclosed SEND to understand the barriers they encountered and what they found helpful, looking across questions to draw out the reoccurring themes. As Table 4 revealed two themes dominated: those relating to the behavior, qualities, attitudes of other people, and comments relating to the experiences of teaching and learning. Taking first the comments that fell into the category Other People, these revealed that relationships were an important source of support but could also pose a major barrier. Friends featured heavily, consistent with previous research (Porter 2016) but here as someone to go to for help. The comments revealed the need for someone the girls felt comfortable to ask questions when they were uncertain about where they should be going and what they should be doing. In many of the responses this was directly linked to issues of pedagogy and classroom organization. Poor teacher explanations of the work were compounded by seating plans that left you sitting with someone you do not get on with, and who therefore would not provide you with support. While seating plans may be an important strategy by which teachers manage behaviour, they do not necessarily lead to optimum conditions for learning for these girls.

Notably it is the relational aspect that dominates even with respect to teaching and learning "I'm sometimes scared to put my hand up or answer a question in front of the class." When it came to the content of teaching, namely the curriculum, the girls had little to say. Even with respect to the third most frequent theme, Facilities and the Environment, the difficulties largely referred to their experience of other people in those environments, being too noisy, too crowded, and busy corridors. What helped for a number of the girls were quiet environments "so I can focus."

We explored two aspects of belonging or being connected to school, feeling part of the school and feeling safe. In line with other research (Hamm & Faircloth 2005; Einberg, Lidell & Clausson 2015; Craggs and Kelly 2018b) feeling part of the school involved participation in extra-curricular activities and this was mentioned most frequently in their responses. Being part of the sports teams and events, clubs and concerts, offered opportunities for the girls to excel, be praised and have fun. Shared activities, especially within friendship groups, also gave girls a positive sense of being part of the school. Craggs and Kelly (2018) highlight the psychological impact that in-group membership can have on feeling connected to the school. Parker (2010) discusses how being part of an activity group or team can act as "a badge" that means you are recognized within the wider community. This also resonates with girls' sense of unfairness when "teachers always pick the same people," that prevents them feeling part of the school. Feeling respected and supported featured prominently in what helps and also what gets in the way. Getting along with people and being accepted helped that positive feeling, including "when teachers come over and say how was your day," and when teachers and peers "accept me for who I am." Conversely, girls also wrote about the different types of negative interactions mostly from their peers. Whereas teachers' negative interactions were more commonly ones of neglect, "not understanding," "having favourites," the comments with respect to peers suggest they were more targeted and deliberately "unkind." Gowing and Jackson (2016) argue from their data that relationships with teachers are seen as more transitory than relationships with peers and do not have the intensity. Students including those with SEMH want to be understood and valued as an

individual (Marsh 2018) and feel respected (Ellis et al 1998) but it is relationships with their peers that appear to be pivotal.

This theme reoccurred with respect to feelings of safety, where relationships with other students, rather than relationships with teachers were more of an issue. This echoes other research across all groups which demonstrates the importance of social relationships to feeling safe, providing a buffer to feeling excluded (Hamm and Faircloth 2005) as well as to threats that are physical in nature (Einberg, Lidell and Clausson 2015). Studies of bullying suggest that young people with SEND are more likely to be involved in bullying (Fink et al 2015) with girls with SEND more likely than other groups to be victims (Rodriquez –Hidalgo, Alcivar and Herrera-Lopez 2019). Ringrose (2008) argues for caution in how we label behaviours in girls as bullying. There is a complexity to these interactions and the meanings of this behaviour can be missed. Discussions with girls that use this label can lead to further anxiety and defensiveness. The issue of feeling safe to be yourself also arose in our data; the need to hide parts of yourself that you or others saw as different.

Feeling unsafe at school impacts on girls' attendance as well as mental health (Korpershoek et al. 2020; Hughes, Gaines and Prior2015). Issues of mental health arose in many of the girls responses with particular reference to anxiety and feeling stressed and pressurized. Others have argued girls feel this more keenly (Bor et al. 2014; Moffa, Dowdy and Furlong 2016) although the reasons for this remain largely speculative in the literature. The girls' data here suggests that they do not feel they can be open and themselves, especially in the classroom with some comments railing against the need to conform to "teenage stereotype."

While girls wrote little about the physical environment with respect to barriers and supports, it did however feature in what they would change about school. Their comments illustrate the lamentable state of school buildings in England with poor toilet facilities and a population that has vastly outgrown the design specification (NAO/DfE 2017). Girls comments concerning noise and crowds may well have contributed to the negative interactions as they found their way around the school. Hagsborg (1998) suggests that the size of school may contribute to feelings of connectedness. Large and crowded environments contribute additional pressures in finding one's way around, getting to lessons on time, as well as making it harder to find one's place within the community. One aspect which girls would change was having places to "hang out." Dytham (2018 1056) describes the importance of sitting places for girls as "markers of ownership, both of people and places." These activity sites, which are accompanied by a set of rules and norms, are an important aspect of girls' social relationships. Fundamentally, places for sitting both in and outside the classroom, establish group boundaries, who is included or indeed excluded from the group.

Craggs and Kelly (2018) argue that school belonging should be seen as a phenomenon that is "intersubjective and relational… positive interactions between peers were a prominent site for the co-construction of a sense of school belonging" (Craggs and Kelly 2018 6). We suggest we might go further than this, based on the data on girls with

disclosed SEND presented in this paper, to highlight the possibility of negative interactions being a site for the co-construction of not belonging.

Implications

There are important points of departure here from other studies. Allen and Kern (2017) in their meta-analysis of 45 studies identify teacher support as one of the strongest predictors of school belonging. More specifically, Cosma and Soni (2019) in a review of the literature also emphasize the importance of relationships with teachers for young people with behavioural, social and emotional difficulties. Sheffield and Morgan (2017) likewise refer to positive teacher-pupil relationships being a protective factor as they help young people to manage their difficulties. They do however also refer to a dominant theme within the pupils' interviews of unfair treatment and being unfairly blamed. The girls in the study presented in the current paper were much less likely to write about their interactions with teachers, even with respect to lessons. References to teachers when they occurred were more likely with respect to what made things difficult, rather than the support they provided. Others have argued that teachers are more transient in the lives of secondary school pupils (Gowing et al 2016) and therefore aspects that impact on peer relationships are more likely to be at the forefront of girls responses. That is not to conclude that teachers do not have an important role to play.

Teachers may unwittingly contribute to the marginalization of particular pupils through their negative comments, and legitimizing criticisms and insults made by peers. Ellis, Hart and Small-McGinley (1998) note from their data the importance for their "difficult" students of teacher respect and caring. Girls in the current study wrote about the helpfulness of teachers "being interested in your life outside school" coming "over and asking how was your day."

Teachers may also underestimate the extent to which students may feel unsafe in school (Thappa et al. 2013). They play an important role in managing the use of space, especially where there are pinch points within the school which offer challenges in negotiating a smooth passage without incurring negative interactions. Staff also need to be observant and recognize more nuanced indicators of isolation. They need to create informal opportunities to listen to girls about their experiences and work with them to develop effective strategies rather than introduce an anti-bullying strategy (Ringrose 2008). In tandem there needs to be opportunities for girls with SEND to find their niche (Gowing and Jackson 2016) with activities (such as music, art, drama as well as sport, and excursions) that provide spaces for positive and new interactions. These enable peers as well as teachers to interact and engage with them in different spheres of activity and relating. At a more general level they need to provide a safe learning environment (Cumming, Marsh and Higgins 2017) that promotes engagement and where girls feel they can ask questions and do not feel they are made to look stupid. Involving pupils in classroom decisions enables them to define and manage the support they receive (Rose and Shevlin 2017). There is therefore a requirement for both spontaneous and planned responses (Gowing and Jackson 2016) both of which reflect a culture of schooling where teachers see pupils as individuals.

Finally, given that girls' difficulties may go under the radar, using a tool that reveals the girls sense of belonging as a screening device will help to identify the numbers of at-risk girls. Moffa Dowdy and Furlong (2016) explore the possibility of using school belonging as part of a screening device for mental health difficulties. Here we argue its place more broadly as indicative of the extent of girls' difficulties and the benefits of setting it alongside their comments about the barriers and supports encountered to make a systemic rather than purely individualized response.

Limitations

The nature of this study means that we need to be careful to recognize that although there is an association between girls scores on the barriers and supports encountered across a range of settings and feeling a sense of belonging to school, we can only infer the nature of this relationship, and be careful not to assume causality. Qualitative data however enables us to gain further insights although it can be argued that questionnaires are imperfect devices. Fewer young people respond to open than closed questions. The majority of open questions in this study had between two thirds and three quarters of girls responding. Analysis of the whole questionnaire suggests that responses from pupils with SEND were not under-represented (McDermott et al 2020). A few questions however (what prevents you feeling part of the school; and that on safety) had lower response rates indicating that these topics need further exploration in a different forum. At the same time questionnaires do have the advantage of anonymity and this may be particularly important for some of our girls with SEND whose usual strategies mask the difficulties they encounter. Moreover, the use of a self-disclosure strategy for SEND has the strength of incorporating females whose difficulties may have been largely invisible to their school.

Conclusion

There is a strong case that higher rates of exclusion of young people with SEND is indicative of a failure of mainstream schools to meet pupils needs. Some groups are more visible than others. It is likely that the domination of a male landscape with its emphasis on behaviour has contributed to an under-representation of girls, both with respect to identification of need, and to the forms of exclusion they experience which are under-represented within formal data captures. Girls needs can be much more difficult to discern, their strategies for coping can often effectively mask their difficulties. We therefore need more subtle indicators and recognize how "Designing a response to exclusions based on traditional formal exclusions data alone, therefore risks gender bias," Social Finance (2020 14). Tools that investigate school belonging alongside the barriers and supports to participation may have something to offer in revealing what is currently invisible. Research indicates the importance of feeling connected to school for students with SEND (Cumming Marsh and Higgins 2017; Graham 2019). The data presented here reveal that it is the relational aspects of schooling that are important for girls with self-disclosed SEND both with respect to feeling a sense of belonging to school, and to the barriers and supports to participation. Their comments reflect Cragg and Kelly's (2018 9) definition of belonging being: "feeling safe to be yourself in and through relationships with others" but place greater emphasis on peer friendships than previous research.

This is particularly pertinent following the COVID-19 pandemic when relationships with others have been constrained and there has been no access to activities that contribute to a sense of identity within a school community.

The data suggest that adopting a systemic approach, one that foregrounds their experiences of school and removes the barriers that girls with SEND encounter will benefit all girls. School belonging alongside investigating barriers and supports to participation may be a useful device to make visible the exclusionary experiences in school. From the preliminary data presented here, we suggest that schools should be attentive to the importance of peer interactions, recognizing the particular vulnerability of girls who find it difficult to build and sustain positive relationships. They would benefit from a school culture of respect and valuing that goes well beyond a singular focus on academic attainment and provides them with a safe learning environment, one which does not further marginalize their participation in the mainstream classroom.

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Declaration of Interest
The authors declare that they have no conflict of interests

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Tables

Table 1: Numbers (and Percentage) of Returns from Girls with Disclosed SEND in Each School.

School	Pilot	Dale	Kings	Xenon
Girls with SEND N=108	19	20	39	30
% of all girls	19/74 25.7%	20/77 26%	39/103 37.9%	30/127 23.6%

Table 2: Number of Girls Identifying How Often the Condition Affects Them in School.

How often does the condition affect you in school?	Pilot	Dale	Kings	Xenon	Total
Most days/about the same from day to day	8	6	10	12	36
Some days/ it comes and goes	5	5	15	10	35
It flares up under certain circumstances	6	7	14	8	35
Blank		2			2

Table 3. Mean Ratings of Girls with Disclosed (and Non-disclosed) SEND on their Experiences in Different Settings.

How do you generally feel …? .	Range of scores 1= very good; 2=Good; 3=OK; 4=not OK; 5=bad; 6= very bad SEND Girls	Mean Rating Girls with Disclosed SEND (girls without disclosed SEND)	N= Girls with Disclosed SEND (girls without disclosed SEND)
During lessons	1-6	3.05 (2.55)	108 (236)
During break	1-5	2.35 (1.97)	107 (234)
During lunch time	1-6	2.15 (1.80)	106 (233)
Moving between lessons	1-6	3.12 (2.63)	106 (232)
During special events (like school concerts, charity days)	1-6	2.45 (2.20)	107 (235)
In school trips and visits	1-6	2.19 (1.89)	108 (233)
When all students are doing the same task led by the teacher	1-6	2.54 (2.53)	108 (2.36)
Working in pairs or small groups	1-6	2.3 (2.09)	88* 3 schools only (188)
Working by yourself	1-6	2.91 (2.53)	107 (233)
Practical classes like art, food technology, lab sessions	1-5	1.80 (1.72)	107 (234)
Sports, games, dance, gym	1-6	2.54 (2.22)	108 (236)
Tests, assessments, exams	2-6	4.41 (3.59)	107 (230)
Doing homework	1-6	4.18 (3.50)	108 (235)

Table 4 Answers to Open Questions Concerning Barriers and Supports from Girls who Disclosed SEND.

Questions with number of respondants Codes	What helps at different times and places? N=72 (67%)	What makes things more difficult at different times and places? N=81 (75%)	What helps in lessons? N=75 (69%)	What makes things more difficult in lessons? N=75 (69%)	What 3 things would you change in your school if you could? N=77 (71%)	Total
Curriculum	5	1	2	3	9	20
Teaching & Learning	11	22	51	41	18	143
School Systems and Structures	7	5	0	5	26	43
School Values	0	1	0	1	10	12
Facilities and Environment	12	18	4	5	17	56
Other People	46	47	36	39	13	181
Unsure	3	0	0	1	5	9
Other	6	7	2	7	12	34

Table 5: Feelings of Belonging to School for Girls with Disclosed SEND on (N=108) and Non-send Girls

Statements for Feelings of Belonging	Mean scores Girls with disclosed SEND N=108	Mean scores Girls without disclosed SEND N= 237
I feel like a real part of the school	3.07	3.48
People at this school are friendly to me	3.5	3.80
I am treated with as much respect as other students	3.32	3.62
I can really be myself at this school	2.85	3.40
The teachers here respect me	3.53	3.74
I feel proud of belonging to this school	3.19	3.61
I feel safe in this school during lessons	3.70	4.20
I feel safe in this school at break and lunchtime	3.81	4.15
I can have time on my own in this school	2.72	3.34
There are lots of places to be with my friends in this school	3.02	2.96
Overall Feelings of Belonging to School	3.27	3.63

Table 6: Frequency of Coded Responses to Open Questions on Feeling Part of the School by Girls who Disclosed SEND?

Code	"What things (if any) help you feel part of the school?" N= 53/89 (60%)	"What things (if any) prevent you feeling part of the school?" N=37/89 (42%)	Total
Extracurricular	16	4	20
Social, Friendship, Activity	13	8	21
Feeling Supported	14	12	26
Sharing Symbolic Resources	4	0	4
Curriculum	5	3	8
Other	4	8 (6= don't know)	12
Nothing	5	2	7
Individual Identity	5	8	13

Table 7: Frequency of Codes in Responses from Girls who Disclosed SEND to "Can you tell us more about safety?"

Codes	Girls with disclosed SEND N=31
Relationships – Students	11
Other	6
Relationships – Teachers	3
No	3
Space Systems	6
Individual Identity	7
Curriculum	3