

# **Communicating About Young People at Risk of Educational Exclusion in England**

## **A FrameWorks Strategic Brief**

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**In partnership with Porticus**

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# Introduction

When school discipline appears in the news, it is often politicians bemoaning the decline of behavioural standards in England and the need to tighten up and crack down on bad behaviour. The education secretary recently cited a rash of ‘out-of-control behaviour’ in schools and called for ‘firm action to create a disciplined and calm environment’.<sup>1</sup>

This public conversation is counterproductive, pushing the educational system to be more punitive when the reality is that too many students – especially children and young people from marginalised communities – are already excluded. The punitive orientation prevents the adoption of the kinds of inclusive, responsive practices that can actually improve student learning and behaviour.

England needs a new conversation that centres on the needs of young people at risk of exclusion. Changing the public conversation is crucial to create an environment in which politicians and educational leaders feel obliged to be more responsive to young people’s needs, rather than cracking down. This will require a concerted, strategic reframing effort – an introduction of new ways of talking about young people, school discipline and exclusion that can change the nature of the debate. In order to figure out which frames might work, we first have to understand how members of the public currently think about exclusion and young people at risk of exclusion.

In this strategic brief, we summarise the findings from original research that the FrameWorks Institute has conducted, in partnership with Porticus, to understand existing public perceptions of this issue. For each of these findings, we outline core ideas held by the field and then contrast these with the public’s existing understanding of the issue. We trace how some of these ways of thinking stand in the way of needed reforms to the educational system while others enable people to recognise the need for these reforms.

As we discuss findings, we offer initial recommendations about how to communicate in ways that address obstacles and leverage openings in public thinking. These recommendations are intended to be helpful to individuals and organisations who are seeking to achieve change for young people at risk of exclusion from education – this includes those with significant experience of communicating about these issues (for whom some of the recommendations will be familiar) and those who are newer to communications in this area. Further research will be needed to identify specific framing strategies that have the potential to truly shift the nature of the public conversation about school discipline and exclusion, but these initial recommendations offer some immediate guidance for those communicating about these issues.

# Methods Overview<sup>2</sup>

## What Are We Trying to Communicate?

To develop an effective strategy for communicating about educational exclusion in England, it's necessary to identify a set of key ideas to get across. To do this, FrameWorks researchers conducted a series of 14 interviews with researchers and advocates in the field as well as feedback sessions with researchers and advocates and with young people who had direct experience of exclusion. This was supplemented by a review of relevant literature on the issue. Below, we summarise the key ideas that emerged from this process, which represent the core points that need to be effectively communicated and the solutions that the field wants to build support for through communications. For more information about this method, see Appendix below.

## Public Thinking About Educational Exclusion and Young People at Risk of Exclusion in England

To explore the public's thinking about school discipline, educational exclusion and young people at risk of exclusion in England, researchers at FrameWorks conducted 20 one-on-one, two-hour-long cognitive interviews with members of the English public. For these interviews, FrameWorks recruited a diverse sample of participants with variation along multiple demographic and ideological dimensions: age, gender, race and ethnicity, educational background, income, employment status, political views (as self-reported during the screening process) and family situation (e.g., married or single, with or without children).

These interviews were analysed to identify the deep, implicit ways of thinking that the public draws upon to think about school discipline, educational exclusion and the young people at greatest risk of exclusion. The analysis looked for common patterns of thinking that were shared across participants, rather than ways of thinking that are specific to particular groups.

The demographic variability of the sample is adequate to ensure that the identified patterns in thinking are shared across different groups within England. While a larger sample would be needed to explore the thinking of specific subgroups, a sample of 20 participants is widely accepted as sufficient to identify shared cultural models. For more information about this method, see Appendix below.

# Research Findings

## **Finding #1: Members of the public see exclusion as a fair tool for dealing with ‘problem’ students.**

### **Core ideas from the field**

- Educational exclusion refers to the act of formally removing a pupil from a mainstream educational setting – most commonly for reasons related to their behaviour.
- Schools may informally exclude pupils without following the relevant legislation and statutory guidance – an illegal practice known as ‘off-rolling’.
- Although exclusions are meant to be a last resort, many schools over-exclude because they are unable to meet the needs of all children.

### **What the public brings to the conversation**

**Members of the public assume that when a student gets excluded, it is because they must have behaved poorly and violated school rules.** People take for granted that exclusion is always a warranted response to misbehaviour. People assume that exclusion only happens as a last-resort solution to a long buildup of misdemeanours and small offences (e.g., uniform violations, tardiness, attendance problems), or as a punishment for actual crimes committed on school grounds that endanger the safety and health of other students and teachers (e.g., bringing contraband to school, physical violence, stealing, abuse). Interview participants hardly ever saw that students are sometimes excluded because of low attainment or discrimination by the school.

**People’s acceptance of exclusion is grounded in the idea that students learn to follow the rules through consequences – punishment and reward.** Members of the public in England typically reason that the best way for teachers and school staff to ensure that students learn subjects, respect rules and know right from wrong is to condition them through a system of punishment and reward. The logic is that students are rational actors who will learn if they see that the rewards for their work are worth their effort, and who will behave well if the punishment for misbehaviour is harsh enough. Interview participants highlighted a spectrum of disciplinary actions, from extra homework and detention to temporary exclusion, to permanent exclusion. They explained that these measures were necessary to ‘teach’ students the proper ways of behaving in society.

**Members of the public often rely on beliefs and assumptions about the criminal justice system to reason about school discipline.** People implicitly model school discipline on criminal justice, using the same concepts – retribution (deserved punishment), deterrence (preventing offending and reoffending) and segregation (removing violators) – to think about both.<sup>3</sup>

- *People see exclusion as fair **retribution** for misbehaviour.* They believe that when students behave poorly, they deserve to be punished. Interview participants consistently assumed that exclusion is a fair response to disruptive behaviours.
- *People assume that one purpose of exclusion is **deterrence**, but sometimes think it isn't effective in preventing misbehaviour and violations of rules.* People take for granted that a key goal of school discipline, like criminal justice, is to deter misbehaviour through the threat of serious punishment. Yet just as people sometimes think that prison is a 'holiday', they sometimes worry that excluding a student for misbehaviour – especially if only temporarily – ends up giving them what they wanted all along: getting out of school. Interview participants often imagined students being glad or even proud to get a few days off and wearing their exclusion like a 'badge of honour' once they come back to school. When thinking in this way, participants brought up other types of punishment they considered more effective than exclusion because they would not inadvertently give students satisfaction, like community service.
- *People see exclusion as a useful step that schools can take to **segregate** disruptive or 'problem' students.* When thinking in this way, they see exclusion as a way to protect teachers and 'well-behaved' students who 'want to be here' from violence and disruption. Interview participants often talked about how once a disruptive student is removed from the classroom and the school, others are better able to learn and apply themselves, teachers are relieved and can actually teach, and the school environment as a whole becomes more positive.

### **What this means for the field**

When people think that educational exclusion is always a *fair* response to student behaviour, it is difficult for them to see it as a social issue that needs fixing in England.

The assumption that exclusion is always a response to misbehaviour and rule violation makes it hard for people to recognise that the way the education system is set up in England can encourage unfair exclusions. Because people take it for granted that exclusion is a warranted response to students' behaviour, off-rolling and the role of systemic racism and discrimination in exclusion are off people's radars.

The value people place on punishment as a key component of the educational process can make it difficult for them to see that the best way to reduce rates of exclusion is to focus on

inclusive practices rather than harsher discipline. People's tendency to model school discipline on criminal justice reinforces a punitive orientation and leads people to think of children as the problem.

When people assume that exclusion helps create better school environments, it makes it almost impossible to see the need to improve school environments to make them more positive and inclusive to reduce exclusion rates.

### **Preliminary recommendations**

- **Avoid** focusing on the different types of misbehaviour that typically result in exclusion. Focusing on misbehaviour is likely to reinforce the idea that 'problem' students are the issue.
- **Lead** with the structural issues that need fixing (e.g., assessment policies for schools that focus narrowly on attainment rather than wellbeing, budget cuts for education leading to reduced resources to support children with additional needs, structural discrimination against minoritised communities). Foregrounding the role of context rather than behaviour can help to shift responsibility from children to the education system.
- **Explain** how these problems lead to unfair cases of exclusion and how addressing them will improve children's learning.
- **Avoid** using terms that can activate the unhelpful parallel between school discipline and criminal justice in people's minds (e.g., offender, deterrence, punishment, crime).

#### **How the public understands the term 'exclusion'.**

We found that interview participants didn't always grasp what was meant by the term 'exclusion' from the onset of the conversation. While this didn't significantly hinder the interviews, participants sometimes took a broader, less accurate view of the term that also included children being excluded from a group by their peers, students deciding to drop out of school themselves or students not being allowed in a school because they didn't pass a selection test or because they didn't live in the right geographical area. Some participants used the terms 'suspension' (for temporary exclusion) and 'expulsion' (for permanent exclusion) and seemed more familiar with this terminology.

### **Key takeaway for future communications**

When addressing non-experts, provide a short definition of what educational exclusion means at the start of your communications – for example, ‘young people who are excluded (e.g., expelled or suspended)’. This can help ensure that your audience understands what is truly under discussion.

## **Finding #2: People are largely fatalistic about excluded youths’ prospects and have outdated understandings of alternative provision.**

### **Core ideas from the field**

- Educational exclusion can lead to poor educational and employment outcomes, stigmatisation and social exclusion. It also affects the economy, health care system, and the criminal justice system.
- Alternative provision is where most excluded children go after leaving mainstream school to continue their education.
- When alternative provision is well-funded and can support a pupil’s specific needs, excluded students can be more successful than if they remained in mainstream school. Alternative provision should be better funded, generally and consistently.

### **What the public brings to the conversation**

**When thinking about the effects of exclusion, members of the public tend to focus on the negative consequences that will be incurred by others.** People’s first thought is often that excluded students become a heavier burden for parents who suddenly have to care for their child 24/7 and might no longer be able to fulfil their professional responsibilities. People only secondarily think about effects on children themselves.

**When people think about effects on children, the parallel between school discipline and criminal justice leads them to assume that excluded students are destined for a life of crime.** People think that young people are either already committing crimes in school (e.g., dealing cannabis or physically abusing others) or that violating rules in school is a precursor of things to come once the students are out of the school.

**People recognise that exclusion has negative consequences for children, but they think that children have brought these consequences upon themselves.** Interview participants often talked about how stigma follows excluded students like a criminal record and affects

how they might fare in a new school. But this was generally taken for granted as ‘the way things are’, or it was seen as the logical consequence of their ‘choice’ to misbehave in school. Excluded students’ downward trajectory is seen as both inevitable and deserved.

**People have an outdated and very negative view of alternative provision.** Interview participants talked about students being sent to ‘naughty’ or ‘borstal’ schools where the main focus of educators is assumed to be fixing behaviour problems through harsher punishment than is used in mainstream schools. People see alternative provision in much in the same way that they think of harsh prison sentences for serious crime.

### **What this means for the field**

People already recognise that exclusion can have negative consequences for children and families, yet people tend to see these consequences as deserved. And the assumption that children’s trajectories are set makes them fatalistic about children’s futures and unlikely to support policies aimed at supporting children who experience exclusion.

People’s highly negative view of alternative provision makes it difficult for them to see that when done right, it can actually help students do better by providing them with the support they need. It also makes them unlikely to support more investment in alternative provision in the future.

### **Preliminary recommendations**

- **Avoid** talking about the consequences of exclusion solely in terms of a burden placed on others (e.g., parents, the NHS or the economy).
- **Focus** on what the students themselves, their families and society as a whole stand to gain with lower rates of exclusion.<sup>4</sup> Emphasising what can be gained is important to combat complacency and fatalism.
- **Mention** effects on health and economic prosperity at least as often as on crime rates when talking about societal consequences. If it is necessary to discuss crime, focus on the effects of exclusion policies and avoid suggesting that young people are to blame.
- **Explain** how reduced rates of educational exclusion can lead to better health and wellbeing for children in England.<sup>5</sup>

## **Finding #3: People realise that some children misbehave because of circumstances outside of their control, but they reason that most just don't care about school due to their families' and communities' values.**

### **Core ideas from the field**

- Pupils who come from low-income backgrounds are at higher risk of exclusion. Families' socioeconomic status can make it harder for pupils to comply with elements of the behavioural policy that carry a financial cost, such as school uniforms or access to the internet to complete homework;<sup>6</sup> families may also have less knowledge about the education system and fewer resources to seek redress following an exclusion.
- It is essential for schools to engage parents and carers in solutions to address pupil behaviour. Schools should communicate and collaborate with parents so they more fully understand the education system, the rules and expectations of the school and how their child is doing.

### **What the public brings to the conversation**

**People are sometimes able to see that the conditions in which children live can shape their likelihood of misbehaving at school and being excluded.** They reason that physical and mental discomfort due to poor living conditions can make it harder for students to focus, which makes them more likely to misbehave. Interview participants notably talked about how some children can get distracted and misbehave because they're tired or hungry. They recognised that if families live in cramped housing or don't have the resources they need for food, this can harm children's ability to learn and focus. They also explained that children who experience abuse, neglect or other types of challenges at home were more likely to struggle at school because their minds are taken up by other issues. When people think in this way they are able to see that, in some cases at least, educational exclusion might be due to circumstances that are outside of the student's control.

**But people consistently blame parents for children's misbehaviour and exclusion from school.** This is grounded in a deep-seated belief that what happens at home fundamentally – if not solely – shapes children's outcomes throughout their lives. They often assume that the main reason why children misbehave in schools is because their parents have failed to instil in them a sense of discipline and values that allow them to differentiate right from wrong. The assumption here is that children naturally absorb their parents' behaviours and values and adopt them as their own.

**People frequently assume that low-income parents, Black and minority ethnic parents and immigrant parents don't value education and have 'bad' values.** Participants talked

about how some people just don't 'value' education and learning because they don't have ambitions of social advancement and are just happy to 'stay where they are'. Participants explicitly talked about people living in social housing and 'on benefits' as the epitome of dependence on the state and lack of aspiration. These classist assumptions were sometimes paired with xenophobic or racist sentiments, as some participants argued that some children might misbehave because their parents didn't speak English and didn't know the English educational system well. While in some cases this could be taken as a genuine acknowledgement of inequality in access to education in England, participants often seemed to assume that people's home 'culture' might itself not value education and discipline in the way that English 'culture' does.

### **People often conflate race and class under the labels of 'geography' and 'culture'.**

Participants frequently suggested that children from densely populated, urban communities were more likely to be excluded from school due to these communities' supposed poor values and lack of respect for order, high crime rates, 'gangs' (a term that is clearly racialised), violence and drug use. According to participants, children from these communities take these activities as the norm for their own behaviour, resulting in students bringing crime and drugs directly into schools or displaying an unquestioned lack of respect for the institution and for education more generally.

### **What this means for the field**

People's existing ability to see that socioeconomic conditions can disrupt children's focus on learning through stress, hunger and other psychological and physical challenges is a helpful starting point. This understanding needs to be cued and reinforced as much and as often as possible in communications.

By contrast, the assumption that low-income, Black and minority ethnic and immigrant parents and communities lack aspiration and have poor values that negatively shape children's behaviour and their attitudes towards education and learning is deeply harmful. This cultural understanding of the effects of disadvantage and marginalisation leads people to blame these communities for any educational and behavioural challenges their children experience. It also makes it hard for them to see that the way the school system currently works makes it more likely for children from lower-income and minoritised families and communities to be excluded for reasons that are outside of their control and that systemic change is needed to address these problems.

### **Preliminary recommendations**

- **Explain** how the conditions in which lower-income and minoritised students live are primarily shaped by the way our society is set up, and flag that they can be improved through policy decisions.

- **Be concrete** about how school policies and practices make low-income and Black and minority ethnic students more likely to be excluded from school (e.g., explain how failure to provide nutritious food can disrupt focus on learning and how dress codes can be discriminatory in nature).
- **Mention** concrete solutions to these issues after identifying the problem and provide a step-by-step explanation of how they would improve learning and reduce exclusions.
- **Highlight** that better supporting parents and communities is an important way to support children’s learning and educational outcomes.

## **Finding #4: The public can sometimes see that age and gender affect the risk of exclusion, but they typically treat these differences in risk as natural.**

### **Core ideas from the field**

- Pupils’ age and gender shape how likely they are to be excluded from school. This is due to power dynamics and cultural attitudes within society at large as well as the goals and structure of the English secondary school system.
  - Boys are at higher risk of exclusion.
  - Exclusion rates are significantly higher in secondary school, with a peak between the ages of 14 and 15.<sup>7</sup>

### **What the public brings to the conversation**

The English public knows that boys are more likely to be excluded than girls and that teenagers are more at risk of exclusion than younger children. But they explain this by drawing on assumptions about nature rather than power dynamics and cultural attitudes in society and the school system.

**There is a widespread, idealised view of childhood as worry- and problem-free that makes it hard to think about exclusion among younger children.** Members of the public assume that young children’s worlds are fundamentally different than the worlds of adults, and that a young child’s life is not encumbered with significant problems or concerns that could distract them from doing well at school. This leads people to assume their young children face few obstacles to learning and respecting rules. As a consequence, members of the public often reason that misbehaviour leading to exclusion is both extremely unlikely and extremely rare among children of primary school age.

**On the other hand, people assume that adolescence naturally makes students – and especially *male* students – unruly and likely to misbehave.** Adolescence is seen as a time when children work towards their own identity and independence, as well as come into contact with a wider variety of people at school and in the community. People believe that secondary school students are more susceptible to negative influences from peers and others around them and that they are inclined to challenge authority as a way to assert themselves, all of which makes them more likely to misbehave and therefore get excluded from school. In interviews, this process was often naturalised as a biological takeover at the time of puberty, when hormone surges lead to chaotic physical and emotional changes. This way of thinking was especially prominent in participants' thinking about male students. They assumed that boys were *naturally* more inclined to be boisterous, violent and eager to show off than girls, at least partly due to testosterone, which makes them more likely than girls to misbehave and get excluded during adolescence.

**People also see adolescence as a loss of innocence.** While people assume that younger children naturally have no other concern than doing well at school, they reason that adolescence marks the end of this idealised time, when adult-like problems and concerns start playing a stronger role in shaping students' lives. Interview participants often reasoned that the older a student gets, the more likely they are to run into problems or interests that might take their attention away from school. The list of possible distractions and disruptions ranged from love interests to the loss of a parent or a relative, to abusive situations at home or at school. Social media's role in adolescents' lives was prominent in almost all our participants' thinking. They talked about online bullying as a new form of anonymous violence that schools struggle to control. People also reason that social media makes it harder for today's teens to focus on school and learning. Participants lamented what they perceived as the *TikTok* generation's short attention span and students' belief that they might not need school if they could become an overnight sensation on *YouTube*. All participants saw these various distractions and concerns of adolescence as sources of misbehaviour and exclusion.

### **What this means for the field**

It is helpful that people already recognise that boys and older children are more likely to be excluded. But for this knowledge to be leveraged into support for needed systemic changes, the public will need to broaden their understanding of the reasons behind these trends. People's existing ways of making sense of these trends make them likely to attribute them to natural causes and assume that nothing can really be done about them.

People's view of childhood as a worry-free world may lead them to underestimate the rates of exclusion amongst younger children. It also may reduce support for early intervention policies and practices intended to support younger children at risk of exclusion.

## Preliminary recommendations

- **Don't** start by highlighting data about relative rates of educational exclusion. On their own, these data are unlikely to convince people to support changes to the educational system.
- **Explain** *why* rates of exclusion soar in secondary school. Focus on the design of the educational system and how rigid systems of rules and forced competition between schools based solely on exam results increase rates of exclusion in secondary school.
- **Highlight** how the educational system can and should be designed with the biological changes of adolescence in mind. Explain how the educational system should be designed to support adolescent development and how tailoring policies and practices to the specific needs of adolescents can improve learning and reduce exclusion.
- **Give examples** of how boys' tendency toward turbulence and violence is constructed by the way our society works (e.g., guns and weapons marketed as toys for boys, media coverage of men's versus women's failures and achievements).<sup>8</sup> Explain how boys' behaviour can be shifted with the right approaches to gender dynamics among children and adults.

## **Finding #5: People recognise that the school system currently can't adapt to all children's needs, but they also often think that some children are simply 'not made for school'.**

### Core ideas from the field

- Pupils with adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) or other forms of trauma are at higher risk of exclusion because the behaviours through which they try to communicate unmet needs are often treated as unacceptable in schools.<sup>9</sup>
- Pupils with diagnosed and undiagnosed special educational needs or disabilities (SEND) are at higher risk of exclusion because schools often lack expertise and resources to accommodate their needs, especially since recent cuts to school budgets.<sup>10</sup> The school assessment system also makes it more advantageous for schools to exclude pupils with SEND than to support them.
- Schools need more funds and expertise for early assessment and detection for learning, social and emotional needs, especially for pupils with a trauma background or special educational needs.<sup>11</sup>

## What the public brings to the conversation

### **People assume that a *one-size-fits-all* approach to education works for most children.**

Interview participants recognised that the education system tends to treat children the same, rather than adapting to individual needs of students, but hardly ever questioned one-size-fit-all systems of rules, exams and teaching styles. They assumed this system should work for all students, so if students don't thrive, they must be the problem.

**People recognise that a select group of students with special needs do need a different approach.** They recognise that children with learning or cognitive disabilities require additional support, and if they don't receive it, the children are not themselves responsible. Participants sometimes realised that some children with learning or cognitive disabilities are undiagnosed and don't receive the support they need, making them more likely to misbehave and be excluded. When interview participants thought along these lines, they argued that schools should have more funding for counsellors and support staff in order to identify issues before they become too serious. Participants widely assumed, however, that students who are diagnosed with a disability do receive adequate support. They also assumed that children with a physical disability would necessarily have access to a specialised type of school (e.g., school for the blind). They didn't recognise that the school system sometimes excludes children with learning or cognitive disabilities for reasons other than misbehaviour, such as their test score performance.

**People rely on the classist idea that some children are just not 'made for school' to explain most cases of misbehaviour and exclusion.** When children do not have a cognitive or learning disability and they misbehave and face exclusion, people assume that the child, rather than the system, is the problem. This argument often had classist connotations in interviews as participants suggested that some children, by virtue of their background and their innate capabilities, were naturally better suited for lower skilled jobs and probably didn't need much of what they were taught in school, especially in secondary school. In other words, for children who don't have special needs, people assumed the problem is that some kids are not suited for school and that schools don't need to be designed for those kids as they're destined for low-skilled jobs anyway.

## What this means for the field

People's awareness that schools need more funding for counsellors and support staff is positive and should be cued as much as possible in future communications. This view needs to be expanded to help people see that schools need more resources to meet children's needs even after disabilities or other issues have been identified.

To prevent members of the public from conflating learning disabilities, other cognitive disabilities and mental health issues, it will be important to clarify what roles counsellors and support staff can be expected to play in schools. Helping people understand the specific

types of support that schools need to provide for students dealing with different challenges is necessary to help people recognise the scope and variety of the services that schools should be providing.

The idea that some children are just not 'made for school' is a deep challenge for the field. The field needs effective ways of spreading the idea that all children can thrive. People's awareness that schools are currently not equipped to meet children's individual needs must be expanded beyond the issue of learning and cognitive disabilities to help them see that inadequate support for students is a root cause of misbehaviour and exclusions.

### **Preliminary recommendations**

- **Explain** how an inclusive, adaptive approach to teaching and learning can benefit all children regardless of their abilities.
- **Emphasise** that all children can thrive in school with the right support.
- **Shift** the focus from children to the educational system, highlighting what the system needs to do better so that people place responsibility on the system rather than on children.
- **Distinguish** the different types of support that schools should provide for young people with learning disabilities, other cognitive disabilities and mental health issues in order to build a greater understanding of the scope and variety of services needed.
- **Give** examples of how children with disabilities or who have experienced severe trauma have benefitted from adaptive teaching strategies and explain how this has worked.

## **Finding #6: Very few people see that systemic racism and discrimination play a role in educational exclusion in England.**

### **Core ideas from the field**

- Societal racism and discrimination in England put children from minoritised communities at a higher risk of exclusion.
  - Pupils from Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities are at high risk of being excluded. Moving around and changing schools frequently can make it more difficult for pupils and families to build relationships with schools and can lead to lower rates of attendance. Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children also experience racist bullying or attacks at school and may have suffered segregation and discrimination in education.<sup>12</sup>

- Pupils from Black Caribbean backgrounds are also at high risk of exclusion due to implicit bias among teachers and school administrators<sup>13,14</sup> as well as discriminatory policies in schools (e.g., policies on hairstyles or ‘kissing teeth’).

### **What the public brings to the conversation**

**Systemic racism and discrimination are significant blind spots for members of the English public on the issue of educational exclusion and beyond.** Many participants vehemently rejected the idea that implicit bias and systemic discrimination might cause a child to be excluded on the basis of ethnicity or any other factor. Instead, they insisted that exclusion is based solely on each individual child’s behaviour in school and hung on to the belief that students of all races were treated equally in the English school system.

**People across racial groups typically understand racism and discrimination as an interpersonal, not systemic, issue in England.** When explicitly asked about the role of racism and discrimination in educational exclusion, participants typically understood racism in interpersonal terms, as the result of individual beliefs and bias, rather than as something built into the educational system or other societal institutions. Participants recognised that Black and minority ethnic students sometimes face discrimination from particular white students but assumed that the only connection to exclusion in this case would be the exclusion of the *discriminating* student. In other words, because people struggle to think systemically about racism and assume that discrimination is isolated to a few racist individuals, they don’t recognise that racism is a *cause* of exclusion. While a few participants of colour were able to speak to more systemic instances of racism and discrimination in a school context, they still often relied on an interpersonal view of racism similar to that of white participants in our sample.

### **What this means for the field**

As long as the majority of the public sees racism and discrimination in interpersonal rather than structural terms, it will be extremely hard for them to see how racism contributes to exclusion rates.

If people don’t see how racism shapes the experiences and outcomes of minoritised communities they are also unlikely to support any type of school reform focused on reducing bias and discrimination in the system. Significant work will be needed in future communications to advance the public’s understanding of these issues.

### **Preliminary recommendations**

- **Avoid** relying on data only to make a point about rates of educational exclusion based on race and ethnicity. This leaves space for people to explain higher rates of exclusion as

the fault of the groups themselves – their supposedly bad values or culture – rather than recognising the role of discrimination.

- **Give** concrete examples of how policies can increase risk of exclusion for minoritised students and explain how this works (e.g., explain how regulations about hairstyles can disproportionately – and unfairly – affect students who are racially or ethnically minoritised).
- **Stress** that training teachers involves developing skills, practices and strategies to make school more inclusive, not simply raising individuals’ awareness that racism and discrimination are unacceptable.
- **Give** concrete examples of how schools can be made more inclusive and foster a sense of belonging for more students and explain how those solutions might work (e.g., rewriting codes of conduct to eliminate discriminatory regulations about uniforms and hairstyles, ensuring there is diversity on school boards and among teaching staff).

## **Finding #7: People think that the best way to reduce exclusion rates is harsher discipline and a more utilitarian curriculum.**

### **Core ideas from the field**

- To lower rates of exclusion, schools should take an approach grounded in inclusion and awareness of the external lives of pupils. They should help pupils build positive relationships with staff and feel a sense of safety, belonging and wellbeing.<sup>15</sup> In practice, this means:
  - **Changing school policy:** Set standards that promote positive behaviour, de-escalate behaviour problems and meet the specific needs of individual students<sup>16</sup> instead of a one-size-fits-all, sanctions-based or zero-tolerance approach to student behaviour.<sup>17,18</sup> Evaluate behaviour policy to ensure that it does not discriminate against pupils through racialised value judgements about what is ‘acceptable’.<sup>19</sup>
  - **Training staff:** Equip the teaching force to understand the root causes of disruptive behaviour and respond to it constructively when it arises. Increase their cultural competency so they are better equipped to teach students from all socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds. Draw on the support of Traveller Education Services to engage families from Traveller communities and prevent disengagement from education.<sup>20</sup>

- ***Diversifying the teaching workforce:*** Increase the proportion of teachers who are Black and minority ethnic and from the communities that the schools serve, taking steps to retain these teachers and ensure opportunities for career advancement.
- At the national level, the policies that structure how school funding is allocated and school quality is assessed (Ofsted framework) need to be reformed so that they reward schools for being inclusive instead of incentivising them to exclude pupils.<sup>21</sup>

## What the public brings to the conversation

**Most people don't see educational exclusion as a social issue that needs to be addressed in England.** Because they reason that exclusion is used as a legitimate response to problematic student behaviour, they don't see it as a problem. Interview participants also said they never hear about exclusion in the media, citing this as proof that it is not a problem.

**In people's minds, high rates of exclusion suggest the need for harsher discipline.** People often reason that students misbehave at school because the existing system of punishment is not harsh enough to be an effective deterrent. Interview participants talked about how past generations had more respect for authority and for teachers specifically, and how the younger generations need harsher discipline to become independent, self-sufficient adults.

**People reason that a more utilitarian curriculum could help more students see the value of school and education.** The public assumes that one key reason why children misbehave to the point of being excluded from school is that they don't see the value of learning and education – because they've absorbed their parents' or their community's perspective, because they're simply not 'made' for studying, or because they're facing other challenges that are preventing them from keeping their eye on the prize. People think students would be more likely to recognise the value of education and stay focused if it were more practical and concrete and less academic. In interviews, participants talked about learning how to handle finances or how to cook a meal as examples of what schools should focus on instead of teaching history, art or literature. Reading, writing and maths were, on the other hand, considered essential for all children, regardless of their assumed predispositions.

**People are sometimes able to think about school as a safe haven or second home, but this view is rarely top-of-mind when people think about educational exclusion.** Occasionally, participants explained that schools are – or ideally should be – places where students feel safe, are able to be themselves and feel cared for and loved. When thinking in this way, people see schools as places of belonging and inclusion. This understanding of schools appeared relatively infrequently in interviews, though this is likely due in part to the focus of the interviews. It is unsurprising that, when participants were asked about educational exclusion, this more inclusive, positive view of schools was less likely to come to mind for

people. Nevertheless, it is important to recognise that people have access to this more productive understanding of schools.

### **What this means for the field**

As long as people don't see that current practice around educational exclusion is a serious issue that needs solving, it will be hard for them to see the need for the types of solutions advocated for by the field.

The belief that harsher school discipline is the best solution to curb exclusion rates in England is actively counterproductive. It buttresses support for harmful zero-tolerance policies and makes it hard for people to recognise the value of alternatives based on positivity and inclusion.

People's assumption that a more practical, utilitarian curriculum can help more students see the value of school might be an entry point to advocate for more adaptive approaches to teaching and education. But further research is needed to find a way to leverage the productive aspects of this belief without also reinforcing existing classism and prejudice about who is and who isn't 'made for school'.

People's existing view of schools as safe havens should be cued as much as possible as it can help them recognise the value of more inclusive practices and policies. While more research is needed to determine which frames most consistently activate this way of thinking, our analysis suggests the need to broaden the conversation beyond exclusion and discipline and to foreground the positive role schools can and should play in creating a sense of inclusion and belonging for young people.

### **Preliminary recommendations**

- **Make** the case that current educational exclusion practices are a problem by talking about unfair cases of exclusion and highlighting how exclusion is used in place of practices that produce better outcomes. Don't just assume or assert that educational exclusion is an issue that needs solving in England.
- **Provide** step-by-step explanations that spell out how specific policies (e.g., diversifying the workforce and training staff) could help to make school discipline fairer and more consistent in application.
- **Explain** how schools can motivate and engage students by fostering a sense of belonging, enjoyment and involvement in the learning process.
- **Provide** concrete examples of inclusive practices at school and explain how they can support children's motivation, sense of belonging and behaviour through teaching strategies, regulation audits and diversification of the workforce.

# Appendix: Research Methods and Sample Composition

This supplement provides detailed information about the research that informs FrameWorks' strategic brief on communicating about young people at risk of educational exclusion in England. Below, we outline the research conducted with researchers, advocates, practitioners and members of the public that provides the evidence base for the brief, describing the methods used and sample composition.

## The Field Story of Educational Exclusion in England

To develop an effective strategy for communicating about an issue, it's necessary to identify a set of key ideas to convey. For this project, these ideas were garnered from researchers and advocates in the field of education. FrameWorks researchers conducted 14 one-hour interviews with researchers, advocates and practitioners, and reviewed relevant literature. Interviews were conducted between December 2020 and January 2021 and were recorded and transcribed for analysis, with participants' permission. FrameWorks compiled the list of interviewees in collaboration with Porticus. Themes also came from two sessions with four people with lived experience of educational exclusion. To refine the field story, FrameWorks conducted a 90-minute feedback session with researchers and advocates in February 2021.

Interviews with members of the field consisted of a series of probing questions designed to capture their understandings about key aspects of the field. All interviews probed what educational exclusion is, who is at highest risk of being excluded, what school-level factors make exclusion more or less likely, what the consequences of the current approach to educational exclusion are and what needs to happen to support young people at risk of exclusion. In each interview, the conducting researcher used a series of prompts and hypothetical scenarios for members of the field to explain their research, experience and perspectives; dissect complicated relationships; and simplify complex concepts. In addition to preset questions, FrameWorks researchers asked for elaboration and clarification and encouraged researchers and advocates to expand on concepts they identified as particularly important.

Analysis employed a basic grounded theory approach.<sup>22</sup> A FrameWorks researcher identified and inductively categorised common themes that emerged in each interview and across the sample. This resulted in a refined set of themes, which researchers supplemented with a review of materials from relevant literature.

## **Public Understandings of Educational Exclusion in England**

A primary goal of this research was to capture the various commonly held assumptions, or cultural models, that members of the public use to make sense of educational exclusion in England. Cultural models are cognitive shortcuts to understanding – ways of interpreting, organising and making meaning of the world around us – shaped through years of experience and expectations and by culturally embedded beliefs and values.<sup>23</sup> These ways of thinking are available to all members of a culture, although different models may be activated at different times. Individuals belong to multiple cultures, each of which include multiple models (e.g., people participate in public cultures at multiple levels, including national and subgroup cultures). In this project, our goal was to explore the models available in English public culture, but it is important to acknowledge that individuals also have access to models from other cultures in which they participate.

In exploring cultural models, we seek to identify *how* people think, rather than *what* they think. Cultural model findings thus differ from public opinion research, which documents people’s surface-level responses to questions. By understanding the deep, often tacit assumptions that structure how people think about education, educational exclusion and what should be done to better support young people at risk of being excluded from school, we can understand the obstacles that prevent people from accessing the field’s perspective as described in the field story. We can also identify opportunities that communicators can take advantage of – existing ways of thinking that can help people arrive at a fuller understanding of the issue.

To identify the cultural models that the public uses to contemplate issues related to education, educational exclusion and what needs to happen to better support young people in England, FrameWorks researchers conducted a set of interviews with members of the public. FrameWorks researchers conducted 20 interviews over Zoom with people across England in March–April 2021. We recruited a diverse sample of participants, with variation along key dimensions such as race and ethnicity, parental status and socioeconomic status (see below).

Cultural model interviews are one-on-one, semi-structured interviews lasting approximately two hours. They are designed to allow researchers to capture broad sets of assumptions, or cultural models, that participants use to make sense of a concept or topic area – in this case, issues related to education, educational exclusion and school discipline.

Interviews consisted of a series of open-ended questions covering participants' thinking on those topics in broad terms. Researchers approached each interview with this set of topics but allowed participants to determine the direction and nature of the discussion. All interviews were recorded and transcribed with participants' written consent.

All participants were recruited by a professional marketing firm and selected to represent variation along several dimensions: age, gender, race and ethnicity, educational background, income, employment status, political views (as self-reported during the screening process) and family situation (e.g., married or single, with or without children). The sample of members of the public included 9 women and 11 men. Nine participants were between 20–39 years old, seven participants were between 40–59 years old and four were aged 60+. Of the 20 participants, 15 identified as white, five as Asian/Asian British, one as Black/African/Caribbean British and one as Mixed/Multiple/Other ethnicity. Five participants had an A-level, apprenticeship, or less; nine had GCSEs or equivalent; and six had an undergraduate or graduate degree. When asked about their annual household income, four participants reported earning less than £15,000 per year; five participants reported earning between £15,000 and £31,000 per year; five participants reported earning between £31,000 and £46,000 per year; and six participants reported earning more than £46,000 per year. Five participants described their political views as 'Conservative'; eight as 'Labour'; three as 'Liberal Democrat'; and four as 'Other'. Thirteen participants had children (from infants to grown children and most ages in between) and seven participants had no children. Four participants lived in London, five in the Midlands, five in the North of England and six in the South of England.

To analyse the interviews, researchers used analytical techniques from cognitive and linguistic anthropology to examine how participants understood issues related to education, school discipline and educational exclusion.<sup>24</sup> First, researchers identified common ways of talking across the sample to reveal assumptions, relationships, logical steps and connections that were commonly made but taken for granted throughout an individual's dialogue. The analysis involved discerning patterns in both what participants said (i.e., how they related, explained and understood things) and what they did not say (i.e., assumptions and implied relationships). In many cases, participants revealed conflicting models on the same issue. In such cases, one conflicting way of understanding was typically found to be dominant over the other in that it more consistently and deeply shaped participants' thinking (i.e., participants drew on this model with greater frequency and relied more heavily on it when arriving at conclusions). To ensure consistency, researchers met after an initial round of coding and analysis, comparing and processing initial findings, then revisited transcripts to explore differences and questions that arose through the comparison. As part of this process, researchers compared emerging findings to the findings from previous cultural models research as a check to ensure that they had not missed or misunderstood any important models. They then reconvened and arrived at a synthesised set of findings.

Analysis centred on ways of understanding that were shared across participants, as cultural models research is designed to identify common ways of thinking that can be identified across a sample. While there is no fixed rule or percentage used to identify what counts as ‘shared’, models reported are typically found in the large majority of interviews. Models found in a smaller percentage of interviews are only reported if there is a clear reason why they only appeared in a limited set of interviews (e.g., the model reflected the thinking of a particular subgroup of people).

While a sample of 20 participants is too small to ensure the sample is *statistically* representative, its demographic variability is adequate to ensure the identified patterns in thinking are shared across different groups within England. While larger sample sizes are needed to investigate variability *within* a population, or to allow for statistically significant comparisons between groups, the goal of cultural models analysis is to describe common ways of understanding within a population. As a result, sample size for cultural models research is determined by the concept of *saturation* wherein a sample is considered to be of a suitable size when new data do not reveal further underlying patterns of thinking within a population. For this project, our analyses confirmed that a sample size of 20 interviews was sufficient to reach a point of saturation for cultural models of education, school discipline and educational exclusion in England.

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## About FrameWorks

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# Communicating about young people at risk of educational exclusion in England

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