Children and Young People's Centre for Justice

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School Exclusion, Inequality, and Belonging: Participation evidence from children

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1. Introduction and Purpose

School exclusion is widely recognised as a key site where educational practice, inequality, wellbeing, and safeguarding intersect. A substantial body of research across the UK demonstrates that exclusion is experienced disproportionately by children and young people who are already marginalised, including those with additional support needs (ASN), care experience, and those living in poverty (McCluskey et al., 2019; Duffy et al., 2025; King, 2026). Research further highlights that exclusion rarely functions as a neutral or corrective intervention. Instead, it often reproduces inequality, damages relationships, and heightens vulnerability to harm (McAra & McVie, 2010; Cornish & Brennan, 2025). However, while the scale and distribution of exclusion are well evidenced, the lived experiences of children and young people, particularly how exclusion feels, how it shapes belonging, and how it is understood, are less consistently centred in policy and guidance. This report presents practice based participation evidence grounded in the lived experiences of approximately 150 secondary school aged children. It brings children's perspectives into direct dialogue with the existing research base, offering insight into how exclusion is experienced in practice and how guidance might better align with both evidence and children's rights.

2. Scope, Methodology, and Ethical Considerations

2.1 Scale and nature of engagement

This report draws on CYCJ participation and engagement work with around 150 secondary school aged children, undertaken across multiple locations in Scotland. The children spoken with had a wide range of experiences relating to schooling, school exclusion, inequality, additional support needs, and care and/or justice system contact. This report highlights themes emerging from focused engagement sessions and reflects recurring patterns observed across multiple small-group engagements over time, rather than isolated or singular accounts. The consistency of language, issues raised, and experiences shared across different groups indicates thematic saturation, strengthening the robustness of the findings.

2.2 Participatory approach

Engagement was facilitated using rights-based, trauma-informed, participatory approaches, consistent with CYCJ's participation and engagement principles. Sessions were intentionally delivered in small groups (typically 4-10 participants) to:

- support emotional and relational safety
- enable peer validation and shared reflection
- allow participants to steer discussion priorities

Children were invited to discuss experiences of justice, fairness, school, and community. School exclusion was not positioned as the sole or primary focus, but emerged organically and repeatedly across sessions, strengthening the credibility of the findings. The facilitation approach prioritised:

- creating respectful, non-judgmental spaces
- allowing children to share discussion priorities
- acknowledging emotions and lived experience as valid forms of knowledge
- ensuring that participation did not feel extractive or interrogative

2.3 Consent and ethical considerations

The engagement activity informing this report was not formal academic research and, therefore, did not use written or institutional research ethics consent processes. Instead, it reflects participation and engagement work, undertaken for the purposes of workforce learning, practice development, policy influence, and systems improvement. Consent was sought verbally within engagement sessions. Children were clearly informed, in accessible language, that:

- the session was voluntary and they could choose what to share
- they could withdraw from discussion at any point
- what they shared could be used in an anonymised way
- insights may inform learning, policy, guidance, and practice development
- no identifying information would be attributed to individuals

Children were given opportunities to ask questions and to clarify how their perspectives might be used. Consent was treated as ongoing and relational, rather than a one off transactional process, and facilitators remained attentive to comfort, boundaries, and emotional safety throughout sessions. All quotations used in this report are anonymised, with care taken to remove any identifying detail relating to individuals, schools, families, or communities. This approach reflects established ethical principles within participatory and youth work practice, where informed, voluntary, and contextual consent is prioritised, and where children's agency and wellbeing are placed at the centre of engagement.

2.4 Status of evidence

The findings presented in this report represent practice-based participation evidence, grounded in the lived experiences and perspectives shared by secondary school aged children during facilitated engagement. While not generated through formal research methodology, this evidence has been systematically documented, thematically analysed, and situated within the wider peer-reviewed research base on school exclusion, inequality, belonging, and safeguarding. As such, it provides a robust and ethically grounded contribution to policy and practice development. The examples included below are illustrative of recurring themes raised across multiple engagement groups and are not intended to imply prevalence or representativeness.

3. Key Findings: Children's Experiences of School Exclusion

3.1 Inequality, labelling, and disproportionality

Children consistently described school exclusion as the outcome of judgment and labelling, rather than a proportionate response to isolated behaviour. Across groups, exclusion was framed as something that happened after assumptions were already in place:

> "Once you've got a reputation, that's it."
> "They already think you're going to be misbehaved."
> "They see me as a problem, not a kid."

Judgment was often linked to family reputation, siblings, previous exclusions, where children lived, or unmet additional support needs. One child explained:

> "No one will give me a chance. They see me as my brother. I'm meant to live up to that."

Rather than interrupting these narratives, exclusion was experienced as confirming them:

> "Once you're labelled, you just end up proving them right."

These accounts align closely with research demonstrating that exclusion disproportionately affects children with additional support needs and those experiencing poverty, and frequently reflects misunderstanding rather than unmet need (McCluskey et al., 2019; King, 2026). Duffy et al. (2025) further highlight how exclusion operates within political economies of schooling, where local context, class, and institutional norms shape who is excluded and how.

3.2 Belonging as a protective factor – and its disruption

A strong theme across sessions was children's limited sense of voice and agency within school:

> "School is suffocating. We don't have a say."
> "People think they're in charge, and what we say doesn't matter."

Despite this, school dominated children's lives:

> "Our lives are just school, but we're so much more than that."

Exclusion, therefore, represented not merely time away from school, but disconnection from belonging. Many children described feeling unwelcome even after returning:

> "Every time I come back, they already assume I'm going to mess up again."

This is particularly significant in light of a robust evidence base identifying school belonging as a protective factor, associated with improved mental health, behavioural regulation, and long-term outcomes (Korpershoek et al., 2020; Allen et al., 2024). Children's experiences illustrate how exclusion actively undermines this protective mechanism.

3.3 Emotional impact: Shame, fear, and humiliation

The emotional consequences of exclusion were consistently raised across groups. Children described exclusion as embarrassing, shame based, and frightening:

> "They assume we have no feelings."
> "Teachers make me feel embarrassed. Singled out. Judged."

One young person described longer-term effects:

> "I was excluded, and I went into a massive depression. I couldn't even see my friends. I was so isolated."

These accounts mirror qualitative research identifying shame, humiliation, and emotional harm as central to exclusion experiences (Thomson & Pennacchia, 2016; McCluskey et al., 2019; Duffy et al., 2025). Recent quantitative analysis further demonstrates that exclusion is associated with increased risk of serious violence, particularly when it compounds existing adversity (Cornish & Brennan, 2025).

3.4 Behaviour as communication of unmet needs

Children consistently rejected narratives that framed behaviour as wilful non-compliance:

> "We don't do things for no reason."
> "Just because I've got a problem doesn't mean I'm the problem."

Behaviour escalation was widely linked to stress, family circumstances, mental health, and feeling unheard:

> "Teachers think I'm disruptive, but actually I've got stuff going on and can't think straight."

Punitive responses were viewed as ineffective:

> "Punishment doesn't stick. It just makes us resist."

This directly reflects findings from systematic reviews of children's experiences of punitive behaviour policies, which highlight feelings of injustice and disengagement (Jones et al., 2023). It also aligns with evidence that relational and emotionally attuned approaches better support regulation, safety, and engagement (Jones et al., 2024).

3.5 Safeguarding, routine, and risk

Despite mixed feelings about school, children often described it as a place of routine and relative safety, particularly within communities impacted by poverty and violence:

> "It's hard to have hope when your area's full of drugs, prison, and violence."

Exclusion removed that structure:

> "When you get sent home, there's nothing else to do but get into bother."
> "There's nowhere to go."

Children linked exclusion directly to increased isolation and risk. This reflects contextual safeguarding research showing that exclusion can shift, rather than reduce, exposure to harm by removing protective environments (Firmin, 2020). Cornish and Brennan (2025) further caution that exclusion may exacerbate pathways into serious violence.

3.6 Understanding, participation, and fairness

Many children reported not understanding exclusion processes or what would happen next:

> "They talk about you, not to you."
> "No one explains it properly."

Children emphasised the importance of accessible explanations, preparation time, and trusted advocacy. Research similarly demonstrates that lack of participation exacerbates distress and undermines trust in exclusion processes (McCluskey et al., 2019; Duffy et al., 2025).

3.7 Inconsistency and reintegration challenges

Children described considerable variability in exclusion experiences depending on the school or staff member:

> "Same thing, different reaction."

Reintegration was often described as awkward or hostile:

"Every time I come back, they expect me to fail."
"It's awkward. Everyone's watching you."

Without deliberate relationship repair, exclusion often resets conditions for further conflict. Evidence from alternative education research highlights the importance of relational reintegration to prevent repeated exclusion (Thomson & Pennacchia, 2016; Mullarkey, 2025).

4. Implications for Policy and Practice

Bringing participation evidence into conversation with the research base highlights the need to:

- foreground inequality and disproportionality in exclusion guidance
- recognise belonging as a core protective factor
- explicitly acknowledge emotional and safeguarding impacts
- frame behaviour as communication of unmet need
- establish minimum standards for participation, explanation, and advocacy
- prioritise relationship-based reintegration and family-inclusive approaches

Children were not calling for the absence of accountability. They were calling for fairness, dignity, understanding, and consistency.

5. Conclusion

This report demonstrates that when children are meaningfully engaged, a clear and consistent picture of school exclusion emerges; one that strongly aligns with, and deepens, the existing research evidence. Across participation with approximately 150 secondary school aged children, exclusion was rarely experienced as a neutral or corrective response. Instead, it was consistently described as an experience that can reproduce inequality, disrupt belonging, and increase vulnerability at precisely the moment when support and protection are most needed.

Children's accounts reinforce what the research base already tells us: that exclusion is disproportionately experienced by those facing marginalisation; that it carries significant emotional, relational, and safeguarding consequences; and that it often removes protective structures such as routine, trusted adults and a sense of connection. Crucially, this participation evidence highlights how exclusion is experienced in practice – through shame, misunderstanding, loss of voice, and disrupted relationships – providing insight that aggregated data alone cannot capture.

Importantly, children were not calling for the removal of boundaries or accountability. Rather, they consistently articulated a need for fairness, dignity, understanding, and consistency. They highlighted behaviour as communication of unmet need, the importance of being listened to, and the central role of relationships in both preventing exclusion and supporting safe reintegration.

Together, the findings emphasise the importance of embedding children's perspectives within exclusion policy and practice as a core component of effective, equitable, and rights-respecting systems. Aligning participation evidence with the existing research base strengthens the case for approaches that prioritise belonging, relational practice, safeguarding, and meaningful involvement in decision-making. If school exclusion is genuinely to be used as a last resort, policy and practice must attend to the lived realities of those most affected. This report affirms that listening to children strengthens professional decision-making by grounding responses in evidence, rights, and lived experience.

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