

School Exclusions and Black-Heritage Families in West London

ESDEG Research Team
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Executive Summary

Education & Skills Development Group (ESDEG) is an independent local charity, with a proven track record of working with children and their families, and schools in the London Borough of Ealing as well as surrounding boroughs. Since 2005, ESDEG has supported children and families who possess intersectional characteristics, primarily minority ethnic and/or refugee status, with many also identifying as having special educational needs. Our work has focused on keeping children in school (reducing exclusion), improving attainment and aspiration, and ensuring SEND children get the support they are entitled to. We recognise that the well-being of families is crucial to a child’s education and thus adopt a ‘whole family approach’ in our early intervention work. In one of our recent projects, ESDEG worked with 6 local schools in West London and supported 50 families facing school exclusion. Services included mentoring, counselling, improving (parental knowledge of) policies at schools, and advocacy support.

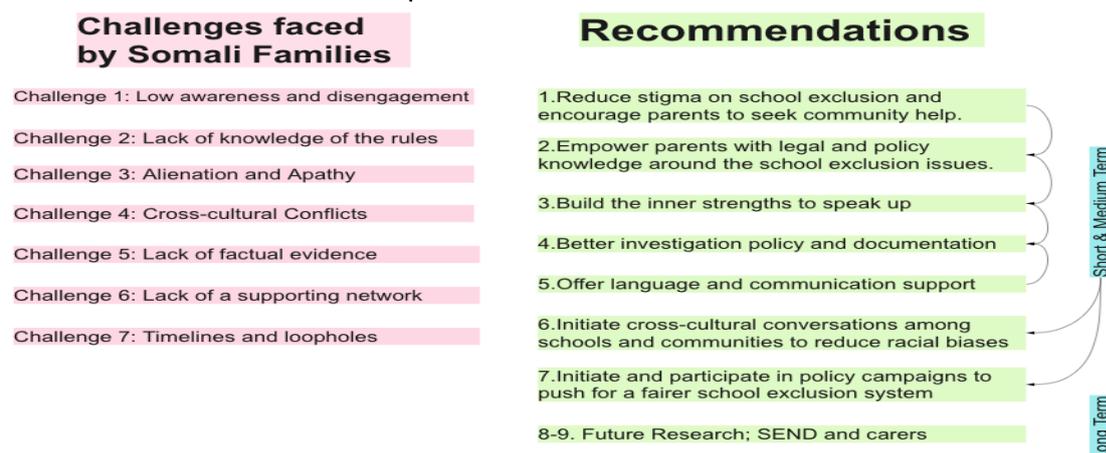
We believe the task of addressing school exclusion is both urgent and important. We know that school exclusion leads to poorer outcomes in almost all areas from health to income in later life. Psychological stress has been found to be prevalent among excluded children. Excluded girls in particular face an increased safeguarding risk such as child sexual exploitation. Convincing research has also linked exclusion with gang membership and lamented the existence of the short road that connects exclusion and prison. Overall, unaddressed school exclusion is undermining equality, children’s rights, and cohesion.

We started this research at the beginning of March 2022, hoping to capture the local families’ experiences with school exclusions. We focused on Black Somali families in this report, as this ethnic group appeared to experience high exclusion rates. Other signifiers such as refugee status, English as an additional language, and socioeconomic status were also explored, and it was found that these factors could make members of this diverse group particularly vulnerable.

Goals of this report:

- Understand the data and patterns of school exclusion in England and Ealing
- Synthesise the existing studies on school exclusions
- Understand the challenges faced by Black Somali families and propose recommendations

The main observations of this report are summarised in the chart below:



2. School Exclusion

2.1. Definitions

In the narrow sense, school exclusion is a legal term, which refers to ‘formal exclusion’.

As defined in s52 Education Act 2002, the head teacher of a maintained school may exclude a pupil from the school for a fixed period or permanently.

- Fixed period exclusion (or suspension) refers to a pupil who is excluded from a school for a set period of time (Department for Education, 2017). For example, a lunchtime period, a day, or a period up to a maximum of 45 school days in a single academic year (Child Law Advice, 2022).
- Permanent exclusion refers to a pupil who is excluded and who will not come back to that school (unless the exclusion is overturned) (Department for Education, 2017).

In the broad sense, school exclusions include both formal and informal exclusions.

Formal exclusion, such as fixed period exclusion and permanent exclusion, are officially notified and recorded.

Informal exclusion happens when pupils are removed from class unofficially. Some pupils may be sent to a separate classroom, sent out of school, taken ‘off the roll’, put on ‘exam leave’, moved to another school by arrangement (the so-called ‘managed move’), sent to a Pupil Referral Unit for an ‘interim’ period or sent home as part of an ‘elective home education’ deal.

Research organisation ROTA found that there is little awareness among parents on informal exclusions, while these types of exclusions are seriously disadvantaging children’s educational and life chances (Race on the Agenda, 2018). Moreover, gathering statistical evidence about informal exclusion has been proven to be extremely difficult.

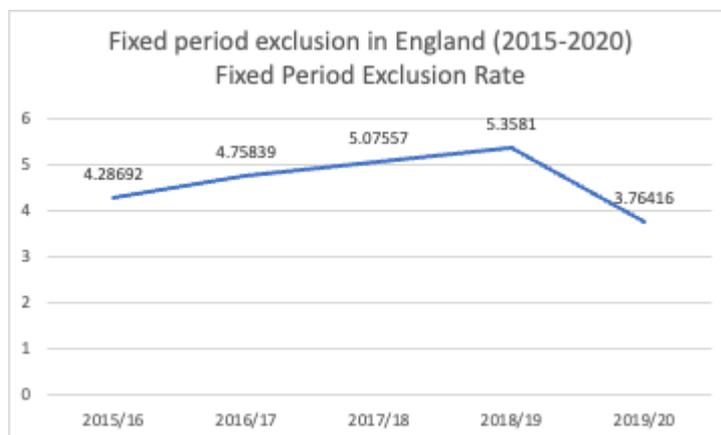
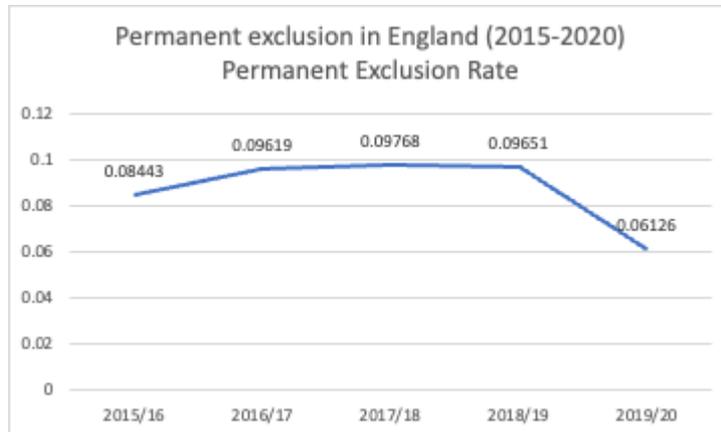
Due to the above reasons, this preliminary report will only focus on formal exclusions.

2.2. Key Facts

Overall Patterns

- The rate of permanent exclusions in England underwent a decline from the 1990s (0.16%) till 2013/14 (0.06%) (Timpson, 2019). Since then, the figure has been rising steadily. **In 2018/19, 1 in 1000 children were permanent excluded** (0.1%) (National Statistics, 2021).

- The rate of fixed-term exclusions showed a similar pattern, dropping from 5.65% in 2006/7 to 3.5% in 2013/4 (Timpson, 2019). In 2018/9, the rate rose to 5.36%, when 438,265 pupils were excluded for a period (National Statistics, 2021).
- The year 2019/20 was disrupted by the COVID lockdown. On the surface, the exclusion rates were falling. However, looking at the Autumn term only (pre-COVID), **the number of school exclusions was increasing** (National Statistics, 2021).



Source: National Statistics (2021), Charts made by ESDEG Research team

Different from the formal exclusions mentioned above, it is extremely difficult to gather accurate data on informal exclusions. The existing research can only give us a snapshot of the whole picture.

- Sometimes, schools informally exclude students through off-rolling or managed-moves. According to an Ofsted blog in 2019, there were a total of 20 000 pupil movements between year 10 and year 11 in 2017/18 (Bradbury, 2019). In addition, the destination of approximately half of these pupils is not known. In 2017/18, a total of 35,100 movements of pupils between the 5 years of the 11–16 age phase were to unknown destinations (Bradbury, 2019).
- For instance, on-site exclusion, seclusion, or Behaviour Support Units may not even be classified as internal exclusion by schools. According to the report conducted by the grassroots coalition No More Exclusions (2021), there were at least 8,996 internal

exclusions from their sample (39 primary schools and 34 secondary schools in England) in 2019/20.

Strong evidence suggests that school exclusions damage the prospects of young people. **89% of children in Young Offender Institutions in 2018 had been excluded** (HM Chief Inspector of Prisons for England and Wales, 2018) and **63% of adult prisoners in 2012 reported being temporarily excluded when at school** (Institute for Public Policy Research, 2017).

Exclusion Reasons

By law, exclusions (formal exclusions) should be made on disciplinary grounds. The common reasons for school exclusions in England are persistent disruptive behaviours and physical assault (National Statistics, 2021). In many cases, the reasons were labelled as 'other', which has been criticised for the lack of transparency (e.g. No More Exclusion, 2021).

2019/2020 School Exclusion Most Common Reasons

Rank	Permanent Exclusion	Percent	Fixed Term Exclusion	Percent2
1	Persistent disruptive behaviour	34.48685	Persistent disruptive behaviour	33.54552
2	Other	15.70101	Other	16.46977
3	Physical assault against a pupil	12.63595	Verbal abuse or threatening behaviour against an adult	15.82902
4	Physical assault against an adult	12.49753	Physical assault against a pupil	15.73377
5	Drug and alcohol related	10.14435	Physical assault against an adult	7.0839

2018/2019 School Exclusion Most Common Reasons

Rank	Permanent Exclusion	Percent	Fixed Term Exclusion	Percent2
1	Persistent disruptive behaviour	35.22929	Persistent disruptive behaviour	31.46065
2	Other	17.36762	Other	18.74209

3	Physical assault against a pupil	13.30124	Physical assault against a pupil	16.29357
4	Physical assault against an adult	10.34963	Verbal abuse or threatening behaviour against an adult	15.33912
5	Drug and alcohol related	8.71548	Physical assault against an adult	6.61746

2017/2018 School Exclusion Most Common Reasons

Rank	Permanent Exclusion	Percent	Fixed Term Exclusion	Percent2
1	Persistent disruptive behaviour	33.97849	Persistent disruptive behaviour	29.95839
2	Other	18.24162	Other	20.12596
3	Physical assault against a pupil	13.11828	Physical assault against a pupil	16.36677
4	Physical assault against an adult	10.68944	Verbal abuse or threatening behaviour against an adult	15.23787
5	Verbal abuse or threatening behaviour against an adult	8.24794	Physical assault against an adult	6.76708

Source: National Statistics (2021),
Tables made by ESDEG Research team

Disproportions

Though exclusions are made on disciplinary grounds, statistics show that school exclusions are **connected to a much wider set of recurring inequalities, including race, poverty, and mental health.**

The famous Timpson Review (2019) led by Edward Timpson, the former minister for children and families at the Department for Education reveals in 2019, demonstrates that

- **8 out of 10 expelled pupils in England are from vulnerable backgrounds**
- Children from the most **disadvantaged families were 45% more likely to be excluded** than other pupils.

School exclusion is **strongly linked to race**. Statistics from the Department for Education (2018a) and Michelmores & Mesie (2019) demonstrate that

- Black Caribbean pupils are **three times more likely** to be excluded than their peers.
- Black Caribbean boys are three times more likely to be permanently excluded than White British boys.

Similarly, according to the Timpson Review (2019),

- pupils from a black Caribbean background were **1.7 times more likely** to be permanently excluded than White British children.
- Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller children are permanently excluded **at five times** the rate of White British pupils.

ESDEG'S own data on children it has worked with in West London from 2017-2019 reveals that Somali-heritage boys were significantly more likely to experience fixed, permanent, and managed moves than their White British peers. The table below shows the types of exclusion that these children have experienced.

	Academic Year	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19
Types of exclusion	Fixed	20	23	19
	Permanent	4	5	4
	Managed moves	5	7	9

Children **living in poverty are also vulnerable to school exclusions** based on data from the Department for Education in 2020. Just for Kids Law (2020) found that children who are eligible for **free school meals (FSM)** in London are nearly **three times** as likely to get a fixed-term exclusion and more than three times as likely to be permanently excluded, compared to their peers.

By law, **excluding children with Special Educational Needs (SEND) is unlawful**. However, official statistics show that **children with SEND** represent 14% of the state-funded school population (Department for Education, 2018c) but **account for almost half of permanent exclusions** (Department for Education, 2018b). The same data shows that pupils with SEND support are almost **six times more likely** to receive a permanent exclusion than pupils with no SEND and pupils with any type of SEND are around five times more likely to receive a fixed period exclusion.

Statistics from National Education Union (2021) confirm a similar pattern and provide more insights.

- Students with Education, Health, and Care (EHC) plans are five times more likely to be excluded from school than students without an EHC plan.
- Figures for students with undiagnosed SEND are likely to be much higher but are not currently recorded.
- Autistic students are the largest group of SEND learners to be excluded.

The first study on educational outcomes of refugee and asylum-seeking children was published in December 2021. According to Education Policy Institute (2021)'s estimation, **unaccompanied asylum-seeking children** experience **higher rates** of fixed-period school exclusions (7.1%) than non-migrant children (5.2%), as well as slightly higher school absence rates of 6.8% compared to 6.6% for non-migrant children.

It is noteworthy that **the disadvantages mentioned above are interconnected, which lead to multi-vulnerabilities**. For instance, according to the Timpson Review (2019), 78% of expelled pupils either had special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), were eligible for free school meals (FSM) or were 'in need'. Boys with social, emotional, and mental health difficulties were 3.8 times more likely to be permanently excluded than a child without SEND. Similarly, as revealed by Just for Kids Law (2020), children on free school meals are twice as likely to have SEND and Black children face a higher chance of living in poverty.

2.3 Literature Review: Explain the Disproportions

Existing literature consistently suggests that certain vulnerabilities significantly increase a pupil's risk of exclusion. As Children & Young People Now (2021) argued, 'Bad behaviour doesn't come from nowhere. It is often a reaction to problems happening in a child's life, from issues ranging from anxiety and bereavement to hunger and poverty'. As a result of disproportionate school exclusions, the existing inequalities are further deepened and reproduced.

Researchers (e.g. Fazel and Newby, 2021) highlight the need to **move away from thinking about individual behaviours to broader system-level approaches** which can help address pupil, family, school and community differences, difficulties and the overall challenges of exclusion.

There is an extended published discussion on the drivers of school exclusions. In this report, we outline the following 5 themes.

Poverty: Far-Reaching Impacts

As revealed in the Just for Kids Law (2020)'s report, a pupil's experience of school and behaviour is significantly impacted by **poverty**. **Home circumstances**, such as deprivation and low income, poor housing, affect whether a family can pay for the essentials, cover the school costs, and provide the pupils with access to computers and the Internet. In many cases, poverty further triggers **emotional bullying** at home, which further affect the pupil's **mental health and behaviour**. All these circumstances can increase the likelihood of school exclusion.

A roundtable discussion held by the Samaritans (2019) among those affected by school exclusions found that '**poverty is often at the heart of what is happening to children**'. Among their sample from Wales, a high degree of those excluded from school were from socio-economically deprived backgrounds. Conversations during the roundtable show that

irregular attendance, arriving at school hungry, a lack of concentration or hostile behaviour are just some of the signs that a pupil may be **experiencing poverty**.

Nicholson and Putwain (2016) interviewed staff and 35 pupils at an alternative provision, who were excluded permanently due to poor attendance, fighting with peers, bullying, and anxiety. Staff revealed that all the families of these pupils were facing challenging issues, including **poverty**, homelessness, parental substance addiction and abuse, gang culture and violence.

Mental Health: A Vicious Cycle

Mental health challenges experienced by families and young people tend to go hand in hand with poverty issues. The factor of mental health struggles can create a vicious cycle, increasing the exclusion risks and reproducing inequalities.

The impact of this factor is more obvious on young people with special educational needs. After interviewing eight young women diagnosed with autism and their parents, Sproston et al. (2017) found that the result of school exclusion is closely linked to some pupils' unmet needs. **Autistic pupils found school environments impersonal and challenging**, including the sensory environment and the staff who cannot understand their needs. This further leads to **school exclusion and long-term 'battles' between parents and schools**.

Parker et al. (2016) interviewed 35 parents and 37 of their 5–12 years old children who had SEND and who had been excluded (both permanently and for fixed periods). Parents reported that the **school failed to provide suitable support to their children, which aggravated their difficulties in coping at school**. The pupils and the families are thrown into a vicious cycle.

Similarly, Jalali and Morgan (2017) highlight that when the school cannot provide suitable support to pupils with SEMH needs, these pupils usually feel that they do not belong to the school or that they are disliked by their peers. As their **sense of disconnection from the school grow, their risk of school exclusion will likely grow**.

Just for Kids Law (2020) expressed concern that using exclusions as a tool to manage pupils with psychological distress and additional learning needs will **further damage these pupils' self-esteem and mental health**.

Institutional Racism in the Education System

Several scholars have discussed institutional racism in schools which, albeit often is unintentional, does lead to discriminatory school exclusions. Wright (2010) interviewed 62 second and third-generation Black children and 52 members of the teaching staff and found that some (White middle-class) teachers appeared to stereotype Black pupils and viewed them negatively. **Black pupils were not viewed as 'ideal learners'** and as a result tended to be excluded from general learning and classroom activities. Stamou et al. (2014) also found negative stereotypes and low expectations as regards Black boys at schools. Demie (2019) has stressed the consequences of the negative labelling of Black Caribbean pupils. **Black people are seen as violent and physically stronger**, which made them more likely to be excluded than White pupils at school. Epstein et al. (2017) describe the process of

'adultification' of Black girls, the negative perception of them being 'less innocent and more adult-like than their white peers, especially in the age range of 5-14'. The mis-perception of these children as being 'older', viewed as 'manipulative', 'deviant' 'troublesome' rather than vulnerable is contributing to the higher exclusion rates of Black pupils.

Moreover, when pupils felt they were being racially stereotyped, this made them feel disrespected and isolated and aggravated **their sense of not belonging in the classroom** (Institute for Public Policy Research, 2017).

As Graham et al. (2019) have argued, teachers' responses to Black pupils' behaviour are still significantly influenced by racialised stereotypes. To this we add that a widespread lack of intercultural competence and dialogue is feeding a lazy narrative of a '**clash of cultures**', which tends to suggest these 'others' cannot be 'integrated'. In practice this translates to the perception as an inability on the part of the Black child to abide by rules which necessitates over-disciplining.

The racial stereotypes at schools are embedded in **broader racial injustice issues**, including low awareness of racial discrimination, the low proportions of BAME teachers, senior leaders and headteachers, and exclusive curriculums. For instance, as mentioned by Just for Kids Law (2020), according to the Department for Education's data in 2018, **around half of newly qualified teachers do not feel that their training has prepared them to teach pupils across all ethnic backgrounds**. Also, the lack of teaching staff from diverse ethnic backgrounds makes it **difficult to build trusting relationships between the BAME pupils and the staff** (The Royal Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce, 2020).

Political Economy in the Education System: Unable to Meet Pupil's Needs

As studies show, school leaders argue that **the current funding crisis in schools** is contributing to increased exclusions (Graham et al., 2019; Timpson, 2019). This might be reflected in schools' **incapability to offer teachers with proper training and provide pupils with suitable support**. This issue is becoming more pressing, as National Education Union (2021) alerted that **SEND students in the post-COVID period are facing greater pressures** with reduced support from specialist TAs, LSAs and mental health professionals.

School Exclusion Processes: Flawed Procedures and Power Imbalance

By law, when a school proposes a school exclusion, parents should be given clear information about the reasons for such a decision, and parents have the right to participate in review sessions. Headteachers should, as far as possible, avoid permanently excluding any pupil with a statement of SEND or EHCP or a 'looked after' child. Parents have a right to require the Local Authority / Academy Trust to appoint a special educational needs (SEND) expert to attend the review (Child Law Advice, 2022).

These rules are put into place to ensure the exclusion procedures are fair and reasonable. However, research suggests that **the procedures are heavily flawed**. Parents often report a **lack of information and poor communication**. In many cases, they did not know the reasons for the exclusions or the alternative options to the exclusions (Just for Kids Laws, 2020). A

school's governing body is the only compulsory mechanism of review, and they tend to lack independence, often deferring to the judgment of headteachers. **The appeal mechanism** available to families is known as an Independent Review Panel (IRP). These are **ineffective** as they do not have the power to reinstate children, even if the Panel finds the exclusion to be unlawful, unreasonable, or unfair (Just for Kids Laws, 2020).

Though some charities offer free **legal support** to parents, there is **a big gap between the resources and needs**. This means that the majority of parents have to go through the **complicated and challenging process of review and appeal by themselves**. Many parents find the process simply too intimidating to engage with effectively (Just for Kids Laws, 2020).

Kulz (2015) found out that many parents felt the system **awards too much power to head teachers**, and the review processes are usually weighted in the school's favour. Both parents and children can develop anger and/or depression during the exclusion processes. Some lost faith in the education system. Due to the lack of resources, **working-class families are further marginalised** in the exclusion processes.

While we divide the literature discussions into several themes, it is noteworthy that most of the driving factors of exclusions are closely linked. Race, class, and mental health discriminations all play roles in the process. Pupils and families with **multiple vulnerabilities are disproportionately penalised** by the current exclusion system.

3. Starting the Local Conversations: School Exclusion at Ealing

3.1 School Exclusion Data at Ealing

Ealing is one of the most populated boroughs in London, with an estimated total population of 342,000 (Ealing Council, 2018). IMD (index of multiple deprivations) 2019 ranks every local authority in England from 1 (most deprived area) to 317 (least deprived area). Though usually being seen as a traditionally well-to-do borough, Ealing ranked 94 in the IMD system, being a relatively deprived area in England (Centre to London, 2019).

Ealing is witnessing significant wealth inequalities within the borough. The IMD ranks every small area (Lower Super Output Area) in England from 1 (most deprived) to 32,844 (least deprived). 4 areas in Ealing were categorised as within the 10% most deprived in England, while 29 areas were among the 20% most deprived areas in England (Ealing Data, 2019).

Regarding school exclusions, the figures of permanent exclusions in Ealing are 59 in 2018/19, 38 in 2019/20, and 30 in 2020/21. Compared to the most and least deprived boroughs in London, Ealing has had relatively high permanent exclusion rates and relatively low fixed period exclusion rates in the past 5 years.

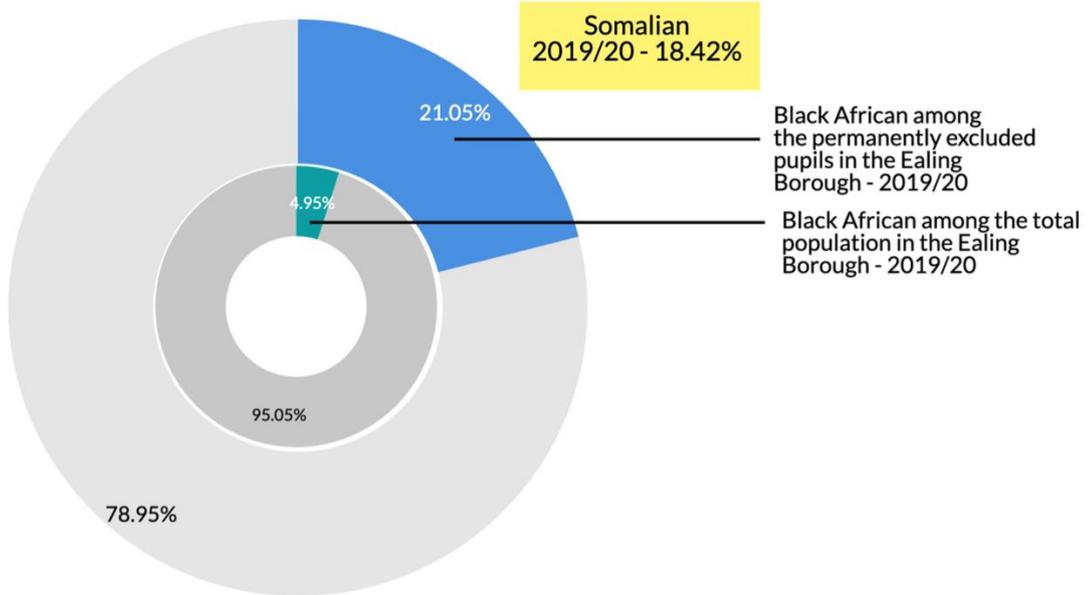
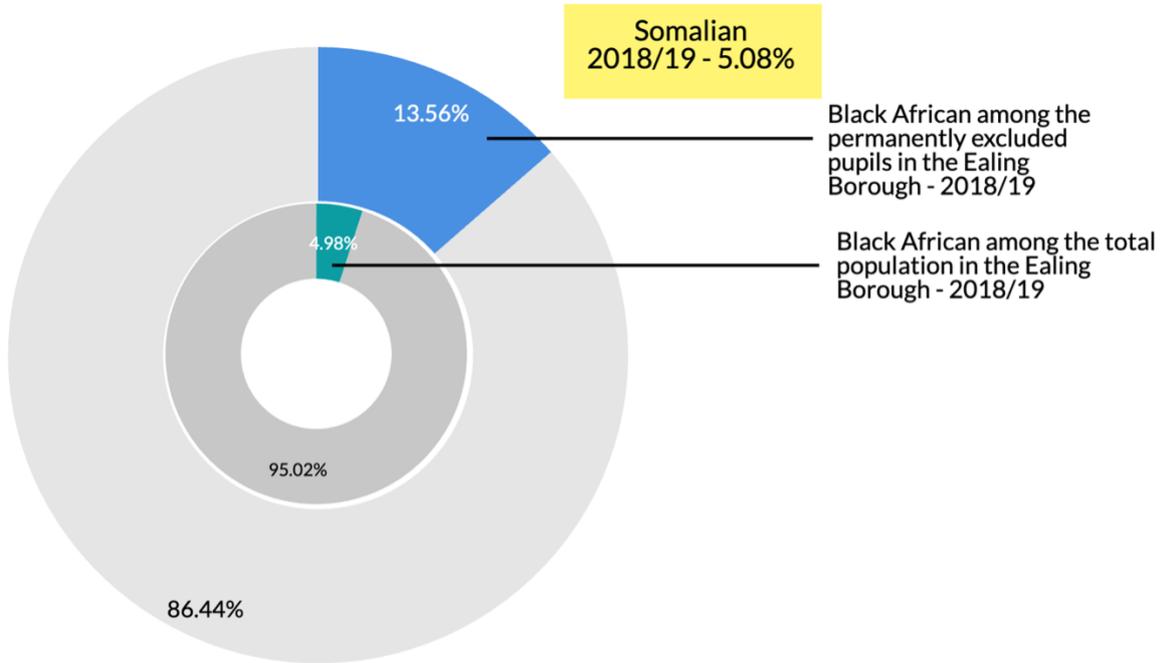
	2019/20	2018/19	2017/18	2016/17	2015/16
Permanent exclusion (per 100 pupils)					
Richmond upon Thames	0.03537	0.05409	0.04054	0.04887	0.05807
Hackney	0.07182	0.12676	0.1508	0.12518	0.0765
Ealing	0.03322	0.10753	0.11174	0.14559	0.13013

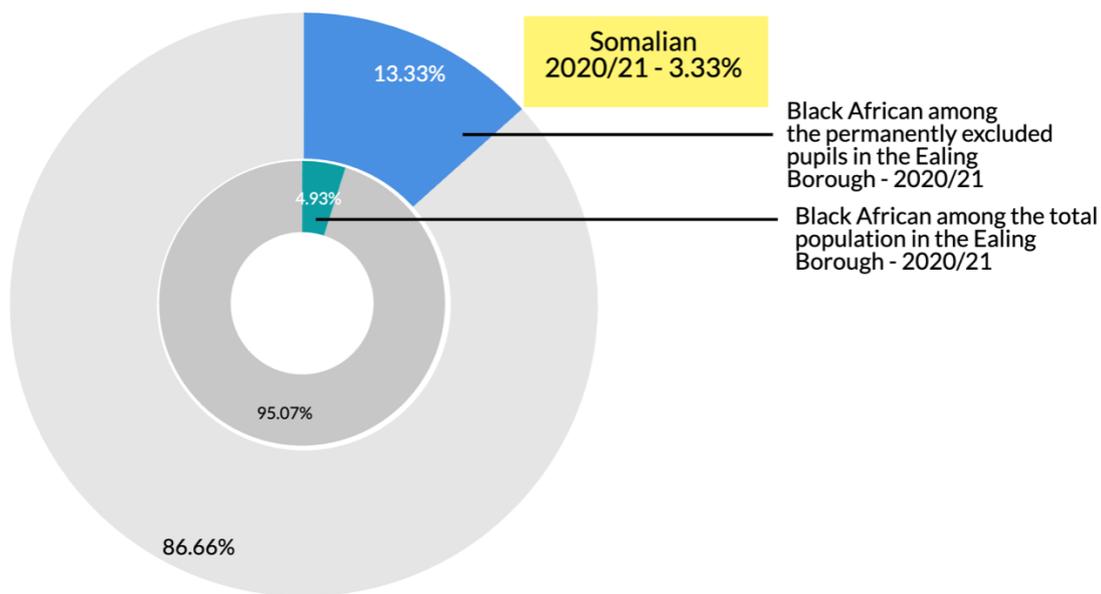
	2019/20	2018/19	2017/18	2016/17	2015/16
Fixed period exclusion (per 100 pupils)					
Richmond upon Thames	1.63424	2.28994	2.85988	2.65799	2.43515
Hackney	5.04151	7.05848	5.98573	5.60116	6.12845
Ealing	2.37322	3.47065	2.57012	3.1096	2.84033

Source: National Statistics (2021),
Charts made by ESDEG Research team

In terms of the school exclusion patterns, Ealing has the similar patterns to the national data. Black African pupils are disproportionately excluded from schools. The data in 2020/21 seems to suggest a better picture. However, as mentioned before, the data collection during the COVID period was disrupted and thus cannot be said to accurately reflect the situation. Organisations, such as National Education Union (2021), are worried that the exclusion rates can be worse during and after the pandemic.

As shown in the charts below, Black African pupils, especially Somali pupils, disproportionately received permanent exclusion punishments. The data is especially worrying in 2019/20. Though pupils with Black African heritage only accounted for 4.95% of the population, 21.05% of permanently excluded pupils in Ealing (2019/20) were identified as Black African. Particularly, Somali pupils, as a relatively small group, made up 18.42% of the permanently excluded pupils in Ealing (2019/20).





Source: National Statistics (2021), Greater London Authority ethnic group projections (2020)
Charts made by ESDEG Research team

The disproportions of the exclusion punishments appear to be more obvious when it comes to fixed-term exclusions. As the tables below show, Black African pupils were 3-5 times more likely to receive a fixed-term exclusion punishment than Indian pupils, and 1.5-2 times more likely than White British pupils in Ealing during the academic years of 2017/18, 2018/19 and 2019/20. Similarly, the rates of Black African pupils receiving multiple fixed-term exclusions were much higher than Indian pupils and White British pupils in the same periods.

2019/20 Fixed-term Exclusion at Ealing

Ethnicity	Headcount	Fixed-term Exclusion (One time)	Rate of Fixed-term Exclusion (One time)	Fixed-term Exclusion (More than one time)	Rate of Fixed-term Exclusion (More than one time)
White British	7567	205	2.709131756	124	1.638694331
Black African	5515	207	3.753399819	147	2.665457842
Indian	8396	86	1.024297284	69	0.821819914

2018/19 Fixed-term Exclusion at Ealing

Ethnicity	Headcount	Fixed-term Exclusion (One time)	Rate of Fixed-term Exclusion (One time)	Fixed-term Exclusion (More than one time)	Rate of Fixed-term Exclusion (More than one time)
White British	7665	266	3.470319635	144	1.878669276
Black African	5816	333	5.725584594	222	3.817056396
Indian	8056	79	0.980635551	62	0.769612711

2017/18 Fixed-term Exclusion at Ealing

Ethnicity	Headcount	Fixed-term Exclusion (One time)	Rate of Fixed-term Exclusion (One time)	Fixed-term Exclusion (More than one time)	Rate of Fixed-term Exclusion (More than one time)
White British	7846	203	2.587305633	114	1.452969666
Black African	5960	241	4.043624161	183	3.070469799
Indian	7750	57	0.735483871	47	0.606451613

Source: National Statistics (2021), Charts made by ESDEG Research team

3.2 First-hand experience: A perspective from Somali families in Ealing

From March to June, the ESDEG research team talked to 12 Somali families in Ealing. To protect their identities, we will use pseudonyms and case numbers. The following table listed the general information of the cases. Most pupils experienced fixed-term exclusions ranging from 1 day to 14 days. Two teenagers were excluded permanently from the school. In all 12 Black Somali families, none of the parents was born in the UK. 70% of families are on the school free meal scheme.

It is worthwhile mentioning that we identified several families who experienced permanent exclusions or longer fixed-term exclusions. Most of them found it traumatic or pointless in sharing their perspective in our report. Therefore, the report mainly reflects the views of the families who received relatively shorter exclusions. It should be noted that the situation in the community is more difficult, compared to the snapshots provided in this report.

Case No.	Data collection	Participants	Age of the pupil when excluded	Gender	Exclusion Length	Reasons (given by the schools)
1	Focus Group	3 Mothers	14	F	2 days	Disruptive Behaviours (a fight)
2			13	F	3 days	Disruptive Behaviours (a fight)
3			12	M	14 days	Disruptive Behaviours (a fight)
1	Focus Group	2 Pupils	14	F	2 days	Disruptive Behaviours (a fight)
2			13	F	3 days	Disruptive Behaviours (a fight)
4	Interview	1 Mother	6	M	Half-day off for 7 months	Disruptive Behaviours (e.g. kicked one teacher)
5	Interview	1 Mother	14	M	3 days	Disruptive Behaviours (a fight)
6	Focus Group	4 Pupils	17	M	Permanent	Disruptive Behaviours (a fight)
7			16	M	Permanent	Drug use
8			12	M	1 day	Disruptive Behaviours (a fight)
9			12	M	1 day	Disruptive Behaviours (a fight)
10	Interview	1 Pupil	12	F	5 times in two terms, max 5 days	Disruptive Behaviours (fights)
11	Interview	1 Pupil	13	F	3 days	Disruptive Behaviours (a fight)
12	interview	1 Mother	13	F	2 days	Disruptive Behaviours (a fight)

Based on the conversations, we synthesised **several challenges faced by Somali families in Ealing when they experience school exclusions**. Some of the challenges (e.g. challenges 6-7) are general but have affected Somali families disproportionately.

Challenge 1: Low awareness and disengagement

One of the general patterns across the 12 Black Somali cases is the disengagement or low awareness among parents on school exclusions. Most parents decided to **trust schools and believed that the teachers had made fair decisions**. They tend to put more pressure on the pupils, rather than communicate, challenge, or negotiate with the schools. Essentially, they gave up their legal rights to question the exclusions¹.

Most pupils in our case studies are over the age of 12 and some gave their parents a clear narrative about the unfairness of the exclusion punishments, including the factor of racial discrimination. However, in cases 8-11, parents were **not alive to the possible exploitation or biases beneath the exclusion decisions and decided to trust the schools**. In case 1 and case 2, the mothers recognised some problems with the rushed exclusions, after long conversations with their daughters. However, as they reflected, they also **took the teachers' word without any questions** in the first few months.

For instance, in case 12, the pupil felt that she was disliked and treated differently by one teacher. This teacher had according to the pupil's testimony wrongly assumed that she had taking a pen from her classmate without her consent. Being scolded for something she did not do, the pupil used a swear word (not directed at the teacher but at the situation) and was excluded for 3 days. It is difficult to put all the blame on the pupil in this case, especially when the general feedback from other teachers regarding her behaviour has been positive. However, the parents respected the school's authority and did not query the decision.

The pupils in case 8 or 9 also shared, *'parents simply don't trust our words. We are young and they believe the teachers. Some teachers are racist or crazy but we cannot convince the parents about this'*.

The reasons leading to parents' disengagement are complex, including **cultural, psychological, and linguistic factors**.

It appeared that, **culturally, Somali parents are not comfortable challenging teachers or authority**. The mothers in case 1 and case 3, shared that **the teachers' authority is highly**

¹ When it comes to school exclusions, parents have the right to defend their children and challenge the decision. To begin with, parents can communicate their initial questions or concerns to the teachers when they receive the exclusion notifications. In the case of fixed-term exclusions (1-5 days), parents can submit their representations to the governors, which must be considered and responded to. In the case of fixed-term exclusions (6- 15 days), parents can request a meeting with the governors, which allows all parties to make their views known. If the exclusion is between 15 days to 1 term, governors must arrange a meeting among staff, parents and themselves. For permanent exclusions, meetings are necessary and parents can appeal against the decision. Source: https://www.egfl.org.uk/sites/default/files/Services_for_children/Exclusions/Information%20for%20parents%20and%20carers%20of%20pupils%20who%20have%20been%20suspended%20or%20excluded%20from%20school.pdf

respected in Somali culture. *'At home, we respect teachers a lot and we taught our kids to respect or obey the teachers'*. This cultural belief has been confirmed by local experts, including ESDEG staff, and two Somali youth workers from local youth centres. According to them, Somali culture generally grants teachers unqualified trust and respect, which might make it **difficult for some Somali parents in the UK to defend their kids against teachers who are not following policy, process, or law.**

Another contributing factor to the disengagement could be their **immigration background, which makes them feel powerless and alienated.** School exclusion punishments put immense pressure on the families. The immigration backgrounds make some families more vulnerable. Parents tended to be **intimidated by the school system,** which was perceived as having the power to deprive their children's education rights. For them, defending their kids is not just about speaking up. In their understanding, to challenge a school exclusion decision requires a knowledge and skills and access to a rich network of resources such as lawyers, campaigners, and politicians. They lamented that the Somali community is small, often perceived as problematic, and generally is powerless in the UK and no one will seriously listen to their complaints.

For instance, the mother in case 1, Jamilah (pseudonym) explained her feelings of powerlessness clearly *'If we are like the Asians or White people who know lawyers or people from Education Department, we will know where to go and how to do things. Our voices will be heard. I am not being a racist [saying that Asians and White people know how to game the system]. No, this is just how I feel. We are just chunks that ended up in the bins.'*

From our 12 cases, it is not clear how the factor of language affects parents' involvement in school exclusions. In case 8, a mother is raising her kids alone and she relies on her 12-year-old son as an interpreter when she talks to the teachers. In the other 11 cases, parents have different levels of proficiency in English and **some struggle to explain their points fluently.** School exclusions can involve complex controversies, which demand relatively high language skills. We believe that **the language factor does put Somali parents at a disadvantage,** which makes it harder for them to actively engage in the relevant matters.

Challenge 2: Lack of knowledge of the rules

Even when some parents know something might be unfair in the school exclusion punishments, they have **been silenced due to the lack of knowledge of the relevant rules.** As a result, they had to tolerate some unlawful or problematic school exclusions.

In case 4, Yasmiin (pseudonym), a single mother of two boys, had been coping with the part-time timetable for 7 months. **By law, this type of arrangement is not allowed but Yasmiin did not know this and had to follow the headteacher's instructions.** Her 6-year-old son became moodier after the COVID lockdowns. Teachers reported that they have been kicked by this boy. For this reason, from September 2021 till April 2022 (the time of the interview with ESDEG), Yasmiin had been called to collect her son from school at 12:30 or 1:30 every day, instead of the 3:15 when the school time ends. **The headteacher suggested Yasmiin keeping her son at home all day. If not, they can permanently exclude her son.** There is a likelihood that the boy might have SEND, like his brother. The family have been waiting for

the diagnosis result for more than 6 months. **While waiting for the SEND diagnosis, the school labelled the boy as ‘being disruptive’ and put him on a part-time timetable unlawfully. Meanwhile, the school attendance officer is pressuring Yasmiin about her son’s low attendance rate, though it was the school who asked Yasmiin to collect her son at midday.**

In addition, because of the school’s early collection demand, Yasmiin **had to stop working**. She is pressured from different angles. She has been traumatised by **anxiety and fear**. She kept asking us questions in the interview, *‘What should I do? Now, I have kept my son at home for two days, after they demanded me to do so. If I send him to school today and he kicks the teacher, he would be excluded tomorrow. What should I do? I am scared to come to school now. After the exclusion, where should I go? I am so scared of them.’*

Case 12 is equally revealing, in terms of how parents were **confused by the regulation jargon and had to give up their rights**. Cumar (pseudonym) was furious about the exclusion punishment received by her daughter but **‘felt silenced’ when she talked to the school**. Her 13-year-old daughter was excluded for 2 days. But a review of the background revealed troubling questions. The young girl claimed she was bullied by several pupils, who made her hide in a toilet cubicle and call her mom in desperation. When things got out of control, the girl fought back physically. As it was a physical fight started by Cumar’s daughter, the girl received the punishment of a 2-day exclusion while her bullies walked away. Cumar protested the decision and urged the school to acknowledge the fact her child had suffered bullying. However, **the school only told her that there is nothing they can do according to the school rules**. The child must be excluded owing to starting the physical altercation. Cumar felt like **‘being beaten by all the jargon used by the school, which she cannot understand’**. The school refused to acknowledge their failure in dealing with bullying issues and told Cumar that **they are following the correct procedures**. During the process, **no one told Cumar that she has the right to write to the school governors and request a response**.

Cumar had no way to challenge the school and said *‘My inputs had no impact. This is not a partnership...they just speak about jargon or procedures, not helpful at all...My daughter has been bullied for a while. The moment my daughter stood up for herself, the school excluded her. What message does that send to our family and our daughter? I kept the school aware of these facts. But it made no difference to the outcome.’*

Challenge 3: Alienation and Apathy

Strikingly, there are cases where parents **voluntarily gave up their rights in the exclusion processes, due to the loss of hope in the schools**. In some cases, parents and pupils knew that schools disliked them and were determined to exclude them. Feeling alienated at school, they decided to give up their legal rights. In some cases, parents developed grievance toward schools and thus stopped actively engaging with the relevant matters.

In case 6 and case 7, the pupils were excluded permanently from school. As introduced in previous sections, schools must arrange a hearing with the panel of governors, the headteacher and parents, to review the permanent exclusion decisions. In addition, the

parents have the right to appeal the decision. In both cases, **parents were only notified of the decision in a meeting and the pupils were excluded permanently on the same afternoon.**

The parents and the pupils aged 16 and 17 in two families decided to give up their rights, mainly because they did not see any hope of having a fair hearing. For both families, **schools were a hostile and alienating place.**

As said by Bashiir (pseudonym, case 6), *'what's the point? They [the school] just wanted to kick me out. My grades were good enough to apply for a medical degree. Who cared? They hated me and they just wanted me out.'*

Assad (pseudonym, case 7), *'The problem started when I was quite young. They disliked me. When they found weed on me, they were excited. They finally had a reason to kick me out. What's the point of negotiating about the exclusion?'*

Some parents, after **fruitless negotiations** with the schools, reached the conclusion that the schools will not be fair to Black Somali families. Some parents stressed **the racial reasons and felt hopeless about working with the school as partners.**

Jamilah (pseudonym, mother, case 1) asked her children to **pretend to be someone else, after the alienating experiences**, *'I told my kids, you're Black, you're Muslim, and you're Somali. We're not just Black or Muslim. When you walk out of your home, those three are already against you. So you need to understand the system is not for you. I shouldn't say that to my children. We have to teach it, you know. I tell them, control your voice, give your consent.'*

Her daughter's comment (case 1) resonates with Bashiir (pseudonym, case 6)'s point, *'if we're clever enough, they [the school] will put us out and say we behave badly. So yeah, we're not gonna go farther.'*

Challenge 4: Cross-cultural Conflicts

Data in the above sections have shown the relevance of race in the exclusion discussion. **Cross-cultural conflicts between schools and Black Somali families could further reproduce the sense of powerlessness and apathy. 9 participants (7 cases) in 12 cases think that they were penalised by the school based on their race, which made them feel that there is nothing they can do to improve the situation.** 4 cases did not mention race in the conversations and 1 case did not think race was a relevant factor.

Some families believe that schools have racial biases against Black Somali pupils. Aamiin (pseudonym, case 3) introduced, **'teachers already have a target or targets, because of the news about knife crimes and gangs in Black communities.** *But it does not mean that all the Africans are doing it. A lot of Asians are involved in drugs and gangs as well. Teachers have strong prejudices against us. Another girl (Asian) always provokes my daughter, and*

they fight. But my daughter is always considered as the predator and the other girl is seen as the victim by the teachers.'

In a focus group meeting, multiple Black Somali boys commented on a similar pattern at their schools, *' a few years ago, there were some group fights at schools, among Somali boys... After that, teachers paid special attention to Somali boys **since day 1** they joined the school'.*

Our data (12 case studies) does not allow us to draw a broader conclusion on the role of racism in the school exclusion process. However, stories do reveal **a strong theme of cultural insensitivity, and racial biases.**

Aamiin (pseudonym, case 3) pointed out that **Somali pupils' bodies and gestures could make them seen as 'non-ideal learners by non-black teachers'**. *'I just feel like because our children kind of look stronger and they are very hot-blooded people, they were seen as aggressive or rude. But that doesn't mean they are rude.'*

Jamilah (pseudonym, mother, case 1) thought **Somali culture also factored in**. *'Our kids also don't like unfairness. Fairness is important in our culture. In our families, we teach them mutual respect. If our kids see unfairness, they will not stop fighting for their rights. We teach them to respect the teachers. But if the teachers are not respecting them, they will fight back. Yes, it would be clever to control your anger. But they are kids.'*

Some schools in Ealing have a few Somali teachers or Somali school-parent liaison officers. However, parents showed suspicions about this arrangement. Jamilah, Hibaaq and Aamiin (pseudonyms) acknowledged the value of having some Somali staff at school who can better understand their children. However, as they see schools as white institutions, they generally do not trust school staff regardless of their cultural backgrounds.

Jamilah (pseudonym) was pushed back harshly by a Somali officer once. When she defended her kids, she was told by the officer *'don't come to me with the Somali women stories'*. Aamiin (pseudonym) further explained this comment. In Somali culture, a Somali mother is seen as being strong and protective. The male Somali liaison officer assumed that Jamilah was blindly defending her kids. Jamilah felt worse when she was refused and lectured by someone who shares the same cultural identity as her.

Challenge 5: Lack of factual evidence

The lack of factual evidence to justify the exclusion decisions might apply to families from all ethnic backgrounds. In this case, the factor has **reproduced parent-school grievances and made Somali parents believe that racist motivations lay behind the exclusions.**

In 8 cases out of the 12 cases, parents felt that they only knew 'a little bit' about the events leading to the exclusions. Most parents received a phone call from a teacher and were given a vague reason, such as being abusive or disruptive. No evidence was provided to back up the decisions.

Parents (cases 1,2,3,10,12) became angry when schools **cannot justify why their Black Somali kids were excluded while the White pupils were not, even though both sides were involved in fights**. When it comes to fights, their **Black Somali kids are usually seen as the perpetrators**. From the parents' perspective, the communication between schools and parents appeared to be abrupt. They do not think that the schools completed necessary investigations before they made the exclusion decisions. In their view, schools would omit facts or **take certain things out of context when justifying their decision**.

For instance, Aamiin (pseudonyms) shared, *'I'm about to go crazy. My son used a ruler when he was playing with his friend. He was excluded for two days. A girl brought a compass to school and pointed at my daughter. Then my daughter got excluded. They told me to come and get my daughter from school. Because my daughter was angry, and they were worried that my daughter might attack back.'*

In case 10, the 12-year-old girl was excluded 5 times across two terms, because of fights. It appeared that teachers tend to believe that she is usually the perpetrator. Even in a group water fight, she was immediately seen as the leader.

Besides formal exclusion, young people from these families have been informally excluded, such as isolation (internal exclusion). Similarly, the concise and vague communications between parents and schools further escalate the hostilities. Jamilah and Aamiin's children were isolated for being 'disrespectful in class'. After checking with their children, they believe that the children were simply asking questions or disagreeing with some points mentioned in class.

As the ESDEG research team has not spoken to schools about these exclusion cases, we are unable to conclude to what extent the schools failed to thoroughly investigate incidents resulting in exclusion or complaints by parents. However, what is clear, is that schools did not manage to convince parents about the exclusion reasons. The short and unclear conversations have made parents and young people become more resentful. Moreover, as shown in our cases, parents and young people stressed this fact: when Somali pupils got into fights with White pupils or pupils who share the same cultural backgrounds as the teachers, only Somali pupils got punished. This observation **made the families believe that their kids were punished because of their skin colour**. More evidence-based research is needed to draw out the tensions discussed including through contrasting the perspectives of teachers, parents, and pupils.

Challenge 6: Lack of a supporting network

Compared to White British families, Black Somali families generally lack a supporting network, which can analyse the rules and make strategies. As mentioned in Challenge 1 (Disengagement), the immigration background tends to make them feel powerless and alienated. This further demotivated them to negotiate with or to push back on decisions made by schools.

Another factor that made the school exclusion **an isolated** experience is **stigma**. In **9 cases out of 12, parents never sought help** from the community. **Parents consciously or unconsciously blame themselves when their kids were excluded**. As Aamiin (pseudonyms, case 3) said, *'it's a taboo. They don't want to talk about it. No, they don't want to look like they are a failure as a parent.'*

Challenge 7: Timelines and loopholes

Besides the barriers of resources, legal knowledge, languages and cultural biases, **some exclusion procedures also made it difficult for families to get involved in the process**.

For instance, in case 4, as introduced earlier, there seem to be no clear rules to protect this boy who is waiting for the SEND diagnosis results. During the waiting time (in his case, 6 months. In some cases, it can be 18 months), schools labelled him as disruptive and kept threatening the family to exclude him permanently.

The timeline of events, namely exclusion occurring first and then parents receiving communication of rights to challenge or appeal, made it difficult for some parents to intervene. In 6 cases, parents were called by the teachers prior to the exclusions, but they received no information about their rights including how to challenge the decision. Their **children stayed at home** for the next 1-3 days, **after which parents received the formal letters, informing them of their rights**. Considering the timeline and the high communication cost with teachers, some parents decided not to contact the school.

4. Recommendations

As the 12 cases show, the power imbalance between schools and Black Somali families appeared to be obvious. In this context, parents and schools are **not partners**. Instead, some parents feel **intimidated, bullied, or even humiliated by schools**. These power dynamics created barriers for parents to get involved in the school exclusions, which has far-reaching impact on pupils.

Based on our research, we propose several recommendations that would help Black Heritage children, not just Somalis.

Short-term and Medium-term

- 1. Reduce stigma on school exclusion and encourage parents to seek community help.**

Feeling stigmatised and being isolated will make Somali and other Black-heritage families more vulnerable. Opening a safe space to discuss the issue can be a first productive step. Community groups may do so via online or offline forums. Community

organisations in collaboration with other stakeholders have a crucial role in facilitating such forums.

2. Empower parents with legal and policy knowledge around the school exclusion issues.

Different from White British families, many Somali and immigrant-heritage parents completed their education outside the UK and thus do not have sufficient knowledge of the UK education system. Though schools are legally obliged to inform parents about their rights, evidence indicates that parents are not well-informed and cannot exercise their legal rights properly. In some cases, they cannot identify the facts that schools have acted unlawfully. Upskilling and improving the knowledge and confidence of Black-heritage families to challenge and negotiate with schools needs to occur. Knowledge sharing can be effectively done through the native language of families and through culturally sensitive training to help parents understand the school rules, exclusion process, and law.

3. Build the inner strengths to speak up

Empowering parents with legal and policy knowledge can help parents to speak up and defend their children. Meanwhile, emotional support is also necessary. As shown in the above discussions, some parents chose not to challenge the exclusion partially due to cultural and psychological reasons, such as lack of confidence, apathy, or the cultural convention (e.g. teacher's authority). Training that helps them to develop negotiation skills and to set up support networks are needed. Black-heritage parents should also be supported to become parent governors, which may boost the community's confidence in building an equal partnership with schools.

4. Better investigation policy and documentation

In the face of school investigation results, some parents feel unconvinced or confused. Parents do not tend to believe the teacher's short explanations. On the other hand, they do not believe their child's account unequivocally. To bridge the gap, schools need to have in place a robust investigation process and must document the reasons for exclusion and be able to explain and provide evidence to parents which will build trusting and confident relationships. We also recommend reconciliation policies, which enable a child or parent to reset their relationship with the teacher or school when things do go wrong.

5. Offer language and communication support

In some cases, it appears necessary to have interpretation support offered by community groups. Some immigrant-heritage parents struggle to communicate effectively in English. Though schools offer interpretation services, interpreters are not always available, especially for relatively short exclusion punishment.

Long-term

6. Initiate cross-cultural conversations among schools and communities to reduce racial biases

Case studies and statistics show that racial stereotypes against Somali and other Black-heritage pupils may explain the high exclusion rates of this group. These stereotypes have profound negative impacts on Somali pupils' self-esteem, mental health, and academic performance. It is urgently necessary to initiate or expand the conversations among schools and families to reduce racial biases. Workshops, cultural festivals, or social events are excellent forums to foster trusting and positive relationships between different ethnic groups.

7. Initiate and participate in policy campaigns to push for a fairer school exclusion system

As revealed in this report and existing studies, the school exclusion system in the UK is not easy to navigate and suffers from maladies which contribute to inequity in the provision of education to some children from minority ethnic groups. All children should experience a professional service, untarnished by discrimination, bias, abuse of power or prejudice. It is important for the Somali and other Black-heritage communities to participate in campaigns that mitigate the factors which are leading to disproportionate exclusion of children from particular (ethnic) groups and to keep children in school.

Research

8. Further research should discuss the excluded pupils with SEND

Constrained by the sample size and resource, this report did not include the experiences of excluded pupils who identify as SEND. This signifier is often avoided by Black Somali families, which makes it challenging to gauge the extent which this factor is contributing to school exclusion figures affecting this community. Future research ought to include this sensitive issue.

9. Further research should include the group of carers

One feature of the Somali community in the UK is that many Somali women work as carers, who usually have busy work schedules and high mental stresses. This may make it harder for these Somali parents to intervene when exclusion is on the cards or has occurred. This report did not manage to include carers' families, for the reasons outlined earlier. As they are an important feature of the community, future research should also consider this area.

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