

# **The Connection between Personal Traumas and Educational Exclusion in Young People's Lives**

## **Abstract**

The correlation between young people with poor outcomes and educational exclusion is well documented, but the relationship between the two is taken for granted and remains unexplored. A qualitative longitudinal research project, employing innovative biographic and visual methods, explored this relationship. This article argues that the timing of exclusion is directly related to periods of increased or intense trauma with the transference of emotionality from one domain (personal) to another (educational). This methodological approach enables a distinctive and powerful way of understanding young people's experiences of exclusion and social change. Through the voices of the young people themselves, the article aims to understand the interconnectedness between these traumas and the events that seemed to precipitate their educational exclusion. An original contribution is made both methodologically and empirically, by: exploring the unique value of a biographical longitudinal approach focusing on critical moments in young people's lives to understanding their experiences of exclusion; the relationship between multiple traumas in young people's lives; and how these traumas precipitate exclusion.

## **Introduction**

The NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training) debate continues to dominate the youth policy agenda across Europe. However, for many young people who swell the statistics, their experience of being NEET begins before the age of 16 through educational exclusion.<sup>1</sup> Despite decreasing levels of educational exclusion over the last decade, NEET rates post-16 remain persistently high in the UK. Whilst the numbers are recorded annually, research rarely explores the complex circumstances of these young people's lives and the experiences and events that preceded, and even precipitated, their exclusion. There is clearly a correlation between young people with poor outcomes and educational exclusion but the relationship between the two is often taken for granted and remains under-explored. A qualitative longitudinal research (QLR) project in England and Wales, employing innovative biographic and visual methods, explored this relationship. This methodological approach enables a distinctive and powerful way of understanding young people's experiences of exclusion and social change. It is this distinct perspective, both methodologically and through giving primacy to the lived experiences of young people, that contributes a new perspective to debates around young people and exclusion. The article argues that the timing of exclusion is directly related to periods of increased or intense trauma, often within the personal domain (at home). Young people's 'problematic behaviour' in school is an acting-out of the emotions they experience as a result of trauma in their lives with the transference of emotionality from one domain (personal) to another (educational). Through the voices of the young people themselves, the article aims to understand the interconnectedness between these traumas and the events that seemed to precipitate their educational exclusion. Understanding this relationship is crucial, for both policy makers to develop appropriate responses and for practitioners to develop timely interventions. The article makes an original contribution both methodologically and empirically, by: exploring the unique value of a biographical longitudinal approach focusing on critical moments in young people's lives to understanding their experiences of exclusion; the relationship between multiple traumas in young people's lives; and how these traumas precipitate exclusion.

## **Background Literature and Context**

Much social policy directed at young people has 'focused on the symptoms rather than the causes of the difficulties they face', further impacting on 'fractured youth transitions' caused by rapid social and economic change (Coles, 1998: 247). This remains the case in the current climate of austerity, international financial crisis and record levels of youth unemployment across Europe. The highly uncertain context of contemporary society is having a profound effect on young people's biographies (Leccardi, 2005). Within this context, the issue of educational exclusion is crucial, with this label often representing those young people already condemned to joining the swelling masses of the un- and under-employed. The research is contextualised within UK youth studies literature that focuses on young people's experiences of educational and social exclusion; and wider research on young people's experiences of various traumas, which is explored within the discussion section.

Excluded young people are embedded within a social environment that individualises them and deems them 'at risk', subjecting them to immense pressure, including from policy makers and practitioners. A strategy of 'progressive competitiveness', valuing young people for their economic potential, is complimented by notions of individualisation within a risk society. MacDonald and Marsh (2005) have argued that whilst a multitude of hardships have been identified as the 'problem' of social exclusion, the single 'solution' to social inclusion as seen by the government is the securing of paid work. However, such a narrow conceptualisation of 'inclusion' is not designed for more challenging children and young people. Problematically, the inclusion and equal opportunities agenda neglects to recognise that young people start from unequal bases and therefore lets down the very young people who need it most. Policy rhetoric focuses on young people's 'inclusion' in terms of mainstream society and education/employment and considers those who do not conform to be socially excluded. However, research conducted for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF) (Johnston et al., 2000) found that whilst young people may live in an area that possesses all of the 'official, objective indicators of social exclusion, the subjective experiences of many young people growing up in the place...are of 'social inclusion'" (Johnston et al., 2000). Young people may feel socially included within their own community, locked into social networks, which are supportive of the few opportunities they have; despite the 'outside world' viewing their community as socially excluded from wider society.

Defining young people as excluded brings a myriad of problems, not least due to the contentious nature of the definitions themselves. Use of such terms can further perpetuate the stigma attached to marginalised groups and constrain ways of thinking about the issues that they face. For example, the acronymic method (NEET) of identifying young people is problematic and unhelpful, as it defines young people by what they are not, and subsumes under a negatively-perceived label a heterogeneous mix of young people whose varied situations and difficulties are not conceptualised (Yates and Payne, 2006). This is perpetuated by public concern about young people at risk of not completing or dropping out of compulsory education, which focuses too narrowly on personal attributes (Aaltonen, 2012: 220). Within the prevalent exclusion discourse, the young people involved in the research who were educationally excluded are thus also likely to be the young people most at risk of social exclusion now and in the future. How young people interpret interventions alongside wider systems of social and cultural control and support is integral to our understanding of contemporary experiences of excluded young people. Indeed, the literature highlights the complexity and fluidity of the issues facing excluded young people, which are evidently not discretely related to their excluded status, but can continue to impact upon their future inclusion or exclusion.

Educational exclusion remains one of the biggest indicators in identifying whether young people will continue to experience social exclusion in adulthood. Not only does non-completion of education result in limited life chances and reduced social mobility, such young people are often portrayed as

deviant, lacking maturity and motivation and having flawed morals (McGrath, 2009: 82). Whilst the numbers of permanent and fixed-term exclusions in England and Wales have fallen over the last decade, this remains a persistent social problem, which usually leads to young people becoming NEET post-16.<sup>ii</sup> Statistics for both countries consistently reveal that pupils who are eligible for free school meals have higher rates of exclusions, as do schools located in areas of deprivation. Young people experience a whole range of social, institutional and psychological issues that impact on their engagement with education. They are also significantly more likely to be excluded if they have a Special Educational Need or are from an ethnic minority background (DfE, 2013; WAG, 2013). Persistent disruptive behaviour is consistently the most common reason for both fixed-term and permanent exclusion, followed by assault and verbal abuse (DfE, 2013; WAG, 2013).

Coles et al. (2010) found that young people who smoke and drink alcohol from an early age are more likely to truant, be excluded from school and be NEET between the ages of 16-18. However, whether this is a cause or a consequence of exclusion is unclear. Research has also highlighted the association between exclusions and high levels of family stress, family disruption, poverty and unemployment (Berridge, et al., 2001). Sexual abuse, changing homes, parental violence, bereavement and homelessness were all common experiences for young people permanently excluded from school. Feelings of being 'failed' by teachers or schools made transition to post-16 learning very difficult for NEET young people (Barnardo's, 2007). Poor relationships with teachers often stem from being humiliated in front of peers, racism, sexism, stereotyping and negative labelling, all of which can have enduring detrimental effects on the young people subjected to them (Barnardo's, 2007).

Clearly, young people who face educational exclusion experience a whole range of interconnected traumas and familial issues which impact upon their educational engagement and future lives. However, the complexity of this relationship and the potential changing consequences of this remain unexplored. Research demonstrates that families who experience multiple problems are more likely to experience social exclusion in adulthood, but it is the multiples of these which predict poor outcomes (Spratt, 2009). Levitas et al. (2007) recommend that in-depth qualitative work be undertaken with groups at risk of social exclusion to explore these multiples and experiences of them. This research is positioned within a distinct perspective developed through the methodological approach, which can provide us with new knowledge that comes from giving primacy to the lived experiences and voices of young people themselves and foregrounding the complexity of the relationship between interconnected traumas, timing and the transference of emotionality from one domain to another.

## **Methodology**

A QLR project was undertaken over a period of 18 months with young people at two voluntary sector alternative education projects in England and Wales. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with ten young people aged 14-16 at each site (20 in total), at the beginning and end of the project. Ongoing fieldwork with the wider cohort at the projects (approximately 50 young people at each) and visual biographic methods, in the form of memory books, were also employed. The interviews explored young people's lives holistically and across different domains. Adopting this *Inventing Adulthood* (Henderson et al., 2007) domains framework, life-grids were developed to examine the synchronicity of events occurring across two domains – the personal and educational – and longitudinally through their lives. Analysis of the data enabled exploration of an individual's role in creating change and the 'dynamic interplay of timing, resources, and resourcefulness' (Thomson, 2007: 578).

In addition, case histories allowed the investigation of key issues that significantly impacted upon young people, which often acted as critical moments in their lives. Henderson et al. (2007) attempted to identify critical moments in the construction of young people's biographies and what their role was in the processes of social inclusion and exclusion. Some critical moments are 'dramatic, traumatic and heavy with potential for disruption of the life course' (Shildrick and MacDonald, 2008: 52). They can be highly consequential with some more so than others. However, it is the configuration and timing of critical moments that become significant and the extent to which young people are able to respond with resources and resourcefulness (Henderson et al., 2007: 21). Considering critical moments in relation to educational exclusion and their relationship between the different domains, develops our understanding of young people's experiences. Combining the use of biographical methods longitudinally with a focus on critical moments in young people's lives, this distinct perspective provides new knowledge on the complex relationship between the multiple traumas that young people face; how these precipitate exclusion and their experiences of exclusion.

### Findings and Discussion: Traumas in the Personal Domain

The young people in the research had all experienced multiple traumas, often occurring simultaneously. The completion of life-grids for each young person highlighted the overwhelming sense of chaos and destruction that has happened and continues to go on in their lives. Many of the traumas have had impacts in different domains and at different times. For example, in several cases the issue of parental separation is also linked to issues of parental bereavement, parental alcohol or substance misuse, or domestic violence. The life-grids and case histories showed that there was consistently a correlation between problems happening at home and subsequent school exclusions shortly after (see Table 1). However, more often than not, young people don't actually immediately recognise this connection between the two.

**Table 1: Example of Life-Grid from Case History of Brandon (male participant)**  
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Age/ Domain	0-2	3-5	6	7-8	9-10	11-12	13	14
<b>Educational</b>				FT exclusion		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Struggled from start</li> <li>• Regular truanting</li> <li>• Regular fixed term exclusions (arguing with teachers)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Longer fixed term exclusions (aggression towards teachers)</li> <li>• Increasingly volatile/aggressive behaviour</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Diagnosed with dyslexia</li> <li>• Truants whilst mother is in hospital</li> <li>• Throws chair at a teacher leading to permanent exclusion</li> <li>• Starts at project</li> </ul>
<b>Personal</b>	Lives with mum	New step-dad,	Parents split-up	Mum has new violent	• Mum splits up has	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Grandmother passes away</li> <li>• Mum splits</li> </ul>	Mum has new violent partner	• Mum in hospital (domestic

	and older step-sister	older brothers born		partner (alcohol abuse)	daughter by new partner • Brandon & older sister move in with grandmother	up with partner		violence by step-dad) • Step-dad having an affair with neighbour opposite
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The table demonstrates the correlation between and timing of a multitude of traumas occurring in Brandon’s personal domain, including parental separation, domestic violence and bereavement; and periods of exclusion from school within his educational domain.

Drawing on the biographic data from some of the case histories, the article will now discuss the key findings in relation to the traumas in young people's personal domains. It will demonstrate how the emotions created as a result of those traumas played out negatively within their educational domain, ultimately resulting in their exclusion from school. The complexity of this emotional dimension and other resulting impacts will also be discussed. All of the young people experienced a combination of multiple traumas, often occurring simultaneously and within a wider chaotic environment and family context. However, traumas and critical moments usually occurred around the same time as their difficulties in school and resultant exclusion. This article explores some of the key interconnected issues that young people experienced, including parental separation, parental alcohol and substance misuse, domestic violence and bereavement. Key literature and research within each area provides a framework for analysis of the young people’s accounts. Whilst these are dealt with individually, the emphasis remains on the complex and interconnected relationship of these traumas.

The topic of families with 'multiple problems' has been much debated in recent years. However, ‘remarkably little is known about the lived experiences of families facing severe and enduring difficulties’ and therefore ‘competing versions of the truth are all highly amenable to caricature and thus to increasingly amplified ideological skew’ (Morris et al., 2013: 457). Therefore, research such as this, which explores such families' experiences of the complex problems they face, is important not just for informing the development of policy and appropriate interventions, but also in 'countering popular and political discourses about so-called ‘troubled families’' (Bond-Taylor, 2015: 372).

### ***Separation and Reconstituted Families***

Perhaps the most striking similarity across all of the cases was the highly disrupted family patterns and relationships in which the young people lived. Literature on divorce and separation suggests that this has a considerable impact on the wellbeing of children and young people and can result in long-term poor outcomes (Bream and Buchanan, 2003). Behavioural problems and performing less well in school are just two of the resultant outcomes usually experienced (Weaver et al., 2015). Whilst severe distress is usually short-term at the time of separation, it is often increased again when adjusting to new reconstituted family dynamics. Living in a more complex stepfamily, for example with various combinations of step-siblings, is associated with more adjustment difficulties than in a stepfamily where all the children are related to the mother (Dunn, 2002). The 'evidence indicates unequivocally that those children whose parents separate are at significantly greater risk than those whose parents remain together, for a wide range of adverse outcomes in social, psychological, and

physical development' (Pryor and Rodgers, 2001:73). In addition, repeated changes in family structure are even more likely to lead to negative outcomes and inevitably involve greater related changes, such as moving house and school (Wade and Smart, 2002).

Changing family relationships, in particular gaining 'new' parents and often 'new' half- or step-siblings can become a major series of life events for young people; not least because it involves a major re-arrangement of living arrangements, as well as new relationships with potential friends (and adversaries) as well as authority figures. However, in the research sites studied, every young person came from a separated and multiply reconstituted family. These turbulent family circumstances ranged from experiencing a minimum of the separation of their biological parents to having experienced as many as five different partners by either parent, resulting in over 14 siblings of one form or another. In policy terms, under the New Labour government (1997-2010) a distinct shift to supporting and sustaining the family took place, with recognition of the changing shape of families. However, the policy rhetoric that framed this research and persists today, continues to portray the traditional nuclear family as the societal norm. Under Prime Minister David Cameron's leadership, the coalition reaffirmed governmental commitment to marriage and the traditional family unit, such as through tax breaks for married couples and the altered child benefit.

This research suggests that there is a marked contrast between policy rhetoric and the real lived experiences of some young people. In addition, it is difficult to uncover what the actual impact of separated families has on young people, as if they consider it to be the norm, they may be less likely to see its importance in creating a background of disturbance for other domains in their lives, such as their education. In this study, the emotional response of young people to difficult and changing family relationships was to feel hurt or confused. However, this emotionality, caused by family issues, often spilt over and became an emotional response to situations unrelated to their family issues, such as in school. For all of these young people, their behaviour deteriorated in school, resulting in exclusions, each time their parents' latest relationship came to an end, as the emotional mayhem they experienced spilled over into the classroom.

For example, Kanisha clearly recognised the impact family change had on her and her schooling, even though the latter seems 'added in' as an afterthought rather than foregrounded. She described how her failed relationships with her parents had affected her and impacted upon her education. The emotional trauma that she experienced because of her parents' changing relationships played out in school, but she was unable to share this with them.

'You can see children these days and they have, like, a really strong connection and bond with their parents, especially with their mum. But that's not me, cos I feel like my parents don't understand me at all and they never tried. They were too busy screwing around and only cared about their relationships...They might take the time now to try and get to know me, but for me, now, it's too late. I needed them when I was young, but they didn't want to know me back then. Every time they thought their world had fallen apart cos they'd been dumped, they never thought about what happened to my world. Or what I thought of like her new fella, or his kids that I didn't know but had to share my room with. They didn't care what was happening to me back then, like in school when it all went wrong or anything else. So I don't need them now cos I'm used to managing on my own. I just learnt not to let it affect me, cos what's the point of getting upset if no-one cares?'

Matty has two younger half-brothers who have the same father as him and three younger half-sisters through his mother, all of whom have different fathers. He has nothing to do with his father and only found out in year 9 who he was and that he had two half-brothers. Following various, short-term,

exclusions since the age of 7, all of which correlated with his mothers changing relationships, he faced permanent exclusion at the end of year 9. The final series of violent altercations with a teacher led to his referral to an alternative curriculum project. His life-grid demonstrates that this coincided with a period of several weeks during which he discovered who his father was. A local man from the estate with a reputation for drug-dealing, Matty rebutted his father's attempts to suddenly get to know him. However, his anger and frustration at his father and situation was taken out on a teacher in school.

'I was fucking fuming...sorry...but he's a nob. Mum asked if I wanted to know who he was and I said no, but he still turned up at a match [football] and just said to me after the game "I'm yer dad". I mean, what a fucking nob. Then I had to go into school on Monday and have food tech and I knew Mrs Williams would get on at me, cos she always does. But I just saw red and threw me chair at her. I had him [father] pestering me all week down Rhos [estate], at footie practice, and that stupid bitch getting on at me in lessons about fucking quiches or something, like I gave a shit. So I just lost it.'

For both Kanasha and Matty, their changing family dynamics and structures impacted on how they felt and behaved in school. However, they were also facing other concurrent traumas, including parental alcohol misuse, domestic violence and in Matty's case, a range of complex emotions related to discovering his father's identity and trying to make sense of this. As their cases illustrate, the traumas that young people face are often multiple and interconnected and therefore the consequences of these cannot be addressed through a singular or linear solution. The cumulative effect of these difficulties can be catastrophic and far-reaching, with life-long consequences far beyond the educational domain.

### ***Parental Alcohol and Substance Misuse***

A key study for the JRF (Bancroft et al., 2004) found that parental substance misuse was often connected to other sources of family stress, including re-partnering. As with the issue of reconstituted families above, young people in the JRF study took for granted this aspect of their lives and understated the risk and disruption it caused them. They had to 'grapple with the complex emotions of anger, pity and love, in the knowledge that their parent, although felt to care about them, was not able to care for them' (Bancroft et al., 2004: 36). There are key gaps in the literature, especially on children's views, impact and resilience factors, as this remains a difficult topic to research (Templeton et al., 2006). Young people are an even less frequently studied group, virtually absent from policy debates on the issue and with fewer services for them. Unsurprisingly, the little research available demonstrates how school is particularly challenging for these young people, who concurrently have poor attendance, struggle to concentrate, are unable to complete homework, underachieve, find it difficult to maintain friendships and experience bullying (Tunnard, 2002). Behavioural disturbance and problems are also common – both at home and at school, along with other emotional difficulties (Templeton et al., 2006).

The research found this to be an issue seriously affecting many of the young people. Kanasha discussed how she felt about her mother's alcoholism and how she dealt with this, including in school. Here she demonstrates two elements of the transference of emotionality between domains – directly releasing the anger she felt towards her mother on a teacher and secondly, using this as a coping mechanism, as she was unable to do so at home.

'Researcher: How do you think your home life affected you? Did it affect you in school?'

Kanasha: Yeah definitely. Cos like I wasn't getting any attention at home, so I got attention by being bad really, cos I wasn't that good in lessons and stuff... So it did play a part in like school. My parents did make me angry, cos like nobody else had to put up with the drinking – none of my other mates, their parents were just like normal. So it did used to play a big part for me in school. Cos I used to carry that anger around with me and didn't know how to like channel it out in a way where like... So I released it out on other people really. So like if the teacher said something wrong to me, you know, or if a student said something to me then I would just flip out at them. The rest of the time I was just arguing with teachers and putting my fist through a wall, cos I didn't know how to deal with what was happening at home or how to tell anyone.'

The JRF found that parental substance misuse was at the centre of a web of problems that often included violence and neglect. Children counselled by ChildLine's free 24-hour telephone service (2005) report drug taking as associated with physical abuse and neglect. Experiencing such violence can lead in turn to the young people themselves becoming violent. Templeton et al. (2006) reported that girls tended to internalise the negative effects, leading to withdrawal and mental ill health and used more passive coping strategies. In comparison, the impact on boys tended to manifest itself through externalised behaviours, including increased aggression. Consequently, young men often find it more difficult to 'leave home behind' when at school (Bancroft et al., 2004).

During the fieldwork John talked about his experiences of his mother's drinking and why he felt his response to the violence surrounding it was violence itself. Here he projects the emotions he experiences at home onto his relationship with teachers in school.

'She's always drunk. She's always drunk really and I used to get beaten up a lot when I was little, mostly when she'd had a drink. She drinks beer mostly, but then it moved onto spirits, from the time he [step-dad] was there, for about 5-6 years. They just drunk pretty much all the time, every night and I got slapped around a lot. I didn't get much sleep either so in school I'd be dead tired. If the teachers got on at me I just used to kick off. Mum kicked off at me all the time when she was drunk so it felt normal to kick off in school. What was I supposed to do?'

Again, in John's case, his experience is more complex than just the impact of his mother's alcoholism. This issue is intertwined with changing family structures, domestic violence and physical abuse, all of which combine to play a part in John's behaviour in school.

Young people contacting ChildLine (2005) talked about being worried, frightened and confused by their parents' alcohol and drug misuse, often making it difficult to concentrate in school. At the more extreme end, the JRF (2004) found emotional blackmail to be a particularly difficult experience for young people to deal with, especially as this was often in the form of suicide threats. Whilst parental alcohol or substance misuse can cause huge concern for young people, many said that as they became more used to it, they became resigned to it and therefore less concerned. This could be seen as a way of young people taking control of their emotions and developing coping strategies. For example, Cara said that, now she was an adult herself, she had had enough of her father's drunken behaviour.

'He's always been an alcoholic. Well I think always. But definitely since me mum died and he's tried to commit suicide loads of times...it used to scare me and it's all I could think of, like I couldn't concentrate in class for worrying or anything. But now I've got bored of it to be honest. He does it so much and there's always a different woman there getting hysterical or falling out so I just decided I couldn't be bothered with it anymore.'

Several of the young people have parents who are drug addicts (some are also dealers) and young people appear to feel the effects of parental alcohol and substance abuse in similar ways. However, the structural consequences of having a substance misusing parent are often severe. For example, each young person in the research with a substance misusing parent has had to move house on at least one occasion as a result of eviction and experienced some form of involvement from Children's Services departments. Templeton et al. (2006) also found that, unsurprisingly, drug addiction brings the additional problems of homelessness and neglect into children's lives. This is often also related to an increased likelihood of being referred to social services due to child protection concerns and more difficult transitions into adolescence and even adulthood. An analysis of 161 serious case reviews between 2003 and 2005, found that of the 47 reviews that had more detailed information, 57% of the families included substance misuse (Brandon et al., 2008). However, any involvement with social work is often seen by children and young people as being shameful and possibly making things worse (Bancroft et al., 2004). As a result, they are reluctant to speak outside of the family about the problems, often out of loyalty and fear (of others reactions, stigma, nothing being done and being taken away from their families).

Shauna and Jamie are siblings with a substance misusing father and mother with serious mental health problems. Here we see Shauna's attempt to hide her circumstances from both peers and teachers – the resulting anxiety and frustration permeates all domains. Speaking of her father's addiction, Shauna said:

'I don't like to think about him. Is it bad that I don't even care if he's dead? There used to be some right dodgy bastards hanging round, like if I waggged off and came home. They used to nick our stuff as well and stuff always went lost cos dad used it for drugs or the bailiffs took it. They [bailiffs] always took the TV. It got me in shit in school as well. I mean what are you meant to say, "uh, sorry Miss I haven't done my homework cos me dad nicked me bag and we had no lecy [electricity] so I couldn't see anything anyway?"'

'There were always "the social" (social services) coming to check up on us as well. What was the point though cos they [social workers] didn't stop dad's drugs or mum's craziness. I fucking hated them, interfering and always getting us evicted. We had meetings at *Transform* [alternative education project] cos mum kicked off if they come to the house. That was better though cos I was worried if they come to the house everybody'd see and spread it round school.'

Despite foregrounding the issue of parental alcohol and substance misuse, the cases discussed here demonstrate the chaos and complexity these young people experience having to concomitantly cope with domestic violence, poverty, abuse, changing family structures, moving home and parental mental health issues, all whilst continuing to engage with education. Clearly single solutions to tackle parental alcohol or substance misuse are inappropriate, when such an interconnected range of problems need addressing. It is only by giving primacy to the voices of young people and exploring their experiences biographically in this more holistic methodological manner that we can begin to understand the complexity and chronicity of the difficulties they face.

### ***Domestic Violence***

As identified above, a family life framed by domestic violence often further compounds the chaos of some young people's lives. As with most of the traumas explored here, how children negotiate and make sense of living with domestic violence is still under-researched (Swanston et al., 2014).

However, there has been growing recent recognition of the impact of domestic violence on children. Violence at home is often connected to a number of other risk factors experienced by young people, which Rossman (2000) terms 'adversity package', including poverty, child abuse, parental substance abuse, unemployment, homelessness and involvement in crime.

Children and young people who witness domestic violence are significantly more likely to be physically aggressive at school. They are also more likely to react to, or tune out from, aggressive cues in their interactions with other young people, thus increasing their risk of bullying or being bullied (Cunningham and Baker, 2004). Lundy and Grossman (2005) also found that 20% of their sample of 4,636 struggled to adhere to school rules and acting out, peer difficulties, sadness and depression of this group frequently brought them to the attention of teachers. For example, Devon's mother had been in a violent relationship for many years and as a result they had to flee to new places. He regularly truanted or missed large periods of schooling during their hurried and sporadic moves. This is common for young people experiencing domestic violence, with numerous changes of address making it particularly difficult to attend school regularly and maintain concentration whilst there (McGee, 2000). Devon discussed how the moves affected him:

'In the end, I didn't care anymore, cos I knew it would probably happen again. I just got used to it. I wasn't bothered because I was in all the bottom sets so nobody cared anyway. Mum was too preoccupied with all her shit so she never give me too much 'aggro' over it.'

Moving around a lot and living with different relatives has been a key feature of his childhood.

'The thing I hated most was always having to leave stuff behind. There was never enough time to pack everything, but I've just got used to it now. Mum always expected me to leave my stuff to help her pack up all me little sister's stuff, cos they were always crying and scared...I've had enough of it now. So mum's always chucking me out when I mouth at her about him [violent step-dad] and having to move.'

Violence between parents can spill over into the parent-child relationship. Young people are more likely to become increasingly active in trying to prevent or intervene in the abuse (Hester et al., 2000). Matty disclosed during the fieldwork that he became aware, when he was in year 8, that his step-dad beat his mum up, usually after drunken nights out. His response was to challenge the perpetrator and try to come between him and his mother, in order to protect her. This is a common response by young people, who are likely to feel angry towards the perpetrator and decide to intervene (Hester et al., 2000). However, as with other traumas, there is evidence that girls and boys respond differently to exposure to violence. Again, boys often externalise difficulties through aggression and hostility and girls seem to internalise problems, such as through depression and somatic complaints (McIntosh, 2003). McIntosh (2003) suggests that boys externalise due to experiencing a high level of threat from exposure to violence, where as girls' internalisation is related to feeling self-blame.

The young people in the study who experienced domestic violence also struggled to concentrate in class, often distracted by worry or lack of sleep and the inability to complete their homework in such tumultuous home surroundings became a source of further conflict with teachers. For example, Matty spoke of his worry for his mother and sisters' safety and we can also see this manifesting in externalised behaviour. During these violent interludes at home, his behaviour deteriorated in school and we see a transference of emotionality from the personal to the education domain, as he released his anger and aggression on teachers. Although he was experiencing a range of interconnected and

compounding difficulties, it was his concerns about the domestic violence that ultimately impacted as a critical moment in school, leading to his expulsion:

‘It was hard, cos I had all this going on at home and I wasn’t scared of him but I was scared of what he might do to me mum or me little sisters. So I was dead distracted in school. It was worst in lessons I didn’t like, cos I wouldn’t be listening and then like Mr Jones would have a go at me and I’d lose it cos I was so wound up and angry and worrying about what was happening at home.’

### ***Family Bereavement***

Family bereavement is another issue that impacts upon young people’s educational domains. Given the relatively small cohort participating in the research, a significant number had experienced close family bereavement. However, this is perhaps less surprising given that they all lived in areas of high deprivation. Research shows that young people living in deprived areas are more likely to experience bereavement and these are most likely to be serious and multiple (Ribbens McCarthy, 2006). Furthermore, bereavement by the age of 16 has more damaging implications for disadvantaged young people (Parsons, 2011). Research into young people’s experiences of bereavement is rare and those who experience multiple bereavements, or bereavements alongside other difficulties, are more at risk of experiencing negative outcomes, especially in education (Ribbens McCarthy and Jessop, 2005). Results from the British Cohort Study (1970) showed that young people from bereaved and disrupted families achieved lower educational attainment and more behavioural difficulties leading to truancy and suspension from school (Parsons, 2011). There is also a relationship between bereavement and increased school absence and a lack of perceived support from parents, peers and teachers has also been associated with further post-traumatic stress.

Several young people in the study were also involved in caring for terminally ill relations, most often grandparents suffering from cancer. The life-grids of the young people highlighted that the death of a close family member often acted as a critical moment, correlating with periods of truanting, unacceptable behaviour in school and fixed-term exclusions. Cara has had perhaps the most traumatic experiences of loss at several points in her life and this topic featured prominently in her biography. Her mother died of cancer when she was seven years old. The family then moved to live with her Aunt, who died three years later, also of cancer. This resulted in another move and Cara was sent to live with her grandmother just before commencing secondary school. However, her grandmother then died of a heart attack when Cara was in year 9. Cara discussed at length how these bereavements had affected her in school and how she had coped with it. Here the young person has received some acknowledgment from school but further support is needed for bereaved young people.

‘I remember my teachers coming to the funerals, but it was a different one each time cos we moved around. Some of them [teachers] tried to be nice to me in school but I didn’t really want to talk about it. Everybody around me keeps dying, what do they expect me to say? I skipped school a lot, but nobody seemed to mind and it was just like ‘well her mum or whatever’s just died’ so I got away with it. I never really got over my mum dying. I’ve got used to it now – you have to accept it and get on with it. But back then I couldn’t concentrate in school. I hated school and none of it really mattered to me, so I just ignored teachers or shouted back. Then I’d get exclusions but nobody really cared.’

Ackerman and Statham’s (2014) review of childhood bereavement studies reported that such children experience a wide range of emotional and behavioural responses to grief, including anxiety,

depressive symptoms, fears, angry outbursts, regression regarding developmental milestones, lower self-esteem and greater external locus of control and somatisation. Furthermore, longitudinal studies have highlighted the connection between three or more stressful events, including family bereavement and a significantly higher likelihood of developing mental health difficulties (Parry-Langdon, 2008). Once again, the negative impact of bereavement on educational measures and behaviour has been found to be far more apparent for boys.

One young man in the study, Adam, lost his mother to cancer when he was eight. Having lived as an intact nuclear family unit until then, he struggled when his mother first passed away, as he had no major female influence in his life. He took out his anger at her death and his situation on others, including in school.

‘Me dad and me brothers, we were all devastated. It was hard cos mum wasn’t there to make us all feel better. I became quite angry cos it felt so unfair, so I just snapped at anyone. I was a lot quieter and disillusioned, especially in school cos I didn’t care anymore.’

As one of the youngest siblings in his family, Adam also witnessed his older brothers struggling in school and being excluded. The impact of bereavement was thus further compounded by being judged according to his brother’s behaviour, making his relationships with teachers even more tenuous.

## **Conclusion**

Through focusing on young people’s lived experiences and how they interpret them, we can see how critical moments and changes in their personal domains can impact on each other and the educational domain. The study starkly demonstrates the complexity of young people’s lives and the interconnectedness of the domains. For all of them, chaos and disappointment often happened simultaneously and within more than one domain, unsurprisingly causing greater havoc. Often, the limited resources that they are able to draw on are insufficient to deal with such disruption. In addition, their resourcefulness is challenged further as they try to cope with a multitude of concurrent problems. It is usually during the periods of greatest chaos and uncertainty, following a culmination of difficult experiences, that critical moments occur and they become faced with permanent educational exclusion. We see the transfer of emotionality from their home-life to their school-life, as the emotions that they feel and may be unable to deal with are released within the school setting.

According to Spratt (2009: 445) ‘it is not particular combinations of difficulties, but the multiples of these which become predictive of poor outcomes’ for families with multiple problems. Levitas et al. (2007: 13) have argued that research using biographical methods is needed ‘to explore the experience of social exclusion and the nature and sequence of precipitating events and interventions that reduce or prevent exclusion.’ Consequently, research such as this helps us to better understand the needs of young people in order to better provide for those needs. Young people’s resilience to adversity is covered in a wide range of literature and existing QLR studies (Henderson et al., 2007) discuss the importance and diversity of young people’s resourcefulness and the resources they draw upon. However, this research has demonstrated how this can be tested to the maximum for young people who require timely specialised interventions, tailored to meet their changing needs and circumstances in order to navigate a positive path through the chaos in their lives. The unique methodological approach developed through the research provides new knowledge that comes from giving primacy to the lived experiences and voices of young people themselves and foregrounding the complexity of the relationship between interconnected traumas, timing and the transference of emotionality from one domain to another. Exploring and identifying the critical moments that take

place in young people's lives contributes to our understanding of their experiences of complex and interconnected difficulties and highlights opportunities for intervention. This is particularly important for practitioners working with young people and families with multiple problems, as it highlights: the importance of the timing of interventions to try to mediate the impact of critical moments; the need for ongoing multi-agency support to address such a wide range of inter-connected problems; and tailored support in and with schools to maintain educational inclusion. Further investigation into successful methods of working with young people during these periods is necessary for appropriate types of intervention to be developed. This research demonstrates to policy makers that clearly single solutions are inappropriate given the complex and interconnected nature of the difficulties that these young people experience. Although full-scale macro-level structural changes may ultimately be required at the policy level to address the difficulties that they and their families face, successful interventions at the individual level should be able to prevent the downward spiral that often follows critical moments in excluded young people's lives. Policy makers therefore need to recognise this and provide further direction, support and resources to the range of agencies who work with young people and families with multiple problems in order to mitigate against these problems in an appropriate, timely and supportive manner.

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<sup>i</sup> In the UK, educational exclusion involves a young person being removed from school for either a fixed-term or permanently (expelled).

<sup>ii</sup> In England and Wales, secondary school is for young people aged 11-16, however since 2014 young people must stay in some form of education until the age of 18. Permanent exclusion denotes young people permanently expelled from a school; fixed-term (FT) exclusion denotes young people temporarily removed from school.