

From Exclusion to Engagement: Pedagogical Innovation in Alternative Provision

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From Exclusion to Engagement: Pedagogical Innovation in Alternative Provision

Title Page

Title	From Exclusion to Engagement: Pedagogical Innovation in Alternative Provision
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Key words	Education; Alternative Provision; Inclusive Pedagogy; Educational Inequality; Engagement; Social Equity
Direct Submission or Co-submission	Co-Submission

From Exclusion to Engagement: Pedagogical Innovation in Alternative Provision

Abstract

Alternative provision (AP) supports young people aged 11–16 who are excluded from mainstream education, but the sector remains under-theorised and inconsistently resourced, despite serving learners facing significant educational and social disadvantages (DfE, 2023; Ofsted, 2021). This study develops a pedagogical framework grounded in practitioners' experience in both in-person and digital settings. Through qualitative interviews with AP staff, it identifies strategies to boost engagement, re-engagement, and attainment. The research addresses structural educational inequality and promotes scalable practices for marginalised learners, aligning with global aims for inclusive education and social equity (UNESCO, 2020). By translating practitioner insights into transferable concepts, it offers an evidence basis for improving policy, practice, and institutional design in alternative education. The study explores pedagogical practices for pupils aged 11–16 in AP, a key site for tackling educational inequality, focusing on barriers to engagement and innovative teaching strategies. Its societal importance lies in enhancing educational equity for marginalised learners and in guiding a pedagogical framework rooted in practitioner experience. The findings aim to inform educators, policymakers, and practitioners in creating more inclusive, responsive educational environments.

Keywords: Education; Alternative Provision; Inclusive Pedagogy; Educational Inequality; Engagement; Social Equity

SPECIFICATIONS TABLE

Subject area	Education; Alternative Provision; Inclusive Pedagogy; Educational Inequality; Engagement; Social Equity
More specific subject area	Societal Impact of Pedagogical innovation in alternative provision
Category/categories of societal impact	Education reform; Social inclusion; Youth development; Policy and practice in alternative education
Sustainable development	GOAL 16: Peace and Justice Strong Institutions
Goals (SDGS) of the research	GOAL 4: Quality Education GOAL 10: Reduced Inequality
Resource availability	The criteria are not applicable.
Research Project	The Research Investment Fund (RIF) at Edge Hill University funded this study. The project examines how pedagogical practices within

alternative provisions in England can foster re-engagement, achievement, and long-term inclusion.

Related published article

Project description:

This project explores Alternative Provision (AP) in education for pupils aged 11-16 years in non-mainstream English schools. By mapping the nature of this diverse provision and the different approaches to teaching and learning that many of these settings use, it will highlight the ways in which this sector makes positive contributions to the lives of young people who, for a variety of reasons, are not able to access, or have failed to flourish, in mainstream schooling. This project undertakes research with schools in the Education Division of The Progress Group (TPG) - a business committed to impacting young people's lives through access to high-quality alternative education and careers services. It will investigate the ways in which learning in an online format has met the needs of pupils within Progress Group settings. The project explores some of the barriers to engagement in the online format for pupils in alternative provision, to examine pedagogical innovations for pupils in the online format, and to help develop a research-informed pedagogy for use going forward. Using a mixture of desk-based research and documentary methods, the research initially maps out the nature of AP in England. Following this, and using qualitative methods such as focus groups of pupils and teaching staff, as well as data on pupil attendance and attainment, the research aids in the development of a research-informed pedagogy to inform teaching and learning practices for AP.

Grant: Funding of £17,632.51 supports the production of two peer-reviewed journal articles (one mapping the nature of AP; the second an analysis of the pedagogical approaches for online learning in AP. A briefing paper will be produced for policymakers, and the content will be used to generate material for dissemination nationally and internationally.

Issues by: Research Investment Fund, Edge Hill University

Dates: 03/03/25 → 30/10/26

Link to the summary of the project: [Developing a research-led pedagogy for online education for pupils aged 11-16 in alternative provision - Edge Hill University](https://research.edgehill.ac.uk/en/projects/developing-a-research-led-pedagogy-for-online-education-for-pupils-aged-11-16-in-alternative-provision-edge-hill-university)

<https://research.edgehill.ac.uk/en/projects/developing-a-research-led-pedagogy-for-online-education-for-pupil-2/activities>

Related publications by the authors:

Shaw, S., and Allan, D. (2025). *Thinking about tomorrow: Creative use of technologies in higher education*. SOLSTICE and CLT conference, Ormskirk, United Kingdom.

Marsden, R., Allan, D., Corner, J., & Mackenzie, A. (2025). *Lessons Learned: How lesson study can enhance pupil learning, teacher education, and teacher development*. Paper presented at Beating the Odds, Changing Futures, UKLA– 60th Conference, Liverpool, United Kingdom.

Allan, D. and Duckworth, V. (2018), Voices of disaffection: disengaged and disruptive youths or agents of change and self-empowerment? *British Journal of Special Education*, 45: 43-60. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8578.12201>

Stage of research	In Progress

Societal Impact

Alternative provision (AP) occupies a complex and often marginalised position within educational systems. It serves young people who have been excluded from mainstream schooling or who are unable to thrive within conventional educational environments. However, it lacks the necessary recognition and esteem. Learners in AP in England have often faced intersecting disadvantages, including socioeconomic marginalisation, mental health challenges, and disrupted educational trajectories. Recent national data highlights the concerning scale and urgency of exclusion in the English education system, with around a quarter of young people having disengaged from it at secondary level (Jerrim, 2025). Despite a small decrease in the latest term for suspensions and exclusions, the figures have increased in recent years and have consistently failed to return to their pre-pandemic level (Gov.UK, 2025). Persistent disruptive behaviour remains the main reason, accounting for 51% of suspensions and 39% of permanent exclusions. These numbers show increased challenges in managing behaviour and a greater reliance on exclusionary practices. This emphasises the important role of AP, both as a response to, and a consequence of, systemic pressures in mainstream schools. As such, AP is not merely an alternative educational pathway; it is a critical intervention to address systemic inequality.

This study examines how education systems can better support learners at risk of exclusion. It addresses a persistent gap in educational research: the need for empirically grounded, practitioner-informed pedagogical frameworks tailored to alternative settings. AP settings, while often positioned as remedial, hold significant potential as sites of innovation. By focusing on educators' lived experiences and practices in these settings, this study seeks to reframe AP as a space of pedagogical possibility rather than a deficit. The research study aligns closely with several Sustainable Development Goals. In relation to Goal 4 (Quality Education), it seeks to enhance the quality and inclusivity of educational provision for marginalised learners. Goal 10 (Reduced Inequality) addresses structural disparities by identifying practices that support equitable access to learning (UNESCO, 2020). The connection to Goal 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities) lies in the role of education in fostering social cohesion and reducing exclusion. Finally, Goal 16 (Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions) is reflected in the study's emphasis on fair and responsive educational systems that support *all* learners, as well as on the role of equitable educational institutions in fostering social stability and justice.

The potential societal impact of this work lies in its ability to inform educational practice and policy. It offers practical insights for educators and an evidence base to support developments relating to inclusion, exclusion, and alternative pathways. While policy frameworks often

emphasise accountability and outcomes, they tend to under-specify the pedagogical processes needed to support disengaged learners (OECD, 2021). By presenting its findings in accessible terms, the study aims to bridge research, policy, and practice while offering practical guidance for educators. Simultaneously, it can enhance understanding of how educational systems can be reformed to better support vulnerable learners. In doing so, it seeks to improve individual outcomes and promote systemic change.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design centred on practitioner perspectives within alternative provision settings. Participants were recruited through professional networks and institutional partnerships, ensuring representation from a range of AP contexts. Braun and Clarke (2021) argue that this approach enables in-depth exploration of pedagogical practices and decision-making processes, particularly in complex and under-researched environments. The primary method of data collection is semi-structured interviews with staff working in AP environments for pupils aged 11–16. These participants include educators and support staff who are directly involved in teaching and learning processes. The original intention was to interview separate focus groups of young people; however, this became challenging due to time constraints at the settings, timetabling and competing priorities meant voluntary projects without immediate benefit were often deprioritised, despite initial enthusiasm from gatekeepers. Having said that and in line with the project’s commitment to inclusivity, a small sample of young people was interviewed. This enabled the research to capture the important voices of those directly affected by the marginalisation process of compulsory schooling and provided an important contribution to the findings.

At the time of writing, the initial phase of data collection has been completed with 12 staff participants across three alternative provision settings and 6 young people aged 11–16, located in the North West of England (Liverpool City Region). While the sample offers valuable insight into practitioner and learner experiences, its scope limited to three AP settings in one region means the findings should not be assumed to represent all AP contexts nationally. Staff participants included teachers, learning mentors, pastoral leads, and support workers. Young participants represented a range of educational backgrounds, including previous suspensions, disrupted educational histories, and identified SEND needs. All participants were anonymised using pseudonyms. Although the dataset is small-scale at this early stage, the emerging findings closely mirror patterns identified in wider research on alternative provision. Both quantitative and qualitative data were collected using open- and closed-ended questionnaire items. Descriptive statistics were used to summarise contextual information, such as age, gender, and learner background, to support the interpretation of the qualitative data.

The qualitative data were analysed using Braun and Clarke’s (2021) reflexive thematic analysis, in which subjective codes evolve in an “organic and unstructured” way (p. 39). The transcripts were coded inductively line-by-line to identify patterns relating to engagement, relationships, pedagogical adaptation, and learner support. Codes were generated separately before being reviewed, grouped, and refined into broader candidate themes through iterative discussion among the research team. To enhance transparency, analytic decisions were documented throughout to identify potential assumptions. Member checking and analyst triangulation were incorporated not to seek objective verification but to support critical

reflection and reduce interpretive bias. The developing themes were checked against the dataset to ensure consistency and coherence. This process resulted in three interconnected themes: relational pedagogy, adaptive instruction, and integrated support systems. Additionally, analytic decisions were documented throughout the coding process where checking was undertaken through participant review of interview summaries. This was also used as part of an analyst triangulation during theme development. Rather than seeking objective verification, these processes were used to strengthen credibility and support reflexive interpretation of the data.

Ethical procedures were strictly followed, including informed consent, anonymity, and the right to withdraw in accordance with BERA (2024) guidelines. Interviews were conducted via secure online platforms. Individuals were invited to participate based on their experience in AP settings. Interviews were conducted online, reflecting the increasing use of digital pedagogies in AP settings. Each interview lasted approximately 20-35 minutes and was recorded. Transcriptions were produced accordingly. Data were anonymised to protect participants' identities, and all materials are stored securely in compliance with data protection regulations. The analytical focus was on three core dimensions: (1) strategies for learner engagement, (2) pedagogical adaptations in response to diverse needs, and (3) the integration of digital and in-person learning modalities. Table 1 demonstrates the research design, the data collection phase and replicable aspects of the study.

Table 1. Summary

Timeline Phase	Description	Outcomes
Initial Phase	Development of research aims focused on AP pedagogy; identification of research questions relating to engagement, barriers to learning, and pedagogical innovation; ethical approval secured, and participant recruitment initiated (Sites 1,2,3).	Research framework established; ethical compliance ensured; practitioner participants identified.
Data Collection	Conducting semi-structured interviews with AP staff (online) to explore teaching practices and learner engagement.	Qualitative data capturing practitioner perspectives and diverse pedagogical approaches.
Data Verification	Transcription of interviews and participant validation (member checking) to ensure accuracy and credibility of responses.	Increased reliability and validity of data through participant confirmation.
Data Analysis	Thematic analysis of interview data to identify key patterns across practices, including relational pedagogy, adaptive instruction, and holistic support systems.	Identification of core pedagogical domains and key principles.
Interpretation Framework Development	Synthesis of findings into a research-informed pedagogical framework for AP settings, focusing on replicability and practical application.	Development of a structured, practice-oriented framework to support inclusive pedagogy.

Timeline Phase	Description	Outcomes
Dissemination (Ongoing)	Preparation of outputs, presentations, and resources.	conference Knowledge mobilisation across academic and practitioner communities.

Results and Implications

As data collection remains ongoing, the findings reported here should be viewed as preliminary and indicative of emerging patterns within the dataset. The wider study will incorporate additional interviews and documentary analysis, which may refine or extend the themes presented here. The present paper, therefore, reports early-stage findings rather than finalised outcomes. The emphasis is on themes that appear to support effective pedagogy within the specific AP settings included in this study, rather than universal characteristics of all AP provision. These are explained through three interconnected areas of effective practice: relational pedagogy, adaptive instruction, and integrated support systems.

Relational pedagogy

First, engagement emerges as a challenge. Many pupils in AP have experienced negative educational trajectories, leading to disengagement and distrust of formal learning environments. Young participants' accounts show that relationships shape their engagement with learning. Many described arriving in AP with a sense of mistrust, shaped by previous experiences of exclusion or feeling 'unheard' in mainstream settings. Over time, the consistency and attentiveness of staff became a turning point. One young person explained, "I didn't talk at first because I thought they'd tell me off like before. But they kept talking to me". Other participants spoke of the importance of being supported beyond academic performance, one noted, "Here they actually listen. Not just to what I say, but how I'm feeling". A recurring theme was also the sense of emotional safety that AP provided, contrasting sharply with earlier experiences of unpredictability and conflict. One participant captured this shift, noting, "I feel safer here. In my old school I was always waiting for something to go wrong". These reflections show how relational pedagogy can contribute to a sense of belonging and psychological safety that enables re-engagement with education. Thus, nurturing consistent and attentive relationships may help counteract the effects of previous exclusionary educational experiences.

Educators respond to this by prioritising relational approaches, building trust, and creating supportive learning environments (Fensham-Smith, 2025). According to Ofsted (2021), many learners in AP have experienced repeated educational disruption, resulting in low levels of institutional trust. This suggests that relationship-building is a prerequisite for re-engaging, marginalised learners and rebuilding confidence (OECD, 2021). This can be seen in staff participants' interviews where they noted: "I can't teach them until they trust me. The relationship comes first." (teacher, AP site 3). One staff member added, "Most of them come in expecting us to give up on them. When we don't, that's when things start to shift" (teacher, AP site 2). Whereas learning support staff noted that "if they don't feel safe, they won't learn. My first job is to show them I'm here every day, no matter what mood they arrive in" (pastoral worker, AP site 1). "Trust isn't built in a lesson; it's built in the small conversations before and after the lessons" (learning mentor, AP site 2). Collectively, these accounts indicate that trust-

building is *not* simply a relational strategy, but a prerequisite condition for engagement and participation in learning. These quotations illustrate how participants framed relational work as foundational rather than supplementary. The thematic interpretation therefore reflects not only recurring language in the interviews but also the centrality of trust-building in shaping learners' willingness to engage.

Adaptive Instruction

Young participants emphasised the impact of flexible, responsive teaching on their confidence and learners' willingness to participate. Many described how an adaptive method of instruction, unlike traditional methods, has helped them overcome feelings of failure and frustration that had accumulated in previous settings. One student noted, "If I don't get something, they explain it differently. They don't make me feel stupid." This method of personalised explanation can support learners' self-perception. This was echoed by a further young participant who spoke of the value of learning through interests, "It (the lesson's content) makes sense to me. I like using music or games. It helps me focus." This sense of relevance and accessibility was further reinforced by comments from another participant about pacing, "They let me go at my own speed. I don't get left behind. If I get upset, I go out to cool off." Together, these accounts show how participants linked flexible teaching approaches with increased confidence, reduced anxiety, and greater willingness to participate in learning activities. Adaptive instruction, thus, can contribute to re-engagement by meeting learners *where they are*, reducing barriers to participation, and creating pathways into learning that feel both meaningful and achievable.

Adaptive instruction helped practitioners respond to diverse learner needs. The examples provided by both staff and learners demonstrate how adaptive instruction operated in practice through pacing, personalised explanations, and interest-led tasks. These accounts directly informed the theme by showing how flexibility functioned as a mechanism for re-engagement. Participants favoured learner-centred approaches over standardised delivery models. This includes adaptive teaching approaches, project-based learning, and the integration of vocational and experiential elements in teaching and learning. These often integrate real-world elements alongside academic content to address the immediate concerns of young people. One of the participants noted, "if I stick to a rigid lesson plan, I lose them. I build the lesson around what they bring that day" (learning mentor, AP site 2). This extends to the use of digital tools, particularly in response to shifts towards online learning. Other participants echoed a similar approach noting, "You can't plan Monday's lesson on Friday, you plan it when you see *who* walks through the door and *what* they're carrying emotionally" (AP teacher, site 1).

Where other participants noted "Some days we do maths through football stats, other days through music playlists. It's about finding the hook that keeps them with you" (learning Support Assistant, AP site 3). Another participant exclaimed, "A rigid curriculum doesn't work here. You must bend it, stretch it, reshape it so it *fits* the young person in front of you" (teacher, online AP, site 3). Rather than viewing curriculum delivery as fixed, participants described adapting learning activities to learners' interests, emotional states, and individual needs. These suggest that adaptive instruction is *not* simply a teaching technique, but a much broader pedagogical orientation that is centred on accessibility, relevance, and participation. The use of digital tools formed part of this adaptive approach. Previous research suggests that hybrid models can provide greater flexibility and engagement opportunities for AP learners, although

challenges relating to digital access, consistency, and participation remain (Smith, 2025; DfE, 2023).

Integrated Supported Systems

Integrated support systems extended beyond academic instruction and were viewed as essential for addressing learners' social, emotional, and behavioural needs. Several practitioner participants emphasised the importance of multidisciplinary collaboration, including pastoral staff and engagement with external services. During interviews, a practitioner participant noted, "Teaching is only half the job. The other half is helping them (students) manage everything that stops them learning" (pastoral lead, site 1). "We work as a team.... we are teachers, mentors, counsellors. So, if one of us misses something, another picks it up" (AP practitioner, site 2). In relation to providing pastoral care, mentoring, and opportunities for personal growth for AP learners who may face a wide range of unmet needs, diagnosed or undiagnosed, in previous settings, one participant noted, "Sometimes the breakthrough comes from a conversation with the youth worker, not the lesson. It's all connected" (support worker, site 1). Such approaches sought to address factors contributing to educational disengagement. For example, participant noted, "some days the priority isn't maths, it's helping them feel safe enough to learn." (pastoral lead, AP site 3). These approaches show potential for adaptation across different contexts, although further research is needed. The thematic interpretation draws directly on these accounts, which consistently positioned pastoral, emotional, and multi-agency support as inseparable from academic progress. The theme therefore reflects participants' own framing of support as an integrated system rather than a set of discrete interventions.

Young participants' reflections highlight how emotional regulation, pastoral care, and multi-professional collaboration contribute to a sense of stability that enables learning. One young participant described the value of emotional support at the start of the day noting, "Sometimes I come in upset, and they help me calm down before lessons. No one did that in my old school." Another emphasised the collective nature of support saying, "It's not just teachers. The mentor, the counsellor, the support worker, they all help me in different ways." For some, the most significant impact came from help with challenges outside the classroom. For example, a young participant noted, "They help with stuff *outside* school too. When that's sorted, it's easier to learn. I don't have to worry then much." Young participants' accounts suggest that educational engagement cannot be separated from wider social and emotional circumstances. These highlight how pastoral and multi-agency support may contribute to greater stability, enabling learners to participate and manage their learning journey.

Limitation

This study has several limitations. First, findings are based on a relatively small sample drawn from three AP settings and should therefore be regarded as exploratory rather than representative of all alternative provision contexts. Second, while efforts were made to include both practitioner and learner perspectives, the number of young people interviewed was limited by practical constraints associated with recruitment and participation within AP settings. Third, AP settings vary considerably in terms of structure, funding, learner demographics, and local

context, which may limit the impact of findings. Finally, the study remains ongoing, and the themes reported here should be viewed as preliminary. Additional data collection and analysis may refine, expand, or challenge aspects of the thematic framework presented.

Replicability and Practice-Based Relevance

Effective replication depends on adaptation rather than standardisation. The three emerging themes, relational pedagogy, adaptive instruction, and integrated support systems, represent practices that have the potential to be applied across a range of educational contexts. These approaches are not dependent on significant additional resources but instead reflect practitioner-led strategies that can be embedded within existing educational frameworks. The methodological approach used in this study, combining semi-structured interviews with thematic analysis, also offers a scalable model for practitioner inquiry that can be adopted in other settings. The findings at this stage have practical relevance in the context of current policy concerns surrounding exclusion, behaviour, and learner disengagement (DfE, 2023). They suggest that responsive, relationship-centred approaches may support engagement among learners who have struggled in mainstream education. However, the practicality of implementing these practices should be considered cautiously, as implementation is likely to be shaped by local factors including staffing, funding, organisational culture, and learner characteristics. Consequently, the study advocates a principle-led approach in which core values of inclusion, flexibility, and relationship-building are adapted to local circumstances.

Conclusion

Across the three themes, a consistent pattern emerged within this sample: practitioners tended to *respond* flexibly to individual learner needs. Although relational pedagogy, adaptive instruction, and integrated support systems are presented as distinct themes, the data suggest that they operate in combination rather than isolation. This suggests that effective AP pedagogy may be best understood as a holistic and interconnected approach rather than a collection of separate strategies. While previous research has highlighted the importance of relational practice, inclusive pedagogy, and pastoral support within alternative provision (OECD, 2021; Ofsted, 2021), this study contributes by examining how these elements operate together as an interconnected pedagogical system. Rather than treating relationship-building, instructional adaptation, and pastoral care as separate domains, the emerging findings suggest they function as mutually reinforcing aspects of effective AP practice.

While preliminary, these findings have implications for policy discussions relating to exclusion, inclusion, and educational equity. This may require a shift in resource allocation, professional learning, and accountability frameworks to better reflect the complexity of AP contexts (Timpson, 2019). In doing so, the study can contribute to ongoing debates about educational equity. By identifying effective pedagogical practices and situating them within a wider societal context, it lays a foundation for practical action and further research. As such, its value lies in its ability to promote more inclusive, equitable, and effective educational systems that are in tune with young people on the margins of education. The study's contribution lies in demonstrating how relational pedagogy, adaptive instruction, and integrated support systems operate not as isolated strategies, but as an interconnected

pedagogical system within AP settings. This puts emphasis on the interplay between these domains which adds nuance to existing research where they are often treated separately.

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Declaration Statements

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no competing interests or conflicts of interest.

Ethical Approval

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from Edge Hill University in accordance with institutional research ethics procedures and the British Educational Research Association (BERA) Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research (2024).

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Declaration of Interest Statement

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could be seen to influence the work presented in this paper.

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Ethics statement

The authors have read and followed the ethical requirements for publication in Societal Impacts and confirm that the current work does not involve human subjects, animal experiments, or any data collected from social media platforms. For this research, prior to collecting the data, several approvals were obtained from various organisations, including the university's research ethics committee, the participating schools and stakeholders. The ethical procedures were adhered to in terms of providing participants with an informed consent form, ensuring voluntary participation, and protecting participants' confidentiality.