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GCSE attainment in alternative provision (AP): A comparison of AP Free Schools and AP Academies

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Abstract

Alternative provision (AP), in particular Pupil Referral Units (PRUs), have been criticised as a forgotten part of the education system, side-lined and stigmatised as somewhere only the very worst behaved pupils go. In response to this criticism, PRUs have now been academised to become AP Academies and new AP schools have been set up—AP Free Schools. A sample of 5 years of AP pupils sitting their GCSE examinations from 2016/17 to 2020/21 ($N = 15{,}019$) was used to compare the academic attainment of AP Free School pupils and AP Academy pupils. AP Free School pupils achieved 13.26% more capped GCSE points than AP Academy pupils, which increased to a difference of 18.65% when controlling for selection bias, suggesting that not only do AP Free Schools outperform AP Academies academically, but they do so with more disadvantaged pupils. However, this difference is equal to one grade in one GCSE subject and the national average score for 'Attainment 8' is 7.3 times higher than the average capped GCSE points of AP Free School pupils, such that pupils may fare better academically if they remain in mainstream education. The controlled disadvantageous pupil characteristics of being a looked after child ($\beta = -1.67$), being eligible for free school meals ($\beta = -1.42$), having special needs ($\beta = -1.26$) and being of an ethnic minority ($\beta = -1.23$) were found to be stronger predictors of capped GCSE points

than AP type ($\beta = 1.04$) and are characteristics more likely to be found in pupils who are in AP as a result of exclusion. The superior academic performance of AP Free Schools over AP Academies is not sufficient to overcome the disadvantages faced by pupils excluded into AP. Permanently excluding should be a last resort and mainstream schools should work in partnership with AP Free Schools so that the relative strengths of both types of schools are leveraged in the interest of pupils at-risk of permanent exclusion.

KEYWORDS
academic attainment, alternative provision, exclusion, schools

Key insights

What is the main issue that the paper addresses?

Alternative provision (AP), in particular Pupil Referral Units (PRUs), have been criticised as a forgotten part of the education system, side-lined and stigmatised as somewhere only the very worst behaved pupils go, but house nearly 50,000 pupils in the United Kingdom. PRUs have now been academised and AP Free Schools are a new type of AP.

What are the main insights that the paper provides?

AP Free School pupils attain more capped GCSE points than AP Academy pupils, a difference which increases when characteristics that are negatively associated with academic attainment are controlled for, suggesting that AP Free Schools not only academically outperform AP Academies, but do so with more disadvantaged pupils. Although AP type predicts academic attainment, disadvantageous pupil characteristics were more predictive and attending an AP Free School does not overcome these disadvantages—as is evident in the academic attainment of AP Free School pupils still being far below the national average. Therefore, pupils should only be permanently excluded to AP as a last resort and mainstream schools and AP Free Schools should work in partnership in the best interest of pupils at-risk of permanent exclusion, leveraging the strengths of each other.

INTRODUCTION

From the sixth day after a pupil has been excluded from a mainstream school, Local Education Authorities (LEAs) are legally obligated to arrange full-time alternative education provision (Education Act, 1996). Alternative provision (AP) settings are defined as places that provide education for children who can't go to a mainstream school (Department for Education, 2016). In 2023/24, AP housed 47,600 pupils, an increase of 16% from the previous year (Department for Education, 2024a). AP has been described ‘as a forgotten part

of the education system, side-lined and stigmatised as somewhere only the very worst behaved pupils go' (House of Commons Education Committee, 2018, p. 3) and pupils in AP have been described as 'forgotten children […] failed by the system and […] not receiving the education they deserve' (House of Commons Education Committee, 2018, p. 3). In particular, Pupil Referral Units (PRUs), which are now called AP Academies, are considered dumping grounds (Morris, 1996)—simply in existence to meet an LEA's legal obligations, rather than to educate (Hill, 1997), with the often unrealistic and ineffective aim of reintegrating excluded students back into mainstream schools (Morris, 1996). Since 2012, AP Free Schools have begun operating, which are state-funded educational institutions free from local authority control and operated by academy trusts (Department for Education, 2024b). This study compares AP Academies and AP Free Schools in terms of the GCSE attainment of their pupils.

EXCLUSION

According to the Department for Education (2016), there are two types of exclusion in the United Kingdom: (1) suspension and (2) permanent exclusion. A suspension is a fixed-term or fixed-period exclusion where a pupil is removed temporarily from school. A permanent exclusion is an expulsion where a pupil is no longer allowed to attend a school. There are also unofficial and sometimes illegal practices that result in a pupil being in effect excluded, such as off-rolling (Daniels & Thompson, 2024; Duffy et al., 2024; Power & Taylor, 2021) and differences in the underlying reason for school exclusions that are not reported or evident in pupils' official records (Tseliou et al., 2024). It has been observed that schools demonstrate an increased propensity to blame and punish badly behaved pupils with permanent exclusion, rather than society for perpetuating a pupil's disadvantages that precede their exclusion (MacRae et al., 2003; Parsons, 2005), and that permanent exclusion is often administered idiosyncratically and unfairly, whereby some schools use exclusion as a last resort while others use it as a first-line strategy (Maag, 2012). Such idiosyncratic administration was evident in a study by Strand and Fletcher (2014), who found that school accounted for 20% of the variation in rates of permanent exclusion, suggesting that permanent exclusion has a school policy dimension. This is borne out in the starkly contrasting number of permanent exclusions between the four jurisdictions in the United Kingdom, where Scotland has barely any permanent exclusions and England has a far greater number of permanent exclusions (McCluskey et al., 2019, 2025), which is explained by diverging policy on the purposes of exclusion and the responsibilities of schools (McCluskey et al., 2025). Similarly, school conceptualisations of vulnerability and risk influence whether a pupil is deemed to be 'at-risk' and requiring support or 'a risk' and better educated elsewhere (Porter & Tawell, 2024). The number of permanent exclusions peaks in the 2 years prior to GCSE examinations (Department for Education, 2024c), which suggests that schools are acting opportunistically to permanently exclude pupils who are unlikely to positively contribute to a school's academic performance and thus their position in school league tables. Indeed, the House of Commons Education Committee (2018) found that schools perceive that measures of school performance incentivise them to permanently exclude in the interests of the school, even if this is counter to the interests of individual pupils.

Permanent exclusion is regarded as an extreme form of discipline that only heightens inequalities (Kulz, 2019). Permanent exclusion from mainstream school into AP can be the first step in exclusion from society (Blyth & Milner, 1993), and there is widespread consensus that excluded pupils are at far greater risk of a variety of negative outcomes than their non-excluded peers (Pirrie et al., 2011)—including crime, drug use and other anti-social behaviours (Berridge et al., 2001; Daniels & Cole, 2010; Hodgson & Webb, 2005; McCrystal

et al., 2007; Pritchard & Cox, 1998)—that have significant costs to society. Other costs associated with permanent exclusion are the cost of AP to receive permanently excluded pupils and the costs of school staff, counsellors and special educational needs specialists (Zhang et al., 2024). Even prior to being excluded, permanently excluded pupils are subject to disproportionate social vulnerabilities and disadvantages. Permanently excluded pupils are more likely to be a looked after child (Strand & Fletcher, 2014), have special educational needs and disabilities (Achilles et al., 2007; Bowman-Perrott et al., 2013; Krezmien et al., 2006; Strand & Fletcher, 2014), be of lower socio-economic status (Achilles et al., 2007; Strand & Fletcher, 2014) and be an ethnic minority (Achilles et al., 2007; Bowman-Perrott et al., 2013; Demie, 2021; Krezmien et al., 2006; Strand & Fletcher, 2014). The interpretation of the causes of permanent exclusion by school staff focus on these vulnerabilities and view pupil behaviour as symptomatic of adverse socio-economic and familial circumstances. On the other hand, pupil-facing accounts focus on the offence and do not view them as vulnerable or as victims (Power et al., 2024).

ALTERNATIVE PROVISION

Once a pupil is permanently excluded, it is unlikely that other mainstream schools will accept them (Morris, 1996; Pirrie et al., 2011) because permanently excluded pupils are viewed as uneducable and destined for a life of crime (Gazeley, 2010). Of the few who are reintegrated back into a mainstream school, many get excluded again (Berridge et al., 2001; Pirrie et al., 2011). As such, the only education available for many excluded pupils is AP. Currently, within the United Kingdom, there are thwo types of state-maintained AP: AP Academies and AP Free Schools, but a decade ago the only state-maintained AP was PRUs, which were AP schools maintained by the LEA.

AP Academies are, for the most part, PRUs which have been academised. According to the Department for Education (2014), being academised means that, rather than continuing to receive their funding from a local authority, they receive their funding directly from central government and are overseen by academy trusts (which are individual charitable bodies), control their own admissions process, have greater freedom to innovate (e.g., can opt out of the national curriculum) and have greater control over teacher pay, length of school day and term times. AP Free Schools are a new type of AP set up in 2014. They are established as academies and funded in the same way but originate as new schools set up by groups of parents, teachers, charities, trusts or voluntary groups, rather than converted from PRUs. Independent schools also provide AP but do not receive state funding, although they are required to register with the Department for Education if they offer full-time education to five or more pupils. They do not contribute data to the National Pupil Database (NPD).

AP has received very little attention in the academic literature of late. The research that has been conducted on AP was at a time when the only AP available was PRUs. According to Gazeley (2010), low attainment of excluded pupils is closely connected to the limitations of PRUs, more so than the policy discourse which emphasises the impact of family background on educational backgrounds. Similarly, Hill (1997) undertook a participant observation within a PRU and concluded that PRUs are simply in existence to meet LEAs' legal obligation to house permanently excluded pupils, rather than to educate. Furthermore, Morris (1996) describes PRUs as dumping grounds, unfit to tackle the problem of exclusion, focused on the unrealistic and ineffective aim of reintegrating excluded students back into mainstream schools. Meo and Parker (2004) observed that reintegration of excluded pupils occurred at the expense of good pedagogic practice, amplifying disaffection and misbehaviour. Furthermore, a preoccupation about classroom control was observed to take priority over lesson aims and content.

STUDY PURPOSE

The purpose of our study is to add to the AP literature by undertaking the first empirical study of AP Free Schools. In particular, we compare the academic attainment of AP Free School pupils with that of AP Academy pupils. This comparison, most importantly, should help inform AP policy in terms of whether AP Free Schools or AP Academies better serve pupils in terms of their academic attainment. Benchmarking against average academic attainment in mainstream schools will have further policy implications in terms of the debate around the use of permanent exclusions, as highlighted by the close to zero number of permanent exclusions and limited AP in Scotland (McCluskey et al., 2019, 2025).

HYPOTHESIS DEVELOPMENT

Permanently excluded pupils are known to have limited aspirations, academic attainment and career prospects (Berridge et al., 2001; Daniels & Cole, 2010; Mainwaring & Hallam, 2010). Hills et al. (2025) tracked a cohort of 1490 permanently excluded pupils in England and found an attainment gap of 24.64 capped GCSE points against non-permanently excluded pupils, who scored 3.76 times more GCSE points than permanently excluded ones. However, when gender, prior attainment, ethnicity, language, looked after status, eligibility for free school meals and special educational needs were controlled for, this GCSE attainment gap approximately halved. Therefore, the act of permanent exclusion does not (in isolation) predict academic attainment, such that the education provision post-exclusion may also have an influence on academic attainment. Furthermore, Power et al. (2025) described the landscape of AP across the United Kingdom as complex, with marked differences in the scale and nature of AP between England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. England was found to have the greatest volume and diversity of AP providers, the availability of which may create the demand found in England's highest rates of exclusion. Similarly, Taylor and McCluskey (2024) specifically mapped AP in Scotland, where permanent exclusion has been all but eradicated to find a preponderance of part-time and third-sector offerings as well as in-school AP, which reflects Scotland's prevention-focused approach. Previous research into PRUs that described them as dumping grounds (Morris, 1996), in existence to meet legal obligations rather than to educate (Hill, 1997), suggests that the negative outcomes associated with permanent exclusion, in particular academic attainment, would not be avoided by being educated in a now academised PRU—an AP Academy. AP Free Schools originate as new schools set up by groups of parents, teachers, charities, trusts or voluntary groups, rather than being converted from PRUs. Hope (2015) questioned whether the new model of AP Free Schools would be 'educational fireworks or sparks of optimism for excluded young people' (p. 107) because (on the one hand) parents with social and cultural capital could exploit these schools to their own advantage but (on the other hand) AP Free Schools could offer a real alternative to mainstream provision when underpinned by the values of youth and community work.

Null hypothesis H0. There will be no significant difference in GCSE attainment between AP Free School pupils and AP Academy pupils.

Alternative hypothesis Ha. GCSE attainment between AP Free School pupils and AP Academy pupils will differ significantly.

METHOD

Sample

England's NPD was the source of data for this study. This database is controlled by the Department for Education and contains data on all pupils in state-funded education. The database is sourced primarily by returns from schools, including state-funded AP schools, that are provided three times a year by the school census, but also awarding bodies and other sources. Data are matched using pupil names, dates of birth and other factors.

In total, 15,019 AP pupils in their final year of compulsory education (Year 11 when GCSE examinations are sat) from the five academic years of 2016/17 to 2020/21 were participants in this study. As reported in Table 1, the majority of pupils were in AP Academies (72%) and 28% of pupils were in AP Free Schools. The majority of pupils were male (68%), which is consistent with exclusion data showing that males have more than twice the rate of permanent exclusions, 0.15 compared to 0.07 for females (Department for Education, 2024c), as well as the growing rate at which girls are being excluded (Clarke, 2024). The prior academic attainment of the sample was low, whereby 82% were below the median level of academic performance, which is consistent with Department for Education (2024c) data suggesting that some schools opportunistically exclude to boost their exam performance. Although the majority of pupils were White (72%), a large group of pupils were of an ethnic minority (28%). Compared to the UK population where, according to the most recent census, 18.3% identify as an ethnic minority (Office for National Statistics, 2022), this confirms prior research that ethnic minorities are disproportionately subjected to exclusion. A minority of pupils did not have English as their first language (7%), had been previously looked after (8%) and had special needs (10%), but a majority were eligible for free school meals (63%), which confirms prior research that pupils of lower socio-economic status are disproportionately subjected to exclusion.

Variables

Dependent variable

The outcome of interest is academic attainment, for which results from GCSE examinations are being used. Specifically, capped GCSE points are used because the number of GCSE examinations a pupil takes can vary—there is a requirement to take a minimum of five subjects, but most pupils take nine subjects. GCSEs are marked on a scale of 1 to 9 or are 'ungraded'. A pupil's capped GCSE score is the cumulative score of their English, mathematics and science GCSEs, plus their next best six subjects, for a cumulative total GCSE score. A perfect performance of nine GCSEs graded as 9 would accrue a maximum score of 81. The capped score, rather than an uncapped score, was used as a control for the number of GCSE subjects taken so that a high score is more representative of quality of educational attainment than quantity of subjects taken. Discrete data were taken from the NPD's Key Stage 4 Data Tables for the five academic years of 2016/17 to 2020/21, restricted to Year 11 when GCSE examinations take place. The dataset does not include results from the compulsory resits after Year 11, such that GCSE scores in this study are based on just the single first attempt.

TABLE 1 Participant characteristics.

	n	%
Alternative provision type		
AP Academy (0)	10,789	72%
AP Free School (1)	4230	28%
Total	**15,019**	**100%**
Gender		
Female (0)	4871	32%
Male (1)	10,148	68%
Total	**15,019**	**100%**
Prior attainment		
One (1)	4966	33%
Two (2)	7292	49%
Three (3)	1784	12%
Four (4)	977	7%
Total	**15,019**	**100%**
Ethnic minority		
No (0)	10,976	72%
Yes (1)	3124	28%
Total	**14,100**	**100%**
English as first language		
No (0)	1099	7%
Yes (1)	13,920	93%
Total	**15,019**	**100%**
Looked after		
No (0)	11,950[a]	92%
Yes (1)	1070[a]	8%
Total	**13,020**[a]	**100%**
Free school meals		
No (0)	5514	37%
Yes (1)	9505	63%
Total	**15,019**	**100%**
Special needs		
No (0)	13,519	90%
Yes (1)	1500	10%
Total	**15,019**	**100%**
Pandemic year		
No (0)	10,312	69%
Yes (1)	4707	31%
Total	**15,019**	**100%**

[a]Rounded to nearest 10 for data protection of a protected status.

Independent variable

The independent variable of interest is AP type. AP type is reported as a binary categorical variable as reported in the NPD now that all PRUs have been converted to AP Academies and because, although independent schools are also AP, they do not report their data to the Department for Education, so data were not available for pupils of such AP schools. AP Free School pupils were coded as 1 and AP Academy pupils were coded as 0. Such categorical data were taken from the NPD's Key Stage 4 Data Tables for the five academic years of 2016/17 to 2020/21, restricted to Year 11 when GCSE examinations take place.

Control variables

To control for potential selection bias into either type of AP, prior academic attainment and pupil characteristics associated with academic attainment for which data were available in the NPD were controlled for. Prior academic attainment is associated with subsequent academic attainment (Lessof et al., 2018) and is recorded in the NPD at the end of Year 6 (the end of Key Stage 2), based on the results of school-administered tests for reading, writing and mathematics from which pupils are allocated to quartiles based on their relative performance. Gender is associated with academic attainment (Early et al., 2020; FFT Education Datalab, 2024) and was available as a dichotomous variable (male = 1; female = 0) in the NPD. Ethnicity is associated with academic attainment (Jackson, 2012; Strand, 2013) and, from a long list of ethnicity categories recorded in the NPD, ethnicity was recoded as a dichotomous variable with all White ethnicities (i.e., non-ethnic minorities) coded as 0 and all other ethnicities (i.e., ethnic minorities) coded as 1. Language ability is associated with academic attainment (Demie & Strand, 2006; Strand et al., 2015). Whether English was a pupil's first language was available as a dichotomous variable (yes = 1; no = 0) in the NPD. Looked after status is associated with academic attainment (Fletcher et al., 2015; Harland, 2014; Luke et al., 2015) and, in the context of the NPD, pupils are classified as looked after if they have been in the care of their local authority for 1 day or more during 2018/19, which was available as a dichotomous variable (yes = 1; no = 0). Socio-economic status is associated with academic attainment (Farquharson et al., 2024; Gorard & See, 2009; Ilie et al., 2017; Shuttleworth, 1995) and a measure of socio-economic status available in the NPD is eligibility for free school meals in the previous 6 years, which was available as a dichotomous variable (yes = 1; no = 0). Having special educational needs is associated with academic attainment (Humphrey et al., 2013; Velthuis et al., 2018) and was available in the NPD as a dichotomous variable (yes = 1; no = 0). Data for all control variables were taken from the NPD's Key Stage 4 Data Tables for the five academic years of 2016/17 to 2020/21, restricted to Year 11 when GCSE examinations take place. A final control variable used was whether or not the data were taken from a school year impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic because, for the 2020/21 school year from which data were taken, the GCSE results were based on teachers' predicted grades, rather than examination results, resulting in record passes and top grades (Long et al., 2021).

Data-collection procedure

All data were taken from the NPD's Key Stage 4 Data Tables for the school years 2016/17–2020/21. Data were restricted to Year 11, the school year when GCSE examinations take place, through which the dependent variable of academic attainment was being measured. An application to access the data was made to the Department for Education after the lead

researcher undertook the required training and examinations to become an accredited researcher with the United Kingdom's Office for National Statistics (ONS). After requested revisions were made, the application was approved and the required data were made available in an ONS 'safepod' so as to protect the sensitive individual-level data. A further application was made to the ONS Secure Research Service to clear the data analysis outputs, which was approved following establishment that outputs were compliant with the rules for using sensitive data.

Analytical strategy

Using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS), our analytical procedure began with a comparison of mean averages of capped GCSE points between AP Free School pupils and AP Academy pupils. To accomplish this, we used an independent-samples *t*-test to provide an unadjusted measurement of any difference in GCSE attainment. Next, a multiple linear regression model was constructed to measure the influence of the independent variable of AP type on the dependent variable of capped GCSE points. By holding constant the control variables of prior academic attainment, gender, ethnicity, first language, looked after status, free school meal eligibility, having a special educational need and whether or not the data were taken from a school year impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, selection bias in terms of these variables was controlled for. This provided an adjusted measure of the difference in academic attainment between AP Free Schools and AP Academies adjusted to whether pupils were equal in these potentially confounding variables. The multiple linear regression formula is expressed as follows:

$$Y_i = \alpha + \beta_1 X_{i1} + \cdots + \beta_k X_{ik} + \varepsilon_i$$

where Y is the outcome variable, X_k refers to the explanatory variables, α is the intercept, β_k is the regression coefficient for the variable k and ε accounts for the residual.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based upon a population of 15,019 pupils in AP, this study found that AP Free School pupils had statistically significantly higher capped GCSE points (6.32 ± 6.57) than AP Academy pupils, (5.58 ± 6.53), a mean difference of 0.74, $t(15017) = 6.252$, $p < 0.001$, a difference of 13.26%. The low attainment of AP Academy pupils suggests that little has changed with PRUs being academised, with Morris (1996) describing them as dumping grounds that are, according to Hill (1997), only in existence to meet legal obligations rather than to educate. Based on a sample of 12,208 pupils for whom data were available for all control variables, as reported in Table 2, this difference increased to 1.04 when holding constant control variables ($\beta = 1.04$, $p < 0.001$). In other words, when pupils attend an AP Free School, rather than an AP Academy, their capped GCSE points increased by 1.04, when holding constant gender, prior attainment, ethnicity, English as a first language, looked after status, being in receipt of free school meals, special needs and pandemic year. If a mean difference of 0.74 was a difference of 13.26%, it can be inferred that a difference of 1.04 was a difference of 18.65%. That the GCSE attainment gap increases to 18.65% from 13.26% when holding constant the predictor of academic attainment suggests that AP Free School pupils achieve greater academic attainment and also have characteristics less likely to attain academically. Therefore, this study's null hypothesis is disproven and the alternative hypothesis is supported. As reported in Table 2, all control variables significantly predicted capped GCSE points and

TABLE 2 Linear regression for academic attainment.

	β	SE	t	p
Constant	4.93	0.25	19.62	<0.001
AP Free School (vs. AP Academy)	1.04	0.13	8.18	<0.001
Male (vs. female)	−1.53	0.12	−12.6	<0.001
Prior attainment (1–4)	1.58	0.07	21.51	<0.001
Ethnic minority (vs. not)	−1.23	0.14	−8.51	<0.001
English as first language (vs. not)	−0.6	0.23	−2.63	0.009
Looked after (vs. not)	−1.67	0.21	−8.07	<0.001
Free school meals (vs. not)	−1.42	0.12	−11.57	<0.001
Special needs (vs. not)	−1.26	0.2	−6.24	<0.001
Pandemic year (vs. not)	2.86	0.12	24.16	<0.001

the model significantly predicted capped GCSE points, $F(9,\ 12{,}199) = 178.22$, $p < 0.001$, $R^2 = 0.116$, such that 11.6% of variance in capped GCSE points is explained by the model.

Although the difference is statistically significant, the unadjusted difference between AP Free Schools and AP Academies is less than a single grade in a single subject and the adjusted difference is only marginally more than a single grade in a single subject. Furthermore, the unadjusted average GCSE capped points of AP Free Schools are only 6.32 points out of a possible maximum of 81 capped GCSE points. Although not a direct comparison, the Department for Education (2024d) report the national average score for 'Attainment 8', which is a measure of pupils' performance in eight GCSE-level qualifications similar to capped GCSE points, but where the points from mathematics are counted twice, as 46.3 for the 2022/23 school year. This is 7.3 times higher than the average GCSE capped points of AP Free School pupils. On this basis, in answering the question of Hope (2015) as to whether AP Free Schools would be 'educational fireworks or sparks of optimism for excluded young people' (p. 107), it can be concluded that AP Free Schools are sparks of optimism and more work is needed to improve their academic attainment.

Although AP type significantly predicted the academic attainment of AP pupils, all of the control variables also significantly predicted the academic attainment of AP pupils. Other than whether or not English was a pupil's first language, all control variables had a larger coefficient than AP type, such that their influence on capped GCSE points was greater than that of AP type. Although, had a pupil been in an AP Free School rather than an AP Academy, their academic attainment would have been 18.65% higher ($\beta = 1.04$), their academic attainment would have increased even more had they not been of the controlled characteristics previously and again found to be negatively associated with academic attainment, such as being a looked after child ($\beta = -1.67$), being eligible for free school meals ($\beta = -1.42$), having special needs ($\beta = -1.26$) and being of an ethnic minority ($\beta = -1.23$). Pupils who are in AP as a result of exclusion are more likely than pupils not in AP as a result of exclusion to be a looked after child (Strand & Fletcher, 2014), be of lower socio-economic status (Achilles et al., 2007; Strand & Fletcher, 2014), have special needs and disabilities (Achilles et al., 2007; Bowman-Perrott et al., 2013; Krezmien et al., 2006; Strand & Fletcher, 2014) and be of an ethnic minority (Achilles et al., 2007; Bowman-Perrott et al., 2013; Demie, 2021; Krezmien et al., 2006; Strand & Fletcher, 2014). The greater influence of these control variables suggests that more needs to be done than simply replacing AP Academies with AP Free Schools.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The UK Government has responded to the harsh criticisms of PRUs by both academising PRUs and establishing new AP in the form of AP Free Schools. Although the average academic attainment of AP Free School pupils was statistically significantly higher than that of AP Academy pupils, the practical difference is only a single grade in a single subject, and both sets of pupils are attaining far below the national average of the 'Attainment 8'. Therefore, this study is unable to support that AP Free Schools are 'educational fireworks' (Hope, 2015, p. 107) or a silver bullet to address the low academic attainment of pupils in AP. Our work lends support to Scotland's eradication of permanent exclusion (Taylor & McCluskey, 2024), rather than England's high rate of permanent exclusions and high volume of AP (Power et al., 2025). That said, remaining in a mainstream school alone will not address the various disadvantages that were found to be more predictive of AP pupils' academic attainment than AP type, and which were previously found by Hills et al. (2025) to account for half of permanently excluded pupils' GCSE attainment gap. According to Duffy et al. (2024), mainstream schools suffer from limited support and resources to support at-risk pupils. This can contribute to pupils transitioning from being deemed 'at-risk' and requiring support to 'a risk' and better educated elsewhere (Porter & Tawell, 2024).

Although AP Free Schools could offer a real alternative to mainstream provision when underpinned by the values of youth and community work (Hope, 2015), their failure to provide a silver bullet for improved academic attainment in AP can be understood in the context of their offering of fewer GCSEs. Currently, collaboration between mainstream schools and AP is restricted (Duffy et al., 2024). We recommend this be addressed so that mainstream and AP schools can share their expertise, specialised support and resources—and at-risk pupils can access both mainstream and AP resources as needed. To encourage partnership and discourage mainstream schools from strategically excluding pupils, the attainment of the pupil should continue to be counted against the excluding school in league tables, regardless of destination. And to further encourage mainstream schools to work with AP schools in partnership, there should be a premium used whereby the GCSE points of at-risk pupils are multiplied to reflect the challenges they face.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This study was only able to control for observable selection bias and alternative explanation bias measured in the NPD, but did not control for unobserved or other differences not measured in the NPD. To overcome this limitation, future research could undertake a randomised controlled trial to randomly assign pupils to either an AP Free School or an AP Academy, removing all bias if the sample size is sufficient to allow randomisation to balance out any differences. A further limitation is that this study only compared AP Free Schools and AP Academies, but it would also be interesting to compare these schools to independent AP schools and mainstream schools where excluded pupils have been reintegrated in future research. Comparing with independent AP schools would require some primary data collection, but comparison with mainstream schools could be undertaken by tracking a cohort of permanently excluded pupils to their GCSE examinations and grouping them based on the type of school they were in when they undertook their exams. Finally, a limitation of this study is that it offers only a one-dimensional quantitative comparison. Future research could compare the different types of education on other outcomes, such as employment and offending, and could qualitatively compare methods and experiences through case studies of the different education settings.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT
Research data are not shared.

ETHICS STATEMENT
This study was conducted in accordance with BERA's Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research and the ethical standards of the London Metropolitan University. Ethics approval was obtained from the London Metropolitan University Ethics Committee prior to the commencement of the research.

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