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How is theory used to understand and inform practice in the alternative provision sector in England: trends, gaps and implications for practice

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ABSTRACT

This article examines how theory features in the research literatures concerning the English alternative (education) provision (AP) sector. Despite increasing interest over the past decade in how AP can (re)engage school-aged young people in learning, there has been no comprehensive review of the theoretical ideas used to understand, analyse, and inform practice in the sector. This article presents a framework for categorising the literature on AP, which refer to theory. This framework is of international relevance and can be used by researchers who are seeking to understand the state-of-knowledge on AP in their own contexts. Applied to the English context, this framework demonstrates trends and gaps in the ways theory is used to frame and understand the sector by researchers and practitioners. The framework highlights a shortage of published research which seeks to understand how practitioners in English APs understand, and use, theoretical ideas, concepts, and frameworks to inform their work with young people. We also find that theories drawn from psychological and therapeutic orientations are more common than those drawing on socio-political framings. We reflect on the causes and implications of these trends and gaps and conclude with suggestions for future research to better understand them.

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Introduction

Over the past decade, increasing attention has been given to the role of the Alternative Provision (AP) sector in engaging and better including young people in education and learning (Thomson and Pennacchia 2014; Department for Education, (DfE) 2018). AP is broadly defined as education outside of mainstream schools, arranged by local authorities or schools for excluded students or students who – because of illness or other reasons – may not receive suitable education without such arrangements being made

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(DfE 2013). Growing interest in AP has occurred alongside a pre-coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic trend of increasing permanent and fixed-term school exclusions in England (DfE 2022). AP also plays a key role in engaging students, who have been managed out of mainstream schools through illegal or 'grey' exclusionary practices, such as off-rolling and elective, or coerced, home-education (Done, Knowler, and Armstrong 2021; McShane 2020).

Policymakers have recently situated AP as an enduring component of the compulsory education system in England, and as a crucial sector for achieving the government's vision for an inclusive and equitable education system (HM Government 2022). This has perhaps intensified post-COVID-19, which has led to new and diverse forms of risk and the exacerbation of structural inequalities in young people's lives. These are often noted by politicians and policymakers as being exacerbated by poor attendance and a lack of oversight of APs (Porter et al. 2020). In this context, policymakers are concerned with understanding how the quality of AP practice can be understood and managed, to ensure the sector is cultivating attainment on a par with mainstream schools and improving the dispositions of the students it caters for. Yet, knowledge about 'effective' practice – and the theoretical foundations of AP – remain patchy and often overlooked in contrast to either mainstream or special education (Thomas and Loxley 2001). Rigorous research on and theorised knowledge of AP hold the potential to legitimise its status as an appropriate, credible or 'new' field of practice for educating a – growing and disadvantaged – part of the school population in England (DfE, 2022). This is significant with various political, professional and institutional interests at play in the development of policy and its implementation. In this context, knowledge held by researchers is only one form of knowledge (of many) that may construct foundations for the sector. This knowledge may also be increasingly important for informing practitioners' decisions about their own practices as well as influencing the conditions that shape young lives. It is therefore pertinent for researchers to understand and challenge existing knowledge, and the methodological routes to that knowledge.

This article provides insights into the current context of AP knowledge in England by reporting on a comprehensive review of the theoretical ideas which have been applied to understand, analyse, and inform practice in the sector. These insights highlight trends and gaps in the ways theory is used to frame and understand the sector by researchers and draws out what published research reveals about how AP practitioners engage with theory through their practice. This article therefore makes two important contributions to knowledge and potential practice in the AP sector. First, it presents a framework for categorising the types of literature on the AP sector and its practices, which refer to theory. This framework is of international relevance and can be used by researchers who are seeking to understand the state-of-knowledge on alternative and informal education in their own contexts. This is important because these are often peripheral sectors, which attract less funding and research, and draw on a wider range of professional knowledge and practice expertise than mainstream settings. Applied to the English context, this framework for organising the literatures highlights a shortage of published research which seeks to understand how practitioners in English APs understand, and use, theoretical ideas, concepts, and frameworks to inform their work with young people. This article reflects on the causes and implications of this shortage. Second, the article reviews the dominant theories that are referenced in the AP literature and

finds that theories drawn from psychological and therapeutic orientations are more common than those drawing on social and political framings. We reflect on the causes and implications of the theoretical trends observed, and their potential implications for practice and for the accumulation of knowledge about the sector, concluding with suggestions for future research to better understand them.

AP: the English policy context

The section reviews the AP policy context in England, and the key debates which circulate in this field, with implications for the AP sector, its practitioners, and the young people who attend. Over the last decade, government policy has positioned AP as an increasingly necessary and established part of the compulsory educational offer available to young people in England (DfE 2018). This suggests a policy position underpinned by an acceptance of exclusion rather than a fully inclusive comprehensive ideal, and across national contexts APs can offer a convenient way for schools to continue as they are, without having to adapt their practices to engage young people who are not flourishing in the mainstream environment (Pennacchia et al. 2016). In England, the focus has recently been on questions of quality; if AP is to be an enduring part of the compulsory education system, how can its ‘quality’ be understood and improved? (Thomson and Pennacchia 2014). Moreover, how can this be done to address issues facing young people in and beyond AP, such as low attainment and poor engagement (Johnston and Bradford 2023) and better transitions into further education, employment, or training (Malcolm 2022). The question of transitions and engagement is particularly significant, with the AP sector positioned as an important and potentially more inclusive space than mainstream schools for supporting young people to develop the required routines and behaviours for success in and beyond compulsory education (Malcolm 2021). Indeed, policy documents including the Timpson review (2019) and the recent SEND review (HM Government 2022) have highlighted the value of APs in developing appropriate standards and institutional practices for students who appear to be ‘struggling to reach their potential’ (Timpson 2019, 26), and in preparing young people for Education Employment and Training as early as possible. There now appears to be broad agreement at the policy level that the AP sector is a means of offering school-aged students, with differing abilities and aptitudes, a ‘second chance’ to develop their psychological, social, learning and economic capabilities.

Despite policy changes in the sector, there remains little specific policy guidance on how providers can effectively plan psychological, social, or pedagogical approaches around an individual’s perceived needs (Tate and Greatbatch 2017). There is a risk that understandings of quality taken from mainstream schools may be unhelpfully applied to APs, resulting in a view of learning, participation and inclusion which does not capture – and risks undermining – effective practices that are particular to this context (Johnston and Bradford 2019). There is however a long-standing, international body of evidence which distils the effective practices that are seen to underpin work with young people in APs (for a comprehensive overview see Thomson 2014). Key aspects include relationships which adopt non/less hierarchical approaches and prioritise listening to young people; a curriculum that draws on the knowledge, environments, and experiences of young people; and learning cultures which are smaller in scale and more nurturing in approach. However, the

theoretical basis for such practices is less clearly understood in the contemporary English AP context. These practices may well be grounded in specific philosophical, pedagogical, and ethical standpoints and may be drawn from the fields of education, psychology, youth work, special educational needs, criminology, and social pedagogy. Theories may be defined and used in various ways by researchers and practitioners within APs, and what counts as a theory more generally remains contested and culturally normative. Certain kinds of theoretical knowledge and any favoured methodological pathway to such knowledge may also be dependent on a person's disciplinary orientation towards explanation and/or it may include attempts to critique or transform the social world (Anyon 2008). That said, there has been no systematic analysis of the theories that AP practitioners' utilise to make sense of their work with young people or as an 'aid to interpret new instances' (Sommer and Strong 2016, 68). Such an analysis is needed at a time when a growing AP sector is gaining increased legitimacy through new policy developments (HM Government 2022), and whilst important decisions are being made about how 'quality' and 'effective' practice can be understood in the sector.

For the purposes of this literature review and systematic analysis, we draw on Anyon's definition of theory as a framework of ideas which form

a coherent structure of interrelated concepts – whose contemplation and application (1) help us to understand and explain discursive and social phenomena and (2) provides a model of the way that discourse and social systems work and can be worked upon. (Anyon 2008, 4)

We would also extend this definition to orient it more explicitly to educational practice. Theory informs the conceptual tools and frameworks educationalists take into their practice. It can help them to understand and explain why a particular intervention or practice has or has not allowed them to achieve their desired aims with a particular student or group in a particular context. It also provides a framework for making explicit some of the assumptions and values that underpin and sustain current practice, which might be a step for changing practice where needed (Orchard and Winch 2015).

The article contends that the character of accumulated knowledge about the AP sector may begin to illuminate how AP is conceptualised and understood, and how 'effective' practices may be placed within specific theoretical and practical boundaries, which can make certain meanings, constructs, mindsets, and practices more or less likely in AP. Questions remain over whether particular theoretical ideas are being consciously drawn on to inform practice, and whether there are more or less common 'go-to' theoretical standpoints informing or explaining staff practice in APs, and the implications of this for understandings and approaches of AP. These are important questions because the sector is an arena of power struggles between actors, advocating for differing concerns and world views (Fairclough, Cortese, and Ardizzone 2007). Such debates are exclusionary, as powerful people and groups can influence and/or monopolise public debates more proactively than those with limited power, such as practitioners or young people themselves (Lahusen and Kiess 2020). This applies directly to AP, because public discourses define (unruly) youth as a pressing public issue requiring policy intervention. The debates around AP can be monopolised by discourses which view young people through an 'at risk/risky' binary (Pennacchia and Thomson 2018). Young people – particularly those from more disadvantaged socio-economic

backgrounds and from minority ethnic groups – are more likely than older groups to experience multiple insecurities stemming from societal issues such as low-pay, the prevalence of precarious work, and housing shortages (Dorling 2014). Amidst this wider context, young people accessing AP are positioned as particularly vulnerable, as they are more likely to have characteristics which are related to poorer life-chances and outcomes such as: growing up in poverty; having a special educational need or disability; being from minority ethnic groups; and involvement from other statutory services. Public and policy discourses on poor behaviour in school and, thus, those attending AP, have constructed young people, and the provisions they attend, in deficit terms (Parsons 2005). Young people who cannot achieve in mainstream school are positioned as a risk to the education of others, and those in AP are the focus of commentary on risky behaviours such as serious youth violence, and drug taking (DfE 2022). This makes it important to understand the theoretical and empirical knowledge-base circulating in and around the sector, and to pay attention to the kinds of explanations this enables or prioritises for why young people in AP might be at a higher risk of poorer outcomes and perceived ‘risky’ behaviours. This is particularly important given the expansion of APs which has mobilised providers with competing interests, and thus competing visions and definitions of the issues at stake. The present review of published research is first step towards developing this understanding.

What constitutes ‘effective’, theoretically informed practice with young people who are at risk of educational exclusion is a question which has resurfaced in the inclusive education debates (Nilholm 2021) and there is now a policy-level emphasis on how understandings of effective practice in AP may inform more inclusive approaches in mainstream and special school settings (SEND review, 2022). There has therefore been a shift from treating those theoretical ideas which are rooted in AP as marginal, to seeing them as posing potentially valued insights, frameworks for analysis and suggestions for effective practice that can have applicability across educational sectors and institutions. Given the emergent positioning of AP as having potential influence on other schooling contexts, alongside growing policy emphasis on the role of AP in creating an inclusive schooling system, understanding the theoretical basis for AP practices becomes an increasingly pressing issue. The article therefore addresses the following questions:

- How does theory feature in the literature(s) on AP in the English context?
- What are the implications of theory prevalence, trends and gaps for understandings and practices of/in AP and the young people who attend?

Methods

This article draws on work undertaken for a literature review which considered the role of relationships in AP (Malcolm 2021). This review was focused on AP in England and the searches for this literature review were undertaken in December 2019 using two sets of terms detailed below:

Abstract: “Alternative educational provision” OR “alternative education provision” OR “pupil referral unit” OR “AP free school” OR “AP academy” OR “education otherwise than at school”

All text: England OR English OR UK OR Britain OR “United Kingdom”

And,

Abstract: “alternative provision” AND (education OR educate OR school)

All text: England OR English OR UK OR Britain OR “United Kingdom”

The databases searched which returned results included Discover, Academic Search Elite, Web of Science, Sage Premier, Jstor and Scopus. Before the removal of duplicates, these databases returned a total of 749 results. A search of google scholar which combined these terms returned 981 results and a google search of these terms for PDF and Doc files returned 134 and 161 results respectively. The removal of duplicates and irrelevant sources reduced these 2025 results to 250 relevant to AP. This was further reduced to 114 studies by including only studies which were focused on educational experiences, undertaken in, or with specific reference to AP settings, three book chapters were included and these were only included if the author had not published this work in a journal article. This search strategy was repeated in May 2021 and April 2022 identifying an additional 11 and 9 studies respectively bringing the total number of sources to 134. While there are limitations to any search and some relevant studies may not have been included in this analysis, we are confident that the studies considered here include the vast majority of published research undertaken in or with reference to AP settings in England and that the addition of any studies which have been missed would be unlikely to change the overall dynamics noted below in our discussion.

The starting point for the review of theories presented in the main body of this paper was a theory theme in the analysis undertaken for the literature review on which this study draws. Studies were coded to this theme where they made explicit mention of specific theoretical ideas. This theme was not included in the final literature review and the findings presented here have not been published elsewhere. In undertaking the initial literature review upon which this study is based the analysis focused on the methods of data collection, the evidence presented and the author’s interpretation of this evidence. Further analysis of the database of 134 studies was undertaken by making use of the explore function in NVivo to search for studies where the theories identified had been mentioned. The 1000 most common words of three characters or more, used within 15 words on either side of the terms framework, theory, concept and their generalisations were considered to identify additional theories/theorists. Terms in line with theories from education, psychology, sociology, youth work and criminology were also searched, and all search terms used are set out in the appendix. All studies were also reviewed to consider authorship identifying practitioner involvement in research. A total of 106 studies were identified through this process as having made use of theory in relation to research about AP.

A typology for understanding how theory features in the literature on AP

The analysis identified the theories that are being drawn on in published research, to develop knowledge about, and understandings of, the English AP system. [Table 1](#) details the findings of this literature search. It arranges the literature into 4 types (columns) and lists the theories that are drawn on in each of these text-types (rows).

Table 1. Theory types.

Theory	Type 1: Theory in passing	Type 2: Theoretically informed analysis	Type 3: Researchers reporting on practitioners' use of/reference to theory	Type 4: Practitioner research/Practitioner- researcher collaborations
Attachment (<i>N</i> = 35)	13	11	12 (4 no other type)	7
Containment (<i>N</i> = 11)	4	4	0	3
Attachment to school (<i>N</i> = 6)	2	4	0	0
Risk and Resilience (<i>N</i> = 29)	7	14	7 (2 no other type)	6
Social and political framings (<i>N</i> = 25)	10	12	1 (0 no other type)	3
Labelling (<i>N</i> = 23)	13	7	6 (3 no other type)	0
Stigma (<i>N</i> = 22)	9	9	3 (3 no other type)	1
Social Justice OR Fraser (<i>N</i> = 22)	14	5	2 (1 no other type)	2
Grounded theory (<i>N</i> = 17)	8	8	0	1
Restorative Approaches (<i>N</i> = 14)	3	4	8 (3 no other type)	4
Bourdieu (<i>N</i> = 13)	5	6	0	2
Foucault (<i>N</i> = 13)	5	6	0	2
Masculinity OR femininity (<i>N</i> = 12)	5	6	1 (1 no other type)	0
Bronfenbrenner (<i>N</i> = 11)	1	8	0	2
'Social capital' (<i>N</i> = 10)	1	7	0	2
'Cultural capital' (<i>N</i> = 7)	0	6	0	1
'Economic capital' (<i>N</i> = 5)	2	2	0	1
Maslow – Hierarchy of needs (<i>N</i> = 9)	4	3	0	2
School disaffection (<i>N</i> = 9)	2	6	0	1
Dewey (<i>N</i> = 9)	8	1	0	0
Freire (<i>N</i> = 9)	6	1	0	2
Disability (<i>N</i> = 9)	6	1	0	2
Self-Determination Theory (<i>N</i> = 8)	3	5	0	0
'experiential learning' OR Kolb (<i>N</i> = 8)	5	3	1 (0 no other type)	0
Dweck – theories of self and motivation (<i>N</i> = 8)	6	2	0	0
(Carl) 'rogers' OR client centred therapy (<i>N</i> = 7)	3	2	0	2
behaviourism OR behaviourist (<i>N</i> = 6)	2	3	3 (0 no other type)	1
Emotional Labour (<i>N</i> = 5)	1	3	0	1
Social Control theory (<i>N</i> = 5)	4	0	1	0
Social learning theory – Bandura (<i>N</i> = 4)	3	1	1 (0 no other type)	0
Bill Rogers – behaviour specialist (<i>N</i> = 4)	2	0	2	0
Zone of proximal development (<i>N</i> = 4)	2	2	0	0
Giroux (<i>N</i> = 4)	1	1	0	2
Piaget (<i>N</i> = 4)	3	0	0	1
Community (ies) of practice (<i>N</i> = 3)	0	3	0	0

(Continued)

Table 1. Continued.

Theory	Type 1: Theory in passing	Type 2: Theoretically informed analysis	Type 3: Researchers reporting on practitioners' use of/reference to theory	Type 4: Practitioner research/Practitioner- researcher collaborations
Progressive education (<i>N</i> = 3)	3	0	0	0
School-prison pipeline (<i>N</i> = 2)	1	1	0	0
Self-regulated learning (<i>N</i> = 2)	1	1	0	0
Bloom AND taxonomy (<i>N</i> = 2)	1	1	0	0
'Critical pedagogy' (<i>N</i> = 2)	0	0	0	2
Illich (<i>N</i> = 2)	1	1	0	0
Solution focused therapy (<i>N</i> = 1)	0	0	0	1
'multiple intelligences' (<i>N</i> = 1)	0	0	1	0
Adverse childhood experiences (<i>N</i> = 1)	1	0	0	0
'Critical Race theory' (<i>N</i> = 1)	1	0	0	0
'Cultural historical activity theory' (<i>N</i> = 1)	0	1	0	0
Social Disorganisation (<i>N</i> = 1)	1	0	0	0
Bauman OR Liquid Modernity (<i>N</i> = 1)	1	0	0	0

The theories that were present are listed in the rows of [Table 1](#), providing us with insights into the theories being drawn on in published research on the sector, their prevalence, and any gaps. We found that theory was being put to work in different ways, to different extents and by different kinds of researchers. Theory was being used to: inform methodology (e.g. Grounded Theory); inform or explain practice (e.g. restorative approaches, self-regulated learning); explain specific social practices or arrangements (e.g. the notion of a school-prison pipeline, ideas of risk and resilience); and to explain the broader context in which AP is located (e.g. the use of Bourdieu and Bronfenbrenner).

A typology (table columns)

Clear distinctions needed to be made about the types of research AP theory was featuring in. We have captured this variation through four broad categories, which are listed in the columns of the table and elucidated below. This presents a tool which helps us to understand the different ways that theory is used in the published research on the AP sector in England, and any distinctions between the theoretical orientations of practitioner-researchers and academic researchers.

Type 1: theory in passing

Under this heading we have placed published research which makes passing or minimal reference to a particular theory. In such cases, the theory is not elaborated or explicitly

applied as a conceptual or analytical framework for what is included in the paper. More commonly, a theory is briefly mentioned or summarised, for instance as part of a literature review. In such cases, the theories are not being purposefully or systematically applied to contribute to knowledge about the AP sector.

Type 2: theoretically informed design or analysis

Under this heading, we have grouped published papers where there is a more consistent or explicit reference to, or use of, theory to elucidate data drawn from a study of AP. Importantly, there is high variability in the extent to which theory is drawn upon in papers listed here, from minimal application (e.g. Brown's (2018) use of attachment and Twells' (2020) use of the notion of a protective factor) through to the use of theory as a more encompassing analytical framework which is consistently applied to data (e.g. Armstrong's (2017) use of Bronfenbrenner and the use of attachment in Fitzsimmons, Trigg, and Premkumar (2019)).

Type 3: researchers reporting on practitioners' use of/reference to theory

In this category, we include papers which report directly on how practitioners understand and use theory to inform their work in AP. Included in this category are papers where a researcher reports on AP practitioners discussing and/or applying theory to understand their work. Again the extent of discussion and depth of application is on a continuum from a single mention (e.g. a member of staff referring to labelling in Leather (2009) and AP staff in the NFER (2012) study referring to the need for resilience in staff) to more sustained discussion or application of theory (e.g. Dodman (2016) refers to the determination of an AP setting to adopt restorative practice and Bruder and Spensley (2015) report staff taking into account attachment experiences of the young people in their AP). Five studies included in this column evidence students making use of theoretical terms and all five of these instances are in relation to labelling and stigma.

Type 4: practitioner research/ practitioner-researcher collaborations

In this category, we include papers written by practitioner-researchers in the AP context. In some cases, these are reflections on practice written by practitioners (e.g. Solomon and Thomas 2013; Duckett, 2021) or collaborative projects between a university-based researcher and an AP practitioner (e.g. Levinson and Thompson 2016). In others, research is reporting on a project undertaken in an AP setting, often by educational psychologists (e.g. Ellis and Wolfe 2019; McLoughlin 2010). Doctoral research studies undertaken by AP practitioners within their workplace are also included in this category (e.g. James 2005; Woodley, 2017).

Discussion

Table 1 highlights the prevalence of different theoretical orientations, and the types of research that theory features in. Out of the 106 studies making use of theory, our literature search finds 70 studies deploying theory in line with type 1, 60 studies in line with type 2, 30 studies in line with type 3 and 20 studies in line with type 4. Across this, 48 theories are drawn on in total. Several studies make use of more than one theory and in line with more than one type – this is most significant in a doctoral study (Leather,

2009) with 18 applications of theory across all four types. One consequence of developing a framework which brings together researcher (type 2) and practitioner (type 3) use of theory, is that this highlights both correlations and differences in the application of theory. There are many theories used by researchers which are not identified as being drawn on by practitioners, yet where theories are identified by practitioners there tends to be a broad correlation with researchers also using these ideas. The one instance where practitioner use significantly outstrips researcher use is in relation to restorative justice. In this section, we discuss the trends and gaps apparent in the use of theory in the AP literature based on the typology presented in Table 1. We make three central arguments about the implications for practice and for the accumulation of knowledge about the AP sector.

Key findings

1. AP practitioner engagement with theory

First, our typology shows that relatively few studies have been conducted to understand how AP practitioners engage with theory to inform their practice, or to frame practitioner-research on the AP sector (Type 3 = 30 studies; and Type 4 = 20 studies). We cannot straightforwardly interpret this finding as evidence that practitioners are not drawing upon theoretical ideas, since this might be happening in practice but not being captured by published research. However, it does allow us to identify a gap that exists in the types of knowledge being produced through published research, which is shared and accessed as one important way of understanding the work of APs, including by research communities, trainee educational practitioners and policymakers. It suggests that a theoretically derived evidence base on practitioner-informed research in English AP is in its infancy. There is a clear need to better understand the reasons for this through primary research, which might include speaking directly to practitioners about the framework of ideas they use but also about the factors which enable and inhibit practitioner engagement with research and theory. We hypothesise two areas that would be worthy of further research in relation to this finding.

The first concerns the culture of AP settings as it pertains to engagement with theory, research and wider staff Continuing Professional Development (CPD). The evidence base on the supports and barriers to mainstream teachers' engagement with research and theory is illuminating here. It highlights the vital role played by school leaders in creating the time, infrastructure and institutional culture to support CPD and learning amongst teachers (Cordingly 2015), and in translating research into accessible and usable forms for teachers (Coldwell et al., 2017). Leaders are also found to play an important role in engaging teachers with theory, helping them to make explicit the theories and assumptions that underpin their practices, as a necessary step for developing practice (Robinson, Hohepa, and Lloyd, 2015). These points speak to the importance of institutional culture and leadership in cultivating engagement with theory and research in mainstream school settings.

The question of how this translates into AP settings is an important topic for further research, but the current context of AP leads us to postulate some unique challenges that might be faced by staff in AP settings when it comes to engaging with theory and

research. First, many APs are precariously placed, as short-term and unequal funding arrangements continue to mean relatively high institutional turnover in the sector (Integrated 2022). It is also the case that in smaller APs many staff wear multiple hats and must step into multiple roles quickly, and smaller APs can experience a disproportionate burden of audit and inspection (Thomson and Pennacchia 2014). These institutional features might impact on the feasibility of undertaking or engaging with research, or (at a leadership level) of cultivating a culture of CPD. Practices that support CPD and learning might be particularly difficult to embed in smaller and/or more precariously positioned provisions where staff are paid per-delivered session, as time for CPD would either be voluntary or incur a direct cost for the provision. This context poses important questions for further research about the extent to which the institutional culture in AP settings is conducive to supporting practitioners to either undertake their own research, or engage with broader theoretical ideas, to understand or develop their practice, as well as whether such cultures have any impacts on the experiences and outcomes of young learners.

The second area worthy of further research which might help to explain the relatively few examples of Type 3 and Type 4 studies concerns the status and idea of AP as a 'sector'. Alternative and informal education are not new, but the notion of an 'AP sector' is in its infancy, and networks, professional bodies, communities of practice, and a sector knowledge base are still in a state of development. We suggest that of all sectors in the English Education system, AP remains the least understood and the least attended to in research, with far less funded research taking place compared with mainstream schools. There has also been little consideration of AP staff as professionals worthy of theoretically informed practice, which perhaps suggests a low status is ascribed to those working in APs and the young people they work with. The most recent schools' workforce data for 2022–2023 indicates that while teachers in AP settings are slightly more likely to have Qualified Teacher Status, they also have a higher proportion of support staff and overall, there is a significantly higher proportion of staff with an 'unclassified' qualification level. It is also important to note that this data only includes state-maintained alternative provision. It excludes unregistered provision and provision registered as independent schools which – as the most peripheral organisations in the sector – are likely to include practitioners with varied professional backgrounds and qualifications such as youth work, social work and psychotherapy (Malcolm 2021). The implications for engagement with theory and research of having a workforce drawn from varied professional and educational backgrounds would be important to assess in future research. It would be simplistic to argue that staff without a university education or QTS status are less likely to use theory, since the role of theory in teacher training is a live debate (Orchard and Winch 2015) and qualified mainstream teachers also report low confidence with using research to inform their practice (Coldwell et al., 2017). However, exposure to a range of theories, and the practice of interrogating assumptions, might be more common-place orientations in university-based teacher training, and may lead to more confident and/or regular engagement with these practices.

2. The dominance of psychological framings

Overall, theoretical orientations which are located in psychology – such as attachment theory, risk and resilience – are most commonly drawn on in the AP research. One

reason for this may be the significant number of educational psychologists completing a doctoral research project in AP settings as part of their training. We found that:

- 15 of the 35 studies using attachment are connected to counselling or EP training or practice;
- 7 out of 11 studies using containment theory are connected to counselling or EP training or practice;
- 12 out of 29 studies using risk and resilience theories are connected to counselling or EP training or practice.

A possible explanation for this is that AP settings provide access to a concentrated population of disadvantaged young people with additional needs, which may be hard to come by elsewhere for a trainee educational psychologist. This phenomenon strengthens the leaning towards psychological theoretical orientations in the literature. We would be interested to understand whether there is a similar dynamic in other countries, and it will be important to explore whether this filters through to staff theorisations of AP practice.

Type three in our categorisation allows us to reflect specifically on which theoretical ideas practitioners draw on in discussions about their work with young people in AP. References to attachment are the most prevalent of these (12 references), and it therefore appears that the broader emphasis of attachment theory in research is reflected in practice contexts. A reason for this focus on psychologically derived theories by practitioners might be that some concepts appear to be more apparent in everyday use and are perhaps perceived to be more tangible or applicable. For example, attachment might be readily associated with a focus on relationships. Meanwhile, there were 8 mentions of restorative approaches under Type three. We posit that the higher occurrence of risk, resilience and labelling reflects their migration from theoretical concepts into popular discourse. A possible explanation for the more prevalent discussion of restorative approaches might be that this approach was used in the 'Back on track AP pilots' (White, Martin, and Jeffes 2012) which were invested in by the New Labour government (1997–2010). This seems to suggest the sector shifts in relation to wider contextual and policy dynamics and discourses, and that at present these might be more influential than a set of established theoretical underpinnings for the sector. We propose that research is needed to understand more specifically how terminology is being used. For instance, 'attachment' might be adopted as a shorthand for signalling the value of relationships in the work of AP, rather than as a more systematic theoretical framework for reflecting on practice (as Shemmings in Harlow 2021).

3. The marginality of social and political theoretical framings

This overview of the theories currently used within the research literature on AP suggests there is a tilt towards the use of models such as attachment from psychology. This is accompanied by a relatively small amount of research that uses social and political theoretical orientations to frame knowledge of the AP sector. We use the phrase 'social and political framings' to refer to those theoretical perspectives which explore and problematise the inequalities associated with the AP sector. Only three of the 25 studies that used social or political framing to consider gender, class and/or racial inequalities were

undertaken by AP practitioners. This suggests a shortage of such ‘framings’ being actively used by practitioners to understand the sector in which they work.

There are some potential risks associated with this trend. First, is the propensity for psychological approaches to make connections with individualised accounts of young people in AP, for example Bryant et al. (2018) note that the language of ‘attachment issues’ is used by practitioners, while young people in AP are reported as rejecting being labelled as academically deficient (Dean 2018) and focus on unfairness in the system rather than personal responsibility (Jalali and Morgan 2018). These dynamics could lead to tensions in practice; indeed, research has suggested an important connection between staff perceptions of young people in AP and their outcomes (Dean 2018). Second, we are concerned about the implications of the lack of social and political framings given that AP is a site where existing inequalities on the basis of gender, class and/or race can become entrenched if left unchallenged. The example of gender is particularly illuminating here. Girls are a minority group in AP, and the limited evidence on their specific experiences highlights that provision is often not designed with them in mind and can be reactively designed in ways which reinforce gender stereotypes, which remain relatively unchallenged in AP settings (Vincent 2016). Gender is one example, yet a language to engage with inequalities that relate to race, (dis)ability, SEND, sexuality and social class would be a similarly valuable way to support staff to engage with the inequalities they encounter through their work. Developing a common, usable, accessible, and theoretically informed space for talking about the inequities staff and young people in AP encounter and experience in their day-to-day lives and practices is critical. We contend that such pedagogies of discomfort (Zembylas 2015) perform a key role in the AP context, enhancing the individual support on offer with an awareness of, and ability to challenge, inequitable societal structures.

Whilst we are reporting on published research, a question for further primary research would be to understand the extent to which AP practitioners draw on social and political framings more tacitly through their day-to-day work with young people, and whether this varies depending on the size and type of the provision. It would also be valuable to understand potential challenges practitioners face in putting social and political framings to use in their work with young people. For instance, do staff struggle to access these theoretical approaches in the first place, or is the issue a lack of time to read understand and apply them? Finally, it is important to understand whether the challenging and potentially uncomfortable nature of social and political issues and framings lead practitioners away from such discussions and towards a perhaps more comfortable or recognisable frame-of-reference drawn from (popular) psychology. We contend that, if staff in AP do not have a common and usable language for discussing these issues and inequalities – which might at times be challenging and uncomfortable – then AP runs the risk of perpetuating inequalities on the basis of social differences (e.g. gender, race, class and/or disability) despite the supportive environment it can offer to young people who experience marginalisation and exclusion from mainstream school (Jones 2013).

Conclusion

At a time when there is increased national policy focus on the role of AP in achieving a more inclusive and equitable education system (HM Government 2022), this article has

examined how theory features in the research literatures concerning the English AP sector. This is the first comprehensive review of the theoretical ideas used to understand, analyse, and inform practice in the sector, and we have presented a framework for categorising the literature on the AP sector and its practices, which refer to theory. Our review provides a useful tool to researchers new to the field or seeking a comprehensive overview of theories used within the literature on English alternative provision. Meanwhile, the framework is of international relevance and can be used by researchers who are seeking to understand the state-of-knowledge on alternative and informal education in their own contexts.

Applied to the English context, this framework highlights a shortage of published research which seeks to understand how practitioners in English APs understand, and use, theoretical ideas, concepts, and frameworks to inform their work with young people. We find that theories drawn from psychological and therapeutic orientations are more common than those drawing on social and political framings. We presented some of the causes and implications of these trends and gaps and highlighted areas for further research (listed below), including research that draws directly on practitioner experiences and perspectives on the theoretical ideas and frameworks which inform their work, and the challenges of using theory, sharing ideas, and doing practitioner research.

Questions for researchers to take forward in future work:

- How do researchers justify and explain the theoretical frameworks they select to inform empirical work about the AP sector?
- How are theories and concepts being put-to-use by AP practitioners to inform and understand their work, and how do practitioners rationalise their use of these theories? What opportunities and barriers do AP practitioners face to undertaking and publishing research on their practice and engaging with theory and research to inform their work?
- Is it possible to create an AP sector more conducive to theory-informed practice, and what would this look like?
- How does this picture of theory use in English AP compare to other national contexts and systems of informal and alternative education, and what can we learn from comparison?

The final question highlights our particular interest in the applicability of the tool we have developed for understanding alternative and informal education in other national contexts, and what might be gained from comparative work in this area. We view this as important work because the COVID-19 pandemic has (re)focused international attention on the educational access and equity, and wider wellbeing, of disadvantaged young people across the world (Suero 2020). Our analysis has shown that prior theorising of English AP tends to neglect structural inequalities and sociological perspectives on this field of education. If this trend is present across national contexts, there are important social justice implications, given the ways in which structural inequalities have been magnified through the pandemic. Supporting AP staff across national contexts to

engage with social and political framings could strengthen the individual support AP offers to young people and begin to challenge the entrenchment of existing inequalities.

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