

**Hearing the Voices of Pupils with SEMH Needs: Experiences of Staff
Relationships in Primary Mainstream Schools**

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Abbreviations

SEMH – Social, Emotional and Mental Health
 SEND – Special Educational Needs and Disabilities
 SEN – Special Education Needs
 CYP – Children and Young People
 TSR – Teacher-Student Relationship
 EHCP – Education, Health and Care Plan
 SENCo – Special Educational Needs Coordinator
 SAP – Specialist and Alternative Provision
 TA – Teaching Assistant
 EP – Educational Psychologist
 TEP – Trainee Educational Psychologist
 UEA – University of East Anglia
 LA – Local Authority

Executive Summary

This thesis is comprised of three chapters exploring the topic of pupils with social, emotional and mental health (SEMH) needs' experience of their staff relationships in the primary mainstream setting. The thesis adopts a social constructivist lens and considers wider ecological systems which impact on the child and staff relationship. By hearing the voices of an often unheard population, the thesis adds to the literature base, developing both the academic understanding and implications for practice of how relational approaches and staff relationships are experienced by children with SEMH needs.

Chapter 1: Literature Review

A narrative literature review is presented through the Person-Process-Construct-Time Framework (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006), using a bioecological system lens to consider wider contextual influences on pupil and staff relationships. The chapter aims to highlight and synthesise what is known about the topic of children with SEMH needs' relational experiences with school staff. The literature is organised across the following ecological levels; Chronosystemic (time) influences, Macrosystemic (social norms, culture and policy) influences, Exosystemic (media and local government) influences, Mesosystemic (interaction between microsystems) influences, Microsystemic (school and family) influences and Individual influences. This chapter sets the scene and rationale for the following empirical paper which follows.

Chapter 2: Empirical Paper

The Empirical Paper outlines the qualitative research study which explores the relational experiences of seven primary aged participants with staff in mainstream schools. The empirical paper is guided by one overarching research question which forms the basis for the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Smith et al., 2021) of findings. Through participatory methodology in the form of the Relational Mapping Interview (Boden et al., 2019) which guided the interviews, four superordinate themes and eleven subordinate themes were generated from children's verbal data. Implications for practice, research and policy are discussed in addition to strengths and limitations of the study and future research directions.

Chapter 3: Reflective Chapter

The final chapter includes a critically reflexive account of the research journey from development through to execution. The chapter is written in the first person and considers aspects of ethical practice in educational research in addition to the researcher's positionality and power dynamics that exist between themselves and the participant group. Disruption to the research journey is discussed alongside a reflective account of the interview and data analysis process. Finally, the chapter reflects on alternative methodologies and discusses the research's contribution to the field alongside proposed dissemination of findings.

Chapter 1 - Literature Review

Introduction

The literature review aims to identify, analyse and synthesise what is already known about the topic of children with social, emotional and mental health (SEMH) need's relational experiences with staff in school, through an ecological systems framework. The review will set the context for the empirical paper to come in chapter 2 by critically evaluating the current literature base. Through the use of a narrative literature review using an ecosystemic framework of the Process-Person-Construct-Time Model (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006), the literature will be organised across ecological levels. The purpose of this will be to explain how relational experiences emerge from interactions within and between systems highlighting that staff relationships and the teacher-student relationship (TSR) with students with SEMH needs do not occur in a silo, and cannot be separated from the context within which it is situated. The review aims to demonstrate the multi-level complexity of TSRs for children with SEMH needs and build a theoretically aligned platform for which the subsequent study will be presented, whereby lived experiences are situated within wider ecological influences.

SEMH as a primary need among pupils with SEND continues to increase year on year, with SEMH being the second most common need in 2024 among pupils with special educational needs (SEN) after Speech, Language and Communication Needs (Cordis Bright, 2025). These trends indicate that the incidence of SEMH needs are rising and schools are increasingly recognising and recording SEMH as a need. The Department for Education (2025) published statistics for the academic year 24/25 which state that for all schools and settings in England excluding independent, there were 71,306 Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs) with SEMH as the primary need and 279,230 pupils without an EHCP on SEN support with SEMH as their primary area of need. These figures have dramatically increased from the academic year of 19/20 where there were 39,189 EHCPs for the primary area of SEMH need and 194,11 at SEN support. There has been a marked increase in the number of EHCPs being issued across all areas of need, where now 5.3% of children are supported by an EHCP, up from 4.8% in 2024. Similar trends are apparent for children on SEN Support with 14.2% in 2025, increasing from 13.6% in

2024. The rise in both statutory and SEN support likely contributes to increased identification of SEMH needs due to more pupils being assessed and supported than before. The consistent rise in SEMH needs as a primary need for CYP indicates growing demands for SEMH related support in schools where schools are under increasing pressure to meet the SEMH needs of an increasing number of children.

Language, definitions and terminology

Before beginning the literature review, it is important to comment on the language used throughout the presenting chapters, including the empirical paper, where children are referred to as those who are described as having or experiencing SEMH needs. Billington (2006) states that what we say when speaking to children, and about them, matters. There is a power which words hold, where language is not neutral, shaping relationships and identities. Language, and the way in which we use it, can influence how we interpret people and events and the way in which we respond to children's behaviours (Stanbridge & Mercer, 2019). Considering the words that are used in practice and within the literature is a key consideration for the following literature review.

The research acknowledges the marginalising and limiting language that exists around special educational needs, where pathologising discourses locate 'deficit' within the child (Dudley-Marling, 2007; Robinson, 2017). Historically, a medical model of need has shaped the culture and language within the education system, where attempts to shift towards a more social model of need are apparent, however the effects have not come to fruition operationally in schools (Weir, 2021). In keeping with ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), the ideologies of the culture and dominant language used shapes interactions, and these either disrupt or perpetuate these same dominant ideologies. This can be explained by the recursivity of the micro and macro systems. The worldview held by individuals within systems creates macro-discourses, influencing the coordination of activities with one another and micro-interactions which are had. Subsequently, rituals and patterns emerge which influence standards and expectations, ultimately further impacting on the worldview and dominant discourse (McNamee, 2024).

Previous research and educational discourse uses the language of 'social, emotional and behavioural difficulties' (SEBD), with a focus on locating

'problems' within the child rather than the context (Norwich, 2008). The Code of Practice (CoP) refers to SEMH needs as those that may manifest in a variety of ways, including behaviour that presents as "withdrawn, challenging, disruptive or disturbing" (DfE & DoH, 2015). Critiques of the SEMH categorisation include the definitional complexity, where different stakeholders will conceptualise 'mental health' differently (Humphrey & Wigelsworth, 2016). Labels have additionally been highlighted by children and parents as limiting, where staff reduce their expectations of pupils (Caslin, 2021). These critiques will be further explored in later sections of the review. The current research acknowledges the broad (and sometimes unhelpful or limiting) categorisation of need issue, where the children within the current study should not be reduced to labels.

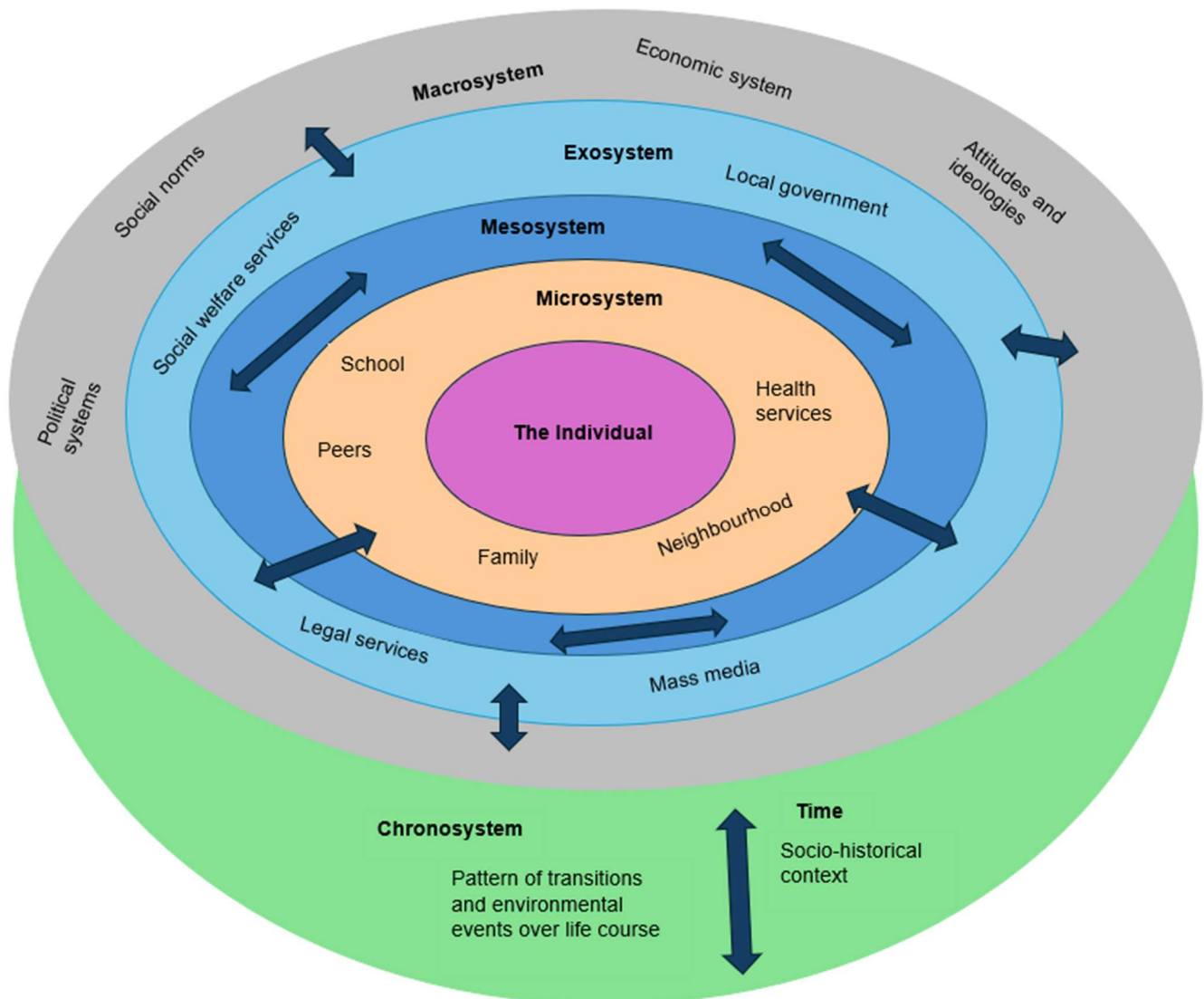
Narrative Literature Review

Narrative literature reviews are recognised as a rigorous form of knowledge synthesis, especially for research contexts which are conceptionally complex, integrating theoretical and qualitative literature where the aim is interpretation rather than meta-analysis (Sukhera et al., 2022). Narrative reviews provide conceptual insight, build arguments and synthesise complex information from sources that cannot be compared through standardisation (Baumeister & Leary, 1997; Green et al., 2006). The narrative nature of the review allows the researcher a level of flexibility in including studies that align and fit with the study's aims. Critiques of Narrative reviews include the broad nature of the review, where literature selection methods are unspecified and potentially biased (Grant & Booth, 2009). Systematic literature reviews in contrast are linked to specific search criteria, detailing explicit selection inclusion criteria for papers, resulting in critical evaluation of literature in reference to a specific research question (Petticrew & Roberts, 2006; Tranfield et al., 2003). For the nature of the current research and literature review, systematic literature reviews are considered as limiting in scope as they have the potential to exclude theoretically rich and context-dependent studies (Chong et al., 2022) which are crucial in understanding complex socio-cultural and educational phenomena (Newman & Gough, 2020).

Narrative reviews serve the purpose of critiquing the literature, identifying gaps and drawing conclusions in a qualitative evidence synthesis method, a meta-ethnography (Durai , 2021). The current literature review also incorporates elements of historical reviews, such as considering the issues of staff and pupil relationships over time. Importantly, a rigorous review should aim to be replicable and demonstrate a clear structure and rationale for literature which is drawn upon (Hart, 2018; Siddaway et al., 2019). The current review will incorporate the developmentally informed theoretical framework of Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006), Process-Person-Context-Time (PPCT Model). The framework emphasises that proximal processes are influenced by the individual characteristics of the child, the variety of contexts in which that individual interacts and time (Navarro et al., 2020). This theoretical framework has been included within the narrative review in order to communicate that the TSR does not exist in isolation and that a multitude of factors influence the TSR, especially in pupils with SEMH needs. The review will consider the TSR between pupils with an SEMH need and school staff through various lenses. These will include, The Chronosystem, Macrosystem, Exosystem, Mesosystem, Microsystem and the individual level, figure 1 presents what each of these systems incorporates.

Figure 1

Ecological Systems Theory – PPCT, Adapted from Bronfenbrenner & Morris (2006)



The literature review will aim to address concerns that research does not use the PPCT Model comprehensively, only superficially (Tong & An, 2024), by attempting to rigorously explore the complete use of Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1989), hopefully strengthening the conceptual framing. Academics have published guidance around increasing rigour and transparency of narrative reviews, advocating for studies to state the explicit search strategy, inclusion criteria

and develop reflexive statements throughout (Paré et al. 2017). Within the current research, from August 2023 – December 2025, searches were made through a variety of websites and data bases including, EBSCO, Google Scholar, APA PsycINFO and SCOPUS in addition to departmental and government publications. Primary research, grey literature and discursive or theoretical work is included within the review. The PPCT model as a conceptual scaffold for the review, questions and search criteria are demonstrated in Table 1. The review will be structured round the different systems, however for some more complex and nuanced topics, their relevance to different systems will be discussed within the structured presentation of the review.

The search terms were developed through the researcher's background reading across academic literature, grey literature, and statutory guidance relating to SEND, inclusion, and SEMH. Key policy documents such as the SEND Code of Practice (DfE & DoH, 2015) and Behaviour in Schools guidance (DfE, 2024) influenced the definition of SEMH and inclusion criteria of language within the literature review and informed the terminology used in the search strategy. More broad reading around educational psychology texts emphasising ecological and relational perspectives (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006; Norwich, 2013) further supported the development of theoretically aligned search terms. Practice-based knowledge gained through the researcher's role as a TEP within a LA also contributed to the refinement of terms. The researcher's experience of SEMH systemic support in schools, including both relational and behaviourist practice frameworks used in schools, guided the literature review search terms development. The researcher in an applied field of psychology acted as the bridge between both professional experience and academic theory, ensuring that the search terms reflected both academic rigour and relevance to practice.

Predominantly, the social model of need (Norwich, 2013) and Bronfenbrenner and Morris' (2006) PPCT model provided the overarching structure for organising the search strategy. After reviewing key texts on SEMH, teacher–student relationships, and ecological models of development, the researcher mapped search terms onto each PPCT system. This ensured that the search remained grounded in education, SEMH needs, and relational practice, while also highlighting the multi-layered influences on children's experiences in school. Core texts selected as required

reading throughout the training on the Doctorate in Educational Psychology also informed the overarching research, practice-based experience and ultimately, literature review and search terms (Beaver, 2011; Kelly et al., 2008).

The Chronosystem search terms were additionally influenced by practice-based observations of how time, transitions and changes in routine affect the relational experiences of children with SEMH needs, particularly during key points such as moving between classes or phases. The Macrosystem terms drew on work within schools, where national policy, behaviour expectations and wider cultural norms strongly influence how SEMH is understood and responded to. Exosystem terms were informed by experience of how indirect factors, such as Local Authority processes, funding decisions, and external services, impact the support available in schools and shape staff–pupil relationships. Mesosystem terms reflected the importance of interactions between home, school and community services, which frequently emerged in casework, consultations and multi-agency meetings. Microsystem terms were grounded in direct relational work observed in classrooms, focusing on the immediate environments in which children with SEMH needs interact with staff. Finally, individual-level terms centred on children’s own needs, informed by pupil voice work and ethical practice (BPS, 2021). Diagnostic labels such as ‘ADHD’ (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder) or ‘EBSA’ (Emotionally Based School Avoidance) were intentionally not used as search terms to avoid narrowing the focus and to ensure research was centred around the broad area of needs and SEMH category used in educational settings.

Table 1

Literature Review search term examples relative to ecological system

PPCT System	Review Question	Search term examples
Chronosystem	How does time, transitions and developmental change influence relational experiences of children	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - ‘school transition’ and ‘SEMH’ - ‘TSR’ and ‘time’ - ‘relational stability’ and ‘teacher’

	with SEMH needs with staff in school?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 'historical changes' and 'teacher-child relationship' - 'historical changes' and SEMH - 'SEMH' and 'Social, emotional and behavioural difficulties (SEBD)'
Macrosystem	How do wider cultural values, norms, political systems and policies influence the relational experience of children with SEMH needs with staff in school?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 'culture' and 'behaviour' and 'school' - 'behaviour norms' and 'school' - 'SEMH' (on DfE) - 'relational practice' and 'schools' - 'inclusion' and 'SEMH' - 'attachment aware' and 'trauma informed' schools - 'policies' and 'behaviour in school' - 'educational reform uk' and 'TSR'
Exosystem	How do indirect factors such as local government and mass media influence the relational experience of children with SEMH	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 'public perception' and 'SEMH' - 'behaviour in schools' and 'local authority'

	needs with staff in school?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 'Local authority' and 'SEMH' - 'special school' and SEMH - 'SEND funding' - 'whole school approach' and 'behaviour'
Mesosystem	How do connections between key micro-systems (school/family/community) influence the relational experiences of children with SEMH needs with staff in school?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 'pastoral support' and 'SEMH' - 'school-family relationship' and 'SEMH' - 'services' and 'SEMH needs' - 'school outcomes' and - 'multi-agency working' and 'child mental health'
Microsystem	How do direct factors such as school, family and the local community influence the relational experiences of children with SEMH needs with staff in school?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 'teacher-student relationship' and 'SEMH' - 'Support staff-student relationship' and 'SEMH' - 'Behaviour' and 'primary school' - 'Health services' and 'mental health children'

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 'attachment' and 'school' - 'family' and 'SEMH'
Individual	How do individual factors within children who are described as having SEMH needs influence their relational experience with school staff?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 'SEMH needs' - 'Special educational needs and disabilities' and 'SEMH' - 'Relationships' and 'children with SEMH needs' - 'pupil voice' and 'SEMH needs'

Chronosystem

Transition and children with SEMH needs

Primary to secondary school transition for children can be a challenging time, where children with SEMH needs are additionally vulnerable to this period of instability and change (Bagnall et al., 2021; Donaldson et al., 2023). Research exploring ways to ameliorate this impact for pupils with SEMH needs found that children experience significant change in support received at secondary school and communicate a desire for safety and belonging in their new setting (Bagnall et al., 2021). Findings reiterated the importance of supporting pupil's emotional health and wellbeing in the short term whilst at primary school and to consider children's longer term wellbeing, advocating for communication across schools, providing a level of continuity in the support across settings (Bagnall et al., 2021). Several Educational Psychology doctoral theses in recent years have explored the topic of transition within this population through the voice of the young people, indicating the importance and prevalence of the issue in applied practice (Clark, 2025, Grant, 2020; Marisha, 2020). Factors impacting successful transition include, a reduction in trauma informed approaches (Clark, 2025), a need for trusting relationships, choice, autonomy and distancing from primary school experiences (Grant, 2020). Crucial aspects of the transitional period include pre-transition anxieties and the adjustment

to secondary school in the first year (McCrossan, 2023), where peer relationships, TSRs and punitive behaviour policies are additional risk and resilience factors of successful transition. These findings are reiterated by Aspley (2023) who describes relationships, inclusive approaches, emotional and physical safety, as crucial factors in relation to ideal and maladaptive transitions for CYP.

Policy, reform and funding across time and the TSR

The climate of global competition and league tables, reduces the function of school to academic achievement, contributing towards the challenges faced in education with supporting mental health and wellbeing and responding positively to 'difficult' behaviour (Parker & Levinson, 2018). The likely mechanism that influences schools to reduce their function are multiple, including increased pressures on schools linked to performativity and accountability (Brill et al., 2018; Hutchings, 2015) and wider societal views on the function of schooling in terms of economic productivity (Ball, 2012). The Education Reform Act (1988) introduced the National Curriculum, Standardised Testing and Ofsted's predecessor (HMI), marking a shift from education as locally controlled to centralised and standards driven. Researchers have commented on the educational climate of the 1990s being more attuned to CYP's needs before the highly prescriptive curriculum and pressured delivery of this in the 2000s (Parker & Levinson, 2018).

Funding to schools had also fluctuated across time in line with national issues such as post-2010 austerity. Schools made significant savings, reduced support staff and reported tighter resources during this period (Sibieta, 2021). Inevitably these changes impacted on pupils, with reductions in support staff disproportionately affecting vulnerable pupils, including pupils with SEND and their access to mainstream education (Alliance for Inclusive Education, 2018). The loss in staff is directly relevant to the staff-student relationship for all pupils, specifically those with additional support needs in the continuity of relational availability. Research has evidenced that spending cuts have a detrimental impact on pupil's standardised test performance, demonstrating a link between funding reductions and attainment (Pavese, 2024). This is relevant when considering the conceptualisation or assessment of need when used to potentially marginalise children further. National austerity and economic issues through time additionally impact on family and home factors for children and young people within their microsystem. This is particularly

salient when considering SEND (including SEMH needs) as a social justice issue (Symes, 2015; Alderson, 2018). Funding cuts and tight school budgets are not an issue of the past, figures for schools are still challenging with latest estimates demonstrating continuing resource challenges and pressures around funding impacting across phases (ISF, 2025).

Within the UK, policy changes over time impact on the quality of the TSR, where accountability, high-stakes testing and inspection performance indicators consistently reduce teachers' capacity for the TSR, with effects varying by age and phase (Jerrim & Sims 2022; Jerrim et al., 2024). Primary teachers' experiences of neo-liberal education reforms highlighted that performance and workload pressure contributed to a shift in classroom priorities, away from their relational work with pupils (Sturrock, 2022). This is further evidenced in research around accountability measures, indicating that pressure on teachers changes the nature of interactions between teachers and students, where teachers prioritise instrumental teaching over more supportive or relational practices (Levantino et al., 2024). Ofsted may be considered a key part of these pressures, with research into inspectors' voices highlighting concerns around increased politicisation of Ofsted, with a narrow focus on education within their framework (Tian, 2024). The single word judgements assigned to schools from Ofsted have historically been considered to damage the relationship between schools and Ofsted (Diamond, 2024). Changes to Ofsted across time include the new introduction of School Report Cards replacing single word judgements which are being implemented in November 2025, grading evaluation areas across schools (DfE, 2024, 2025). Accountability measures could be argued as one of the mechanisms that therefore reduces teacher capacity, notably time, cognitive and emotional capacity, where teacher wellbeing has been found to be impacted by educational reform, bureaucracy, accountability measures and increased workload (Skinner et al., 2019; Towers et al., 2022). However, it is not educational reform alone that contributes solely to declining teacher mental health and wellbeing, with societal and work-life factors also at play (Jerrim et al., 2021).

Over the last fifty years, teachers' roles have moved from autonomous, widely respected professionals towards an identity shaped by neo-liberal restructuring, managerialism and bureaucracy which have contributed to identity tension and conflict for teachers. These shifts have also contributed to marketisation, increased

parental choice, and changes in power dynamics, where the transactional nature of the TSR likens students to consumers (Hon, 2015). High stakes contexts have contributed to this transactional nature of TSRs, where exam performance and curriculum content delivery is emphasised over holistic development for students (Andrews et al., 2019; Hutchings, 2015). However, despite the clear shift presented in the context in which teachers are working, schools which protect teacher time and promote supportive cultures, allow space for teacher agency, pastoral support and relational practice (Gilbert, 2012; Hibbin, 2024; Moran et al., 2024).

TSRs across time

Longitudinal research highlights the importance of TSRs for pupil's long term outcomes, where relationships have lasting impacts for pupils despite the transient nature of teachers roles in children's lives (Ansari et al., 2020; Hamre & Pianta, 2001, Quinn, 2017). The impact of time and developmental stage on TSRs is discussed in the literature, where conflict between teachers and students is more prevalent in later years (Ansari et al., 2020). This may be in part related to the increasing academic and social demands on pupils as they progress through school. Research and theory suggests that a critical period for TSRs includes secondary school, where adolescents' needs vary across stages of development (Eccles et al., 1996). During early adolescence students look to teachers for social bonds where parental and child dynamics shift, this occurs at the same time as the TSR becomes less personal and positive (Eccles et al., 1993). It has been suggested that both teachers and students change over the course of a school year, where the TSR fluctuates, impacting on how the TSR meets the student's developmental needs (Gehlbach et al., 2012). This research highlighted that pupil's self-reporting of the quality of the TSR tend to become less positive throughout the year, although many relationships improved, perhaps suggesting that the TSR is not fixed (Gehlbach et al., 2012). Where TSRs are not fixed, the potential for teachers and students to influence their relationship appears encouraging. Longitudinal research in this field, looking at individual TSR dyads over time has been challenging for researchers to conduct, related to time intensive data collection methods and resourcing (Wentzel, 2022).

Mesosystem

Current policy and legislation

Current legislation and policy place legal responsibility on schools to identify, assess, and develop reasonable adjustments to support children with SEND including those children with SEMH needs (DfE & DoH, 2015; Children and Families Act, 2014). Where children's needs are deemed as additional or beyond the threshold of reasonable adjustments or ordinarily available provision, children needs are assessed through the statutory assessment process of an Education, Health and Care Needs Assessment (DfE & DoH, 2015). Although this legal entitlement to provision supports some children with the most observable of SEMH needs, many children without an EHCP have SEMH needs, where there are national issues with statutory assessment backlogs and inequity in financial support given to schools to meet need (Lee et al., 2024). These inequalities impact on the TSR for pupils with SEMH needs, related to funding around additional staff support and staff understanding of need, whereby children with an EHCP may be supported and understood differently in comparison to a child with a similar pattern of presenting need without an EHCP (Webster & Blatchford, 2019; Hutchinson et al., 2024). The Behaviour in Schools guidance (DfE, 2024), although not statutory legislation, promotes the need for whole-school culture around behaviour with anticipatory support for pupils with SEND. Despite this, there is an emphasis on sanctions and structured behaviour policies which arguably could be seen to juxtapose understanding of SEMH related behavioural presentation. Teacher's Union advise on the guidance commented that although it acknowledges SEND, teachers feel that the sanctions-based approach undermines relational practice and disproportionately penalises pupils with SEND (NASUWT, 2022). Teachers here can be seen to experience a difficult balance between operationalising a behaviour policy that is expected of them and developing and maintaining understanding and compassionate relationships with children. Additionally, wider safeguarding legislation positions teachers and staff as 'trusted adults' where their emotional availability is crucial for disclosure (KCSIE, 2015). Staff need to know pupils well to identify changes in their behavioural presentation which may indicate an underlying safeguarding issue in addition to being the adults who CYP come to with their problems.

Mental health stigma

A wider cultural and societal ideology impacting on the understanding of SEMH need includes the public perception of mental health (Hinshaw, 2007; Rose et al., 2019). Despite recent shifts in the prevalence of mental health issues and increase in language related to wellbeing, stigma surrounding mental health remains deeply embedded in wider society, with attitudes and mental health services “backsliding” (MIND, 2025). Research demonstrates that societal stigma contributes to the misunderstanding of SEMH needs, interpreting unmet need as a weakness or deficit in individual and family functioning, undermining the role of enabling or disabling environments (Parr, 2019). Research additionally highlights the stigma experienced by parents and families of children with emotional and behavioural difficulties (McClean & Halstead, 2021). Deficit based assumptions filter into schools, impacting on staff’s interpretations of pupil behaviour in addition to how confident staff feel responding to mental health needs (Loades & Mastroyannopoulou, 2010). Staff have reported anxiety about responding to mental health needs in children where they lack specific mental health training (Rothi et al., 2008). Pupils are additionally impacted by their own internalisation of stigma, with studies reporting reduced help-seeking and shame (Moses, 2010). Societal stigma and negative connotations of labels attached to children with SEND arise from discriminatory attitudes which exist within society around those who do not conform to society’s norms (Mowat, 2015).

The classification of need problem

The classification of need for CYP operates at multiple ecosystemic levels. At a macrosystemic level, classification stems from policy, societal values and cultural understanding of disability, informing national approaches to SEND (Norwich, 2014; Lindsay, 2007). These views underpin an understanding of need and influence how needs are identified and responded to. At an exosystemic level, Local Authorities (LAs), operationalise these classifications and use them to determine support, resourcing and provision. An example of this being the increase in capacity in mainstream school to support the SEND local offer, such as the development of enhanced resource bases, which are specific to areas of need including SEMH and Autism Spectrum Disorder (Solihull Local Authority, 2022; Cambridgeshire County

Council, n.d.). CYP do not neatly fit into 'boxes' and categorising their presenting needs across the four broad areas of need including; cognition and learning, communication and interaction and sensory and physical (DfE & DoH, 2015) can be somewhat problematic in practice (Carroll et al., 2018). The SEMH classification is perceived as ambiguous (Carroll et al., 2018; Norwich et al., 2022). Children attending an SEMH specialist setting for example or enhanced resource base in a mainstream setting are likely to have other needs across the broad areas and a unique pattern of needs (Antalek et al., 2015; Hutchinson et al., 2024). Classification systems of need risk simplifying and underestimating individual profiles. Research conducted by Mowat exploring pupils with a SEBD label in mainstream schools concluded that assumptions cannot be made about how CYP experience identification of need, which is unique and individual to the CYP, where labelling can contribute to stigma (Mowat, 2015). Although the research cannot make broad claims or generalisations, a sense of belonging and 'otherness' are experienced by pupils in their conceptualisation of labels attributed to them, either inclusion or exclusion (Mowat, 2015). Classifications are linked to attribution error, where labels place the 'problem' within the child and underestimate wider environmental and systemic factors (Thomas & Loxley, 2022). Assumptions about children based on their classification of need inadvertently influence teacher perception and subsequent interactions. Stigma exists around the SEBD/SEMH classification, where teacher's framing of the label can marginalise pupils (Caslin, 2021). Research into mainstream teachers' perceptions of inclusive education for children with SEND identified that including children in mainstream classrooms was perceived as an additional burden on an already stressful role when support is not sufficient (Warnes et al., 2022). The authors presented teachers' concerns around children with emotional and behavioural needs, perceiving pupils with this presentation of need as particularly challenging to include in the classroom (Warnes et al., 2022). Reasons for these challenges were cited as insufficient resources, lack of support staff and becoming increasingly like 'counsellors', where teachers feel they have the rest of the class to consider, where additionally provision for pupils with SEND becomes a source of anxiety (Warnes et al., 2022).

Attachment aware and trauma informed schools

There is a macrosystemic, exosystemic and microsystemic lens which can be applied to attachment aware and trauma informed practice and policy. Primarily they sit within a macrosystemic, cultural and policy framework, where they include societal beliefs about children's needs. These cultural narratives around attachment, trauma and behaviour impact the way in which children's needs are understood and presenting behaviour approached. From an exosystemic level, these ideologies shape school policies, training, and resource allocation. From a microsystemic lens, these approaches, influence the day-to-day interactions between staff and children. The Timpson Review of School Exclusion (2019) highlighted the need for expert training in schools to understand the causes of behaviour to be better able to meet pupils needs, including attachment aware and trauma informed training. Schools adopting an attachment aware culture reported stronger TSRs and improved staff confidence and wellbeing (Dryden, 2022). Behaviour policies that don't sufficiently account for trauma, such as restrictive responses, exclusionary practices and use of restrictive physical intervention, undermine relational safety, where punitive practice weakens the TSR (Willis, 2021). Although it would be grossly inappropriate for the researcher to assume that all children with an SEMH need have experienced relational trauma within their familial contexts, CYP who have been exposed to trauma are more likely to have psychological and behavioural problems (Lansford et al., 2012; Greeson et al., 2014). Additionally, children with developmental difficulties and disabilities are more likely to have experienced trauma than the general population (Lewis et al., 2019). Challenging behaviour and trauma are linked, CYP who demonstrate challenging behaviour are more likely to have been exposed to trauma than the general population and there is evidence to suggest that challenging behaviour is a 'symptom' of trauma (Wilton, 2020). Regardless of personal, familial and early life contexts for CYP, the definition of systemic trauma includes harm caused to people by contextual environments and institutions through discrimination and oppression (Goldsmith et al., 20214), therefore it is possible that some children with SEMH needs are exposed to traumatising experiences in school as a result of discriminatory, punitive practices (Wilton, 2020), likely exacerbating their needs. Restrictive physical intervention, seclusion, suspension and exclusion have a negative impact on CYP's mental health irrespective of trauma exposure (Ford et al.,

2018), where this relational experience damages the relationship between staff and CYP. Research has identified that for CYP who have experienced relational trauma in their personal and familial contexts outside of school, exclusionary practices and seclusion are disproportionately distressing for these CYP (Wilton, 2020). CYP who have experienced physical or sexual abuse are vulnerable to re-traumatisation by physical restraint (Cusack et al., 2018).

Trauma-informed schools

Trauma informed schools are those who understand and are committed to reducing the risk of adding to CYP's traumatic experiences. Building on this, trauma-informed schools are those which develop mechanisms to support CYP to heal from past traumatic experiences and create a culture to support the wellbeing of everyone in the school community, not just those affected by past trauma (Wilton, 2020). Social and emotional learning (SEL) is cited as a key mechanism of trauma-informed school support which has been found in a large-scale review of international evidence to provide positive effects on emotional health and wellbeing (Weare & Nind, 2011). A crucial function of a trauma-informed school, includes culture, climate and ethos which is particularly difficult to capture or measure (Hendrick et al., 2025), with no overarching general consensus on what a trauma-informed school is (Onipede et al., 2024). Studies have found positive effects in the relationship between a positive school environment and emotional and behavioural development for children, specifically in more vulnerable populations of CYP (Wang et al., 2013; Walker & Graham, 2019). Theoretically, a school's climate positive impacts can be explained through CYP having a positive experience in school, a strong and positive relationship with an emotionally attuned and safe adult which can to some degree, mitigate against previous relational trauma (Bergin & Bergin, 2009; Hamre & Pianta, 2003; Wilton, 2020). Within the literature, these positive experiences are described as Benevolent Childhood Experiences (BCEs) which lessen the harmful impacts of Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), characterised by relational safety (Crandall et al., 2019). Critiques of trauma informed practices include tools for the evaluation of practice and lack of dominant unified approach to these practices (Long, 2022). Trauma informed practices involve wider system adaptations to attitudes, beliefs, resources and practice in order to embed practice in policy (Greig et al., 2021; Thomas et al., 2019)

Attachment aware schools

Attachment awareness has gained traction in recent years, with 'attachment awareness' a broad term distinct from the Attachment Aware Schools Framework (AAS) which was a targeted project implemented and evaluated across two local authorities (Rose et al., 2019). Pupils demonstrated improvements in academic achievement in addition to practitioners reporting reduced use of sanction, exclusions and overall difficulties measured in Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ), (Rose et al., 2019). In addition, the framework supported staff to reflect on their own practice, develop self-awareness and increase confidence and competence in supporting pupil wellbeing. Emotion Coaching was one of the main attachment strategies adopted by schools which produced positive outcomes including helping adults to remain calm in face of challenging situations and accept pupil's emotional experiences with empathy, reiterating previous findings (Gilbert, 2018). It is with caution that Attachment Aware Schools have been framed as a solution for a group of CYP, when they are considerably impacted by wider systemic issues, including a lack of SEND funding (Rose et al., 2019). There is still a limited research base for the effectiveness of attachment-based school strategies and whole school strategies (Bergin & Bergin, 2009; Kennedy, 2008; Kennedy & Kennedy, 2004; Riley, 2009) however recent developments in neuroscience and children's social and emotional development have supported attachment theory (Cozolini, 2013; Immordino-Yang, 2011). A key consideration for Attachment Aware Schools includes the prerequisite that whole school approaches require the training of all staff (Roffey, 2010).

Parker et al., (2016) link attachment and secure attachment to the school as enhancing a sense of school belonging. They support the notion that educators should be aware and understand the process of attachment for its impact of subsequent SEMH development, capacity to learn and attachment like relationships that form between the teacher and student. Schools as organisations have the capacity therefore to buffer the impact of stress and develop resilience and potential for learning in children (Nagel, 2009). Attachment Aware Schools ensure adults are equipped to attend to CYP, informed by attachment theory and neuropsychology, whole school approaches for all children have the capacity to decrease sanction and reduce exclusionary practices for all (Parker et al., 2016;

Rose et al., 2019, Kelly et al., 2020).

Evaluation research on the AAS pilot found significant improvement in teacher awareness and understanding of attachment theory with the greatest impact seen in the area of policy, physical environments and pedagogical development (Rose et al., 2017; 2019). Improvements were also reported in pupil behaviour and improved relationships with parents and carers. However, a key limitation to the AAS project includes the difficulty in measuring or capturing the positive school changes that are a direct result of the AAS programme, where other wider school developments may have contributed to the positive outcomes measured (Rose et al., 2019). Bomber & Hughes (2012) critique attachment-based approaches, arguing that the approach is not sufficient in isolation and may not be appropriate for CYP suffering from complex trauma, where more specialist therapeutic intervention may be required.

Exosystem

Social Care and Safeguarding

The importance of school and teachers in child welfare is widely recognised (Gilligan, 1998; Baginsky et al., 2022). The indirect impact of early help and social care pressures contribute to schools' increasing responsibilities for children with SEMH needs particularly where school staff perceive social care thresholds to have become increasingly high, meaning schools take responsibility for increasingly complex cases (Purcell, 2022). Schools are often first-responders in complex family and safeguarding issues (McGovern & McGovern, 2021). Children in the care of the local authority, or looked-after children (LAC) have a high probability of developing SEMH needs, where their educational needs should be prioritised from the beginning of a social care assessment (Hutchinson et al., 2025). There is additional systemic pressures on teachers which contribute to conflict between their perceived roles as teachers versus those as carers, especially the support they offer to parents (Webb & Vulliamy, 2002). The statutory role of the 'Designated Teacher' (DT) in supporting pupils who are currently or previously 'looked-after', is a central point of contact within school surrounding children's Personal Education Plans (DfE, 2018). The role of the DT highlights the mesosystemic level of interaction between wider services such as The Virtual School and Social Care with schools. Looked-after children

(LAC) have substantially higher rates of mental-health needs than the general population with 45% of looked-after CYP aged 5-15 experiencing emotional and mental health problems in comparison to 10% of their peers (Education Committee, 2025). These realities raise the stakes for schools to ensure both LAC and previously LAC children's SEMH needs are identified and met. Guidance from *Mentally Healthy Schools (2025)* comments on the importance of staff taking time to build relationships with children in addition to taking time to care for themselves due to the impact of working with this group of children which can be challenging emotionally. Research into DTs' experiences includes concerns around workload, competing roles and responsibilities, training gaps and inconsistent local systems (La Fosse et al., 2023). The role of safeguarding in school is all staffs' responsibility in line with statutory guidance, *KCSIE (DfE, 2025)*. Therefore it is not just teaching staff who take on additional roles in protecting children's welfare. The additional workload related to operational and emotional burden of safeguarding for teachers is recognised (Hulme et al., 2024), where the same effect on support staff is not as widely understood.

Mental Health Services

The impact of strained mental health services (such as Children and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS)), places additional responsibility on schools to meet the growing emotional health and wellbeing needs of pupils (Crenna-Jennings & Hutchinson, 2020). Research reports that over a third of CAMHS referrals are rejected, for not meeting threshold, where these concerns and mental health needs persist in school (Ford et al., 2020). With rising demands and long waiting lists for specialist support, often weeks and months, schools are typically the first line defence in identifying and supporting mental health needs for children (Edbrooke-Childs & Deighton, 2020). Teachers face greater workload, often incorporating an emotional component which without training or capacity, can leave many feeling underprepared and incompetent (Maclean & Law, 2022). Research, looking at teachers' experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic, reported teachers feeling they lacked confidence, training and sufficient time to support perceived worsening SEMH needs in children alongside a backdrop of reduced accessibility to services, highlighting that specialist health service strains contributed to teacher workloads and burden (Doyle & Thomas, 2022). It has also been argued that

teachers are well placed to support the mental health needs of children who do not require specialist support, due to their understanding of the 'whole-child' (Holt, 2019), positive relationships that exist between them and being well placed to notice emotional distress (Shelemy et al., 2019). A critique of the evolving nature and relationship between students and teachers is that the boundaries of the role may be blurred into those of therapists or social workers (Parker et al., 2016). In addition, caution has been suggested in schools undertaking mental health interventions where the perception of children experiencing emotional vulnerability has been pathologised (Ecclestone, 2007).

The role of the EP

EPs are often the first professionals schools seek advice and guidance from when concerns around a CYP's mental health and wellbeing arise, yet EPs are not traditionally positioned within a mental health context (Hatterlsey, 2023). EPs who are often asked to support behaviour in schools (Hart, 2010) are encouraged to adopt a relational lens when working with stakeholders to develop an understanding of how to reduce problematic behaviour in school (Vasilic, 2022). The implications for practice include EPs having a role in supporting schools to implement restorative approaches to facilitate change and positive outcomes for CYP (Dean & Gibbs, 2020). There is a role for EPs in reflective supervision, psychoeducation, training and restorative approaches in specialist and alternative provisions to develop TSRs and positive behaviour of students further (Fitzsimmons, 2021). In addition, research has advocated for reflective spaces for teachers to support them with emotional containment, EPs being well placed to offer this (Hatterlsey, 2023). The British Psychological Society responded to the revised behaviour guidance and suspension and exclusion guidance (Baker et al., 2022). Key recommendations include school systems developing relational approaches to behaviour management based on promotion of self-motivation through connection rather than compliance and control. The society advocates for use of positive feedback and restorative practice over sanction and rewards. Good practice would include school systems that support the holistic individual, including families and communities, in addition to staff training, development and staff wellbeing support. The advice recommends training for school staff on relational approaches. Notably,

clear blanket rules and the same expectations for all result in CYP from marginalised backgrounds becoming disproportionately punished.

Role of Specialist and Alternative Provision

Consideration has been given to specialist or alternative provisions (SAP), their role and the teachers in the settings, in how their social and emotional approach differs from that of their mainstream counterparts. It has been suggested that SAP teachers prioritise an emotional investment with their students and come to the relationship from a humanistic or egalitarian perspective where they are able to humanise their interactions with pupils when needed, such as apologising when appropriate (Pomeroy, 1999; Malcolm, 2020). However, secondary trauma and burnout within this population of the educational workforce is rife (Partridge, 2012). It has been argued that SAP teacher retention is based on individual resilience and the social and emotional qualities staff possess rather than the support they receive to stay in the role (Fitzsimmons, 2021). AP is intended to be a short-term intervention, rather than a long term placement for CYP. The idea that APs open up mainstream schools' capacity to address needs earlier, re-engage CYP with learning and reduce avoidable exclusions (DfE, 2023) is controversial. Time bounded and transitional placements which offer intensive support with the aim of returning pupils to mainstream undermines the impact of the TSR (Malcom, 2021; Owen et al., 2021). These short term placements locate the issues within the CYP, communicating that they are 'going off to be fixed' resulting in a sense of rejection that may indeed exacerbate difficulties for children within both AP and mainstream schools (Atkinson & Rowley, 2019). Critiques of SAP exists where these provisions for children with SEMH needs are used to offer an alternative curriculum to support the needs of CYP, now the offer is more 'mainstream', indicating a child-deficit model, i.e. that 'their behaviour' is what required an alternative provision (Parker & Levinson, 2018). Additional critiques of SAP include the impact on pupil's emotional wellbeing, when removed from relationships with key staff and pupils in their mainstream school. Child voice research into AP illuminated young people's experience of rejection and being "sent away" by mainstream schools (Children's Commissioner for England, 2017), this is reinforced by educator perspectives where staff reported that

pupils SEMH needs were exacerbated by their exclusion from mainstream settings (Kaip et al., 2024).

Behaviourist principles

Historically schools' discipline systems and 'behaviour management' systems are built on behaviourist principles that assumes discipline equals punishment, the 'default position' (McCluskey et al., 2011). Although these principles may manage behaviour, for some children some of the time, they are typically reliant on extrinsic motivators which undermines autonomous motivation (Deci et al., 1999). Where punitive policies produce short term compliance but poor long term outcomes for many pupils (Valdebenito et al., 2018). Behaviourist values and policies are embedded in schools across the country and impact on teachers' and support staff's current experience of their role and relationships with pupils. Traditional behaviourist systems which tend to involve rewards, consequences, zero-tolerance rules and exclusionary practices are based on the idea that behaviour is modified through external reinforcement rather than relational understanding (Skinner, 1953; Rogers, 2011). Children with SEMH needs are often disproportionately affected by behaviourist policies in school, such as rigid responses to behaviour with research highlighting that these systems increase distress and breakdown relational trust (Gill et al., 2017). Staff report difficult feelings operationalising behaviour policies based on behaviourist principles, where teachers are positioned as enforcers of compliance, undermining the TSR, reducing opportunities for co-regulation, empathy and attunement (Noddings, 2012; Colman et al., 2020). Research has called for a change in orientation from viewing CYP's behaviour as something we need to stop, towards offering comfort towards the individual. When language changes, actions will too, shifting the social construction of behaviour from 'defiance' to 'distress' and 'control' to 'connection' (Khan, 2023; Lucas, 2020). Relational approaches such as Nurture Groups (Boxall, 2002) or restorative approaches support staff to reflect on CYP's behaviours that 'challenge' as a response to internal stress or distress (Winnicott 1954, 1956; Greenwood, 2002). These approaches emphasise containment and attunement, supporting staff to consider the driving force of or function of behaviour.

Relational Practice

Relational practices strengthen TSRs, increase emotional safety and reduce the risk of exclusion for pupils with SEMH needs (Hinton et al., 2021; Long et al., 2022). Humanistic approaches are those which promote relational models, they are a way of being rather than a particular framework or structure (Cooper & Cefai, 2013) which is where the difficulty may arise in considering how school systems can implement humanistic or relational approaches and evidence this. Relational approaches therefore require a more robust evidence base (Gus et al., 2017) where there is a focus on relationships between people rather than on an individual deficit or difficulty. Harold & Corcoran (2010) go further to suggest relational action is restorative and reparational where inclusive environments include humanist approaches acknowledging the complexity of behaviour. Billington et al., (2022) considers relationships as fundamental to secure attachments and a feeling of safety and school belonging, and advocates for a relational approach to support CYP's mental health in schools. Research has suggested that the challenge to whole school relational approaches to behaviour management is the barrier of time, competition within the curriculum and poor implementation of relational approaches (Norwich et al., 2022). The researchers suggest that an education for wellbeing would focus on CYP's needs and their interests and less on the compulsory academic curriculum. Whole school relational approaches should therefore not split the intellectual from social and emotional aspects of learning as is presented in a dichotomous position (Thornburn, 2015). Although there is no inherent contradiction between schools being able to promote emotional development and academic knowledge, the dichotomous view exists (Parker & Levinson, 2018).

Mesosystem

Family and school interactions

Strong home and school relationships have been advocated for pupils with SEMH needs to promote positive development (Gus et al., 2017), with parental engagement and trust central to effective school and home relationships. Pastoral support including family support workers, non-teaching pastoral staff and home-school liaison play a crucial role in the development and maintenance of staff and

pupil relationships, particularly for vulnerable children (Fazel, et al., 2023). National guidance on mental health and wellbeing provision in schools indicates that family support roles and pastoral teams enable consistency in approach towards children across home and school contexts, promoting continuity and emotional safety through predictability (DfE, 2018). Person-centred practices including collaborative consultations held between staff and parents develop shared understanding and mutual perspective taking, which teachers report as improving the quality of relationships for pupils with additional needs (Sutcliffe, 2015).

Within school staff interactions

Research demonstrates the growing number of pastoral staff being employed who relieve teacher's emotional and cognitive burden, which can create role ambiguity with variable impacts on TSRs (Barnes, 2015; Education Support, 2023; O'Toole et al., 2022). These roles are often taken up by non-teaching staff (O'Toole et al., 2022), where pastoral roles can be poorly defined and staff lack the training to manage the complexity of their roles (Edmond & Price, 2009). Research indicated there was a lack of information sharing between teachers and members of pastoral staff, where the separation of pastoral care and responsibilities from their work, created confusion around job roles and responsibilities for teachers (O'Toole & Soan, 2021). There is debate around the reality in practice of whole school trauma informed approaches where the emphasis is upon all staff taking responsibility for concerns related to wellbeing, with the underlying expectation that all staff have had sufficient training to approach CYP with understanding and provide emotional support when needed (Long, 2022). Research has highlighted that support staff and teacher alignment influences belonging for pupils with SEN/SEMH needs (Finnegan, 2022; Lovell, 2022).

External services and school interactions

Evidence suggests that where schools work collaboratively with health, social care and mental health agencies, they are better equipped to support children and intervene early to address need. Multi-agency partnerships have been consistently linked with increased outcomes for pupils with SEMH needs, developing a shared understanding of need and coordinated planning for intervention across systems (Ofsted, 2019; Munro, 2011). The importance of early assessment and intervention is key, where schools are encouraged to commission specialist support such as from

Educational Psychologists (DfE, 2018). Educational Psychologists contribute to consultation, assessment and intervention for children, supporting schools systemically to understand and respond to children's needs (Farrell & Woods, 2015; Jones & Atkinson, 2021), including those with SEMH needs and presenting behavioural difficulties.

The DfE Mental Health and Behaviour in School's guidance (2018) emphasises the need to integrate both education and health to ensure better outcomes for pupils with SEND and SEMH needs. Recent national investment in Mental Health Support Teams (MHSTs) speaks to this principle, ideally positioning mental health practitioners in school contexts to support delivery of intervention and development of whole school approaches. The guidance also details funding for Senior Mental Health Leads in all schools which aims to put mental health provision as a whole school priority, where an individual member of staff has oversight to mental health provision, coordinating with external agencies. Where schools have well connected partnerships with external agencies, appropriate training and regular communication, schools report feeling more confident to meet the needs of children with SEMH needs (Ford et al., 2020; Sharpe et al., 2021). The opposite is true where decreased communication across agencies negatively impacts students and inconsistent messaging exacerbates difficulties for children with SEMH needs (Cooper et al., 2016). Multi-agency working is not only advantageous for children with SEMH need but crucial in preventing crisis and supporting inclusion in school in order to promote the long term positive outcomes for pupils (Walker, 2018).

Microsystem

The teacher-student relationship (TSR)

TSR's have been considered widely beneficial in the general population of students across social, emotional and academic outcomes (Hughes, 2011; Roorda et al., 2011). Extensive research within the UK specifically highlights these benefits, such as close TSRs in early childhood predicting improved behavioural and emotional development in the primary years (O'Connor & McCartney, 2007). Furthermore, the emphasis of the TSR as a protective factor in children's engagement, sense of belonging and emotional wellbeing (All et al., 2016;

McLaughlin & Clarke, 2020). Measurement of the TSR in research has typically used the student-teacher relationship Scale (Pianta & Steinberg, 1992), a teacher report standardised measure, most often used in the early years. Critiques include lack of consistency between teacher and student reports of the quality of the TSR (Mantizicopulos, 2005), where students' views historically may have been overlooked. Using teacher views and measures only to capture the quality of the TSR is problematic, specifically where teachers are responsible for 'grading' or producing outcomes for children in terms of academic or social adjustment which are used to compare TSR's with pupil outcomes, therefore perhaps biased (Wentzel, 2016). Research also highlights the difference in children and teacher's perceptions and evaluations of warmth, fairness and emotional safety, suggesting that teacher-only measures undermine relational experiences of children (Split et al., 2010; Hughes & Kwok, 2007).

Teacher experiences of supporting student mental health needs have been researched (Hatterley, 2023). Teachers shared their experiences of the importance of relationships and a safe classroom environment for CYP. The research also found that teachers felt having open and honest conversations with CYP about mental health was crucial, including use of labels and diagnoses to support staff and pupil understanding of needs, however, these labels can also create child deficit narratives. Teachers expressed that the barriers to supporting CYP's mental health was the academic and behavioural policy inflexibility which punished CYP for expressions of their needs. The research advocates for training and ongoing support for teachers alongside greater clarity of the role teachers play in their students' mental health. The research considers the development of 'relational communities' built on respect and genuine and authentic care where CYP develop a sense of belonging.

Higher teacher stress levels have been reported to correlate with increased level of disruptive behaviour (Herman et al., 2018). In addition, use of reactive behavioural management strategies has been associated with increased teacher stress and reduced on-task behaviour (Clunies-Ross et al., 2008). This is highlighted even further in research that has found a significant link between poor teacher mental health and wellbeing and pupil wellbeing (Harding et al., 2019). The role of the TSR in behaviour in school was highlighted by researchers who found that

teachers who had a positive relationship with pupils report fewer behaviour related difficulties in the classroom (Marzano, 2003). Good TSRs enable children to engage in school and function more effectively both academically and socially (Martin & Dowson, 2009). There is a focus on the quality of the TSR in the relatedness and attunement of the teacher to the student through responsive relationships where both parties play a key role (Kennedy, 2011).

Kennedy (2008) described teachers as having the opportunity to “rehabilitate” pupils who are insecurely attached, supporting children to adapt their internal working model through positive relational experiences that are attuned and genuine. Responsive, warm interactions or attuned responses help to create neural structures of the internal working model (Siegal, 2012). Research in the field of neuroscience supports the role of early secure attachments and relationships in typical brain development (Schoore, 2001). Constant exposure to stress and the absence of consistent care or stable relationships with caregivers, expose the developing brain to ‘toxic stress’ which impact development across many areas of functioning (Field & Diego, 2008; Porges, 2011). Neuroscience also offers insight into the capacity for healing and the opportunity for future secure relationships and attachments to support to form new connections, the concept of ‘neural plasticity’, where the brain forms new pathways (Siegal, 2006). Regardless of early attachment experiences, teachers have the opportunity to develop positive TSRs and support children to succeed in the education system (Geddes, 2006). Research indicates that relationships are crucial to re-engaging young people who have been excluded back towards education (Gutherson et al., 2011; Michael & Frederickson, 2012). Teacher self-efficacy and group or collective efficacy has been associated with increased TSRs (Dean & Gibbs, 2023), shedding light on the importance of how teachers conceptualise their own skills and belief in their own abilities.

Teachers in secondary schools have been described as ‘ad hoc’ attachment figures, which is insufficient to ameliorate effects of early difficulties in secure attachments (Kobak & Madsen, 2008). There is a potential role therefore in supporting transition to secondary school and facilitation of positive TSRs in secondary provisions. Teachers report burnout and secondary trauma when

supporting CYP with SEMH needs (Kidger et al., 2016) and TSRs with students with SEMH needs can often be characterised by conflict (Nurmi, 2012). The behaviour of students and teachers can affect the quality of their relationships, indicating a reciprocal nature to their interactions (Sutherland et al., 2013). It has been suggested that student perceptions of how teachers respond affects the TSR. Increased TSRs are based on mutual respect which reduces the need for disciplinary and exclusionary practices (Augustine et al., 2018). Research has found a relationship between increased group collective self-efficacy of teachers and reduction of fixed term exclusions, indicating where staff believe they can manage behaviour successfully, the incidence of difficult behaviour is reduced (Dean & Gibbs, 2023).

Self-determination theory supports the understanding that people will have a desire to change if they are intrinsically motivated to do so, teachers investing in student relationships will support pupils to behave in a way that aligns to values of mutual respect (Deci & Ryan, 2012), reducing need for use of punitive discipline. A function of the TSR may be in developing teacher's empathetic mindsets to support them to intervene early before behaviour escalates, reducing need for disciplinary action. By supporting enabling environments for TSRs, where mutual respect is fostered, difficult or challenging behaviour is reduced (Gallagher et al., 2019). Restorative approaches can promote mutual respect in TSRs and support pupils to develop trust (Augustine et al., 2018; Gregory et al., 2016) in addition to developing a sense of school connectedness (Deci & Ryan, 2012). In Gregory and colleagues' study (2016) pupils reported that restorative practices were related to TSRs, increased respect and reduced use of exclusionary discipline. The barrier to the implementation of restorative approaches in school include time and resources, researchers advocating for these restorative practices to be built into the curriculum (Gregory et al., 2016).

Support staff role

Much of the dominant literature around children's relationships with staff in school is centred around the TSR. The increasing role of support staff in supporting children and young people in schools is being recognised. A systematic review highlighted well trained, deployed support staff can have a positive impact on pupil's individual and group progress in literacy, facilitate pupil engagement in social and academic learning and support to alleviate workload from teachers (Alborz et al.,

2009). Small-scale research has looked into the employment of pastoral support staff working with children with SEMH needs, highlighting their primary role in emotional support for CYP, taking responsibilities away from the teacher (O'Toole & Soan, 2021). This is relevant when considering the shift in children's primary contact or key relationship within school which may move away from their class teacher. Recent theses exploring the role of the teaching assistant (TA) found that TAs develop close bonds with pupils who seek them out for emotional support more than teachers, where TAs can experience emotional burden related to this (Kelly, 2020). TAs reported lack of training and supervision to support them in their roles working with children's mental health, with children more likely to turn to their key TA than teacher (Conboy, 2021). Support staff roles go beyond emotional support for children, supporting independence in learning for individuals and groups of children (Sae-Kang, 2019). The Education Endowment Foundation (2025) released a guidance report on the deployment of TAs which highlighted the 'trap' of pupils who struggle the most, spending the most time with TAs, where children who need the most academic support should spend just as much if not more time with the teacher than the majority of pupils. A research report published by the Department for Education (2024) discussed the increasing role of TAs in supporting pupils with SEND more broadly and those with SEMH needs since the COVID-19 pandemic. The report also highlights the issues with budget pressures and staff recruitment and retention which ultimately impacts on the relationship and availability of staff for children with SEMH needs.

Attachment Theory

Although attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969; 1988) is a cultural, psychological and scientific framework that shapes policy, practice and wider understanding of children's needs, it's placement within a microsystemic level is due to the direct relational patterns or attachment like behaviours that have been discussed and will be discussed. Research has made connections between Attachment Theory and teacher-child relationships (Commodari, 2013; Geddes, 2006) which forms the foundation for the current research. Bowlby's early iteration of attachment theory explains how children form attachments with a primary caregiver, the quality of the attachment affecting later psychosocial and emotional development of the child (Bowlby, 1969). Attachment needs are related to children's relationships with staff,

their peers and their learning, with securely attached children demonstrating positive outcomes in the areas of social, emotional and academic development (Bergin & Bergin, 2009). Secondary attachment figures that could include teachers have also been considered to provide an ameliorating effect for CYP who have experienced insecure attachments to their familial caregivers (Bowlby, 2007). Ainsworth (1979) devised 'The Strange Situation' to investigate attachment behaviour, concluding that children develop different 'attachment styles' and behaviours in response to the quality of care or sensitivity from their mother. People are predisposed to sociability and come to know themselves through relatedness and relationships with others (Trevarthen, 1980). A proposed function by which this occurs is the process of containment, where the caregiver remains attuned to the care seeker, or child's needs and emotional state, regulating their own emotions (McCluskey, 2005). Through the containing relationship, children learn to regulate their own emotions (Frosh, 2012). The research reflects the importance of connection with attuned, accepting and empathetic others within education.

Critiques of attachment theory have come in the form of it not considering wider eco-systemic issues (Duschinsky et al., 2015). Here the 'problem' is located in the child rather than responses to inequalities, with authors commenting that attachment frameworks may unintentionally pathologise children from disadvantaged backgrounds (Gilligan, 2008 & Murray, 2014). In addition, the focus of the traditional attachment theory to the maternal role undermines the broader interpretation of other attachment figures (Riley, 2002; Slater, 2007). Others have criticised attachment theory's failure to recognise and account for the variability of 'caregiving' and in specifying conditions for this which pathologise any deviation from the norm (Burman, 2016). Other critiques include the empirical base which was developed primarily for infants and not school aged children, with academics commenting on the limited reliability beyond early childhood and poor predictive quality of attachment style as children age (Fearon et al., 2010). Despite critiques, the imperative on schools to consider children with attachment difficulties is presented in NICE guidance (2015), promoting the need for staff training and collaborative work with other agencies to ensure school is a safe space for children. Systematic reviews into how schools support children with attachment needs and SEMH difficulties found that secure, consistent and attuned adult relationships amongst a variety of teaching

and support staff roles are a significant influential factor in outcomes for pupils in this group (Jones & Harding, 2023). Approaches such as Nurture Groups, relational-practice, key available adults and consistency were cited in addition to specific support around emotional regulation. Schools support to create the 'safe base' for children to explore, learn and develop resilience (Rees, 2007).

Family

The role of social deprivation and disadvantage in the SEND population of children highlights the vulnerability of children persistently eligible for free school meals for the majority of their primary school years, moving to a special school or being identified with SEMH needs in addition to other SEND (Hutchinson et al., 2025). These findings are further supported by previous longitudinal research into children's parental socioeconomic backgrounds and the risk of their children developing mental health problems (Connelly & Platt, 2014). Parental mental illness is repeatedly associated with an increase in the risk of emotional difficulties for children, related to reduced parental responsiveness and increased household stress (Cleaver et al, 2011; Gajos & Beaver, 2017). The role of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) has already been discussed in the current review, however, the risk factor of exposure to neglect, abuse, parental substance misuse amongst other adversities strongly predicts emotional and behavioural difficulties (Houtepen et al, 2020). Research has highlighted the interplay of attachment processes between child and parent and household environments including 'chaos' and 'instability' which influence children's subsequent emotional regulation (Klemfuss et al., 2018). Additional family and microsystemic factors include household instability, housing and homelessness which impact on rates of SEMH needs through disrupted schooling, sleep and routines in addition parental stress (Crenna-Jennings & Hutchinson, 2018; Ford et al., 2008; Jensen et al., 2017; Khan et al., 2021). Parental substance misuse and incarceration are additionally associated with an increased risk in children developing SEMH needs often co-occurring with other adversities such as economic disadvantage (Houtepen et al., 2020). Importantly, family risk factors for SEMH needs rarely appear alone and have cumulative and intergenerational effects on SEMH outcomes for children, who may face additional disadvantage (McCoy, 2025).

Individual

SEMH need

There may be difficulty for school staff, in characterising behaviour, as typically developmental or as a result of unmet SEMH needs, attachment or trauma related adverse childhood experiences (ACEs). Teachers may misinterpret insecurely attached pupils' behaviour as aggressive or uncooperative (Kennedy & Kennedy, 2004). This judgement of pupil behaviour may reflect difficulties within teachers' own intra or inter personal relationship history. Researchers have recommended that teachers need further support to recognise pupils needs and understand the function and communication of behaviour (Kennedy, 2008). Students with SEMH needs have referred to the power of caring in SAP TSRs in relation to directing them onto more positive paths (Cefai & Cooper, 2010) whilst excluded students have indicated a failure to develop any meaningful relationship with teachers within mainstream education (Meo & Parker, 2004).

Schools cannot be deemed effective if they are only appropriate for some of the pupils, some of the time (Kennedy & Laverick, 2019). In their study the researchers examined the role of headteachers, who face increased accountability for CYP alongside reduced resources. They described the nature of teaching as relational and bi-directional between pupils, teachers, parents and other key stakeholders. The researchers suggest that if left uncontained these relationships may experience pathologising patterns, which could result in increased control and negative behavioural patterns (Jackson, 2002; Hulusi & Maggs, 2015). A relational model of supervision in applied psychological practice (Kennedy et al., 2018) was advocated for headteachers in providing a safe and containing space for them, which impacts positively across the school community and cascades to other staff (Kennedy & Laverick, 2019). Hodas (2006) argues that professionals working with children with complex emotional and behaviour needs lack access to reflective supervision and feel ill-equipped to respond to presenting behaviour. These weighty feelings can contribute therefore to compassion fatigue, burnout and reactive behaviour management approaches. Studies evidence that teachers report feeling underprepared to manage behaviour linked to trauma and attachment when they do not have the access to specialist support (Moor et al., 2020; McMahon et al., 2023),

which is linked to reduced self-efficacy (Kidger et al., 2016) and reduced wellbeing (Hogarth et al., 2022).

The Department for Education commissioned a review into identifying and supporting CYP with SEMH needs in mainstream settings (2025) which found inconsistencies in how SEMH is defined and challenges in identification of need. The evidence supports a multi-agency approach in supporting children. Relational and attachment aware models are advocated for which highlights the importance of consistent, trusted adult relationships for this population of children alongside emotional regulation support. The review discussed inconsistent implementation of strategies to support pupils with SEMH needs, where schools lack capacity, time and funding to sustain support. Recommendations include developing teacher training, investing in SEMH provision and tracking outcomes for pupils with SEMH need longitudinally. Many SEMH needs for children in school are hidden or internalised, not associated with externalised behavioural difficulties such as anxiety, withdrawal, low mood and somatic symptoms which are less visible (Ford et al., 2008; Patalay et al., 2017). Research indicates that staff are more likely to refer pupils for support with disruptive or externalised behaviour, where anxious or socially withdrawn pupils will not receive sufficient identification and support (Loades & Mastroyannopoulou, 2010). These internalised difficulties can be misattributed to shyness which delays identification and support, posing risks for longer term outcomes for pupil's academic and emotional development (Deighton et al., 2019).

Child voice and SEMH

The role and importance of children's voices in decisions about their lives is encapsulated in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989). Article 12 established that children have the right to express their views freely in matters that concern them, where their views should be given due weight in line with their age and maturity. Research highlights that involving CYP in the development of policy and procedure supports their emotional wellbeing and social and academic engagement (Mitra, 2004; Lansdown, 2018). CYP should be engaged in conversations and development of their school policies, procedures and

conditions, ensuring they are supported to actively participate in affecting change (Pearrow & Pollack, 2009).

Research that considered teachers' experiences of rupture and repair of the TSR in specialist SEMH provision has advocated for future research to focus on understanding the lived experience of CYP with SEMH need themselves of TSR rupture and repair (Fitzsimmons, 2021). This message reflects a wider critique of research into the field of SEMH needs where children's voices are historically underrepresented. Existing studies emphasise that CYP with SEMH needs experience nuanced perspectives about their relationships with adults which cannot be fully captured by teacher-report measure alone (McCluskey et al., 2019; Cooper & Cefai, 2013). Child voice on the subject of staff relationships in alternative provision has been gained, where pupils expressed their relationships were both important and fragile at times (O'Connor et al., 2022). Cracknell (2023) explored secondary school aged girls with SEMH needs' experiences of their relationships in school, highlighting that staff are central to their school experience and stability. Hickinbotham & Soni (2021) through a systematic literature review exploring the views and experiences of young people with the 'label' of SEMH need revealed illuminating findings. Young people spoke about the importance of language used to describe and talk about their needs and the impact this has on their identity. Additionally, the children emphasised the importance of being listening to by staff (Hickinbotham & Soni, 2021). The researchers advocate for greater inclusion of pupil voice in decision making and greater staff awareness in how labels affects pupils. Pupils' voices have been gathered in the context of perceptions of restrictive physical intervention (RPI) and relationships with staff, where RPIs impact on the rupture of relational experiences and impacts trust and emotional safety with adults (Willis, 2021). A relatively recent doctoral thesis explored CYP's views who have EHCPs, identifying that their active participation is often procedural and not meaningful (Sharma, 2021). The majority of experiences captured by research into pupils with SEMH needs' views are in the secondary, specialist or AP field and primary-aged CYP voices are seldom heard. Barriers to meaningful participation and child voice include bureaucratic demands on staff, accessibility issues and professional anxieties prevented CYP involvement (Sharma, 2021). Factors that supported authentic child voice included relational approaches, building trust with familiar adults

and children feeling respected and understood. Pupil voice research has also highlighted that CYP with SEMH needs value staff who are predictable, emotionally available and non-punitive, where these relationships support school belonging for pupils (Morgan et al., 2021). Exploring children's lived experiences of their perspectives and meaning making of relationships with staff is essential for informing relational practice.

Conclusion

The literature review has presented the role of teachers and wider support staff in the role of supporting children with SEMH needs in school, where schools, government and wider society are asking an increasing amount from staff in schools. The review has highlighted the role of time in the relational experiences of CYP with SEMH needs and staff including the role of transition, longitudinal impact of TSRs and the changing contexts of political reform and funding on schools. The legislative framework and wider ideologies including mental health stigma, classification of need and attachment aware and trauma informed understanding has been discussed with relevance to children's relational experiences with staff. The review has also explored the tension between the dominant behaviourist principles and relational approaches, evidencing how philosophies impact the way in which staff and teachers form relationships with pupils, specifically with SEMH needs. Furthermore, literature highlights the role of external agencies including social care, health and CAMHS and the interactions between these systems, schools and families further impacting on staff relationships with CYP with SEMH needs. Finally, the review has recognised the role of individual child differences and child voice in shaping these relational experiences with staff, where meaningful participation and recognition of pupil perspective is key in fostering trust, engagement and positive outcomes for pupils with SEMH needs.

Overall, the evidence presented suggests that effective TSRs and staff and pupils relationships with children who experience SEMH needs are not reliant on staff effort alone but emerge from a complex interaction across the ecological systems. This further signals the need for policies, training and school practices which prioritise relational practice, staff continuity, professional wellbeing amongst

staff and multi-agency collaboration to ensure the best outcomes for pupils. The review paves the way for the primary population of pupil's with SEMH needs voices to be in heard in regard to their experience of staff relationships which will be explored in the following chapter.

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Chapter 2 - Empirical Paper

Abstract

Relational practice is widely recognised as key to supporting pupils with social, emotional and mental health (SEMH) needs, and the role of the teacher-student relationship in pupils' outcomes is well established. However, the voices of primary-aged pupils with SEMH needs are underrepresented within the literature around their relational experiences. The current study adopts a qualitative methodology to explore pupils with SEMH needs' experiences of their relationships with staff in mainstream primary schools. The current study acknowledges the increasing role of support staff in the education of children with SEMH needs. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis is employed using the participatory method of the Relational-Mapping-Interview approach, which combines drawing and talking through a semi-structured interview dialogue. Four superordinate themes were generated, including eleven subordinate themes. The four central themes consisted of: 'Emotional safety through trusted, attuned and compassionate relationships'; 'A desire for person-centred adaptive support'; 'Finding common ground: Authentic and genuine relationships'; and 'Seeking stability: The need for consistent relationships that endure'. The study makes a distinctive contribution by foregrounding the perspectives of a marginalised population, and implications for practice are discussed for school staff, school leadership, educational psychology practice, and wider policy, with particular emphasis on trauma-informed and attachment-aware approaches.

Introduction

The empirical paper will outline the current research's rationale and methodology, including ontological, epistemological and ethical considerations. The paper will present the study's findings which will then be discussed in relation to the existing literature, highlighting how the study contributes to the current understanding of the topic. The discussion will also consider the practical implications of the research, identify the study's limitations, and offer suggestions for future research. Overall, the paper aims to provide a rigorous and reflective analysis that situates

participants' lived experiences within broader theoretical and applied contexts, demonstrating the significance of the study both academically and for professional Educational Psychology practice.

Chapter 1 established an ecological framing that situated children's experiences within wider systems that shape their lives. This perspective was vital for contextualising the study within wider social, organisational and political environments and for recognising that children's development and their relational experiences with staff do not exist in isolation from the systems within which they are located. However, the empirical focus of the thesis required a shift in analytic lens. Chapter 2 therefore, moves from this macro-level ecological orientation to a more individual and interpretative focus. This transition reflects the methodological commitments of IPA, which prioritises idiographic depth, lived experience and meaning-making. While the ecological framing remains an important backdrop, the analytic work in this chapter centres the child's voice and subjective world as the primary focus.

The shift and focus of Chapter 2 is grounded in attachment-aware and trauma-informed perspectives and theory that emerged strongly from the data. Participants' accounts and interpretation of their relationships with staff consistently pointed toward relational safety and emotional attunement. Chapter 2 therefore, adopts a more focused psychological and relational lens to honour these findings, enabling close attention to the ways in which pupils made sense of their interactions with adults and honouring the applied nature of the doctoral thesis linking findings to practice. Rather than departing entirely from the ecological framing in Chapter 1, Chapter 2 deepens it by examining how wider systemic influences are lived and felt within the child-staff relationships. In doing so, it maintains conceptual continuity throughout the thesis while giving prominence to the relational experiences that sit at the heart of the empirical work.

Background context

There has been a marked increase in the number of children and young people (CYP) in education identified as having Social, Emotional and Mental Health (SEMH) needs (DfE, 2023). The Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND)

Code of Practice (DfE, 2015) defines these needs broadly, as those that manifest in ways including being withdrawn or isolated and displaying challenging behaviour. Schools and colleges are expected to have clear processes to support this group of pupils and manage the effect of “disruptive behaviour” (DfE, 2015). Outcomes for pupils with SEMH needs are poor, with around 50% of adults experiencing mental health problems, first encountering difficulties in adolescence (Kessler et al., 2005; World Health Organisation, 2021). The role of Educational Psychologists (EPs) in supporting this group is significant (Birch & Guilliford, 2023) and there is an increasing role for schools in supporting pupil’s mental health and wellbeing (NICE, 2022; Crenna-Jennings & Hutchinson, 2020). Research has indicated that teachers often feel ill-equipped to support this group of children (O’Reilly et al., 2018) and that exclusion rates reflect the lack of understanding and relationships that exist between pupils and their teachers.

The current research recognises the significant role staff in school play, in creating enabling and inclusive environments for CYP with SEMH needs (Dolton et al., 2020). School staff are defined as those that work directly with children, encompassing both teaching and support staff (DfE, KCSIE, 2023). Although the literature focusses heavily on the role of the teacher, the role of support staff will be discussed. The empirical paper will outline the rationale for the study that addresses the current gap in the literature around pupils with SEMH needs and their relationships with school staff.

The role of relationships in child development, and education has been well founded (Bandura, 1977; Vygotsky, 1987; Bowlby, 1982). Not only are children’s academic learning skills mediated by adults, but also their social and emotional development. Teachers play a key role in pupil’s development and the teacher-student relationship (TSR) is a significant risk and resilience factor for student outcomes, academically and socially (Bergin & Bergin, 2009; Cefai & Cooper, 2010; Fitzsimmons et al., 2021). Positive TSRs are also associated with more positive classroom environments and pupil behaviour (Schwab *et al.*, 2019; Yassine et al., 2020).

The underlying function or mechanism of the TSR has been discussed in the literature, with Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1969) being referenced consistently

(Bergin & Bergin, 2009; Kennedy & Kennedy, 2004). Attachment behaviours are defined by proximity seeking to a caregiver (Bowlby, 1969) and these attachment figures are the secure base from which a CYP can explore (Ainsworth, 1979). Billington et al., (2022) considers relationships as fundamental to secure attachments and a feeling of safety, advocating for a relational approach to support CYP's mental health in schools. Parker et al., (2016) also link secure attachment to school success. They support the notion that educators should understand the process of attachment for its impact on subsequent SEMH development, capacity to learn and attachment like relationships that form between the teacher and student. Attachment theory has been criticised in that it fails to account for variability and situational factors that mitigate against healthy, attuned relationships developing (Pomerantz, 2016). Other critiques include the lack of cultural sensitivity, oversimplification of the theory and lack of consideration of individual differences (Fitzgerald, 2020).

Regardless of early attachment experiences, staff have capacity to enhance TSRs (Geddes, 2006). The TSR is often difficult or challenging within the SEMH population (Sheffield & Morgan, 2016) with teachers reporting burnout (Kidger *et al.*, 2016) due to TSRs characterised by conflict (Nurmi, 2012). Pupils with SEMH needs may have experienced difficult early relationships, therefore positive and trusting relationships with key adults in school, have an ameliorating effect (Kennedy & Kennedy, 2004, Parker & Levinson, 2018; Bomber, 2007; Kelly et al., 2020). TSRs have been linked to directing pupil's with SEMH needs onto more positive paths (Cefai & Cooper, 2010), whilst excluded students have indicated a failure to develop any meaningful relationship with teachers in mainstream education (Meo & Parker, 2004). The impact on teacher and support staff wellbeing who work with this group of pupils, is a concern within practice (Hattersley, 2023).

There has been an increase in the employment of support staff in school to support pupils identified with SEND and a changing nature of the role of support staff (Chambers, 2015; Sharples et al., 2016). There is growing concern that those pupils with SEMH needs will spend most of their time with 'non-qualified' staff (Graves & Williams, 2017). Deployment of support staff has been debated within the literature and the inclusive use of support staff is one where they are not 'stuck' to one student, adversely impacting their independence (Skipp & Hopwood, 2019). In

practice, the researcher in their role as a Trainee EP (TEP) has seen the increased incidences of students with SEMH needs having a 1:1 member of support staff assigned to them. Support staff-student relationships can be vital in promoting wellbeing, building trust with CYP, who often approach them, rather than teachers (Conboy, 2021), indicating a potential stronger relationship between the child and their key member of support staff than teachers.

Educational Psychologist's Role

EPs are often the first professionals schools seek advice and guidance from with concerns around CYP's mental health and wellbeing, yet EPs are not traditionally positioned within a mental health context (Hatterlsey, 2023). EPs who are asked to support behaviour in schools (Hart, 2010) are encouraged to adopt a relational lens when working with stakeholders to develop an understanding of how to reduce problematic behaviour in school (Vasilic, 2022). EPs have a role in supporting schools to promote positive outcomes for CYP (Dean & Gibbs, 2023), humanising interactions between teachers and students. EPs should promote the active participation of children with SEND and work towards social justice (Schlze et al., 2019) where pupils with SEMH needs are often marginalised (Jalali & Morgan, 2018). Furthermore, EPs have a role in supporting staff in schools to manage the challenges of their role (Dunsmuir & Leadbetter, 2010), where supervision for staff is an increasing area of practice and research (Reid & Soan, 2019). EPs are well placed to facilitate supervision (Murray, 2022), with particular benefits in the SEMH specialist setting (Willis & Baines, 2018).

Rationale

Existing research into TSRs with CYP with SEMH needs focusses on the perspective of teachers and not CYP (Fitsimmons et al., 2021). Research tends to reduce 'school staff' to teachers and undermines the key role support staff play (Conboy, 2020; Littlecott et al., 2018). Poor relationships with school staff are a significant risk factor for CYP with SEMH needs (Cosma & Soni, 2019) and positive relationships with school staff have the potential to protect these young people against exclusion (Wall, 2021). The current research is aligned with global, national and local priorities around child voice and mental health in schools (Appendix B).

The current research aims to address a population gap of both primary aged children and children attending a mainstream setting. Limited research explores the voice of the child with SEMH needs (Cefai & Cooper, 2010). It is hoped that capturing child voice will promote inclusion and shed light on their perspectives of their social world (Dolten et al., 2019).

Research question

How do pupils, described as having SEMH needs in their EHCP, experience their relationships with school staff in the primary mainstream setting?

Methodology

Ontological and epistemological considerations

The research is based on assumptions about the nature of reality, knowledge and learning that align with a social constructivist paradigm. Through this lens, reality is not merely discovered, but socially constructed, and developed through communities (Kukla, 2000). Learning is a social process, occurring when people engage in interactions with each other and their environment. Social constructivism therefore supports the interpretivist and subjective nature of the research. The research considers that multiple subjective realities exist, each of which is socially constructed by and between individuals. Social constructivism emphasizes the importance of culture and context in understanding what occurs in society and constructing knowledge based on this understanding (Derry, 1999; McMahon, 1997). This perspective is closely associated with many contemporary theories, most notably the developmental theories of Vygotsky and Bruner, and Bandura's social cognitive theory (Shunk, 2000; Kim, 2001) fitting and in keeping with the topic of relationships in education.

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Smith et al., 2021) complements the social constructivist paradigm by examining how individuals make sense of their experiences within the social and cultural contexts. IPA is based on the premise that people do not experience events in isolation; their interpretations of those events are shaped by relationships, norms, and shared understandings. This reflects the

ontological and epistemological basis of the research, which honours the socially constructed nature of reality. At the same time, IPA retains a commitment to exploring the idiosyncratic, personal meaning that each participant ascribes to their experiences, aligning with the constructivist view that multiple subjective realities exist. By focusing on lived experience, with due regard to social and contextual influences, IPA bridges the gap between individual sense-making and the social frameworks that help construct and guide that meaning, making it particularly suited to research on relational dynamics in education and other social phenomena (Smith et al., 2009, 2022; Crotty, 1998).

Methodology (IPA)

The theoretical underpinnings of IPA are grounded in phenomenology, hermeneutics and idiography (Smith et al., 2009, 2022). IPA considers that people are naturally reflective beings who seek to understand their own experiences (Larkin & Thompson, 2012). When individuals encounter challenges or events that disrupt the familiar, they instinctively try to interpret what is taking place and why. This process of meaning-making is seen as an inherent part of human existence, where it happens automatically. In this sense, the researcher does not attempt to prompt participants to make sense of their experience, but rather to capture and interpret it (Smith, 2018). IPA is idiographic, exploring how individuals make sense of a particular phenomenon, emphasising how phenomena are subjectively lived and perceived.

IPA enables exploration of how individuals interpret and make sense of their lived experiences. The methodology was informed by philosopher Merleau-Ponty (1962), who believed that perception and meaning are created through our engagement with the world. IPA recognises that researchers cannot separate themselves or their own understanding from the process. The researcher is engaged in a 'double hermeneutic' in which the researcher attempts to make sense of the participant's sense-making or understanding of their own experience. IPA research focuses on the depth and richness of data rather than breadth, aiming to shed light on the complexities and nuances of the human experience.

Phenomenology

Phenomenology is a branch of philosophy that looks at how people experience and understand reality, the study of phenomena (Gill, 2020). Edmund Husserl, the father of phenomenology, describes trying to see things from the viewpoint of those who have lived through them, focusing on the meanings people give to their experiences, the underlying structure or 'essence' (Husserl, 1989; Moran, 2000), bracketing their assumptions. Unlike approaches that look for causes or general laws, like those in behavioural psychology, phenomenology is more interested in understanding than explaining. In social research, this means studying how people make sense of events or issues, not just finding universal rules. Phenomenologists focus on describing experiences, but they do not ignore explanation; instead, any explanation is based on the context of lived experience, not just on cause and effect (Smith et al., 2009, 2021).

Hermeneutics

Hermeneutics is concerned with interpretation itself, rather than simply using it as a tool to study other phenomena, the theory and understanding and interpretation of language (Schmidt, 2016). In IPA, this means that understanding a participant's lived experience is always through the researcher's own perspective where Philosopher Martin Heidegger rejected Husserl's bracketing of assumptions, claiming meaning is interpreted not simply discovered (Heidegger, 2010). In other words, we never have direct access to someone else's inner world, our understanding is shaped by our interpretive engagement as we try to make sense of their personal meaning. This process is known as the 'double hermeneutic' (Smith et al., 2009, 2022), where the researcher is attempting to make sense of the participant's sense-making.

Idiography

IPA focuses on exploring in depth individual case experiences, understanding the particular before and instead of looking for broad generalisations (Smith, 1995). Its goal is to understand how specific people in a certain context interpret and make sense of a situation. Attention is given to themes that emerge across a group of participants' experiences, in addition to highlighting the individual and distinct perspectives of individuals (Smith et al., 2009, 2022).

Validity

IPA is valued for its in-depth, personal examination of people's experiences, but it does have some limitations. Because studies often involve small, relatively homogenous samples, it can be difficult to know how far the findings can be applied beyond the group studied (Brocki & Wearden, 2006; BPS, 2011). Both the participant and the researcher contribute to the interpretation, in a process known as the "double hermeneutic", where the method acknowledges subjectivity. However, this openness might mean that a researcher's own views might influence the analysis. For this reason, some have pointed out that efforts to uncover meaning occasionally result in interpretations that are open to debate or may extend beyond what the data can firmly support (Pringle et al., 2011; Tuffour, 2017). Additionally, IPA is a demanding method that requires researchers to be highly reflective and skilled, and it can be time-consuming.

Yardley (2000, 2008, 2015) put forward a practical set of guidelines to help researchers keep IPA studies on track. She highlights four main areas: being sensitive to context, showing commitment and rigour, maintaining transparency and coherence, and considering impact and importance. Being sensitive to context means truly hearing what participants have to say and linking their stories to what's already known from other studies and drawing on context from the world around them. Being committed and rigorous is about digging into the data with care and not cutting corners. Transparency and coherence relate to researchers demonstrating their exact procedures and protocol, in order to support the golden thread throughout the research, where the reader can understand each decision point and how conclusions were drawn. As for impact and importance, these are about whether the research actually gives us new insight into people's experiences and adds something valuable to the field. Sticking to these principles helps IPA researchers earn trust and keeps the unique details of each person's experience front and centre (Yardley, 2000, 2008, 2015; Smith et al., 2009). Yardley's Principles have been considered in relation to the current study, detailed in Table 2.

Table 2

Table to evidence how the current research met Yardley's Principles (2000; 2008; 2025)

<u>Yardley's Principles considered in the current study</u>	
Principle	Evidence
<i>Sensitivity to Context</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Making adaptations to the developmental needs of primary aged pupils with SEMH needs - Careful consideration of power dynamics between adult researcher and child participant - Ethical considerations around consent, assent and safeguarding in addition to attention to emotional containment - The research is grounded in relevant theory around SEMH needs and the TSR in context - Acknowledgement of positionality and reflexivity in Chapter 3
<i>Commitment and Rigour</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Prolonged engagement with the data and iterative IPA analysis. Extended time for reflection due to extension period (see Chapter 3) - Systematic transcription and coping, multiple reading of transcripts and listening to audio allowing for immersion in participants' lived experienced - Careful development of themes grounded in the data, treating all children's language, sentences and utterances as meaningful
<i>Transparency and Coherence</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Transparent ethical approval process, consent and recruitment processes - Clear outline of steps undertaken through the procedural and analytic process of interviews and IPA - Strong alignment between research aims, epistemological stance, choice of participatory methods and IPA - Limitations acknowledged
<i>Impact and Importance</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Amplifies voices of an under-represented group (primary aged children with SEMH needs)

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Contribution to child voice, inclusion and relational practice literature - Practical implications for staff relational practice and participatory methods in SEMH research - Contributions to educational psychology practice - Ethical and social value in relation to power, marginalisation and inclusion, trauma-informed and relational school practice
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Visual Data

The richness of lived experiences has many facets and cannot be fully understood or communicated through verbal accounts alone (Boden & Eatough, 2014; Todres, 2007). There are elements of a felt experience, which occur prior to conscious reflection (Ratcliffe, 2008) in the immediate experience related to automatic process, rooted in phenomenology. Relational experiences are full of felt experiences which may require additional methodological considerations to capture fully, where traditional enquiry could be reductionist in neglecting implicit or intersubjective facets (Boden et al., 2019). Simply put, focussing exclusively on language may limit our understanding of the experience or world itself. Experience therefore can be communicated in both narrative and non-narrative means, both literal and metaphorical spheres.

Visual imagery captures a quality of experience by incorporating different sensory elements which have been thought of in art therapy contexts where visual images are infused with richness and meaning (Malchiodi, 2005). Drawings are not only compatible with IPA in supporting to communicate subjective experience, but additionally supports participants by providing a 'shared focus' for joint reflection and conversation (Boden et al., 2019). The participant is bodily engaged with their lived experience, providing an element of tangibility that words alone may not capture. Here the researcher, in viewing and making sense of the image in their own subjective experience, has the opportunity to gain a fuller understanding, in a different medium to verbal data, which aids the analysis. This supports in making connections and sense of meaning between the participant and researcher. Visual methods promote the richness or texture of the verbal data by providing a prompt

and alternative medium to explore experience. In addition, the visual data is worthy of analysis independent from the verbal data, where images have multiple meanings understood in relation to the participants meaning making to interpret, complementary to IPA.

Visual methods have been used to capture relationships in research and applied psychology including the use of genograms (Jolly et al., 1980) and sociograms (Moreno, 2012). Visual methods and drawings in phenomenological research are becoming more widely used (Attard et al, 2017; Shinebourne & Smith, 2011) and explored in research in relation to what they can add to IPA research (Boden et al., 2019). Visual methods in IPA research include photo-elicitation (Siler & Farrants, 2016), visual voice (Williamson, 2019) and found images (Bacon et al., 2017). In order to capture the subjective quality and texture of participant's connectedness and relational experiences, Boden et al., (2019) developed a method to allow participants to map their own relationships without standardisation. Participants are therefore considered 'experts' in their own experiences (Smith et al., 2009), where what participants produce is not dictated by the researcher.

The Relational Mapping Interview Framework

The relational-mapping interview (RMI) developed by Boden et al. (2019), is a drawing-and-talking interview and data collection methodology to support participants in reflecting upon and communicating their relational experiences. The RMI facilitates an exploration of relational, lived experiences that may otherwise remain difficult to access through verbal methods alone and is well aligned with IPA. Boden and colleagues (2019) conceptualise 'lived-experience' as individuals' encounters with everything within their lifeworld'. In this way, the RMI provides a participatory and developmentally sensitive means of accessing subjective, relational worlds of participants.

Boden and colleagues (2019), building on earlier work by Boden and Eatough (2014), propose a framework for incorporating visual materials into IPA that remains faithful to its philosophical and methodological principles. Within this perspective,

drawings and other imagery are treated as legitimate forms of experiential expression that can deepen phenomenological insight.

The RMI uses an interview-arc and the format of draw-talk-draw-talk in order to structure discussions. Aligned with semi structured interviews often used with IPA research (Smith *et al.*, 2009; 2022), the RMI's interview-arc structures conversations around four 'touchpoints'. The technique is less rigid or narrow than traditional semi-structured interviews where the researcher prompts the participant in response to their emerging images and verbal accounts. The touch points include 'mapping the self', 'mapping important others', 'standing back' and 'considering change'.

Visual modalities do not aim to uncover a single definitive truth; rather, they facilitate a dialogue between what participants explicitly communicate and what is implicitly conveyed through their images. The Relational Mapping Interview (RMI) enables individuals to visually represent complex relational dynamics quickly, while simultaneously discussing these relationships as they draw. This creates a three-way interaction between participant, researcher, and drawing, offering rich access to relational experience that might otherwise remain difficult to articulate.

Design

The research is qualitative by design, appropriate for the purpose of understanding lived human experiences in social sciences (Ritchie *et al.*, 2013), with use of participatory methods. Early discussion is advocated with children in the research context (Harcourt & Conroy, 2011) and the researcher has considered ways to involve CYP so that the process is not done to them but rather with them. Young people from the marginalised group (having an SEMH need), whose voices are rarely represented within research (Dolton *et al.*, 2020) play an active role. They have opportunity to be actors within the process, not passive subjects, but competent contributors with agency, as defined by Aldridge (2016).

The design encompassed an initial 'meet and greet' with the participants where the researcher had an opportunity to develop rapport with the CYP and explain the interview schedule to them, answering questions and ensuing consent was gained for the researcher to return on another date to carry out the interview. Semi-structured interviews were carried out using the Relational Mapping Interview (RMI) Framework (Boden *et al.*, 2019). The visuo-spatial method element of the RMI

enables the capturing of the complexity of relational experiences within the field of psychology research (Boden *et al.*, 2019).

Participant sample and recruitment

Purposive sampling was used to recruit seven participants (Appendix C for recruitment poster). SEMH is a broad term and encompasses significant variability, therefore homogeneity of the participant group has been considered in line with IPA guidance (Smith *et al.*, 2009). In order to support informed consent, homogeneity and the positive identity of the young people, the researcher used the following inclusion criteria:

- a) attend mainstream primary school and are currently in Key Stage 2
- b) have been identified by an EP/SENCo as having SEMH as their primary area of need within their EHCP
- c) have provision written within their EHCP related to access to key adult support at times throughout the school day to manage their emotions, social interactions or within the school environment

Smith *et al.*, (2009) suggest between four and ten participants to be used within an IPA study, with clinical psychology studies suggest between six and eight participants (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). The number of pupils may be less where the qualitative data gathered is rich.

Recruitment of participants occurred within the local authority (LA) in which the researcher was on placement as a TEP. With due consideration to conflict of interest and the aforementioned dual role, the researcher sought permission from the Principal Educational Psychologist (PEP) before recruitment for participants began within the LA. The schools that the researcher advertised to did not include those that the researcher had a prior relationship with as the link psychologist.

Parental and individual child consent was gathered prior to the research commencement. Parents and children consented to meeting with the researcher on two separate occasions. The first visit to school formed part of developing rapport between the participants and the researcher. In the interest of relational practice, the

researcher met first with the young people to introduce themselves, take part in enjoyable shared activities which included activities such as games and drawing. The children's right to withdraw from the research during the researcher's following visit on a subsequent day was reiterated. The rationale for this was to provide the children with further information to support their decision making to take part and answer any questions or concerns the children may have about the interview schedule or activity. Participants ranged in year group from Year 3 to Year 6. Each child chose their own unique pseudonyms to protect their anonymity, which were as follows:

- DSFootballer
- Santa
- Burger
- WW2 Soldier
- Thanos
- Dumpling
- The Uno Guy

Data collection

Through semi-structured interviews, the researcher incorporated an adapted relational mapping technique. RMI (Boden *et al.*, 2018) is a semi-structured interview technique that involves a drawing activity. Drawing can be rich in meaning and capture a tangibility that verbal accounts alone cannot (Hustvedt, 2006). The 'interview-arc' follows the format of 'draw-talk-draw-talk', providing a structure to support the facilitation of discussions around relational experiences, rather than a fixed set of questions. The method has been deemed as having the potential to be adapted for different contexts (Boden & Larkin, 2020). The rationale for this is to ensure the richness of data in reference to school staff. RMI in its original form explores all relationships in the participant's life. The adapted interview schedule in the current study (Appendix F) directed pupils to map their relationships with school staff only.

In keeping with ethical research policy and guidance (UEA, 2025; BERA, 2024) the audio recorded interviews and drawings were stored securely by the

researcher. The audio recordings were transferred to the University's One Drive and encrypted at the earliest opportunity. Original data files on the recording device were deleted at the earliest opportunity. Drawings were kept in a locked filing cabinet in the researcher's home with due regard for confidentiality and anonymity and the sensitive nature of the data.

Data analysis

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was employed as a method of data analysis which aims to analyse and examine aspects of personal, lived experience of the children's verbal data (Smith & Osborn, 2015). In line with the researcher's social constructivist position, IPA involves considering how meaning is constructed by individuals within their own social world, drawing on concepts from hermeneutics and phenomenology. Participants' drawings were initially analysed in accordance with the RMI framework process (Boden *et al.*, 2019) through a guide developed for visual materials (Boden & Larkin, 2020), an example of which is presented in Appendix M. However, in isolation the relational maps children drew were not considered separate findings. The maps as standalone data did not answer the research question, however, supported engagement as a participatory method to elicit children's voices and their verbal data, a mechanism through which discussions were centred around. Appendix N presents an example of the map analysed in Appendix M.

Following the transcription of the interviews, the researcher used a key IPA text, published to support researchers through theory, methodology and research, to guide their data analysis (Smith *et al.*, 2020) the steps of which are presented in Table 3.

Table 3

Steps of Data Analysis

Steps of Data Analysis	
Step	Description
Step 1 Starting with the first case: Reading and re-reading	This step involves immersing yourself in the data. It involves reading and re-reading the data, additionally listening to the audio to ensure transcripts are

	accurate. This step supports the researcher to focus on the participant and their unique contribution, slowing down the analytic process and reflecting on what you are reading, entering the participant's world.
Step 2 Exploratory Noting	This step involves examining the participants' use of language and highlighting units of meaning, staying very close to the original transcripts. This step begins to characterise ways in which the participant talks about and thinks about an issue. The aim is to produce a comprehensive and detailed set of notes and comments on the data. These comments have a clear phenomenological focus with explicit meaning. See Appendix G for an example of exploratory noting, these are featured as comments in standard text.
Step 3 Constructing experiential statements	This step involves communicating the most important features of the exploratory notes, retaining complexity whilst reducing the volume of detail. The statements relate to the participant's experience and the sense making of the experience. The researcher here has a more central role in organising and interpreting the data. This step involves creating a concise summary of what was important in the transcript, more abstract and conceptual than exploratory notes. See Appendix G for an example of emergence of experiential statements which are in Bold font.
Step 4 Searching for connections across experiential statements	This step involves considering how experiential statement fit together. The statements were written on pieces of paper and spread across a large surface. Not all experiential statements were incorporated into groups, as they are outliers, not forming wider meaning with other statements. The aim of this step is to organise experiential statements to highlight the most interesting and important aspects of the participant's account. Examples of this visual process can be found in Appendix H where the researcher took the time to come back to the data, developing PETs over numerous iterations.
Step 5 Naming the personal experiential themes (PETs) and consolidating and organising them in a table	A title is created to describe the cluster of experiential statements that share meaning, making sense of the material. A table was developed to demonstrate the PETs, their related experiential statements and quotations from the participant that support the PET. See Appendix I for an example of a table of PETs.
Step 6 Continuing the individual analysis of other cases	This step involves repeating steps 1-5 for all other participants. Each case is treated as unique and not compared to previous participant's account at this stage, in keeping with the idiographic obligation. The researcher acknowledges the influence of previous cases that have been analysed, where the researcher's 'fore-structures' (structures of

	understanding that guide interpretation of the text) have changed. There is rigour in systematically following the same process for each case.
Step 7 Working with PETs to develop group experiential themes (GETs) across cases	This step involved searching for patterns and shared themes including similarities and differences across the seven participants' PETs, in order to create a group set of experiential themes. The PETs were separated, mixed and spread across a large surface whilst the researcher looks for connections across the contributing cases. The researcher checks back for meaning in the original transcripts when re-organising the PETs and creating group themes. In order for the GET to be plausible, at least half of the participants contributed towards the majority of the group themes, however this is not a rigid rule of IPA. See Appendix J for a table of GETs.

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was sought from the University of East Anglia's School of Education and Lifelong Learning Research Ethics Committee on 22nd August 2024 (Appendix A), following internal (UEA, 2021; UEA, 2022) and external (BERA, 2024; BPS, 2021) guidance. CYP are by definition a vulnerable group, therefore the BPS (2021) considers the research to involve a greater level of risk. The children are additionally vulnerable due to their identified SEN. The research sought to mitigate for the potential risk of harm caused to identity or self-esteem by labelling their SEMH needs (BPS, 2021). In the interest of transparency as a key principle in educational research (BERA, 2018), children have the right to know how they meet the inclusion criteria. Due to the age of the pupils in the primary setting, they may not be aware of their classification of SEMH needs. Research suggests that many CYP do not understand the classification and that it is not a relevant label to use with the CYP themselves (Hickinbotham & Soni, 2021). Appendix K evidences the potential risks, mitigating controls and procedures in the instances of any potential harm caused.

Parents in addition to CYP themselves were required to give informed, voluntary consent to participate (BERA, 2024). The researcher produced participant information sheets informing CYP and their parents of the purpose of the study, participant expectations and their right to withdraw (BERA, 2024). The participant information sheet was accessible to the particular audience (Appendices D&E). The

data remained confidential and raw data recordings or transcriptions were saved under a pseudonym (BPS, 2021). Schools and gatekeepers such as Headteachers and SENCOs, who supported facilitation of children participating, were made aware that CYP were under no perceived 'institutional pressure' to participate under the school's daily expectations and children were free to withdraw from the research activity at any time (BPS, 2021). In addition, the researcher followed school's safeguarding and whistleblowing policies and ensure any relevant clearance paperwork is gathered, such as Disclosure and Barring Service checks prior to commencement.

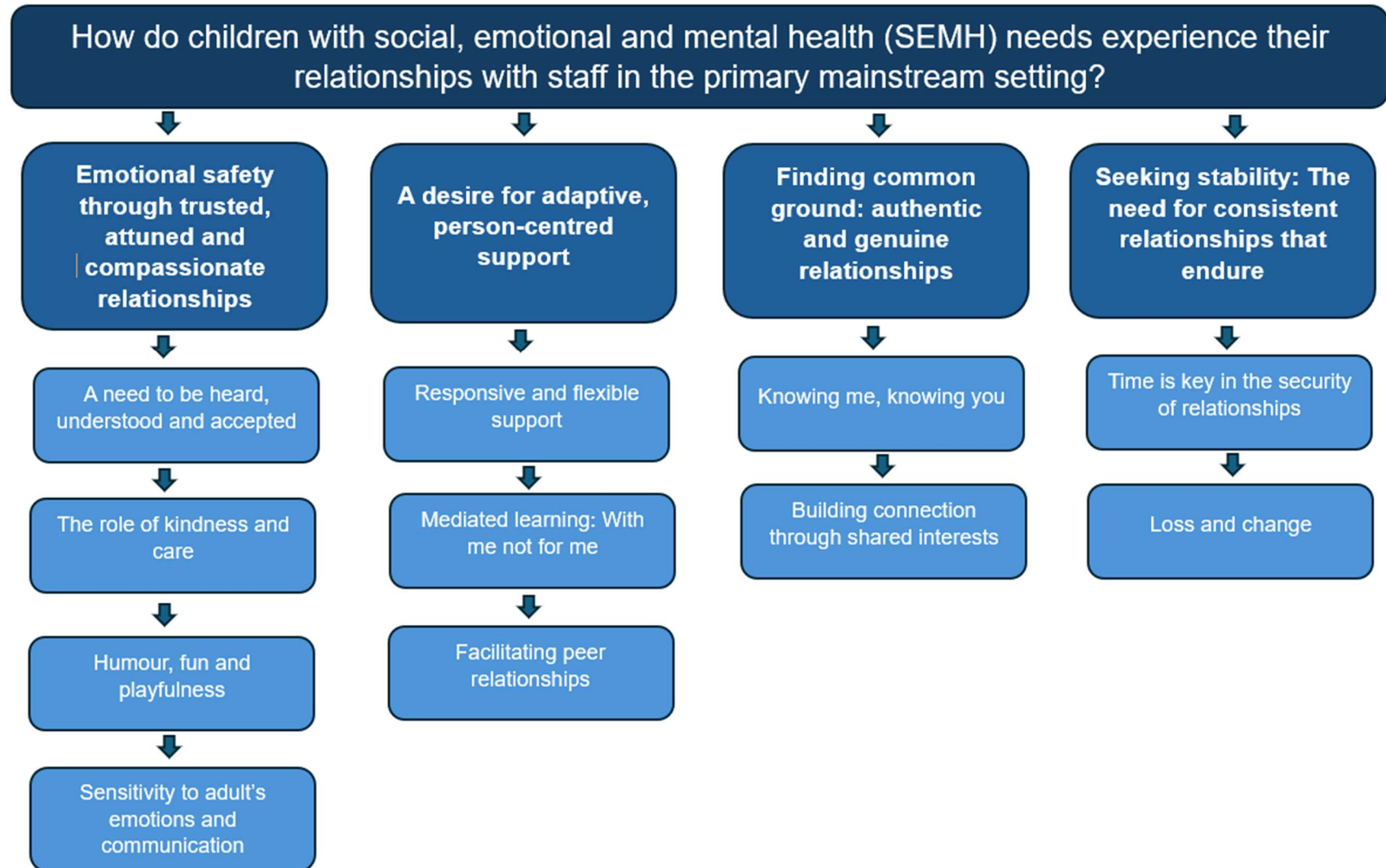
Findings

The following section presents the findings of the study with a primary focus on the verbal data collected from participants and group experiential themes (GETs) generated. In order to tell a coherent story communicating shared meaning-making across participants, the GETs are presented as overall findings to avoid repetition and disruption of the narrative flow. However, the idiographic focus of IPA is still a core feature of the current research, where individual participant experiences were analysed in depth. A pen portrait of each individual participant is presented in the appendices which will present their individual meaning-making accounts and contextual information surrounding their research participation (Appendix P)

Despite the visual methods being crucial in opening up the conversation with children and acting as a prompt or discussion point, they will not be presented as findings separate from the children's verbal contributions. The relational maps supported the children to consider aspects of their relationship which may not have come up organically, specifically step 3 'stepping back' and step 4 'considering change', where children make direct comments on the maps they have drawn, therefore the verbal data cannot be separated from the visual maps created. Appendix O presents all children maps. Figure 2 represents a visual diagram of the overall findings of the current study.

Figure 2

Overall Findings



RQ) How do children with social, emotional and mental health (SEMH) needs experience their relationships with staff in the primary mainstream setting?

The research question aims to explore how children make sense of their relationships with staff in school and how these relationships are experienced by children. Four superordinate themes were established; 'Emotional safety through trusted, attuned and compassionate relationships', 'A desire for adaptive, person-centred support', 'Finding common ground: authentic and genuine relationships' and 'Seeking stability: the need for consistent relationships that endure'. Within each superordinate theme there are subordinate themes which were established, speaking to distinct aspects of the overarching theme.

Theme 1: Emotional safety through trusted, attuned and compassionate relationships

This overarching theme highlights the importance of the adult role in creating emotional safety for children in school. The theme speaks to the emotional and relational dimensions of adults fostering children's wellbeing. Trust and connection is developed through a complex interplay of attunement, emotional warmth, empathy and compassionate responses. Subordinate themes within Theme 1 include; 'A need to be heard, understood and accepted', 'The role of kindness and care', 'Humour, fun and playfulness' and 'Sensitivities to adult's emotions and communication'.

1.1 A need to be heard, understood and accepted

An important feature of the participants' description of their experiences of how relationships with adults contribute to emotional safety in school includes a need to be heard, understood and accepted - to be truly seen. There is a sense of children communicating their need to be valued and respected by adults through non-judgemental and empathetic support. For example, WW2 Soldier said:

WW2 Soldier - "He's just like...If I'm sitting down he thinks I've been naughty so he's like 'Erm X you can come in my class actually', I haven't done anything bad I'm just learning" (p.5)

Here, WW2 Soldier points to the difficulty in adults making automatic assumptions about him, interpreting his behaviour immediately through a negative lens. This presumption relates to a sense of unfair judgement when WW2 Soldier's intentions were good. There is a perception of being targeted, more likely to receive

punishment or sanction based on preconceived judgements that staff may hold about him. DSFootballer reflected similar sentiments which are framed in a more positive light:

DSFootballer - "Because if you were in her lessons, like she'll... say if I've done something silly, she won't actually put me in the red, no yellow sometimes, she does just pick my name up and put me there, but she don't as soon as I stop, she'll put it up again" (p.4)

For DSFootballer, his teacher supports him through making allowances and reasonable adjustments for his behaviour. Here, DSFootballer communicates that it is important to him how his teacher does not automatically implement sanctions in response to his behaviour in the classroom. It is received well by him that his teacher understands his behavioural presentation and adjusts their practice to demonstrate empathy and acceptance of DSFootballer. Dumpling echoes a similar need to feel heard, seen and understood:

Dumpling - "Like when I say I'm in a sticky situation, like upset because my dad upsets me sometimes like being mean to me.....I speak to her about it and then she says yeah and she just helps me". (p.1)

Dumpling communicates the importance of having someone he can speak to, where his voice is heard, received and he can be fully accepted, contained and validated. His key adult provides a feeling of safety where Dumpling can speak openly without fear of judgement on himself or his family. There is a sense of relatedness first, regard for the individual, remaining curious before adult's respond with empathy, which is further highlighted by Burger:

Burger - "Because I ran off because I was getting upset so he came and talked to me...Well he was calm". (p.13)

Burger describes a time where he was supported by an important adult during times of heightened emotion and associated presenting behaviour in school, running away. Here, the adult receives Burger's behaviour as a form of communication, something that deserves 'getting to the bottom of'. This attunement is regulation-enhancing and speaks more widely to separating behaviour from the worth of the

child, demonstrating respect and value continuously. Respect is further communicated through avoiding blame by DSFootballer:

DSFootballer - “they never choose someone to blame” (p.8)

Here DSFootballer shares the importance of key supporting adults holding multiple perspectives in mind whilst respecting and valuing individual children, removing blame or judgement from social situations. The importance of adults engaging without pre-conceived ideas, demonstrating fairness. Empathy is experienced as non-judgemental, balanced and curious rather than accusatory. The opposite is true in feeling targeted or singled out as WW2 Soldier’s experience suggests:

WW2 Soldier - “Just like to me...it’s the way he talks to me sometimes.” (p.6)

For WW2 Soldier, it feels as though unfair judgement is directed towards him disproportionately in comparison to other children, demonstrated through the way adults engage and interact with him. This speaks to the need to feel heard and seen, and adults acting as a champion for you.

Thus a key feature of emotionally safe relationships is the need to be heard, understood and accepted, where children express a deep desire and need to be held in continuous positive regard. Adults demonstrating a level of understanding is displayed through listening to hear in order to understand, children being seen, respected and valued without judgement.

1.2 The role of kindness and care

Another key feature of how children experience emotional safety through their relationships with adults includes the role of kindness and care in their interactions with adults. Physical care and affection is experienced not just through actions, but through emotional warmth that is felt, which contributes towards a sense of safety for children. For example, Thanos said:

Thanos – “they like help and they care” (p.3)

Here care can be understood to mean adult’s caring about Thanos, showing genuine interest in her, holding her in high regard. Additionally, the nuisance of care is communicated by Thanos as being cared for, a caring act:

Thanos - "Yeah, erm so when I'm unwell I'll be sitting like this (demonstration head on desk), just zoning out, I go really white when I'm not well and like I've got like a headache...she like erm gives or tell me and asks if I need any water". (p.6)

Thanos describes the physical care and attention that a key adult offers her. There is something about the adult tuning into Thanos, noticing her emotional and physical needs and offering her responsive and considerate help and assistance. Ultimately this communicates a sense of care and consideration of Thanos' wellbeing, holding her in mind. This is echoed by DSFootballer:

DSFootballer – "Miss XX has helped me what a lot of stuff, Miss XXX has helped me with that thing there (points to head), what my best friend done errr when I cut my head open, and Miss X she used to help me with a lot of first aid like all TAs have to do". (p.8)

DSFootballer shares how three members of support staff have contributed to the sense of care he experienced in school through use of first-aid and tending to him when he is hurt. This care is exemplified by the comfort offered and nurture demonstrated towards him when he is vulnerable, likely both physically and emotionally. A regard for his physical wellbeing is communicated where emotional reassurance builds trust and provides a sense of physical and emotional safety. Offering care and comfort to other children is also noticed and an important relational factor for Dumpling and Thanos:

Dumpling – "she says nice kind comments like being kind and asking me if I'm okay and if someone is upset she goes over and says like asks what happens and tells the person who upset them". (p.2)

Thanos - "yeah she notices when something's wrong, yeah she also does this to other kids as well and she's actually really sweet" (p.6)

Dumpling and Thanos communicate experiencing a feature of nice and kind, by adults checking in on children and asking if they are okay. This shows they care about their physical and emotional state. It feels equally important for Dumpling and Thanos that adults are consistent in their care and evidence this towards others, adding to the level of safety they feel in their company. For Dumpling and Thanos, adults offering support and empathy to their peers demonstrates the value of

kindness across contexts, creating a sense of trust, that adults are consistent in their approach.

The sweetness that Thanos describes speaks to the felt sense of kindness, a delightful characteristic, the opposite of sour or bitter, leaving a pleasant taste. Sweetness suggests a facet of kindness is related to a gentle way of being and interacting with others, thoughtful and caring. Kindness and being nice is a universal feature of the relational experience that is frequently mentioned by participants:

The Uno Guy – “She’s kind, helpful”. (p.3)

Santa – “She’s nice”. (p.2)

WW2 Soldier – “But she is a well nice teacher.” (p.3)

Burger – “Well, they are kind”. (p.6)

DSFootballer – “She’s nice, she helps me with a lot of stuff”. (p.6)

Here, kindness and being nice are valued attributes possessed by staff, which is an important aspect of the support received and emotional connection they have to staff. The participants do not consistently expand on what kind and nice is or means to them, which in part may be related to the difficulty in articulating the complexity and felt sense of the expression of nice or kind. In this sense, it may be difficult to communicate why some adults are particularly likeable, and emotionally warm. Thanos demonstrates this difficulty:

Thanos - “I like how kind she is to me...she’d like, its hard to explain...really hard to explain”. (p.4)

Kindness is presented as a feature that is difficult to define for Thanos, where the emotional warmth that is displayed by key staff cannot easily be explained. There is a tangibility, felt sense or feeling to the experience that words may not be able to fully capture. Kindness is also communicated as a quality within adults, something they possess as a trait rather than being purely reliant on actions alone. This sentiment is echoed by WW2 Soldier when he speaks about changes he would like to make to adults in school:

WW2 Soldier - “Yeah, be a bit more kinder just like being kind” (p.8)

Here WW2 Soldier initially uses the word 'kinder' to describe how he would like adults to change for the better if he could. It suggests that kindness is already valued but could be improved upon. This speaks to the idea that kindness can be demonstrated through actions, suggesting kindness isn't fixed. The repetition, adding, 'just being kind', reinforces the qualities' importance.

Demonstrating kindness and care is understood as involving empathy, compassion and concern for children which is reflected in helping and comforting them, ultimately forming part of children's experience of emotional safety. Adults who are important and positively regarded naturally choose to help; kindness is embedded in who they are, shown both through their actions and through the caring qualities they embody.

1.3 Humour, fun and playfulness

A further subordinate theme that contributes towards a sense of emotional safety for children in their relationships with adults in school includes humour, fun and playfulness. Emotional warmth and attunement are demonstrated by creating joyful and positive interactions, encouraging bonding and connection. For Santa, preferred adults are agents of fun:

Santa - "Sometimes like when they do something fun like making stuff". (p.4)

Here Santa expresses the importance of adults facilitating enjoyable experiences, where adults are perceived as fun and creative, engaging him in practical activities. He adds depth to his explanation by sharing the mechanism in which adults being perceived as fun may be achieved:

Santa - "They might be doing stuff like in Maths, like in Maths we've been doing bar charts Christmassy and that's fun because its Christmassy...No its important if people, if people enjoy it" (p.5)

Santa shares the role in which adults play to engage children in learning through a hook or sense of intrigue and fun. For Santa, it is important to him that the fun adults inject into lessons or activities in school is universally appreciated by his peers, a sense that all children are excited by the opportunity they have been presented. In addition to opportunities, Dumpling discussed a key adult's sense of fun in the personality trait they possess:

Dumpling - "Funny...her jokes, when she dances around the room sometimes" (p.2)

The use of humour and physicality through dancing is positively received and the key adult is described as funny. There is a light-heartedness to the way the adult behaves in the classroom which includes the use of physicality and a sense of jovialness. The use of jokes implies that the member of staff deliberately attempts to engage with humour to benefit the children and bring hilarity to the classroom. The quality of funniness is echoed by Burger in relation to his positive experience of another key adult:

Burger - "He's just funny..." (p.2)

Burger - "Just the way he acts" (p.3)

Being funny is important and described as a likable characteristic within one of his preferred adults which relates to how this teacher acts with everyone, a personality he has. The way a key adult acts in regard to their sense of humour of funniness is replicated by DSFootballer:

DSFootballer - ""He's very funny, he's a very funny teacher" (p.3)

Here DSFootballer emphasises the quality of funny, repeating the words 'very', indicating how appreciated this attribute of his teacher's is and how important this feels to his teacher being positively perceived by him. He expands on what it is that makes his teacher funny:

DSFootballer - "He's just funny in general. When I'm standing up and he tells me to sit down, he's always like 'sit' (gesturing with hands)... good boy' (smiling)... Yeah it's funny. And then I look somewhere else and not at him, he's always like, 'we're not playing hide and seek XXX'... 'oh yep, oh yep you found me'." (p.4)

A teacher being funny is characterised by playfulness where humour is conveyed through gesture, facial expressions, and a jokey manner. For DSFootballer, banter is displayed and created between the two of them; a playful way of communicating that is mutually enjoyable, developing their bond. This animation in communication style and sense of playfulness is shared by Dumpling:

Dumpling – “She said that um, no, once when we were doing Kensuke’s Kingdom, it’s a book, um they came and she in a part of the book it goes, ‘demida demida’ and she goes ‘DEMIDA DEMIDA’ and then Mrs XXX came running in the room and go ‘did you say ariba ariba?’ and she was like no, but then she was like ‘ARIBA ARIBA’, I can’t remember what language that is.” (p.3)

Here Dumpling shares the use of tone and playfulness which his teacher employed to bring a text to life in the classroom. The teacher engages children with the use of voices in the text, capturing their attention and creating excitement and anticipation. Additionally, Dumpling comments on the dynamic and sense of playfulness between two members of staff here when another adult joins the pre-existing ‘fun’ being had. This adds layers of humour and connection, creating a safe and relaxed atmosphere, where it is received positively by Dumpling that staff appear to bond and get on well. The class relishing in being part of an inside joke, a wider community, where efforts resemble adults putting on a show for the children.

For participants, demonstrating humour and playfulness, engaging children with fun and excitement, is crucial in their positive perception of adults, supporting with relationship development. Humour and light-heartedness plays a part of overall emotional safety and attunement between the children and their key important adults in school. Humour is a mutually enjoyable experience for both parties, where adults demonstrate to children that they are warm, ultimately contributing to a safe and relaxed environment where children can see adults as equals in the shared experience that unites them.

1.4 Sensitivities to adult’s emotions and communication

The final subordinate theme within the overarching ‘emotional safety through trusted, attuned and compassionate relationships’ category includes sensitivities to adult’s emotions and communication. The subtheme describes the importance of both non-verbal and verbal communication signals which adults in school exhibit in developing a sense of emotional safety for children. Children express their relational experience through heightened sensitivity to perceived changes in adult’s emotional states and the impact this has on them. For example, WW2 Soldier conveyed the sense of distrust he experiences in response to emotional cues expressed by an adult:

WW2 Soldier - "It's sometimes like, the face, it's sometimes like, I don't trust them that much, it's like sometimes how they, the way they, and sometimes makes me uncomfortable." (p.7)

Here, distrust involves a feeling of uncomfortableness which is created from the facial expressions that an adult communicates. WW2 Soldier struggles to articulate and find the words to express exactly what it might be about the adult's behaviour or presentation that unnerves him, suggesting a felt sense or lack of warmth being portrayed. Uncomfortableness for WW2 Soldier is fostered by further non-verbal cues including body language and physicality:

WW2 Soldier - "(does impression of arms folded) I don't like them standing like this...cos it makes me uncomfortable" (p.6)

There is a sense of power which is imbalanced as WW2 Soldier is in the adult's presence. Power is communicated through closed body language in the adult, that elicits authority, signalling to WW2 Soldier that he is not emotionally safe. This vulnerability that exists in the adult-child dynamic is reiterated by The Uno Guy in his experience of use of tone and emotional expression in language:

The Uno Guy - "they are less strict because they are kind of strict ...so I can listen...when they are shouting" (p.5)

The Uno Guy speaks about how he would like adults to change. He alludes to a state of being emotionally heightened where he is unable to listen or process what is being said when adults shout, withdrawing or shutting down. For him, being strict involves a tone and way of speaking to children which impacts his ability to receive and process what is being said to him. The Uno Guy continues that the use of shouting impacts his own emotional safety and state:

The Uno Guy – "a bit frightening because I'm just ten" (p.5)

This sense of helplessness that is experienced when staff are strict and shout, elicits a strong emotion of fear in The Uno Guy where he receives the angry emotions of the adult. The Uno Guy mentioned his age, speaking to the innate power imbalance of the adult and the child, which is intimidating. This exemplifies the idea that children do not deserve a harsh treatment, but nurture and warmth. This quote speaks to the impact of adult behaviour on children's emotional safety and stress

response. Shouting is also explored by Dumpling as an important feature of how emotional safety can be eroded:

Dumpling - "it's annoying (shouting), it upsets me, it's really loud, louder than me sometimes and I'm really loud" (p.1)

Dumpling – "Like Mrs XXX, I don't like her, not a single bit, I don't like her...shouty"(p.5)

Here Dumpling initially describes the emotional impact shouting has on him, the sensitivity to the loudness of the adult communication is an important feature, comparing this to his own volume which he perceives to be loud. This comparison signals a level of disproportionality in the adult's use of shouting, unnecessarily loud and threatening. Dumpling also suggests that the use of shouting, creating a feeling of unsafety breaks down the relationship he has with staff, once trust is broken in this way, it cannot be re-built. The emotion of anger being communicated in adult's communication is also highlighted by WW2 Soldier and Thanos in regards to preferred and difficult experiences:

WW2 Soldier - "Err, a bit talky, just like a bit angry sometimes about when I pull out my little (toy)" (p.2)

This difficult experience for WW2 Soldier points to the use of negative language or cues which highlight that the adult's emotional state had changed and WW2 Soldier feels responsible. Thanos shares how her positive experience with adult communication conveyed more positive emotional states:

Thanos - "she talked to us calmy, like she wasn't mad or anything" (p.5)

The kindness displayed by the staff member is communicated by using their tone of voice, a warmth and calmness that does not indicate they are emotionally heightened. For Santa, it is not tone alone that positively contributed to how emotions are communicated, highlighting the role of facial expressions:

Santa - "And that is happy...smiling" (p.5)

Smiling demonstrates an openness, emotional warmth and friendliness, supporting Santa to feel reassured, that adults are happy, which forms part of a sense of safety. Children are perceptive to the emotional state of adults which is

communicated through tone of voice, and non-verbal cues. The role of adult's communication style and expression of emotion is important to the children's experience of emotional safety in school, feeling comfortable, valued and safe in their presence.

Theme 2: A desire for adaptive, person-centred support

This theme encapsulates the type of support needs that children have and what they appreciate and would like to change about the way in which adults support them in school. The three subthemes that emerged include: 'Responsive and flexible support', 'Mediated learning: with me not for me' and 'Facilitating peer relationships'. For participants, support is positively received when it is flexible, adjustments made and individualised for them. Children also spoke about staff's roles in managing conflict and facilitating positive interactions with peers, contributing to their overall positive sense of inclusion in school.

2.1 Responsive and flexible support

This subtheme centres around the children's positive experience and desire for responsive and flexible support across social and academic landscapes. Positively received support ensures children are given elements of agency and choice by adults. For Burger, positively received support from key adults should be flexible, not all the time and does not limit school experiences:

Burger - "I think I'd like it to be all the time (support)...actually no, not learning and play and at lunchtimes... I think we will stay in here for learning and break at lunch outside" (p.14)

Here, Burger is speaking about his hopes for adult support, which include having a voice in when the support he is offered, in terms of additional adult contact time, is utilised. For Burger, this would feel most helpful in learning, having 1:1 key adult support in the library, outside of the classroom. When outside with his peers at lunch and at play time, he would prefer reduced adult support in social environments. For Burger, person-centred support that feels comfortable to him and does not limit school experiences is crucial, he shares his frustrations about lack of autonomy or agency over staffing support:

Burger - "No it's not up to me, but there's one adult I don't like...Well, I'm like mm I don't really wanna be with them but I'm gonna have to" (p.6)

Burger describes his lack of power in decision making about the staff who support him. When he expressed 'gonna have to', it feels as though he has developed a heavy sense of disappointment and normalcy in tolerating or feeling adult support is being done unto him, rather than with him. It feels important for Burger to have a say in not only when adults support him but which adults support him. DSFootballer echoes the sentiments of appreciating choice being offered to him by adults:

DSFootballer - "err I weren't allowed to run cos my head, they let me stay in and I was allowed to choose someone to do something inside .. like lego or something" (p.8)

For DSFootballer, TAs providing him with choices over who and what to play with which is received positively. The word 'allowed', indicates the power and authority held by adults and suggests that adults are respecting DSFootballer's rights, valuing him by making his environment more child-centred. Tuning into children and understanding what they need forms part of child-centred responsive support for Thanos:

Thanos - "She'll help you if you need help" (p.2)

Here, staff help is positively received when staff ask and check in with Thanos, whilst simultaneously tuning in and knowing when Thanos needs help. It feels important that staff don't support all the time and have a good understanding of her needs, knowing when it is that Thanos requires additional help. The member of staff builds a sense of trust and security, where Thanos knows they will step in if she needs them, whilst simultaneously encouraging her independence. Help and adjustments are further explored by WW2 Soldier:

WW2 Soldier - "Having little breaks in between learning, I like that a lot" (p.7)

Help is received well by WW2 Soldier from adults with reasonable adjustments and breaks in learning to support with his needs. He speaks to the individualised support that is in place for him, adults providing him with flexible break

opportunities. Noticing when he needs a break, by viewing his behaviour as a form of communication is evidenced by WW2 Soldier's further comments:

WW2 Soldier - "Well if I'm feeling uncomfortable I show them a sign like this (head on table). And then they say "do you want to go to the quiet area and get a fidget?" And then I'm like (action moving to leave quickly)" (p.7)

Adults are noticing his needs and re-directing support to promote WW2 Soldier's emotional and sensory regulation, ultimately contributing to his wellbeing in school. Adults act with sensitivity and use questioning and choice to ensure support does not feel prescriptive, promoting autonomy and independence. The quick action of WW2 moving suggest he trusts the adults and appreciates their guidance and support strategies.

This subtheme conveys the importance of responsive and flexible support that children are offered and they desire from key adults that notice and respond sensitively to children's needs. This support feels most helpful when it is tailored to the individual and ensures children are given choice and agency, whilst simultaneously knowing adults are available to them if they need them.

2.2 Mediated learning: With me not for me

The second subordinate theme within 'a desire for adaptive, person-centred support', focusses on children's experiences of the academic support adults provide them in school. Children shared their appreciation of staff scaffolding their learning, with an emphasis on adults promoting their independence and experience of success in learning. For Santa, adults in school should facilitate learning which is a relational process:

Santa - "Adults in school should be, they should be helping you learn" (p.4)

The role of the adult is seen as an agent of growth and development for Santa academically, indicating that the primary role in his experience for adults in school is to support children to access the curriculum and learn. For Thanos, impactful support from TAs looks like noticing when she needs help, offering support strategies to mediate her learning, so she is able to complete the task herself:

Thanos - "she doesn't tell me the answer but she helps me work it out...so if I was stuck...she'd give me a way to work this out" (p.6)

There is a clear distinction here between adults scaffolding the work, responding dynamically to Thanos' approach to the task, in comparison to giving her the answers or taking away the challenge completely. This sentiment is echoed by Santa:

Santa - "Not write for me, when you copy" (p.4)

Santa - "I'm writing it and she's telling me, like and if I don't know what the word, like sound is" (p.6)

Santa described a key adult in school supporting him with writing, with a clear feature of positively received support being related to promoting Santa's independence in learning. Support in learning that feels helpful for Santa, includes adults modelling writing and prompting him with phoneme/grapheme correspondences. Here staff adopt a watchful or waiting approach, offering support once it is clear the child is beginning to find a task too difficult. Noticing this change in the children is a feature of mediated learning, in addition to providing the appropriate level of support in response to children's perceived difficulty. Providing support to mediate learning and notice and fill gaps or areas when children are struggling. DSFootballer also comments on his desire for adults to make adjustments to help him access learning:

DSFootballer - "my work...with me...helping me in the lesson" (p.12)

DSFootballer conveys a desire for help in lessons to continue, where staff support him with the work alongside them, not doing work for him. Adults facilitating learning is a relational process and supports children to bond with staff, opening up and being vulnerable, taking academic risks. For The Uno Guy staff play a role in correcting misunderstanding or mistakes which is positively received:

The Uno Guy - "she teaches me, she teaches my mistakes I've made" (p.3)

Here The Uno Guy is receptive to the feedback he received from a key adult in learning, appreciating the adult's position of more knowledgeable other. For The Uno Guy, he would like adults to be even more educated as he values academic learning and views adults in school as gatekeepers to his access to knowledge:

The Uno Guy – “learn, I’m not trying to say this in a rude way but they should learn more, add more lessons” (p.4)

The importance of adult’s developing their own knowledge to support children to develop theirs speaks to the mechanism of the more knowledgeable or skilled adult in mediated learning (Vygotsky, 1978). Children discussed their need to be engaged with learning by adult’s who notice their need for additional support, scaffold their learning and promote a level of independence and success for children’s independence in learning, ultimately contributing to a sense of connectedness and trust to adults. There is a fine balance to be had which does not reduce children’s self-worth by relying too heavily on adult support.

2.3 Facilitating peer relationships

The third and final subordinate theme within the wider ‘desire for adaptive, person-centred support’, includes staff’s role in facilitating positive peer relationships. Appreciated adult support involves intervening when conflict between participants and other children arise, whilst being available for them in social spaces. The adaptive support from staff within social interactions promotes social and friendship skills and contributes to the connection between staff and participants. For DSFootballer, help from his preferred TA is experienced on the playground:

DSFootballer - Er, normally out on the playground” (p.5)

Here, DSFootballer comments on when the help received from his preferred TA is received, indicating that social difficulties are an area where his key adult’s help is welcome. When considering what it was exactly that the key adult did to help on the playground DSFootballer was unsure:

DSFootballer – “Erm, I can’t remember” (p.5)

This could indicate that these social experiences are difficult to recall and potentially associated with emotional challenges. The nature or exact details of the support here not feeling as significant to DSFootballer as knowing the adult was available to him in a time of need. Burger further comments on how social support is received from important adults.

Burger – *“Well they would tell the other person to not be rude or stop being unkind or leave him alone...yeah other kids and me” (p.9)*

Burger describes two key adults' support to manage conflict and facilitate positive peer interactions by resolving disputes and managing behaviour. There is a perception that adults are protectors, empowering those peers who the adults feel are being unfairly treated, in recognising and challenging unkind or negative behaviour. There is a belief that these adults will act in a way that is in the interest of impartiality, not siding with particular children, where Burger recognises his own part in peer conflict. This is echoed by Thanos in her experience of adult support:

Thanos - "when she sorts stuff out like arguments and that, she helps me and others...she got us all in a room and sat us around a table and she tried sorting it out and now we all get along (p.4)

For Thanos the role of her important adult in school is centred around resolving conflict between her and her peers, providing support to herself and her peers which is notable. The adult is viewed as organised, fair and effective in restoring positive peer relationships by implementing a structured approach, actively facilitating conflict resolution. Here, Thanos communicates the reliance on adult guidance to support open and honest communication and further comments on the role of the adult in eliciting all children's perspectives:

Thanos - "she asked how it started and who it was...she like asked how we could all be friends and sorted it out and she told our parents obviously that we had had an argument," (p.5)

The structured and methodical way in which the adult approaches the conflict between peers indicates they are fair and focussed on repairing friendships, not purely stopping any presenting behaviour. The adult gathers information, utilises a solution-oriented approach and communicates with parents. For Thanos, this evidences trust and confidence in the adult's decision making and ultimately communicates trust through the restorative approaches that are employed by the adult.

Adults are positioned as active agents in improving relationships between participants and their peers. Children expect adults to step in and intervene when challenges arise, acting as mediators during conflict. Adults play a role in behaviour management and wider social learning processes for participants which impacts positively on their sense of connection to key adults and confidence in seeking and

accepting support from them in social spaces. The support is flexible and adapted to the presenting situation and ensure that participants' best interests are at the centre of decisions adults make when navigating conflict between peers.

Theme 3: Finding common ground: authentic and genuine relationships

The third superordinate theme that has come out of the participants' group data is centred around building authentic relationships and finding common ground between children and adults. Two subordinate themes were generated which include 'knowing me, knowing you' and 'building connection through shared interests and activities'. The overarching theme speaks to the importance of adults sharing who they are as a person and demonstrating genuine interest in children, bonding through their shared interests and activities.

3.1 Knowing me knowing you

The 'knowing me, knowing you' subtheme encompasses participants' experiences of getting to know key staff members. Adults sharing personal information about themselves is viewed as humanising and important in supporting to build connections with children. Adults being authentically themselves is important in how children relate to and connect with adults in school, helping children to get to know them and allow adults to get to know them. DSFootballer shares the importance of getting to know key adults:

DSFootballer – *“This is a teacher called Miss XXX and she is my favourite TA and if you get to know her, she might be your favourite TA” (p.5)*

Here, DSFootballer shares what he would tell a child who was new to the school about his favourite TA, who holds emotional significance for him. The inference of children's active participation in opening up to the adult, 'if you get to know her', where relationships are not automatic and require growth through interaction and deliberate effort. Dumpling shares similar thoughts about a preferred adult in school:

Dumpling - “I like her... I just like Mrs XXX.. I know them a lot” (p.4)

Dumpling shares the importance of knowing adults in school as a person, knowing them well. Here it can be suggested that familiarity is a key factor in building relationships rather than or in addition to specific actions. Frequent, consistent

interaction builds relational bonds. For Thanos, key consistent adults are genuine and predictable:

Thanos - *“they are perfect, they are themselves, they are really kind” (p.7)*

Thanos shared the importance of adults behaving in a consistent and authentic way which helps to develop her relationship with them, feeling as though they are not trying too hard or putting on an act. Knowing what to expect where adults are ‘themselves’ contributes to the overall positive experience Thanos has with them. For Santa, positive experiences include adults knowing the children well and planning their learning opportunities around this:

Santa - *“No no no like I mean if they do something yeah and actually make it so we know, and it helps us know what other people like” (p.5)*

For Santa, the development of positive relationships with staff is supported by staff getting to know children well and utilising these interests to motivate and engage children, evidencing that adults are taking an interest in them. Here adults are not passive in receiving children’s likes or interests, but actively demonstrate their value by incorporating it into learning, where Santa feels appreciated or held in mind. For DSFootballer and The Uno Guy, adult’s sharing personal details about themselves has supported children to view adults in school as real people:

DSFootballer - *“Mr xxx loves football, he supports Liverpool...he likes Ronaldo better than Messi”.* (p.14)

DSFootballer – *“and I think Miss XXX’s favourite colour is pink or purple” (p.7)*

When talking about two different adults that are important to him, DSFootballer shares some personal facts and details about these adults. For DSFootballer, this feels distinct from actions and qualities they may demonstrate in their pedagogical practice. Here, knowing adults contributes to the relational experience through understanding who the adults are, what they like and ultimately reduces a sense of power, humanising adults. Adults opening up about their lives supports them to be relatable which The Uno Guy also suggests:

The Uno Guy - *“she likes bees...she tells me a lot...she has a family” (p.2)*

For The Uno Guy, a preferred adult opens up to share their likes, interests and aspects of their personal life. The adult is seen as forthcoming in sharing these details about herself which are notable and remembered by The Uno Guy when discussing her. Knowing his teacher has a family feels meaningful for The Uno Guy, perhaps reducing authority and supporting him to feel more safe in the knowledge that adults have people who they care for and care for them outside of school, creating a sense of safety and security for him.

There is an importance of children relating to adults, seeing themselves in their preferred adults or the similarities between them. Adults showing an interest in children and volunteering information about themselves supports to build empathy in children and develop trust in their relationships. For children to know that despite their distinct roles or positions in the school context, they are united by human experience, where adults role model openness and positive social interaction skills.

3.2 Building connection through shared interests and activities

The following subtheme includes children's experiences of building connection through shared interests and activities, fostering enjoyment and their bonds with one another. These shared experiences play a role in instant connection, a bonding moment where children appreciate having something in common with key adults in school. Engaging in shared interests and activities supports children's identity and belonging and plays a key role in relational development between child and adult. Burger comments on his shared passion of a TV series with his preferred adult:

Burger - "Yeah oh and we loved The Simpsons" (p.5)

Here, they are united by their shared joy and interest in The Simpsons. The use of the word 'we' feels poignant, they are bonded together, creating a sense of partnership. For Burger he continues to speak about key adults, appreciating their skill in Burger's own area of strength and interest, art:

Burger - "He's funny and he's really good at art" (p.2)

Burger - "She's good at art" (p.3)

The authenticity in the skills that Burger values due to his own strengths lying in this area is appreciated. ...Adult's demonstrating a skill in an area of interest for The Uno Guy is also impactful:

The Uno Guy - "she knows Maths, which is my favourite subject" (p.1)

Here, The Uno Guy shares the importance of a key adult 'knowing' or being adept in Maths, which is valued and respected in him, an alignment. There is a shared interest between them in Maths. The perceived expertise in the adult is admired, where The Uno Guy's favourite subject is linked to feelings of joy and success, further deepening the bond between them as the adult is associated with these positive emotions. Positive experiences and sharing of experiences is highlighted by Santa:

Santa - "Making things...if I needed a castle...someone making a castle (p.3)

Here Santa describes adults working collaboratively with him to create a castle out of junk modelling materials, where the adult is perceived as helpful. The engagement in a joint project or shared activity together is positively received and strengthens their connection. The teamwork displayed in enjoyable activities creates a sense of equalness, co-collaborators where power imbalances are reduced. For DSFootballer, spending quality time with his preferred teacher is experienced through their shared interest of sport:

DSFootballer - "I've got a club with him this evening ...Tag-rugby...that's what I like, running and sport" (p.15)

DSFootballer enjoys spending extra time in afterschool clubs related to their mutual shared interests and strengths. Here, the key adult offers an opportunity in school for DSFootballer to demonstrate his skills and take part in his preferred and enjoyable activities. The positive association is strengthened by DSFootballer seeing himself and qualities he possesses in his preferred teacher which is further evidenced by:

DSFootballer - "he talked about when he wanted to be a footballer" (p.7)

DSFootballer sees himself in his teacher through their shared ambitions, a positive role model. The relationship is strengthened by their values, strengths and passions aligning and DSFootballer feeling as though his teacher understands what is important to him. For DSFootballer he is developing his sense of identity, who he is and who he wants to be through his preferred adult.

For children, shared interests and activities strengthens the relational connection to adults in school. There is a personal and meaningful bond between them that reduces authority in the relationship and humanises adults. Seeing yourself in the adults in school, promotes a sense of belonging and inclusion for children and supports their identity development.

Theme 4: Seeking stability: The need for consistent relationships that endure

The fourth and final superordinate theme that has come out of the data includes children's need for stability and consistent relationships that endure over time. Within the overarching theme, there are two subthemes which include 'time is key in the security of relationships' and 'loss and change'. For participants, key relationships with staff are developed over a period of time, where adults are consistent. There is also a sensitivity in participants' experiences of loss and change in adult relationships.

4.1 Time is key in the security of relationships

For participants, the length of time that they have shared with their key adults is crucial in the connection and bond they have developed. These positively perceived relationships are not created overnight, it takes time to get to know one another, feel safe with one another and for children to ensure adults will be there for them consistently who are reliably present and available to them in school. Thanos speaks to the importance of relationships that endure across her whole school life:

Thanos - *"yeah I've known her for a long time, she's known me since I was like really young" (p.4)*

Adults who have known Thanos for a long time have a better understanding of her and provide consistency for her in school, where trust is developed and familiarity has emerged over time. For Thanos, knowing her since she was 'really young' is significant, the key adult seeing her grow over the course of her primary career, knowing her across phases and years groups. Relationships that have involved knowing children from a young age, over the course of a long period of time is expressed by Burger:

Burger - "Well, even longer than Mr XXX...yeah like when I was in reception" (p.4)

Burger comments on the hierarchy of adults who have been well established and known for prolonged periods of time. How he views and conceptualises adults and their relationship to him involve the concept of time and length known to him. There is a security in adults knowing him from a young age, a relationship rooted in deeper familiarity and understanding. DSFootballer echoes the sentiment of his key relationship with a staff member that endures:

DSFootballer - "Erm, she's worked with me pretty much every year...she's my favourite TA" (p.4)

Having a continuous relationship with a TA over a span of time develops his sense of security with her, where the TA plays an important role in DSFootballer's positive experience of staff in school. There is a direct link between his positive feelings around the member of staff and the length of time known. The relationship strength grows over time for DSFootballer where there is a security in their relationship which has stood the test of time, a felt security and sense of continuity. The Uno Guy speaks to the importance of having a class teacher for a second year in their experience of a positive relationship and a TA over three consecutive years:

The Uno Guy - "yeah she was my class teacher in year 4 and year 6" (p.2)

The Uno Guy - "she's a teaching assistant...she was in year 3, she was in year 4 and year 5 with me" (p.1)

Here The Uno Guy shares the concept of continuous relationships over time, where the familiarity and consistency of having a class teacher for two years and TA for three years, supports the connection and bond they have. The staff have provided a sense of familiarity and reassurance, with the child knowing what to expect. Thanos further comments on the benefit of having a consistent class teacher over a number of years:

Thanos - "He's a year 5 teacher now but I've had him for three years, year three, year four and year five and now I'm in year 6 with Miss XXX" (p.2)

Thanos shares a positively perceived teacher who she has been taught by over three consecutive years. This consistent and supportive relationships endures over time with Thanos commenting on how they are still important to her despite being with a different teacher in her current year 6. Her past teacher remains significant to her based on the time and previous experiences they have shared. Preferred teachers remaining important despite distance is communicated also by Burger:

Burger - "This is one of my favourites...he was my teacher...he works in year 4" (p.1)

Burger emphasises the importance of the connection through the description of this teacher as his favourite. It feels significant as he 'was' his teacher, but the bond they share endures despite the relative space between them. There is a sense of history which is crucial in Burger's experience of their relationship.

For participants, longevity of relationships with staff is key in their experience of positively perceived relationships that are meaningful to children. Consistency, familiarity and continuity are valued by children who communicate a desire for stability and relationships that endure over the course of time, who have developed an understanding of children across phases and stages of their school lives.

4.2 Loss and change

The second subtheme within the wider 'seeking stability, the need for consistent relationships that endure', captures the sensitivity to loss, change and transition that children experience in their relationships with staff. Children express a difficulty in the experience of separation from key adults and a desire for consistency in the supporting adult they interact regularly with. For Burger, he comments on his preference of working with one key adult:

Burger - "Well if we could just stick to one adult that would be good" (p.13)

Change and transition between a variety of supporting adults is experienced as difficult, where Burger would prefer one key member of staff to work with him. Consistency is appreciated by Dumpling:

Dumpling - "all mornings every morning if she's okay...all mornings" (p.4)

Consistency of TA support and timetabling helps Dumpling know what to expect, where he speaks fondly of his key adult due to the sense of security in knowing who to expect each morning. For Dumpling he further expresses a desire for key supporting adults to transition to secondary school with him:

Dumpling - "come to XXX with me" (p.5)

Dumpling voiced the changes he would make to key adults in school, stating for him, he would want his supporting network of existing adults in primary school to move up with him to secondary, alluding to the anxieties around transition and reliance on established relationships. DSFootballer also commented on the upcoming transition to secondary school:

DSFootballer - "way more...because there's more children, more classrooms". (p.13)

Here, DSFootballer expresses a recognition of the amount of teachers that will increase and change between primary and secondary school, a sense of an uneasy feeling. There is a security in the smaller amount of teachers who are familiar and known to DSFootballer in primary school which is in stark contrast to the amount of teachers who will be new to him in secondary school. Change is also experienced as difficult for children in the loss and separation of teachers who were significant for children in school. For The Uno Guy, he comments on how often he gets to see one of his preferred adults and what this feels like:

The Uno Guy - "not really a lot, not a lot...being separated" (p.2)

Separation is experienced when not seeing much of a key TA anymore, where they were once closely connected. The repetition of 'not a lot' has an emotional component, a sadness and reflection of the realisation that he has experienced this loss which feels like being separated, disconnected and removed from one another. Thanos replicates this experience of separation, not seeing or having access to a key staff member:

Thanos - "she's gone off because she's had a baby for a bit, but yeah, haven't seen her in a while" (p.2)

Here Thanos notices and is perceptive to the absence of a key adult, where maternity leave is experienced as significant for children, a change to the key adults that have supported her historically. Not seeing her feels significant, where there is a barrier to the relationship they currently have. Dumpling also speaks about the impact of maternity leave on his relational experience in addition to the transitional nature of the TA role:

Dumpling - "Mrs XXX isn't here, she's still on maternity leave, and miss XXX is down in three/four (years three and four) because she works round the school and works with me on a morning and all day on a Wednesday" (p.3)

Distance and separation is communicated surrounding key staff members, working across school and being absent from school. The use of the word 'still', highlights that this time feels long for Thanos, and there is a sensitivity to the distance and time they have not seen one another. Dumpling additionally shares the distance and experience of change between him and a key member of support staff, working across the school, appreciating the time he has consistently with her in the mornings and all day Wednesdays, a routine that feels important in their relationship and his security in school.

Participants communicated a sensitivity to loss and separation, where children are perceptive and reluctant to change. Children express a desire for consistent staffing, reduced variation in staffing and an anxiety about upcoming transitions. Participants shared their need for stability where children describe disruptions to relational continuity which impact on their sense making of relationships.

Summary of findings

As outlined within the current section, four superordinate themes and eleven subordinate themes were identified following data analysis. The overarching superordinate themes included 'emotional safety through trusted, attuned and compassionate relationships', 'a desire for adaptive, person-centred support', 'finding common ground: authentic and genuine relationships' and 'seeking stability: the need for consistent relationships that endure'. The subordinate themes further explore the more specific meaning making and nuance of the participant's experiences as illustrated in Table 4.

Table 4

Summary of Findings

Superordinate and Subordinate Themes	Example Quote
<p><u>Theme 1 - Emotional safety through trusted, attuned and compassionate relationships</u></p> <p>1.1 A need to be heard, understood and accepted</p> <p>1.2 The role of kindness and care</p> <p>1.3 Humour, fun and playfulness</p> <p>1.4 Sensitivity to adult's emotions and communication</p>	<p><i>"He's just like...If I'm sitting down he thinks I've been naughty so he's like 'Erm X you can come in my class actually', I haven't done anything bad I'm just learning" (WW2 Soldier, p.5)</i></p> <p><i>"yeah she notices when something's wrong, yeah she also does this to other kids as well and she's actually really sweet" (Thanos, p.6)</i></p> <p><i>"Funny...Her jokes, when she dances around the room sometimes" (Dumpling, p.2)</i></p> <p><i>"they are kind of strict...like when they are shouting...a bit frightening because I'm just ten" (The Uno Guy, p.5)</i></p>
<p><u>Theme 2 - A desire for adaptive, person-centred support</u></p> <p>2.1 Responsive and flexible support</p>	<p><i>"Well if I'm feeling uncomfortable I show them a sign like this (head on table). And then they say "do you want to go to the quiet area and get a fidget?" And</i></p>

<p>2.2 Mediated learning: with me not for me</p> <p>2.3 Facilitating peer relationships</p>	<p>then I'm like (action moving to leave quickly)" (WW2 Soldier, p.7)</p> <p><i>"Adults in school should be, they should be helping you learn" (Santa, p.4)</i></p> <p><i>"Well they would tell the other person to not be rude or stop being unkind or leave him alone" (Burger, p.9)</i></p>
<p><u>Theme 3 - Finding common ground: authentic and genuine relationships</u></p> <p>3.1 Knowing me, knowing you</p> <p>3.2 Building connection through shared interests and activities</p>	<p><i>This is a teacher called Miss XXX and she is my favourite TA and if you get to know her, she might be your favourite TA. (DSFootballer, p.5)</i></p> <p><i>"Yeah oh and we loved the Simpsons" (Burger, p.5)</i></p>
<p><u>Theme 4 - Seeking stability: the need for consistent relationships that endure</u></p> <p>4.1 Time is key in the security of relationships</p> <p>4.2 Loss and change</p>	<p><i>"she's a teaching assistant...she was in year 3, she was in year 4 and year 5 with me" (The Uno Guy, p.1)</i></p> <p><i>"she's gone off because she's had a baby for a bit, but yeah, haven't seen her in a while" (Thanos, p.2)</i></p>

Note. The table presents the findings of the study to demonstrate some of the key individual quotes that exemplify the subordinate themes

Discussion

The research explored children with SEMH needs' experiences of their relationships with staff in the primary mainstream setting. It addresses the research question: 'How do children with SEMH needs experience relationships with staff in the primary mainstream setting?' by interpreting how pupils with SEMH needs experience relationships with staff. Adopting an interpretative phenomenological approach, four main superordinate themes were generated with eleven subthemes which will be explored in relation to the current research base. Limitations of the research and implications for practice will also be explored in the discussion. Throughout the discussion the participant group will be referred to as 'children' or 'children in the current study'. These interpretations are grounded in the children's own verbal accounts and RMI maps, which consistently illustrated how they made sense of their relationships with staff.

The findings of the current research demonstrate how pupils with SEMH needs experience their relationships with staff in primary mainstream schools, indicating that emotional safety, adaptive person-centred support, shared connection, and relational stability are crucial to how they make sense of these relational interactions. Throughout the children's accounts, they consistently described feeling heard, understood, and regulated when adults were kind, attuned, and emotionally available. These claims are supported by multiple data extracts in which children explicitly linked staff kindness, calmness and emotional availability to feeling safe and able to learn. Alternatively, adult communication styles, including perceived emotional expression, staffing inconsistency, or misattunement, disrupted their sense of safety. This interpretation is grounded in children's descriptions of moments where staff responses felt unpredictable or emotionally mismatched, which they experienced as unsettling or unsafe. The findings presented also indicate that pupils value support that is flexible, collaborative, and respectful of their independence and autonomy, alongside relationships built through shared interests, reciprocity, and enduring familiarity. This was evident in the data through children's emphasis on wanting choices, collaboration, and respect for their independence, which appeared repeatedly across findings. These experiential themes provide an answer to the research question by demonstrating that SEMH pupils' voices are shaped and often enabled by the quality, consistency, and emotional tone of the

relationships they hold with key adults in school. The consistency of these descriptions across participants strengthens the validity of these themes and grounds the interpretations firmly in the children's lived experiences.

The findings of this research fit closely with the concept of attunement, how responsive a person is to someone else's emotional needs, by communication and behavioural responses that indicate appreciation of the person's emotional state (Cubeddu & MacKay, 2017). Attunement is closely linked to attachment theory, considering infant-carer interactions and the concept of being attuned to one another (Bowlby, 1969), developing positive associations and neural pathways such as those described in affect regulation, secure attachment and brain development research (Schore, 2001). Attunement can be considered as one of the building blocks of empathy and contributes towards emotional health and wellbeing, and positive social and academic development (Jacobsen & Hoffman 1997; Thompson 1987; Trevarthen 1980; 1982). Attunement principles (Kennedy, Landor, and Todd 2010; 2011) were developed in the use of Video Interaction Guidance, a strengths-based intervention developed to promote attunement between child and parent. The majority of the findings of the current study fit well within the attunement principles and are visually presented in Figure 3 and Table 5. This alignment was directly observable in the children's narratives, which frequently illustrated attuned or misattuned interactions with staff.

The attunement principles outline a structured approach to strengthening attachment and communication within relationships. They highlight the essential behaviours that support positive, responsive exchanges between a caregiver and child. These principles are grouped into six categories, with each one represented through various specific actions. The distribution of the principles evidenced by the subthemes are a useful way of exploring the processes or mechanisms that underlay the relational experiences children are making sense of. The mapping of subthemes onto these principles reflects clear patterns in the data, demonstrating how children's relational experiences correspond to established relational processes.

Figure 3

Attunement Principles, taken from Cubeddu & MacKay (2017)

Being attentive: (looking interested with friendly posture; giving time and space for other; wondering about what they are doing, thinking or feeling; enjoying watching them)

Encouraging initiatives: (waiting; listening actively; showing emotional warmth through intonation; naming positively what you see, think or feel; using friendly and/or playful intonation as appropriate; saying what you are doing; looking for initiatives)

Receiving initiatives: (showing you have heard, noticed their initiative; receiving with body language; being friendly and/or playful as appropriate; returning eye contact, smiling, nod-ding in response; receiving what they are saying or doing with words; repeating/using their words and phrases)

Developing attuned interactions: (receiving and then responding; checking they are understanding you; waiting attentively for your turn; having fun; giving a second (and further) turn on same topic; giving and taking short turns; contributing to interaction/activity equally; cooperating – helping each other)

Guiding: (scaffolding; extending, building on their response; judging the amount of support required and adjusting; giving information when needed; providing help when needed; offering choices that they can understand; making suggestions that they can follow)

Deepening discussions: (supporting goal-setting; sharing viewpoints; collaborative discussion and problem-solving; naming difference of opinion; investigating the intentions behind words; naming contradictions/conflicts (real or potential); reaching new shared understandings; managing conflict (back to being attentive and receiving initiatives aimed at restoring attuned interactions))

Table 5*Subthemes and corresponding attunement principles evidenced*

		Attunement Principles					
		Being attentive	Encouraging initiatives	Receiving initiatives	Developing attuned interactions	Guiding	Deepening discussions
Subordinate Themes	1.1 A need to be heard, understood and accepted	X	X	X			
	1.2 The role of kindness and care	X	X	X			
	1.3 Humour, fun and playfulness	X	X	X	X		
	1.4 Sensitivity to adult's emotions and communication	X	X	X			
	2.1 Responsive and flexible support				X	X	
	2.2 Mediated learning: with me not for me				X	X	
	2.3 Facilitating peer relationships					X	X
	3.1 Knowing me, knowing you					X	X
	3.2 Building connection through shared interests and activities				X	X	X
	4.1 Time is key in the security of relationships						
	4.2 Loss and change						

Emotional safety through trusting, attuned and compassionate support

One of the key findings of the current study identified children's experiences of school staff's role in emotional safety for children through the trusting, attuned and compassionate support that staff offer to children. Features of being heard, understood and respected in addition to having kindness and care demonstrated towards them are communicated. Furthermore, the use of humour, fun and playfulness are explored in addition to children's sensitivity to the emotions and communication style of adults. These interpretations are grounded in the children's own descriptions and RMI drawings, where they repeatedly highlighted the emotional

tone of staff behaviour as central to feeling safe or unsafe. There are a range of psychological theories that may be relevant to understanding these experiences including Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1969 ; Ainsworth, 1979; Geddes, 2006), Affect Attunement (Lutzker, 2014; Poulsen, 2001), Emotional- Regulation Theory (Gross, 1998; Gross 2011), Trauma Informed Frameworks (Avery & Freund 2020; Maynard et al, 2019), and Relational, Therapeutic and Restorative Practices (Oakes, 2018; Wachtel, 2016). The relevance of these frameworks is rooted in the data and children's voices, where their accounts consistently matched processes described in attunement, co-regulation and trauma-informed and relational practice.

Attunement principles apply to staff-pupil relationships, where consistent, responsive adults help children to feel safe, supporting regulation and learning (Pianta, 199; Riley, 2010). Therefore the role school staff play in children's emotional regulation is captured through considering how adults support co-regulation with children, developing a felt sense of safety (Gross, 1998; Gross, 2011). Trauma-informed approaches emphasise the increased sensitivity to adult behaviour that children who have experienced ACEs may present with, where trauma-informed, sensitive and relationally safe school environments promote emotional safety for children (Avery & Freund, 2020; Maynard et al., 2019). In therapeutic and restorative practice, research highlights the role of compassion, shared responsibility and relationship-focussed practice, which is key to children developing a feeling of emotional safety in school (Oakes, 2018; Wachtel, 2016). These links, illustrated through the experiences of the children, which are grounded in the data, frequently demonstrated how staff responsiveness, tone, and emotional availability impacted their sense of safety and emotional regulation.

The overarching superordinate theme 1 was experienced for all children within the current study, where they communicated both positive and negative experiences of key staff in school through the lens of the compassionate interactions children have with them. This theme was strongly grounded in the data, as every participant described specific moments where staff behaviour either enhanced or undermined their emotional safety. Research indicates that programmes aimed at increasing caregiver sensitivity can positively influence the development of secure

attachment relationships (Bakermans-Kranenburg, Van IJzendoorn, & Juffer, 2003). The use of these attunement principles is likely an important contributor to the staff interactions with children in the current study, supporting their social, emotional, and behavioural development. This interpretation is supported by the children's accounts, which frequently reflected the core components of attunement, such as noticing, responding, and emotionally matching, within their relationships with staff.

The first superordinate theme, centred around emotional safety through trusting, attuned and compassionate relationships in particular, including four subthemes, is captured by the fundamental, basis of attunement principles, such as 'being attentive', 'encouraging initiatives' and 'receiving initiatives'. These principles were clearly reflected in the data, with children describing how staff attention, encouragement and responsiveness helped them feel understood and secure. Here the basis of emotional safety is demonstrated through responsive adults who are attuned and emotionally available to children to develop their sense of felt safety in school where attachment concepts have been applied to classroom relationships (Riley, 2010; Geddes 2006). The children's narratives consistently illustrated this process, grounding the interpretation that emotional safety in school is built through everyday relational interactions with attuned adults.

Subtheme 1.1: A need to be heard, understood and accepted

This subtheme centres around children's experiences of how adult's support their sense of validation, attunement and acceptance. The level of respect and understanding children appreciate in the approach of school staff is reflected in the research around being listened to and a sense of dignity and self-worth that develops, which is crucial for acceptance and engagement (Lansdown et al., 2014). UNCRC (1989) promotes children's rights to express views affecting them, often children's sense of voice and agency is overlooked in classroom behaviour contexts (Barrance & Hampton, 2023). Humanistic perspectives support this subtheme in the sense that children have shared a desire for unconditional positive regard, where rejecting behaviour is separate from rejection of the child (García-Moya et al., 2020). Mentalisation literature is relevant here, a process which has been considered to support adult's capacity to understand children's intentions, feelings and thoughts. Research has found that reflective practice and mentalisation improves adults'

responses to dysregulated behaviour and increases children's sense of being understood (Fonagy *et al.*, 2002).

Children's emotional safety is promoted when school staff consistently listen, validate and mentalise their emotional experiences, supporting a sense of belonging, identity and unconditional acceptance within the school environment. These findings align with humanistic, attachment-informed theories which emphasise that children experience safety when their voice is heard, their emotions and behaviour make sense to staff and they are accepted as they are.

Subtheme 1.2: The role of kindness and care

This subtheme centres around children's experiences of both physical and emotional care which is demonstrated towards them from key staff members. Kindness is a universal trait and action that children express an appreciation of and desire for in their staff relationships. This echoes the wider literature around the ethics of care and kindness and moral responsibility in students' dignity and belonging in education (Noddings, 2013). Recent literature exploring Noddings work in the context of higher education highlights the importance of care in the holistic development of pupils' social and emotional learning (Chen & Shih, 2025). Care is not a manner or trait alone, but an inter-personal relational-dynamic, reciprocity between an individual and their interactions. Kindness in teachers as a personal trait is discussed as particularly important to TSRs in pupil voice research in upper secondary school in Norway (Krane *et al.*, 2017). Kindness as a core feature of pedagogy appears in the literature (Fox & Aspland, 2022). Clegg & Rowland (2010) separate kindness from 'due care' through examination of students' stories in the sense that kindness is a personal value demonstrated by teaching staff which cannot be necessarily prescribed or regulated due to the impact on authenticity. They highlight the importance and the difference it makes when people are well-intentioned towards us. In the current study, pupils make an argument for both kindness and care where children experience care and kindness from staff in school as a relational buffer against emotional threat. Compassionate and attuned responses from staff support children to feel valued, worthy of connection and safe in the warmth displayed.

Subtheme 1.3: Humour, fun and playfulness

This subtheme speaks to the sense of playfulness, humour and fun that children experience in their positive relationships with important members of school staff. Research suggests that play supports emotional regulation and social connection, especially for children with a history of developmental trauma (Porges & Daniel, 2020). The use of humour and fun in broadening attention, building resilience and trust is explored through the role of positive emotions in psychological growth (Frederickson, 2001). The positive shared affect between child and adult strengthens their relationships. A meta-analysis of teacher humour explored the use of humour as a social bonding tool, enhancing student belonging and the TSR (Banas et al., 2011). They discuss the definition of humour which included both deliberate use of verbal and non-verbal behaviour that elicits joy, laughter and general amusement. Humour not only facilitates amusement, but social connection and can ameliorate the effects of stress. Humour can create a positive classroom environment and enhance learning (Garner, 2006; Fitzsimmons & McKenzie, 2003) something which Dumpling shares in his experience of a book being brought to life

In the literature around trauma, playfulness in relationships is discussed as a mechanism which can restore safety to children (Badenoch, 2017; Perry & Szalavitz, 2017). The 'P' of the PACE (playfulness, acceptance, curiosity and empathy) Approach has its origins in Dyadic Developmental Psychotherapy which was developed to support caregivers and professionals to respond to children in order to promote safety and connection (Hughes & Golding, 2012). The 'Playfulness' element of interactions can be described as a lightness which breaks through disconnection. Literature suggests that playfulness acts a relational bridge removing threat whilst fostering joy and attunement (Hughes, 2011 & Geddes, 2006). Children's capacity to learn and relate can be enhanced by humour and playful interactions, relational safety as foundational to emotional and cognitive development (Bomber, 2007).

Subtheme 1.4: Sensitivity to adult's emotions and communication

This theme speaks to the threat response that children communicate in their sense making of relationships and sensitivity to adult's emotions and communication styles. There is a sense of hyperawareness which the literature describes as hypervigilance to relational cues within children who have experienced relational trauma (Ogden et al., 2006; Porges, 2011). Although the trauma and familial

relational-dynamics of the children within the current study are not known, research into disorganised attachment styles highlights children's focus on subtle emotional cues in order to protect themselves (Main & Solomon, 1990) . Pianta (1999) discusses misattunement between children and teachers as being perceived as rejection or threat. Children evaluate staff reactions to understand their own emotional safety where staff affect sets the relational tone in classrooms (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Sutton & Wheatley, 2003).

In the current study children read both verbal and non-verbal cues of staff to understand their intentions and relational stance which echoes TSR research (Skinner et al., 2005). When staff communicate calm, warmth and predictability, they support children's capacity to regulate. When these staff emotions become strained or communication is inconsistent or threatening, children experience threat. Research into autistic pupils' experiences of shouting highlight similar themes in not hearing or being able to listen to the adult when shouting (Gray et al., 2023). More broadly there is consistent evidence that the emotional climate of the classroom including teacher stress impacts on student wellbeing (Carroll & Hurry, 2018; Rainer et al., 2023). This directly links with participants' perceptions and sensitivity to adult tone, facial expressions and body language which supported them to judge whether an interaction felt safe or threatening based on perceived adult emotional expression. By highlighting how pupils actively interpret staff behaviour, this theme directly answers the research question: emotional safety is not a background condition but built through interactions, created through the moment-to-moment attunement, compassion, emotional warmth that allow pupils with SEMH needs to feel heard and understood. This conclusion is supported by repeated examples in the data where children linked their emotional responses to the immediate relational cues communicated by adults.

A desire for adaptive person-centred support

The second key finding of the current study identified children's experiences of their desire for adaptive and person-centred support from staff in school. The findings fit well with pre-existing research, complementing the current literature base. The current study providing an opportunity to close one of the gaps of SEMH pupil

voice in this area, as a key mechanism in developing positive educational outcomes. (Sheffield & Morgan, 2017; Caslin, 2019). This theme was strongly grounded in the children's accounts, where they consistently described wanting support that was flexible, collaborative and responsive to their individual needs. A systematic review of person-centred practices in education (Gray, 2022) demonstrates the relational and reciprocal benefits in TSRs and student-parent relationships. Such approaches are argued to enhance well-being and a sense of belonging with pupils with SEMH needs. In Cosma and Soni's (2019) systematic literature review pupils with SEMH needs' educational experiences describe the importance of adapting the curriculum to meet individual pupil's needs and incorporating strengths and pupil voice into matters that concern them which fits well within the current theme. These findings are closely aligned with the data from the current study, where children emphasised the importance of being listened to, having choices, and being supported in ways that recognised their strengths and preferences. Person-centred and adaptive support is also a core element of effective trauma informed practice (Maynard *et al.*, 2019). The relevance of trauma-informed practice and principles was evident in children's accounts when describing feeling safer and more able to engage when adults adapted their approach to respond to their emotional and communication needs.

Subtheme 2.1: Responsive and flexible support

A systematic review of CYP's views of the SEMH label found that children with SEMH needs often report wanting adaptive, context-sensitive staff support in contrast to rigid protocols (Hickinbotham *et al.*, 2021). Pupil voice research echoes the current study's findings where pupils expressed their desire for personalised support including staff adjusting expectations of them (Bagnall *et al.*, 2021). Studies on differentiated instruction and individualised teaching contribute to better social and emotional outcomes for pupils (Pozas *et al.*, 2021).

Subtheme 2.2: Mediated learning: with me not for me

The theme speaks to the experience children expressed about the role of staff in supporting their learning in the classroom, where the most comfortable support involves staff scaffolding their learning, whilst not doing their work for them. These findings fit within wider theories of mediated learning including Vygotsky's (1998)

Zone of Proximal Development and Feuerstein and colleague's (1991) Mediated Learning Experience. Differentiated and individualised teaching is a core adaptive practice in inclusive classrooms (Linder, 2020). Practical methods are recommended for adaptive teaching such as assessment for learning and within lesson adjustments (Langelaan et al., 2024). Research with pupils with SEMH needs found similar findings to the current study including pupils describing positively perceived relationships with adults who work alongside them (Colley, 2020). Wider research around support staffs use of scaffolding details prompting, modelling, questioning and fading support as a central TA role, aligning with pupil's experiences within the current study (Bowles et al, 2018). Research also comments on the risk of over reliance on TA support in a study around the educational experience of pupil's with EHCPs, evidencing the incidence of doing work for pupils, reducing pupil's independence (Webster & Blatchford, 2019)

Subtheme 2.3 Facilitating peer relationships

The final subtheme encapsulated children's experiences of the role of staff in facilitating peer relationships for children. Research suggests that there is an active role for staff in supporting positive peer networks for children to contribute towards inclusion, resilience and promoting good mental health (Cefai & Cooper, 2017). Research that explored peer relationships for pupils with SEMH needs in specialist provisions, emphasised the importance of the role of staff in structuring and facilitating peer interactions for children (Berridge et al., 2020). These facilitated peer interactions are crucial protective factors for pupils with SEMH needs, with staff mediating peer acceptance and belonging (Cooper & Jacobs, 2011). The current research captures similar themes to existing child voice research, where primary aged children with SEMH needs describe school staff's role in social relationships with peers (Dolton *et al.*, 2020). The 2020 research also highlighted school staffs role in helping and hindering social interactions, where negative impacts on peer interactions were not evident in the current study.

This theme shows that pupils with SEMH needs place high value on adaptive, person-centred support that responds to their individual needs, preferences and contexts, rather than rigid or blanket approaches. This interpretation is reflected in the children's own accounts, where they repeatedly described wanting adults to

adjust expectations, approaches and interactions in ways that matched how they were feeling or what they needed in the moment. Their accounts in the data where children discuss a need to feel competent, included and considered by staff's reasonable adjustments and adaptations, reflect the literature base. They demonstrate that personalised, flexible support enhances wellbeing, belonging and engagement for this group, and that incorporating strengths, autonomy and pupil voice is central to positive school experiences. The children communicated a need for and appreciation of staff who adjust their expectations, scaffold learning alongside them, and sensitively facilitate peer relationships, which supports the literature base that these adaptive supports promote independence and resilience. This was evident across interviews, where children highlighted specific moments when staff flexibility or sensitive guidance helped them feel more confident, connected or able to cope. By demonstrating how pupils actively notice and appreciate these adaptive relational and pedagogical practices, this theme directly answers the research question: SEMH pupils experience relationships with staff as most supportive when adults work with them, tuning into their needs, honouring their agency, and creating conditions in which their voices can be expressed and acted upon.

Finding common ground: authentic and genuine relationships

The third superordinate theme presents children's experiences of finding common ground between themselves and staff, appreciating authentic and genuine relationships with staff. This interpretation is reflected in the children's own accounts, where they frequently described valuing staff who were real, honest and human with them, rather than distant or overly formal. Relational authenticity has been considered a key factor for pupils with SEMH needs as discussed in their relationships with staff (Willis, 2021) reflecting the current study's findings. Other research explored TSRs through teacher and pupil wellbeing, where wellbeing and positive relationships involve reciprocity and authenticity (Roffey, 2012). Common ground is conceptualised as relational reciprocity in other studies (Pianta & Hamre, 2009) where other research highlights the importance of getting to know pupils personally (Webster & Blatchford, 2019). These findings in the literature base link closely with the current study's data, where children repeatedly highlight instances in

which shared interests and mutual respect and understanding made staff feel more approachable and trustworthy.

Subtheme 3.1: Knowing me, knowing you

This subtheme centres around staff and children getting to know one another, their likes and dislikes, sharing information about themselves. Research which supports the current study's findings includes Marucci et al., (2018), where teacher knowledge of students lives promoted children's school experiences and overall sense of safety with teachers who spent more time with students, having a stronger sense of attunement to them. In Willis's (2021) doctoral research, pupils with SEMH needs reported that staff who took the time to understand their likes, dislikes and triggers were easier to trust and engage with, complementing the current study. Staff understanding pupils' likes and interest is further highlighted by Spence (2018), where staff remembering preferences, family context and social connections strengthens pupils' sense of belonging. There is less research focusing on the importance of staff sharing their own likes, interests and appropriate personal information, however Berridge and colleagues (2020) highlight that staff sharing age-appropriate personal experiences or reactions helped children to see adults as genuine, promoting trust and emotional safety. The current study adds to the evidence base around the importance of mutual familiarity and relational depth in supporting SEMH pupils, where staff are seen as genuine and relatable.

Subtheme 3.2 Building connection through shared interests and activities

The second subtheme speaks to the mechanism of shared interests and activities between staff and children in the development of their positive relationships, as perceived by children. This echoes research into school experiences for children with SEMH needs (Willis, 2021) and children in need/care (Berridge *et al.*, 2020), where pupils highlighted that staff who participate in activities they enjoy were easier to trust and engage with (Willis, 2021) and shared interests facilitated positive adult-pupil interaction (Berridge et al., 2020). Additional research also supports the current findings including pupils with and without SEN reporting that teachers and support staff who engage in joint activities beyond formal lessons,

strengthen relational trusts and social engagement (Spence, 2018). Furthermore, the current research also finds similar themes to research looking into experiences of CYP with EHCPs, where TAs who share hobbies or cultural interests with pupils were able to scaffold learning more effectively due to the pupil feeling connected and understood (Webster & Blatchford, 2019). By building relational bonds through shared interests and activities, staff can create inclusive environments that enhance both wellbeing and engagement for pupils with SEMH needs.

This theme highlights that pupils with SEMH needs experience relationships with staff as most supportive when adults are authentic, genuine and willing to find common ground, reflecting wider evidence that relational reciprocity and personal connection underpin positive teacher–student relationships. This is reflected in the children’s own experiences within the data, where they frequently described valuing staff who were ‘real’, approachable and willing to share aspects of themselves in ways that felt human. The children’s accounts show that being known, and getting to know staff in return, creates a sense of mutual familiarity that strengthens trust, safety and engagement, echoing research emphasising the value of staff understanding pupils’ lives, interests, and triggers, as well as sharing appropriate aspects of themselves. These claims are supported by repeated examples in the data where children linked feeling safe or connected to moments of shared humour, shared interests or personal conversations with staff. Shared activities and interests further deepen these bonds, enabling pupils to feel connected, understood and more willing to participate in learning and relational exchanges. This was evident across interviews and RMI maps, where children highlighted specific shared experiences, such as games, jokes or hobbies, as key moments that strengthened their relationships with staff. The findings within this theme highlight the importance of genuine, bidirectional connections, which directly answer the research question by highlighting the reciprocity of staff–pupil relationships and the importance of authenticity in their interactions, which humanise their relational experiences. The consistency of these descriptions across participants reinforces that reciprocity and authenticity were central to how children made sense of supportive relationships in school.

Seeking stability: the need for consistent relationships that endure

The final superordinate theme explores children's experiences of relationships with staff over the course of time in addition to the sensitivity to change and experience of loss in their relationships with staff. Children's experiences in the current study described the emotional impact of staff leaving, changing roles or becoming less available to them, and how these shifts disrupted their sense of stability and safety. Recent doctoral research discussed the TSR as crucial as an aspect of provision and support for pupils with SEMH needs, where the development and maintenance of these relationships is complex and influenced by several factors, including consistency and endurance (Halliwell, 2024). Additionally, The Office for National Statistics highlights the importance of familiarity and stable relationships with staff for pupils with SEND (2022). The concept of high staff turnover is conceptualised in the literature in terms of the negative impact on interventions for pupils (Herlitz & Bonell, 2025) and staff's frustration with changing personnel in the context of supporting pupils with SEMH needs (Booth & Bond, 2025). These links to the wider literature align closely with the data from the current study, where children repeatedly emphasised the importance of familiar, enduring relationships and expressed distress, confusion or sadness when key adults changed or left.

Subtheme 4.1: Time is key in the security of relationships

This subtheme explores the children's experiences of secure relationships that have developed over time, across year groups and provide consistency and security within their schooling experience. Research examining teacher turnover supports the current study's findings, where changes in staffing, partially related to teacher retention, can disrupt relational continuity by not only eroding trust and weakening teacher knowledge of pupils but also weakening relationships between teachers (Menziez, 2023). Within the same study, the researcher argues that students benefit from stable, enduring relationships, developing strong relationships with a key network of staff, 'looping' the same teacher over multiple years (Menziez, 2023), which the children in the current study referenced as part of their descriptions of important staff. The longitudinal associations between TSRs and school outcomes in both typical and vulnerable student population were explored in an international

systematic review, highlighting that TSR quality over time matters for vulnerable students (mental health needs and SEND), providing evidence that enduring positive TSRs are protective (Lisio *et al.*, 2025). None of these studies focus exclusively on pupils with SEMH needs and their experiences of staff relationships spanning several years across year-groups, which may be a unique finding.

Subtheme 4.2: Loss and change

The current study is reinforced by existing research where staff indicated that consistency in staff was considered as supporting CYP to develop relationships, where staff changes impact on pupil's experience of feeling let down (Jones & Harding, 2023). Wider systemic factors, including fragmentation of services, policy changes and staffing changes has been found to undermine support for children with SEMH needs, contributing to exclusionary practices (Thompson *et al.*, 2021). Further research focussing on the Welsh statutory framework for embedding whole school approaches to emotional and mental wellbeing, highlights the impact of loss of a positive adult relationship (following the COVID lockdown) which for some pupils could mitigate against difficulties in their home context (Brown *et al.*, 2025). The current research adds the voice of children with SEMH needs experience of distribution to relationships, providing implications for the perceived losses and sense of separation children experience in moving classroom/class teachers and typical staffing changes e.g maternity leave.

This theme demonstrates that pupils with SEMH needs experience relational stability as a core condition for feeling safe, connected and able to engage with school life. This interpretation is grounded in the children's own accounts, where they consistently described feeling more settled, confident and emotionally secure when key adults remained present and predictable over time. The children's voices highlight how trust is built slowly, across years, through familiarity and continuity, where time is key in the security of relationships. These claims are supported by repeated examples in the data where children explicitly linked the importance of their relationship with staff to long-term relationships (e.g staff they have known over multiple year groups) and ongoing emotional and physical availability or proximity. This replicates prior research which discusses that enduring TSRs are protective for vulnerable learners and that staff turnover can disrupt emotional security, belonging

and progress for pupils. This reflects clear patterns in the data, where children described feeling unsettled, sad or disconnected when important adults left or changed roles. The children's sensitivity to loss, separation and change reflects research showing that instability in staffing or support structures can leave pupils with SEMH needs feeling let down or disconnected, particularly when positive adult relationships have previously buffered challenges in their home or school environments. Across interviews children expressed heightened emotional responses or a sensitivity to relational loss, often describing these changes as disruptions to their sense of safety. The research emphasises how crucial long-term, predictable relationships are to children's relational experiences with staff, whereby loss and change are felt at an amplified level. The consistency of these descriptions across participants reinforces that relational continuity is not simply preferred but experienced as essential for emotional stability. This theme directly answers the research question by presenting the meaning-making of children with SEMH needs whose relational experiences with staff are strengthened when adults remain present over time, offer consistent emotional and physical availability and relational continuity.

Summary of the discussion of findings

The findings of this study highlight the integral role of staff relationships and relational practice in shaping the experiences of primary-aged children with SEMH needs in mainstream schools. Four themes were generated, which provide insight into how children make sense of their relational experiences, including the support, connection and sense of safety they derive from staff interactions.

Emotional safety through trusting, attuned and compassionate support was identified as a key aspect of positive staff relationships. Children valued staff who listened, understood and accepted them. Demonstrations of kindness, care, humour and playfulness, alongside sensitivity to children's emotional cues, were central mechanisms within these positive relational experiences. These findings reflect attachment-informed and relational practice, which emphasise the importance of

responsive, attuned adults in promoting emotional regulation, safety and belonging in school.

A desire for adaptive, person-centred support emerged as another key finding. Children appreciated flexible and responsive approaches that scaffolded their learning without undermining their independence. They valued staff who actively facilitated peer relationships, mediated conflict and supported social interactions. These findings reflect the importance of individualised, inclusive and person-centred practice in promoting engagement, wellbeing and academic development.

Authentic and genuine relationships were also highlighted as crucial for trust and children's engagement. Children identified the value of mutual understanding, shared interests and reciprocal interactions, which helped establish a sense of relational depth and strengthened their sense of connection and belonging within the school environment.

Finally, children communicated the importance of consistent, enduring relationships. They experienced security and a sense of safety when relationships with staff were stable over time. Disruptions to staffing were associated with feelings of loss, separation and emotional distress. Consistent adult relationships across phases and year groups therefore acted as key protective factors.

Overall, the study concludes that SEMH children's experiences of staff relationships are shaped by the interaction between emotional attunement, personalised support, relational authenticity and relational continuity. Positive staff relationships serve as emotional, social and academic scaffolds, highlighting the critical need for schools to prioritise relational practice, including attachment-aware and trauma-informed approaches, to support the wellbeing and development of children with SEMH needs. Taken together, these findings provide a clear answer to the research question by showing that pupils with SEMH needs experience their relationships with staff as meaningful when adults create conditions of emotional safety, offer adaptive and person-centred support, build authentic relational connection and remain consistent over time. These relational qualities shape not only how children feel in school, but also how able they are to express their needs, participate in learning and share their voices. The study therefore demonstrates that hearing the voices of pupils with SEMH needs is inseparable from the relational

environments adults create: when staff are attuned, genuine, flexible and enduring in their support, children feel safe enough to communicate their experiences and engage more fully in school life.

Strengths, limitations and future research ideas

Strengths

Key strengths of the study include the relational approach adopted throughout the research process. The research itself embodies the relational values that it sought to explore and that children communicated a need for. Supporting the participants to feel supported, safe and value added to the authentic sharing of their views. The study was underpinned by a child-centred ethos with children as active contributors rather than passive subjects adding depth to the evidence base through the inclusion of children's voices. The methodology supported children's communication through the use of scaffolded interviewing, facilitating expression of experience that may have been challenging to articulate with verbal methods alone. Another strength includes the relevance to the current issues within applied educational psychology practice, particularly in reference to supporting the group of pupils with SEMH needs. A strength was the consideration of ethical practice in sensitivity to children's wellbeing, using solution-oriented and positively worded questions which also acknowledges the broader context of school staff roles. Care was taken not to undermine or vilify staff, where the research acknowledges teacher's positionality and the pressures they face whilst addressing the issues children communicated.

Limitations

Despite the strengths of the study, limitations exist which should be acknowledged. While most children were able to provide detailed reflections of their relational experiences, some children offered short verbal responses or utterances which may have limited the depth of the analysis process. These differences in developmental stage, emotional literacy and communication skills including

confidence are discussed further in chapter 3. The research may also be subject to potential researcher bias given the researcher's professional background. Although reflexivity was employed throughout the research process, discussed in chapter 3, the scaffolding or questions and interview schedule may have influenced responses. Furthermore the interpretative nature of the analysis may also have introduced the potential for researcher subjectivity in the sense making of participant experience.

The relatively small sample size limits the generalisability of the findings. The findings cannot be assumed to reflect the experiences of all pupils with SEMH as participants were recruited from a specific age group and educational context. The exclusive focus on children in Key Stage 2 in order to support aspects of assent and communication skills, has potentially silenced the voice of younger primary aged children, whose voices were not captured. Although the research methodological inclusion of the RMI supported communication and relational experience expression, the study retained a reliance on verbal expressive communication. Therefore the methodology may have inhibited the extent to which children could fully express their views and favoured children who were more confident to articulate their views verbally.

The structure of the RMI, although supportive for reducing potential anxieties in pupils, knowing what to expect next, may have inadvertently limited responses and the illumination of aspects of relational experience. Particular aspects of the relational experience or phenomenon that likely exist outside of the four stages of the RMI technique were not fully captured, where a more open or different approach could have elicited additional dimensions of this experience. Finally, a further limitation of the study includes the use of the relational maps developed through use of the RMI. Although the original intention was to present the data from the maps as findings in their own right, the visual data alone did not sufficiently address the research question, where data was not sufficiently rich in isolation. The maps functioned as elicitation tools and prompts for interview conversation, supporting children to reflect on their relational experiences and structure the research interview. Despite some aspects of the relational maps, being touched upon and referenced in verbal data, other facets of the symbolic or prereflective aspects of meaning making may not have been fully captured within the analysis and write up of findings.

Future research ideas

Currently, there is a notable lack of peer-reviewed research in the UK that explicitly investigates the experiences of agency or supply staff within Social, Emotional, and Mental Health (SEMH) settings and their impact on pupils' relational experiences with staff. In particular, studies capturing pupils' perspectives on how support from temporary staff influences their sense of stability, trust, continuity, and relationship security are absent. Similarly, there is little to no evidence exploring the effects of frequent staffing changes, including the cyclical employment of agency staff, on relational outcomes for pupils with SEMH needs such as experiences of loss, disruption, or the challenge of 'starting over' with new adults. Given the critical importance of consistent and stable relationships for pupils' social, emotional and academic development (Pianta et al., 2012; Roffey, 2012), this lack of research represents a significant gap in understanding the broader consequences of agency staffing and school staff retention in these contexts. This is particularly relevant when considering the recent rise in teachers who leave the profession, with 38.6% leaving within the first four years of returning from maternity leave and 17-20% leaving in the first year (MTPT, 2025), a phenomenon coined the 'motherhood penalty' (Sheppard, 2023). Future research could explore these population of teachers and barriers and facilitators to returning to the teaching profession after maternity leave building on the work of Osman (2022).

Future research would benefit from longitudinal designs that explore pupil's relationships with staff over time, exploring how relationships develop, encounter rupture and repair and influence emotional wellbeing and wider school belonging. There is also a rationale for evaluating staff's professional development and whole-school approaches that cultivate relational authenticity, emotional attunement and trauma-informed practice among school staff, exploring both staff and pupil outcomes. In line with the values of the current study, child voice should remain central to future research. Participatory methods should be prioritised to capture children's perspectives where children should be involved in the development of new participatory methods with specific consideration for CYP with SEND. Further research investigating teacher's view of their training and preparedness for supporting pupils with SEND and SEMH needs is warranted, particularly which

aspects of relational practice and trauma-informed approaches are sufficiently addressed within their Initial Teacher Training. Research should build on the work of Cronin (2022), exploring the self-efficacy beliefs of inclusive behaviours towards CYP with SEMH needs, building on the literature around the role of EPs and school leadership in supporting this area of practice.

Together, these directions of future research have the potential to strengthen the literature base and practitioner understanding of how relational continuity, staff preparation and systemic factors shape the lived experiences of pupils with SEMH needs within both mainstream and specialist education. This knowledge is key for informing policy, staffing strategies and evidence based interventions whilst upskilling training providers that prioritise the relational and emotional needs of all children.

Implications

For Practice:

School staff

Practical strategies in Table 6 are informed by the current study's findings, where the recommendations reflect what participants feel to be important in their relational experiences and how staff in school might achieve this in the primary mainstream setting. The recommendations or 'possible ideas to support children', have been developed through the researcher's engagement with broader literature within the area, practice based experience and strategies of support directly linked to the children's voices and experience of what is working well and what they would like in their staff relationships. Practical strategies presented in Table 6, are intended to act as a guide or potential self-assessment tool for staff, where in the context of staff's work pressures, it may not be possible to adopt all recommendations at once, yet incorporate those which are the highest priority for them. The recommendations are not intended to present an exhaustive list of strategies for the classroom, yet act as a prompt for staff, linked directly to the data.

Table 6

Practical tools to support relational experiences for pupils with SEMH needs

Area identified through subordinate theme	Possible Ideas to Support Children
A need to be heard understood and accepted	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Employ active listening techniques when speaking with children - Consideration of Emotion Coaching approaches (Gottman, 2011) - Adopt the approach of continuous positive regard for children at all times - Demonstrate curiosity, adopting a non-judgemental tone when engaging with children around behaviour
The role of kindness and care	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Carry out daily check-ins with children - Demonstrate concern for children in their physical and emotional wellbeing - Smile, demonstrate relaxed and open body language
Humour, fun and playfulness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Play games with children - Speak in a light-hearted tone - Laugh authentically and demonstrate a sense of humour - Find an engaging hook or creative element to learning - Consideration of the PACE approach (Hughes & Golding, 2012)
Sensitivity to adult's emotions and communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Speak in a calm and balanced tone, without raising your voice - Get down to children's level when speaking with them - Seek support and supervision when emotions may overwhelm you in your role
Responsive and flexible support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Apply the principle of 'prompt and withdraw', in terms of adult support

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Ask children what support feels helpful from key adults - Provide children with agency and autonomy over aspects of their support
Mediated learning: With me not for me	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Work alongside children ensuring children complete their work with increasing independence - Provide scaffolding and differentiation for children - Model skills and learning process - Adopt a Growth Mindset (Dweck, 2017) culture in the classroom
Facilitating peer relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Opportunities to socialise with peers from across the school, facilitating peer connection through clubs, interventions etc - Consider peer mentoring or buddy systems
Knowing me, knowing you	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Share personal details about yourself within the boundaries of appropriate professional practice - Ask children about themselves, their likes, strengths and interests - Demonstrate authenticity and genuineness in your interactions with children
Building connection through shared interests	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Use your knowledge of children to engage them in motivating activities - Carve out opportunities to engage in collaborative activities together
Time is key in the security of relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Where possible ensure continuity of support in staffing - Reduce the number of unnecessary staff changes children experience throughout their primary education

Loss and change	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Support children to manage change with enhanced transitions and anticipatory and preparatory information - Keep relationships and communication with staff who are off on maternity leave e.g sharing photos and reminding children of their return
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School leadership

School leaders play a pivotal role in supporting staff to implement relational policies and embed relational practice in their classrooms for pupils with SEMH needs. The following implication arises from the theme of 'Seeking stability: The need for consistent relationships that endure', which demonstrates the importance of continuity in staffing for pupils. Schools can potentially support to promote relational continuity by minimising unnecessary staff turnover and staffing changes, where pupils with SEMH needs are considered in classroom and staffing operational decision making. The following implication arises from the theme of 'Emotional safety through trusting, attuned and compassionate relationships', which demonstrates the importance of relational practice as a commitment to build strong, respectful relationships with pupils. Relational practice should be regarded as a core element of provision for children with SEMH needs alongside therapeutic and academic support given the centrality of relational security in supporting pupils emotional regulation (Pianta et al., 2012). School leaders should consider working alongside Educational Psychology Services in the development of relational policies and work collaboratively to support to embed these practices across school.

The following implication arises from multiple themes generated within the study, most notably 'Emotional safety through trusted, attuned and compassionate relationships. The theme which has been discussed in previous sections of the empirical paper speak to the direct links between children's voices and experiences and trauma-informed practice. Given that pupils repeatedly described feeling safer and more able to learn when adults responded with attunement and emotional sensitivity, the findings support the adoption of trauma-informed practice. Training

and professional development should be strategically prioritised by school leaders, where they ensure that all staff receive ongoing trauma-informed practice and attachment-aware training. This training should be embedded and not a one off discrete session, ensuring the development of whole-school culture. This would include promoting psychological safety among pupils and staff where emotional needs are recognised and supported as a prerequisite to academic learning. The following implication arises from the subtheme of 'Sensitivity to adult's emotions and communication', here children expressed their views around adult's own emotional regulation and expression. School leaders should consider protecting time for staff to engage in reflective supervision and wellbeing practices in order to ensure their fitness for practice and how to respond when emotions are heightened within the classroom. The following recommendations arise from many of the findings with specific reference to the nature of the research in eliciting pupil voice and directly from the theme 'A desire for adaptive person-centred support'. The children communicated a need to be involved in decision that affect them which has implication for school leaders who should consider how to recruit staff whose values align with relational, child-centred approaches where an induction process could be developed to support SEMH relational practice, engaging pupils within these process. School leaders should additionally develop mechanisms within school to amplify pupil voice and prioritise the participation of pupils, specifically vulnerable pupils in order to promote their dignity. These processes should not be tokenistic, but engage children as active participants and agents in their own lives and in decision made about their education (Caetano et al., 2020; Hart, 2008).

For EPs

The current research also has important implications for Educational Psychologists. Notably the Relational-Mapping-Interview proved to be a useful tool in eliciting the views of children in a research context which may have transferability to assessment in practice. Using the RMI in the elicitation of child voice has implications for assessment of relational experiences for children in practice. Using the RMI to elicit the voice of the child has implications for assessment of children's relational and school experiences as it scaffolds reflective capacity, supports emotional safety and promotes participation which aligns with children rights and person-centred practices (UNCRC, 1989; Punch, 2002). Visual methods have been

considered helpful in educational psychology assessments, especially considering the emotional and communication needs of children (Clark, 2011).

Additionally, the findings provide implications for EP systemic work with schools. The following implication arises from the theme 'Emotional safety through trusted, attuned and compassionate relationships', relating to pupil's relational experiences which strongly support whole school development in the field of relational practice, emotional safety and attunement, central to effective SEMH provision (Bomber, 2007; Rose & Gilbert, 2015). As bridges between theory and practice, EPs are well placed to use the findings of the current study to influence school practice such as development of provision, by acting as agents of change translating research into applied practice (Farrell et al., 2006). The findings of the current study could therefore be used by EPs to inform staff-development, provision design and reflective practice culture with the relational needs of some of their most vulnerable pupils in mind with specific direct reference to the theme 'A desire for adaptive person-centred support'. The findings support EPs to be best able to suggest what works in relational practice, using positive psychology and solution-oriented framing (Wagner, 2008) to support mainstream school staff to feel more able to meet the relational needs of pupils with SEMH needs. An example of this includes the recommendation of the continued work of Video Interaction Guidance and the consideration of attunement principles in staff and children interactions in schools, facilitated by EPs, related directly to the theme 'Emotional safety through trusted, attuned and compassionate relationships'. An additional example of this is for Educational Psychologists to be positioned within initial teaching training programmes, working across systems and levels of influence. EPs should partner with education providers to develop training materials and support teachers early in their career to better understand the importance of relational and emotional aspects of their role and the TSR's mechanism in pupil outcomes.

For Policy:

The findings of the current study highlight the need for education policy to more explicitly recognise the role of staff relationships in supporting pupils with SEMH needs. While current policy considers inclusion, behaviour and attainment, the relational practice that supports emotional regulation and subsequent academic and behaviour outcomes is underemphasised (DfE, 2018; DfE & DoH, 2015). Policy

at both national and local level should acknowledge the impact of staffing changes workforce stability and relational continuity on pupils (linked to the theme 'Seeking stability: The need for consistent relationships that endure'), especially when considering the considerable differences in staffing continuity and consistency across primary, secondary and specialist school contexts (Rose & Gilbert, 2015; Parker, 2020). This has implications for resource allocation, prioritising investment which is sustained in order to prioritise staff retention alongside academic and behavioural interventions considering maternity and paternity policy. There is a need to view relational work as a core feature of education rather than an additional or 'add on' element of provision.

The following implication arises from the themes of 'Emotional safety through trusted, attuned and compassionate relationships' and 'A desire for adaptive, person-centred support', which recognise pupil's needs to be understood through empathetic and trauma-informed lenses and for children to have autonomy and agency in their own schooling. Trauma-informed and relational frameworks should be embedded more explicitly across national guidance, inspection frameworks and local authority policy in order to hold schools accountable in how they promote emotional safety, trust, attunement and individualised support, where relational policies are statutory obligations not optional enhancements to schools (DfE, 2028; EEF, 2021; Bomber & Hughes, 2012). Embedding these principles would strengthen the coherence between evidence, practice and school level expectations for inclusive and relational practice, increasing accountability for schools. Recognising and meeting children's relational and emotional needs, specifically those pupils who are disproportionately at risk of exclusion and poor long term outcomes, including those with SEMH needs (Parker & Levinson, 2018; Timpson Review, 2019), should be a priority for both national and local government. Given cost implications for schools and both national and local government around SEMH intervention and provision adaptations, it is key that the development of cost- and practice-effective interventions is informed by what pupils themselves identify as regulating and supportive, prioritising sustainable relational practices that enhance emotional safety (linked to Theme 1 and 3) and person-centred support (linked to Theme 2) rather than relying solely on high-cost specialist provision that may not reflect pupils' lived

experiences or needs and undermine the relational continuity of their education (linked to Theme 4).

For Research:

The findings of the current study have implications for future research design with children, specifically children with SEMH needs. Visual and participatory methods, including the RMI are valuable mechanisms for capturing pupils voice, by reducing the reliance on verbal communication alone. The use of drawing alongside conversation supported children to externalise their experiences and represent their experiences symbolically in addition to maintaining their development with the interview. This aligns with existing research which suggests use of visual methods in supporting emotional expression and participation where children may find interviews and verbal dialogue alone challenging (Clark, 2011; Mitchell et al., 2011). Future research could explore the current study's methodology in the context of other areas of SEND, where the RMI maps supported pupils with SEMH needs to communicate aspects of their relational experience, exploring how different profiles of need or SEND experience relationships. Research should continue to explore the reliability of the RMI and evaluation of the analysis of visual data produced in the RMI in child participant groups. Comparative studies across SEND groups could be beneficial in investigating whether relational needs and experiences with staff vary according to primary need. There is currently limited research exploring how children with different primary needs (e.g ASD, cognition and learning, speech and language needs) experience relationships with staff. Research in this field could inform differentiated relational practice across SEND groups.

Based on Table 5 which directly compares each of the current study's subthemes with corresponding attunement principles evidenced, it may also be beneficial to explore the use of the Principles of Attunement (Cubeddu & MacKay, 2017) within initial teacher training and further education providers in early career development for teachers and support staff. Further research into how these principles are met or evidenced in staff-student relationships may be beneficial, considering how attunement can be systemically developed within wider school culture. Longitudinal research could explore the impact of attunement training on staff's relational practice and pupil emotional security would be illuminating and strengthen the evidence base for relational practice in education.

Conclusion

The study offers a distinctive contribution to the area of relational practice in understanding the perspective of primary aged pupils with SEMH needs, who are arguably those most directly affected by such practice. By centring children's relational experiences through developmentally sensitive methodology, the research adds to existing knowledge in the field beyond adult interpretations of SEMH provision. The findings emphasise the fundamental role of emotional safety, adaptive support, authenticity and stability within staff and pupil relationships in the primary school context. Overall, the current study provides meaningful implications for educational practice and underscores the necessity of actively listening to children's voices whose experience are too often marginalised.

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Chapter 3 - Reflective Chapter

Introduction

The following chapter will include a reflective account of the current research journey from development of the topic area through undertaking the research, to the final write up of the thesis. The current chapter will adopt an understanding of reflection as both 'reflection-in-action', thinking while doing and 'reflection-on-action', after the event thinking (Schön, 1983). First person will be used throughout in order to engage in reflexive commentary. The role of the Educational Psychologist is broad, where standards of proficiency for practitioner psychologists include a focus on research and reflective practice (BPS, 2017; BPS 2019; HCPC, 2023). The standards discuss the value of research and critical analysis of evidence when informing practice in addition to involving service users in research where appropriate. In terms of reflexivity, practitioner psychologists must understand the value of reflective practice, considering alternative ways of working. Becoming a reflective practitioner, involves, but is not exclusive to; self-awareness, an understanding of power imbalances between practitioner and service users and commitment to anti-discriminatory practice (BPS, 2019). A critical reflection approach

considers cultural bias, ideological assumptions and personal values on interpretation, where practitioners and researchers are not neutral (Parker, 2015). Core components of reflective practice for EPs include bridging theory into practice, good communication and relationships, in addition to emancipatory practice (Rowley et al., 2022). Through this engagement in practice experience and reflection, practitioners develop self-awareness, meaningful practice, growth and change. It is with this in mind that the reflective account is presented in the context of the doctoral thesis.

Conceptualising and clarifying the project

I found choosing a research topic incredibly difficult at first. When we were asked to spend the summer between first and second year developing a literature review in our chosen area, I was reluctant and confused to say the least. Many of my peers had a project title already in mind and found the process of sifting through the relevant literature easy. I had initially considered the very broad area of 'relational practice' and found drafting my first iteration of a literature review challenging due to the sheer quantity of papers on the subject and no clear 'funneling' towards a more specific topic or research question. Mayer (2008) encourages researchers to tap into their 'intellectual curiosity' and consider their personal interest whilst developing a specific area of interest. Finding a specific topic was difficult, as many of the areas in relational practice excited me. I decided to simplify exactly what it was that relational practice meant to me, and at that point a lightbulb moment arrived. It surely mattered more what relational practice means to children. What do children feel about relational practices in school? How do children speak about adults in school? What specifically do children with SEMH needs, need from their relationships with adults in school? Ultimately leading to considering the current research question; 'How do children with SEMH needs experience their relationships with staff (in the primary mainstream setting)?'

In my second year of the doctorate we presented our research proposals to the cohort and course tutor team. I remember feeling particularly nervous following a poor first draft of a literature review and the fact I was first up first to present. The feedback was really positive which supported me to develop my formal research

proposal further. Particularly important critical feedback included consideration of the broad area of SEMH need and the children's identity in their awareness or understanding of this label. As previously mentioned in chapters 1 and 2, the classification of need issue and concept of SEMH capturing a multitude of presenting needs, does not ultimately describe a homogenous group. In order to mitigate this, the children were all in key stage 2, had current EHCPs in place, all experienced their education in primary mainstream settings and I had discussions with the school SENCos to ensure that SEMH was felt to be the children's primary need. It was key that I considered how children would be given the necessary information for them to make an informed decision to participate in the research, whilst ensuring their self-esteem and identity was not adversely impacted. My review of the literature supported my decision to use age and stage appropriate language to describe their selection criteria, where labels used don't tend to have significance or meaning to children (Hickinbotham & Soni, 2021). I decided to describe factually what it was that made the children appropriate for my study and include this in the children's participant information booklet. The language chosen included, "children who have extra support from adults throughout the day to manage their emotions". I felt this was open enough to encapsulate different provision that would be written into the children's EHCPs, yet specific enough to capture the emotional nuance of the SEMH broad area in comparison to the other three broad areas of need (DfE & DoH, 2015). I hoped this would also be phrased in a way which didn't locate the 'problem' within the child and that children would be aware they had additional support to their peers at times. Despite the heavy focus on the SEMH categorisation within the research, the children in the study should not be reduced to labels. They are family members, friends, skilled artists, critical thinkers, considerate helpers, to name but a few of the other identities that they may hold.

Personal connection to the research

My personal connection to the area of SEMH needs has been longstanding. Personally, I grew up as the birth daughter of two foster carers, where I spent my teenage years living with numerous CYP who had experienced adversity in their childhood, all of whom experienced SEMH needs in the context of their education. Two of my foster siblings became permanent members of our family under a Special Guardianship Order. They had very different experiences of school, one who

remained in mainstream education and the other who transitioned to specialist independent schools, both receiving an EHCP with SEMH as their primary need. I am now the kinship carer for these two young people, aged 20 and 15. The impact of these personal experiences for me included the sense of empathy, understanding and passion I have for supporting young people with additional needs, specifically SEMH needs. I appreciate the great disadvantage this group face in education and society and the incredible strength and resilience that children who are care experienced embody. Furthermore, I am acutely aware how unique and different all young people are that fall into the 'SEMH need' categorisation.

Professionally, I started my teaching career undertaking my second placement, during my PGCE, at a specialist independent SEMH school in Leicestershire. I worked here for five years as a class teacher and trained and worked as a SENCo for my final two years, leaving to pursue my dream of the doctorate. Relationships were at the core of everything within the setting. Without secure, trusting relationships where adults showed genuine interest in children and worked hard to earn children's respect, no meaningful learning was achieved. Not only child and staff relationships, but the relationships between staff, where it was key that children felt our own genuine interactions with one another within a considerate and warm 'family like' environment. These experiences have shaped my understanding of the ameliorating effect of supportive and empathetic relationships for children, where in the absence of typical family or childhood experiences, school can and should be the place to provide these opportunities. My experience working in mainstream settings historically felt very different, where the primary function of education was skewed to supporting children's academic learning, not necessarily their holistic development. I had felt that children with SEMH needs were misunderstood.

It took me some time on the doctorate between my first and second years to reflect on the pros and cons of specialist education and the idea of 'inclusion', how the definition of inclusion is not universal in education contexts (Norwich, 2002; 2022). I remember feeling challenged when I reflected on the outcomes for children in specialist settings being poorer (Sinclair & Luke, 2024). I had held an existing view supported by the literature that the integration of pupils with SEND in mainstream does not equal 'inclusion', where pupils can often experience social exclusion and

marginalisation (Woolfson, 2025). My interest in how mainstream schools support this population of pupils with SEMH needs grew and my own practice as a TEP was concerned with supporting the staff in mainstream settings better meet the needs of pupils with SEND more broadly, a systemic model of educational psychology practice (Young et al., 2019). In terms of my research journey, I acknowledge my bias and where I have preconceived ideas and experiences that have shaped my connection to the research. In IPA, these background experiences and beliefs, called 'fore-conceptions', shape how the researcher sees participant's accounts, where the researcher acknowledges they are not neutral (Smith et al., 2022). Therefore, researchers must be aware of their positionality, engaging in reflexivity throughout the research process, reflecting on how their personal history, beliefs and theoretical orientation may influence data analysis (Ugiagbe et al., 2024). It is important for researchers to be aware and vigilant that their own lens can distort the way in which they make sense of the participants' accounts when exploring their lived experiences (Reid et al., 2005). Reflexivity in research should not include a one off statement about personal connection to the research, but an ongoing process of self-reflection throughout the research, from design, data collection and through to analysis and write up (Corlett & Mavin, 2017).

Further aspects of my positionality have been considered during the research journey. I am a white, middle class woman who did not grow up with SEMH needs which were identified or supported in school. I do not have first-hand experience of my participant's experiences, which distances me somewhat from the research and perhaps allows me to be more balanced in my interpretation of their voices (Berger, 2015). However, I have been exceptionally mindful of my position of power in the research context and have sat with uncomfortableness at points around the idea of the research being seen as emancipatory. There is something difficult about the nature of my privilege in comparison to the relative disadvantage/s of the participants. These different identities and power dynamics that exist between myself and the participants could potentially mean that there are blind spots which impact on my perception of participants' experiences (Bourke, 2014; Finlay, 2002). The most important visible difference between the participant group and myself in terms of The

Social Graces¹ (Burnham, 2018) was age, with invisible differences including ability, education and class. These differences may have shaped how freely the children felt able to express their views and perhaps influenced how I understood and interpreted their experiences. My adult and professional standpoint ultimately differs from the participants, where it was important to challenge my thinking at various points during data collection and analysis.

Participant recruitment and ethical considerations

When it came to recruiting schools and reaching out to SENCOs and Headteachers as gatekeepers for my participant group, I reflected on the institutional pressure that could exist within settings and on children to participate, where children have previously shared in research that is it “never okay to say no to teachers” (Kirby, 2020). These concerns were raised and mediated through submission of ethics by ensuring schools were aware that their participation would not impact their relationship with the service, and parents and children’s decision to participate would not impact their relationships with the school. Although finding it challenging to recruit, I did not face significant barriers. A reflection around the types of schools who demonstrated interest was that they all considered promoting pupil voice to be a priority and something they value, which has supported the recruitment of participants and enthusiasm of schools. Therefore the voices of the children were captured in settings where schools promoted the research and advertised this to parents proactively. Here I encountered an ethical conundrum around how researchers can ‘access’ child populations, where researchers are reliant on their supportive adults to facilitate their involvement. This is a critical reflective point around the group of children within the current study, where findings cannot be generalised across all primary aged pupils with SEMH needs.

Ethically, I struggled with my dual-role during the interview process. For my first participant, I reflected on the difficulties and needs they presented with and communicated. He told me that Maths is tricky and he struggles to remember things in the classroom during our initial meet and greet. He also commented on his belief that other kids are better than him at football, additionally speaking about himself and

¹ GRRRAAACCEEESSS: Geography, Gender, Race, Religion, Age, Ability, Appearance, Culture, Class, Education, Employment, Ethnicity, Spirituality, Sexuality, Sexual Orientation (Burnham, 2012)

his skills very negatively during our interview. I had to remind myself of the purpose of my visit and acknowledge that I was not the school's or young person's TEP/EP, but a researcher. I internally debated with myself whether it was appropriate to pass on this information to the school SENCo, and reflected that this was not in my role. The only information that would be passed on would relate to whistleblowing and safeguarding concerns. I think the difficulty of this for me is in that I care for all the children I have involvement with and to spend two sessions with them where we built a good rapport and trust between us, I had their best interests at heart. These tensions between researcher and practitioner role identities have been explored and commonly experienced by other researchers, where transparency and emphasising the role you are currently adopting is encouraged (BERA, 2017).

I reflected on what I was able to offer the young people in terms of my own interactions with them and decisions made about our time together. An example was that for one young person in their meet and greet, they told me that it would not work for me to come back for the interview the next day as they were at a sports competition. I ensured that I listened to their concerns and re-arranged my follow up school visit on an alternative day that suited the participant. Here, there was an element of my own relational practice hopefully positively impacting the young person. I reflected on the idea that my time with the young people in of itself may be in part an intervention where the phrase 'every interaction is an intervention' has become popularised within education (Early Intervention Foundation, 2022). Participation in research can be considered to have a wide range of benefits for young people including therapeutic properties (Watson et al., 2023). Although I feel it would be inappropriate to consider two sessions with a child a targeted therapeutic intervention, in my perception the sessions were universally considered positive by all my participants where they demonstrated genuine enjoyment in their role in the research, where I hoped I supported them to feel important. Research has considered that participatory methods for children can function as both research and intervention (D'Amico et al., 2016) and have benefits for participants in the sense of voice, agency, engagement, empowerment and wellbeing (Biddle & Haime, 2024; Shamrova & Cummings, 2017).

Ethically, I had an important and valuable experience with one child who I met, that did not become a participant in the study. The child's parents had

completed their full consent, however the child's consent form was only partially completed, stating that they consented to the meet and greet and not the subsequent interview. I took this to research supervision, where my supervisor asked me to name my concerns and my hypotheses around the child's responses. I named that ethically, I felt uncomfortable meeting with a child to speak to them about my research, where I did not want to come across as coercive or pushing the child into another meeting with me. One of my hypotheses included thinking that the young person may not have understood the interview and research process or what was being asked of them. My research supervisor encouraged me to reach out to school to ask if an advocate and key adult for the child could join the initial meet and greet, where I would build rapport, play games and re-read my participant information sheet to them, asking if they wanted to engage in a follow up session to take part. The additional adult in the room would therefore be a protective factor to ensure I was not putting the young person under any pressure and was briefed beforehand that it was important the child knew they could say no and there would be no further action or consequence. During the meet and greet, it became apparent that the young person was playful and enjoyed the opportunity to engage in fun and motivating activities. After about 20 minutes the young person left the room, indicating that they withdrew their consent to be part of the session. I followed up with the school SENCo and said that unless I hear otherwise, I will assume the young person does not want to see me again. The young person reiterated this message to his key adult after I had left school, that he did not want to take part in the research. This experience was a key learning opportunity for me and important in the values I want to display as a researcher and practitioner, listening to the child, respecting their voice and allowing them agency and choice in matters concerning them.

Throughout the research design and data collection process, I considered aspects of ethical research guidelines as highlighted in BERA (2024) and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989), where information pertaining to children, should be accessible for children. In the current study, the children's information and consent forms used child friendly language and were visually simple, including images. Children were allowed and encouraged to ask questions during the initial meet and greet to ensure they knew what to expect in the following session. BERA (2024) also emphasises the importance of researchers

considering aspects of consent and assent with children as participants. Consent referring to the formal agreement by a parent of legal guardian, allowing their child to participate in the research. Where assent refers to the child's agreement and willingness to participate, obtained in a manner appropriate to their age and understanding, an active participant in the process. Previous reflective accounts in the literature base highlight that assent can only be possible when adults engage in reflexivity and communicate with children regarding their approach (Patton & Winter, 2023). Throughout the interviews with participants, I aimed to be highly attuned to the young people, and what their verbal and non-verbal cues may be communicating. In this sense, I felt secure in my skills as a researcher, where my previous work experiences and dual-role as a TEP supported my relational and ethical practice. Many of the children required breaks throughout the research interview, where we played games, the child went out to their normal breaktime or we spoke about other topics and paused the recording. The presenting behaviour that indicated that they may need a break or to pause and do something else included: children becoming slightly fidgety, asking when break time was and struggling to answer a question. In addition to looking out for signs of assent being withdrawn from participants, all children were offered a break and provided with an alternative communication method for indicating that they wanted to have a break or stop completely.

Reflection on data collection and interview process

During the interview process, I encountered challenges with supporting children to effectively express their views. Occasionally children would pause, look down, demonstrate a sense of uncomfortableness or say "I don't know" in response to a question. For me, the most important aspect of the my interviewing skill was to reassure the CYP, support them to feel safe in our session and be led by the child. My response therefore differed each time, adapting to the individual needs of the participant. Literature has suggested that interviewers should adapt methods, language and consider their pacing, being aware of developmental considerations in their approach (Spratling et al., 2012), matching the types of questions and communication to each child's communication style (Steultjens et al., 2023). On occasion, I believed the children needed support around their emotional literacy or

language, where scaffolding or alternative phrasing of questions was required. Alternatively, on some occasions, I believed the questions I had asked unintentionally posed a threat in some sense to the child's emotional safety and therefore I changed the subject and offered the child a chance to have a break, or talk about something else, moving on. I have reflected on the skill that comes with this and how no research manual will explicitly support a researcher to carry out interviews, especially with children. My experience working with children in this group very much supported my capacity to manage each interview with empathy and react dynamically and responsively to the presenting situation. Ethical research through an individual dignity model incorporates agency, autonomy and choice (Nairn et al., 2020). This can be difficult to facilitate where children may feel an element of institutional pressure where power dynamics influence their participation in research (Kirby, 2020). The relational mapping interview has four key touchpoints (Boden et al., 2019), where I placed the numbers 1-4 on four individual post it notes. When children felt they had had enough of talking about one specific topic, I asked them to move onto the next number. They would demonstrate this by ripping/scrunching up the post it notes, which helped the children to have some sense of agency and autonomy over the interview procedure and a sense of what was coming next.

I have reflected on whether bringing additional resources, such as emotion cards or word banks would have been appropriate. Ultimately there is a fine balance between supporting children to share their views, scaffolding their developing skills, whilst ensuring any tools are not biased, providing leading or limiting responses. I did not use questions which would elicit a yes or no response, potentially leading to acquiescence bias, children favouring answering affirmatively (Cleveland et al., 2016). Although scaffolding in the sense of highly directive prompts can lead children or increase suggestibility (Quas et al., 2005), scaffolding in terms of drawing, contextual prompts and age related support promotes children to report more detailed information (Gentle et al., 2014). Throughout the interviews I found that summarising and reflecting back what the CYP said allowed the CYP some time to process our conversation, check that my understanding of their experience was correct and ensured the conversation wasn't stilted or broken, meaning that the conversation felt more natural and less 'question, answer, question, answer' in style. These are skills commonly used in consultation in educational psychology practice

including active listening, paraphrasing, clarifying and summarising (Royle & Atkinson, 2025). My working knowledge of what children are capable of and how to ask questions that support service users to share their views in a safe space were drawn on. There was an element of trying to help the participant make sense of what they are saying by checking my interpretation out with them, reflecting back what I believed I understood from their offerings which supported me to feel confident in my interpretation of their experiences.

Disruption to my research journey

In January 2025, my mother sadly suffered a brain haemorrhage which resulted in emergency brain surgery and a lengthy inpatient stay in the Neuro-Intensive Care Unit at the John Radcliffe Hospital. This significant event not only disrupted my emotional capacity to continue my research journey, but had wider impacts on my personal circumstances. My mother was the primary caregiver for three young people, my siblings, who all have SEND and social care needs. Myself and my husband immediately relocated from Bury St Edmunds in Suffolk to Oakham in Rutland to care for my three siblings and support my elderly father.

The disruption to my life during this period of stress and significant change understandably impacted upon my 'readiness' for research and capacity to manage the considerable placement expectations and thesis responsibilities of third year. Despite these challenges I was determined to complete my doctorate and made best use of supervision, including personal, research and placement to ensure my fitness for practice in line with standards of proficiency and practice (HCPC, 2023). Initially, after a period of compassionate leave, I was supported to re-engage with placement through a significant reduction in work. It was decided that my interview procedures and recruitment for my thesis would take priority for me during this period of re-integration. Thankfully, I had already carried out the majority of my participant interviews in December 2024. I began to reach back out to school SENCOs and book in planned meet and greets and interviews for my remaining participants.

In February 2025, my research supervisor and I made the decision to apply for an extension to the deadline of my thesis. Although this was something which I did not initially wish to do, I was aware the reality of my personal circumstances would impact on my ability to dedicate time to writing. On reflection, this was an

incredibly important decision as sadly, my mother passed away in early March 2025. After a short period of further compassionate leave I made the decision, with the support of my research supervisor to carry out the interviews I had planned in mid-March. I was nervous before walking into school about carrying out these interviews, anxious that although I felt ready, maybe I wasn't. On walking into school, I felt an immediate wave of purpose and determination, supported by the amazing young people whom I met. There was something incredibly therapeutic for me in continuing my professional and doctorate responsibilities and working with young people who offered me a welcome distraction, sense of hope, optimism and purpose. This is echoed by a study exploring how researchers cope with emotionally challenging research areas, where participants communicated feeling inspired and driven by their work (Skinner et al., 2025).

Reflection on the analysis journey

It was important to keep a research diary and notes throughout the process of data analysis. Where I feel that research questions had to be more scaffolded and potentially leading, I kept exploratory notes around those answers linked directly to children's own words and volunteered contributions. This supported me to stay close to the participants' account and use their words, not the words or phrasing I used in questions. At first glance during the analysis process, I carried out a literal interpretation of text, where later, the analysis deepens and I attempted to not take the words at face value, adding layers of interpretation and sophistication to the analysis (Smith et al., 2021). I felt I really had to immerse myself in the data by re-listening to the accounts whilst sense making of the participants' experiences, ensuring I was not reading the text or transcription without context.

I had quite an emotional response to the data analysis process and the themes of trauma informed practice that came through in the findings. I felt a real sense of responsibility in communicating and amplifying the children's voices and a sense of sadness about their experiences at times. For example, in my second iteration of naming personal experiential themes for one participant, I was overwhelmed by emotion in his communication of the need to be understood, valued and respected, a basic human right (UNCRC, 1989). Many children communicated a

need to be liked, cared for and supported in a compassionate environment which I reflected on being something that was not too much to ask, but in the context of schools and education it felt like was not coming to fruition in practice in some settings. I was saddened by the idea that adults were getting 'swept up' in the culture of school discipline and authoritarianism and perhaps neglecting seeing the individual child in front of them communicating a need to be understood. It was important for me to acknowledge my distance from the role of school staff member, where I was able to look at child and staff experiences with a balanced view and not bring judgement or attribute blame to staff.

In terms of language, I don't feel that the short quotes from children are a limitation to the study's quality or depth. I added my layers of interpretation as the person who was in the interviews and met with the young people, not a researcher coming to analyse transcripts without the experience of the interview context. I am acting as a platform for their views, organising them but keeping to their experiences. The quotes reflect the language level of the participants and should not be discounted based on an academic view of what constitutes rich or meaningful data, not judging children's data by adult linguistic standards (Einarsdóttir, 2007), the data is meaningful to the children and to me. Whilst developing personal experiential statements I took some time between the first and second iteration, coming back to them with a fresh perspective. This was helpful and I was appreciative that time pressures for me in terms of a deadline were reduced. I feel that my extension gave me longer to ponder and reflect on my research and analytic stage which provided more opportunities to engage with the data and ultimately strengthened my research, where IPA takes time and prolonged immersion in the data (Smith et al., 2022; Yardley, 2000). I was able to re-order the statements and looked for new ways to make connections, looking more broadly at superordinate themes and how personal experiential themes (PETs) relate to one another. Whilst naming PETs, I needed to refine the language used and ask myself whether it described what the children were communicating. At this stage it helped to link back to my research question; "How do children experience relationships with staff?".

In terms of developing group experiential themes (GETs), there was a natural progression from PETs that had emerged in the study and similarities across participants' experiences. The GET which required the most analytic work was

centred around the theme of emotional safety. I believe this speaks to the difficulty in conceptualising or naming this phenomena, one which is deeply emotional and involves a felt sense, perhaps no words I used could capture this experience. One participant's experience of emotional safety was described through both visible and invisible facets of the phenomena, which helped me to develop my GET and attempt to 'sit' in the children's experiences. The role of attunement in this GET became apparent where I drew on literature around Video Interaction Guidance (VIG) to support me. In our initial third year training in VIG, I was struck by one of the values and beliefs that underpin VIG; "In every interaction/conversation there are two equally important people" (AVIG UK). Again, this was a revolutionary moment for me in my analytic and thesis journey, where I made the decision to use the Principles of Attunement (Cubeddu & MacKay, 2017) within the empirical paper as many of the group subordinate themes fit well within the framework. For another GET I was inspired by Louise Bomber's book 'Know me to teach me' (Bomber, 2020). The participants in the current study went further than this communicating the importance of staff getting to know them and in turn, children getting to know staff. In the subordinate theme entitled 'Knowing me knowing you', I wanted to convey the importance of staff sharing information about themselves, with an appreciation of the bi-directional relationship.

Maps

The use of maps during the data collection and analysis process were key in eliciting the voice of the children. For example, the colours used within the drawing for one participant linked the football teams his preferred adults supported to his experience of his relationship with them. Without me commenting on why he had chosen the colours he did, I would have not captured this information and understanding. For one participant in particular maps were crucial in mediating his difficulties with effective communication, related in part to his age and developmental stage. This particular child drew images which helped him to express and communicate his thoughts, for example a smiley face in response to questions about interactions with staff. This helped me to understand his conceptualisation of his verbal data he shared, "nice and kind" with the behaviour or quality that he associated with this, smiling, friendly faces. For one young person, drawing was one

of their skills and interests, without the RMI technique, I may not have been able to tap into the aspect of shared interests and activities that were key in his relational experience, in the form of drawing with his preferred teacher. Rarely, the mapping became a barrier for children. For a few participants, their fear of getting it wrong or being judged for their artistic skills played a part in limiting potential view or experience sharing. This was mediated by reducing the perceived pressure and drawing alongside children. Other research has highlighted the risk of assuming that visual methods automatically support children, where participants resisted drawing, rejecting the method (Scherer, 2016). I had my own paper and pens and drew my own picture of myself, modelling the first step of the RMI. The purpose of this was not to lead children, but to humanise my role, sharing in the activity and communicating that I was not in a position of power, exerting critique on their offerings. I reiterated to children that they could depict themselves on the page in any medium they wish e.g. writing, symbols, colour, drawing etc.

Although I completed initial analysis for all children's maps as standalone data, I made the decision to not write up the thesis with findings specifically from the maps. The rationale for this was that on their own, the data the maps presented did not provide a source of information to answer the research question. However, they did provide a platform and medium for children's participation and at times eluded to more nuanced or felt aspects of the relational experience in the pre-reflective, implicit domain (Boden et al., 2019). Not only this, but the structure of the RMI, provided an element of safety for the children, who knew that there were four distinct aspects of the procedure, not an ambiguously long conversation without observable purpose to the interview. Here it could be argued that for children, unstructured interviews may cause additional anxiety due to the ambiguous nature of not knowing what to expect and open ended conversation (Kirby, 2004), which may be even more apparent in the SEND or SEMH population. I also feel that the activity of the RMI in of itself created an element of 'one-step removed' where children felt less directly challenged by emotive questions or topics, the maps provided some space between the researcher and the child and a creative medium to share the interview experience. I had initially felt disappointed that in my research proposal I had commented that the MAPs would be individually analysed and findings presented where deviating from this plan somehow meant I had failed. On reflection, I made decisions as the thesis

project evolved and changed, not sticking rigidly to my initial plan. Consideration of alternative methodologies for the elicitation of pupil voice in the current study includes participatory approaches such as photo-elicitation and the MOSAIC approach which has been widely used to support children's experiences (Clark & Moss, 2011), where methods must be matched to children's confidence and competence (Punch, 2002). These approaches may have proved beneficial, however the current research recognised that participatory methods may also generate performance anxiety for some children (Mitchell et al., 2011) and that what works for individual children is variable and dependent on their communication, emotional and cognitive profile (Lewis & Porter, 2004).

Bringing the research to an end

I found that for many of the young people, I had had a positive impact on them where our sessions were enjoyable. This was related to me as a person, the activities we shared together and time and space dedicated to them. Many of the young people asked when I would be back, where it was important that I developed a closure statement and supported the children to know what to expect. Although as a TEP, I am used to meeting children for discrete pieces of work and 'deep diving' on their lives, coming away again, something felt different during the research journey. I have reflected on this being due to the fact that there were two 1:1 sessions with each child and the nature of the research being designed by me. In other pieces of work, I negotiate with schools, families, the local authority and young people around what my involvement may look like. In my personal research project and thesis, I felt a huge sense of responsibility and gratefulness towards the children, where perhaps I had more of an emotional connection to the CYP than in my typically TEP work. Whilst I was walking out of one of the schools that has facilitated my research interview, the child called my name from down the corridor and called goodbye for a second time, waving confidently and smiling. This had been such a stark contrast from the young person's presentation at the start of our time together a few days before, where they were slightly withdrawn and lacked animation. I found it particularly difficult to walk away knowing what this participant had shared about their staff experiences and how I imagined my practice had differed from the staff in school. To stay bounded in my role was challenging, I wanted to 'check-in' on pupils following the sessions, however considering the ethical parameters of parental

consent and time limitations to my role, did not. Child voice research using a teddy bear or 'Ted', found that children developed a meaningful relationship with Ted throughout the study, where Ted went to a new preschool once the study finished (Patton & Winter, 2023). The researcher subsequently developed a transitional tool in the form of a book to support children to reflect on their time with Ted, which would be left in the setting. Patton and Winter (2023) advocates for researchers to have developed good communication and reflective skills, ensuring the relational process mitigates against power imbalances. In the current research, I produced a certificate for each child which they could keep as a reminder of their achievement, participating in the research and additional de-briefing information (Appendix L for an anonymised version).

Contribution and future research

I believe that my contribution has been valuable to the field of child voice research, specifically in the population of pupils with SEMH needs who are primary aged, where their voice does not currently saturate the literature base. I hope that the effectiveness of use of drawing and the RMI as an example of participatory methods used with children has been evidenced, particularly when eliciting child voice and engaging the children in a positive and engaging research experience. In terms of implications for practice, the felt sense and experience of kindness and emotional warmth which is evident amongst all participants' experience of their current relationships with staff or longing for in their future relationships is key. This highlights the importance of relational qualities when recruiting school staff, if kindness can't be measured, schools should use children as part of feedback in interviewing and recruitment processes. Not all staff have this characteristic or way of being, so we need to ensure we hire the right people for the job, especially as children highlight the distinction between acts of kindness and the sense they get from staffs' demeanour or presence, with impacts on children's experiences.

Through the lens of children we may understand more about ourselves as practitioners, gaining insight into their world. In my experience, it is becoming more common for children to sit on interview panels or for school council members to help develop questions for interviews. It is important to question whether the children who need to develop relational trust most, particularly those with SEMH needs, are offered to contribute to interview processes. This would be a recommendation for

schools in their recruitment processes, ensuring children with additional support and SEMH needs' voices are heard in interview processes in order to improve the relational quality of school staff.

The current research promotes the use of participatory methods that balance structure and flexibility, adapting practice to meet the individual needs of the participant. Future research could explore how methods can be adapted for a particular population within the field of SEND and SEMH. Furthermore longitudinal studies would benefit the field in terms of examining how relational qualities of staff impact pupil wellbeing over time. Finally, studies looking into culture and ethos of schools could capture the voices of children and staff in their experiences of inclusive schools. Overall, I felt the research journey has supported me to develop my values in child centred practice, amplifying the voice of children. It has additionally supported me to reflect critically on my own relational practice and the impact of my presence in terms of power dynamics.

Disseminating findings

Each participating school will receive an overview of the findings to be shared with the individual children and families. This will be in child-friendly language and aimed at informing the participants and parents what has been found. Research advocates for dissemination to consider age-appropriate language and visuals to ensure that children felt their contribution was valued (Clark et al., 2021; Patton & Winter, 2023). I have offered all participating schools a one-off feedback session in the form of dissemination of findings as a whole which may be incorporated into a training day for staff. Therefore the application of the findings to relevance for practice is important. Research highlights that dissemination in educational contexts should involve key stakeholders and translate findings into practice where briefings or workshops have been recommended, communicating findings in ways practitioners can use (Thomas, 2022). I will need to mitigate against ethical concerns around dissemination of findings in the sense that in participating schools quotes or visuals presented may impact upon confidentiality (BERA, 2024; Christensen & James, 2017) where I will only present overall findings and their implications for practice. A challenge I have faced when considering disseminating findings is that some children were in Year 6 during the academic year 24/25. Therefore school SENCOs in their primary settings will be responsible for getting in touch with previous

pupil's families to pass on the dissemination resources which may prove a barrier. However, all parents and carers have had the opportunity to gather my email address and my research supervisor's email address in documents sent out prior to the research being carried out. Children themselves also have had access to my email address, which is included in their participation certificate. For children now in year 7, it may be possible that they could independently email me with their own questions.

Conclusion

Conducting the research has been a transformative process for me personally and professionally. I have gained a deeper understanding of the experiences and perspectives of children with SEMH needs. My values as a practitioner are now even more aligned to a social justice perspective and child-centred approach. The research journey has reinforced the importance of relational practice as a prerequisite to children's meaningful learning in school. Adults have the opportunity to rehabilitate children and ameliorate previous negative experiences. I have renewed appreciation for how research plays a role in informing systemic practice, policy, pedagogy and professional development. Overall, the research experience has strengthened my professional identity, deepened my understanding of ethical and relational research and reaffirmed my commitment to amplifying the voices of children in education who are often marginalised. I would like to finish this thesis by using a colloquial term 'from the mouths of babes', where children express truths, insights and wisdom in a simple and surprisingly honest way. Children, no matter their age can make accurate and profound observations and their voices are worth hearing!

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Appendices

Appendix A – Ethics

Decision - Ethics ETH2324-1539 : Miss Kate Mullinger

University of East Anglia

Study title: Exploring the views of children described as having SEMH needs, of their relationships with school staff, in the primary mainstream setting.

Application ID: ETH2324-1539

Dear Kate,

Your application was considered on 22nd August 2024 by the EDU S-REC (School of Education and Lifelong Learning Research Ethics Subcommittee).

The decision is: **approved**.

You are therefore able to start your project subject to any other necessary approvals being given.

This approval will expire on **31st August 2025**.

Please note that your project is granted ethics approval only for the length of time identified above. Any extension to a project must obtain ethics approval by the EDU S-REC (School of Education and Lifelong Learning Research Ethics Subcommittee) before continuing.

It is a requirement of this ethics approval that you should report any adverse events which occur during your project to the EDU S-REC (School of Education and Lifelong Learning Research Ethics Subcommittee) as soon as possible. An adverse event is one which was not anticipated in the research design, and which could potentially cause risk or harm to the participants or the researcher, or which reveals potential risks in the treatment under evaluation. For research involving animals, it may be the unintended death of an animal after trapping or carrying out a procedure.

Any amendments to your submitted project in terms of design, sample, data collection, focus etc. should be notified to the EDU S-REC (School of Education and Lifelong Learning Research Ethics Subcommittee) in advance to ensure ethical compliance. If the amendments are substantial a new application may be required.

Approval by the EDU S-REC (School of Education and Lifelong Learning Research Ethics Subcommittee) should not be taken as evidence that your study is compliant with the UK General Data Protection Regulation (UK GDPR) and the Data Protection Act 2018. If you need guidance on how to make your study UK GDPR compliant, please contact the UEA Data Protection Officer (dataprotection@uea.ac.uk).

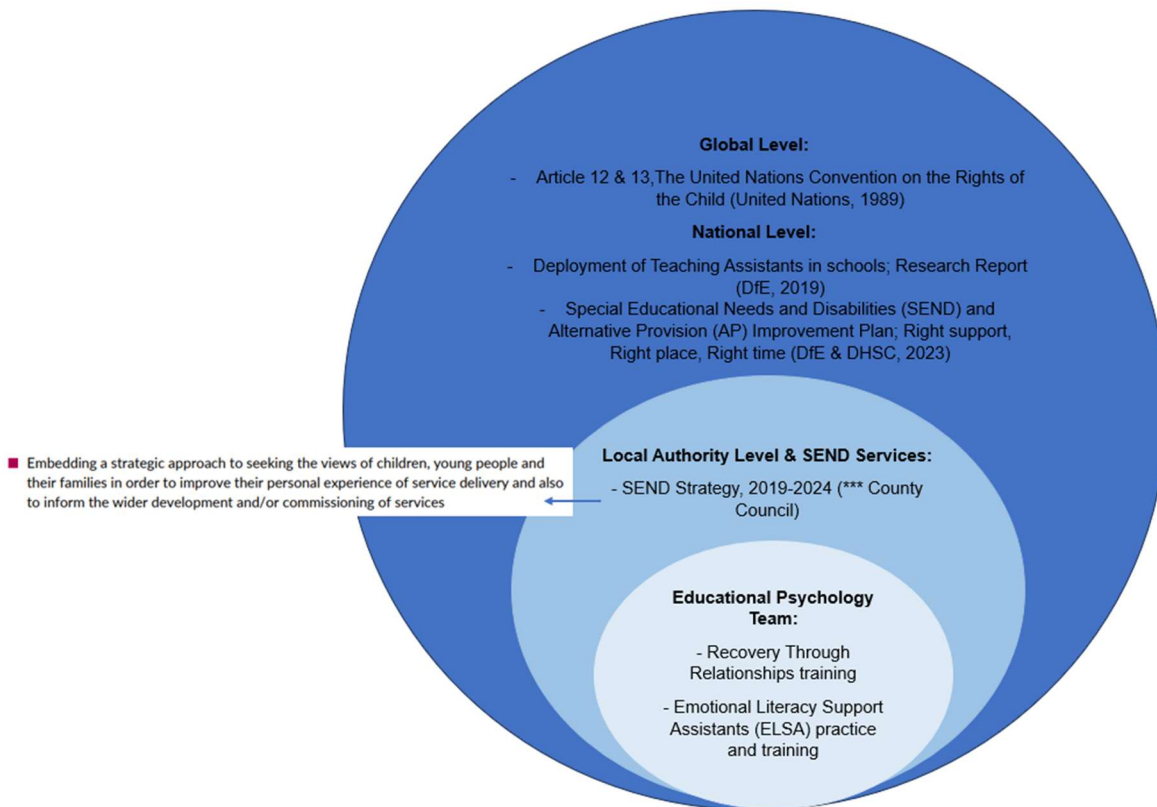
I would like to wish you every success with your project.

On behalf of the EDU S-REC (School of Education and Lifelong Learning Research Ethics Subcommittee)

Yours sincerely,

Victoria Warburton

Appendix B – National and Local Priorities



Appendix C – Recruitment Poster

Participants Needed!

Child Voice

Exploring the views of children with social, emotional and mental health (SEMH) needs, of their relationships with staff in school!

What does it involve?
Children to meet the researcher in school and find out about what taking part means for them.

A separate interview with drawing and talking techniques to explore their experiences of adult relationships in school.

Inclusion criteria:

- In Key Stage 2
- Has an EHCP
- Has SEMH as their primary area of need
- Has additional adult support at times to support their needs

Think you could help? Contact [Kate Mullinger](mailto:K.Mullinger@uea.ac.uk), postgraduate researcher and trainee educational psychologist at K.Mullinger@uea.ac.uk

UEA
University of East Anglia

EDU S-REC Ethics Application Number:
ETH2324-1539

Appendix D – Parent information sheet and consent form

Kate Mullinger

*Trainee Educational Psychologist and
Post Graduate Researcher*

10th April 2024

Faculty of Social Sciences

School of Education and Lifelong
Learning

Exploring the views of children described as having SEMH needs, of their relationships with school staff in the primary mainstream setting.

PARENTAL/GUARDIAN INFORMATION STATEMENT

(1) What is this study about?

Your child is invited to take part in a research study about their views of their relationships with staff in school. Your child has been invited to participate in this study because they have social, emotional and/or mental health (SEMH) needs identified in their education, health and care plan (EHCP). Within section F of your child's EHCP, they will have provision relating to additional support from school staff at times throughout the school day to manage their emotions. This Participant Information Statement tells you about the research study. Knowing what is involved will help you decide if you want to let your child take part in the study. Please read this sheet carefully and ask questions about anything that you don't understand or want to know more about.

Participation in this research study is voluntary. By giving consent to take part in this study you are telling us that you:

- ✓ Understand what you have read.
- ✓ Agree for your child to take part in the research study as outlined below.
- ✓ Agree to the use of your child's personal information as described.
- ✓ You have received a copy of this Participant Information Statement to keep.

(2) Who is running the study?

The study is being carried out by the following researcher and Trainee Educational Psychologist: Kate Mullinger, School of Education and Lifelong Learning, University of East Anglia.

This study will take place under the supervision of Imogen Nasta Gorman, Course Director of the Doctorate in Educational Psychology and Associate Professor, I.Gorman@uea.ac.uk.

(3) What will the study involve for my child?

Your child will be invited to meet with the researcher in school prior to the research being conducted. There will be no other children with them, however, they are more than welcome to have a familiar adult with them in this introductory session. This will consist of the researcher introducing themselves and explaining the scope of the research through a child version of the participant information sheet, in addition to developing some rapport with the young people through card or turn taking games. Your child's participant information sheet will explain what the research involves and the researcher will be able to answer any questions they may have. The children will also be asked if they voluntarily consent to their participation with accompanying consent forms and informed of their rights and how they can stop the research at any time and change their mind about their participation.

Once your child has consented to take part in the study, they will be asked to meet with the researcher for no longer than one hour on a separate occasion to the initial meet and greet. The researcher will liaise with the school's SENCo/Headteacher to ensure that the child is as least impacted by the research as possible. The researcher will be led by the SENCo/Headteacher as to what time and which subjects the child may be released from to participate. The researcher will be accommodating and flexible to work around the school and ensure children's access to learning to play is not impacted greatly. Your child will be invited to meet with the researcher in school in a break out space or classroom with minimal distractions, where they will be asked to draw and talk. Children may request a familiar adult to be present if they wish, however said adult will be asked to be as non-participatory as possible. The researcher will ask a series of questions to support your child to explore and express their experiences of their relationships with staff in their school. With parental and child consent, the researcher will audio record the interviews.

There is no need for the researcher to access your child's EHCP, however the researcher will rely on your child's SENCo or Headteacher to select participants based on their eligibility to meet inclusion criteria e.g having an SEMH need and provision relating to additional adult support at times to manage their emotions.

(4) How much of my child's time will the study take?

The initial meet and greet will take no longer than 1 hour. The study itself will take place on a separate day and will take no longer than 1 hour. This accumulates to no more than 2 hours in total.

(5) Does my child have to be in the study? Can my child withdraw from the study once they have started?

Being in this study is completely voluntary and your child does not have to take part. Your decision to allow your child to participate will not affect your current or future relationship with your child's

school, the researchers or anyone else at the University of East Anglia or anyone at Cambridgeshire County Council, now or in the future.

If you decide to let your child take part in the study and then change your mind later (or they no longer wish to take part), they are free to withdraw from the study up to the point that the data has been analysed and results published. You can do this by emailing the researcher at K.Mullinger@uea.ac.uk or contacting your child's school's Headteacher.

(6) What are the consequences if my child withdraws from the study?

Your child is free to stop the interview at any time. Unless you say that you want us to keep them, any recordings or drawings will be erased and the information your child has provided will not be included in the study results. Your child may also refuse to answer any questions that they do not wish to answer during the interview. Your child will be given a card to share with the researcher should they wish to stop or leave the session which they can share with them at any time, removing the necessity to verbally articulate that they wish to stop. If you decide at a later time to withdraw your child from the study, yours and your child's information will be removed from our records and will not be included in any results, up to the point we have analysed and published the results.

(7) Are there any risks or costs associated with my child being in the study?

Other than the time your child will give up to take part in the research there are potential additional costs or risks that may be associated with taking part in the study. Children may not be aware of their identified SEMH need, or classification within their EHCP. In order to mitigate against this risk and support children to understand why they have been selected to take part in the study, their participant information sheet will not include the SEMH classification, but be explained in the language outlined below:



Why have I been selected to take part?

I would like to speak to children who have extra support from adults throughout the day to manage their emotions.

In addition, your child may become dysregulated during the study. The researcher has had extensive experience supporting children with SEMH needs in their previous role and will work collaboratively with staff in school who know your child well to ensure they have a positive experience throughout the study and are supported once the study has ceased.

(8) Are there any benefits associated with my child being in the study?

There will not be any reward for the child in taking part in the study, however, the researcher would like to give the child a certificate for taking part in the researcher. Additionally, the researcher hopes that by taking part, children will feel valued within school and they will make a meaningful contribution to psychology and education research. It is hoped that by expressing their views on their relationships with school staff, the findings will support to put child voice at the centre of the support which they will receive. Furthermore, there is an option for your child to disseminate the findings to their school leaders once the data has been analysed and the thesis submitted.

(9) What will happen to information provided by my child and data collected during the study?

Your child's personal data and information will only be used as outlined in this Participant Information Statement, unless you consent otherwise. Data management will follow the Data Protection Act 2018 (DPA 2018) and UK General Data Protection Regulation (UK GDPR), and the University of East Anglia's [Research Data Management Policy](#).

Your child's information will be stored securely and their identity will be kept strictly confidential, except as required by law. Study findings may be published and may also be used for other scholarly and educational purposes such as in teaching, but your child will not be identified if you and your child decide to participate in this study. The data will be kept for at least 10 years beyond the last date the data were used. The study findings may be deposited in a repository to allow it to facilitate its reuse. The deposited data will not include your child's name or any identifiable information about your child.

(10) What if we would like further information about the study?

When you have read this information, the researcher, Kate Mullinger, K.Mullinger@uea.ac.uk will be available to discuss it with you further and answer any questions you may have about the study.

(11) Will my child/I be told the results of the study?

You and your child have a right to receive feedback about the overall results of this study. I will write a child friendly summary of the results of the study which your child will be invited to share with their school SENCo/Headteacher to disseminate findings within their school. If you would like more information about the findings of the study please indicate on the consent form that you would like a short summary of the results of the study. This will not include your individual child's responses.

(12) What if I have a complaint or any concerns about the study?

If there is a problem please let me know. You can contact me via the University at the following address:

Kate Mullinger

School of Education and Lifelong Learning

University of East Anglia

NORWICH NR4 7TJ

K.Mullinger@uea.ac.uk

If you or your child are concerned about the way this study is being conducted please contact my research supervisor in the first instance, Imogen Nasta Gorman, on i.gorman@uea.ac.uk

If you would like to make a complaint to someone independent from the study, please contact the Head of the School of Education and Lifelong Learning, Professor Yann Lebeau, Y.Lebeau@uea.ac.uk

(13) How do we know that this study has been approved to take place?

To protect your safety, rights, wellbeing and dignity, all research in the University of East Anglia is reviewed by a Research Ethics Body. This research was approved by the University of East Anglia's Research Ethics Committee, School of Education and Lifelong Learning Research Ethics Subcommittee.

(14) What is the general data protection information my child needs to be informed about?

According to data protection legislation, we are required to inform you that the legal basis for processing your data as listed in Article 6(1) of the UK GDPR is because this allows us to process personal data when it is necessary to perform our public tasks as a University.

In addition to the specific information provided above about why your child's personal data is required and how it will be used, there is also some general information which needs to be provided for you:

- The data controller is the University of East Anglia.
- For further information, you can contact the University's Data Protection Officer at dataprotection@uea.ac.uk
- You can also find out more about your child's data protection rights at the [Information Commissioner's Office \(ICO\)](#).
- If you are unhappy with how your child's personal data has been used, please contact the University's Data Protection Officer at dataprotection@uea.ac.uk in the first instance.

(15) OK, I am happy for my child to take part – what do I do next?

You need to fill in one copy of the consent form and return to your child's school. Please keep the letter, information sheet and the second copy of the consent form for your information.

(16) Further information

This information was last updated on 12th April 2024.

If there are changes to the information provided, you will be notified by your child's school.

This information sheet is for you to keep

PARENTAL/GUARDIAN CONSENT FORM (First Copy to Researcher)

I,[PRINT PARENT'S/GUARDIAN'S NAME], consent to my child
 [PRINT CHILD'S NAME] participating in this research study.

In giving my consent I state that:

- I understand the purpose of the study, what my child will be asked to do, and any risks/benefits involved.
- I have read the Parental/Guardian Information Sheet and have been able to discuss my child's involvement in the study with the researchers if I wished to do so.
- The researchers have answered any questions that I had about the study and I am happy with the answers.
- I understand that being in this study is completely voluntary and my child does not have to take part. My decision whether to let them take part in the study will not affect our relationship with the researchers or anyone else at the University of East Anglia or Cambridgeshire County Council or my child's school now or in the future.
- I understand that my child can withdraw from the study at any time.
- I understand that my child may stop the interview at any time if they do not wish to continue, and that unless I indicate otherwise any recordings will then be erased and the information provided will not be included in the study results. I also understand that my child may refuse to answer any questions they don't wish to answer.
- I understand that my child may stop the research activity at any time if they do not wish to continue, and that unless I indicate otherwise any materials (e.g. images, recordings, text) will then be erased and the information provided will not be included in the study results. I also understand that my child may refuse to take part in any of the activities that they wish.
- I understand that the results of this study will be used in the way described in the information sheet.

- I understand that personal information about my child that is collected over the course of this project will be stored securely and will only be used for purposes that I have agreed to. I understand that information about my child will only be told to others with my permission, except as required by law.

I consent to:

<i>My child's initial meet and greet with the researcher</i>	YES <input type="checkbox"/>	NO <input type="checkbox"/>
<i>My child's participation in an interview</i>	YES <input type="checkbox"/>	NO <input type="checkbox"/>
<i>Audio-recording of my child</i>	YES <input type="checkbox"/>	NO <input type="checkbox"/>
<i>My child's drawing data being collected</i>	YES <input type="checkbox"/>	NO <input type="checkbox"/>
<i>My child disseminating findings to their school</i>	YES <input type="checkbox"/>	NO <input type="checkbox"/>

.....

Signature

.....

PRINT name

.....

Date

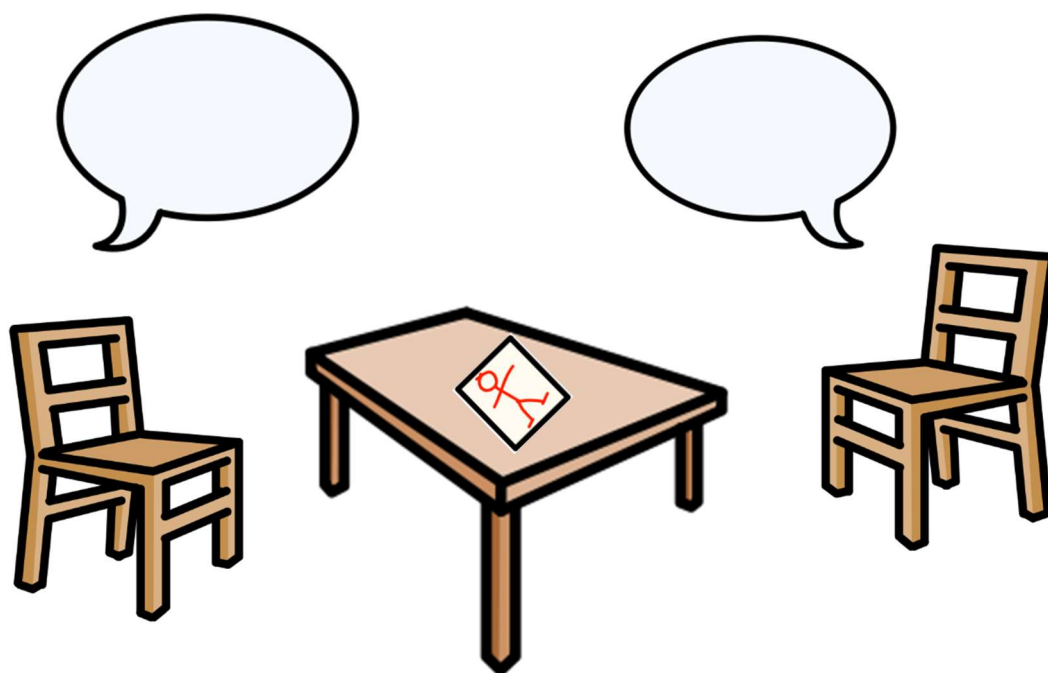
Appendix E – Children’s/participant’s information sheet and consent form



University of East Anglia
Norwich Research Park
Norwich, NR4 7TJ

Email: k.mullinger@uea.ac.uk

Research Participant Information Booklet for Children





Who is the researcher?

Hi, my name is Kate and I am a researcher at the University of East Anglia.



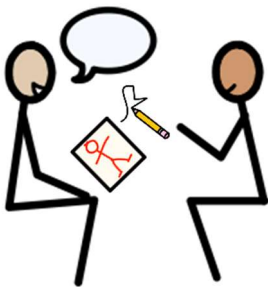
What is the research about?

The researcher wants to gather a group of children's views about their relationships with adults in school.



Why have I been selected to take part?

I would like to speak to children who have extra support from adults throughout the day to manage their emotions.



What will I have to do?

I would like to meet with you first to introduce myself and play some games like Uno or Dobble together so we can get to know each other.

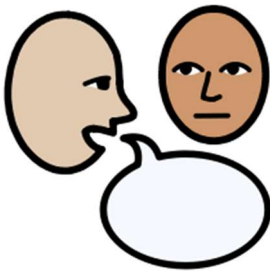
If it's okay with you, on another day I would like to talk to you and ask you questions about adults in school while you draw (don't worry you don't have to be an artist - stick people are okay).

When I ask you questions, you can choose which ones you want to answer. If you don't want to talk about something, that's ok. You can stop talking to me at any time if you don't want to talk to me anymore and leave the room we are in.

I will give you a card that you can give to me to let me know that you want to stop or leave the room. I will also check in with you to

make sure you are okay, and if you are looking unhappy/cross/worried, I will make sure we stop.

If you say it's okay, I will record what you say with an audio recorder.



Will anyone else be told what I say?

Everything you say will stay between us UNLESS you tell me something that means you or someone else is at risk of harm. Then I will need to let an adult in your school know.

I will write about what I learnt from you and other children in a big essay and anyone who reads it won't know who you are. I won't use your name, the name of adults in your school or the name of your school in my work.

All the information I have about you will be stored in a safe place and I will look after it very carefully.



How long will it take?

The research will take no longer than 1 hour.



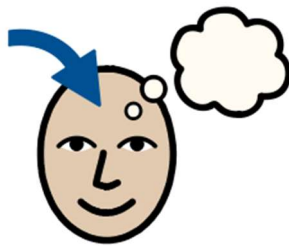
Are there any good things for me about being in the study?

You will get a certificate for taking part. You will be helping me to gather children's views and you can share the findings with your school afterwards.



Are there any bad things for me about being in the study?

This study will take up a little bit of your time, but I don't expect it to be bad for you or cost you anything.



Will you tell me what you learnt at the end of the study?

Yes, if you want me to, you could help me to share what I learnt with adults in your school. If you choose 'yes' in part of the consent form, I will get in touch after the study.



What if I am not happy about being in the study or not happy with the researcher?

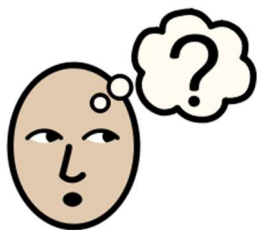
If you are not happy with how I am doing the study or how I treat you, then you, your family or adults in your school can:

- Tell me during the study
- Email me k.mullinger@uea.ac.uk
- Contact my supervisor i.gorman@uea.ac.uk
- Email my head of school y.lebeau@uea.ac.uk



How do I know the research is safe to take part in?

All research I undertake is checked and approved by an Ethics Committee at the University of East Anglia before I can start it.



What if I want to know more about the information collected?

Your information is stored by me within the University of East Anglia. They help me protect your information and look after it. If you, your family or an adult in school wants to know more about the information collected about you, you can email me (k.mullinger@uea.ac.uk) or the University's Data Protection Officer (dataprotection@uea.ac.uk).



Further information

This sheet was updated on 25.07.2024. I will update you if I make any changes to this sheet.

This information booklet is for you to keep

Participant Consent Form (*First Copy to Researcher*)

If you are happy to be in the study, please:

- **write** your **name** in the space below.
- **sign** your **name** at the bottom of the next page.
- put the **date** at the bottom of the next page.

You should only say 'yes' to being in the study if you know what it is about and you want to be in it. If you don't want to be in the study, don't sign the form.

I, [PRINT NAME], am happy to be in this research study.

In saying yes to being in the study, I am saying that:

- ✓ I know what the study is about.
- ✓ I know what I will be asked to do.
- ✓ Someone has talked to me about the study.
- ✓ My questions have been answered.
- ✓ I know that I don't have to be in the study if I don't want to.
- ✓ I know that I can pull out of the study at any time if I don't want to do it anymore and it will be possible to remove any information I have already provided.
- ✓ I know that I don't have to answer any questions that I don't want to answer.
- ✓ I know that the researchers won't tell anyone what I say when I talk to them unless I talk about being hurt by someone or hurting myself or someone else.

Now I am going to ask you circle 'Yes' or 'No' to tell me what you are happy to do or not do in the study.

Are you happy to **meet with the researcher and play some games** in the first session?

Yes No

Are you happy to **speak just to me on another occasion in school?**

Yes No

Are you happy for me to ask you **questions about adults in your school?**

Yes No

Are you happy to take part in a **drawing activity** while you are with me?

Yes No

Are you happy for me to **audio record** your voice?

Yes No

Do you want me to tell you what I **learned** in the study?

Yes No

Do you want to **share what I learnt in the study with adults in your school?**

Yes No

.....

Signature

.....

Date

Appendix F – RMI Interview Schedule

Proposed Interview Schedule	
Housekeeping	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The interviewer will remind the children of the expectations of the activity and right to withdraw their consent, ensuring they are okay to proceed • The interviewer will provide the children with a laminated card to present to the interviewer when they want to stop or require a break
Mapping the self	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The interviewer will ask the children to draw a picture or use words or symbols to represent themselves in school in the middle of the paper
Mapping relationships with adults in school	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The interviewer will ask the children to draw the most important adult to them in school • Enquiring skills will be used to ask the children asking open questions about this individual • The interviewer will ask the children to add further important adults in school to the map and verbal prompts will encourage depth of qualitative responses and rich description <p>Examples of questions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - “What is this person like?” - “What would school be like without this person?” <p>Prompts:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - “Can you tell me a bit more about that?” - “What do you mean by _?”
Stepping back	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The interviewer will support the children to reflect on the visual representation of their staff relationships <p>Examples of questions and prompts :</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - “Looking at your map, what do you notice?” - “What is different about your relationship with this person vs this person?”
Considering change	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The interviewer will support the children to consider if there is any way they would like their map to be different – using verbal prompts to elicit the natures of said desired changes <p>Example questions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - “What would you change about your map if you could?” - “Would you like your map to look different?” <p>Prompts</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - “How might that happen?” - “What would they be doing differently?”
Debrief	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Thank you for participating • Signposting to parents and Headteacher with questions • Give out certificate • Explain how results will be shared
<p>Each interview will last no longer than one hour, the interviews will be audio recorded and transcribed for verbal data and collated with visual data to be analysed.</p>	

Appendix G – Exploratory Noting & Experiential Statements

Burger

B: He's just funny and he's really good at art.

I: Funny and good at art.

B: Yeah.

I: And are they things that are important to you, like someone being like funny and cos you like art?

B: Yeah.

I: I get that.

...drawing...

B: He has glasses as well.

I: He has glasses as well. What makes him funny, how would I know he's funny?

B: Just the way like he acts.

I: Is he like that with everyone or just with you?

B: With everyone

I: He sounds great

B: Yeah, I've done his hair perfectly actually

I: Is that exactly how he looks?

B: Yeah.

I: So how long have you known him?

B: He's been teaching me since year 1 and I'm in year 5 how.

I: wow, oh my goodness. So is he a teacher or a TA?

B: He is teacher.

I: Yep, but you've known him for a while?

B: Yeah.

I: I like that he's funny with everyone

B: And my favourite TA is called Miss Dogart.

I: Well we can definitely put her on the map if that's okay, take you're time.

Thanos

The screenshot displays a vertical thread of four posts from a user named Kate Mullinger (EDU - Postgraduate Researcher). Each post includes a profile picture, name, title, and a text-based experiential statement. The posts are as follows:

- Post 1:** "Funny and good at art. Shared interest being important." Below the text is a text input field with the placeholder "@mention or reply".
- Post 2:** "Something about the way he is, the way he act and behaviours." Below the text is a text input field with the placeholder "@mention or reply".
- Post 3:** "Being funny is important and likable which relates to how his teacher acts with everyone, a personality trait he has." Below the text is a text input field with the placeholder "@mention or reply".
- Post 4:** "Long standing relationship, known for years." Below the text is a text input field with the placeholder "@mention or reply".

Each post also features a blue circular profile picture with the initials 'KM', a three-dot menu icon, an edit icon, and a share icon.

I: yeah so she asked you what would be helpful and it kinda sounds like she spent time with you as well is that true?

T: yeah

I: what else is Miss XXX like if you were going to describe her to a new kid that was starting school

T: Err shes very kind shes a really good like, shes really kind, shell help you if you need help, She's a reception or a year 1 teacher. I thinks shes gone off because shes has a baby for a bit, but yeah, havnt seen her in a while.

I: Ah okay, so was she your teacher when you were in reception or year 1?

T: Yeah shes been my teacher since like year 1, 2, reception, all that.

I: Ah so you've had her for a few years?

T: yeah

I: but shes gone off on maternity leave

T: Oh and then Mr XXX is also quite important

I: Mr XXX?

T: Mr XXX

T: Hes a year five teacher now but I've had him for three years, year three, year four and year 5 and now I'm in year 6 with miss XXX.

I: Okay, shall we put those people on the map? So where about would the first teacher you mentioned go

T: Miss XXX?

I: yeah you can draw or mark or do anything

T: do you want me to do a little...and then draw it later

I: so that's Miss XX

T: Yeah

(drawing)

I: I like that you've kept them anonymous on the map

I: okay so second teacher and fave, she was really helpful with your mental and health and was helpful. What else is she like, you've said shes kind..



Kate Mullinger (EDU - Postgraduate Researcher)
Very/really kind, more than just kind.

⋮ ✎ 👤

@mention or reply

Kate Mullinger (EDU - Postgraduate Researcher)
Noticing or knowing when you need help.
24 July 2025, 13:51

⋮ ✎ 👤

@mention or reply

Kate Mullinger (EDU - Postgraduate Researcher)
Staff help is positively received by staff asking and checking in with Thanos whilst simultaneously tuning in and knowing when Thanos needs help, being highly attuned.
24 July 2025, 15:03

⋮ ✎ 👤

@mention or reply

Kate Mullinger (EDU - Postgraduate Researcher)
Length of relationship, through the years.

⋮ ✎ 👤

@mention or reply

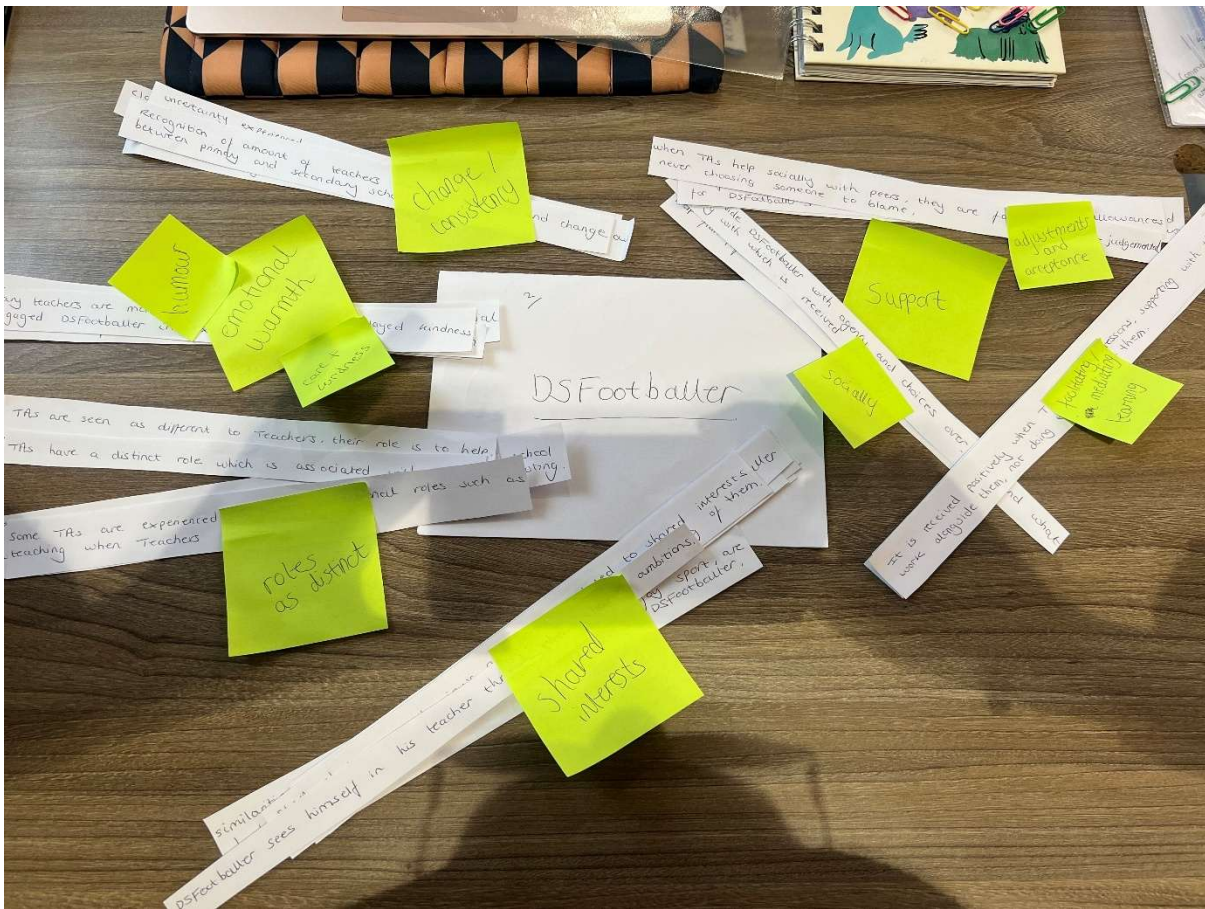
Appendix H – Visually searching for connections across experiential statements

Spreading of experiential statements for DSFootballer



Clustering of experiential statements for DSFootballer

Second iteration at developing PETs for DSFootballer



Appendix I – Table of PETs

WW2 Soldier's PETs
<p>A. Trust as fundamental</p> <p>Trust is binary, it is either present or absent in regards to staff relationships. <i>"Yeah, these two are the ones I trust, I don't trust ..."</i> p.5</p> <p>Distrust involves a feeling of uncomfortableness which is created from the adult's actions. <i>"It's sometimes like, the face, it's sometimes like, I don't trust them that much, it's like sometimes how they, the way they, and sometimes makes me uncomfortable."</i> p.7</p> <p>Trust is a key feature in developing relationships with key adults who are liked, and the opposite is true for disliked and untrusted adults. <i>"They're the only one that I trust"</i> p.1 <i>"There is a year 5 teacher I don't trust"</i> p.1</p> <p>Trust for adults involves having a high opinion of them, including a factor of likability. <i>"Trust means to me like I trust someone like I rate them five stars"</i> p.6</p>
<p>B. Importance of communication, tone and language</p> <p>There is a tone that is important in which staff speak to be perceived as kind. <i>"they show that like this (impression "today kids we are learning like something like Science or English so we're learning about Oliver and Seawigs")"</i> p.7</p> <p>Body language and physicality play a role in WW2 Soldier feeling comfortable in the presence of adults and their behaviour. <i>"(does impression of arms folded) I don't like them standing like this...cos it makes me uncomfortable"</i> p.6</p> <p>Sometimes the teacher is angry when telling WW2 Soldier off. <i>"Err, a bit talky, just like a bit angry sometimes about when I pull out my little (toy)"</i> p.2</p> <p>Teacher talks a lot in the classroom. <i>"Just like just talks and talks"</i> p.2 <i>"Right so today we're going to learn about blablablabla"</i> p.3</p> <p>Teacher talking a lot in the classroom which can be both a help and a hindrance in terms of learning, especially when space isn't held to ask questions. <i>"And I mean like a lot...yeah sometimes but it stops me from asking questions"</i> p.8</p>
<p>C. A need to be understood, valued and respected</p> <p><u>Perceived judgement vs. a need for empathy</u></p> <p>Rudeness in teacher is experienced as the way in which they speak to WW2 Soldier, making negative assumptions about his behaviour. <i>"He's just like...if I'm sitting down he thinks I've been naughty so he's like "Erm X you can come in my class actually" I haven't done anything bad I'm just learning"</i> p.5</p> <p>Feeling targeted by teacher's behaviour. <i>"Just like to me...it's the way he talks to me sometimes"</i> p.6</p>

Teachers can challenge pupil behaviour and remain nice and kind without being rude.

“mm yeah, just sometimes, just sometimes, not like in a rude way” p.3

If WW2 Soldier were to change his experience of adults in school, he would want them to make school more fun and for adults to be kind.

“Yeah, be a bit more kinder just like being kind” p.8

Responsive, attuned support

Trusted adults understand his needs and offer strategies of support proactively.

“And then they say “do you want to go to the quiet area and get a fidget?” And then I’m like (action moving to leave quickly)” p.7

Adults tuning into needs of WW2 Soldier, noticing his needs and re-directing support to re-direct and regulate.

“ Well if I’m feeling uncomfortable I show them a sign like this (head on table)” p.7

Trusted adults make him feel comfortable, supporting emotional regulation and directing him to somewhere he feels calmer.

“There is a corner where I just sit, like a tiny corner, bean bags and toys and stuff” p.7

Help is received well with reasonable adjustments and breaks in learning to support with his needs.

“Having little breaks in between learning, I like that a lot” p.7

Appendix J – Table of GETs

Table of Group Experiential Themes (GETs)
<p>A. EMOTIONAL SAFETY THROUGH TRUSTING, ATTUNED AND COMPASSIONATE RELATIONSHIPS</p> <p>A need to be heard, understood and accepted Rudeness in teacher is experienced as the way in which they speak to WW2 Soldier, making negative assumptions about his behaviour. <i>“He’s just like...If I’m sitting down he thinks I’ve been naughty so he’s like ‘Erm X you can come in my class actually’, I haven’t done anything bad I’m just learning” (WW2 Soldier, p.5)</i></p> <p>Teachers who are important are responsible for implementing rewards and sanctions and make allowances or reasonable adjustments for behaviours. <i>“Because if you were in her lessons, like she’ll... say if I’ve done something silly, she won’t actually put me in the red, no yellow sometimes she does just pick my name up and put me there, but she don’t as soon as I stop, she’ll put it up again” (DSFootballer, p.4)</i></p> <p>Feeling targeted by teacher’s behaviour. <i>“Just like to me...it’s the way he talks to me sometimes” (WW2 Soldier, p.6)</i></p> <p>Emotional regulation supported by preferred staff who display kindness, empathy and have genuine interest in Burger. <i>“Because I ran off because I was getting upset so he came and talked to me...Well he was calm” (Burger, p.13)</i></p> <p>Help from preferred TA is experienced as them making allowances for DSFootballer’s behaviour. <i>“Sometimes she lets me off stuff” (DSFootballer, p.5)</i></p> <p>Helping quality in TA related to being available to Dumpling and receptive, listening and providing support and guidance to work through challenging situations. <i>“Like when I say I’m in a sticky situation, like upset because my dad upsets me sometimes like being mean to me.....I speak to her about it and then she says yeah and she just helps me”. (Dumpling, p.1)</i></p> <p>When TAs help socially with peers, they are fair and non-judgemental, never choosing someone to blame. <i>“they never choose someone to blame” (DSFootballer, p.8)</i></p> <p>The role of kindness and care Dumpling notices how TAs demonstrates kindness and care for other children, supporting to manage conflict without judgement. <i>“if someone is upset she goes over and says like ask what happens and tells the person who upset them” (Dumpling, p.2)</i></p> <p>TA offers physical care and attention to Thanos. <i>“she like erm gives or tells me and asks if I need any water” (Thanos, p.6)</i></p> <p>Tas demonstrates care towards DSFootballer, helping him with first-aid when he is hurt. <i>“Miss XXX she used to help me with a lot of first aid like all Tas have to do” (DSFootballer, p.8)</i></p>

Kindness and emotional warmth that is displayed by key staff cannot be easily explained, there is a tangibility or felt sense that Thanos experiences.

"I like how kind she is to me...she'd like its hard to explain...really hard to explain" (Thanos, p. 4)

Kindness is a feature of support received.

"She's nice, she helps me with a lot of stuff" (DSFootballer, p.6)

If WW2 Soldier were to change his experience of adults in school, he would want them to make school more fun and for adults to be kind.

"Yeah, be a bit more kinder just like being kind" (WW2 Soldier, p.8)

Kindness and helpfulness demonstrated by reliability of teacher carrying out their role despite perception of heightened emotion or a feeling of finding their job challenging at times.

"she's kind, helpful" (The Uno Guy, p.3)

Observation of how TA supports other children displaying care, impacts positively on Thanos' perspective of them.

"yeah she notices when something's wrong, yeah she also does this to other kids as well and she's actually really sweet" (Thanos, p.6)

Kindness is a trait possessed by adults who are likable

"Well they are kind" (Burger, p.6)

Teachers who Thanos has the closest relationship with demonstrate care and kindness towards her and direct support and help to Thanos.

"they like help and they care" (Thanos, p.3)

Being kind is related to and experienced as emotional warmth received from adults in school.

"She's nice" (Santa, p.2)

Humour, fun and playfulness

Adults facilitating enjoyable experiences for children.

"No its important if people, if people enjoy it" (Santa, p.5)

The use of humour and physicality through dancing is positively received, funny and important to Dumpling.

"Funny...Her jokes, when she dances around the room sometimes" (Dumpling, p.2)

Teachers being funny is characterised by playfulness, gesture and facial expressions, use of humour and jokes.

"He's just funny in general. When I'm standing up and he tells me to sit down, he's always like 'sit' (gesturing with hands)... good boy' (smiling)." (DSFootballer, p.4)

Being funny is important and likable which relates to how his teacher acts with everyone, a personality trait he has

"He's just funny..." (Burger, p.2)

"Just the way he acts" (Burger, p.3)

The power and importance of humour, teacher's funny personality is key to how they are positively received.

"He's very funny, he's a very funny teacher" (DSFootballer, p.3)

Adults perceived as fun where they are creative and engage in enjoyable activities together.

"Sometimes like when they do something fun like making stuff" (Santa, p.4)

Animation of teacher bringing the texts to life and engaging Dumpling with learning involves use of humour and light-heartedness.

"Once we were doing Kensuke's Kingdom it's a book, um they came in and she in a part of the book it goes 'demida demida' and she goes 'DEMIDA DEMIDA'" (Dumpling, p.3)

Sensitivity to adult's emotions and communication

Distrust involves a feeling of uncomfortableness which is created from the adult's actions.

"It's sometimes like, the face, it's sometimes like, I don't trust them that much, it's like sometimes how they, the way they, and sometimes makes me uncomfortable." (WW2 Soldier, p.7)

Vulnerability experienced when staff are strict and shout, which elicits a strong emotion of fear where he is shutdown and unable to listen or process what is being said.

"they are kind of strict...like when they are shouting...a bit frightening because I'm just ten" (The Uno Guy, p.5)

Sometimes the teacher is angry when telling WW2 Soldier off.

"Err, a bit talky, just like a bit angry sometimes about when I pull out my little (toy)" (WW2 Soldier, p.2)

The kindness displayed by the staff member is communicated by using their tone of voice, a warmth and calmness that does not indicate they are emotionally heightened.

"she talked to us calmy, like she wasn't mad or anything" (Thanos, p.5)

Body language and physicality play a role in WW2 Soldier feeling comfortable in the presence of adults and their behaviour.

"(does impression of arms folded) I don't like them standing like this...cos it makes me uncomfortable" (WW2 Soldier, p.6)

Facial expressions are important and smiling supports Santa to feel that adults are happy which forms part of a sense of safety

"Smiling" (Santa, p.5)

Dumpling cannot like a member of staff as a person if they have broken down the relationship through shouting.

"like Mrs XXX, I don't like her, not a single bit, I don't like her...shouty" (Dumpling, p.5)

Santa picking up on emotions of adults in school

"And that is happy" (Santa, p.3)

Shouting is perceived as emotionally distressing and excessively loud, interpreted as threatening.

"it's annoying, it upsets me, it's really loud, louder than me sometimes and I'm really loud"
(**Dumpling**, p.1)

B. ADAPTIVE, PERSON-CENTRED SUPPORT

Responsive and flexible support

Positively received support from key adults is flexible, not all the time and does not limit school experiences.

"I think I'd like it to be all the time (support)...actually no, not learning and play and at lunchtimes" (**Burger**, p.14)

Help is received well with reasonable adjustments and breaks in learning to support with his needs.

"Having little breaks in between learning, I like that a lot" (**WW2 Soldier**, p.7)

Lack of autonomy around which adults support him and power to choose preferred adults to work with.

"No it's not up to me, but there's one adult I don't like" (**Burger**, p.13)

"Well, I'm like mm I don't really wanna be with them but I'm gonna have to" (**Burger**, p.6)

Staff help is positively received by staff asking and checking in with Thanos whilst simultaneously tuning in and knowing when Thanos needs help.

"She'll help you if you need help" (**Thanos**, p.2)

TAs provide DSFootballer with agency and choices over who and what to play with which is received positively.

"err I weren't allowed to run cos my head, they let me stay in and I was allowed to choose someone to do something inside .. like lego or something" (**DSFootballer**, p.8)

Adults tuning into needs of WW2 Soldier, noticing his needs and re-directing support to re-direct and regulate.

" Well if I'm feeling uncomfortable I show them a sign like this (head on table). And then they say "do you want to go to the quiet area and get a fidget?" And then I'm like (action moving to leave quickly)" (**WW2 Soldier**, p.7)

Mediated learning: With me not for me

Adults making adjustments to help Santa with writing and to access learning

"Not write for me, when you copy" (**Santa**, p.4)

Impactful and appreciated TA support in learning looks like them noticing when Thanos needs help and offering support and strategies to mediate her learning so she is able to complete the work herself with scaffolding

"she doesn't tell me the answer but she helps me work it out...so if I was stuck...she'd give me a way to work this out" (**Thanos**, p.6)

It is received positively when TAs help in lessons, supporting with the work alongside them, not doing work for them.

"helping me in the lesson...great" (**DSFootballer**, p.12)

TA supporting with learning and correcting misunderstandings or mistakes.

“she teaches me, she teaches my mistakes I’ve made” (The Uno Guy, p.3)

Adults in school should facilitate learning which is a relational process.

“Adults in school should be, they should be helping you learn” (Santa, p.4)

Teachers providing support to mediate learning and notice and fill gaps or area when children are struggling with work.

“I’m writing it and she’s telling me, like and if I don’t know what the word, like sound is” (Santa, p.6)

TA supporting with learning and correcting misunderstandings or mistakes.

“she teaches me, she teaches my mistakes I’ve made” (The Uno Guy, p.3)

Facilitating peer relationships

Key adults supports to manage conflict and facilitate positive peer interactions by trying to understand children’s perspectives and actively listening.

“she like asked how we could all be friends and sorted it out” (Thanos, p.5)

Adults who are preferred help to manage conflict and facilitate friendships and social interactions.

“Well they would tell the other person to not be rude or stop being unkind or leave him alone” (Burger, p.9)

Help from preferred TA is experienced on the playground

“Er, normally out on the playground” (DSFootballer, p.5)

C. FINDING COMMON GROUND

Knowing me, knowing you

Staff sharing personal views and opinions related to shared interests with DSFootballer supports relationship and understanding of them.

“Mr xxx loves football, he supports Liverpool...he likes Ronaldo better than Messi” (DSFootballer, p.14)

Important to get to know TA

This is a teacher called Miss XXX and she is my favourite TA and if you get to know her, she might be your favourite TA. (DSFootballer, p.5)

Key consistent adults are authentic and genuine, being themselves.

“they are perfect, they are themselves, they are really kind” (Thanos, p.7)

Adults are emotionally available and warm, simultaneously checking on her whilst noticing and staying attuned to Thanos.

“He’d help as well, and like he’d like ask how I was doing” (Thanos, p.3)

Considering his teacher’s likes and interests connects DSFootballer with Mr X through a shared interest of football.

“Cos Mr XXX’s favourite football team is Man City and that’s blue so ...I put him as blue” (DSFootballer, p.7)

Preferred staff are liked by Dumpling as a person, where he feels he knows them well.
"I like her... I just like Mrs XXX.. I know them a lot" (Dumpling, p.4)

Adults helping to make learning fun by using children's likes and interests, adults knowing children well.

"No no no like I mean if they do something yeah and actually make it so we know, and it helps us know what other people like" (Santa, p.5)

The Uno Guy taking an interest in his teacher's life and their likes. Teacher sharing aspects of themselves to support relationship development and getting to know one another.

"she likes bees...she tells me a lot...she has a family" (The Uno Guy, p.2)

DSFootballer shows an appreciation of his teacher's likes and interests.

"and I think Miss XXX's favourite colour is pink or purple" (DSFootballer, p.7)

Building connection through shared interests and activities

Appreciating preferred adult's skills and their shared interest of Maths.

"she knows Maths, which is my favourite subject" (The Uno Guy, p.1)

United by shared likes and interests.

"Yeah oh and we loved the Simpsons" (Burger, p.5)

Adults demonstrate authentic skill in shared interest and skill area of Burger

"He's funny and he's really good at art" (Burger, p.2)

"She's good at art" (Burger, p.3)

Enjoys spending extra time in afterschool clubs related to shared interests and DSFootballer's strengths led by a preferred teacher.

"I've got a club with him this evening ...Tag-rugby...that's what I like, running and sport" (DSFootballer, p.15)

DSFootballer sees himself in his teacher through their shared ambitions.

"..he talked about when he wanted to be a footballer" (DSFootballer, p.7)

Adults helping is experienced by collaborating with Santa, taking part in shared activities.

"Someone making a castle".."Helpful" (Santa, p.3)

D. SEEKING STABILITY: THE NEED FOR CONSISTENT RELATIONSHIPS THAT ENDURE

Time is key in the security of relationships

Key teacher for two school years, time being a factor in positive relationship.

"yeah she was my class teacher in year 4 and year 6" (The Uno Guy, p.2)

Adults who have known Thanos for a long time have a better understanding of her and provide consistency for her in school.

"yeah I've known her for a long time, she's known me since I was like really young" (Thanos, p.4)

Having a continuous relationship with a TA over a span of time and over the school years.

“Erm, she’s worked with me pretty much every year” (DSFootballer, p.4)

Consistency and length of time known plays a role in the experience of staff relationships for Thanos.

“He’s a year 5 teacher now but I’ve had him for three years, year three, year four and year five” (Thanos, p.2)

Favourite teachers remain important despite distance, the relationship endures.

“This is one of my favourites...he was my teacher...he works in year 4” (Burger, p.1)

Class teachers from throughout the years play a key part in her school experience and are significant adults in her life.

“Yeah my first teacher ...and yeah she’s also really important to me” (Thanos, p.1)

His preferred and most important adult is a TA that worked with him for three consistent years.

“she’s a teaching assistant...she was in year 3, she was in year 4 and year 5 with me” (The Uno Guy, p.1)

Hierarchy of adults who have been well established and known for prolonged periods of time.

“Well, even longer than Mr XXX...yeah like when I was in reception” (Burger, p.4)

Loss and change

Separation is experienced when not seeing key TA a lot anymore, where they were once closely connected.

“not really a lot, not a lot...being separated” (The Uno Guy, p.2)

Change and transition between a variety of supporting adults is experienced as difficult, where Burger would prefer one key member of staff to work with him.

“Well if we could just stick to one adult that would be good” (Burger, p.13)

Consistency of TA support and timetabling helps Dumpling know what to expect.

“all mornings every morning if she’s okay...all mornings” (Dumpling, p.4)

Recognition of amount of teachers that will increase and change between primary and secondary school

“way more...because there’s more children, more classrooms”. (DSFootballer, p.13)

Desire for key adults from primary to move with him through to secondary school.

“come to XXX with me” (Dumpling, p.5)

Experience of loss or separation when key adult is not in school.

“she’s gone off because she’s had a baby for a bit, but yeah, haven’t seen her in a while” (Thanos, p.2)

Distance and separation communicated surrounding key staff members, working across school or absent from school.

“Mrs XXX isn’t here, she’s still on maternity leave, and miss XXX is down in ¾ because she works round the school and works with me on a morning and all day on a Wednesday” (Dumpling, p.3)

Appendix K – Risks and Mitigations

Risk assessment for potential harm caused			
Risk number	Potential harm caused	How to prevent risk of harm	Procedure for when harm arises
1.	<p>Pupil's may experience difficulties with their own identity, not knowing the SEMH classification or being aware of their differences from their peers without SEN.</p> <p>Pupils may become upset or resist the label used as inclusion criteria should it be shared with them or come up during the research procedure.</p>	<p>The researcher will produce two PISs and CFs. One aimed at parents/carers and school settings, the other aimed at primary aged pupils.</p> <p>The SEMH classification will be included on the parental and school setting version to support informed consent. Research suggests that many CYP do not understand the SEMH classification and that it is not a relevant label to use with the CYP themselves.</p> <p>The researcher will develop a social story for the recruitment process for the CYP themselves. The term SEMH will not be used, but the concept will be explored in terms of requiring additional support at times from staff in school, managing their emotions, interacting socially and managing in the school environment. This social story will be shared with parents prior to their agreement for their children to participate.</p> <p>Should questions arise from the pupils about the why they have been chosen or asked to participate, the researcher will refer to this social story again.</p>	<p>Should a child become upset regarding their identity, or become aware of the SEMH classification that they were not previously, the researcher will inform the key adult or gatekeeper (i.e SENCo) who has supported the researcher to arrange the interviews.</p> <p>The researcher will support the young person to access support from a key, familiar adult within school and return the young person safely to their classroom or pre-agreed safe place in school.</p>
2.	<p>Pupils may experience difficult emotions whilst recalling the relationships they have with staff in their school setting, becoming upset during the interview.</p>	<p>The researcher will ensure that all children are aware that they can leave the session or interview at any time and return to their class base or pre-agreed safe space. The researcher will provide children with a symbol/card to present to the researcher should they wish to leave, removing the expectation or challenge of articulating how they may be feeling.</p>	<p>Should a child become upset whilst answering or partaking in the interview, the researcher will immediately respond with empathy and care, offering the child the opportunity to pause, or cease the activity.</p>

		<p>Asking open questions which are solution focussed or positively phrased within the interview schedule. The questions will avoid probing and overtly closed questions which are directed at difficult relationships or experiences for young people to recall. The interview schedule and direction will be led by the participants and allow the young people to speak about the aspects of their staff relationships that they wish to.</p> <p>Within the population of SEMH students, there is an additional rationale for not asking children about all relationships in their life (familial), considering that some of their relationships, particularly in the context of relational trauma, may be difficult (Hibbin & Warrin, 2022) and is therefore avoided in order to reduce harm. The same reasoning can be applied to peers considering the social difficulties many of the children may experience. The interview will only seek to understand participants' relationships with school staff.</p>	<p>Where a potential risk may arise of a disclosure from a CYP, the researcher will follow the school's safeguarding and whistleblowing policy and report this immediately to the designated safeguarding lead – likely the Headteacher.</p>
3.	<p>The task and expectations of the research activity or interview may become overwhelming or difficult for the young people who may disengage or struggle to attend and concentrate.</p> <p>Due to the nature of the pupil's needs and SEMH classification of SEN, some pupils may struggle to regulate their emotions and</p>	<p>The researcher has a dual role as a TEP and previous extensive experience working with this population of young people as a Teacher. This will support the researcher in identifying any behaviour changes which indicate signs of the CYP disengaging or becoming dysregulated.</p> <p>The activity will be pitched at an appropriate level for the CYP, within their zone of proximal development. The researcher will adapt their language and modify interview questions to meet the individual needs of the child, dynamically responding to their presenting needs. The activity will incorporate participatory methods, including drawing to motivate and engage the young people.</p> <p>The researcher will provide children with a visual card which they can present to the researcher to indicate they would like to stop the activity</p>	<p>Should a child present with behaviours that indicate the child is disengaged, the researcher will offer the child the opportunity to pause or cease the session and return to class or their pre-determined safe space.</p> <p>Should a child become dysregulated and present with 'difficult' or 'dangerous' behaviour², the researcher will respond with empathy and care and support the young person to regulate. The</p>

² The Local Authority in which the researcher is placed in their dual role as a TEP uses the language of 'difficult' and 'dangerous' to describe children's presenting behaviour in line with Therapeutic Thinking [Therapeutic Thinking](#)

	behaviour during the session.	<p>or interview and return to class and leave the room. This will be explained to the young person and allows them to return to the interview if preferred at a later date.</p> <p>The researcher will ensure that prior to any direct contact with the CYP, they will meet with the gatekeeper of the school setting e.g SENCo to establish procedures for when any young person becomes dysregulated. This may include (subject to parental consent) the researcher having access to any risk assessment or individual education plans (e.g. 'all about me' documents) for how to support and best communicate with each individual.</p>	<p>researcher will use any strategies that have been outlined in the child's individual education plans. The researcher will follow the procedure that has been pre-agreed in this instance and notify pre-agreed members of staff, seeking their support.</p>
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Appendix L – Anonymised Certificate



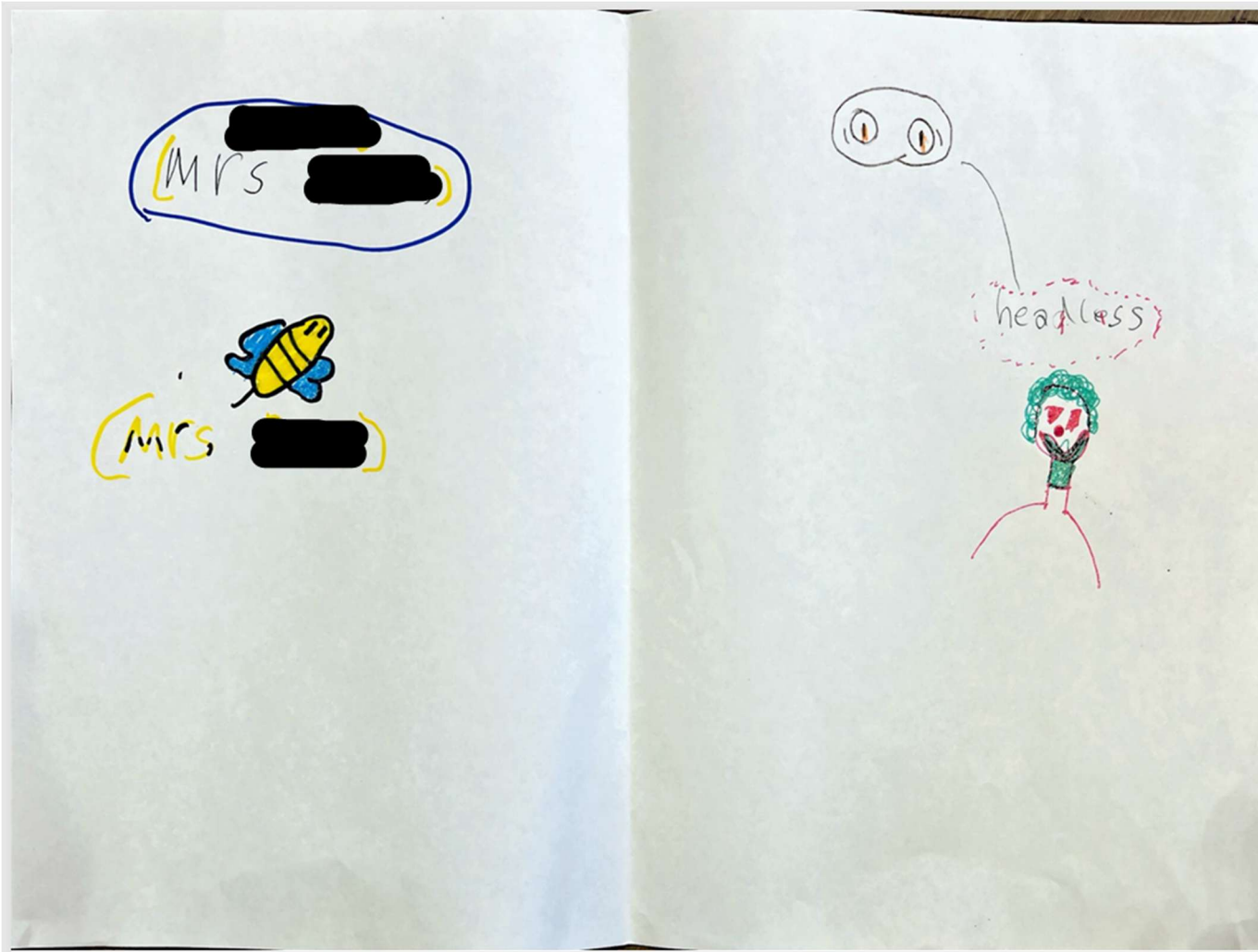
Appendix M – Framework for analysing relational maps example

Map analysis for: Burger

Framework for analysing relational maps (Boden et al., 2019)	
<i>Question:</i>	<i>Response:</i>
1. How can the overall nature of the map be characterised (e.g., shapes, hierarchy, list, mind map, extended visual metaphor, visual narrative, unconnected)?	Burger is surrounded by adults, equally positioned around him.
2. How is the participant represented in the map (colour, shape, location, texture, meanings)?	In the centre of the map, represented by a drawing of himself as a person. He is dreaming or thinking of pizza and there is a cartoon element to his drawings which demonstrates his skill and area of strength in drawing.
3. How many people are included in the map? Is anyone left out but named?	Six adults are included on the map. All adults named are detailed, however one adult's name is not recorded next to their image.
4. In what ways are other people represented?	People are represented in similar ways to how Burger has represented himself, as cartoon images of people resembling their physical characteristics.
5. In what ways are the relationships and their qualities represented?	Some adults have a tick next to them indicating his favourite Tas. There is one non-preferred member of staff who is demonstrated as smaller and not given a label or name.
6. In what ways are people interrelated (i.e., social density, fluidity, separation, hierarchy)?	Preferred teacher and Tas are closest to his in proximity on the map. There is no hierarchy amongst roles, however key Teacher and two main Tas are the closest to him .
7. What kinds of relationships and types of people are represented? Who are they? What is their age, length of time known, category, status, and so on?	Teachers and Tas he has known over a number of years. Six adults are presented in the image in relation to Burger.
8. Where are the people located? How does this relate to their emotional or geographic accessibility to the participant?	The adults are located around Burger and are not on the extremities of the paper. They are available to him. Some adults are more on the periphery, yet this does not define their importance to Burger.
9. How can the overall tone and impression of the image be characterised (e.g., style, expressive content, effect upon viewer)?	Tone is warm and the cartoon like images are intriguing and engaging. The adults are smiling and the

Appendix O – Anonymised Maps of Participants

The Uno Guy



Thanos



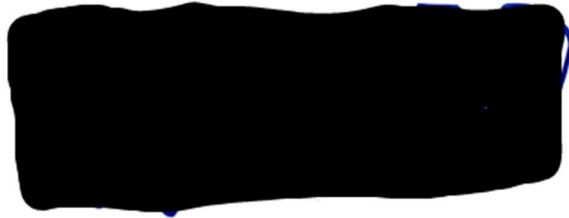
WW2 Soldier



Dumpling



DSFootballer



GOAL SCORER
W



Mr [redacted]
Mr [redacted]
Miss [redacted]
Miss [redacted]
Miss [redacted]
Miss [redacted]

Santa



20 ÷ 10 = 2



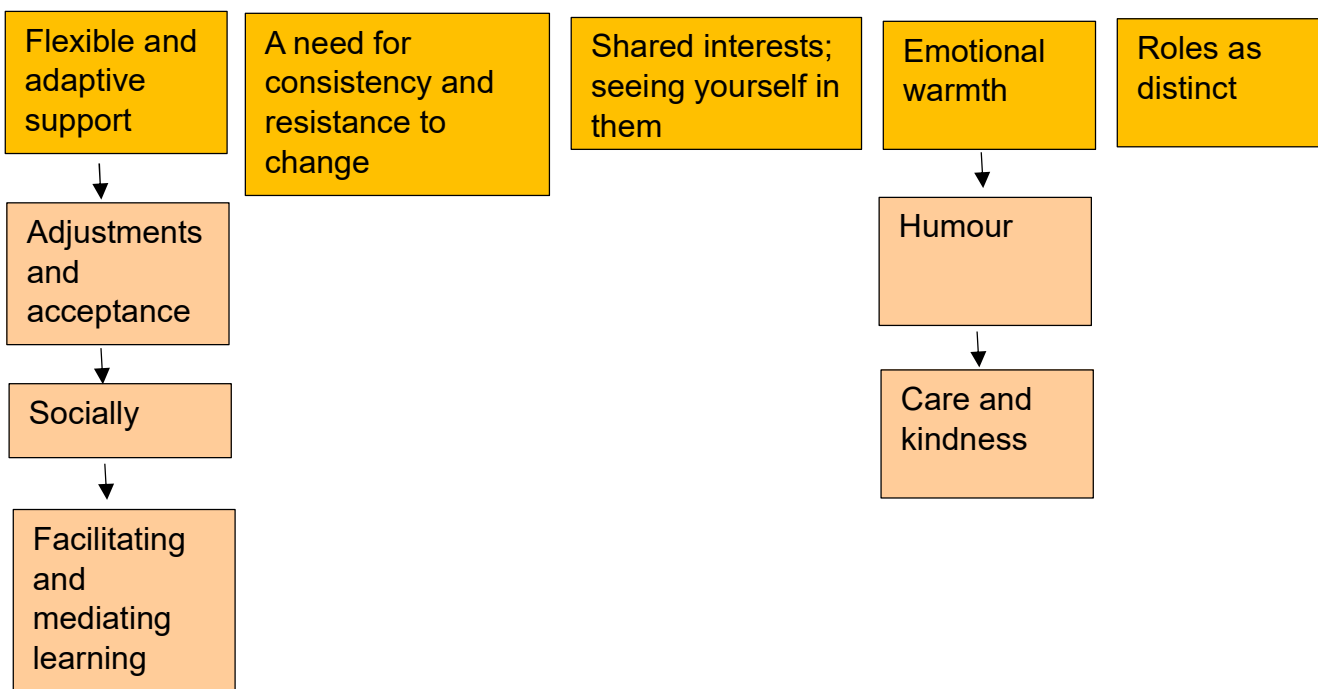
Appendix P – Pen Portraits of Participants

Pen portrait for DSFootballer

Additional contextual information:

- DSFootballer was in upper key stage 2 at the time of the research
- DSFootballer appeared to enjoy the meet and greet and research procedure
- DSFootballer appeared to lack confidence with drawing and preferred to share their experience verbally, however agreed to continue the map and was happy to discuss the adults and content he had depicted

Overall personal experiential themes for DSFootballer:



Summary of findings for DSFootballer:

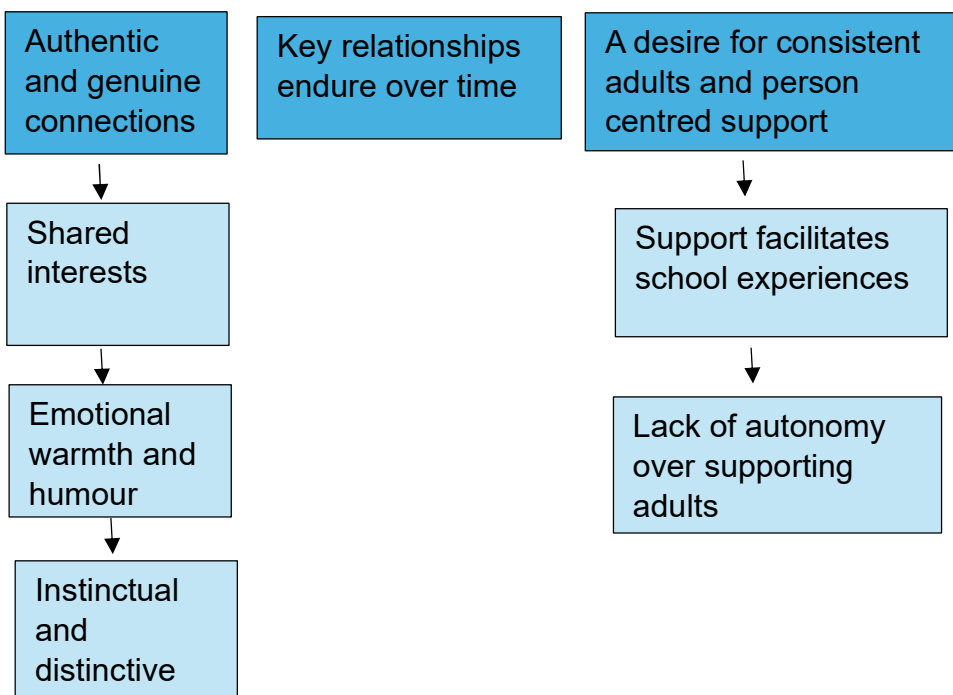
For DSFootballer, their experience of relationships with staff centred around five superordinate personal experiential themes and five subordinate themes. The first superordinate theme speaks to DSFootballer's need for flexible and adaptive support from key adults. For DSFootballer, this looks like reasonable adjustments, and acceptance of his differences or behaviours. Additionally this looks like support in both social and learning environments from adults. The second superordinate theme includes a need for consistency in staffing and resistance to change of staff, including DSFootballer's worries around upcoming secondary transition. The third superordinate theme includes DSFootballer's appreciation of shared interests between him and those most important adults in school, where he can see himself in the adults that support him. Fourthly, emotional warmth was communicated as a key factor in DSFootballer's relational experience. This included two subordinate themes around the use of humour from staff and their demonstration of care and kindness. Finally, DSFootballer communicated his experience of understanding staff in their distinct roles as different, such as support staff and teachers having different responsibilities impacting on his relational experience with them.

Pen portrait for Burger

Additional contextual information:

- Burger was in upper key stage 2 at the time of the research
- Burger communicated the importance breaks to his research experience, where we paused the interview a number of times to play games or for Burger to go out to break
- Burger thoroughly enjoyed the mapping process as a confident artist

Overall personal experiential themes for Burger:



Summary of findings for Burger:

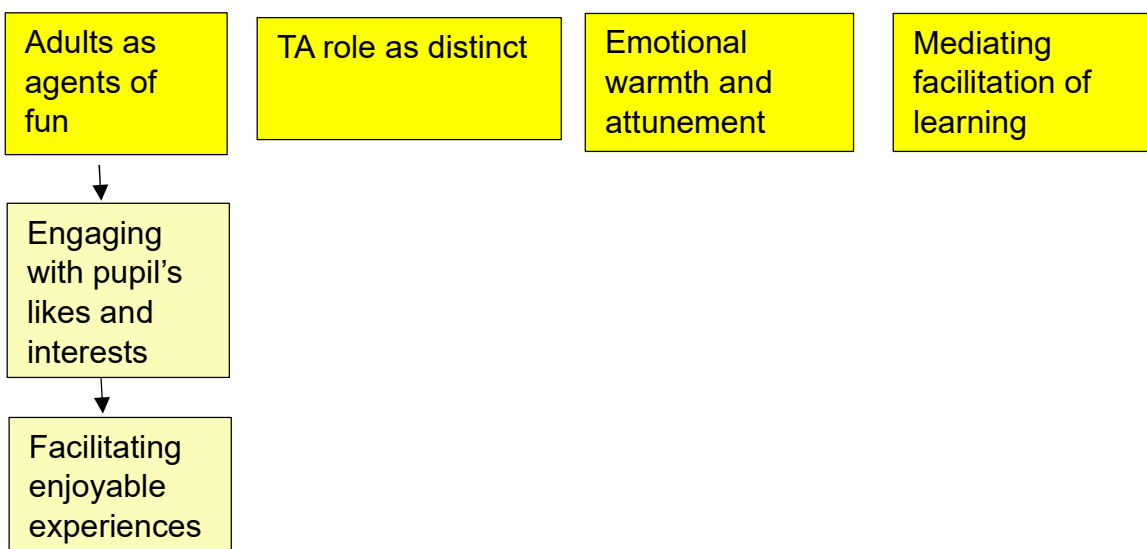
For Burger, their experience of relationships with staff centred around three superordinate personal experiential themes and five subordinate themes. The first superordinate theme speaks to the importance of authenticity and genuineness in staff's interactions and relationships with Burger. This was broken down into the authenticity of shared interests that staff share with Burger, emotional warmth and humour demonstrated towards Burger and a distinctive and instinctual aspect of the relational experience, where Burger developed a felt sense around certain staff. The second superordinate theme centres around the need for Burger to have key relationships with staff that endure over time. Finally, the last superordinate theme includes a desire for consistent and person centred support. Burger highlighted the importance of staff support in facilitating positive experiences for him in school and a sense of difficulty in lack of autonomy over the adults who support him and when throughout the school day.

Pen portrait for Santa

Additional contextual information:

- Santa was in lower key stage two at the time of the research
- Santa enjoyed the drawing aspect of the interview procedure
- Santa at time demonstrated developmentally younger speech and emotional literacy skills which may have limited what they could share verbally, thereby using the map to scaffold the sharing of experiences

Overall personal experiential themes for Santa:



Summary of findings for Santa:

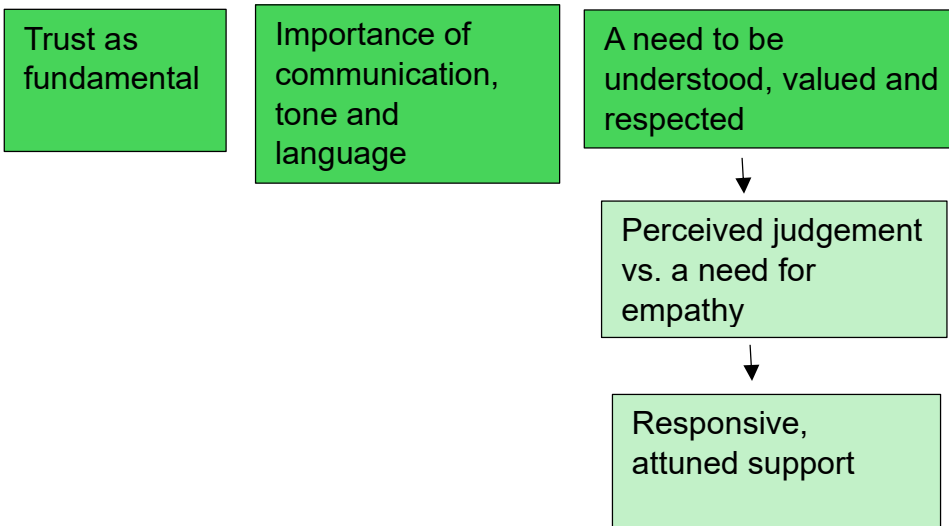
For Santa, their experience of relationships with staff centred around four superordinate personal experiential themes and two subordinate themes. The first superordinate theme speak to the relational experience of adults I school as agent of fun. This was further discussed as both engaging with pupil's likes and interests in addition to facilitating positive experiences for children. Additionally, Santa experiences Teaching Assistant's roles as distinct to teachers which formed part of his relational experience. Furthermore, emotional warmth and attunement were important aspects of the relational experience for Santa demonstrated by facial and emotional expressions. Finally, staff's role in the mediation and facilitation of learning for both Santa and other pupils was an important aspect of his relational experience with staff in school.

Pen portrait for WW2 Soldier

Additional contextual information:

- WW2 Soldier was in lower key stage two at the time of the research
- WW2 Soldier enjoyed the process and creativity that came with drawing a map
- WW2 Soldier needed support with attention and concentration at times
- WW2 Soldier enjoyed playing games in between the research activity stages

Overall personal experiential themes for WW2 Soldier:



Summary of findings for WW2 Soldier:

For WW2 Soldier, their experience of relationships with staff centred around three superordinate personal experiential themes and two subordinate themes. The first superordinate theme speaks to the concept of trust as fundamental to the relational experience between WW2 Soldier and staff. Secondly, the importance of communication, tone and language was key to WW2 Soldier's relational experience, both physical and verbal forms of communication. Finally, a need to be understood valued and respected was discussed by WW2 Soldier including the experience of perceived judgement from staff which contrasted with their need for empathy from staff in school. Furthermore, WW2 Soldier communicated that responsive and attuned support from key staff contributed to feeling understood, respected and valued.

Pen portrait for Thanos

Additional contextual information:

- Thanos was in upper key stage two at the time of the research
- Thanos was very chatty and enjoyed sharing verbally
- Thanos needed some support and scaffolding with initiating the map task
- Thanos demonstrated an awareness and understanding of their own needs

Overall personal experiential themes for Thanos:

Visible support received to promote social, emotional and academic learning

Felt availability, warmth and attunement

Attachment to key people

Secure relationships are built over time

Summary of findings for Santa:

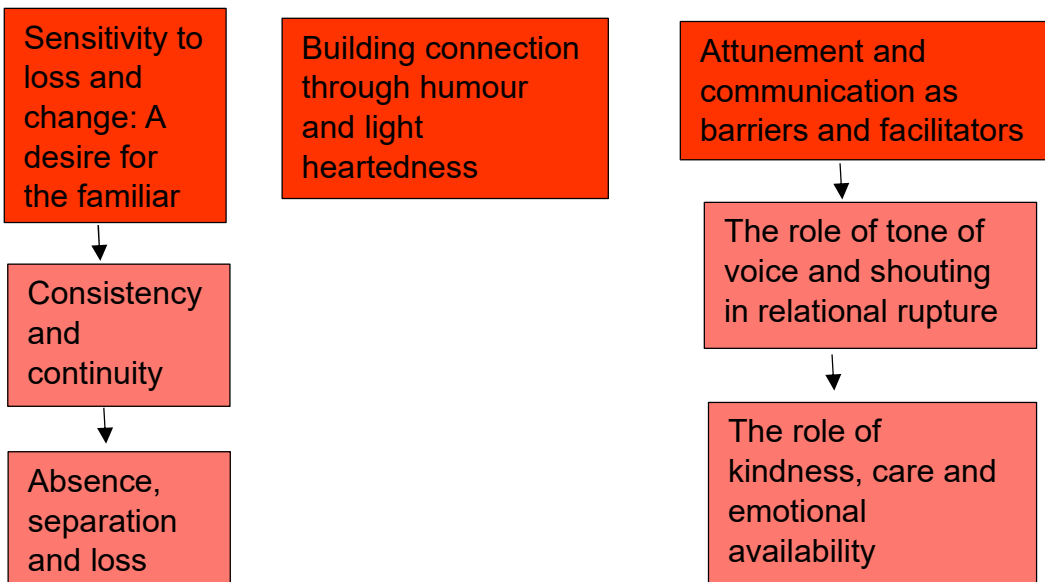
For Thanos, their experience of relationships with staff centred around four superordinate personal experiential themes. The first of which speaks to the idea that there are visible aspects of the relational experience which include social, emotional and academic support from key staff. Secondly, Thanos shared that felt emotional availability including an expression of warmth and attunement from staff in school was a positive aspect of their relational experience. Thirdly, Thanos expressed a more salient or closer relational experience through secure attachment to key staff in school who were the most important. Finally, Thanos communicated that length of time known and familiarity contributes towards the secure relationships they built with key staff which happens over a period of time and years in school.

Pen portrait for Dumpling

Additional contextual information:

- Dumpling was in upper key stage two at the time of the research
- Dumpling needed support to focus his attention at times, however was happy and willing to participate in the research procedure
- Dumpling used the map to support him to communicate complex ideas

Overall personal experiential themes for Dumpling:



Summary of findings for Dumpling:

For Dumpling, their experience of relationships with staff centred around three superordinate personal experiential themes and four subordinate themes. The first superordinate theme centres around Dumpling's sensitivity to loss and change in his relationships with staff and a desire for the familiar. This was split into a need for consistency and continuity in staff relationships in addition to a heightened experience of loss and separation in staffing changes. Secondly, Dumpling communicated the importance of building connection through humour and light heartedness as part of the relational experience between them and key staff. Finally, Dumpling spoke to the theme of attunement and communication as barrier and facilitators to the relational experience between them and staff. For Dumpling, this looks like the role of tone of voice and shouting in disrupting or rupturing the relationship when demonstrated by staff. Additionally, Dumpling communicated the role of kindness and care in promoting the relational experience between them and key staff including staff remaining emotionally available to Dumpling.

Pen portrait for The Uno Guy

Additional contextual information:

- The Uno Guy was in upper key stage two at the time of the research
- The Uno Guy needed support and encouragement to participate safely, where they asked for some of the conversation to not be recorded and took regular breaks
- The Uno guy warmed up throughout the research process and was warm and friendly sharing they sadness that I was leaving on the final day

Overall personal experiential themes for The Uno Guy:

Sensitivity to the emotional states of adults and their amplified impact

The importance of adults facilitating and mediating learning opportunities

Connection through sharing and common interests

Enduring bonds with key adults despite separation

Summary of findings for The Uno Guy:

For The Uno Guy, their experience of relationships with staff centred around four superordinate personal experiential themes. The first of which speaks to the idea of The Uno Guy's sensitivity to the emotional states of adults, picking up on how they were feeling which can have a big impact on The Uno's guys emotional safety experience. Secondly, The Uno Guy communicated the importance of adults facilitating and mediating learning opportunities in the relational experience between them, valuing education and adults as a more knowledgeable other. Additionally, The Uno Guy shared their experience of the connection between them and staff made through staff sharing personal information about themselves and finding common interests between them. Finally, The Uno Guy communicated the experience of enduring bonds with key staff members that exist despite distance or separation where staff remain key and important regardless of immediate availability to close proximity to them.