

An exploration of secondary school teachers' views of attachment, trauma, challenging behaviour and inclusion.

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## Summary

This document contains three parts: a review of the literature relating to the subject area; an empirical review; and a reflective account. Firstly, the literature review examines a selection of the literature relating to the concepts: 'attachment', 'trauma', 'challenging behaviour', and how they relate to inclusion within school settings. Secondly, the empirical review comprises a qualitative study carried out with a sample of 15 teachers from 2 mainstream secondary schools in an English Local Authority (LA). The study employed the use of online focus groups and a written task to explore teachers' conceptualisations of attachment, trauma, challenging behaviour, and whether those conceptualisations related to holding inclusive beliefs. Finally, the reflective chapter provides a reflexive account of the research process as a whole and includes: a discussion of the initial ideas and beginning stages of the research questions and research design; consideration of ethical issues; reflections about how the research study has contributed to personal knowledge and practice; and a discussion about how the research study can contribute to wider educational psychology practice and the literature base.

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**List of abbreviations**

<b>Abbreviation</b>	<b>Definition</b>
AAS	The Attachment Aware Schools programme
ACE	Adverse Childhood Experiences
ADHD	Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder
APA	American Psychological Association
BESD	Behavioural, Emotional, and Social Difficulties
BPS	The British Psychological Society
COVID-19	Coronavirus
CPD	Continuing Professional Development
CRPD	Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
DDP	Dyadic Developmental Psychotherapy
DSM-5	Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (5 <sup>th</sup> edition)
EBD	Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties
EEF	Educational Endowment Foundation
EHC	Educational, Health and Care (Plan)
EP	Educational Psychologist
GCSE	General Certificate of Secondary Education
GDPR	General Data Protection Regulation
HCPC	The Health and Care Professionals Council
LA	Local Authority
NQT	Newly Qualified Teacher
PACE	Playfulness, Acceptance, Curiosity, Empathy
PE	Physical Education
PRU	Pupil Referral Unit
PTSD	Post-traumatic Stress Disorder

RSA	Royal Society for the encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce
SAMHSA	Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration
SEBD	Social, Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties
SEMH	Social, Emotional and Mental Health
SEN	Special Educational Needs
SENCo	Special Educational Needs Coordinator
SEND	Special Educational Needs and Disabilities
SLT	Senior Leadership Team
TA	Teaching Assistant
TEP	Trainee Educational Psychologist
UEA	University of East Anglia
UNESCO	The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
VIG	Video Interaction Guidance

## **Part One: Literature Review**

### **Introduction**

Increasing rates of exclusions in English schools are a key issue for education professionals, including educational psychologists. The most common reason for both fixed-term and permanent exclusions in England is 'persistent disruptive behaviour' (Department for Education, 2019). There are calls to implement 'trauma-informed' practices across English schools to help improve emotional wellbeing of students and staff, and facilitate greater inclusive practice for students who are at risk of exclusion (e.g. Little & Maunder, 2021). Consistent, trusting and available relationships with adults (e.g. teachers) have been argued to be key to improving outcomes for children and young people who have experiences of developmental and relational trauma (e.g. Geddes, 2006; Schofield & Beek, 2005; Treisman, 2017). Employing a 'trauma-informed' approach within a whole-school setting aims to enhance teachers' knowledge about trauma and attachment, and provide them with the skills to understand and support children's emotional wellbeing (e.g. Kelly et al., 2020; Rose et al., 2019). The following literature review aims to provide both an overview and critical analysis of the literature related to the conceptualisation of 'attachment', 'trauma', and their links with behaviour, exclusion and inclusion within the classroom and wider school environment. The particular emphasis of the review will be a focus on teacher-student relationships and inclusion of children who display 'challenging behaviour' at school, with the overall aim of formulating appropriate research questions relating to the subject areas.

A thematic literature review was used in order to place the researcher's study within the existing body of knowledge and formulate the research questions for conducting the empirical study. It was decided that a systematic literature review would not be appropriate for this piece of research. A systematic literature review starts with a well-defined research question to be answered by the review, in order to deliver conclusions and recommendations for practice or address knowledge gaps. The aim of the current review is to organise and discuss the literature based on themes that are arguably significant to understanding the key debates that have shaped the direction of the field. A thematic literature review provides an overview of the relevant psychological theories; organises, synthesises and critically analyses current research information; and explores the rationale for the proposed area of research.

The electronic database, powered by EBSCO Host, available at the University of East Anglia and searches using Google Scholar, were used to conduct the literature search. The areas explored included the concepts of attachment and trauma, adverse childhood experiences, challenging behaviour, exclusion, inclusion, and teachers' views of challenging behaviour in the classroom. Key words and combinations of terms searched were: 'attachment'; 'trauma'; 'attachment theory'; 'teacher-student relationships'; 'challenging behaviour'; 'SEMH'; 'BESD'; 'adverse childhood experiences'; 'inclusion'; and 'inclusive education', carried out over the period from December 2019 to February 2021. The literature was then broadened to include other journal articles and books that authors conveyed as relevant. In addition, government reports, advice and guidance, and historical and current legislation also contributed to the review. Research studies dated from the year 2000 were included to ensure that the information was as up-to-date and relevant as

possible. However, some references from before year 2000 were included due to their significance in the field. I acknowledge that this literature review provides only one narrative, of the many available, in gaining an understanding of the areas explored.

The review begins by exploring the conceptualisation and theoretical basis of 'attachment' and its importance in the classroom setting; then 'trauma', 'traumatic experiences', and 'adverse childhood experiences', and the potential relationship these have with children who display 'challenging behaviour'; the significance of teacher-student relationships; and finally exploring what 'exclusion' and 'inclusion' means for children and young people at school.

## **Attachment**

A key theory that has underpinned psychologists' understanding of child development is the theory of "attachment". Bowlby (1969; 1973; 1980) and others (Ainsworth, 1982; Ainsworth & Wittig, 1969; Ainsworth et al., 1978) have proposed that the primary relationship between the infant and primary caregiver (usually mother) affects the behaviour of the infant in ways that underlie later relationships and interactions with their environment.

Ainsworth and Bell (1970) developed the 'Strange Situation' procedure to investigate the security of attachment of infants, by observing their behaviour in response to a repeated experience of relationship rupture and relationship repair. It was suggested that attachment relationships could be characterised in children, by showing preference for or retreating to the attachment figure when threatened or upset, and using the attachment figure as a secure base while exploring their world. From this procedure, Ainsworth and Bell (1970) proposed three main attachment

styles: secure, insecure avoidant, and insecure ambivalent/resistant. A fourth attachment style, insecure disorganised, was later put forward (Main & Solomon, 1990). Some researchers, for example Bergin and Bergin (2009), argue that secure attachment styles are facilitated by the attachment figure's sensitivity to the child, high quality communication, warmth, accessibility and acceptance of the child. These attachment figure behaviours are referred to as attunement, mutuality, synchrony or insightfulness (Bergin & Bergin, 2009). Duschinsky et al. (2015) argue against the rigid classification of attachment styles and suggest that it may be more appropriate to think of attachment theory as 'a psychology of the interplay of dynamic forces'.

There is debate in the literature regarding infant attachment styles and their stability over time. Bruer (1999a) argued that infant attachment classifications from the 'Strange Situation' procedure were not found to be stable over time, but the evidence actually suggested the classification only remained stable for as long as the life circumstances for the mother, the infant and for their caregiving relationship remained stable. Bruer (1999a) emphasised the significance of life circumstances and experiences and their impact upon children and young people throughout their lives. This is perhaps a wider lens to frame the infant-caregiver relationship than initially proposed by early attachment theory researchers (e.g. Ainsworth & Bell, 1970; Bowlby, 1969, 1973, 1980;).

Some proponents of attachment theory stipulate that by the time an infant is between 10 months and 1 year old, their attachment response will have been established, whether in response to an insecure or secure attachment relationship (e.g. Ainsworth & Bell, 1970; Bowlby, 1979). Macvarish et al. (2014), social science researchers, reviewed the critiques of the so-called 'first three years' movement (Thornton, 2011). The 'first three years' movement became increasingly influential

from the early 1990s, as child welfare advocates and politicians collaborated together and had significant influence on widespread public awareness of attachment and development in the early years. They drew apparent claims and 'evidence' from neuroscience research to argue that social problems such as inequality, poverty, educational underachievement, violence and mental illness were best addressed through early intervention programmes, to protect or enhance emotional and cognitive aspects of children's brain development (Bruer, 1997, 1998a, 1998b, 1999a, 1999b; Thornton, 2011). Macvarish et al. (2014) postulate that, amongst psychologists and neuroscientists, there is consensus that too much deterministic power is attributed to the development of children in their early years. Brain development, they suggest, is therefore better described as plastic and resilient rather than determined or fixed.

Bergin and Bergin (e.g. 2009), are two researchers and professors in the field of child development and educational psychology in the US. It may be that Bergin and Bergin subscribe to the 'first three years' school of thought as part of their ongoing research of infants, children and young people. For example, in a study of substance-exposed toddlers (Bergin & McCollough, 2009), 'low-quality caregiving' was suggested as an area of intervention for low-income mothers who participated in the study alongside their 'insecurely attached' children. One of the limitations of the study expressed by the researchers was the lack of consideration of variables outside the family that could have impacted on the attachment relationships between mothers and children. It could be argued that the intervention targeting social factors (including stable and safe housing, finances, social support, mental health intervention, and substance addiction support) would bring about change for the mothers who were providing caregiving labelled as 'low-quality' by the researchers.

Research suggests that security of attachment is linked to child outcomes over long periods of time, including academic achievement, social competence, emotional regulation, attention and concentration skills, the capacity to accept challenges, and independence skills (e.g. Bergin & Bergin, 2009; Sroufe, 1996). In general, the research suggests that children with disorganised attachment styles have the most negative outcomes, children with secure attachment styles have the most positive outcomes, and children with avoidant and resistant (insecure attachment styles) are in-between (Bergin & Bergin, 2009). However, some argue (e.g. Bruer, 1999a) that stability of children's attachment styles depends on the stability of the infant-caregiver relationship, therefore contextual and environmental factors have significant implications for changes to attachment styles for individuals.

It is argued that the primary attachment relationship organises the child's internal working model: their sense of self in relation to others (e.g. Bowlby 1973; 1980). Fonagy and colleagues (e.g. Fonagy, et al., 2004; Fonagy & Allison, 2014) have developed the theory of mentalisation as a means of explaining the construction of 'the self' and attachment. Mentalisation, they explain, is the ability to infer and represent our own and other people's mental states in order to interpret human behaviour (e.g. needs, desires, feelings, beliefs, goals, purposes and reasons) (Allen et al., 2008). A child's ability to understand his/her and others' mental states develops from interpersonal interactions, particularly the child-caregiver relationship, which allows the development of the capacity to regulate emotions and ability to learn from the social environment. The development of the ability to mentalise may be compromised in children who have not benefitted from the opportunity to be understood and thought about in this way by a sensitive caregiver (e.g. those that have suffered neglect and trauma). Fearon and Roisman (2017)

argue, in their review of attachment theory, that the literature broadly supports the idea that secure attachment is associated with better socio-emotional outcomes. However, there is limited research investigating the specific role of 'attachment' and attachment relationships that facilitates the correlation between secure attachments and these outcomes (Fearon & Roisman, 2017).

Important components of internal working models have been suggested to include: (1) a model of others as trustworthy, (2) a model of the self as valuable, and (3) a model of the self as effective when interacting with others (Bergin & Bergin, 2009). It is posited that, for secure children, their internal model is based upon their experience of an attachment figure that can be relied upon to provide protection, security, and comfort. This becomes an expectation for the responsiveness of others in general, that others are caring and trustworthy, and that the social world is a safe place (Ainsworth 1979; Bowlby 1973; Sroufe 1996). In contrast, children who have a working model of their attachment figure as inaccessible or unresponsive do not establish that others can provide feelings of trust, value and effectiveness. They do not believe that the world is a safe place (Bergin & Bergin, 2009). Some researchers (e.g., Schofield & Beek, 2018) argue that internal working models are malleable to change, so with consistent and available attachment figures, children can develop a sense of security and a belief the social world is a safe place.

Key theorists argue that attachment is important across childhood, from infancy to adolescence (e.g., Ainsworth, 1982; Ainsworth & Wittig, 1969; Ainsworth et al., 1978; Bowlby, 1969, 1973, 1980). Bergin and Bergin (2009) posit that as a child grows older, their dependence upon their attachment figure decreases and they are able to confidently explore their world with increasing independence. For example, toddlers will show difficulties physically separating from their primary

attachment figure by getting upset and crying, older children do not show the same difficulty as they tend to have established feelings of security and remain confident that their attachment figure will return. In middle childhood and adolescence, the attachment figure's availability remains important. Availability includes physical presence, openness to communication, responsiveness to the child's request for help and awareness of the child's needs. Research suggests that an available attachment figure leads to feelings of security, and adolescents' progress towards increased self-reliance and independence (Allen et al., 2003; Bergin & Bergin, 2009; Moretti & Peled, 2004).

In the classroom, attachment relationships serve a useful function to learning new skills and exploring new environments (e.g. Geddes, 2003, 2005, 2006). Children seek to feel secure so that they feel able and motivated to explore new environments. Children's social skills are able to develop and flourish with the support of attachment relationships, learning about emotions and behaviour as part of attuned interactions (Bergin & Bergin, 2009).

Heather Geddes' (2003, 2005, 2006) work builds on the theory and research on attachment, and describes how the different attachment styles relate to how children present in the classroom setting with regard to their learning. Geddes is a psychoanalytic therapist and qualified teacher, specialising in supporting children with social and emotional difficulties in education settings in the UK. Geddes' published work (e.g. 2005, 2006) is based on her PhD thesis from 1999: '*Attachment and learning: an investigation into links between maternal attachment experience, reported life events, behaviour causing concern at referral and difficulties in the learning situation*' (Geddes, 1999). Geddes' (1999) research and subsequent publications (2003, 2005, 2006) have provided a 'framework' for helping school staff

to understand and frame children's behaviour through an 'attachment lens'. She aimed to extend teachers' understanding of the meaning behind the child's behaviour and provide strategies to support them in the classroom through the perspective of a 'learning triangle', i.e. the relationships observed between the child, teacher, and class-based task. For example, a child who presents as having an insecure resistant/avoidant attachment style, she suggests, will display high levels of anxiety and uncertainty and display 'attachment-needing' behaviour towards the teacher. The child may not feel that they can complete tasks independently and seek the attention of the teacher in order to avoid the task (Geddes, 2003). Geddes (2003) suggests that attachment styles, and therefore children's internal working models, are open to revision and change. She emphasises that education professionals can provide the secure relationship to change the child or young person's internal working model, and thus provide potential for the development of resilience.

It could be argued that there are limitations to Geddes' work. At the time of writing, Geddes' 'learning triangles' framework (e.g. Geddes, 2005, 2006) has not been reviewed by any other researcher, so it could be argued that the framework may lack generalisability across different contexts and education settings, and the effectiveness of using the framework within education settings has not yet been evaluated. Geddes' work (1999, 2006) is also based on her perspective and experience of working with children and young people as a psychoanalytical therapist, which could have limitations in terms of alternative psychological positions and wider systemic influencing factors (e.g. ecological systems theory, Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Harlow (2021), a researcher in the field of social work in the UK, summarises the changing landscape of attachment theory research over the past 50 years as an

evolving evidence-base from inflexible and simplistic categorisation of attachment types, towards a conceptualisation of the integration and development of new theoretical and philosophical insights, to provide wide-ranging perspectives of human attachment and associated outcomes. Schofield and Beek (2018) integrate and embed their 'Secure Base model' (see Figure 2) within the framework of ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The implications of such an integration allow the focus to shift to wider, more systemic change as opposed to the more 'traditional' attachment theory lens (e.g., Ainsworth & Bell, 1970; Bowlby 1969, 1973, 1980) which posited for the focus of intervention to be within the caregiver-child relationship.

Thus, the research suggests that attachment relationships, of children with their primary caregivers and attachment-type relationships in school settings can impact on long-lasting outcomes for children and young people. Attachment relationships can influence children's internal working models; that other people are trustworthy and reliable, and the world is a safe place. Internal working models can change with the support of sensitive attachment figures, and thus children can develop resilience, confidence and self-esteem. It is suggested that attachments play a part in the initial development of children's emotional regulation and social interaction skills, which are key components to learning, socialising and becoming independent.

It is important to note that attachment theory and research related to attachment and relationships has had wide-ranging implications across numerous areas of professional practice, including, but not limited to health, education and social care, internationally but also in the UK. As Harlow (2021) aptly summarises, the observed popularity of attachment theory has fluctuated over the past 50 years,

and has recently been re-invigorated with the integration of alternative theoretical and philosophical concepts. Key challenges to attachment theory have been suggested. Based on attachment theory, the 'first three years' movement and subsequent researchers (e.g., Bergin & McCollough, 2009), maintain that categorising attachment styles and providing interventions to improve the quality of caregiver-child relationships in the early years is crucial for improving future outcomes for children. For example, the use of Video Interaction Guidance ([VIG], e.g. Kennedy et al., 2011) as an intervention to support attuned interactions between caregivers and infants and children. Others, however, (e.g. Bruer, 1999a; Harlow, 2021; Schofield & Beek, 2018) posit that there is too much deterministic power given to the early years, and that consideration should be given to wider contextual, environmental and systemic factors. Intervention, therefore, is required systemically, particularly in education settings, to promote and support relationship building between children and attachment-figures, and foster the emotional wellbeing of all students. It may be that, in practice, a congruent, multi-systems approach to intervention is required to ensure greater success, by providing support within the caregiving relationship and also within the wider context.

## **Trauma**

The literature indicates there is an important connection between attachment and trauma. Treisman (2017) is a clinical psychologist, researcher and author in the field of trauma and trauma-informed practice in the UK. Treisman (2017) refers to the terms 'relational trauma' or 'attachment-related trauma' to describe children or young people who have experienced trauma within the context of their relationships, which are often interfamilial and/or with their caregivers. Trauma may also impact the

capabilities of individuals in the ways that they relate to other people, hindering opportunities for the development of safety and security within relationships (Pearlman & Courtois, 2005). Pearlman and Courtois (2005) are clinical and counselling psychologists (respectively) and have published work on the theory and treatment of psychological trauma in the US. They suggest that a relational approach is used when working with adult clients who have experienced complex trauma: as the therapeutic relationship built between the client and therapist acts as a 'secure base' to enable change and the development of relational skills. Furthermore, Treisman (2017) suggests that for children who have experienced trauma within the context of their relationships, relationships should be the main area for intervention and change. Children can be taught about healthy relationships and shown that there are people available who they can trust as their 'secure base', revising their relationship templates that have been forged previously from experiences of relational trauma.

Hughes (2004, 2006, 2009; Hughes et al., 2015) is a clinical psychologist who developed Dyadic Developmental Psychotherapy (DDP), an approach which is underpinned by attachment theory (e.g. Bowlby, 1969, 1973, 1980) and mentalisation theory (Fonagy et al., 2004; Fonagy & Allison, 2014). Hughes suggests that the fundamental underpinning of attachment theory lies in physical and emotional safety. Children who have experienced trauma at the hands of their caregivers (e.g. those who have experienced neglect or abuse) are not likely to view caregivers as being a source of safety. DDP focuses on developing and attaining a secure attachment for the child with their caregivers by helping the child to make sense of their experiences, and helping them to regulate their emotions within the safe therapeutic relationship. The development of the safe, therapeutic relationship

is created by the fostering of a 'PACE' ethos: playfulness, acceptance, curiosity, and empathy.

The literature surrounding trauma is extensive, particularly from the fields of psychiatry and clinical psychology, with a large number of studies from the US. It is also important to note that much of the research surrounding 'trauma' is related to the Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) diagnostic criteria referenced in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (5<sup>th</sup> ed.; [DSM-5]; American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2013). Researchers from the fields of clinical psychology, counselling psychology and psychiatry from the US (e.g. Pearlman & Courtois, 2005; van der Kolk, 2005) argue that the fundamental disruptions within attachment relationships are at the core of 'complex trauma' (Cook et al., 2005) and 'developmental trauma' (van der Kolk, 2005).

A working definition of trauma has been agreed through an international consensus exercise led by the US Department of Health and Human Services:

*"Trauma is defined as an event, series of events, or set of circumstances that is experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or life threatening and that has lasting adverse effects on the individual's functioning and mental, physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being."* (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration [SAMHSA], 2014).

There are debates within the literature regarding the conceptualisation of trauma in childhood. Kliethermes et al. (2014) explain that the construct of 'complex trauma' has evolved significantly over the past 30 years. The debate in the literature stems from whether the concept 'complex trauma' refers to the traumatic events specifically, or the presenting symptoms associated with such events, or a combination of the two. There is debate around various definitions having emphasis

on number of traumatic events, types of traumatic events, the developmental periods in which they occur, and the resulting symptoms experienced by individuals. The lack of an agreed definition of complex trauma from the literature has an impact on the ability for such a concept to be researched (Weathers & Keane, 2007).

Terr (1991), a Clinical Professor of Psychiatry and researcher in the US, has conceptualised two basic types of childhood trauma: Type I trauma involves witnessing or experiencing a single event such as a serious accident or rape. Type II trauma results from repeated exposure to extreme external events, such as ongoing sexual abuse. Treisman (2017) refers to 'developmental trauma' to conceptualise trauma that occurs during childhood, a critical time where babies and young children's brains are absorbing new experiences and learning from their environments. When trauma occurs during this time, the impact can shape the child's neurological, social, emotional, physiological, moral and cognitive developmental pathways (Perry, 2009).

van Der Kolk and colleagues (e.g., D'Andrea et al., 2012; Ford et al., 2013; van der Kolk, 2005), researchers in the field of psychiatry in the US, argue that 'developmental trauma', and 'Developmental Trauma Disorder', should be considered as separate from the existing diagnostic criteria for assessing and treating PTSD in adults. They argue that children who are exposed to victimisation and interpersonal trauma (including abuse and neglect) are at risk of significant immediate and long-term psychological distress and can lead to difficulties with: emotion regulation, impulse control, attention and cognition, dissociation, and interpersonal relationships (D'Andrea et al., 2012).

Bowman (1999), a clinical psychologist and researcher in Canada, argues that personal characteristics of individuals are more predictive of distress and

symptoms related to PTSD diagnoses than the qualities of the event deemed to be 'traumatic'. 'Toxic' or traumatic events have multiple effects, she argues, including positive ones that can lead to the development of resilience for individuals.

McDonnell (2019), a clinical psychologist and researcher in the UK, highlights the role of perception within the definition of trauma, what one individual finds to be traumatic may be different to another individual, especially if they have experienced multiple traumatic events in their life. Traumatic events may not be perceived by some as a major life event or natural disaster (e.g. an earthquake) but may seem relatively minor to an observer. Factors such as current stress levels and past experiences can impact on the individual's perceptions of life events as being 'traumatic' to them (McDonnell, 2019).

The ability to cope with stressful events and regulate emotions across different circumstances has been suggested as a key area for intervention to decrease the risk of negative outcomes for children and adolescents (e.g. Compas et al., 2017). Coping has been defined as conscious efforts to regulate emotion, cognition, behaviour, physiology, and the environment, in response to stress (Compas et al., 2001). There is limited but growing evidence to suggest that relational trauma (such as abuse and neglect) disrupts children's abilities to regulate their emotions and promotes greater use of 'negative' coping strategies such as: avoidance, suppression, and emotional expression (Gruhn & Compas, 2020). Within the school setting, research demonstrates that trauma can undermine a child's ability to learn, form healthy relationships, and regulate emotions and behaviours effectively within classrooms (Blodgett & Lanigan, 2018).

Practitioners are increasingly viewing children's behaviour through a trauma-informed lens. McDonnell (2019) defines trauma-informed practice as: "developing

an understanding of how trauma works, including how events can re-traumatise individuals. Helping individuals to reduce their stress levels and being mindful of their past traumas is key when supporting others (McDonnell, 2019: p.66). Developing practitioners' use of trauma-informed working can impact their behaviour management approach when working with children and young people. Interventions such as Dyadic Developmental Psychotherapy (Hughes, 2004, 2006, 2009), influenced by attachment theory and research and child development theory, highlight the importance of new attachment relationships to create a source of safety to help children overcome the impact of previous traumas. There is a growing but limited evidence base to support the use of DDP for children that have experienced relational trauma (e.g. Hughes et al., 2015).

Thus, the conceptualisation of 'trauma', including developmental and relational trauma, is important for professionals and teaching staff so that they can provide appropriate support to children and young people in education settings. When analysing a child or young person's behaviour through a trauma-informed lens, behaviours can be interpreted as 'survival skills' that have been established in order for the child to protect themselves. This can be useful for contextualising children's behaviour and identifying appropriate areas for intervention and support.

## **ACEs**

Over the past 20 years, discussions have emerged within the literature about the prevalence of experiences of childhood trauma and Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) within the adult population. The Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) Study (Felitti et al., 1998) reported a correlation between the number of adverse childhood experiences (see Figure 1) an individual goes through

and their increased risk of poor health and social outcomes in adulthood. They discovered that a person's cumulative ACEs score (e.g. four or more ACEs) had a strong, graded relationship to numerous health, social, and behavioural problems throughout their lifespan, including substance use disorders. Furthermore, many problems related to ACEs tended to be comorbid, or co-occurring. The study did have limitations, which included the methodology and participant sample. Participants included in the study were mostly employed, middle class university graduates, thus impacting on generalisability across the wider population. The participants were required to self-report their experiences from their own childhoods, creating possibility for recall bias, for both over and under reporting.

**Figure 1**

*Adverse Childhood Experiences, from Education Scotland: 'Nurture, Adverse Childhood Experiences and Trauma informed practice: Making the links between these approaches'.*



Retrieved from: <https://education.gov.scot/improvement/Documents/inc83-making-the-links-nurture-ACES-and-trauma.pdf>

Felitti et al. (1998) suggested the negative outcomes revealed by the original ACEs study could be explained by increases in health-harming behaviours (e.g.

alcohol and substance misuse in adolescence and early adulthood) to cope with high-levels of increased stress. However, subsequent studies have suggested that biological (e.g. McEwen, 2000a, 2000b) and social factors (e.g. Asmussen et al., 2020) may have contributed to the relationship between ACEs and negative health, social and behavioural outcomes.

There has been further research since the initial ACEs study investigating the connections between ACEs and negative outcomes in adulthood. Evidence from the biological sciences suggest one factor could be 'toxic stress', high levels of continuous and unresolved stress, the kind of stress children experienced when coping with ACEs on a regular basis (McEwen, 2000a). Specifically, studies showed that too much of this chronic stress (or 'toxic stress') caused the body to overproduce cortisol, which then exerted 'wear and tear' on the nervous and immune systems (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2005; Shonkoff et al., 2012). Researchers report that this 'wear and tear' eventually interferes with the development of important autoimmune processes, thereby weakening the body's resistance to life threatening diseases (McEwen, 2000b). It must be emphasised that the research from neurobiological researchers is in its preliminary stages, and much of the research has been carried out with animals, so must be viewed with a critical stance.

Asmussen et al. (2020), in their review of the ACEs evidence base, reported that studies researching the social processes associated with ACEs and other childhood adversities may help explain their impact on adult outcomes, both positively and negatively. These processes include coercive family cycles, which maintain aggression and abuse within the home; peer victimisation and bullying, which increase the risk of children becoming vulnerable to victimisation outside of

the home (e.g. involvement with gangs); and positive adult behaviours, which can increase children's resilience to the negative impact of childhood adversities. They argued that interventions that target these social processes represent a useful opportunity for stopping ACEs and reducing their negative consequences.

Asmussen et al. (2020) argue that the original 10 ACE categories were too narrow (see Figure 1). They considered the impact of a broader set of negative childhood circumstances on child trauma and poor adult outcomes, including common forms of child victimisation, such as bullying, and social deprivation, including low family income, which chronically restrict children's access to resources which are essential for them to thrive. Studies (e.g. Lanier et al., 2018) show that these additional adversities are not only highly correlated with the 10 original ACE categories, but their negative impact on some adult outcomes may be as strong, if not stronger than a history of four or more ACEs.

There is debate in the literature about the relationship between 'adversity' and 'trauma' as distinct concepts. Spence et al. (2021) define 'trauma' as congruent with the criteria listed in the DSM-5 (APA, 2013) for diagnosing Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), and relates to two distinct concepts: exposure and impact. ACEs, they argue, are known to be damaging to children, however are not classed as 'trauma events' according to the DSM-5 definitions and therefore not linked to trauma models and specific mental health difficulties such as PTSD. It is important, they emphasise, that teachers are aware of the differences and the relationship between ACEs and trauma experiences, and the role of mediating factors such as attachment, regulation and identity, to ensure that young people are provided with early and appropriate psychological support. Treisman (2017) puts forward the argument that the DSM-5 PTSD inclusion criteria, which was initially conceptualised

in the Western world from an adult perspective focusing on single-event traumas and veteran studies, is too narrow. She suggests that children who have experienced relational and developmental trauma are often misdiagnosed (e.g. with ADHD) or do not meet the criteria for a PTSD diagnosis but do still require psychological support. This viewpoint supports van der Kolk and colleagues' perspective (e.g. D'Andrea et al., 2012) on the conceptualisation of 'developmental trauma' as distinct and separate to the constructs included within the mostly adult-focused PTSD criteria. Treisman (2017) advocates for attending to the child within their context rather than just a diagnosis, with the hope that broader systemic and context-informed trauma and attachment-sensitive practice can reach a wider remit and strengthen preventative and early intervention approaches.

One of the key messages from research regarding ACEs, trauma and attachment (e.g. Bellis et al, 2017; National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2015), is the importance of a stable adult relationship that acts as a protective buffer to allow the child or young person to develop the coping skills and resilience to deal with the adverse experiences they face. This is in line with Attachment Theory literature (e.g. Ainsworth & Bell, 1970; Bowlby, 1977; Geddes, 2006). In schools, it is important for teaching staff to be aware that their relationships with students can mitigate against negative outcomes. This research points to an increased need within high-poverty or trauma-exposed communities for warm, nurturing, and responsive relationships with adults, in contrast to the punitive responses described at some 'zero-tolerance' schools (Ben-Porath, 2013).

### **Teacher-child relationships**

The literature around attachment, relational and developmental trauma and adversity suggests that relationships and relational approaches are key to supporting children and young people (e.g. Pearlman & Courtois, 2005; Schofield & Beek, 2018; Treisman, 2017). It has been suggested that, at school, teacher-child relationships may be an important area for intervention and support for children and young people who have experienced relational trauma (e.g. Geddes, 2003, 2005, 2006). The work of Robert Pianta in the United States in the early 1990s instigated interest in the importance of teacher-child relationships. In 1992, Pianta edited an issue of the *New Directions for Child Development*, which looked to explore the role of other adults, outside the home environment, that had an impact on children's lives (Pianta & Steinberg, 1992). Whether or not teacher-student relationships are considered as 'attachment bonds', in the same way as parents and carers, is debated in the literature (e.g. Verschueren & Koomen, 2012). However, teachers have been constructed by some researchers (e.g. Zajac & Kobak, 2006) as 'attachment figures', in that they may provide a secure base for children to explore the learning and social environment, and a safe, supporting adult to turn to in times of stress. Pianta and Steinberg (1992) suggest that the quality of teacher-student relationships is related to the quality of the parent-child relationship. Although there is a moderate association in early childhood, the relationships become increasingly complex as children develop (for example, as children enter secondary school and are taught by many different teachers for different subjects) (Sabol & Pianta, 2012).

Sabol and Pianta (2012) highlight the implications of research which integrates both attachment theory and developmental systems theory. This research suggests that teacher and caregiver characteristics, such as sensitivity, may change and revise the internal working models children have previously developed within the

caregiving relationship (Buyse, et al., 2011). The importance of the teacher's role as an attachment figure may be especially key for younger and more vulnerable children, as these children's attachment systems get activated more easily and their capacity for self-regulation is more limited (Verschueren & Koomen, 2012).

Young people have also identified relationships with education staff to be key to their motivation and engagement with learning. In a study by Lumby (2012), the perspectives of 65 young people considered by their school or college to be 'disaffected' or 'disengaged' were analysed. Negative relationships with teachers were frequently reported among the group. The negative relationships described by the young people had, in some cases, a disproportionate impact on learning. The majority of the participants identified positive relations with some staff, either in their school or alternative provision. Some participants highlighted the relationships they had built with mentors or learning assistants, as opposed to teachers. The characteristics valued by the participants were a genuine interest in the welfare of the individual, trust, making an effort to help and giving praise. Some participants believed that some teachers had decided they were not worth effort, or support, or required to be removed from the community. Lumby (2012) reflected that young people are at risk due to the lack of attention paid to their voices by adults. Furthermore, there seemed to be lack of motivation or willingness for change within existing school systems.

One of the key recommendations from a recent report into improving behaviour in schools was for teachers to know and understand their pupils and what influences their behaviour (Education Endowment Foundation [EEF], 2019). Insight into the context surrounding the young person's behaviour can help teachers to respond appropriately and effectively. The value of supportive teacher-student

relationships was also emphasised. Geddes (2018) found when teachers were given explanations of where students' projected feelings were coming from, and time to discuss them, they made fewer referrals to outside services. This suggests an increase in perceived professional competence and ability to handle the behaviour resulted from increased understanding, in line with the recommendations from the EEF report (2019).

### **Growing evidence base for attachment-aware and trauma-informed working**

Trauma-informed approaches (also described in healthcare settings as trauma-informed care or practice) have been growing in popularity in recent years from emerging promising evidence from the US. A 'trauma-informed approach' can be described as a:

“strengths-based framework that is grounded in an understanding of and responsiveness to the impact of trauma that emphasises physical, psychological, and emotional safety for both providers and survivors; and creates opportunities for survivors to rebuild a sense of control and empowerment” (Hopper, et al., 2010, p. 82).

DeCandia and Guarino (2015) discuss the evolution, current models and practice, and evidence base of trauma-informed care in the US in their 2015 review paper. They argue that organisations and systems moving towards being 'trauma-informed' require a paradigm shift in thinking from a traditional within-person, medicalised perspective to an ecological response. Core principles of trauma-informed care across models include trauma knowledge, safety, choice, empowerment, and cultural competence (Hopper et al., 2010). Children and young people who have experienced traumatic events may present as disruptive, aggressive or 'oppositional'

and, based on their behaviours, pathologised or mis-diagnosed with conditions by professionals aligning to the more traditional medicalised model. Trauma-informed practice aims to reframe such behaviour as 'survival skills' developed in response to earlier traumatic experiences. DeCandia and Guarino (2015) also highlight that focusing on the environment offers multiple opportunities for intervention within a trauma-informed organisation or system.

Sweeney et al., (2016) reflect, in their review of trauma-informed practice in the UK related to mental health services, that there is a growing interest of trauma-informed practice coming from the increasing evidence-base from the US. Sweeney et al. (2016) suggest that a shift in practitioner thinking about the causes of mental distress is vital to being able to understand the role of trauma in individuals' lives and adapt practice accordingly. Providing opportunities to acquire and develop knowledge, ongoing supervision for practitioners, and a systems-approach to implementing trauma-informed practice across organisations are suggested avenues to achieve change.

Fondren et al. (2020), in the United States, reviewed the research around, as they describe 'fully trauma-informed practices', i.e. multi-tier prevention, intervention and policy-wide approach to trauma-informed working. The review highlighted the limited scope regarding specific conclusions of 'best practice' trauma-informed multi-tiered programmes. Studies within the review, however, illustrated evidence for the efficacy of prevention and intervention programmes delivered in the school setting.

There is a limited, but growing, evidence base from studies in the UK that suggest whole-school interventions focusing on increasing staff knowledge of attachment and trauma, and providing support for staff leads to positive outcomes for both staff and students (e.g. Kelly et al., 2020; Little & Maunder, 2021; Rose et al.,

2019). Attachment Aware Schools (AAS) is an example of a whole school training programme which was implemented and evaluated across 40 schools in 2 Local Authorities (Rose et al., 2019). The AAS framework promotes the importance of attachment, attunement and trauma-informed practice to teachers and, provides strategies and interventions (such as Emotion Coaching, Gottman et al., 1997) to enable staff to address challenging behaviour. Rose et al. (2019) reported their findings demonstrated significant improvements in pupils' academic achievement in reading, writing and maths. In addition, there were significant decreases in sanctions, exclusions and overall difficulties. Teaching staff reported a positive impact on professional practice, adult self-regulation and emotional self-control, and were more confident when talking to children about emotions. The study, however, had a relatively small participant sample of teachers and students from 2 Local Authorities in the UK, limiting cross-cultural and socio-economic representation. Some of their data set also relied on subjective self-reporting, which could have provided room for bias.

Similarly, Kelly et al. (2020) evaluated the impact of an AAS programme from the perspective of supporting Looked After Children and other vulnerable learners. The evaluation included 17 schools, a mix of infant, junior, primary, secondary, a Pupil Referral Unit (PRU) and special schools, across one Local Authority in the UK. After one year of implementation, AAS schools reported they had become more inclusive, and noted that staff conversations regarding behaviour had changed, to include seeing the context of the whole child. Many of the participating schools moved away from a behaviourist approach of rewards and sanctions towards a supportive and inclusive ethos. The programme facilitated systemic changes and led to the creation of many more safe spaces and nurture areas in schools. AAS schools

reported that the intervention had led to 'happier children' who felt more valued and listened to within more nurturing and caring environments. It should be noted, however, that the study only reflected the data captured after the first year of implementation of AAS in the schools, so subsequent data will need to be analysed and evaluated to see the potential continued impact of the intervention.

Further to the promising evidence from the AAS studies (Kelly et al., 2020; Rose et al., 2019), Little and Maunder (2021) suggest that 'attachment aware' approaches should be implemented in schools across the UK. They argue that childhood trauma is a causal factor for disruptive behaviour in the classroom, and teachers should receive training on 'attachment aware' approaches to help them respond effectively. They conclude that the current COVID-19 pandemic has shown the importance of schools and educators to prioritise providing emotional support to children, young people and families, shifting from a performative educational culture. The current pandemic could provide a unique opportunity for schools to prioritise relationally-oriented practices moving forward, thus leading to more inclusive education settings.

Attachment-based group interventions (such as Nurture Groups, Boxall, 2002) have been used in school settings to support children and young people identified as having 'social, emotional and behavioural' difficulties, including children from disadvantaged and deprived areas and those that have been taken into care. Boxall's (2002) Nurture Group design provides a small group environment (between 10 and 12 children) for a certain period each day for a limited length of time over the academic year. Within the small group environment, children are able to build attachment relationships, express and develop their emotional literacy skills and access opportunities to develop their social skills and educational learning tasks.

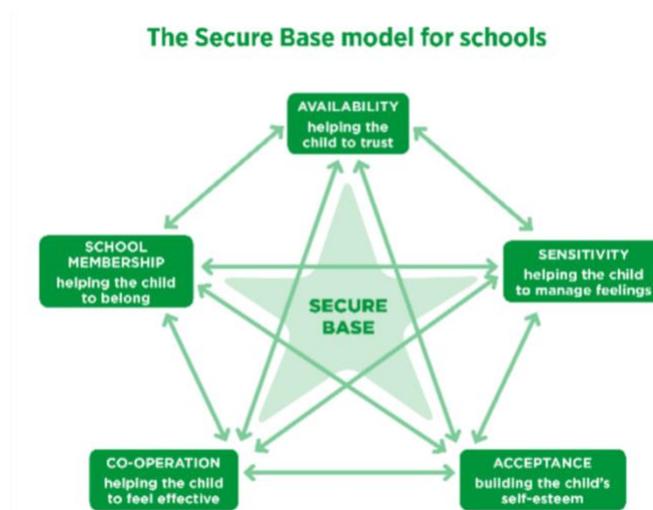
Reviews of studies of Nurture Groups (e.g. Hughes & Schlösser, 2014; Bennett, 2015) suggest that Nurture Group provisions have a positive impact on children's social, emotional, and behavioural difficulties; that improvements made are generally well-sustained over time; and that because children are better able to access the curriculum, as a result of these improvements, they make gains in their educational attainment. Sloan et al., (2020) conducted a large-scale evaluation of Nurture Group provisions in Northern Ireland. The evaluation provided clear and consistent evidence of improvements in social, emotional, and behavioural outcomes for children attending Nurture Groups compared to those in the control group. However, there was no evidence of improvements on academic outcomes (e.g. literacy and numeracy skills).

Beek and Schofield (2020) have developed a 'Secure Base model' (see Figure 2) as a framework for practice using an attachment-informed approach, promoting relationships and interactions within the school that build children's trust, reduce their anxiety, and enhance their capacity for finding satisfaction in education and learning. Initially the model was developed for social workers to plan, analyse, recognise progress and identify emerging difficulties for children and adolescents in long-term foster placements (Schofield & Beek, 2009). Research (Schofield & Beek, 2005) has demonstrated that, over time, positive caregiving across the five dimensions of the 'Secure Base model' provides a secure base from which the child can explore, learn and develop in a positive direction. By employing the key principles outlined in the framework, the school can act as a 'secure base' for all students, not only those that have been identified as 'vulnerable' or having insecure attachment styles. It has now been adapted for use in school settings, as part of a national project to promote attachment awareness in schools, to help improve

behaviour and reduce exclusions (Beek & Schofield, 2020). One of the key principles the authors adapted for use in schools was changing 'family membership' to 'school membership', highlighting the importance of schools to foster a sense of belonging for children and young people.

### Figure 2

*The Secure Base Model for schools by Beek & Schofield (2020).*



Retrieved from: <https://sites.uea.ac.uk/providingasecurebase/secure-base-in-schools>.

It could be argued, therefore, that trauma-informed and attachment-aware approaches to working with children and young people could provide useful and effective frameworks for practice and intervention for teaching staff in UK schools, in order to promote emotional wellbeing for students and staff, reduce exclusions and support children and young people to build safe and secure relationships with staff.

### **Exclusions: permanent and fixed term**

Attachment-aware and trauma-informed approaches may be particularly beneficial for children and young people who are 'at risk' of exclusion from school. These approaches aim to re-frame children and young people's behaviour as a form

of communication or 'survival skills', and provide support strategies and frameworks for staff to support the children and young people, rather than using more traditional, punitive approaches (Kelly et al., 2020; Little & Maunder, 2021; Rose et al., 2019). Under Section 52 of the Education Act (2002), Head Teachers in England may exclude pupils for a fixed period or permanently for disciplinary reasons. A pupil may be excluded for one or more fixed periods (up to a maximum of 45 school days in a single academic year). A fixed-period (or fixed-term) exclusion does not have to be for a continuous period and may be for parts of the school day (e.g. lunchtimes) (Department for Education, 2017). The government guidance emphasises that:

“permanent exclusion should only be used as a last resort, in response to a serious breach or persistent breaches of the school's behaviour policy; and where allowing the pupil to remain in school would seriously harm the education or welfare of the pupil or others in the school.” (Department for Education, 2017, pg.6).

There are concerns in England about the increasing rate of exclusions, particularly in secondary schools. Exclusions are estimated to cost £370,000 per young person affected across education, benefits, healthcare and criminal justice costs (Gill et al., 2017). Recent data (from 2017/18) suggests that the rate of permanent exclusions had slowed in secondary schools and has remained at 0.20 per cent (20 pupils per 10,000) (Department for Education, 2019). However, the data also shows that the majority of fixed-term exclusions occurred in secondary schools (compared to primary and special schools) in which the rate continues to increase from 9.40 per cent in 2016/17 (940 pupils per 10,000) to 10.13 percent (1,013 pupils per 10,000) in 2017/18. Procter-Legg (2018) argues that, in English schools, if such discipline approaches were effective “our exclusion rates would not be so high; those same

children would not be in trouble each time; and our alternative-provision sector would not be full to bursting point” (p.52). The negative impact of overly punitive disciplinary practices has been suggested by researchers as counter-productive because it represents an overreaction which can result in a clear worsening of students’ behaviour (Greenwood, 2002; Kupchik, 2010; Warin & Hibbin, 2016).

Past research has shown that permanent disciplinary exclusion often has many negative long-term consequences for all aspects of young people’s lives (Daniels et al. 2003; Parsons, 2009; Scottish Government, 2017). Additionally, the mental health needs of young people, both at risk of exclusion and currently excluded, are substantial (Cole, 2015). Irby (2014) argues that overly punitive discipline approaches alienate children and young people from the academic curriculum and those punished are more likely to enter into the school to prison pipeline, having huge implications for their entire lives.

In contrast, however, in Scotland the permanent exclusion rate reduced to an all-time low of just five cases in 2014/15 (Scottish Government, 2018). Rates for temporary school exclusions are also lower in Scotland than in England and continue on a downward trajectory. In a recent study by McCluskey et al. (2019), key aspects of the success in Scotland of reducing school exclusion were found to include: the effectiveness of a strategic emphasis on prevention; national and local collaboration and planning; and maintaining focus on the complexity of some young people’s lives and the often deep levels of disadvantage they experience.

The most common reason for both fixed-term and permanent exclusions in England is ‘persistent disruptive behaviour’ (Department for Education, 2019). O’Regan (2010) argues that there is a lack of consensus around the definition of ‘persistent disruptive behaviour’ and that it can be used to cover a wide range of

behaviours including: calling-out in class; annoying or distracting other students; general 'attention-seeking' behaviour; to more aggressive actions and verbal abuse of teaching staff. This could lead to inconsistencies between teaching staff having differing 'behaviour management' styles or experience (e.g. Newly Qualified Teachers: NQTs). The lack of a clear definition and criteria for exclusion due to 'persistent disruptive behaviour' may indicate that schools have different thresholds for making decisions to exclude pupils, highlighting the inconsistencies between schools and difficulties when comparing school statistics. The literature (e.g. Hébert, et al., 2018) indicates that children who have experienced relational and developmental trauma are more likely to struggle with noticing, modulating, and regulating their emotions and behaviour. In the school setting, this may present as behaviours that are disruptive to teaching and learning including: physical aggression, verbal abuse, impulsivity, and controlling behaviours (Little & Maunder, 2021; Treisman, 2017).

Schools have a requirement under the Equality Act (2010) to put reasonable adjustments in place to ensure that no child is ever unlawfully excluded because of their disability or additional needs. However, the Timpson Review (Timpson, 2019) showed that 78% of permanent exclusions issued were to pupils who either had SEN, were classified as 'in need' or were eligible for free school meals. Notably, 11% of permanent exclusions were to pupils who had all three characteristics. Furthermore, the increase in rates of exclusions were significant in areas of high deprivation (Department for Education, 2019). It could be argued that there is a correlation between an unmet need, emotional or academic, and lack of consideration given to the child's wider context, that puts them at risk of displaying 'persistent disruptive behaviours'. Schopler and Mesibov (1994) use the 'tip of the

iceberg' analogy: what is seen above sea level is the 'persistent disruptive behaviour', but what is hidden below sea level are the underlying, often complex, causes of the visible behaviour (for example, history of trauma, sensory processing differences, or stress).

King (2016) investigated 20 young people's experience of exclusion and the interconnected traumas and adversities they faced at home. The study employed a qualitative longitudinal research project approach, drawing data from young people's case histories alongside individual interviews. She found that all of the young people had experienced multiple traumas (e.g. parental bereavement, parental alcohol and substance misuse, domestic violence) and these traumatic experiences were often interconnected. There was a consistent correlation between problems happening at home and subsequent exclusions from school shortly after. She argued that the emotions created as a result of young people's experience of trauma played out negatively within their educational domain, ultimately resulting in their exclusion from school. It is therefore essential, she argues, for children at risk of exclusion to receive interventions at these critical times, and for schools to provide tailored support to maintain their inclusion within the setting. Although the study had a small sample size of 20 participants, King provided a unique perspective of the stories of young people's lives to understand their experiences of trauma and exclusion. Discipline-based school exclusions may be particularly harmful for students who have experienced trauma, in part because the act of social exclusion is often re-traumatising (Marcus, 2014; Balogh, 2016).

Research conducted by the Royal Society for the encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce ([RSA], Partridge et al., 2020) highlighted the complex web of factors within the education system and beyond, that contribute to the rising

number of exclusions in England. These included wider societal factors such as: rising poverty; increasing diagnoses of mental ill-health; increasing number of children with a social worker; and the systems that are lacking the capacity to manage the impact of these factors on the lives of children and young people. Additionally, they emphasised the consequences of policies that are contributing to the rise of exclusions, including: changes to the curriculum that make it more difficult for some children and young people to access learning; cuts to funding in schools; and cuts to funding for Local Authorities and support services working with children and young people (e.g. community-based youth clubs). Shifts in thinking, influenced by the 'zero-tolerance' culture in the US and unintended consequences of policies (such as Progress 8) may also be contributing to rising exclusions.

Grimaldi (2012), writing from a social justice perspective on Italian education, argues that current education and economic government policies and systems put emphasis on how children and young people need to change in order to fit into school systems, rather than considering what changes could be made to the system to better meet the children and young people's needs. Grimaldi further notes that such systems consider deviations in behaviour to reflect individual characteristics, rather than considering that differences may be caused by and/or maintained by the situations in which children and young people who are struggling to manage their emotions and subsequent behaviour. Gill et al., (2017) provided a review of school exclusions and social exclusions for children and young people in England. Gill et al. (2017) argue that schools operate within a system that rewards them primarily on the academic outcomes of students, and there are increasing incentives for schools to use cheap and short-term measures to improve results (such as exclusions). Thus, it is crucial to reflect on the complex systemic and contextual factors that influence the

increasing school exclusion rates across the English school system. It is pertinent to explore the concept of 'inclusion' for children and young people who might display 'disruptive behaviour' within the school setting, perhaps as a result of relational or developmental trauma, and are, therefore, 'at risk' of becoming excluded.

### **Inclusion**

One of the key factors identified by the review (McCluskey et al., 2019) of low Scottish exclusion rates was the focus on how deep levels of disadvantages can impact on the lives of young people. Disadvantaged young people are substantially more at risk of exclusion from school than their peers (Department for Education, 2019; Timpson, 2019). The literature indicates that children and young people who have experienced relational and developmental trauma are likely to have significant difficulties with regulating and managing their emotions and behaviour within the school setting (Treisman, 2017). The most common reason for school exclusions in England is 'persistent disruptive behaviour' (Department for Education, 2019), so it is therefore pertinent to focus on how teachers and school staff can support children at risk of displaying such behaviour, such as children who have experienced trauma.

Gazeley et al. (2015) directly link inclusive practice to reducing fixed-term exclusions. Rose et al. (2018) found that a group of schools working collaboratively to reduce fixed-term exclusions succeeded in developing more inclusive systems. Research from Ofsted comparing high and low excluding primary schools in socially deprived areas found the school's philosophy was one of the main determinants of its exclusion rate (Ofsted, 2009). Thus, the literature indicates that there is a relationship between inclusive practice and reducing exclusions (Stanforth & Rose, 2018).

Inclusive education, when implemented successfully, has numerous academic and social benefits, including ensuring the provision of quality education, improving learners' outcomes and promoting long-term social inclusion (Kefallinou et al., 2020). The concept of 'inclusion' was explored in a review paper by Nilholm and Göransson (2017) who reported a lack of clarity concerning the definition of inclusion, which varied between articles and, also at times, within the same article. The overwhelming majority of empirical research analysed in the paper understood inclusion to be a placement definition, i.e. where education takes place. Thus, the lack of clear definition to what 'inclusion' means with regard to research is likely to lead to a high level of variety of how it presents in schools and how it looks in practice. The SEN Strategy (Department of Education and Skills [DfES], 2004), for example, highlights that inclusion should be less about 'place', and much more about "the type of school that children attend: it is about the quality of their experience; how they are helped to learn, achieve, and participate fully in the life of the school" (DfES, 2004, p. 25) which may explain the focus on supporting children with additional needs within mainstream school settings (SEND Code of Practice, Department for Education & Department of Health, 2015).

The underlying theoretical aspects that define inclusion in schools and communities are useful to explore when considering practices that promote inclusive education. Ainscow et al. (2006) summarised the conceptualisations given to inclusive education into six main categories: (a) inclusion concerned with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND); (b) inclusion as a response to disciplinary exclusions; (c) inclusion as about all groups vulnerable to exclusion, (d) inclusion as the promotion of the school for all, (e) inclusion as 'Education for All', and (f) inclusion as a principled approach to education and society. UNESCO (2008)

describes the key factors of inclusive education for all students as: (a) promoting student participation and reducing exclusion from and for education; (b) the presence, participation and achievement of all students, but especially of those who are excluded or at risk of marginalisation. Key concepts emphasised include: SEND, reducing exclusions, vulnerable groups, and education that is available for all.

Kurth and Gross (2014), a researcher in the field of inclusive education and a special education teacher in the US (respectively), from their book 'An Inclusive Toolbox' define inclusive education as: "a student must have access to all of the supports and services he or she will need to participate fully in general education activities and curriculum" (p.5). Hence, it can be argued that inclusive education provides a means to move beyond traditional, deficit-based conceptualisations of students with disabilities and other forms of diversity, and move toward a more comprehensive approach to meet the needs of all students (Shogren et al., 2017).

With respect to the inclusion of children and young people with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND), over the past 30 years there has been a worldwide shift in thinking. Reports including The United Nations Salamanca Statement of 1994 extended the idea that mainstream schools must meet the needs of children with SEND (UNESCO, 1994), emphasising a universal 'right to education' as enshrined by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and reinforced in the World Declaration on Education for All (UNESCO, 1990) and Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities ([CRPD]; 2006). In England, as a result of the Warnock Report (1978) and the Education Act (1981) there has been a change in the way SEND is viewed and understood, through the introduction of 'statements' of SEND and an 'integrative' approach based on common educational goals for all children. Most recently, the SEND Code of Practice (2015) has a strong focus on

removing barriers to learning through disallowing schools to refuse students with SEND, and also strengthening the ability of parents and professionals to petition to LAs for Education Health and Care plan (EHC) assessments.

Norwich (2014) argued that inclusive education represents a move away from a medical model to a social model of disability. Kinsella (2020) supported Norwich's stance and emphasised that the change required for a school to becoming more inclusive demands a shift from individual to organisational pathology, the education system must move from the deficit model to one underpinned by a social model of disability. For children that display 'challenging' or 'disruptive' behaviour, an inclusive approach may also require a shift in thinking and practice from the individual to the wider context. When investigating the causation of challenging behaviour, Stanforth and Rose (2018) suggested differentiating between the 'individualising' model (where the cause of the challenging behaviour lies within the individual) and 'contextualising' model (where the cause of the challenging behaviour lies within the context or environment). Anning et al. (2006) also suggested that it is possible for people to have complex models of understanding where two models may co-exist or interact with one another. In practice, it may be useful for teachers and school staff to use the co-existing models to explore hypotheses for children's behaviour. For example, a child may have an underlying literacy need which is not supported within their English lessons, and have just experienced a parental bereavement, causing them to display 'challenging behaviour' at school.

Stanbridge and Mercer (2019) report that the language used to describe behaviours causing concern can have an important impact on how the behaviours are framed, and therefore responded to by teaching staff. They argue for the avoidance of language which predisposes within-person accounts of behaviour at

the expense of the situational and systemic interpretations. They emphasise that inclusive approaches to supporting children and young people rely on a situational perspective, leading to a more equality-based, social model of additional needs across school systems.

Essex et al. (2019) investigated the views around inclusion from the perspectives of student teachers. The majority of the student teachers in the study shared a deficit-based notion of inclusion, which promoted the use of strategies for the 'remediation' of individuals with particular characteristics (i.e. catering to the determined 'abilities' of children identified as having SEND needs or as 'low ability'). This reflects the concerns raised by Grimaldi (2012) and Gill et al. (2017). Although inclusion was recognised as a 'positive concept', achieving academic success was seen as a priority within their training and teaching practice. Therefore, it is important to note the potential ongoing tensions between teachers' professional and personal beliefs regarding implementing inclusion within their classrooms.

With regards to schools having an 'inclusive ethos', Hatton's (2013) research provides an insight into the difference in school ethos (school practices and staff views) between excluding and non-excluding primary schools. The school practices reported as features of an inclusive (non-excluding school) included: clear and consistent behaviour management strategies and policies; an emphasis on using preventative behaviour management strategies, implemented at a whole school level; staff using rewards more frequently than sanctions; and a sense of shared responsibility for the behaviour of all pupils within the school community. Staff beliefs differed between the schools, with non-excluding school staff describing the need to consider behavioural difficulties in a similar way to learning difficulties, and they felt confident in meeting the needs of all pupils in their setting. Excluding school staff

believed that some children's needs could only be met in specialist provisions. Furthermore, staff from excluding schools described a range of reasons as to why exclusions may be needed for some pupils, whereas non-excluding school staff expressed doubt about any benefits of exclusion. Thus, Hatton's research may indicate the importance of the school ethos in relation to inclusion.

For schools to be able to build and foster an inclusive ethos, MacFarlane and Marks Woolfson (2013) suggest that school leaders have a central role in promoting inclusion within their schools. Teachers' perception of their school head teachers' expectations predicted teacher behaviours for working with children with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties. They conclude that head teachers have an important role in communicating clear expectations of inclusive practice to staff, providing them with appropriate support and training, and promoting a collective sense of efficacy.

In terms of improving inclusion for children who display 'challenging behaviour', Standforth and Rose (2018) suggested that conditions that allow teachers to enhance their knowledge of students displaying challenging behaviour in order to understand and empathise with them, could lead to more inclusive teaching practice and reduce exclusions. Additionally, Gazeley et al. (2013) found that staff and students identified relationships as key to reducing exclusions. Malmqvist's (2016) study highlighted the need for schools to have an inclusive ethos with a dominant relational perspective in order to prevent exclusions for children displaying behaviour problems. Thus, supporting teaching staff to reflect on understanding children and young peoples' behaviour from contextual perspectives and, promoting the importance of relationships, could be key to creating meaningful change towards an inclusive ethos within school settings.

To summarise, the literature indicates that school exclusions have many negative long-term consequences for children and young people. Inclusive education is seen to be the most effective way of supporting all learners to engage and feel supported and achieve within their education setting. Shifting from a within-child to a contextual perspective of behaviour can lead to more inclusive practice from teaching staff. Inclusive schools promote and encourage an inclusive ethos, across the whole school community from senior leadership cascading down to teaching assistants and midday supervisory assistants. Establishing an inclusive ethos also includes promoting a relationship-based approach to preventing and managing challenging behaviour (e.g. trauma-informed approaches). This may be particularly beneficial for children and young people who struggle with understanding and managing their emotions and behaviour, including those who have experienced relational and developmental trauma.

### **‘Persistent disruptive behaviour’**

Those most at risk of exclusions are those that display ‘persistent disruptive behaviour’, as outlined in the exclusion data. The different terms given to describe such children and young people in both research and policy include: ‘challenging behaviour’ (Orsati & Causton-Theoharis, 2013); ‘behavioural, emotional and social difficulties’ (BESD) (Burton & Goodman, 2011; Pillay et al., 2013), ‘emotional and behavioural difficulties’ (EBD) (Scanlon & Barnes-Holmes, 2013) or ‘social and emotional and behavioural difficulties’ (SEBD) (Mowat, 2010). Sheffield and Morgan (2017) found that the young people interviewed in their research who were labelled as having ‘BESD’ needs were frequently unaware that they had a Statement of SEN, and that their presenting need was categorised as ‘BESD’. The evaluations of young

people towards the labels of BESD and SEMH were predominately negative. This is important when reflecting on professionals' use of language, particularly when characterising children and young people with needs related to their behaviour. If children and young people are displaying behaviour as a result of trauma or attachment-related difficulties, a label of SEMH or BESD may have an impact on their perception of themselves and how others perceive them.

Emerson (2001), a health researcher in the UK with a special interest in disability and social inequality, defines 'challenging behaviour' as:

“Culturally abnormal behaviour(s) of such an intensity, frequency or duration that the physical safety of the person or others is likely to be placed in serious jeopardy, or behaviour which is likely to seriously limit use of, or result in the person being denied access to, ordinary community facilities.” (Emerson, 2001: p.3).

This definition includes the physical safety of the individual child or young person or others, but could also include: absconding from school or when out on a school trip; verbal abuse; and damage to property. Stanbridge and Mercer (2019), educational psychologists, analysed which behaviours were reported to 'cause concern' on the referral forms for teachers to make requests for involvement from large Local Authority multi-disciplinary teams (made up of Educational Psychologists, Specialist Teachers and Specialist Practitioners). The referrals came from teacher participants from primary, secondary and special schools. These included physical behaviours (e.g. words such as 'violent' and examples such as 'hitting and kicking'); verbal behaviours (described as 'verbally aggressive' or 'offensive'); refusal (e.g. 'refusing to follow instructions' and 'not conforming'); general (behaviours that did not fit into any other category such as 'leaving the classroom'); emotional (using descriptors

such as 'anxiety' and 'fear' and specific internalising behaviours such as 'withdrawing' and 'crying'); and social (including 'lacking social skills' and 'seeking out physical contact'). They concluded that language could have an important impact on how behaviours are framed, and therefore responded to, from the perspectives of teaching staff.

Research indicates that children who display 'challenging' or 'problem' behaviour have more difficulty establishing positive relationships with teaching staff. For example, Spilt and Koomen (2009) explored teachers' narratives around children who displayed disruptive behaviour. Disruptive children appeared at risk for unfavourable relationships, as shown by elevated levels of teacher conflict, anger, and helplessness. When examining these narratives through an attachment and trauma-informed lens, it could be argued that teachers' misunderstanding and punishing 'challenging' behaviour could serve as a rejecting and re-traumatising experience, and therefore feed into the child's internal working model that they are unworthy.

Additionally, the Department for Education ceased using the term BESD and now use 'social, emotional and mental health' (SEMH). Perhaps this change from the government is a shift in thinking away from a 'within-child' view of behaviour and a more contextual approach to understanding behaviour. A lack of consensus around the language that professionals and researchers use can also indicate inconsistencies and confusion in understanding, supporting and managing children who display 'persistent disruptive' or 'challenging' behaviour. McDonnell (2019) argues for using a neutral term to describe such behaviours and advocates for the use of 'behaviour of concern'. Professionals should be mindful of the language they use and the implications that this language has on the children and young people

with whom they work (Stanbridge & Mercer, 2019). How teachers conceptualise and perceive 'challenging behaviour' is important, as Kos et al. (2006) reported that their attitudes shape their behaviour and practice within their classrooms.

Weiner (2006) describes a cognitive emotional model that suggests that the attributions people make to causes of behaviour affect their emotional responses which in turn affects the probability of particular behaviours. Weiner's model suggests that the attribution of control of behaviour is a core human judgement. There is a tendency to assume that another person's behaviour is under their control and that they behave intentionally (e.g. Ross, 1977; Sabini et al., 2001). Sanctions and consequences (such as exclusions, detentions, and isolation) are used to establish control over behaviour, in line with behaviourist theories (e.g. Skinner, 1963). This approach fails to acknowledge that some behaviours are not easily managed, and visible behaviours are complex (in line with the iceberg analogy, Schopler & Mesibov, 1994).

The attribution of control has been suggested as important in determining many aspects of organisational and individual responses to challenging behaviour (e.g. Armstrong & Dagnan, 2011; Phillips & Rose, 2010). For example, if a teacher perceives the attribution of control to be high for a child or young person displaying 'persistent disruptive behaviour' or 'challenging behaviour' they may be more likely to use a punitive discipline approach to behaviour management. Additionally, in line with Standforth and Rose's (2018) argument regarding causes of behaviour, teachers holding an individualising view of the cause of the behaviour (e.g. the child is naughty or 'attention-seeking') and high attribution of control, may be more likely to punish the child or young person for their 'challenging behaviour'.

Children and young people who have experienced traumatic events may display difficulties with key executive function skills such as impulse control, planning, goal-setting and decision-making as well as learning and memory skills (Arnsten, 1998; Arnsten et al., 2012; Noble et al., 2007; Raver, 2004;). Geddes (2006) also emphasised the attachment styles of children and young people and the impact of this on their ability to learn. Such difficulties may be interpreted by adults as displaying 'persistent challenging behaviour' and therefore punished by teachers, in line with their school's behaviour policy. Thus, it is important for teachers and school staff to have an increased awareness of the impact of trauma and attachment needs, and the impact this may have on the children and young people with whom they work. Teachers and school staff, in line with the psychological theory and research, can provide stability and high-quality relationships to help their students develop emotional regulation skills and resilience.

Carroll and Hurry (2018) reviewed the literature of effective provision to support pupils with SEMH needs. Underpinning all the successful programmes identified in the review was a positive approach adopted by teachers and school leaders to pupils with SEMH needs. Approaches that avoid a deficit model perspective and that support pupils to feel secure and foster relationships with teachers resulted in pupils who were more motivated to learn, and therefore at less risk of exclusion. Simpson et al. (2011) summarised essential features of effective SEMH provision which included: (a) qualified and committed professionals; (b) practical and functional environmental supports; (c) effective behaviour management plans; (d) relevant and effective social skills programmes; (e) robust academic support systems and ongoing evaluation of interventions against pupil outcomes and progress (Simpson, et al., 2011). Positive, high quality teacher-pupil relationships

were identified as a protective factor for children and young people identified as having BESD/SEMH needs (Sheffield & Morgan, 2017).

In Dimitrellou and Male's (2020) study, they explored the views of young people identified as having 'SEND' in mainstream secondary schools. Pupils with SEMH needs expressed the greatest dissatisfaction with their school, compared to pupils identified as having 'moderate learning difficulties' and children without SEND needs. Students identified as displaying challenging behaviour felt particularly dissatisfied with their relationships with teachers, TAs and peers. Pupils identified what makes a positive school experience for them, which included the following: receiving interesting and engaging lessons; effective classroom behaviour management; equal allocation of teachers' support; and positive relationships with teachers and peers. One of the main issues identified in the study was that the voices of pupils with SEND often go unheard due to ineffective mechanisms in place, where students do not have the confidence to put their views forward to staff, and/or there is little action or consideration to changes suggested by students. Schools should listen and 'hear' the voices of their students in order to create an inclusive environment for all.

The research conducted by the RSA (Partridge et al., 2020) emphasised that teachers experienced pressure to collect and report data, which impacted on the amount of time they had for building relationships. They also reported that they felt it was particularly difficult for secondary school teachers to build strong relationships with children and young people as they have less time with each pupil (some classes they see once per fortnight) and they have substantial reporting requirements. The Education Endowment Foundation (EEF; 2019) produced guidance on 'Improving Behaviour in Schools' and has emphasised the importance of the teacher-pupil

relationships which are key to good pupil behaviour. The authors identify that a good relationship ensures that a teacher can become aware of negative changes in a child's life before they manifest and begin to display in the classroom as 'challenging behaviour'. The teacher has the opportunity to think about the reasons behind the behaviour, taking into consideration the child's current or past context, and mitigate against the strong reasons that might result in the child or young person becoming excluded. It is also clear that secondary schools are in particular need of support to understand the reasons behind the increasing exclusion rates and access interventions to reduce rates.

## **Conclusion**

Thus, the literature indicates that exclusions, particularly fixed-term, are of growing concern in secondary schools. Children at risk of exclusion include those who have SEND, live in areas of high deprivation, and who have experienced trauma and attachment difficulties. The impact of exclusions has been researched thoroughly and indicates poor outcomes. Schools are under increasing pressure to support children and young people's mental health and emotional wellbeing within educational settings. The current COVID-19 pandemic may emphasise the need for further support in schools for both teaching staff and children, due to consequences not only because of bereavements as a result of the pandemic, but also long-term school absences and continual worldwide uncertainty. The existing literature suggests that a relational approach to managing children's wellbeing, whilst taking into consideration their context (e.g. a trauma-informed approach), provides a more inclusive ethos and reduces exclusions. Although there is a wealth of literature promoting trauma and attachment-awareness training, as well as attachment-based

approaches, as catalysts for positive change towards understanding behaviour and inclusive practice, there have been no studies (at the time of writing this review) examining the views of teaching staff in relation to their conceptualisation of 'trauma' and 'attachment'. The literature suggests that there are multiple, sometimes contradicting, conceptual understandings of 'trauma', 'attachment', 'challenging behaviour' and 'inclusion' from the perspectives of researchers. The conceptualisations from a teacher perspective, are therefore important to be able to understand current knowledge and how that might impact on their practice, as part of their 'frontline' role, working with children and young people who have experienced relational and developmental trauma. The focus of my research will therefore examine the perspectives of teachers regarding their conceptualisations of 'challenging behaviour', trauma and attachment and how this relates to holding an inclusive ethos and providing inclusive practice.

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## Part Two: Empirical Paper

### Abstract

This study explored the perspectives of mainstream secondary school teachers with regards to 'attachment' and 'trauma' and how their perspectives may be related to their practice of including children who may display 'challenging behaviour' in their classes and across the wider school environment. The purpose of the study was to provide insight into the existing views of secondary school teachers from a 'trauma-informed' perspective, with the aim of identifying good inclusive practice already in place. It also considered what role educational psychologists can take when supporting teachers manage and support those children who display 'challenging behaviour'.

Focus groups were conducted with a purposeful sample of 15 mainstream secondary school teachers and 12 teachers within the sample completed written tasks prior to their participation in the focus groups. Both the written tasks and the focus group questions investigated views around 'trauma', 'attachment', 'challenging behaviour' and 'inclusion'. Their responses were then analysed using thematic analysis. The main themes identified from the data collected were 'Emotional Regulation and behaviour'; 'Relationships and connection'; and 'Multi-faceted role of teachers'.

Key findings indicate that teachers' knowledge and understanding of children's experiences of traumatic events, including interpersonal or 'attachment-related' trauma, is related to the way that they perceive 'challenging behaviour'. Participants made connections between adversity within the home context and the impact that this often had on the emotions and feelings, and subsequent behaviour,

of children within the school setting. When thinking about schools embedding 'trauma-informed' approaches, the findings highlight the need for those promoting and facilitating such approaches (including school leaders and educational psychologists) to acknowledge the complex and extensive role of teachers within secondary school settings.

## Literature Review

### Introduction

In England, rates of both fixed period and permanent exclusion have been on the rise since 2013/2014 (Timpson, 2019). Past research has shown that permanent disciplinary exclusion often has many negative long-term consequences for all aspects of young people's lives (Daniels et al. 2003; Parsons, 2009; Scottish Government, 2017). Additionally, the mental health needs of young people, both at risk of exclusion and currently excluded, are substantial (Cole, 2015). The Timpson review (2019) indicated that 78% of permanent exclusions issued were to pupils who either had SEN, were classified as 'in need' or were eligible for free school meals. 11% of permanent exclusions were to pupils who had all three characteristics.

The most common reason for both fixed-term and permanent exclusions in England was 'persistent disruptive behaviour' (Department for Education, 2019). Children who have experienced trauma often have difficulties with regulating their emotions and behaviour in the classroom (Blodgett & Lanigan, 2018; Geddes, 2006;; Treisman, 2017). The literature suggests that there is a connection between attachment and trauma. 'Relational trauma' or 'attachment-related trauma' is used to describe children or young people who have experienced trauma within the context of their relationships, which are often interfamilial and/or with their caregivers (e.g., Treisman, 2017). For children who have experienced trauma within their interpersonal relationships (e.g., abuse or neglect), it is argued that relationships should be the main area for intervention and change (Pearlman & Courtois, 2005; Schofield & Beek, 2005; Treisman, 2017). Within the school setting, education professionals may serve as 'attachment figures' for children and young people (e.g.,

Zajac & Kobak, 2006), so that they can experience safe and trusting relationships, and thus provide potential for the development of resilience (Geddes, 2003, 2005, 2006). In a recent guidance document (Educational Endowment Foundation [EEF]; 2019) the importance of the teacher-pupil relationships was highlighted to be significant in facilitating positive behaviours from students. The authors emphasised that building teacher-student relationships ensures that a teacher can become aware of negative changes in a child's life before they manifest and begin to display in the classroom as 'challenging behaviour'.

There are calls to implement 'trauma-informed' and 'attachment aware' practices across English schools to help improve emotional wellbeing of students and staff and facilitate greater inclusive practice for students who are at risk of exclusion (e.g., Little & Maunder, 2021). However, there have been no studies to date exploring the perspectives of teachers in relation to their knowledge and experience working with children and young people who have experienced trauma and attachment-related difficulties. This study, therefore, aims to explore the perspectives of mainstream secondary school teachers with regards to 'attachment' and 'trauma' and how their perspectives may be related to their practice of including children who may display 'challenging behaviour' in their classes and across the wider school environment. The purpose of the study is to provide insight into the existing views of secondary school teachers from a 'trauma-informed' and 'attachment aware' perspective, with the aim of identifying inclusive practice already in place.

I will begin by placing the current study within the context of the current literature surrounding the key concepts: attachment, trauma, challenging behaviour and inclusion. This section will be concluded with the research questions. I will then

go on to discuss the methodology adopted for the current research study, including my epistemological and ontological position, the process of data collection, and the data analysis undertaken to address the research questions. The data, analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2013), will be presented and discussed. The implications of the findings in relation to the research questions are considered, and their position in relation to the existing literature is reviewed. To conclude, the value and limitations of the study, and suggestions for future research and educational psychology practice are summarised.

### **Attachment**

A key theory that has underpinned psychologists' understanding of child development is the theory of 'attachment'. Bowlby (1969; 1973; 1980) and Ainsworth and colleagues (e.g. Ainsworth, 1982; Ainsworth et al., 1978; Ainsworth & Wittig, 1969) have proposed that the primary relationship between an infant and their caregiver has a significant effect on their relationships and emotional development. Bowlby postulated that primary caregivers who are available, nurturing and responsive to the needs of the infant create an environment in which the infant feels a sense of security. The infant knows that the caregiver is dependable and reliable, a 'secure base', and is therefore safe enough to explore their world.

In the 1970s, Mary Ainsworth's research extended Bowlby's initial research around attachment, to include descriptions of 'attachment styles' they had identified as a result of the 'Strange Situation' procedure (Ainsworth & Bell, 1970). From this procedure, Ainsworth and Bell (1970) identified three main attachment styles: secure, insecure avoidant, and insecure ambivalent/resistant. A fourth attachment style, insecure disorganised, was later identified (Main & Solomon, 1990). Research

suggests that security of attachment is linked to child outcomes over long periods of time, including academic achievement, social competence, emotional regulation, attention and concentration skills, the capacity to accept challenges, and independence skills (e.g. Bergin & Bergin, 2009; Sroufe, 1996). Research (McConnell & Moss, 2011) has indicated that there are many variables from within the family system (e.g. maternal mental health) and contextual, environmental factors (e.g. negative life events) that may impact the stability and change in attachment styles over time, from infancy to adulthood.

It is argued that the primary attachment relationship organises the child's internal working model: their sense of self in relation to others (Bowlby, 1969; 1973; 1980). Secure children's internal working model is reflective of their experience that their attachment figure reliably provides protection, security, and comfort. This becomes an expectation for the responsiveness of others in general, that others are caring and trustworthy, and that the social world is a safe place (Ainsworth 1979; Bowlby 1973; Sroufe 1996). In contrast, children who have an internal working model of their attachment figure as inaccessible or unresponsive do not establish that others can provide feelings of trust, value and effectiveness. Therefore, they do not see the world as a safe place and people are not trustworthy or reliable (Bergin & Bergin, 2009). Some researchers (e.g., Geddes, 2006; Schofield & Beek, 2018) argue that internal working models are malleable to change, so with consistent and available attachment figures, children can develop a sense of security and a belief the social world as a safe place.

Within the school setting, education professionals may serve as 'attachment figures' for children and young people (e.g., Zajac & Kobak, 2006), so that they can experience safe and trusting teacher-student relationships, and thus provide

potential for the development of resilience (Geddes, 2003, 2005, 2006). Teacher characteristics, such as sensitivity, may have an influence on changing and revising children's internal working models that have previously developed within the caregiving relationship (Buyse et al., 2011; Sabol & Pianta, 2012).

Children who have experienced trauma within their caregiving or interpersonal relationships, such as abuse or neglect, are described as experiencing 'attachment related' or 'relational' trauma (Treisman, 2017). The literature (e.g. Hébert et al., 2018) indicates that children who have experienced relational trauma are more likely to struggle with noticing, modulating, and regulating their emotions and behaviour. In the school setting, this may present as behaviours that are disruptive to teaching and learning including: physical aggression, verbal abuse, impulsivity, and controlling behaviours (Little & Maunder, 2021; Treisman, 2017).

One of the key recommendations from a recent report into improving behaviour in schools was for teachers to know and understand their pupils and what influences their behaviour (EEF, 2019). Geddes (2018) found that when teachers were given explanations of where students' projected feelings were coming from (and time to discuss them) they made fewer referrals to outside services. Teacher-student relationships could, therefore, be a focus for intervention and change particularly for children and young people who have experienced relational trauma and attachment-related difficulties. As part of their role, teachers work with children and young people who have experienced attachment-related difficulties on a daily basis. Although there is an emerging evidence base and calls to use 'attachment aware' and 'trauma informed' practice in schools (e.g. Little & Maunder, 2021), to date, there have been no studies in the UK exploring the current perspectives of

teachers with regards to how they currently support children and young people who have experienced attachment-related difficulties (or relational trauma).

## **Trauma**

When analysing and understanding children's social and emotional development and behaviour in schools, it may be pertinent to explore hypotheses through a trauma-informed lens (e.g. Perry, 2009). The literature indicates that there is an important connection between attachment and trauma. Hughes (2004, 2006, 2009) suggests that the fundamental underpinning of attachment theory lies in physical and emotional safety. Children who have experienced trauma at the hands of their caregivers (e.g. neglect or abuse), i.e. relational trauma (Treisman, 2017) are not likely to view caregivers as being a source of safety. Within the school setting, research demonstrates that trauma can undermine a child's ability to learn, form healthy relationships, and regulate emotions and behaviours effectively within classrooms (Blodgett & Lanigan, 2018).

Treisman (2017) refers to 'developmental trauma' (e.g. van Der Kolk, 2005) to conceptualise trauma that occurs during childhood, a critical time where babies and young children's brains are absorbing new experiences and learning from their environments. Children who are exposed to victimisation and interpersonal trauma (including abuse and neglect) are at risk of significant immediate and long-term psychological distress and can lead to difficulties with: emotion regulation, impulse control, attention and cognition, dissociation, and interpersonal relationships (D'Andrea et al., 2012).

McDonnell (2019) emphasises the role of perception within the definition of trauma: what one individual finds to be traumatic may be different to another

individual, especially if they have experienced multiple traumatic events in their life. Treisman (2017) emphasises that traumatic events do not occur within a vacuum; they are influenced by multiple systemic, relational and contextual elements which are likely to affect the impact and consequences of the trauma on children, young people and adults. Factors including personal characteristics (Bowman, 1999) and the ability to cope (Compas et al., 2017) have been identified as significant regarding the impact of trauma upon individuals. Furthermore, research indicates that potential negative outcomes from experiences of developmental and relational trauma can be mitigated through building and maintaining a sensitive and caring relationship with a significant adult (e.g. Jackson & Martin, 1998; Gilligan, 2008).

Trauma-informed approaches have been growing in popularity in recent years from emerging promising evidence from the US (e.g. Purtle, 2020). Core principles of trauma-informed approaches across models include trauma knowledge, safety, choice, empowerment, and cultural competence (Hopper et al., 2010). Children and young people who have experienced traumatic events may present as disruptive, aggressive or 'oppositional' and, based on their behaviours, pathologised or misdiagnosed with conditions by professionals aligning to the more traditional medicalised model. Trauma-informed practice aims to reframe such behaviour as 'survival skills' developed in response to earlier traumatic experiences (DeCandia & Guarino, 2015).

There is a limited but growing evidence base from studies in the UK that suggest whole-school interventions focusing on increasing staff knowledge of attachment and trauma, and providing support for staff leads to positive outcomes for both staff and students (e.g. Kelly et al., 2020; Little & Maunder, 2021; Rose et al., 2019). Attachment Aware Schools (AAS) is an example of a whole school training

programme which was implemented and evaluated across 40 schools in 2 Local Authorities over a period of two years (Rose et al., 2019). The study had a relatively small sample size, and the data was collected over 2 years, so the long-term implications of the project are yet to be evaluated. However, the short-term results were promising, indicating improvements in pupils' academic achievements, and decreases in sanctions and exclusions.

It could be argued, therefore, that trauma-informed and attachment-aware approaches to working with children and young people could provide useful and effective frameworks for practice and intervention for teaching staff in UK schools, in order to promote emotional wellbeing for students and staff, reduce exclusions and support children and young people to build safe and secure relationships with staff. The evidence-base for the use of trauma-informed approaches in UK schools, although promising, is very limited at the time of writing. As stated previously, teachers and education staff use their expertise to support children who have experienced relational and developmental trauma as part of their role. It is pertinent, therefore, to investigate the good practice and knowledge already in place from the perspectives of teachers (i.e. a 'strengths-based' approach). There have been no research studies, to date, that have explored UK-based teachers' views and practice of supporting children and young people who have experienced trauma.

### **Challenging behaviour**

Without regular opportunities from a safe, consistent adult to understand and express their emotions, children who have experienced developmental or relational trauma often have difficulties with regulating their emotions and behaviour (Koomar, 2009; Treisman, 2017). Furthermore, these high-intensity emotions are often

displayed as externalising and internalising behaviours, including: physical aggression; verbal abuse; 'controlling' behaviours; sensory processing differences; difficulties with attention and focus; withdrawal and anxiety (Treisman, 2017). Such difficulties may be interpreted by adults within the school setting as displaying 'persistent challenging behaviour' or having Social, Emotional and Mental Health (SEMH) needs.

The most common reason for both fixed-term and permanent exclusions in England was 'persistent disruptive behaviour' (Department for Education, 2019). Past research has shown that permanent disciplinary exclusion often has many negative long-term consequences for all aspects of young people's lives (Daniels et al. 2003; Parsons, 2009; Scottish Government, 2017). Irby (2014) argues that overly punitive discipline approaches alienate children and young people from the academic curriculum and those punished are more likely to enter into the school to prison pipeline, having huge implications for their entire lives.

The literature indicates that children and young people who display 'challenging behaviour' or who are identified as having 'SEMH' needs can be successfully included within education settings. Key elements of effective support approaches for such children and young people have been suggested as: a positive approach adopted by teachers and school leaders to pupils with SEMH needs; and supporting pupils to feel secure and foster relationships with teachers (Carroll & Hurrey, 2018). Positive, high quality teacher-pupil relationships were identified as a protective factor for children and young people identified as having 'SEMH' needs (Sheffield & Morgan, 2017).

Thus, it can be argued that children who struggle with understanding and managing their emotions and behaviour, including those that have been affected by

trauma and attachment-related difficulties, are at risk of exclusion within English schools. It may be useful, therefore, for teachers to have an understanding of the impact of developmental and relational trauma on children's capacity to manage their feelings and behaviour within the school setting. Through a 'trauma-informed' lens, 'challenging' or 'disruptive' behaviour could be interpreted as 'survival skills' or a communication of an unmet emotional need, and therefore teachers can provide the appropriate support rather than taking a more traditional, punitive approach to behaviour. Although there are numerous studies investigating teacher perceptions of managing 'challenging behaviour' (for a review see Armstrong, 2014), exploring 'trauma' and 'attachment' and their relationship to 'challenging behaviour' from the perspectives of UK teachers have not been explored to date.

## **Inclusion**

The literature indicates that school exclusions have many negative long-term consequences for children and young people. Inclusive education is seen to be the most effective way of supporting all learners to engage and feel supported, achieve within their education setting (Kefallinou et al., 2020); and reduce exclusions (Gazeley, et al., 2015). For children who display 'challenging behaviour', inclusive settings have been found to differentiate between the 'individualising' model (where the cause of the challenging behaviour lies within the individual) and 'contextualising' model (where the cause of the challenging behaviour lies within the context or environment) (Stanforth & Rose, 2018).

From the literature (e.g., Hatton, 2013), key elements of inclusive (non-excluding) school settings involve: clear and consistent behaviour management strategies and policies; an emphasis on using preventative behaviour management

strategies, implemented at a whole school level; staff using rewards more frequently than sanctions; and a sense of shared responsibility for the behaviour of all pupils within the school community. The literature indicates that schools incorporating an ethos with a dominant relational underpinning, building and maintaining teacher-student relationships, are key to promoting inclusive education and reducing exclusions for children displaying 'challenging behaviour' (Gazeley et al., 2015; Malmqvist, 2016; Stanforth & Rose, 2018).

### **Rationale for study**

Enthusiasm and popularity of 'trauma-informed' approaches, care, and practice have increased significantly across various different fields in the US over the past decade (e.g. Purtle, 2020). Children and young people who have experienced traumatic events may present as disruptive, aggressive or 'oppositional' and, based on their behaviours, pathologised or mis-diagnosed with conditions by professionals aligning to a more traditional medicalised model. Trauma-informed practice aims to reframe behaviour as 'survival skills' developed in response to earlier traumatic experiences. The limited but growing evidence-base from UK-based research within schools (e.g. Kelly et al., 2020; Rose et al., 2019) suggests that whole-school approaches to increasing staff knowledge around trauma and attachment, and providing strategies and interventions for supporting students with emotional regulation have led to positive outcomes for staff and students.

Trauma-informed interventions for school settings are directed at the staff level (rather than individual or groups of children) and aim to increase knowledge and provide strategies and interventions in order to create and sustain meaningful systemic change. At the time of writing, there have been no studies exploring the

perspectives from UK teaching staff about how their knowledge and expertise around trauma and attachment may impact on their practice. Furthermore, the existing research suggests that there are relationships between education settings who promote 'behaviour as communication' and contextualised perspectives of challenging behaviour and inclusive education settings. There have been no research studies at the time of writing which have explored teachers' views of, 'attachment', 'trauma', 'challenging behaviour' and their relationship with inclusion. This study therefore aims to investigate the perspectives of mainstream secondary school teachers with regards to their knowledge and experience of supporting children and young people who have been affected by trauma or attachment-related difficulties (relational trauma), 'challenging behaviour' and how these children might be supported and included within the classroom and wider school environment.

### **Research questions**

Based on the above review of the existing literature, the following overarching research question was formulated:

How does the knowledge and expertise of mainstream secondary school teachers around 'attachment', 'trauma', and 'challenging behaviour' relate to inclusive practice?

The sub-questions were:

- How do teachers conceptualise 'attachment' and 'trauma'?
- How do teachers conceptualise 'challenging behaviour'?
- How do these views impact on their tendency to hold inclusive beliefs?

## **Methodology**

This section outlines the methodology adopted for the present research study and details the process of data collection and data analysis undertaken to address the research questions. This includes discussion of the ontological and epistemological position adopted by the researcher, and critical reflection of how this shaped the design requirements of how data was collected and analysed within the study.

### **Ontological and Epistemological position of the researcher**

The researcher's ontological and epistemological position sits within Critical Realism. Archer et al. (2016) postulate that the critical realist position is to accept that much of reality exists and operates independently of our awareness or knowledge of it. Easton (2010) argues that critical realists accept that reality is socially constructed, but not entirely so. Knowledge of the world is always 'historically, socially, and culturally situated' (Archer et al., 2016). Critical realists believe in the fallibility of knowledge, so the job of social science researchers is to keep searching for knowledge about causal mechanisms in different research contexts (Benton & Craib 2001: p.120). Research from a critical realist perspective aims to provide a more truthful knowledge of reality.

To explain something, from the perspective of critical realism, involves first describing and conceptualising the properties and causal mechanisms generating and enabling events. Qualitative methods assist the researcher to explore causal processes because causal mechanisms are examined in the social world through real open contexts where they interact with one another in often contingent and

unpredictable ways. Easton (2010) posits that critical realism and case study methodology are well suited as companions in research. Case research provides the opportunity for the researcher to tease out and disentangle a complex set of factors and relationships in a certain situation, or case. Case study methodology, using the approach of Yin (2003), aims to identify a context in which a specific causal mechanism is identified and explored. Case study design allowed the researcher to explore the concepts across the two relatively similar schools (with regards to exclusion rates) i.e. that the cases may have similarities and therefore be closer to the 'truth', and therefore more in line with the critical realist position.

The aim of the study was to draw out understandings and perceptions of teachers and provide further knowledge to a limited area of research. A small-scale qualitative case study design allowed the researcher to explore the viewpoints in greater depth and with more contextual information than perhaps another design would offer (e.g., a large-scale quantitative questionnaire). Thus, a small-scale qualitative case study was deemed appropriate to explore current practice from the perspectives of teaching staff in 2 mainstream secondary schools in order to gain an insight into the mechanisms within the schools.

## **Design**

The researcher, from an ontological and epistemological position in critical realism, chose a case study design, to employ qualitative methods in order to investigate the research questions. A case study design enabled the researcher to closely explore and examine the data within a specific context. Other research designs were considered, such as action research, however a case study design allowed the researcher to investigate the research questions which focused on

exploring concepts within a specific context (secondary schools), within a currently limited area of literature. Action research may have been more suitable for research questions regarding the impact of changes to a context (e.g., putting in place an 'attachment aware' whole school approach). According to Yin (2003) a case study design should be considered when: (a) the focus of the study is to answer "how" and "why" questions; (b) you cannot manipulate the behaviour of those involved in the study; (c) you want to cover contextual conditions because you believe they are relevant to the phenomenon under study; or (d) the boundaries are not clear between the phenomenon and context. An exploratory case study design enabled the researcher to answer "how" questions; cover contextual conditions relevant to the study; and explore the boundaries between the phenomenon and context.

Yin (2003) and Stake (1995) have suggested placing boundaries on a case to ensure that the research questions are appropriate for the study. Baxter and Jack, (2008) suggest that researchers employing case study designs 'bind the case' to ensure that the study remains reasonable in scope. There were boundaries identified relating to time, activity and place. As there were restrictions in place due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the researcher was restricted to collecting data remotely, using virtual means. The researcher sought to approach mainstream secondary school teachers within the Local Authority where she was working as a trainee educational psychologist (TEP) and within the constricted timescales it was deemed appropriate that two schools would be reasonable. Mainstream secondary school teachers were included within the 'boundaries' due to the data indicating that exclusions in secondary school settings were an increasing issue in England.

The type of case study employed was 'exploratory', which Yin (2003) defines as exploring those situations in which the intervention being evaluated has no clear,

single set of outcomes. The case study could be defined as a single case study involving two secondary schools. Schools were identified using the Local Authority's (LA) data related to fixed term and permanent exclusions and were chosen due to their similar low rates of exclusions. Furthermore, School A and School B had similar numbers of students on roll (approximately 950) and have both male and female students ('mixed'). They are both part of academy trusts. The percentage of students eligible for Free School Meals (FSM) (as of January 2020) at School A was 7.3%; and School B was 12.7%. The FSM average from the wider region in the academic year 2019-2020 was 13.6%. School B is a faith school. Further defining characteristics of the schools have not been included to ensure anonymity.

### **Data sources**

An essential feature of case study research is the use of multiple data sources, a strategy which also enhances data credibility (Patton, 1990; Yin, 2003). Each data source is one piece of the 'puzzle', with each piece contributing to the researcher's understanding of the whole phenomenon. It was decided that focus groups would be employed, alongside written tasks, to gain the perspectives of the participants and provide the means to source the data. Focus groups were facilitated, as opposed to individual interviews, in order to gain multiple perspectives and allowed participants to engage in discussions with each other, which may have offered greater insight into mechanisms within each of the school contexts (Kidd & Parshall, 2000). Focus groups can also facilitate more sensitive and personal disclosures than individual interviews (Guest et al., 2017). Written tasks, which were used in the Barker and Mills study (2018), provided an additional source of data that were provided to participants before the focus groups. The written task may have helped to familiarise the participants with the topics discussed as some participants'

made reference to the sentence starters and case study during their focus groups. Due to time and COVID-19 restrictions, data were collected electronically via virtual focus groups and written tasks were emailed to participants.

### **Ethical considerations**

The design and execution of this research was done in accordance with ethical guidelines set out by the School of Education and Lifelong Learning Research Ethics Committee at the University of East Anglia (please see Appendix 1 for Ethical Approval). The proposal referenced the guidelines and standards in line with the BPS Code of Ethics and Conduct (2018) and the BPS Code of Human Research Ethics (2014). Informed consent was obtained, electronically via email, prior to the study from the teachers involved and an information sheet was provided. The information sheet outlined the aims of the study, the time and commitment required, and where and how the findings would be disseminated. During the recruitment phase, it was emphasised that participation was voluntary, and teachers were not obligated to participate in the study. Documents relating to informed consent can be found in Appendices 2 and 3.

Participants were informed that they would be able to withdraw their data until the information from the written tasks and focus groups were transcribed and therefore anonymised. Participants were discouraged from mentioning names of any children or young people within the focus groups or written tasks. All mentions of the schools were anonymised into 'School A' or 'School B' and any identifying features of the school (e.g., name of town or LA) were kept anonymous. The data from the recordings and the written tasks were held on a password protected laptop and stored in line with GDPR regulations (2018) and LA data protection policy.

One of the potential ethical issues considered as part of planning the study was the potential emotive concepts discussed, particularly related to trauma and attachment. Discussions held as part of the focus groups may have provoked attachment/trauma experiences of the staff involved. As part of the recruitment and gaining informed consent, participants were made aware in advance of the potentially emotive topics presented and reminded that their involvement in the study would be voluntary. It was agreed that participants would be signposted means of support if necessary (e.g., speaking to their line manager). They were encouraged to get in touch with the researcher, if needed, to discuss further support options. This did not prove necessary ultimately, to the researcher's awareness.

The potential influence of power dynamics was also considered. In order to negate potential power dynamics and so that participants would feel comfortable enough to share their experiences openly in the group, the participants were grouped into: 'Senior Leadership Team' (SLT) staff (e.g., Head teacher, deputy head teacher, SENCo) and 'main grade' teachers.

## **Method**

### **Sample**

Purposive sampling is a technique widely used in qualitative research for the identification and selection of information-rich cases for the most effective use of limited resources (Patton, 2002). The purposive sampling technique was employed for this study. As highlighted in the Literature Review section, the literature indicated that a more inclusive ethos leads to reduced exclusions in schools. Schools were identified by using the Local Authority's (LA) data related to fixed term and permanent exclusions. In order to gain a deep understanding of inclusive practice in

secondary schools, the two schools that were identified and approached for involvement in the study had the lowest exclusion rates over the past two academic years (2018-2019; 2019-2020). The 2019-2020 academic data was analysed part-way through the year, but it provided a similar picture to the 2018-2019 data. This approach was in line with other research involving English secondary schools (e.g. Gazeley et al., 2015) which indicated a connection between a strong ethos of inclusion and lower exclusion rates.

The sample was sourced from a two secondary schools in a single Local Authority in the Eastern Region of England. Participants were all secondary school teachers at both Key Stage 3 (11-14 years old) and Key Stage 4 (14-16 years old). Some participants also taught Sixth Form students (16-18 years old). Participants recruited were either members of the Senior Leadership Team (SLT) or were 'main grade' teachers. Secondary school teachers were recruited due to their knowledge and experience working with children who display 'challenging behaviour'.

The head teachers of the schools were contacted via email by the Principal Educational Psychologist of the LA Psychology Service and asked whether they would like to become involved with the study, alongside the information and consent forms (see Appendices 2 and 3 for copies of these). The head teachers referred to their Special Educational Needs Coordinators (SENCOs) for the researcher to arrange recruitment for the study. The researcher had an established working relationship with the SENCO from School A. The SENCO approached potential participants on behalf of the researcher, and therefore acted as a 'gatekeeper'. The ethical implications of the gatekeeping role as part of the recruitment process were discussed within research supervision. The participants were approached by the assigned gatekeepers and may have felt some obligation to participate in the

research study. The participant sample was discussed with the gatekeepers in an initial meeting, and it was agreed that staff who would be approached for potential participation would be representative of the staff team (e.g. a wide range of years of experience, different subjects, and different roles and management experience). It is important to note that the gatekeeping role of the SENCOs impacted the participant sample, as the researcher relied on the gatekeepers as part of the recruitment process.

Information and subsequent informed written consent was obtained from participants who were interested in becoming involved in the study. The written tasks were disseminated by the researcher after receiving signed consent forms. The researcher and SENCOs arranged the times for the virtual focus groups to be facilitated by the video conferencing platform, Microsoft Teams.

**Table 1**

*Participants*

Participant	School	Focus group	SLT*/main grade
1	A	1	SLT
2	A	1	SLT
3	A	1	SLT
4	A	1	SLT
5	A	2	Main grade
6	A	2	Main grade
7	A	2	Main grade

\*SLT = Senior Leadership Team e.g. Head teacher, deputy/assistant head teacher, SENCO

Table continues

**Table 1 (Continued)**

*Participants*

Participant	School	Focus group	SLT*/main grade
8	A	2	Main grade
9	B	3	Main grade
10	B	3	Main grade
11	B	3	Main grade
12	B	4	SLT
13	B	4	SLT
14	B	4	SLT
15	B	4	SLT

\*SLT = Senior Leadership Team e.g. Head teacher, deputy/assistant head teacher, SENCo

### Data collection and Procedure

Data collection was carried out in a case study design, comprising two sources of data collection: qualitative written tasks and virtual focus groups.

#### *Written task*

Information was gathered using a written task that was sent to all participants prior to attending their online focus group. The writing exercise was similar to the one employed by the Barker and Mills study (2018) and used sentence starters and a short case study to explore participant views regarding 'challenging behaviour'. There was no mention of 'attachment' and 'trauma' within the written task. This was intended within the design of the written to gain the views of participants regarding 'challenging behaviour' without having 'attachment' and 'trauma' prompts, to potentially gain a more balanced and honest perspective on 'behaviour'. This was with regard to attribution theory (Weiner, 2006), which suggests that the attributions people make to causes of behaviour affect their emotional responses which in turn

affects the probability of particular behaviours. Furthermore, the study by Kos et al. (2006) reported that teacher attributions about children's behaviours shaped their own behaviour and practice within their classrooms. Fifteen requests were sent, and 12 written tasks were completed. A copy of this written task is in Appendix 4.

### ***Online focus groups***

Focus groups were chosen in order to utilise the capacity of group dynamics and group discussion, in contrast to individual interviews which do not provide that advantage (Kidd & Parshall, 2000). Caution was taken and adequate preparations made, as highlighted by Acocella (2012), to minimise the cognitive and communicative risks potentially presented by using the focus group technique. It was intended, at the beginning of the research process, that the focus groups would be in-person and located within the school environment. However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and restrictions put in place by the government and the Post-graduate Research department at UEA, all in-person data collection was prohibited. The researcher conducted all focus groups virtually via Microsoft Teams. The questions for the focus groups can be found in Appendix 5.

Focus groups took the form of 'mini-groups' and were made up of groups of 3 or 4 participants. The literature (Greenbaum, 1998; Barbour & Kitzinger, 1999) describes mini groups as usually of 4 to 7 participants, having good internal homogeneity that will facilitate the 'freeing emotions process' in members. Focus groups can facilitate more sensitive and personal disclosures than individual interviews (Guest et al., 2017). It could be argued that the discussions that occur within peer/colleague situations, such as focus groups, may encourage disclosures differently than the interviewer-researcher relationship (Coenen et al., 2012). Focus

groups were conducted online via Microsoft Teams. Some participants joined their focus groups from within the school setting (i.e. from an office or classroom) and some joined from their own homes. In one focus group, two of the participants provided their views via the 'chat' function due to technical issues with their microphones. Participants were split into groups according to the SLT/main grade categorisation: SLT teachers together and 'main grade' teachers together. It was hoped that this would encourage greater honesty and trust to share their views as colleagues. The same questions were asked to both groups of participants (SLT and 'main grade') in order to gain further insight into similarities across each of the secondary school contexts (e.g. whole school ethos).

Data were collected in the summer term of 2020, after completed consent forms were received. Online focus groups were facilitated by Microsoft Teams, and lasted from 35 minutes to an hour. The focus groups were recorded using the video and audio features of Microsoft Teams, and the audio data was transcribed by the researcher verbatim while simultaneously anonymised. An example of a transcribed focus group extract can be found in Appendix 6.

## **Analysis**

Thematic Analysis is a mode of analysis that fits the declared ontological and epistemological position of the researcher in relation to the present study. Critical realism looks for tendencies not laws, and tendencies can be seen in rough trends in empirical data. Data collection in critical realism studies helps to identify demi-regularities for further analysis. Demi-regularities can be effectively identified through qualitative data coding. A thematic analysis, with use of the template proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006), was completed to identify patterns of meaning and

experience across the entire dataset collected from participants. According to Braun and Clarke (2013), this method involves seven steps: transcription, reading and familiarisation, coding, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and finalising the analysis. Examples of thematic analysis stages are included in Appendix 7.

Baxter and Jack (2008) emphasise that the researcher must ensure that the data are converged in an attempt to understand the overall case, not the various parts of the case, or the contributing factors that influence the case. A strategy suggested to ensure that the researcher stays focused on the original case is to involve other researchers to provide feedback on the analysis phase (Baxter & Jack, 2008). The researcher sought regular advice and feedback from her research supervisors, as well as checking with other post-graduate researchers/TEPs as part of her university cohort.

## Results/Findings

The following section outlines the findings of the data collection. In order to collect the data, fifteen teachers were included in four virtual focus groups: two in each school. Participants discussed their experiences of supporting children who displayed challenging behaviour and their understanding of 'attachment' and 'trauma' within the school context. Data were also collected via a written task which was emailed to the participants prior to the focus group. The written task is included in Appendix 4 and was completed by twelve participants. The data collected were analysed using the thematic analysis template proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). The thematic analysis process followed the six phases: familiarisation with the data; coding; generating initial themes; reviewing themes; defining and naming themes; writing up. However, the limitations of the analysis process should be acknowledged, in relation to trustworthiness and rigour. The researcher was completing the research independently, and therefore did not have the privilege of co-researchers working through data analysis to provide additional rigour and trustworthiness to the process. It should be noted that the researcher engaged with regular research supervision and was able to reflect and discuss the coding, initial themes, and defining and naming themes steps of the process with her research supervisor and other post-graduate researchers. Furthermore, the researcher kept a reflective research log as part of this process. A sample of transcribed interview is included in Appendix 6. Examples of thematic analysis stages are included in Appendix 7.

The major themes are summarised at the outset of the section, as seen in Figure 3. Each major theme is presented and detailed within a separate sub-section

of the section. The sub-themes contained within each major theme are outlined and discussed in turn.

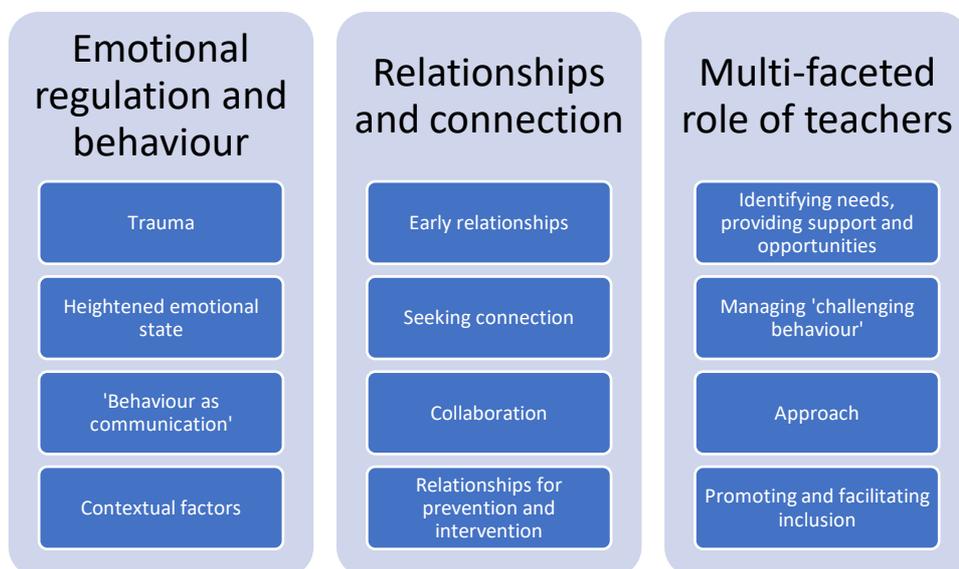
### Summary of Main Themes

Following several iterations of grouping codes and refining themes, the following major themes were identified across the data:

- Theme 1: Emotional regulation and behaviour
- Theme 2: Relationships and connection
- Theme 3: Multi-faceted role of teachers

### Figure 3

*Summary of Main Themes and Subthemes*



### Theme 1: Emotional regulation and behaviour

The theme “emotional regulation and behaviour” was apparent across the discussions and written tasks from all participants across the focus groups and across the two different schools. This theme relates to the presentation of ‘challenging behaviour’ experienced by the participants. Participants highlighted the relationship between emotions, feelings and behaviours displayed by the children and young people the teachers support with regards to their ability, or inability, to regulate their emotions and the resulting behaviour which occurred.

The following subthemes comprised this theme:

- i. Trauma
- ii. Heightened emotional state
- iii. ‘Behaviour as communication’
- iv. Contextual factors

### ***1.i. Trauma***

The analysis of the data provided an insight into teachers’ conceptualisation of ‘trauma’. Within this subtheme, teachers’ views indicated that trauma was defined as being a serious, stressful incident or ongoing incidents for individuals. The traumatic event or experience would have lasting and potentially ongoing implications for individuals’ mental and physical health. One participant, however, suggested that the impact of traumatic events could be mediated by coping skills.

Some participants expressed that ‘trauma’ was usually a negative, stressful single event. Other participants commented that ‘trauma’ could be defined as recurrent negative experiences (for example historical abuse in the home context). Examples provided included physical, emotional and sexual abuse, relational trauma, neglect, the COVID-19 pandemic, and bereavement.

The participants reflected that trauma or traumatic experiences were usually difficult to process and may require additional professional intervention with regards to diagnoses and psychological support. Some participants made references to the medical, psychological and emotional implications of trauma, including Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). One participant provided examples of children who they had worked with whose trauma impacted them significantly:

*“But we’ve had children who’ve had serious health issues from trauma, we’ve had children lose their hair, I’ve dealt with a child who has lost their speech. The physical stress of that environment has meant that they are unable to communicate with you to their problems” (Participant 6, School A).*

This participant’s comments reflect their belief that the impact of traumatic events can be severe with regards to the physical implications of stress on children and young people’s lives. Children’s ability to share their ‘problems’ with adults at school, and perhaps build trusting relationships, could be hindered by their experience of trauma. Teachers may need to have an awareness that experiences of trauma can lead to complex presentations within the school setting and have the knowledge and expertise to be able to support them. One participant reflected on potential protective factors relevant to the impact of traumatic experiences:

*“some people might go through experiencing quite little trauma...so it’s down to life experiences and exposure to different life events really...and the coping mechanisms that someone might have to process them. So, two people going through two very similar events, but it will cause more trauma in one because they haven’t got the skills or abilities or means to process it in a way to avoid being left with the trauma or the impact of the trauma” (Participant 14, School B).*

This participant's comment suggests that they conceptualise trauma as being related to coping, which may be a mediating factor to potential negative outcomes. Individual differences, including skills and abilities to process and cope with trauma, and potential previous 'life experiences' and contextual factors could result in different outcomes for children and young people. It could be important for teachers to be aware of how experiences may be perceived as 'traumatic' by children and young people, depending on their circumstances and how that may affect the impact of the traumatic event on their lives and how they manage at school. This could be important for teachers to be able to support children and young people who have experienced trauma, to have an awareness of protective and risk factors, and help to develop coping skills to manage challenging situations. It could be argued that this participant has a hopeful perspective to 'trauma', and that children and young people are not necessarily destined for poor outcomes, such as mental illness and extreme physical symptoms, and that teachers could play a key role in the supporting young people's emotional wellbeing.

### ***1.ii. Heightened emotional state***

Analysis of the data revealed that teachers conceptualised 'trauma' and difficulties related to attachment as having significant consequences on children and young people. At school, participants expressed that children and young people who had been affected by trauma often had complex presentations. Some participants reflected that the presentation of trauma-related difficulties at school were displayed as the reduction of children's ability to cope or manage to regulate their emotions effectively. Some participants commented on the 'emotionally heightened' state of

children and young people within the school setting, and that seemingly small, insignificant events or changes could lead to substantial emotional reactions:

*“We’ve got somebody at the moment who is already dealing with just the amount of change that they have had to endure that something as meaningless as say losing a cat has put that particular student back tenfold, er they are really, really struggling...it brings on those suicidal thoughts... they do not see a way out” (Participant 6, School A).*

This suggests that this participant views trauma to impact on children’s ability to cope and manage the challenges of daily life. Something that may seem relatively minor from an outside perspective can have devastating effects on children that have already experienced instability in their lives. This participant highlights that they are aware that experiencing significant psychological distress, including suicidal thoughts, can occur as a result of traumatic situations. Children and young people may not have the coping skills, as discussed previously, and therefore appear to be ‘emotionally heightened’ and struggle with the demands of the school environment. One participant articulated their thoughts about the complex emotional presentation of young people who had experienced trauma within the school environment:

*“there’s an element of panic and nervousness you can see as well with students, depending on what they’re doing, they might have some very safe spaces...you can see it like, an up and down kind of reaction in different subjects and different areas” (Participant 15, School B).*

This suggests that this participant has worked with children and young people who have experienced trauma, and that, at school, they presented as ‘panicked’ and ‘nervous’: emotionally heightened states. The participant did express that the children and young people with whom they had worked may present as being ‘up

and down', that they struggled in some situations, but were able to manage their emotions in other situations, those that were identified as being 'safe'.

The views of the participants in relation to children and young people who had experienced traumatic events were that they could present at school as being 'emotionally heightened' and struggle with coping with the changes and challenges as part of navigating the school environment. It seems that the findings indicates that it would be important for teachers to have a sympathetic understanding of the potential impact of trauma on the presentation of children in school in order for them to be able to provide appropriate support.

### **1.iii. 'Behaviour as communication'**

Many participants believed the children who display 'challenging behaviour' do so as a method of communicating how they are feeling. Some participants commented that children who display challenging behaviour do so as a result of an unmet or unsupported need in the classroom. With regards to children who were 'emotionally heightened' as a result of trauma and attachment-related difficulties, some participants commented that they often would become overwhelmed and stressed which can present as 'challenging behaviour'. One participant provided an example of how a sensitive topic covered in classes can result in distress and discomfort for some students:

*"so erm thinking of one example for instance, they were looking at alcohol, the young person who had been taken into care because of an alcoholic parent and he just couldn't verbalise 'this is too much, I can't cope with it' so you know then started off on, on to being erm quite challenging...it can be that*

*they bring up issues for them that they then can't say" (Participant 12, School B).*

This indicates that this participant believes children and young people communicate how they are feeling through their behaviour. This young person had experienced trauma related to issues of alcohol use within their home context. This lesson may have led to a display of 'challenging behaviour' as a result of feeling distressed by the nature of the topic covered within the lesson. Some participants, however, believed that behaviour was sometimes a choice for children and young people. One participant commented: *"it is purposefully going out of their way to do something whereas it's behaviour talking rather than them actually communicating their issues erm a little bit more."* (Participant 6, School A). This suggests that this participant conceptualises behaviour as a method of communication to some extent. It indicates, however, that this participant may believe that for some students, the behaviour that they display is deliberate and by choice, perhaps as a result of their 'issues'. One participant articulated their perspective on the relationship between feelings and behaviours from their experience of working with young people:

*"they are just scared, scared of perhaps how they are feeling, they don't know how to handle their feelings, erm how they are actually feeling...the one person that can perhaps help them is their teacher...there's normally very good reasons behind it" (Participant 13, School B).*

This suggests that this participant recognises the key role of teachers with regards to supporting young people at risk of displaying 'challenging behaviour'. This participant conceptualises 'challenging behaviour' as children and young people communicating that they are scared, they do not understand their emotions, and that they need support from their teacher. For this participant, behaviour is not a 'bad choice' made

by students. Teachers, therefore, can provide a source of regulation to children who are feeling overwhelmed or stressed. By focusing on what the child might need (e.g. support to understand their emotions) and understanding the reasons behind their behaviour, the situation can move forward positively.

#### **1.iv. Contextual factors**

In addition to experiences of trauma and 'behaviour as communication', there were contextual factors that were raised by some participants. These were boundaries and consistency, and socio-economic factors. Boundaries and consistency were highlighted by one participant as an area of difficulty for some students and staff within their school setting:

*"It could be sometimes that they need dealt with in a different way and that's resulted in them being kind of... being frustrated with the way that it's being dealt with and because it's not consistent across the board and that's then caused them to challenge that behaviour" (Participant 10, School B).*

This suggests that this participant feels that the way that staff support children and young people may be inconsistent and lead to displays of challenging behaviour. Teaching staff who approach difficult situations differently, according to this participant, have more positive outcomes when preventing and managing 'challenging behaviour'. Having clear, consistent boundaries in place with associated consequences was something that some participants recognised as to be important within their settings.

In contrast, one participant highlighted the lack of a whole-school embedded approach to behaviour in a previous school: *"It also depends on the school setting...one school in particular, there was almost a culture of misbehaving..."*

*Whereas, that would never happen at School A, that sort of culture of misbehaviour doesn't happen there"* (Participant 6, School A). This indicates that this participant conceptualises 'challenging behaviour' and the management of 'challenging behaviour' as an important reflection of the school ethos and culture. A whole school approach may be significant, therefore, for preventing and managing incidents involving 'challenging behaviour'.

Some participants discussed their views on the relationship between socio-economic factors, mainly deprivation, and behaviour. One participant commented on the impact of deprivation on the children that they had worked with:

*"You had children that came from single family backgrounds who are on the poverty line, that parent who might be working 16 hours a day who can't pick that child up from school, perhaps they've forgotten their lunch... at my poorer school, children weren't the centre because they couldn't be, it was a case of just making sure they had enough money to get by"* (Participant 6, School A).

This suggests that some of the participants conceptualised 'challenging behaviours' and deprivation to be related. However, it is unclear whether the link is linear or compounded by additional associated factors, such as emotional availability of adults, consistent boundaries within the parenting relationship, whether or not basic needs such as reliable access to food, clothing and care have been considered in relation to deprivation and poverty. Teachers may be required, therefore, to provide additional pastoral support to meet the needs of students living in areas of high deprivation. Staff that struggle with consistency and clear boundaries for students may experience greater incidents involving 'challenging behaviour' and poorer outcomes for students.

**1.v. Summary - Emotional regulation and behaviour**

This theme captured several subthemes related to emotional regulation and behaviour. Participants discussed their conceptualisation of trauma, and the ongoing impact that trauma has on individuals' mental and physical health. The ability to cope and manage the consequences of trauma varied by individuals and depended on additional factors such as coping skills.

Participants commented that children and young people would often appear to be 'emotionally heightened', and that the changes and challenges occurring within the school would activate a significant emotional response or reaction. Furthermore, participants recognised the relationship between emotions and behaviour, and that often displays of 'challenging behaviour' were the consequence of children who had become emotionally dysregulated. Participants reflected about the role of the teacher in identifying unmet needs and providing support in order to help their students feel calm and manage 'challenging behaviour'.

Finally, some participants identified further contextual factors that they believed to be related to emotional regulation and behaviour. These included consistency and boundaries, both at home and within the school setting, and socio-economic factors, specifically the relationship between poverty and deprivation, and children who display 'challenging behaviour' at school.

**Theme 2: Relationships and connection**

The theme "relationships and connection" encapsulated the participants' views in relation to early relationships with regard to discussions around 'attachment' and the resulting connection-seeking behaviours that participants' had experienced within the school setting. Furthermore, this theme incorporated the subtheme

'collaboration' within which participants' explored views relating to working with parents, children and young people and other colleagues. The last subtheme was 'relationships for prevention and intervention', where the participants expressed their views regarding using relationships as a way to prevent and mediate 'challenging behaviour'.

The following subthemes comprised this theme:

- i. Early relationships
- ii. Seeking connections
- iii. Collaboration
- iv. Relationships for prevention and intervention

### **2.i. Early relationships**

Participants discussed and expressed their conceptualisation of 'attachment'. Many participants related 'attachment' to early relationships that infants have with their parents and caregivers:

*"so our first relationships are with our early years and infancy is with our parents, well it's supposed to be, and I think that if that is broken down a little bit erm it, it then goes into how people relate to people in the future"*

*(Participant 11, School B).*

This indicates that this participant viewed early attachment relationships as significant to children's development of relational skills, and that if these relationships 'break down' they may have a lasting impact on that child. Furthermore, there were discussions across the focus groups around 'attachment disorders' and some references to 'insecure attachments'. For example, this participant commented on how there can be issues with attachment relationships:

*“you have erm problems with attachment, whether that’s erm attachment disorders, that become scared of leaving their parent because they feel unloved or something is going to happen to them. Erm so you can get insecure attachments develop if that relationship right from the start isn’t done correctly” (Participant 1, School A).*

This relates to the previous participant’s view around the significance of the early attachment relationship providing a template for future relationships for that child.

This participant suggests some reasons for why the relationship might break down, such as feelings of fear, mistrust and insecurity, and potentially having long term negative consequences.

One participant commented on how they understood early attachment relationships to be significant beyond the foundations of relational skills:

*“it starts right from birth and is kind of the bond that is built between a parent and their child. Erm some of it is related to body language, some of it is to do with kind of interaction and stimulation, it’s shown to have a massive impact on brain development through early childhood and can... impact later in sort of school days, to do with language development, processing speed, working memory” (Participant 14, School B).*

This indicates that this participant conceptualises early attachment relationships to be built through a ‘bond’ between a parent and their child, which is facilitated through interactions and stimulation. This bond has neurodevelopmental effects which can be noticed later by teachers in the school setting. The significance of attachment relationships, starting with infant-caregiver relationships in the early years, was acknowledged by some participants. It may be pertinent, therefore, for teachers and teaching staff to have an understanding of how an experience of attachment related

difficulties may impact children and young people within the school setting, their relational skills and their ability to work with a variety of different staff.

### **2.ii. Seeking connections**

Analysis of the data suggested that participants referred to 'seeking connections' as part of their conceptualisation of 'attachment' and 'challenging behaviour'. The participants provided their observations and experiences working with children and young people at their schools who have a need to seek connections. These connections were with their peers, their parents and with teachers. Some participants highlighted that children and young people who had experienced attachment-related difficulties would often display 'challenging behaviour', in order to fulfil their need to seek connections and gain attention from staff. One participant commented on their understanding of the importance of relationships and their connection to individuals' emotional wellbeing:

*"feeling happy, satisfied, better and worth enough one needs...one particular thing or person or else they will just feel low or unwanted. People have a need to be wanted in some form or another and we look for that attention to different people and different situations" (Participant 7, School A).*

This indicates that this participant viewed relationships as a space for having emotional needs met, and when that does not happen it can lead to negative feelings. Seeking attention and connection from people seems to be important, to this participant, in order to feel positive emotions and develop a sense of self-worth.

References to children and young people with 'attachment difficulties' and their 'attention-seeking' behaviour, both within the home and school context, were common amongst participants. One participant commented on the relationship

between 'attachment' and 'challenging behaviour', from children and young people who seek negative attention or reactions from adults within the school setting:

*"In terms of attachment, again I'd say, attention...what you would call classic challenging behaviour...talking when they shouldn't be, coming out of seat, challenging rules, challenging it verbally, even going towards verbal abuse, anything like that it can just be them wanting some interaction with a member of staff" (Participant 10, School B).*

This indicates that this participant conceptualises the presentation of 'attachment-related difficulties' as children seeking attention and connections with adults through their 'challenging behaviour'. Children and young people who display such behaviour at school may be at risk of sanctions and disciplinary action, as well as difficulties building positive relationships with staff. It may be useful for teaching staff to be aware of children and young people who have experienced attachment-related difficulties, and the potential impact this may have on their ability to manage their feelings, emotions, and behaviour within the school environment. This expertise could be fundamental for staff to be able to provide appropriate support and foster positive relationships with children and young people.

There were comments from participants relating to observations and experiences of young people becoming dependent on staff, when discussing views related to 'attachment'. One participant stated that students becoming dependent on particular members of staff could be difficult to manage: *"we get issues with students forming attachments to certain members of staff, ... that people will form a relationship with one member of erm the support team and then not be willing to work with others"* (Participant 12, School B). The conceptualisation of 'attachment' as 'dependency' was common amongst participants across the focus groups. For

teachers to provide appropriate support for children and young people with attachment-related difficulties, it may be important for teachers and support staff to have the expertise to be able to provide the appropriate support so that safe, trusting relationships can form the basis for feelings of security and developing independence.

### **2.iii. Collaboration**

Analysis of the data indicated that within the conceptualisation of ‘attachment’ and ‘challenging behaviour’, collaboration was highlighted as an important approach towards positive relationships and positive outcomes for children and young people. This subtheme encapsulated the participants’ perspective on collaborative working, with parents, students and other colleagues within the school, and outside professionals and communities. One participant commented on the importance of listening to students as a starting point for collaborative working:

*“A lot of students, especially with challenging behaviour... think it’s the school against them, when actually we’re just trying to facilitate them to get to where they need to go next. So I think... being like ‘okay we want the best for you, what do you want, what do you need?’... and they feel like they’ve been listened to, they feel like they’ve been heard, you’ve given them the time and now we can move on” (Participant 11, School B).*

This suggests that this participant is aware of the negative feelings that children and young people may have towards ‘the school’ as a whole system, and teachers being part of that system. This participant believes that giving students some time and listening to what they might need is an important step towards working together in a positive direction.

Another perspective discussed by participants was collaborative working with parents and colleagues:

*“That’s a, like a team approach...that includes the home team as well and the student...have all got to work together in understanding what are the triggers to the behaviour...then it is us as adults to know how to overcome those barriers and to work with the student to identify how those barriers can be overcome” (Participant 2, School A).*

This suggests that collaborative working as a ‘team’, from this participant’s perspective, can be beneficial when problem-solving complex situations involving children who display ‘challenging behaviour’. Building relationships and working collaboratively with parents and the student can be central to understanding and problem-solving around ‘challenging behaviour’. Information can be gathered and shared amongst the ‘team’ in order to work more effectively towards a shared goal.

#### ***2.iv. Relationships for prevention and intervention***

The final subtheme reflects the views of the participants regarding relationships as a space for preventative working and intervention for students who may be displaying, or are at risk of displaying, ‘challenging behaviours’. One participant provided their view that getting to know students and understanding them was important to providing them with the appropriate support:

*“when you are dealing with any type of behaviour, is about knowing the student and making sure you understand how they work [P11 nodding]...and treat them as a human being like you said...so it’s just how you deal with it. You get a lot more with honey than you do with vinegar” (Participant 10, School B).*

This reflects a relational approach to teaching, learning and 'behaviour management' for this participant. Relationships are key to preventing 'challenging behaviour'. Getting to know and understand students is beneficial to preventing behaviour concerns that may have occurred if teachers use a 'vinegar' or negative, more punitive approach.

One participant commented on the detrimental effect of the narratives and attributions that particular students carry with them at school:

*"for years this particular student had a reputation...as being a bad kid...other teachers would look at him and see trouble... perhaps we should give every kid a fresh start, because someday, you never know, they might actually sort themselves out" (Participant 9, School B).*

This indicates that this participant believed that providing children with a 'fresh start' to change their existing narratives could result in positive changes with the relationships they can build with teachers and, as a consequence, their behaviour. Relationships were identified by participants as being key to preventing and managing 'challenging behaviour' incidents within the school setting.

## **2.v. Summary – Relationships and connection**

This theme captured the subthemes related to 'relationships and connection' from the views of the teacher participants. Early relationships were discussed regarding 'attachment' and their significance in the development of relational skills and emotional wellbeing throughout childhood. Participants viewed early attachment relationships with caregivers to children seeking connections with adults and peers in the school setting. Participants' perspectives focused on children they believed to be 'attention-seeking' at school, and provided their understanding of the reasons behind

this behaviour: they had an unmet emotional need that they were looking to be fulfilled by adults or peers. The issue of 'dependency' upon adults was also raised in relation to 'attachment'.

Collaboration was another subtheme that highlighted the participants' views around the importance of listening and working together with students towards a positive working relationship at school. Working as a 'team' with parents and colleagues was also key in understanding young people from a holistic perspective and achieving shared goals. Building relationships were fundamental for understanding young people and preventing potential behavioural incidents.

### **Theme 3: Multi-faceted role of teachers**

The theme "multi-faceted role of teachers" was apparent across all focus groups and from all participants. It relates to the complexities involved within the role of a teacher in a secondary school, and the expanding responsibilities being a teacher brings. Teachers are required to develop and provide their expertise and approaches to teaching and learning within their role, but there are complex challenges highlighted as part of that too.

The following subthemes comprised this theme:

- i. Identifying needs, providing support and opportunities
- ii. Managing 'challenging behaviour'
- iii. Approach
- iv. Promoting and facilitating inclusion

#### ***3.i. Identifying needs, providing support and opportunities***

The analysis indicated that participants believed that an important aspect of their role as a teacher was identifying needs, in order to provide support and opportunities to all students across the school community. These beliefs were related to participants' views of 'inclusion'. One participant provided an example of a child they had supported where there was an unmet need due to their parent's financial situation:

*"I mean I had a lovely experience of a girl whose mum couldn't afford to purchase things for her, we put a lot of support in place...and she was a high-flyer, she was an A\* student...But schools, dare I say it, don't have the time or even the funding to put that individual support in place. Some are very lucky, some unfortunately slip through the net" (Participant 6, School A).*

This suggests that this participant considers identifying needs and providing support to be especially beneficial for some students, as the student in the example went on to achieve very well academically. Furthermore, according to this participant, the role of the teacher extends much further than purely providing children with subject knowledge in their classrooms. Being able to provide essential items for children and young people enables them to succeed with their learning. However, the participant reflects on the feasibility of that approach, considering the timing and funding limitations of large secondary schools.

One participant reflected on the impact of 'challenging behaviour' on their motivation to provide opportunities:

*"if you do have a challenging class, as a teacher you are not going to go completely out of your way to make that lesson, shall I dare say fun? You are not going to provide any other opportunities say from other universities or*

*colleges, or extracurricular trips or anything like that because of that treatment of perhaps those few students within that class” (Participant 6, School A).*

This suggests that this participant’s ability and motivation to provide extracurricular and higher education related opportunities are affected by the behaviour of the students in their class. It may be that ‘challenging classes’ potentially have less access to engaging and educational opportunities due to their impact on the teacher’s motivation and energy. Providing opportunities and support for students was viewed by participants as being key elements of the teacher role.

One participant expressed that, in an inclusive school, providing opportunities for students was not only the role of teachers, but also the wider school community and staff team:

*“I know that in an inclusive classroom, it’s not treating everyone the same, it’s treating everyone according to their needs, so I would say that within school – and that would be staff and students – just being able to, again, fully be themselves and thrive within themselves” (Participant 11, School B).*

This indicates that this participant views providing opportunities to all, according to individual needs leads to a school community that is able to thrive and feel comfortable and be celebrated for their individuality. According to this participant, that is a key indicator of an inclusive school.

### **3.ii. Managing challenging behaviour**

This subtheme encompasses the participants’ conceptualisation of ‘challenging behaviour’ and the role of teachers to be able to manage ‘challenging behaviour’. Participants emphasised their view that ‘challenging behaviour’ had a

significant impact on their ability to teach. One participant provided their view on how challenging behaviour has impacted their lessons:

*“If you’ve got a student in your class who purposefully goes out of their way to not listen to yourself, to not listen to SLT, to not listen to anybody else and displays various episodes of behaviour you cannot teach. It’s as simple as that, you are fighting fires and the teaching element cannot happen”*

*(Participant 6, School A).*

This participant refers to managing ‘challenging behaviour’ comparable to ‘fighting fires’, and in such an environment they are not able to manage the difficult situation and teach their lesson at the same time. This reflects the reality of managing challenging situations within the classroom setting whilst trying to teach, and the stresses and difficulties that come with the teacher role.

Furthermore, participants commented on the impact of ‘challenging behaviour’ on their time and attention during lessons: *“you have to disrupt your own teaching to deal with that disruption...if you’re constantly having to do that throughout the lesson, it’s going to impact the learning of everyone in that room”* (Participant 10, School B). This indicates that children who display ‘challenging behaviour’ are viewed to be disrupting the teaching and learning of others within the classroom. This relates to the previous subtheme ‘connection seeking’ where teachers recognised that children would attempt to provoke reactions or seek negative attention from adults in order to get their needs met. The impact on other learners is significant for this participant and for many others. Perhaps the removal of children for displaying ‘challenging behaviour’ can be viewed as beneficial for the learning of the other children in the classroom. The analysis suggested that managing

'challenging behaviour' whilst trying to achieve expected professional and learning targets for all other students can be extremely difficult and stressful for teachers.

### **3.iii. Approach**

This subtheme comprises the approach that participants viewed teachers to have when managing challenging situations in their lessons and across the school setting. One participant made references to important personal characteristics of teachers as "*caring*", having "*warmth*" and a "*sense of humour*" (Participant 7, School A). Another participant commented that "*showing respect*" to students (Participant 9, School B) was an important approach. It could be argued that these skills are key to building relationships with students. One participant posited their view that it was important for teachers, particularly for those dealing with 'challenging behaviour', to separate the behaviour from the young person:

*"I think it's so important when I'm speaking to the student, just to remove the behaviour from the person...they feel like 'ugh all the teachers pick on me, it's so sad', and I'm just like do you know what, you are a good person"*  
(Participant 11, School B).

This indicates that this participant views the importance, as discussed previously, of listening and attending to the needs of children and noticing their strengths. Providing them with consequences and boundaries are also important when managing 'challenging behaviour' and remembering that they are a child, and they should not be defined by their behaviour.

Another participant reflected on their beliefs about the effective approach to teaching and managing behaviour:

*“Where teachers that work with a bit of flexibility, that had good relationships with their students, I get less things coming to me than necessarily the ones that will treat the behaviour policy as black and white, because behaviour isn’t word-for-word, it’s always a shade of grey, it’s always in the middle”*

*(Participant 10, School B).*

This highlighted that this participant viewed flexibility as a strength for teachers who could successfully build relationships and manage, and perhaps prevent, incidents involving ‘challenging behaviour’. Flexibility, showing respect to students, being able to separate ‘behaviour’ from students’ narratives, showing that teachers care, showing warmth and can share their sense of humour with students, were key skills and approaches identified for teachers who were successful in building relationships and managing challenging behaviour.

### **3.iv. Promoting and facilitating inclusion**

This subtheme encapsulates the participants’ views that promoting and facilitating inclusion is part of the varied role of a teacher within a secondary school setting. Some participants expressed that representation and role-modelling were part of the role of teachers in order to facilitate inclusion. One participant commented on how they believed representation to be important for promoting an inclusive ethos: *“I’m dyslexic...and my kids know that...it’s about recognising that the students have someone to relate to...it’s about having a different demographic of your staff to show you do have inclusivity”* (Participant 6, School A). This indicates that this participant views representation to be a key element of an inclusive school environment, with teachers and support staff representing and providing positive role models for a diverse student community. Perhaps this also relates back to the

subthemes 'relationships as prevention and intervention' and 'approach', that teachers are relatable and approachable to students which can facilitate trust to build relationships.

Participants noted that they felt that inclusion is promoted and facilitated by teachers in leadership roles: *"I think it is also about being relentless as leaders, we're relentless in that we promote inclusivity...we are relentless in wanting to promote that across the whole school"* (Participant 3, School A). This indicates that this participant feels that promoting and modelling inclusion 'relentlessly' was a key responsibility of members of staff in leadership positions. This approach should then disseminate across the whole school community.

One participant expressed their view about how inclusive practice is incorporated into the school culture: *"I sometimes don't understand how other schools can't be that inclusive, because I don't think it involves masses of work, it's about the way we work"* (Participant 12, School B). This suggests that working to promote and facilitate inclusion, for this participant, is not an additional role for teachers, but actually it is deeply embedded in the role of teachers and wider school community as an inclusive approach to education.

### **3.v. Summary – multi-faceted role of teachers**

The data suggests the participants viewed the role of teachers as much more complex than 'information-providers' within their own classrooms. Participants viewed the role of the teacher to include identifying needs and providing opportunities and support for all students, which led to greater inclusive practice. Teachers were expected to manage 'challenging behaviour', whilst meeting the needs and ensuring the whole class was learning, which was emphasised as being

demanding and often draining. Promoting and facilitating inclusive practice was also acknowledged as being part of the role of a teacher within a secondary school.

Teachers viewed themselves as being role models to the student population. School leaders were identified as key for modelling and promoting inclusive practice.

## **Discussion**

The following section considers the implications of the findings in relation to the research questions and their position in relation to the existing literature. Further critical reflection is made on the limitations of the current study, and the implications for future research and the role of the educational psychologist in this field are discussed.

### **Aims of the research**

The aims of this study were to explore teachers' conceptualisation of 'attachment', 'trauma', and 'challenging behaviour'. These views were explored in order to ascertain where inclusive practice may already be in place, or identify areas in which support may be required for teachers who support children with 'challenging behaviour'. The previous literature around 'trauma-informed practice' is decidedly lacking from the perspectives of teachers, so this research aimed to provide greater insight from those that are working directly with children and young people who have experienced 'trauma'.

### **Findings in relation to research questions and literature**

The following section summarises the findings from the analysis in relation to the research questions that were posed at the outset of the study, detailed below.

The over-arching question posed:

How does the knowledge and expertise of mainstream secondary school teachers around 'attachment', 'trauma', and 'challenging behaviour' relate to inclusive practice?

The sub-questions were:

- How do teachers conceptualise 'attachment' and 'trauma'?
- How do teachers conceptualise 'challenging behaviour'?
- How do these views impact on their tendency to hold inclusive beliefs?

The following sections review the findings in terms of each research question in turn.

### **How do teachers conceptualise 'attachment' and 'trauma'?**

#### ***Attachment***

The majority of participants' conceptualisations included references to the impact of early attachment relationships on the development of children, and the positive and negative consequences of these on the children that they work with. Participants expressed words such as 'nurture', 'bond', and 'connection' when describing attachment relationships with primary caregivers. Many participants framed attachment relationships in a more negative or medicalised perspective, for example making references to 'attachment disorder' and 'attachment issues'. Participants referred to some students as 'attention-seeking', who would often seek connections from adults in the school setting by provoking negative reactions (via 'challenging behaviour'). This supports Geddes' work (2006) within which she emphasised that children's attachment styles can influence their engagement with learning and relationships they have with teaching staff at school.

The impact of early attachment relationships was described by participants to be wide-ranging, including long-lasting impacts on relational skills, emotional wellbeing and brain development. Teachers' understandings of attachment were consistent with the research around attachment theory (Bergin & Bergin, 2009; Sroufe, 1996) connecting security of attachment to child outcomes (including

academic achievement, social competence and emotional regulation skills). Participants viewed relationships as significant for children who had insecure attachment styles as a result of their early relationships. However, it did not seem that participants were aware of the importance of the school as a 'secure base', and the potential change to children's working models result of secure attachment figures at school (Geddes, 2006; Schofield & Beek, 2014). This could be an important focus for development for some teaching staff. If they are aware of the possibility of building relationships, and have the skills and strategies to act as 'attachment figures', attachment styles and internal working models may shift, leading to more positive outcomes.

### ***Relational trauma / 'attachment difficulties'***

Some participants' conceptualisations included references to the child's home context when discussing their views around attachment. They expressed that children coming from home environments where there was abuse or inadequate parenting were some contributing factors to the students' developing attachment-related difficulties (experiencing 'relational trauma', Treisman, 2017). Some participants made reference to children who were experiencing attachment-related difficulties which impacted their ability to recognise, understand, and manage their emotions and feelings. Some participants reflected that some of the children they had worked with were often 'emotionally heightened' at school and would find it difficult to cope with the changes and challenges that were part of the school environment. These views are consistent with the literature (e.g. Bergin & Bergin, 2009; Blodgett & Lanigan, 2018; Perry, 2009) that suggests that children who have experienced inaccessible or unresponsive attachment figures develop an internal

working model of the social world that reflects feelings of distrust, insecurity and unreliability. The world is scary and unsafe, and these feelings and beliefs impact children's ability to regulate their emotions and behaviour (Perry, 2009; Treisman, 2017). Attachment was commonly confused with 'dependency', with some participants referring to children and young people becoming 'over-attached' or not wanting to work with other members of staff after sustaining a relationship with one particular member of staff at school. This could be a potential area for training and development for staff.

### ***Trauma as an individual experience***

The participants' conceptualised 'trauma' as a negative, stressful event or experience for an individual or recurrent negative experiences (for example historical abuse in the home context). Examples provided included physical, emotional and sexual abuse, neglect, the COVID-19 pandemic, and bereavement. The participants reflected that trauma or traumatic experiences were usually difficult to process and may require additional professional intervention with regards to diagnoses and psychological support. This may reflect a medicalised perspective on trauma, that trauma leads to mental illnesses or disorders, with participants making references to children with 'PTSD'. As a result of this perspective, teaching staff may feel that they lack competence or the skills to be able to work with children who have experienced trauma.

### ***The impact of trauma***

The participants highlighted that trauma usually has a long-lasting, negative impact on individuals. Some of the teachers were able to reflect that it may take

some time after the traumatic event for individuals to show symptoms (e.g. of a mental illness such as PTSD) or express their feelings to be able to access support. The view that the impact of trauma can be long-lasting, and feelings of stress can be activated by environmental factors was held by a few participants. Some participants articulated trauma can be identified as the impact upon an individual, which differs from person to person. Interestingly, one participant highlighted that the impact of traumatic events can be mediated by protective factors or coping mechanisms, which reflects the literature about coping (Compas et al., 2017). Furthermore, this perspective also reflects the literature (McDonnell, 2019; Treisman, 2017) which suggests that whether or not an event or experience is perceived as traumatic depends on the individual and their protective factors, which are likely to affect the impact and consequences of trauma. This view was not widely held by the participant groups, so it may be that further development could be put in place for staff in this area. It should be noted that, in contrast to the literature (e.g., Gilligan, 2008; Jackson & Martin, 1998), participants did not specifically comment on their potential role in building sensitive, caring relationships with children and young people to be able to mitigate the negative outcomes of developmental and relational trauma. This could be an area for further training, to be able to provide an alternative perspective of trauma, in contrast to the 'medicalised' perspective mentioned previously.

### ***Presentation within the school setting***

Many participants commented on the complexity and variance of observed behaviours from the children and young people they had worked with. Some participants made reference to specific internalising behaviours and externalising

behaviours, for example making the link between trauma and attachment-related difficulties and 'challenging behaviour' in the classroom. Mostly, participants made reference to the impact of the children who were displaying these behaviours on the learning of others and their ability to teach their lessons. It is important to note that the findings indicate that the role and expectations of teachers are increasing and expanding, with the demanding nature of managing 'challenging behaviour' acknowledged by the participants. The limited but gradually increasing evidence-base around trauma-informed practice in schools (e.g. Kelly et al., 2020; Little & Maunder, 2021; Rose et al., 2019) suggests that employing a whole-school trauma-informed approach can have positive outcomes for staff, by providing ongoing support for their emotional wellbeing. Furthermore, the literature (e.g. Hatton, 2013) suggests that inclusive schools maintain a shared responsibility for the behaviour of all pupils and emphasise the use of preventative behaviour strategies.

Additionally, some participants reflected on the flexibility of their teaching with such students, in that they usually required a relational approach from the teacher, to support them to manage within the school environment. This supports the existing literature which suggests that schools incorporating an ethos with a dominant relational underpinning are key to promoting inclusive education, and reducing exclusions for children displaying 'challenging behaviour' (Gazeley et al., 2015; Malmqvist, 2016; Stanforth & Rose, 2018).

Many participants commented that the behaviour of the children and young people with whom they were working was often a method to communicate their feelings and emotions, oftentimes when they became distressed and overwhelmed. This is in line with the literature (Koomar, 2009; Treisman, 2017;) which suggests that children who have experienced developmental or relational trauma often have

difficulties with self-regulating their emotions, and processing and integrating sensory information.

### **How do teachers conceptualise 'challenging behaviour'?**

#### ***Types of 'challenging behaviour'***

Participants commented that from their experience working in school environments, 'challenging behaviour' usually presents as high level; low level; and disruption to teaching and learning. High level challenging behaviour was described as: being dangerous (to themselves or others); aggression and violence; throwing objects or furniture; vandalising or damaging equipment or furniture; verbal abuse; stealing; drinking and drug use; and behaviours that would constitute additional intervention or assistance from colleagues. Participants were all able to provide descriptions of high-level challenging behaviour from their experience of teaching. Low level challenging behaviour was described by some participants as: non-engagement; no equipment; truanting; being late; tapping or making noises; calling out persistently; rudeness; and refusal or defiance. This relates to the exclusion data referring to 'persistent challenging behaviour' (Department for Education, 2019), and that it was clear from our participants that defining 'challenging behaviour' within the school setting was, in itself, challenging. The majority of participants made reference to the impact of challenging behaviour on their teaching and the learning of others in the classroom. Participants reflected that challenging behaviour often impacted on their capacity to teach. This emphasises the 'multi-faceted role' of teachers from the findings: teachers are expected to teach large classes whilst managing complex and sometimes dangerous behaviour incidents.

***Causes/reasons behind 'challenging behaviour'***

Challenging behaviour was interpreted within the context of emotional regulation, that children or young people were unable to regulate their emotions within certain situations and this led to the presentation of challenging behaviour within the classroom. Some participants, however, subscribed to the more traditional 'behaviourist' position on behaviour (e.g. Skinner, 1963), that children and young people make 'bad choices' for their behaviour. Participants spoke about children who had difficulties understanding and managing their feelings, which often resulted in challenging behaviour. This reflects the literature that suggests behaviour can be interpreted as a way of communicating feelings and emotions (Treisman, 2017). Some of the participants commented on the contextual factors that may lead children and young people to displaying challenging behaviour, which included issues around boundaries and consistency, and socio-economic factors (Stanforth & Rose, 2018). This indicates that some participants were aware of wider systemic influences on children and young people's behaviour (e.g. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, 1979) and that framing behaviour through an ecosystemic lens could be useful for greater understanding.

The findings suggest that participants conceptualised preventing and managing 'challenging behaviour' as the responsibility of teachers, in line with the literature (Hatton, 2013) that indicates that this is a key principle of inclusive schools. The expertise and approaches of teachers were key, according to participants. Teachers who had confidence, were able to be flexible and consistent were in a position to be able to manage challenging behaviour. Many of the participants had strong views around the prevention and early intervention of challenging behaviour in their setting. In line with the literature for trauma-informed practice in schools (e.g.

Kelly et al., 2020; Little & Maunder, 2021; Rose et al., 2019), focusing on preventing 'challenging behaviour' by building relationships with students was emphasised by participants.

### **How do these views impact on their tendency to hold inclusive beliefs?**

#### ***Prevention and management of 'challenging behaviour'***

Participants commented that building relationships with their students, understanding them and their individual needs, was a fundamental approach to preventative behaviour management. Building relationships, getting to know students, respecting them as individuals, listening and really hearing the students were recognised as key elements of teachers that were inclusive. This reflects the literature on inclusive practice for 'SEMH' children, or those who display 'challenging behaviour' (Gazeley et al., 2015; Malmqvist, 2016; Stanforth & Rose, 2018).

Participants made references to collaborating on a more informal basis with colleagues to discuss young people, understand their behaviour, and share good practice and effective strategies. It may be pertinent for school leaders to embrace the 'supervision model' for staff, in order for teachers to have protected time to share good practice, gain feedback, and emotional support from colleagues. Some have argued (e.g. Gibbs & Miller, 2014) that educational psychologists can provide support, via consultative relationships, to generate new knowledge and skills and enhance teachers' self-efficacy to manage children's behaviour, which could lead to better outcomes for children. It has been suggested that setting up and facilitating supervision systems (such as group supervision sessions) within secondary schools, can be a way of promoting the emotional wellbeing of teachers, and thus helping them to support the emotional wellbeing of their students (Salter-Jones, 2012).

Collaboration also extended to building relationships with and involving parents and caregivers at the earliest opportunities in order to problem solve and prevent behaviours from escalating. This extends and adds to the 'multi-faceted role' of teachers to include building relationships, and collaborating with students, parents and colleagues. This requires time, training and ongoing support.

### ***Inclusive ethos***

One of the features of an inclusive school identified by some participants was having and meeting the needs of a diverse student and staff community. One participant described a diverse and inclusive environment as one that facilitated and embraced individuality, so that all members of the community felt comfortable being themselves and not pressurised to 'fit in'. This reflects the 'social model' of disability from the literature (Kinsella, 2020; Norwich, 2014). Key components of an inclusive school, identified by participants from both schools, were in reference to their school culture. School leaders, both the head teacher and senior leadership team, were viewed as crucial in the promotion of an inclusive ethos. This supports the findings from MacFarlane and Marks Woolfson's (2013) study, which suggests that school leaders have a central role in promoting inclusion within their schools. Participants identified an additional aspect of an inclusive school, in line with Hatton's (2013) study, which was structure and clear boundaries. Having a system whereby staff were able to provide appropriate consequences for children and young people was key, for some participants, in order to ensure there were positive learning experiences as a result of situations involving challenging behaviour.

It could be argued that a school that embraces and embeds a true 'trauma-informed' approach would have this reflected across all levels of the school,

including their school policies in relation to behaviour and exclusions. The findings indicate the participants had varying levels of knowledge and approaches concerning trauma and 'challenging behaviour'. It should be noted that neither of the schools, at the time of writing, had accessed any formal 'trauma-informed' training or whole-school interventions related to SEMH needs and behaviour.

### **Summary of findings in relation to the research question and literature**

Key findings indicate that teachers' knowledge and understanding of children's experiences of traumatic events and attachment-related difficulties is related to the way they perceive 'challenging behaviour'. Participants made connections between adversity within the home context and the impact this often had on the emotions and feelings, and subsequent behaviour, of children within the school setting.

The multi-faceted role of a teacher in a secondary school setting was emphasised by the findings. Teachers are expected to manage challenging behaviour, whilst teaching classrooms full of students, identifying additional needs, and providing appropriate and tailored support to those that need it. When thinking about schools embedding 'trauma-informed' approaches, the findings highlight the need for those promoting and facilitating such approaches (including school leaders and educational psychologists) to acknowledge the complex and extensive role of teachers within secondary school settings. Not only should children's needs be viewed from an ecosystemic lens (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), but also those who are supporting those needs across the school system. In order for such approaches to be successful, teachers require training and ongoing support to manage the identified challenges.

## **Critical reflections on the approach taken in this study**

### ***Limits of Methodology***

This was a small-scale, qualitative study which was intended to: explore the views of teachers in mainstream secondary school settings in relation to key elements of their teaching role; to contribute to the evidence base around ‘trauma-informed’ and ‘attachment-aware’ practice, which is currently very limited; and understand how educational psychologists can support secondary schools, and the wider systems, to reduce exclusions. The study aimed to understand and highlight the good practice of teaching staff, who already support children and young people who have experienced attachment-related difficulties and trauma, to be included within the school setting. The findings of the study have led to the development and dissemination of a ‘trauma and attachment’ training as part of the researcher’s placement as a Trainee Educational Psychologist (TEP), and wider discussions with colleagues about ‘challenging behaviour’ and exclusions in secondary schools. While the findings of this study can be usefully considered in relation to existing research, there are limits to their generalisability.

From a validity viewpoint, it was important to consider the researcher’s dual role as a TEP at the time in the local area, in terms of the participants feeling comfortable to share honestly, as this could impact the authenticity of the findings. The authenticity of the findings could have been impacted by the focus group design as some participants may have not felt comfortable to share views in front of their colleagues, which is a potential risk for all studies employing focus groups (Morgan, 1997). It should be noted, however, that this was mediated by the use of the written task, as participant views were often replicated within the findings from the written

task. Further 'triangulation' of data (Yin, 2003) could have been sought from other sources (e.g. school policy documents) or by introducing a further phase of data collection (e.g. in-school observations). However, due to time constraints and restrictions due the COVID-19 pandemic, this was not completed. The focus groups were held virtually, via Microsoft Teams, which may have impacted on the depth and 'flow' of discussions. This may have been different for in-person focus groups.

### ***COVID-19 pandemic***

This study was conducted during the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, so the methods and design of the study had to be adapted in line with ongoing restrictions and 'lockdowns' which impacted school settings. It is important to note that teachers were experiencing unprecedented changes to their 'normal' working role, and having to adapt to different methods of working, whilst also coping with the stress related to living their lives during a pandemic. Teachers that participated in this study may have been bereaved, caught the virus themselves or had been caring for family members who were deemed 'at risk'. Although not explicitly expressed through the data, teachers do not live in a vacuum, and the ongoing stress of the pandemic on their lives should be acknowledged.

### **Implications for future research and EP practice**

This study provided an insight into the views of secondary school teachers in two mainstream schools in the East of England, in relation to attachment, trauma, 'challenging behaviour' and inclusion. The study was small-scale, and it would be useful to acknowledge the perspectives of teachers from a wider range of schools across the country, including primary schools, further education settings, and

specialist provisions. Furthermore, as trauma-informed whole-school interventions are being introduced in some Local Authorities (LA), it may be useful in the evaluation of such approaches to gain views of teachers pre and post intervention. Gaining the views of children and young people would also provide an interesting perspective, in order to provide tailored interventions to schools with diverse populations and varying needs.

The researcher has reflected on the study as a whole and the impact that this has had on current and future practice as a TEP, and thinking towards becoming a newly qualified EP in an English LA. As a result of the study, an 'introduction to trauma and attachment' training webinar was developed. At the time of writing, the webinar is in the pilot stages, but there has been positive feedback thus far. The researcher hopes to help teachers and the wider school systems to understand children and young people's behaviour within a 'trauma-informed' context, in order to prevent incidences of 'challenging behaviour' in schools.

### **Conclusion**

This study aimed to explore teachers' conceptualisations in relation to 'attachment', 'trauma', 'challenging behaviour' and 'inclusion'. The theme 'Relationships and connection' was a key finding from the data, but it has to be highlighted that teachers require the time and capacity to nurture their relationships and feel part of the school community. 'Emotional regulation and behaviour' was another theme, and going forward, there should be ongoing discussions and reflection about how educational psychologists can support teachers to manage their own emotion and stress levels when supporting the emotional regulation of children and young people. From living in a pandemic where, nationally, the impact has been

described as 'unprecedented', the societal shift towards understanding and supporting emotions within school settings could prove to be significant for all students and members of the wider school community.

This piece of research has highlighted the ever expanding and extending role of teachers in mainstream secondary schools in England. Completing this study has refreshed my utmost appreciation and gratitude towards teachers who support diverse populations of students every day, whilst managing the pressures and challenges that being a teacher brings. It was a privilege to hear the perspectives of teachers who kindly offered their time to be part of this study. The good practice shared by the teaching staff, and the hope and positivity that shone through the data was notable.

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### **Part Three: Reflective chapter**

#### **Beginning stages**

The development of my thesis research proposal is a likely reflection of my position and perspective on supporting children and young people, prior to even starting the training course. From participating in university sessions, doing my own reading and working with children, young people, families and professionals as part of working in a Local Authority psychology service as part of my placement, my area of research became clearer.

During Year 1 of the training course, we attended a session on 'critical attachment theory', which sparked my interest in thinking about how attachment relationships have an impact on the development of social and emotional skills for infants, children and young people. Within the session, we learned about the 50-year history of attachment theory (e.g., Ainsworth & Bell, 1970; Bowlby, 1969, 1973, 1980) but also the changing landscape of the theory throughout the years. What really stayed with me from that session was the importance of context, and how psychological theories can be used to promote or dissuade constructs or norms within society. I believe as a trainee psychologist, taking a critical approach to psychological theories that can often be promoted in society as 'fact' (or truth) is extremely important. Furthermore, the societal context of such theories cannot be ignored and must be examined as part of ongoing engagement with psychological theories and constructs. I think it was also around the same time that we discussed epistemology and ontology as part of our training.

### **Formulating a research question**

During Year 1 of the training, I was able to attend a Continuing Professional Development (CPD) day as part of my placement within a Local Authority Psychology Service. One of the sessions I attended was around 'trauma-informed practice'. This session was inspiring and sparked my interest with regards to supporting children and young people with 'behavioural' or 'emotional' needs (or classed as SEMH). The key underpinning principles of 'trauma-informed practice' resonated with me: kindness, compassion, hope, connection, and belonging. There were children and young people that were being referred for support from the Psychology Service with complex past histories, involving domestic abuse, substance misuse, neglect and physical abuse. The children and young people were referred for 'challenging behaviour' concerns and they were often at risk of being excluded from school. Engaging with trauma-informed approaches and, reflecting on the theories and research around 'attachment', inspired me with regards to supporting these children and young people that were increasingly being excluded or at risk of exclusion from school.

When researching further into attachment and attachment theory, Heather Geddes' work, in particular her 'Learning Triangles' (Geddes, 2006) translated the theoretical concepts of attachment into the classroom setting. During my school-based placement in Year 1, I had been tasked, with my fellow trainee, to develop an 'attachment' training for some of the staff in a large secondary school. The SENCo highlighted to me that she felt the teachers and teaching assistants could use further knowledge and understanding of children and young people that may have experienced attachment-related difficulties within their setting, and strategies to

support them within their classes. Geddes' (2006) 'Learning Triangles' provided a framework for discussion within the training session. The theories of attachment were made accessible to the teaching staff attending the training and there was positive feedback. Following on from that training, I felt that secondary school teachers were an important group for research. In particular, secondary school subject teachers may only work with groups of students once a week, or even once a fortnight. Secondary schools are, from my experience, usually large, busy and hectic environments with high expectations (including pressure to achieve well with academic examinations). Some of the concepts associated with attachment theory include 'nurture', 'connection' and 'relationships'. When reflecting on the various tensions and systemic factors at play within a large secondary school setting, as well as ongoing debates within the media about young peoples' mental health including the joint Department for Health and Social Care and Department for Education 'Green Paper' regarding children and young people's mental health, (Department of Health and Social Care & Department for Education, 2018), discussing and supporting emotional wellbeing and relationships seemed to be a high priority.

Some key texts that shaped my thinking for my research were Dr Bruce Perry and Maia Szalavitz's '*The boy who was raised as a dog*' (Perry & Szalavitz, 2007) and Dr Karen Treisman's '*Working with relational and developmental trauma in children and adolescents*' (Treisman, 2017). The texts highlighted the importance of a sensitive, available adult to facilitate a trusting relationship and help children and young people to feel safe and secure. This was the key area of focus for intervention for children and young people who had experienced developmental and relational trauma. Furthermore, what struck me with these two texts in particular was the theme of hope. From my experience working on placement with children with

apparent 'behaviour needs', and some of the research around attachment theory, there was a lack of hope and belief that these children and young people could be supported and experience positive change. Furthermore, we were introduced to Schofield and Beek's (2014) 'Secure Base' model, during a university session about Looked After Children. Subsequent reading into their research (e.g. Schofield & Beek, 2005, 2009) about children and young people in foster care and adoptive settings, highlighted the importance of relationships and connection within a supportive system, and the key underpinning principles of availability, sensitivity, acceptance, cooperation and family/school membership.

Whilst conducting my literature review, it became clear that 'trauma-informed' approaches, although showing increasing popularity and a growing evidence base in the US, had not yet been researched in the UK. There was, however, plenty of research available regarding associated concepts such as 'teacher-student relationships' (e.g. Sabol & Pianta, 2012); children with 'SEMH' needs or 'behavioural needs' (e.g. Carroll & Hurrey, 2018); 'challenging behaviour' and 'inclusion' (e.g. Hatton, 2013); and 'attachment' in schools (e.g. Bergin & Bergin, 2009). Furthermore, my literature review revealed that the most common reason for children to be excluded from school was for 'persistent disruptive behaviour', a concept that did not have an established definition, neither within government guidance nor across school settings (Department for Education, 2019).

The literature review was a critical part of identifying gaps in the existing research base. During the review of the literature, I had found that there was recent research into using trauma-informed and attachment aware whole-school approaches (e.g., Kelly et al., 2020; Rose et al., 2019). Little and Maunder's (2021) paper emphasised the need for trauma-informed and attachment aware approaches

in schools. Such approaches provide knowledge and expertise to teachers and support staff about the potential impact of trauma and attachment-related difficulties for children and young people, and train them to use relational strategies to support their students' emotional wellbeing. There had been promising evidence from the studies, and from the evidence base in the US (e.g. Purtle 2020), that such approaches may help to reduce exclusions in schools.

I was not able to find any research exploring the good, inclusive practice already happening in schools with regards to teachers supporting and preventing exclusions for children and young people who had experienced developmental and relational trauma. This led to my research questions, designed to explore the existing knowledge of secondary school teachers and their conceptualisation of 'trauma', 'attachment', 'challenging behaviour', and how that knowledge may relate to inclusive practice.

## **Research Design**

Up until my training, I had not explored what epistemology and ontology meant to me, or how it might have an impact on my research or my practice as a TEP. Psychological theory was often imparted onto me as 'fact' or 'truth', and my undergraduate psychology dissertation took a positivist stance, with quantitative methods, even though I had not really thought about it at the time. We had discussions at the beginning stages of training regarding whether Psychology was an 'art' or a 'science', which I think reflects some of the ontological and epistemological debates within the field of psychology and beyond. I questioned my position during the course, and during the shaping of my research proposal and questions. Critical realism fits well with my ideas and views of truth and knowledge

as an applied psychology practitioner: my ontology and epistemology. Critical realists believe that much of reality exists and operates independently of our awareness or knowledge of it (Archer et al., 2016). Critical realists posit that knowledge is always historically, socially and culturally situated, and therefore take a relativist stance to epistemology. Reflecting on Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) also highlighted the importance of context within practice and research. Research from a critical realist perspective aims to provide a more truthful knowledge of reality. Moving towards planning my research, I knew that I wanted to seek further knowledge in an area which was lacking perspectives from the very people that work with children and young people every day: teachers.

In terms of design, a case study design in line with Yin's approach (2003) was employed. Initially, I had thought about comparing and contrasting between two different schools: one with high rates of exclusion and one with low rates of exclusion. Upon reflection, and consultation with my research supervisor, it was decided that two schools would be appropriate for an exploratory case study for the concepts I was hoping to investigate. In terms of my approach, exploring the concepts across the two relatively similar schools (with regards to exclusion rates) was more in line with the critical realist position, i.e. that the cases may have similarities and therefore be closer to the 'truth'.

I decided that qualitative methods were the most appropriate approach for data collection. Quantitative methods were considered, such as the use of questionnaires, however, as the current research base was so limited, the use of qualitative methods enabled me as a researcher to explore the concepts in greater depth than quantitative methods would have facilitated. I decided to employ the use of focus groups in order to gather the data to answer my research questions. One of

the key advantages of focus groups, compared to individual interviews, is the group-based interactions. It could be argued that participant interaction, which stimulates the identification and sharing of various perspectives on the same topic, is central to the success of focus groups (Morgan, 1997). Furthermore, focus groups provided greater access to various different perspectives and potentially reflections of the social context, which I thought to be central to the exploratory study. I had read and was inspired by the written task employed in the Barker and Mills study (2018) and sought to use a written task to collect my data alongside focus groups. This additional data source also offered further triangulation to the concepts I was investigating. I formulated the questions for the focus groups and written tasks based on my initial review of the concepts within existing literature, and the gaps that this piece of research was aiming to fill. I was able to informally pilot my focus group questions with my partner and sister, who are both teachers in secondary schools.

It was anticipated that the focus groups would be facilitated in person, at the two identified schools, and arranged to accommodate the busy lives of secondary school teachers. This was subsequently adapted to online focus groups, using the video conferencing platform Microsoft Teams, due to the restrictions put in place regarding face-to-face data collection as a result of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Written tasks were emailed to participants and then sent back to me via email. With regards to the sample, I wanted to explore perspectives of members of the Senior Leadership Team (SLT), such as the Head teacher, Assistant Head teachers, Deputy Head teachers, and SENCos, and 'main grade' teachers (those not classed as 'SLT'). The literature (Barbour & Kitzinger, 1999; Greenbaum, 1998) I explored around focus groups described 'mini groups' of 4 to 7 participants. I aimed to include 4 participants in each focus group across the 2 schools. I wanted the

group dynamics to work as well as they could, therefore sought to ensure that the SLT participants and the 'main grade' participants were in separate groups.

Upon reflection of the research design process, I believe one of the key challenges was making the 'big' and important decisions myself as the researcher. Having very limited experience of research design, it was a huge learning experience. I had not employed the use of qualitative methods previously, so deciding to use focus groups and the written task was significant for my development as a researcher. My position as a trainee educational psychologist and researcher, alongside ongoing experience working on placement, definitely shaped the journey of designing this study. I think if I could have formally piloted the focus groups and received feedback regarding the questions, it would have helped ease feelings of anxiety before the first focus group with the participants. This could be something to explore for future research studies.

### **Ethical issues**

One of the pertinent ethical issues that arose during the research process was related to the concepts that I was choosing to explore, and the potential emotional responses that the concepts may evoke in the participants, particularly with participants discussing emotive topics alongside their colleagues. As part of the research design process, I reflected on the standards and ethical guidelines set out by the Health and Care Professionals Council (HCPC, 2016) and the British Psychological Society (BPS, 2014, 2018). I consulted the BPS *Code of Human Research Ethics* (2014) which emphasises that 'more than minimal risk' could be: "research involving potentially sensitive topics" (p.13). Furthermore, with regards to this ethical dilemma, the HCPC standard I reflected upon was: *6.1 You must take all*

*reasonable steps to reduce the risk of harm to service users, carers and colleagues as far as possible* (HCPC, 2016). An assessment of the risks to participants was conducted as part of the research design. In order to reduce any potential harm, the topics of discussion were highlighted within the consent and information form, and potential participants were reminded that their participation in the study was voluntary and not a requirement. It was agreed within initial discussions with the Head teachers and SENCOs of the schools, that participants would be signposted to their line managers for additional support if this was required, as a result of the emotive topics discussed in the focus groups. I also offered my services to debrief with any of the participants if they needed the time and space to do so. This was not utilised by any of the participants.

Another consideration I had was around the group dynamics, and potential power imbalances that may occur, not only between the participants but also with me as the researcher. The BPS Code of Ethics and Conduct (2018) principle 3.1 'Respect' states that: "*Psychologists value the dignity and worth of all persons, with sensitivity to the dynamics of perceived authority or influence over persons and peoples and with particular regard to people's rights*" (p.5). When thinking about group dynamics and power, I decided that grouping the participants according to their role, and associated hierarchical position in the school system, would minimise potential power imbalances. As part of the introductions to the focus groups, I was able to explain my role and express my appreciation to them for participating in my research, and hopefully minimised the power imbalance between myself and the participants.

Finally, I reflected on potential ethical issues around confidentiality as part of participation within the focus group. Participants were reminded that their data would

be anonymised as part of the transcription process. All participants were mindful of discussing any children and young people they had previously or were currently working with, and no participants mentioned any student names or any personal sensitive information related to students.

### **Data collection and analysis**

These parts of the process were both the most enjoyable and also the most challenging aspects of the research study (respectively). Going into my first focus group I was incredibly nervous. Not only was it my first ever focus group that I had facilitated, but the participants were members of the SLT. Furthermore, I was facilitating the group via Microsoft Teams, a platform that I was becoming familiar with, but was not yet an experienced user. As that particular focus group, and subsequent focus groups went on, I became much more comfortable and confident facilitating and asking questions to the participants. We did have some technical issues, including sound-related issues of participants who were in the same physical space but not accessing the same computer (due to COVID-19 social distancing restrictions), and some participants were not able to turn their microphones or cameras on, so had to contribute their ideas via the 'chat' function.

Upon reflection, I felt that the power dynamics did impact the data collection process. I felt much less comfortable asking the questions and there seemed to be much more of a barrier to the 'freeing emotions process' in the SLT focus groups (Barbour & Kitzinger, 1999; Greenbaum, 1998). This is reflected in the difference in the amount of transcribed data between the different groups: the 'main grade' teacher groups provided much more data. Although the participants were reminded that their data would be anonymised, it may be that the SLT participants felt that they

were representatives of their school, to some extent, and perhaps held back more 'controversial' ideas or beliefs. I reflected after each of the focus groups, and I considered my interactions in relation to the Transactional Analysis Parent-Adult-Child model (e.g. Berne, 1996). Some of the interactions I experienced in the SLT focus groups felt much more like Parent-Child transactions (where I was the Child and some participants were the Parent). There were points in the focus group where I felt intimidated, and even berated, by some participants. Perhaps this reflects my lack of confidence as a developing researcher. On the other hand, in the 'main grade' teacher focus groups, the transactions felt much more Adult-Adult. I really enjoyed speaking to the 'main grade' teachers, and although the concepts we were discussing could have been difficult or even upsetting, I felt a lot of hope and positivity coming out of the sessions. It was a real pleasure, and I was reminded of the hard work and the good practice that these teachers do as part of their role on a daily basis.

The analysis of the data was particularly challenging, as my experience working with qualitative data had been very limited. At times, I became frustrated at the apparent lack of structure and clear guidance that comes with Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2013), in comparison to analysing quantitative data with statistical analysis. This may have been a reflection of my developing confidence and competence, as I believed I was not competent enough as a researcher to make the key decisions with regards to coding and identifying themes. I had become familiar with the Stages of Competency model (e.g. Howell, 1982), and I think that my feelings of anxiety and frustration, particularly during the analysis stage, were a reflection of my awareness of my 'conscious incompetence', and as I progressed

through the analysis and writing up my findings, I moved towards being a 'consciously competent' researcher.

### **Contribution to personal knowledge and professional development**

The process of carrying out research has supported my development as a trainee educational psychologist, and future qualified educational psychologist. In reference to Kolb's (1984) Experiential Learning model, each stage of the research process required going through the learning cycle: from initial ideas; engaging critically with the literature; writing the research proposal and applying for ethical approval; facilitating the focus groups; transcribing and analysing the data; and writing up the literature review paper and the empirical paper. As part of my development as an applied psychologist, I have been able to hone my reflective skills, and have experienced the advantages of using reflection as part of learning development. By using Gibbs' Reflective Cycle (Gibbs, 1988), I can reflect on university sessions and practice placement opportunities. I was able to use research supervision and peer supervision to facilitate the 'Reflective Observation' (Kolb, 1984) stage of the learning cycle, as part of developing my skills as a researcher. Using the stages of competence model, as mentioned previously, was also useful to reflect on my development as part of the research process. I think going forward with further research, I would use what I have learned from this experience and, I would feel much more confident taking on the 'role' as a researcher as part of working as an educational psychologist.

As mentioned previously, my views and experience as a psychology practitioner inevitably shaped the development of my research questions. The experience and findings parts of the research process have also shaped my practice

as a trainee educational psychologist. I was able to develop, alongside an Assistant EP in my Local Authority placement, an 'introduction to trauma and attachment' training webinar and handout, which has been piloted at two schools at the time of writing. I am hoping to schedule further sessions with more schools in order to engage further with the growing popularity of 'trauma-informed' approaches, and support teachers to support children at risk of displaying 'challenging behaviour'. I think that, on the whole, this process has taught me about the importance of context and that 'challenging behaviour', although often pathologised, needs to be understood and supported. If I can help teachers and support staff take away that fundamental idea from 'trauma-informed' working, I think that I will be satisfied. The experience also helped me to achieve research-related BPS and HCPC competencies as part of my development as a scientist-practitioner and reflective-practitioner.

### **Contribution to knowledge, relevance to practice and future directions**

There have been times in my training, whilst on placement and conducting research, that I have felt frustrated and disappointed with how children and young people who display 'challenging behaviour' are becoming increasingly excluded from schools in England (Department for Education, 2019). Within the HCPC (2016) and BPS (2018) standards for practice, educational psychologists are expected to challenge discrimination (1.6; HCPC, 2016); have respect for the dignity of all persons (3.1; BPS, 2018); and act with integrity (3.4; BPS, 2018). Issues around exclusion, I feel, should be pertinent to the practice of educational psychologists. I believe that this piece of research can contribute to the knowledge and practice of EPs in England.

The results of my study have implications both for further research, and to some extent, EP practice. Firstly, the data adds to the existing, but limited, research base around 'trauma-informed' working in English schools. Although the small-scale nature of the study must be noted, the findings offer some useful insights into the existing good practice of secondary school teachers, who work hard to minimise their use of exclusions for children and young people. It has also pointed towards future research in the area, including the potential advantages of tailoring 'trauma-informed' training to the specific needs of individual schools, and building upon their strengths and existing good practice. It would be useful to widen the participant sample to include teaching assistants, office-based staff and midday supervisors, to understand how 'trauma-informed' systems may work in day-to-day practice. Furthermore, understanding and assessing the 'baseline' of knowledge amongst staff may support the evaluation process of potential changes to existing practices. It is hoped that I will be able to publish and disseminate my findings in an educational psychology research journal after the training course, to contribute and further extend thinking as part of the existing literature.

In terms of practice, I think one of the main findings that I will take into practice as an EP from my research are the discussions about the 'multi-faceted role of teachers'. What really struck me when transcribing and analysing my data, was how much teachers in secondary schools have to manage on a daily basis as part of their role. Their jobs can be hugely stressful and difficult, and yet there was so much good practice, hope, inclusive beliefs and positivity that came through from the data. The literature suggests that teachers who have access to 'job resources' such as supervisory support, information, and a positive social climate are more likely to be positive, resilient and engaged with their work (e.g. Hakanen et al., 2006). Often, as

EPs, we are faced with teaching staff that are frustrated and angry, and sometimes their feelings are directed towards particular students that display 'challenging behaviour'. The findings reminded me that the role of a teacher goes beyond providing subject knowledge within the classroom setting. As the participants identified, teachers are expected to recognise and support children with additional needs, manage challenging behaviour, provide opportunities, build rapport and nurture relationships with students, amongst many other professional duties and targets that come with that role. When I reflect about how, as a TEP, I am allocated time and space for emotional and professional support (i.e. in supervision), I think about how, in most schools, the emotional support for teachers can be very limited, or in some cases non-existent.

Some have argued (e.g. Gibbs & Miller, 2013) that educational psychologists can provide support, via consultative relationships, to generate new knowledge and skills and enhance teachers' self-efficacy to manage children's behaviour, which could lead to better outcomes for children. It has been suggested that setting up and facilitating supervision systems (such as group supervision sessions) within secondary schools, can promote the emotional wellbeing of teachers, and thus help them to support the emotional wellbeing of their students (Salter-Jones, 2012). I think that this research has helped me become more empathetic towards teachers in secondary schools, whereas prior to collecting the data, I may have been quick to judge teachers for perhaps not offering the support that I would have expected within their classrooms. Offering supervision, even being able to set up peer supervision, in secondary schools, would have benefits for supporting teachers in order to support their students. Furthermore, as the participants reflected within the data, relationships are key to understanding behaviour, preventative and proactive

working, and the focus for facilitating change. I will remember this fundamental principle during my work as an educational psychologist, and the potential relationships I can build with children, young people, families and teachers.

### **Summary**

To conclude, the entire research process has been a steep learning curve for me. It has been an enormous challenge and test of my confidence and competence. I have been able to recognise my strengths, in terms of rapport building and communication skills as part of facilitating focus groups, and areas for ongoing development, such as academic analytical and writing skills, to which I have gained experience and confidence throughout this process. I have been able to reflect on the development of my skills, in practice and research, as part of this process as an applied psychological researcher/practitioner.

As I have mentioned previously, my utmost respect and appreciation for teachers has grown exponentially as a result of their participation in my study. I hope that their great practice and positivity when discussing and providing examples of some of their most 'challenging' students was reflected across the findings. I think that, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been a societal recognition of the work of teachers, as parents were expected to support their children with 'home-learning' during the lockdowns and school closures.

As Little and Maunder (2021) argued, the COVID-19 pandemic could enable a systemic shift within school settings to move from punitive, within-child approaches to behaviour, towards relational and contextual approaches, thus facilitating greater inclusion for children and young people 'at risk' of exclusion. I would agree with Little and Maunder's (2021) perspective, as part of my engagement with the literature and

the findings from my study, and support the wider implementation of trauma-informed and attachment-aware approaches across English schools.

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## Appendices

### Appendix 1: Ethical Approval

EDU ETHICS APPROVAL LETTER 2019-20	
APPLICANT DETAILS	
<b>Name:</b>	Tanya Edwards
<b>School:</b>	EDU
<b>Current Status:</b>	EdPsyD student
<b>UEA Email address:</b>	<a href="mailto:Tanya.edwards@uea.ac.uk">Tanya.edwards@uea.ac.uk</a>
<b>EDU REC IDENTIFIER:</b>	2020_2_TE_AH
Approval details	
<b>Approval start date:</b>	3.3.2020
<b>Approval end date:</b>	30.5.2021
<b>Specific requirements of approval:</b>	
<p>Please note that your project is only given ethical approval for the length of time identified above. Any extension to a project must obtain ethical approval by the EDU REC before continuing. Any amendments to your project in terms of design, sample, data collection, focus etc. should be notified to the EDU REC Chair as soon as possible to ensure ethical compliance. If the amendments are substantial a new application may be required.</p>	
	
EDU Chair, Research Ethics Committee	

## Appendix 2: Information for Participants

Tanya Edwards  
Trainee Educational Psychologist, Postgraduate Researcher  
[Insert date]

Doctorate in Educational Psychology  
School of Education and Lifelong Learning

University of East Anglia  
Norwich Research Park  
Norwich NR4 7TJ  
United Kingdom

Email: tanya.edwards@uea.ac.uk  
Web: www.uea.ac.uk

### **An exploration of teachers' perceptions of 'challenging behaviour', trauma and inclusion: a case study of 2 mainstream secondary schools.**

#### **PARTICIPANT INFORMATION STATEMENT for teaching staff**

##### **(1) What is this study about?**

You are invited to take part in a research study about teachers' views of inclusive practice related to 'challenging behaviour', trauma and attachment. You have been invited to participate in this study because you are a member of staff in a secondary school. Participant Information Statement tells you about the research study. Knowing what is involved will help you decide if you want to 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 to take part in the research study as outlined below.
- ✓ Agree to the use of your 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 researchers:

Tanya Edwards, Trainee Educational Psychologist and Postgraduate Researcher  
tanya.edwards@uea.ac.uk

Supervisor:

Dr Andrea Honess, Joint Course Director of the Doctorate in Educational Psychology (EdPsyD)  
a.honess@uea.ac.uk

##### **(3) What will the study involve for me?**

You will be asked to complete a short written task via email prior to the online focus group. This will involve a case study example and some questions related to the case study and your practice. You will then be asked to participate in an online focus group (via video conferencing) with your colleagues. The questions asked will be quite open (e.g. what do you think about X? or how does X work in your school?) in order to facilitate a discussion between the group. The discussion and the written task will take around an hour and a half in total (90 minutes). The video focus group will be arranged at a time

that is most convenient to participants. The focus group discussion will be audio and video recorded.

**(4) How much of my time will the study take?**

The study will require you to complete a written task via email and participate in an online focus group. This is likely to take approximately an hour and a half (90 minutes) of your time.

**(5) Do I have to be in the study? Can I withdraw from the study once I've started?**

Being in this study is completely voluntary and you do not have to take part. Your decision whether to participate will not affect your current or future relationship with the researchers or anyone else at the University of East Anglia or the Psychology Team.

If you take part in a focus group, you are free to stop participating at any stage or to refuse to answer any of the questions. However, it will not be possible to withdraw your individual comments from our records once the group has started, as it's a group discussion.

**(6) Are there any risks or costs associated with being in the study?**

It is anticipated that there will be minimal risks participating in the study. However, the themes discussed are around attachment and trauma, and may elicit some discomfort or emotional response related to your personal experiences. You will be able to leave the video call at any time if you require a break from the discussion. If you require support regarding these issues, please do seek support from your line manager.

**(7) Are there any benefits associated with being in the study?**

The possible benefits are an exploration and celebration of inclusive practice happening in your school. Additionally, from the information gathered in the research, it is hoped that we will be able to gain an insight into inclusive practice and thus, will be able to disseminate this practice across other schools in the Local Authority. Furthermore, it may also highlight areas for future training and support to promote inclusive practice in your school.

**(8) What will happen to information about me that is collected during the study?**

By providing your consent, you are agreeing to us collecting personal information about you for the purposes of this research study. Audio and video recordings will be taken during the focus group and will be used for analysis. Data from the written element of the task will also be analysed. Electronic data will be stored on a password-protected computer during the study, which will only be accessed by the researcher. Your information will only be used for the purposes outlined in this Participant Information Statement, unless you consent otherwise. Data management will follow the 2018 General Data Protection Regulation Act and the University of East Anglia Research Data Management Policy (2019).

Your information will be stored securely and your identity/information will be kept strictly confidential, except as required by law. Study findings may be published for the researcher's thesis and potentially journal publications and conference presentations. Although every effort will be made to protect your identity, there is a risk that you might be identifiable due to the nature of the study and/or results. In this instance, data will be stored for a period of 10 years and then destroyed.

**(9) What if I would like further information about the study?**

When you have read this information, Tanya Edwards will be available via email to discuss it with you further and answer any questions you may have. If you would like to know more at any stage during the study, please feel free to contact Tanya Edwards on [tanya.edwards@uea.ac.uk](mailto:tanya.edwards@uea.ac.uk).

**(10) Will I be told the results of the study?**

You have a right to receive feedback about the overall results of this study. You can tell us that you wish to receive feedback by ticking the relevant box on the consent form. This feedback will be in the form of a one page summary. You will receive this feedback after the research has been submitted, marked and returned to the researcher.

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

The ethical aspects of this study have been approved under the regulations of the University of East Anglia's School of Education and Lifelong Learning Research Ethics Committee.

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

Tanya Edwards  
School of Education and Lifelong Learning  
University of East Anglia  
NORWICH NR4 7TJ  
[tanya.edwards@uea.ac.uk](mailto:tanya.edwards@uea.ac.uk)

If you would like to speak to someone else you can contact my supervisor:

Dr Andrea Honess, Course Director  
School of Education and Lifelong Learning  
University of East Anglia  
NORWICH NR4 7TJ  
[a.honess@uea.ac.uk](mailto:a.honess@uea.ac.uk)

If you are concerned about the way this study is being conducted or you wish to make a complaint to someone independent from the study, please contact the interim Head of the School of Education and Lifelong Learning, Professor Nalini Boodhoo at [N.Boodhoo@uea.ac.uk](mailto:N.Boodhoo@uea.ac.uk).

**(12) OK, I want to take part – what do I do next?**

You need to fill in one copy of the consent form and return it to me via email on [tanya.edwards@uea.ac.uk](mailto:tanya.edwards@uea.ac.uk). Please keep the letter, information sheet and the 2<sup>nd</sup> copy of the consent form for your information.

This information sheet is for you to keep

**Appendix 3: Consent forms****PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM (1<sup>st</sup> Copy to Researcher)**

I, ..... [PRINT NAME], agree to take part in this research study.

In giving my consent I state that:

- ✓ I understand the purpose of the study, what I will be asked to do, and any risks/benefits involved.
- ✓ I have read the Participant Information Statement and have been able to discuss my 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 I do not have to take part. My decision whether to be in the study will not affect my relationship with the researchers or anyone else at the University of East Anglia or the Psychology Team now or in the future.
- ✓ I understand that I can withdraw from the study at any time.
- ✓ I understand that I may leave the online focus group at any time if I do not wish to continue. I also understand that it will not be possible to withdraw my comments once the group has started as it is a group discussion
- ✓ I understand that personal information about me 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 me will only be told to others with my permission, except as required by law.
- ✓ I understand that the results of this study may be published. Although every effort will be made to protect my identity, I may be identifiable in these publications due to the nature of the study or results.

I consent to:

- **Audio and video recording** YES  NO
- **Would you like to receive feedback about the overall results of this study?** YES  NO

If you answered **YES**, please indicate your preferred form of feedback and address:

Postal: \_\_\_\_\_

Email: \_\_\_\_\_

.....

**Signature**

.....  
**PRINT name**

.....  
**Date**

**PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM (2<sup>nd</sup> Copy to Participant)**

I, ..... [PRINT NAME], agree to take part in this research study.

In giving my consent I state that:

- ✓ I understand the purpose of the study, what I will be asked to do, and any risks/benefits involved.
- ✓ I have read the Participant Information Statement and have been able to discuss my 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 I do not have to take part. My decision whether to be in the study will not affect my relationship with the researchers or anyone else at the University of East Anglia or the Psychology Team now or in the future.
- ✓ I understand that I can withdraw from the study at any time.
- ✓ I understand that I may leave the online focus group at any time if I do not wish to continue. I also understand that it will not be possible to withdraw my comments once the group has started as it is a group discussion
- ✓ I understand that personal information about me 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 me will only be told to others with my permission, except as required by law.
- ✓ I understand that the results of this study may be published. Although every effort will be made to protect my identity, I may be identifiable in these publications due to the nature of the study or results.

I consent to:

- **Audio and video recording** YES  NO
- **Would you like to receive feedback about the overall results of this study?** YES  NO

If you answered **YES**, please indicate your preferred form of feedback and address:

Postal: \_\_\_\_\_

Email: \_\_\_\_\_

.....  
**Signature**

.....  
**PRINT name**

.....  
**Date**

**Appendix 4: Written task**

Name:

Gender:

Job title(s) (e.g. Head of House and Geography teacher):

Years of teaching experience:

**Sentence starters**

When I think of 'challenging behaviour', I think ...

Some 'challenging behaviours' I have experienced include...

When a child or young person displays 'challenging behaviour', I usually manage/react by...

A child or young person who is displaying 'challenging behaviour' is someone that is...

**Case study**

Justin is 13 years old, he is in Year 8 and attends a mainstream secondary school. He really enjoys PE and has a good relationship with his PE teacher. Justin was taken into care when he was 3 years old due to ongoing domestic abuse between his mother and her partner, as well as concerns around substance misuse in the home. Justin currently lives with his maternal grandmother. However, she has recently been diagnosed with cancer. Justin's academic achievements are generally around the average range, but he struggles in English. There have been some concerns raised about Justin's attention and concentration abilities, as well as difficulties organising himself. Justin displays 'challenging behaviour' at school. This can include: leaving the classroom, being 'silly' with his peers, verbal abuse towards teaching staff (particularly when demands are placed upon him), and not completing written work, particularly in English lessons.

What do you think is going on for Justin?

What could the teachers at Justin's school do to support him?

Is there anything more the teachers should try to find out about Justin's situation?  
How would they do this?

**Appendix 5: Focus group questions**

What can you tell me about 'trauma'?

What can you tell me about 'attachment'?

Have you had any training (on both)?

How does this knowledge impact on your practice?

What does an experience of trauma or attachment difficulties look like in the classroom environment?

How aware do you think you are of children who have experienced trauma or attachment difficulties?

How would you define 'challenging behaviour'? What does it look like in your classroom? How does it affect your teaching?

Why do children display 'challenging behaviour'? What do you know about the children displaying 'challenging behaviour' (e.g. home context, any SEND need)?

How is 'challenging behaviour' managed? How able do you feel to manage 'challenging behaviour'?

How do you support the children who display 'challenging behaviour'?

Can you tell me about inclusion?

What can schools do to be more inclusive? What can be done to support schools/teaching staff to be more inclusive?

What does an 'inclusive school' look like? What is 'good practice' when it comes to inclusion?

What does holding inclusive views or having an inclusive ethos mean to you?

How can teaching staff become more inclusive?

What can schools do to include/be more inclusive of children who display 'challenging behaviour'?

How would we know if a school was inclusive?

**Appendix 6: Sample focus group transcript (extract)**

Interviewer: What can schools do to be more inclusive, do you think?

Participant 2: I think monitor, monitor what inclusivity looks like so with regards to clubs, monitor who is attending those clubs and drill down erm at the pupil characteristic level, so you know what is your spread of girls and boys accessing that particular club or your higher-flyer attainers or lower-flyer attainers. So analysing and erm if you've noticed a gap and then go to student voice and ask why the students aren't accessing that particular element of whatever you are investigating. If you are finding a huge gender divide of an option subject, it is important that you get the student voice as to why girls, perhaps, are not choosing PE as a GCSE option and erm how we as a school could enable that to not be the case. So I think yeah, student voice is really important.

Participant 4: I also think that it comes down an awful lot to the importance of the pastoral role of the form teacher as well, how well we know our form and making sure that we actually know each individual child because we are, as a form teacher, the one person that actually has that regular day-to-day contact and has the opportunity to know that child better than any other teacher within the school perhaps and yes, as subject teachers you sometimes get to know certain children who are interested in your subject but as a pastoral teacher we have the responsibility to make sure that that child, whoever they may be, we understand what their hobbies, their interests are, what their background is, where they need support, what things they are talented at, and I think that is such an important aspect of, of the pastoral care within the school that we are constantly trying to get right.

[Participant 1 nodding]

Interviewer: Okay, what do you think can be done to support teachers/teaching staff to be more inclusive?

Participant 4: Broadening their toolkit, [Participant 2] said it before, about CPD, making sure that teachers have a toolkit of strategies that they can use and also the psychology to understand what it is that they are using. So they're not just using it for the sake of using it, but they are understanding the impact of that particular strategy may have.

Participant 3: I think it is also about being relentless as leaders, we're relentless in that we promote inclusivity and that is a message that isn't going to go anywhere and we are relentless in wanting to promote that across the whole school. Erm and I think that that is important that we model that.

Interviewer: Okay... how can schools be more inclusive of children who display challenging behaviour?

Participant 2: That's a, like a team approach. You've got a whole team working with that student so that includes the home team as well and the student and the pastoral carers as [Participant 4] was saying like the head of year, the form tutor, subject

teachers have all got to work together in understanding what are the triggers to the behaviour and if the triggers are known and understood, then it is us as adults to know how to overcome those barriers and to work with the student to identify how those barriers can be overcome. So yeah, again it is about effective communication. It's about knowing the child but from different aspects, knowing the whole child, rather than just seeing that child in one particular subject.

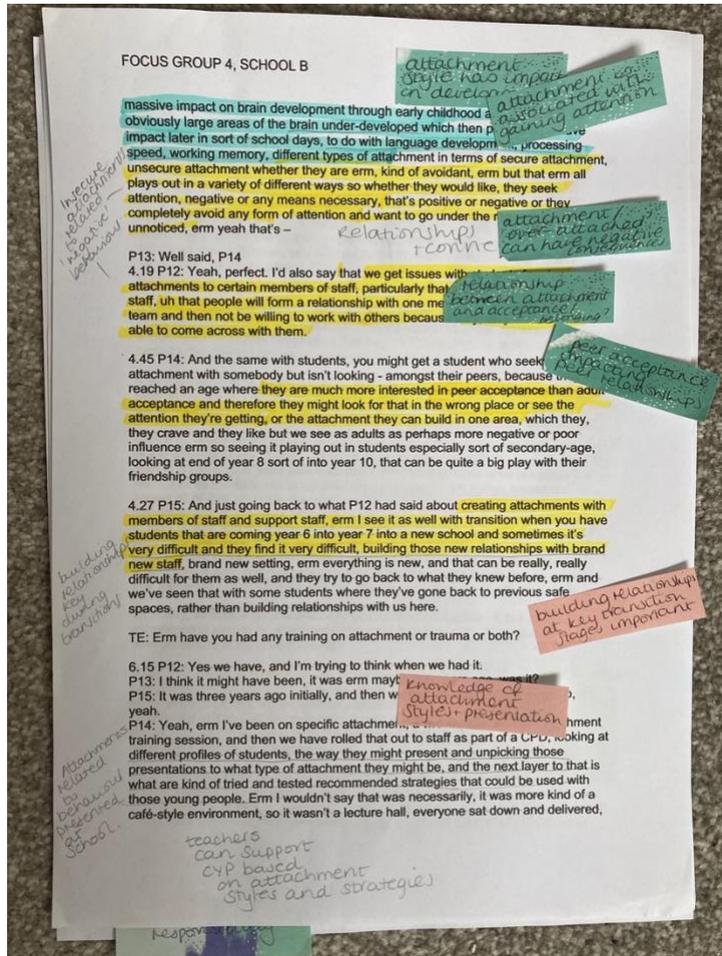
Participant 3: Yeah it's like in your case study, you were talking about PE being a particular buy-in for Justin. And I think that is important, you know, when you have those casual conversations in the staff room you kind of cross-reference experiences with a particular student that maybe [Participant 2]'s found challenging in her lesson but [Participant 4] in his lesson has found that he's got a really fantastic working relationship with, and talking with people you know that have a successful relationship with that child – well what's working well for you? Why is it that you're, how can you draw out the best in this child? Because the CPD doesn't have to be official kind of stuff, it's those conversations you have by putting the staff in touch with each other as well to learn what is working.

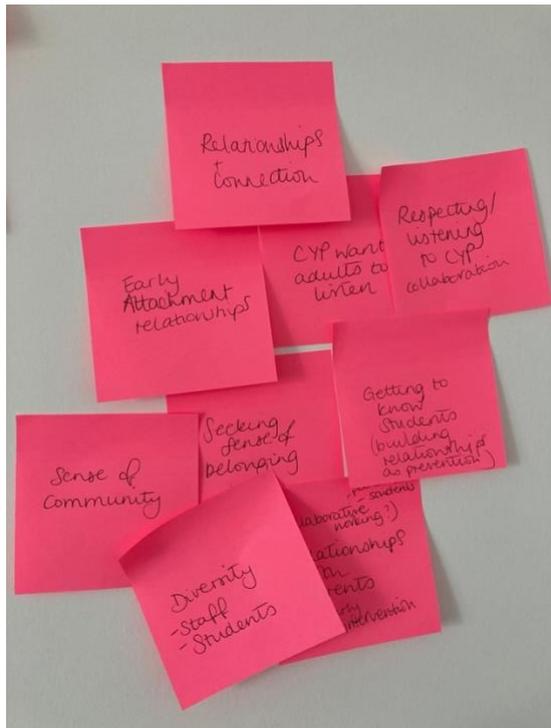
Participant 4: I think having a good home-school relationship and parental engagement is really important in that as well.

Participant 1: Yeah [nodding] Participant 2 & Participant 3 [nodding]

Appendix 7: Selected stages of Thematic Analysis

Image 1 depicts different stages of analysis including initial coding of the text (highlighter), secondary coding of the text (post-it tabs), and development of themes (notes).





Images 2 and 3 depict later grouping of codes and subthemes into overarching themes. In this case, the development of Theme 2: Relationships and Connection.

