What school factors impact on the behaviour of secondary students deemed to have attachment difficulties? A pupil perspective.

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Abstract

The challenges presented by students with behavioural, emotional and social difficulties (BESD) in mainstream settings remain high-profile in educational, social, and political contexts. Exclusion figures (while decreasing since their peak in 2003-4), continue to signal our failure to successfully engage and include a significant minority of young people within their local mainstream schools, particularly at secondary level.While the social and legislative context since the 1990s has led to a proliferation of pupil voice research from within a qualitative paradigm, studies of the voices of secondary students with BESD in mainstream settings have been limited, and their potential contribution in shaping policy and practice within schools largely ignored. Existing research in this area has tended to treat those with BESD as a homogenous group, disregarding the potentially diverse needs underpinning their challenging behaviour. This study proposes that attachment difficulties might underpin some students’ BESD and makes the case for the use of an attachment framework as a lens through which to make sense of such students’ behaviour, and as a tool for tailoring differentiated support mechanisms and interventions that may be different from, or additional to, those often implemented in schools to manage the behaviour of challenging students. Five mainstream secondary school students with BESD deemed to be underpinned by attachment difficulties by school staff participated in semi-structured interviews in order to identify the within-school factors which impacted on their behaviour in school. Transcripts were analysed using Thematic Analysis, using both inductive and theoretically-driven codes. Three major themes were identified as impacting (positively or negatively) on participants’ behaviour in school: ‘Connectedness’, ‘Having a voice’ and ‘Fairness and justice’. The findings were analysed in relation to existing research with undifferentiated groups of students with BESD and commonalities and differences highlighted. Concepts from within an attachment framework were utilised in interpreting the key differences found, and a range of recommendations for school practice at strategic and operational levels proposed as a result, as well as considerations for future research with this under-researched and vulnerable group of young people.

Chapter 1: Introduction

**What is the problem? The significance of Behavioural, Emotional and Social Difficulties (BESD) in our schools**

*‘When I was young we were taught to be discreet and respectful of elders, but the present youth are exceedingly disrespectful and impatient of restraint’ (Hesiod, 8th Century BCE)*

Little arouses the passion of teachers more than the issue of challenging behaviour, and ‘what to do’ about students with behavioural, emotional and social difficulties (BESD) in our schools. This is not a new phenomenon, as indicated by the quotation above. Munn, Johnstone, Sharp and Brown (2007) draw attention to the fact that in the latter part of the nineteenth century the payment by results system of accountability included an element for organisation and discipline, and inspectors from the time report ‘bad discipline’ as including inattention, dishonesty, scrambling out of seats and a rush to the door (p. 54). It is one that has few clear-cut solutions however, and continues to represent an area of concern in education. A recent Poll commissioned by the Teacher Support Network (2014) revealed that 62% of teachers report poor behaviour to be a significant cause of stress, with an earlier poll for the Department of Education suggesting that 60% of teachers felt that behaviour was a major contributory factor to teachers leaving the profession (National Foundation for Educational Research, 2012). There is also the ever present concern about the impact of badly behaved children on the learning of others, starkly expressed recently by the Chief Inspector of Schools:

After all, every hour spent with a disruptive, attention-seeking pupil is an hour away from ensuring other pupils are getting a decent education (Sir Michael Wilshaw, Chief inspector of schools, as reported by Adams, 2014).

The introduction of league tables and Ofsted inspections in which ratings of safety and behaviour represent limiting judgements (a school cannot achieve a rating of ‘good’ or above if safety and behaviour are not rated at this level) might legitimately be viewed as exacerbating these factors.

The impact of permanent exclusion on the life-chances of individuals, and on schools and society as a whole is also significant. Permanent exclusion might be seen as evidence that we are still failing to ‘get it right’ for large numbers of students in our school and, while the numbers have been decreasing in England and Wales since their peak in 2003-4, in 2012-13 there were still 3,900 students permanently excluded from school in England (Department for Education, DfE, 2014) and 99 in Wales (Welsh Government, 2014).

Permanent exclusion is known to be linked to a range of negative outcomes at the individual, school and societal levels. A 2011 report by the Centre for Social Justice highlighted the many ways in which exclusion impacted on young people, making them more likely to be socially excluded with decreased employment prospects, an increased likelihood of drug abuse, mental health issues, homelessness and involvement with the criminal justice system (Eastman, 2011). In addition, the financial cost to society of educating students who have been permanently excluded is high. A study by New Philanthropy Capital (Goodall, Heady and Brooks, 2007) estimated the aggregate lifetime cost of permanent exclusions from school to be £650 million, and truancy more than £8.8 billion, taking into account the costs to education, the health service, social services , higher crime and lower earnings (based on 2005 figures, p. 12 and p. 18).

It is not surprising, in view of the impact of BESD on the students themselves, on schools and on society, outlined above, that there is a vast literature on ‘behaviour difficulties’ in educational settings, and a myriad of views on what is effective in addressing them.

In this introduction I aim to:

Briefly outline the changing psychological and educational context of approaches to addressing behavioural, emotional and social difficulties in schools

Provide a rationale for a focus on pupil voice (explored further in the literature review)

Explain the experiences and understanding that have led me to seek the views of a particular group of students with BESD in this study: those whose BESD are deemed to be underpinned by attachment difficulties

Summarise the structure of the dissertation.

Before beginning, it is worth making a short note on terminology. There are many terms which have been used to describe what we now tend to refer to as BESD – from ‘emotional instability and deviations from acceptable moral conduct’ (Sully, 1895 as cited in Cooper, 1999, p.14), maladjustment, EBD (emotional and behavioural difficulties) and SEBD (social, emotional and behavioural difficulties) are among them. The semiotics of such nomenclature do not fall within the remit of this study, although it is important to note that all terms used up until today remain essentially descriptive, undefined and open to interpretation. Within this study, I use the term BESD, except when reporting research which uses the alternative terms of the time, but regard the terms as broadly interchangeable in nature.

* 1. **A brief chronology: Conceptualisations of BESD and approaches to intervention**

It is neither appropriate nor possible here to document the entire history of psychological and educational conceptualisations of BESD and the many approaches that have been advanced to address these. A broad brush-stroke of the general shifts in the ways in which BESD have been conceptualised, and the interventions or ‘treatments’ based on these conceptualisations, is however helpful in framing the current research.

Originally, the focus of research and guidance on practice which sought to address behavioural difficulties in school took a within-child perspective. This ‘medical model’ of BESD explained emotional and behavioural difficulties in terms of the child being maladjusted, with a ‘diagnosis’ often resulting in the removal of the child from mainstream education into a treatment facility (Jones, 2003). The focus of such therapeutic communities was on care rather than education and the remediation of problems sought through the environment (foreshadowing perhaps the more recent theoretical focus on the importance of school ethos, systems and social relationships), and while early provisions generally had a psychoanalytical orientation, this changed over time to a more behaviourist approach (explored below). A recognition of the needs of ‘maladjusted’ students and the need for (separate) provision were enshrined formally in the 1945 ‘Handicapped Pupils and Health Service Regulations’ which followed the (Butler) Education Act 1944.

The pathologising medical model was broadly superseded with the rise of behaviourist approaches in the 1970s, which foregrounded the role of the environment in potentially modifying the behaviour of troublesome children, and took place within a more educationally focused arena. These approaches were still applied, however, within settings outside of the mainstream, notably within the local authority established units, popularly termed ‘sin-bins’. This situation was not effectively challenged (despite the work of a few ‘progressive’ schools in the 1960s and 1970s) until the Warnock Report (DES, 1978) and the Education Act 1981, which recommended that children with disabilities (including ‘maladjusted’ children, by now termed children with ‘emotional and behavioural difficulties’ or EBD) should be educated in mainstream schools whenever possible, effectively ending the primacy of the medical model. The promise of Warnock for children with EBD, however, did not translate into practice, with placement in specialist provision actually increasing during the 1980s for these children (in contrast to the increased inclusion of children with other special educational needs) and the numbers of children excluded from school rising (Cooper, 1999, p. 28).

The focus of research in both psychology and education was increasingly informed by the view of EBDs as contextual and interactive, reflecting the broader context of the School Effectiveness and School Improvement movements which emphasised the school-related environmental variables in accounting for differences between schools (e.g. Mortimore, Sammons, Stoll and Ecob, 1988). ‘Behaviour’ became something that mainstream teachers were expected to deal with and ‘behaviourism’ was the tool they were offered to do so. The Elton Report (DES, 1989) and the 1994 DfE circulars on ‘Pupil Behaviour and Discipline’ (DfE, 1994a) and ‘The Education of Children with Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties’ (DfE, 1994b) reflect the dominance of the behaviourist model. The popularity of ‘Assertive Discipline’ (Canter and Canter, 1976) in mainstream schools and the ‘token economies’ widely used as behaviour management systems in special provisions attest to the widespread implementation of the principles of behaviourism.

More recently, criticisms of the approaches emanating from behaviourist psychologies have been evident: their focus on the ‘controlling’ of students behaviour; the lack of attention paid by them to the internal emotional world of the child; the lack of autonomy they accord students, and the disregard for the key roles played by social relationships and systems in shaping behaviour. Cooper (1999) seemed hopeful that a new paradigm was emerging in which the ‘pioneer workers with maladjusted children and modern theorists’ might share a ‘commonality of insight’ (p. 42) with the increasing theoretical emphasis on:

[E]cosystemic approaches to EBDs which draw on humanistic and behavioural psychology as well as social systems theory to create ways of construing and intervening in problem situations that take account of the full range of psychological, emotional and social influences that may be relevant. (p. 42).

Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological systems theory was one such influential theory within the research community. Sadly, there is evidence that this shift in emphasis may not have translated into practice within schools (Wiley, Tankersley and Simms, 2012). A systematic review in 2004 (Evans, Harden and Thomas, 2004) identified studies which sought to evaluate the effectiveness of strategies to support pupils with emotional and behavioural difficulties (EBD) in primary schools and found:

[L]ittle evidence …of a shift away from seeing emotional and behavioural difficulties as problems located within individuals (the so-called ‘medical model’ of EBD) towards a more context-based approach, where behaviour is seen as a response to particular situations. (p. 6).

This certainly chimes with my own experiences as a teacher and Educational Psychologist, which lead me to believe that within schools, still, ‘within-child’ or at least ‘within-family’ teacher attributions for misbehaviour remain dominant, and behaviourist approaches to discipline the most prominent.

* 1. **The genesis of the study: A focus on pupil voice and an attachment perspective**

In this study, I focus on what students themselves have to tell us about what impacts on their behaviour within school. I argue (Chapter Two) that one reason for the lack of success of strategies to change behaviour within schools might relate to the fact that the majority of research has focused on the practitioner perspective (Bennett, 2006), or on the outcomes of interventions which were based on these (for reviews see Frey and George-Nichols, 2003; Evans et al., 2004). In their review, the latter state ‘none of the studies consulted with children with or without the label EBD for their views on possible intervention studies’ (p.5).

In the literature review which follows, I focus on the growing area of research which gives voice to student perspectives, and within which tradition this study is located. I made the decision to conduct such a study on the basis of both my professional interests and my experiences within the seven secondary schools with which I work closely in my role as Senior Specialist Educational Psychologist within a small Local Authority in Wales. My experience within these schools certainly tallies with the research and guidance which suggests that behaviourist systems of discipline continue to prevail (e.g. Steer, 2009), with the school behaviour policies consisting largely of hierarchical and progressive systems of reward and consequence. While reducing exclusion figures within the Local Authority, and other behavioural indicators (such as an ‘Audit of Behavioural Need’ which is carried out annually) suggest that these approaches work for the majority of students, all of the schools continue to highlight the difficulties they face with a small proportion of students who repeatedly attract sanctions without changing their behaviour. Individual discussion with the students themselves highlighted the clarity of their perceptions on what helped them within the school context and what didn’t, and the importance of the contribution they could make to the school’s understanding of their behaviour, and the potential for this to influence the support and interventions that could be put in place to improve their engagement, behaviour and achievement. I therefore made the decision to investigate the articulate and insightful perspectives of these students more systematically through this study.

Discussion with school staff and case-work with these students revealed that they were almost exclusively children looked after by the local authority (LAC) or ‘Children in Need’ (CIN, as defined by the Children Act 1989) who had experienced troubled early lives, and seemed to have little investment in school systems of reward or consequence. The majority were characterised by the staff who knew them well as having ‘attachment difficulties’. I acknowledge that the validity and usefulness of the construct of ‘attachment’ in understanding behaviour is debated within the field (this debate is explored in the following Chapter), and within this study view attachment as one factor within a broader understanding of behaviour which is underpinned by a range of factors: biological, psychological and social, with the interplay between factors specific to each individual and context-dependent. The grouping of students ‘deemed to have attachment difficulties’ is not therefore intended to downplay the individuality of the factors impacting on each participant’s unique behavioural patterns, or to provide a reductionist explanation of their entire behavioural repertoire, but used within the study to explore the usefulness of using an attachment perspective as one possible additional lens through which to view (and potentially understand) the often puzzling and seemingly intransigent patterns of behaviour of these students.

* 1. **The structure of the dissertation**

This introduction has outlined the changing psychological and educational context of approaches to addressing BESDs in schools and considered the genesis and rationale for the focus of this study on the voices of pupils who are deemed to have attachment difficulties underpinning their BESD.

In the literature review which follows (Chapter Two), I outline the social and legislative context which has given rise to the recent focus on studies of ‘pupil voice’, and consider the findings from a range of existing studies which explore the views and perceptions of students with BESD. Following an overview of the key concepts and principles of attachment theory and consideration of the debates and issues arising from it, I turn to two sources of pupil perspective studies which may highlight what is important to children who have attachment difficulties underpinning their BESD – those who access nurture groups and those who are looked after (LAC). Having identified the key gaps in the literature which justify the study, the chapter concludes by outlining its aims and research questions.

Chapter Three outlines the methodological orientation of the study and the rationale for using the research methods chosen, and Chapter Four gives a full account of these methods and the procedures followed.

The results and discussion are presented together in Chapter Five. The chapter consists of three elements: a description of my findings presented within the framework of the three themes that I identify as impacting on participants’ behaviour in school (both positively and negatively); an analysis which contextualises the findings within the relevant literature; and a discussion which includes how the key differences might be interpreted in relation to wider theoretical frameworks, notably those that draw upon an attachment perspective.

In Chapter Six: Conclusions, I present a brief overview of my results, and outline the reflexive processes which enable me to identify some strengths and limitations of the study, before outlining some potential implications for practice in schools and suggestions for further research.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

**Introduction**

In the introduction to this dissertation, I provide an overview of the various strands of psychological and educational thinking that have informed different approaches to dealing with BESD in the educational context over time. The first wave of such thinking could be broadly characterised as a pathologising medical one, with the second characterised by an understanding of the importance of environment (firstly taking a behaviourist approach, then a more systemic, interactional one). Within both waves however, teacher perspectives dominate, with the voices of those on the receiving end - the students - largely unheard. In this literature review, I outline the social and legislative context of the burgeoning study of pupil voice, and explore the key debates and issues that arise from it, before considering the findings from a range of existing studies which aim to report the specific views and perceptions of students with BESD. I argue the case for a more nuanced exploration of the needs of students with BESD, proposing that different underpinning needs may require different or additional support mechanisms in schools. I propose that students with attachment difficulties might represent one group of students for whom additional or different support might be indicated, and offer an outline of attachment theory and an analysis of the key debates it gives rise to. The evidence from studies of the voices of students who may have attachment difficulties underpinning their BESD is considered, and finally I outline the aims and research questions of this study, situating it within the broader context.

* 1. **The importance of pupil voice**

The lack of pupil voice in research which aims to inform practice, and the domination of the voices of teachers, outlined in the introduction, is problematic for two reasons. Firstly, research suggests that practitioners’ perspectives may be fundamentally different from the perspective of students with BESD. Cefai (1995, as cited in Cefai and Cooper, 2010) compared the perspectives of teachers, and students with BESD, on the causes of poor behaviour and the best response to it. They found that teachers explain the causes of behavioural problems in terms of within-child factors, for example their personality, family problems, attention seeking, (echoing Evans et al., 2004’s findings), whereas pupils place more importance on school related factors (environmental and interactional factors), for example teacher attitude, teasing and bullying by peers.

These differences in perception are particularly important as the school environment has been identified as a key potential protective factor which enhances resilience (Hart, 2012; Gilligan, 2000) and if teachers’ attributions for problematic behaviour remain ‘within-child’, the school environment (including teachers’ own behaviour) is less likely to be considered as a potential arena for change. For the group of students who are the focus of my study, the implications are even greater as, being LAC, they are more likely to lack, or to have lacked, the protective factors which are offered by the family, rendering the role of the school even more important.

Secondly, research suggests that teachers do not have the training or preparation fully to understand BESD or meet these pupils’ needs (Mihalas, Morse, Allsopp and McHatton, 2009). This may be particularly true for my own participants, all of whom are deemed to have attachment difficulties and are LAC, as the research shows that there is a lack of training (in particular evaluated training) for teachers and other practitioners in schools in these specific areas. Everson-Hock et al., (2012) state in a systematic review of training programmes for professionals working with looked after children and young people (LACYP) that:

There are groups of professionals working with LACYP that may be of particular concern, but for whom little data on training are available, such as teachers, health professionals, youth workers and volunteers. However, there is very little research specifically focusing on these groups. While numerous training programs have been developed by individuals and private agencies, few have been evaluated and reported on. (p. 173).

Given the lack of practitioner training, knowledge and expertise in understanding and meeting the needs of students with challenging behaviour, the research bias towards practitioner-informed interventions and systems (coupled with the key differences between practitioner and pupil perspectives), it is perhaps not surprising that prevailing systems, policy and practice in schools have not always been well matched to the needs of students with BESD (Evans et al., 2004) and we continue to see evidence of our failure to meet all students’ needs in the exclusion statistics previously noted.

It is not of course my intention to suggest that pupil voice is more important in influencing policy, procedure and practice than the voices of others such as teachers, theoreticians and parents, but that it does represent a crucially important contribution to the canon. Pupil voice studies represent a shift from what McCluskey (2005, p.164) calls ‘proxy-informants: parents, teachers and other professionals’ who she views as interpreting and reflecting the views of young people, and it is to these studies that I now turn.

* 1. **The growth of pupil voice and the issues it gives rise to**

The focus on pupil voice that we see emerging in the more recent literature is not limited to research in the field of behaviour difficulties, but reflects a broader social context in which the child has more power to determine outcomes, supported by changes in the legislation related to the rights of the child (such as Articles 12 and 23 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, 1989), and by the promoting of consultation with children on decision making in policies concerning themselves. Examples of this include the Education Act 2002 which required schools to consult with pupils; the Office for Standards in Education framework for school inspections which includes a focus on pupil views (Ofsted, 2015, p. 5 and p. 17); and the Special Educational Needs Code of Practice which encourages schools to consult children with special educational needs on decisions related to their education (DfES, 2001). These legislative and policy developments have given rise to an increase in the number of pupil voice studies, from within a qualitative framework.

However, the issue of hearing the voices of students is not straightforward. I consider some of the ontological and epistemological issues raised through an attempt to illuminate student perspectives in Chapter Three: Methodology, but there are also a number of broader debates within the field which are important to note, before considering the findings of the literature most relevant to this study. Nind, Boorman and Clarke (2012) state:

It is our contention that within this context an unproblematised and over-simplified notion of pupil voice has been promulgated in the policy literature. (p. 2).

The problematic nature of the issue is reflected in ongoing debates concerning the purpose of giving voice to students, its effectiveness in bringing about change, and the potential bias and selectivity of ‘whose voices’ are heard in research as well as within school practices and forums designed to gather pupil voice.

Research and practice which aims to give voice to students have a range of ostensible purposes with their roots in legislative, educational, political, economic and social concerns (Hartas, 2011, p.103; Tangen, 2008, p.2). They can be seen as providing opportunities for marginalised groups to ‘have their say’, to become visible; to promote engagement; to empower; and to provide a starting point for formulating more effective professional development, interventions and systems in schools (Fielding and Bragg, 2003). Sellman (2009) points out that enabling students to ‘have their say’ is not the same as empowering them – empowerment can only come about if change results from the information elicited from students. Garner (1993) states:

There has been little evidence that the views of these students concerning their schooling have been used to develop or refine school procedures or professional practice. (p. 102).

The simplistic assumption that student voice would challenge the status quo, and power shift automatically towards students through their participation has been challenged by a number of researchers (e.g. Fielding 2007). Hartas (2011, p. 104) highlights how:

In some cases, participation can function as a tool for social control, diffusing conventional power relatively built around adult agendas (Fielding, 2001), and establishing “new hierarchies and norms” (Bragg, 2007, p. 354).

Sellman (2009) suggests that mechanisms and forums such as councils, focus groups, forums etc. can be viewed as a ‘Trojan horse, a surreptitious means of inserting adult middle-class values and preferred means of communication into provision…in the name of pupil empowerment’ (p. 35).

He found that many mainstream teachers ‘resisted pupil empowerment initiatives as they are uneasy about conceding power and control to pupils’ (p. 34) and he points out in the same article that the degree of cultural change necessary in schools truly to empower students (rather than simply focusing on litter-picking schedules!) is often underestimated. A common critique of initiatives to engage student voice is that they limit whose voices are heard, favouring those who share the values and ethos of the organisation and those who are willing and able to articulate their views in ways acceptable to the existing powers (e.g. Nind et al., 2012). There is however evidence that researchers are authentically seeking empowerment as an outcome of student voice. One example of this is the seminar series funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) in England which took place between 2004 and 2006 entitled ‘‘Engaging Critically with Pupil Voice: Children and young people as partners in school and community change’’ (Economic and Social Research Council, 2004-2006). Fielding (2007) describes the need for:

[Q]uite different relationships and spaces and a quite different conceptual and linguistic schema if schools are to move towards a more participatory form of engagement characterised by an intended mutuality, a disposition to see difference as a potentially creative resource, and more overt commitment to co-construction. (p. 367).

A number of researchers have attempted to address these issues, such as Nind et al. (2012); O’Connor, Hodkinson, Burton and Tortstensson (2011); and Ravet (2007), focusing on the search for more effective methodologies for engaging and empowering young people.

When it comes to research and initiatives that aim to give voice to students who have BESD, many of the complexities outlined above are compounded, and additional obstacles identified. Nind et al. (2012) outline some of the obstacles to meaningfully hearing the voices of the disaffected and the marginalised, alongside other researchers including Cooper (1993); Curtis, Roberts, Copperman, Downie and Liabo (2004); Riley and Docking (2004); and Ravet (2007). These obstacles include the fact that ‘their communication is often unconventional and their social status marginal’ (Nind et al., 2012, p. 644) and the fact that they are hard to reach, often being disengaged, suspicious and rejecting of school attempts to engage them.

Curtis et al. (2004, p. 168) outline some of the practical issues of trying to gain the views of those who are ‘unfamiliar with the give and take of group or one-to-one, discussion’ through traditional, discursive methods. They include those with challenging behaviour in this group. The research of Nind et al. (2012), O’Connor et al. (2011) and Ravet (2007) offer us some alternative ways of gathering the views of students with BESD, such as the use of digital technologies, role-plays, picture and video stimuli and games, although at this time, such methods remain at the exploratory stage.

Children and young people with BESD are particularly likely to remain unheard as a result of these issues, and Cefai and Cooper (2010) conclude:

[W]hile the number of studies on students’ voice is increasing, those on the voice of students with SEBD are still relatively few. (p. 184).

Notwithstanding these difficulties, the capacity of students with BESD to articulate insightful, fair and important messages is celebrated by those researchers who have engaged in pupil voice studies (Cefai and Cooper, 2010; Sellman, 2009; Hamill and Boyd, 2002; Wise, 2000). Cefai and Cooper (2010) suggest that students with BESD are:

Able to throw light upon the causes and nature of learning and behaviour difficulties that might be overlooked or not mentioned by teachers…[and] should be seen as a source of knowledge and expertise, having unique and inside knowledge of what it is like to be student in a particular school. (p. 184).

* 1. **Studies of the voices of pupils with BESD: Key findings**

My aim in this section is critically to analyse existing studies which attempt to elicit and document the perspectives of students with BESD, and to set out the key findings of such studies. Students in many of the studies cited (e.g. Pomeroy, 2000; Wise, 2000; Cooper, 1993) identify a range of factors that impact on their engagement with school, many of which lie outside of the school context itself. For example, students in Cooper’s (1993) study, listed family problems, (for example: disadvantage, severe emotional tension and discord, and the presence of delinquent influences in the family), and community issues (for example, neighbourhood peer groups exerting pressure to engage in delinquent or deviant activity) as well as problems within school, as impacting on their engagement with it . I focus here on the impact of school-related variables, as this is the primary focus of my own research.

Wise (2000) alerts us to the fact that studies which use student voice date as far back as the 1930s, and lists many studies which took place from the mid-1960s to the mid-1990s, but makes the point that these almost exclusively concerned themselves with mainstream schools, with few focusing on students with special educational needs (p. 16). Pomeroy (2000) highlights the lack of student voices within the School Effectiveness and Improvement Movement which dominated educational ideology following the establishment of league tables and OFSTED inspections in the early 1990s (p. 5). This is not to say that studies of student voice did not feature during this time however, and Cooper (2008) cites a list of twelve empirical studies which drew on the voices of disaffected pupils between 1970 and 2007 (p. 15-16).

The studies I make reference to in this section span a range of contexts, falling into a number of categories: studies of students who have been excluded from school (Brown, 2007; Daniels, Cole, Sellman, Sutton, Visser and Bedward,2003; Pomeroy, 2000; Gersch and Nolan, 1994); studies of students who are educated within PRUs (Michael and Frederickson, 2013; Hart, 2012; Solomon and Rogers, 2001; Hill, 1997); studies of students placed in specialist EBD provisions – these include day schools (O’Connor et al., 2011; Sellman, 2009; Wise, 2000), residential provisions (Nind et al., 2012; Polat and Farrell, 2002; Cooper, 1993) and special classes within mainstream schools (Hamill and Boyd, 2002; Jahnukainen, 2001); and reviews and analyses focussing on students who have accessed a range of provisions (Cefai and Cooper, 2010; ; Munn and Lloyd, 2005; Riley and Docking, 2004; Lloyd and O’Regan, 1999). There are also studies of disaffected students or those with BESD within mainstream settings, although these are fewer in number (Riley and Docking, 2004; Garner, 1995), and one study which focuses on the experiences of ‘reinclusion’ to a new school following exclusion (Lown, 2005). In addition to the context of educational provision, and the ages of the students researched (most studies focus on secondary school students), the studies vary in other ways, with some offering retrospective accounts of former BESD students (Daniels et al., 2003; Polat and Farrell, 2002; Lloyd and O’Regan, 1999), some focusing on particular groups, for example the experiences of girls (Nind et al., 2012; Lloyd and O’Regan, 1999) and some being located in different countries: Scotland (McCluskey et al.,2013; Hamill and Boyd, 2002), Finland (Jahnukainen, 2001), New Zealand (Hajdukova, Hornby and Cushman, 2014), and Malta (Cefai and Cooper, 2010). One significant gap in the literature which concerns itself with the voice of students with BESD is that representing the perceptions and experiences of looked after children (LAC) with BESD and I turn to this issue in Section 2.6.2.

The studies are of course not directly comparable as each tends to focus on particular issues: relationships with teachers (Hajdukova et al., 2014; Pomeroy, 1999); sources of resilience (Hart, 2012); motivation (Solomon and Rogers, 2001); understandings of discipline (McCluskey, 2005; Osler, 2000); opportunities for participation (McCluskey et al., 2013) and others. However, given these disparities of time, location, and the context of provision, the commonalities in themes that emerge are startlingly similar. I have identified the key themes that emerge from the studies below, and return to these in Chapter Five: Results and Discussion, when I compare these themes with those identified in my study.

***Relationships with teachers***

In all of the studies reviewed, the relationships students had with teachers emerge as the single most important factor in their experiences of school. Lown (2005) found that a positive relationship with at least one teacher was a key factor in the successful reinclusion of excluded pupils. Cooper (1993) found that the good relationships students in residential SEBD provision enjoyed with staff played a key role in changing students’ views of themselves and in promoting engagement with learning. Polat and Farrell (2002) also found that former pupils of residential BESD provision regarded positive relationships with teachers as a key feature of their relative success within these settings and afterwards. In the majority of studies in which students within special provision compare their experiences within such provision with their mainstream experiences, relationships with teachers in mainstream are portrayed as negative and as contributing to behavioural difficulties (Hajdukova et al., 2014; Michael and Frederickson, 2013; Hart, 2012; Nind et al., 2012; Cefai and Cooper, 2010; Sellman, 2009; Munn and Lloyd, 2005; Jahnukainen, 2001; Pomeroy, 2000; Wise, 2000; Hill, 1997). Cefai and Cooper (2010) refer to a ‘perceived lack of understanding and support by the classroom teachers’ who caused students to feel ‘humiliated and inadequate’ (p. 168) and this was repeatedly echoed in other studies. In summary, students felt disliked by teachers and their behaviour was often perceived to exacerbate behavioural issues, through their disinclination to listen to students, their negative judgements of students, the imposition of orders, the use of shouting, unfair treatment and the application of rigid and autocratic discipline measures. The qualities that made a good teacher were remarkably consistent with a relaxed approach, caring and respectful behaviour, the ability to joke, listening and understanding high on students’ lists in every setting.

***Curriculum and factors related to teaching and learning***

Issues related to the curriculum and factors impacting on teaching and learning featured as important in the majority of the studies reviewed. Hamill and Boyd (2002) state:

The research literature in relation to young people whose behaviour can be challenging consistently points to how an inappropriate curriculum can exacerbate behavioural difficulties…this theme was echoed repeatedly by all of the young people in the sample. (p. 114).

Their participants emphasised that the curriculum didn’t meet their needs and wasn’t accessible. They suggested that teachers were often not helpful and did not recognise their learning difficulties, and that this made misbehaviour more likely. The authors point out that ‘the relationship between learning difficulties and misbehaviour in class has been well documented in the literature’ (p. 114) and many of the studies reviewed in this chapter make the same link (e.g. Pomeroy, 2000; Wise, 2000; Cooper, 1993). Again, these complaints feature prominently in students’ mainstream experiences, and are often contrasted with more positive experiences within specialist settings (Michael and Frederickson, 2013; Pomeroy, 2000; Wise, 2000; Lloyd and O’Regan, 1999; Hill, 1997;). Specific issues that were contrasted in relation to the curriculum in the two settings include: its relevance and the degree to which it is personalised (Michael and Frederickson, 2013; Hart, 2012); the size of classes (where smaller classes offer students more teacher time, attention and support) (Polat and Farrell, 2002); the extent to which lessons are fun and engaging (Hart, 2012; Riley and Docking, 2004); the amount of help students receive with their work (Cefai and Cooper, 2010; Munn and Lloyd, 2005; Jahnukainen, 2001;). Cefai and Cooper (2010) identify ‘Unconnected learning experiences’ as one of five key themes emerging from their review of eight pupil voice studies in Malta, finding that students ‘found the curriculum boring, academic and unrelated to life and career’ (p. 191) and that:

When students felt supported in their learning and provided with practical, meaningful activities which they could follow and participate in, they became actively engaged in the learning process. (p. 191).

One interesting feature of the research is that student concerns with teaching and learning (the value of education, academic progress, issues relating to the curriculum and teaching styles) appear to have more prominence when students are talking about their specialist placements, with less reference made to these factors when the discussion centres on mainstream provision. Pomeroy (2000) identifies ‘School work, education provision and engagement’ as one of her five themes, Hart (2012) ‘Teaching and learning’ and Michael and Frederickson (2013) ‘Curriculum’ as the second most discussed aspects of educational provision. Jahnukainen (2001) makes reference to the ‘joy of learning’ (p. 154) that students experienced when placed in a small group within a mainstream school, and contrasts this to students’ disengagement with learning when accessing mainstream classes previously. Some reasons for this difference in focus are discussed in Chapter Five: Results and Discussion.

***Unfairness and having a voice***

Common to every study giving voice to students with BESD was the key importance of perceptions of powerlessness and injustice. Cefai and Cooper (2010) describe how students felt:

[P]art of an undemocratic system built on adult power and coercion [that] left them alienated and led them to disengage from the system…they felt they could do little at the school to change their predicament. (p. 189).

Students uniformly disliked the autocratic discipline systems operating within mainstream settings, and many studies which compared students’ perceptions of the fairness of discipline in specialist and mainstream settings highlighted their preference for the systems operating within the former setting (e.g. Michael and Frederickson, 2013; Hart, 2012; Jahnukainen, 2001). Within mainstream settings, teachers were perceived to be unfair in almost all studies, to victimise and label students, to punish unfairly and to apply discipline systems inconsistently. Again, there was remarkable consistency in students’ feelings - that they did not have a voice in school and that teachers did not listen to their perspectives. Although these issues were common to the vast majority of studies reviewed, those that foreground this issue include: Cefai and Cooper (2010); McCluskey (2005); Hamill and Boyd (2002); Pomeroy (2000); and Wise (2000). The findings of these studies should also however be viewed within the evidence base which includes students without BESD, and interested readers are referred to Gorard (2012), and Riley and Docking (2004) who carried out/reviewed large scale surveys of the views of generic groups of students on issues such as fairness and justice, whose views, it would seem, are not different in nature from those of students with BESD. I explore these views in detail in Chapter Five, Section 5.4.1.

***Environment (Physical)***

Many students make reference to the importance of the physical environment as a factor impacting on their behaviour and learning. Students in the studies of Hart (2012); Nind et al. (2012); Riley and Docking (2004); and Wise (2000) make negative reference to the size or physical environment of their mainstream schools. The participants in Wise’s study ‘described a fear resulting from their subjective view of the size of the school buildings and their institutional nature’ (2000, p. 28). The pattern of positive perceptions of specialist settings, contrasted with negative perceptions of mainstream settings that I have highlighted in relation to the other key themes discussed, is also noticeable in relation to the environment. Michael and Frederickson (2013) report that the most commonly highlighted feature of the specialist environment was its small size (p. 419). Physical spaces featured strongly in Nind et al.’s (2012) study of girls at a specialist EBD provision as an important positive factor in their engagement, and Hart (2012) identified ‘Environment’ as one of four themes emerging from her study of students in a PRU. The ‘small family atmosphere’ and ‘calm, quiet and nurturing’ environment were felt to facilitate the ‘development of relationships and a sense of safety and security’ (Hart, 2012, p. 10). Wise (2000) reports that students liked the small size of their alternative provisions, and describes how size is related for her participants to the numbers of students within mainstream schools which they found problematic, as well as with the numbers of students within classes and consequent teacher - pupil ratio, which meant that less help was available for them (a factor discussed above).

***Friends / social issues***

Surprisingly, given their central role in the lives of most adolescents (e.g. Lown, 2005; Riley and Docking, 2004), friendships are not mentioned as a factor highlighted by students in some of the studies reviewed (Munn and Lloyd, 2005; Hamill and Boyd, 2002; Jahnukainen, 2001; Hill, 1997).

Pomeroy (2000) draws our attention to the importance of individual differences between students with BESD, and the role of friends and peers (both within mainstream and specialist settings), would appear to represent one of the areas where there are key differences in student experiences. Cefai and Cooper (2010) highlight the role of friends in contributing to students’ behavioural difficulties, with some students being popular, some having friends who exert both positive and negative influences on them, and some whose primary experiences are of bullying and teasing at the hands of peers. Generally, students in the studies where friendships do feature do not have unproblematic relationships with peers. Gersch and Nolan (1994) highlight difficulties with peers as a factor contributing to misbehaviour, and Michael and Frederickson (2013) identify relationships with peers within the specialist setting as both an ‘enabling factor’, and a ‘barrier’ as other students’ disruptive behaviour impacted on their own behaviour. Polat and Farrell (2002) also report mixed findings, with most of their participants reporting good relationships with peers but with several raising bullying and a lack of friends as negative aspects of their experiences. The picture painted by Nind et al. (2012), however, highlights the importance of the friendships the girls forged within the specialist setting as key to their improved engagement.

Bullying is raised as a significant factor contributing to students’ failure to succeed in the mainstream environment by both Pomeroy (2000) and Wise (2000). The participants in Wise’s study spoke of targeted name calling, victimisation, physical aggression, aggressive and threatening behaviours. The prevalence of such behaviours was seen by some of Wise’s participants as resulting from the size of the school, and the sheer numbers of students which made it impossible for teachers to monitor behaviour. Peer relationships for Wise’s participants were uniformly negative, while in Pomeroy’s (2000) study, positive aspects of friendships were also raised by participants. The positive aspects of peer relationships were framed, however, within an overall context which was ‘described as being rife with conflict…a picture of a volatile existence where emotional and psychological wellbeing is constantly under threat’ (Pomeroy, 2000, p. 72).

I return to each of these themes in Chapter Five: Results and Discussion, where I compare and contrast these findings with those of this study, and offer further analysis and interpretation of the commonalities and differences identified.

* 1. **Towards a more nuanced understanding of BESD**

The themes that emerge from the studies of the voices of students with BESD are consistent across context and have a high degree of temporal validity. Similar themes have been arising in the literature since BESD pupil perspectives were first taken into account (Cooper, 1993). These themes helpfully illuminate important areas of focus for educational professionals in the development of strategies and interventions that are more likely to be effective in meeting the needs and promoting positive behavioural choices for students with BESD than those that are based on purely practitioner perspective for the reasons I have outlined previously. A potential weakness in the evidence base, however, is that the studies have all involved undifferentiated groups of students with BESD, or students grouped by gender or nationality, rather than by similarity of the issues underpinning the BESD. BESD is essentially a descriptive term, with a variety of underpinnings. BESD can arise from a range of causes and these are often interlinked - they range from on-going neurological conditions such as attention deficit hyperactive disorder or autism spectrum disorders, through temporary disturbances of emotional and mental health such as mood disorders, to environmental factors such as a mental illness in a parent, or trauma. The fact that establishing causality is problematic and often multi-faceted, with diagnostic criteria overlapping and conditions coexisting, should not prevent us from being aware of the potential importance of understanding the underpinning meaning of behaviours in designing and evaluating strategies and interventions to meet the needs of students with BESD.

In the search for effective strategies and interventions to meet these needs, it may well be that such differences in the underpinnings of BESD require differentiated approaches by schools, and that what is effective in meeting the needs of students whose BESD are underpinned by one set of variables are less so for another. Even similar behavioural manifestations may have different causes and meanings for individuals, with strategies and interventions impacting differentially. Moran (2010) illustrates how children with attachment difficulties and those on the autistic spectrum can present with superficially similar behaviours and yet require quite different approaches to manage them. While accepting that certain interventions may benefit both, she urges practitioners to be alert to the fact that it is the underlying purpose or cause of the behaviour that will dictate the efficacy of intervention. There may be very different strategies implicated for similar behaviours. At a macro level, a striking example of this is the importance to both sets of children of a stable relationship with a key adult. However, the nature, challenges and aims of establishing the relationship are very different for each. For children with attachment difficulties, the relationship is the key vehicle for bringing about change and the challenges ‘limiting emotional dependence and maintaining appropriate interpersonal boundaries’ (Moran, 2010, p. 48). In contrast, for children on the autistic spectrum, the key challenge lies in establishing a point of engagement, with strategies such as harnessing the child’s interests or obsessions to do so being appropriate. Similarly, at the level of individual behaviours, Moran gives the example of a presenting behaviour common to both sets of children, that of rigid obsessive behaviours around eating. Different strategic approaches are implicated for each however, as the underlying purpose or cause of the behaviour is very different in each case. In the case of children with attachment difficulties, the rejection of food is often intended to provoke emotional hurt or arise from the need for control, while for children on the autistic spectrum, the problems are more likely to be related to physical sensations, the appearance of the food on the plate, or to the child’s routine.

* 1. **The needs of students with attachment difficulties underpinning their BESD**

If we consider the population of students with BESD as being made up of sub-groups with varying underpinning needs (rather than say, differentiated by gender or ethnicity), one group that might have some prominence is the subset of students whose BESD are underpinned by attachment difficulties (cross-cutting gender, ethnicity, or nationality for example).

* + 1. **An overview of attachment theory**

The particular underlying needs that characterise attachment difficulties and their behavioural manifestations in young children were originally theorised in the framework of Attachment Theory (Bowlby, 1990; 1973; 1969) and its subsequent development (e.g. Ainsworth and Bowlby, 1991; Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters and Wall, 1978). It is not within the remit of this literature review to provide a comprehensive overview of attachment theory, but I present below a brief overview of the key concepts and their implications, an exploration of the key debates related to the model, and a rationale for using an attachment framework to inform the interpretation and analysis of my findings in this study.

Attachment theory argues that early attachments play a vital role in emotional security, responses to stress, future interpersonal relationships and our motivation and ability to relate to and learn from the world around us. Bowlby (1969) proposed that infants have a genetically inherited predisposition to form attachments, as this ensures survival through the proximity of the caregiver. He suggested, however, that the quality of the attachment is mediated through the environment, so that different experiences of being cared for result in different patterns of functioning. He asserted that attachment-seeking behaviours are elicited in response to internal or external threat or stress (e.g. cold, hunger, pain or a frightening or strange situation). When the care-giver, on whom the infant depends for survival, consistently recognises and meets the infant’s needs, the adult become the infant’s ‘secure base’ (Ainsworth et al., 1978), from which the infant can venture forth securely to explore the world, in line with developmental imperatives. When internal or external stresses are experienced, the infant returns to the secure base, which functions to regulate the infant’s stress (Bowlby, 1988), enabling the infant to then re-engage with their exploratory activities. The need for proximity to the attachment figure is seen as a homeostatic balance with the need to explore the world, and the two systems, attachment and exploratory, are therefore conceived of as having an inverse relationship. Broadly stated, when distress causes the attachment system to ‘switch on’, the exploratory system is ‘switched off’ (as threat, leading to high levels of stress, interferes with curiosity and learning).

When the infant’s needs are met in a good-enough fashion (the care-giver is available, attuned to the needs and responsive), the infant develops a secure attachment (Ainsworth et al., 1978); he or she experiences ‘felt security’ and develops trust that their needs will be met, and confidence in the adult’s ability to meet them. Conversely, if their needs are not met, are met inconsistently, or, worse, if the caregiver elicits feelings of fear and aversion, the child develops an insecure attachment. Ainsworth et al. (1978) propose three different styles of insecure attachment – ambivalent-resistant; anxious-avoidant and (later) disorganised, each associated with particular behavioural manifestations. Infants with insecure attachments develop adaptive strategies that secure their safety and survival within the context of their care-giving environment (strategies which persist and may later become maladaptive). The attachment style is regarded as largely fixed by the age of three years, and its stability over time has been demonstrated in the research, with a recent meta-analysis of 27 longitudinal studies examining attachment related internal representations suggesting that attachment security is moderately stable across the first 19 years of life (Fraley, 2002).

Through these early experiences, Bowlby claimed that children develop a set of mental representations or ‘Internal Working Models’, IWMs, (Bowlby, 1969). The IWM of the securely attached views adults as available, responsive and helpful, the self as ‘a potentially lovable and valuable person’ (Bowlby, 1980, p. 242), and the world as predictable and safe. With such IWMs, the infants learn to relinquish control, safe in the knowledge that others will meet their needs; to develop trust which allows others to support them in learning to manage their stress; to seek help in the expectation that their needs will be met. The IWM of the insecurely attached looks very different, with the self-viewed as shameful and unworthy of love, adults as unreliable and unable to meet their needs and the world as anxiety provoking and unpredictable. Through the filter of this lens, children do not experience ‘felt security’ nor trust that their needs will be met, and they do not learn to manage their stress though their relationship with the care-giver. They struggle to seek help as they have no expectation that their needs will (or can) be met by others. The way that IWMs function is to influence the child's perceptions of the self and world by predisposing them to select and interpret incoming information in a way consistent with their IWMs of self and others, a process which reinforces and perpetuates the IWM itself (Sroufe, Egeland, and Carlson, 1999).

These processes are presumed to impact in a number of areas throughout the lives of individuals.

Secure attachments have been linked to the development of coping skills, positive mental health, cognitive and social development (increased self-confidence, better social skills, more positive relationships with peers), and school engagement (Ubha and Cahill, 2014). Insecure attachments result in a range of negative behaviours and outcomes, which are well documented in the literature (Riley, 2011; Brisch, 2009; Geddes, 2006). Rees (2005, p. 1060) lists the following outcomes of insecure attachment: poor stress regulation (the regulatory system is ‘set in infancy at a level adaptive to environment’); hypervigilance (the constant scanning of the environment for potential threats) due to the ‘lack of a concept of safety’ and as a ‘response to aggressive parenting and chaos’ (also explored from a neurological perspective by Perry, 2004); a hair-trigger ‘fight or flight’ response (due to continuously raised levels of cortisol, a stress hormone); controlling behaviour (to enhance feelings of safety); vulnerability to failure and rejection; poor motivation and ability to explore the world (as stress regulation, made possible through a ‘secure base’, is a prerequisite for exploration and learning).

Perhaps the single most pervasive impact however is on the establishment and maintenance of social relationships. The child’s IWM of others is used ‘as a prototype for subsequent relationships’ (Riley, 2011, p. 20), and relationships are viewed as an ongoing area of difficulty in children with attachment difficulties (Golding, 2008; Geddes, 2003), as their IWMs do not allow any ‘belief that safety is achievable through relationships’ and any sense in which relationships might be ‘mutually beneficial’ (Rees, 2005, p. 1058).

* + 1. **Attachment theory: Impact and issues**

Attachment theory has had a direct impact on policy and practice in a number of areas. Slater (2007) lists: changes in child day and pre-school care; hospital care for children; fostering and adoption; social work practice and CAMHS teams (p. 205). A brief review of the literature related to the care needs of LAC and the training needs of foster parents show attachment theory permeating the approaches suggested. For example, a recent meta-review of six approaches to social work in residential child care settings (Macdonald and Millen, 2012) concluded that, with the exception of one approach (social pedagogy), theories of attachment and trauma had a prominent position within all the models that underpinned practice.

This is not, however, the case with education. Two recent research reports (Brodie, 2010; Fletcher-Campbell, Archer, and Tomlinson, 2003) focusing on the educational needs of LAC, make no mention of attachment theory or the need for an understanding of it or training in it. This is surprising considering the evidence that many LAC are considered likely to have attachment difficulties (Ford, Vostanis, Meltzer and Goodman, 2007, p. 324), and the preponderance of attachment theory within the literature concerned with the care needs of these children (Macdonald and Millen, 2012).

Slater (2007) highlights the scepticism of many Educational Psychologists about the relevance of attachment theory, and wonders why:

On the one hand we embrace the notion of the importance of environmental and social factors, on the other we find it hard to accept that such influences early in life may be enormous risk factors. It is ironic…that as professionals….we reject (or fail to fully understand and apply) the one theory which could actually promote positive change for these young people [LAC]. (p. 211).

In explaining the apparent lack of impact of an attachment perspective within education, it is important to note that the conceptual basis and usefulness of ‘attachment’ as an explanatory framework for development or BESD does not go unquestioned in the literature. Historically, attachment theory has been subject to criticisms on a number of fronts, from psychologists in both psychoanalytic and behaviourist camps; the former taking issue with its emphasis on environment (rather than fixed phases and internal drives) and the latter for its biological basis! Feminist critiques have:

taken issue with attachment theory, describing the attachment field’s prescriptive mothering role as unreasonable, the emphasis on mothering as politically motivated and the rationale for focusing on mothering in isolation from context as patriarchal. (Buchanan, 2013, p. 20).

More recently, critics such as Kagan (1994) and Pinker (2002) have raised concerns which centre around the concept of infant determinism. Although commonly held, the idea that attachment theory proposes that a bad start in life means no hope of change and is ‘wholly predictive of poor life outcomes’ (Slater, 2007, p. 210), is a misinterpretation. Bowlby himself in 1988 rejected the deterministic model, and Slater points out that, over time, attachment theory has moved from:

A position of within-chid explanations of behaviour to a more environmental, relationships based emphasis. (2007, p. 20).

She points out that this reconceptualisation has been taken on board by psychiatry, as DSM-IV (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, American Psychiatric Association, 1994) recognises an ‘environmental and social dynamic’ in its description of ‘Reactive Attachment Disorder’ (RAD). Slater (2007) concludes that attachment theory is consistent with Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological model of ‘developmental contextualism’ and Waddington’s (1957) concept of developmental pathways, which proposes that positive experiences throughout life give us the opportunity to overcome difficulties and move forward along different pathways. Evidence that IWMs can change over time and in response to life events (Waters, Merrick, Treboux, Crowell and Albersheim, 2000) mean that attachment theory is not inconsistent with these positions. Repeated interactions that contradict existing working models, for example a positive relationship with an empathic teacher, can make a difference (Sroufe, Fox and Pancake, 1983). Perry (2004) asserts that we can make a difference to the behavioural expression of attachment difficulties and trauma through ‘factors that provide structure, predictability, nurturing and sense of safety’ (p. 16). This is of central importance within an educational context as schools have the potential to provide many opportunities for furnishing both positive relationships with empathic teachers and responsive, nurturing environments which may function for students as the secure base they have lacked in their lives.

Overall, studies that explore attachment theory have generated a wealth of evidence that it constitutes a robust and useful model (see, for example, Cassidy and Shafer, 1999 for an overview of research) and, despite ongoing critiques (such as those that focus on some of the controversial ‘therapies’ linked, tenuously, to attachment theory, e.g. Barth, Crea, John, Thoburn and Quinton, 2005), attachment theory is currently widely accepted by clinical, neurological and developmental psychologists (Schore, 1994). Developments in neuroscience have supported many of the tenets of attachment theory, with the importance of the experiences of the early years in forming the very architecture of the brain being demonstrated through neuroscientific studies (Gerhardt, 2004, offers an accessible overview of developments in this area). Perry (2004) throws light from a neuroscientific perspective on some of the typical behaviours of children and young people who have been traumatised and maltreated, explaining how they may be constantly ‘internally agitated…impulsive, hypervigilant, hyperactive’ (p. 9) and he starkly outlines the impact of this state on other areas of functioning:

The core hyperarousal symptoms result in a cascade of secondary, inter-related problems. Inability to engage in appropriate intimacy leads to difficulties with peer and adult relationships; inability to perform adequately in school leads to poor self-esteem, resulting in a variety of learned behaviours which both mask and defend against these core deficits driven by their physiological hyper-reactivity [which] impairs the ability to modulate anxiety, concentrate on academic or social learning tasks, and contain behavioural impulsivity. (p. 21).

While the impact of attachment theory in education may be considered ‘niche’ rather than mainstream (it features in the nurture group movement, considered later, but not in educational reports and guidance for LAC), there is nevertheless a growing literature aimed at practitioners which attempts to describe and explain the typical patterns of behaviour of those students who are considered to experience attachment difficulty within the school context (e.g. Bomber, 2011 and 2007; Geddes, 2006), and which makes recommendations for meeting the needs of such students.

It is of course important to recognise the risks of educationalists potentially using attachment theory to pathologise children and young people, with the concomitant risk that the use of it as a construct might reduce the motivation of teachers to attend to environmental factors as potential areas for change (particularly in view of the tendency of teachers to seek ‘within child’ explanations for BESD, highlighted earlier). However, I would suggest that it can, used carefully, offer a robust and useful lens through which to understand (and perhaps seek to address) challenging and puzzling behaviours. Geddes (2005) describes how these behaviours might manifest themselves, outlining how children may deny the need for support and help from the teacher, cope with their perceived helplessness by becoming very controlling, and demonstrate a lack of empathic understanding of others which leads to difficulties with peer relationships. Furthermore she lists the following ‘adaptations to unbearable fear’ which include coping mechanisms which aim to reduce their anxiety:

[D]isregard of adults, rejection of adult authority; hypervigilance to events around them to safeguard against the constant fear of unpredictable dangers; unpredictable outbursts of aggression; avoidance of situations in which helplessness is likely to be triggered [and where] they are likely to feel humiliation and denigration which would remind them of their intense vulnerability;… brain patterns hot-wired for fight and flight. Hopkins (1990) observes that …they are likely to cope with their helplessness by becoming very controlling. (p. 86).

It is not difficult to see how the characteristics that Geddes (and previously Perry, 2004) outline could quickly result in social, behavioural and disciplinary incidents in the school setting, as well as exerting a significant impact on the child’s learning.

If we accept that the sub-group of students who have attachment difficulties underpinning their BESD might indeed have some specific needs, and that these may be changed through intervention, it is likely that these students may require tailored approaches which are potentially different from, and/or additional to, those provided generally for students with BESD. In line with my focus on pupil voice studies, I will now turn to an exploration of the literature researching what students with attachment difficulties perceive to be helpful or unhelpful in the school context.

* 1. **The voices of students with attachment difficulties underpinning their BESD**

In exploring what students with attachment difficulties find helpful and less helpful in supporting them in making positive behavioural choices, one of the difficulties I have encountered is the lack of a clearly demarcated group of students identified as having attachment difficulties. In contrast to groups of students with more clearly demarcated ‘conditions’ which might underpin BESD, such as ADHD or Asperger’s Syndrome, the majority of children and young people who display characteristic patterns of attachment difficulties are never formally diagnosed. The diagnostic criteria for ‘Reactive Attachment Disorder’ (RAD) as defined by successive versions of DSM are narrow and exclusionary, and diagnostic rates low in comparison to other disorders. Moran (2010) states:

The diagnostic criteria for attachment disorder are very specific and there is an argument that there are more children with significant attachment difficulties than are identified and diagnosed (Howe, 2006). Perhaps the criteria are too narrow. (p. 45).

Researchers therefore tend to use the looser term ‘attachment problems/difficulties’ to describe the patterns of behaviour and underlying needs described in the previous sections, where these lead to difficulties that are severe enough to impact on relationships and everyday life, and I follow this convention in this study.

In the absence of a clearly defined group, I have focused on the views and experiences of two student populations - both potentially having a high incidence of attachment difficulties - in seeking to establish what may be helpful or less helpful in impacting on their BESD in an educational context. The first group are those who have been assessed as needing special provision to meet the needs underpinning their BESD in the form of nurture groups, and the second those who are looked after by the local authority (LAC). I now turn to the evidence of what these students find helpful and less helpful in school.

**Research on the voices of students in nurture group provisions**

Nurture groups were conceived as a school-based therapeutic provision, informed by attachment theory, for young children with BESD (Bennathan and Boxall, 2000). Interest in nurture groups has recently enjoyed an upsurge with approximately 1500 nurture groups operating in the UK (nurture group Network, 2014).

Underpinned by a number of key psychological principles related to attachment theory, the development of attachment relationships is regarded as crucial, and the focus is on emotional development and well-being, which is prioritised over cognitive learning. The ‘classic’ model described by Boxall (2002) caters for between 6 and 12 children between the ages of 3 and 11, with two or more staff (usually a specially trained teacher and teaching assistant) in a base which replicates the emotional security and warmth of a home, with areas for cooking, eating, relaxing, socialising and working. This ‘bridge’ between home and school represents a secure base for children, and aims to support the development of caring and trusting relationships within a nurturing environment (Whitehead, 2012). These provisions are based on the evidence I have cited previously that a secure base and alternative attachment figures can work therapeutically to challenge negative IWMs, thereby impacting on the manifestations of the needs in behaviours which are perceived as challenging.

There have been a number of evaluations of the impact of nurture group provisions, and these have been overwhelmingly positive. The Department for Education and Employment (DfEE, 1997) recognised the effectiveness of nurture groups, as did Ofsted (2011). A recent systematic review (Hughes and Schlosser, 2014) has documented the positive impact of nurture groups on the emotional well-being of children with BESD, drawing upon eleven peer reviewed papers. A potential shortcoming of the research base is the lack of studies of how the pupils themselves perceive the experience, and of which particular aspects of such provisions they find helpful. While some research has incorporated student views (e.g. Sanders, 2007; Cooper, Arnold and Boyd, 2001), most studies rely on teacher or researcher administration of questionnaires, assessment tools, such as the Boxall Profile (Bennathan and Boxall, 1998), or Goodman’s Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (Goodman, 1998), or observations to measure progress, (e.g. Binnie and Allen, 2008; Newman, Woodcock and Dunham, 2007). More recent research explores the perceptions of the adults implementing the intervention in order to extract more nuanced and qualitative information (e.g. Billington, 2012). Whitehead (2012) states:

Few studies have based their rationale on the specific aim of listening to NG pupils regarding their views on the processes and features of NGs and none to date has used participatory methods in an attempt to understand how and why specific NG features relate to SEBD development. It has not been common for researchers to ask pupils “how” they feel NGs have impacted on their experiences and the central focus tends not to have been on the “lived experiences” of NG pupils. (p. 47).

Whitehead’s study aimed to fill this gap in the research, and used the perceptions of primary-aged pupils in one nurture group to evaluate what aspects of the provision impacted (positively and negatively) on their social, emotional and behavioural development. The key themes that emerged from this piece of qualitative research as supporting the development of the children included the importance of separation from the mainstream context, the sense of belonging, increased personal agency through choice, and relationships with nurture group staff. In common with other researchers’ findings (e.g. Cooper and Tiknaz, 2005), peer relationships within the group were found to be problematic and hindering of positive social, emotional and behavioural development.

There are fewer studies of nurture group amongst secondary populations and, of those that exist (e.g. Colley, 2009; Cooke, Yeomans and Park, 2008), none seeks to explore students’ views on the effectiveness of the interventions.

**Research on the voices of students who are LAC**

The second group that I believed might provide some insight into what students with attachment difficulties find useful/problematic in addressing their behavioural, social and emotional needs, comprises those who are LAC. While not all students with BESD who are LAC will have attachment difficulties (some children become LAC as a result of BESD unrelated to attachment issues, although of course such difficulties may result in subsequent attachment difficulties), it is generally accepted that that a high proportion will (Ford et al., 2007). The majority of children become looked after as a direct result of the lack of a satisfactory relationship with a consistently supportive and caring adult throughout their childhood (Demeray and Malecki, 2002), the primary cause of attachment difficulties. Berridge (2007) states, drawing on information provided by the Department for Education and Skills (DES, 2005), that:

Sixty-two per cent of all looked after children in 2004, and 54% of those over 10 years old, were recorded as having neglect or abuse as the main category of need responsible… For others it may have been present but not the main factor. (p. 7).

Further evidence of a link between looked after status and attachment difficulties comes from the literature on the care needs of children and young people who are looked after (and those who are adopted), which reveals an almost pervasive assumption that these children will have attachment difficulties. Even the briefest perusal of this literature demonstrates the dominance of the attachment perspective in the interventions and training opportunities aimed at foster carers and adoptive parents (Everson-Hock et al., 2012).

If it is accepted then that a high proportion of students who are LAC with BESD are likely to have attachment difficulties (Meltzer, Gatward, Corbin, Goodman and Ford, 2003), an exploration of any research focusing on student perceptions of what impacts on such students’ behaviour in school will be of relevance to this study, and it is for this reason that I sought information in this area.

It is widely recognised that a high proportion of students who are LAC have BESD and that exclusions for this group are high. In 2009/10 the permanent exclusion rate for students in public care was 0.2% which was double the rate for the general population. In the same year the rate of fixed term exclusions for children in public care was 9.2% against an average rate of 2.4% (DFE, 2012). Worrying as these statistics are, there is relatively little research which specifically focuses on behavioural concerns or exclusions of LAC with BESD and how the school experiences of these pupils might impact on these outcomes, particularly from the perspectives of the pupils themselves.

The vast majority of research on LAC focuses on the factors that impact on attainment. Even within this field, there is a dearth of academic articles concerned with the education of children and young people in public care (Jackson and Hojer, 2013), when compared with that exploring their care needs, and this is perhaps linked to the traditional divide between care and education systems, and the perceived role of social worker as separate from educator. Berridge (2007) points out that the poor academic results of looked after children are generally attributed to inadequacies in social work ‘and not schools, interestingly’ (p. 4).

Demonstrating the same bias, the literature which seeks to explain the poor outcomes of looked after children in a broader range of areas focuses primarily on factors outside of the school. In a review of factors associated with a wide range of outcomes for looked after children and young people, Jones et al. (2011), look at a total of ninety-two studies, mapping the key factors which mediate outcomes. They conclude that the most salient are: placement stability (number of placements), emotional and behavioural problems, and age at first placement. Other variables identified in the literature include such factors as care environments and the turnover of social workers (Gilligan, 2007).

In a review of the literature on factors associated with outcomes for looked after children and young people, Jones et al. (2011) sum up the current research picture:

The overall findings highlight both the breadth of available evidence and some areas where there are likely to be gaps in the evidence base for potential areas for intervention. For example, there is a wealth of research in this field examining the relationships between system factors (e.g. the type, setting or organisation of care) or carer-related factors (e.g. training or support) and outcomes for children…Fewer studies examine the impact of factors or interventions that relate more directly to an intervention or modifiable factor for an individual child or young person (e.g. provision of adult mentors) or on the relationship of such interventions to adult outcomes. (p. 620).

It is interesting to note that Jones et al. do not use ‘teachers’ as an example of a factor that might modify outcomes! As a first step towards looking at what might constitute ‘modifiable factors’ in schools, and be effective in securing more positive educational outcomes (including a reduction in exclusions), it is helpful to turn to research which aims to throw some light on what the students themselves perceive to be helpful.

There are a number of studies which focus on looked after children and young people’s perceptions of the variables that impact on their educational outcomes (e.g. Gilligan, 2007; Jackson, Ajayi and Quigley, 2005), although, like the literature described above, these focus primarily on what impacts on attainment rather than behaviour and its consequences such as exclusion from school. Perhaps not surprisingly, given the emphasis in the literature on factors related to care rather than education, the findings of these studies also emphasise non-school related factors. Even studies which have focused on those students who have been in care and succeeded educationally despite the odds (Gilligan, 2007; Jackson et al., 2005; Martin and Jackson, 2002) focus primarily on factors outside of, or tangential to, the characteristics of school experience itself, citing factors such as: connectedness to family of origin, remaining in care into young adulthood, care-givers support for education and within child characteristics such as a high degree of motivation.

Where educational factors are mentioned as contributory to outcomes, these tend to be references to broad areas such as attending low performing schools, level of reading skill (both listed by Gilligan, 2007), bullying (Daly and Gilligan, 2005), and the discontinuities in schooling that result from frequent placement changes (Schofield et al., 2012). There is a lack of focus on the specifics of the educational process, the characteristics of the school, the qualities of teachers, the strategies used to support students, and how these might impact on outcomes, so while Gilligan (2007), for example, does include a theme that emerges from the data which he terms ‘inspiration and support from teachers’, this is not explored in detail.

Harker, Dober-Ober, Lawrence, Berridge and Sinclair (2003), in a study that does focus specifically on the educational experiences of LAC, explored the perceptions of a sample of 80 children in care regarding the factors impacting on their engagement with school, a study which provides a more detailed analysis of the specific educational issues faced by LAC. The factors identified as impacting on their engagement were identified by the students in this study as: placement instability and school transfer; lack of someone showing interest and encouragement for educational progress; separation from friends; feeling conspicuous as a sudden mid-term arrival, often without appropriate uniform; initial entry to looked after system (emotional distress impacting on concentration, completing homework); negative labelling of children looked after (some teachers and peers assuming that ‘children were placed in public care due to some form of delinquent behaviour on their part’) (p. 92-95).

While all of these issues are clearly important for schools to address, they relate to the general population of students who are looked after, as the subjects of this study were not specifically selected as having BESD. For my purposes it is unfortunate that the study does not seek to explore what the students perceive to be helpful or unhelpful to them in terms of the overall school experience, for example relationships with teachers, environmental factors, and strategies put in place to support them.

To summarise, there is relatively little research that seeks the views of LAC pupils on the specifically educational factors that impact on outcomes and that which there is focuses primarily on what impacts on educational attainment rather than behaviour. There is in particular a lack of studies focusing specifically on the needs of LAC students with BESD, detailing what they find helpful in addressing behavioural, social and emotional needs. Brodie’s (2010) review for the Centre for Excellence and Outcomes in Children and Young People’s Services stated:

There is a serious lack of evidence about the complex learning and behavioural needs of many looked after young people. (p. 2).

Linked to this is the dearth of evidence on how teachers and other adults in school may effectively contribute to promoting engagement with school for LAC. This is noted by many researchers, e.g. Harker et al. (2003) state:

To date there is little research evidence to clarify factors that might enable teachers to effectively support the needs of looked after children within schools. Future research to address this issue would be opportune. (p. 98).

* 1. **Summary: What do we know about the views of students who may have attachment difficulties underpinning their BESD?**

In this literature review I have established that there exists a robust body of evidence focusing on the views of students with BESD in relation to what they find helpful and less helpful in meeting their behavioural, social and emotional needs. While this evidence base is undoubtedly helpful in informing more effective strategies than those based purely on practitioner perspectives, I have argued that, as BESD are underpinned by a variety of variables, differentiated approaches and strategies will be necessary, as that which may be effective in meeting the needs of students whose BESD are underpinned by one set of variables may be less so for another.

I further assert that one significant group of students who may have specific needs requiring specific approaches and strategies are those whose BESD are underpinned by attachment difficulties. I have therefore sought to explore within this literature review the research on what students who are likely to fall within this group say about what they find helpful and less helpful in promoting their behavioural, social and emotional development.

In the previous two sections (Sections 2.6.1 and 2.6.2), I explore the evidence from two populations who are regarded as likely to have attachment difficulties – those in nurture group provisions, and those who are LAC. The literature on nurture group provision reveals a plethora of studies demonstrating the efficacy of nurture group provisions at primary level in impacting positively on pupils’ BESD as measured by adults. There is little research, however, that seeks the views of the students themselves, for a variety of reasons, not least the fact that nurture group provisions are most prevalent in early years’ education where pupils’ views can be hard to establish. Where establishing pupil views would be less problematic, in secondary schools, nurture group provision is significantly less common. While there are a few studies focusing on such provisions, there is none which explores the perceptions of the students themselves. There is therefore a dearth of evidence about what it is specifically within the overall nurture group environment that students themselves find useful and less useful in promoting positive behaviour, particularly for secondary school students.

In relation to students who are LAC, my review reveals that, while there is a high degree of concern about the poor outcomes of LAC, including exclusions from school, the vast majority of the research which seeks to explain these outcomes focuses on factors outside of, or tangential to, the education process itself. Where there is research that seeks the views of the students themselves, this generally relates to the entire LAC population, and therefore does not tell us specifically about the needs of those students with BESD, those most likely to have attachment difficulties. Furthermore, the majority of the research explores the factors that impact on attainment rather than behavioural, social and emotional development.

In conclusion, then, it would seem that the picture is far from complete in terms of what we know about what students with BESD likely to be underpinned by attachment difficulties perceive to be helpful or less helpful in promoting positive behaviour within the school context, and how their perceptions might be similar to or different from those of the general population of students with BESD.

* 1. **The current study: Aims and research questions**

Through this study, I aim to build on the evidence base concerned with the perceptions of secondary school students with BESD in relation to which school related factors impact, positively and negatively, on their behaviour within a mainstream school environment. I aim to develop this evidence base through a focused exploration of these factors in relation to students with BESD deemed to be underpinned by attachment difficulties. The first and second research questions are therefore:

*What school related factors do students deemed to have attachment difficulties underpinning their BESD identify as impacting on their behaviour in the school context?*

*To what extent are the themes identified consistent with the findings of other studies investigating the perceptions of students with BESD?*

A key aim of my research is to explore whether the specific nature of attachment difficulties (outlined in Section 2.5.1) might have implications for how we might support students deemed to have such difficulties within school in ways that are different from, or additional to, the provisions and processes schools put in place for students with BESD more generally. My third research question is therefore:

*Can an attachment framework support our understanding of the findings and, if so, does this have implications for the strategies and processes schools put in place to support students deemed to have attachment difficulties underpinning their BESD?*

Through addressing these three research questions, it is my hope that the factors I identify from participants’ accounts, and the recommendations that result from the process, might contribute to school practices and processes which better support students deemed to have attachment difficulties, and promote their inclusion within the mainstream setting.

Chapter 3: Methodology

**Introduction**

The current study is situated within the broad field of research on behavioural difficulties which aims to give students a voice. It seeks to identify the factors within the school context that impact on the behaviour of participants, through eliciting their thoughts about, and experiences of, the triggers and maintaining factors which result in behaviours attracting sanctions, and the protective factors that reduce their likelihood. The importance of listening to the voices of pupils has been established in the literature review which cited evidence that policy and practice in schools is frequently based on practitioner perspectives which are often at odds with student perspectives.

Following the dominant paradigm of research on pupil voice, I have used a qualitative methodology within my research. The use of a qualitative approach has a long history in psychology, for example in the work of Freud (1856 - 1939), William James (1842 - 1910) and John Dewey (1859 - 1952). The subjective, interpretive focus on the inner life of individuals exemplified in the work of these early psychologists was however eclipsed by the arrival of the experimental, ‘scientific’ paradigm adopted by Wundt (1832-1920) and Cyril Burt (1883-1971) which dismissed qualitative approaches as ‘unscientific’. The dominance of the ‘scientific’ paradigm, along with the quantitative methodologies it utilises (measurement, statistical analysis and categorisation), continued with the widespread popularity of Watson (1878-1958) and Skinner’s (1904-1990) behaviourism in the early twentieth century and more latterly with the cognitivist framework promoted, for example, in the work of Piaget (1952). Such approaches have however been subject to many critical challenges in recent years, making way for the (re)emergence of qualitative approaches: challenges to the scientific credibility to which they lay claim, to the validity of reductive quantitative methodologies, to the conceptions of human experience they theorise, and to the political and social goals they have served. Perhaps the greatest challenge has been to the positivist assumption underpinning much research from within a quantitative paradigm, that there exists an unproblematised objective, observable reality which waits ‘out there’ to be discovered. A non-positivist qualitative approach provides us with an alternative framework through which to understand the experiences of others - one in which the world is not viewed as reducible to numbers, where meaning and the inner world of others again become legitimate focuses, and where the role of subjectivity and context are foregrounded.

It is within this alternative non-positivist framework that this study sits, and this chapter begins by exploring the epistemological assumptions shaping my research, offering a rationale for the approach I have taken which is based on my understanding of ‘what there is to know’, the nature of reality, and how we can best find out what there is to know, as well as the role and status of my own position as researcher within the process.

In the following sections, I outline how the epistemological standpoints that I embrace have shaped the decisions I made regarding the most appropriate tools for data collection and analysis. In the following chapter, I provide a detailed description of the procedures used for data collection and analysis, and how I sought to address the epistemological issues raised through these.

* 1. **Epistemology**

**What is there to know?**

On the ‘ontology continuum’, which is concerned with the nature of reality (‘what is there to know?’), this study is best characterised as ‘critical realist’ (Willig, 2013). A critical realist stance is opposed to a positivist conception of the world, in that it challenges the notion that there is a single objective reality that can be discovered with certainty, given the appropriate tools. Knowledge is seen as partial and fallible, our understanding is theorised to be constrained and subjective, mediated through our individual perspective and interpretations, which are contextually created. The position is critical of the view that we, as researchers, can be unbiased and objective, unaffected by our context, culture and beliefs, and consequently enables us to critique any claims to truth, bringing to bear an array of different forms of analysis upon it.

The study takes a critical realist position, as it is predicated on the potential for identifying a set of factors ‘out there’ which impact on our behavioural choices. A critical realist position makes the assumption that there exist:

[P]rocesses of a social and/or psychological nature which exist and can be identified. These processes are ‘real’ in that they characterise or even determine the behaviour of research participants, irrespective of whether or not the research participants are aware of this. It is also assumed that these processes can be identified and described by the researcher. (Willig 2013, p.15).

It is these processes (the triggers, maintaining, and protective factors that impact positively or negatively on the behaviour of the participants) that I aim to identify (as best I can), through the themes that I construct from the accounts of individuals, and the commonalities and differences across participants.

The end to which I hope that the research will contribute also situates it towards the critical realism end of the ontological spectrum. It aims to inform more effective school policy and practice, rather than, for example, describe in detail the lived experience of an individual or to examine the structural, social and cultural processes that have led to an individual’s particular perspective. Underpinning this aim is the assumption that, if commonalities are found in the experiences and perspectives of participants, these have the potential to give rise to meaningful and valid, if contextually limited, knowledge with a practical application:

The critical realist position holds that we need to claim that some ‘authentic’ reality exists to produce knowledge that might ‘make a difference’. (Braun and Clarke, 2013, p. 27).

The stance of critical realism differs from naïve realism in its understanding of the status of ‘knowledge’. While both recognise the importance of seeking, valuing and taking seriously the accounts of individuals, critical realism does not assume a mirror image between participants’ accounts and a corresponding external reality. It takes the view that the participants’ knowledge and understanding is contextual, subjective and the product of interpretation, mediated through cultural, social and psychological processes. Accounts of events given by participants are understood from within this framework as an interpretation by the subject, limited by the discourses available to them, and:

[E]mbedded in context, in certain kinds of social relationship and set against a certain kind of cultural background…An individual…will rework available elements into a specific shape to produce something distinctive that captures and represents their own experience. (Parker, 2005, p. 73).

From within a critical realist perspective, these reworkings are accorded the status of ‘truth’, and form the subject of the analysis, as, while acknowledged to be partial and contextual, it is this interpretation of events, together with the feelings that such interpretations elicit, which drive behaviour. It is worth noting that this understanding of the ‘truth’ of participants’ accounts is quite separate from, and irrelevant to, any objective, verifiable external account of ‘what happened’. From within this position the verification of facts is not necessary to determine validity. As Riessman (2013) states:

[N]arrators interpret the past in stories, rather than reproduce the past as it was… the trustworthiness of narrative accounts cannot be evaluated using traditional correspondence criteria. (p. 184).

The goal of the research process from within the critical realist perspective is therefore to produce knowledge about the subjective experience of individuals, while recognising that this is constrained and subjective. I explore whether and how this can best be achieved in the following section.

**How can we best find out what there is to know?**

Within the ontological position of critical realism I adopt, the existence of ‘real’ (if contextually constrained) processes and phenomena and the potential for identifying these are accepted. Within Willig’s description of the assumptions made by critical realists, the assertion is made ‘that these processes can be identified and described by the researcher’ (Willig, 2013, p.15). While this position is disputed by other qualitative researchers (those who lean towards the relativist pole of the ontological continuum), the goal of the research process within a critical realist framework is to produce the most valid knowledge possible about the subjective experience of individuals, with the purpose of describing, explaining or using it pragmatically to inform practice. Lawthom and Tindall (2011) state, in relation to participants’ experiences:

Rather than being silenced or ignored, they are positioned centre stage…and accepted as rich veins of understanding that are ideally used to inform practice. (p. 16).

The epistemological question therefore becomes how we can best access such knowledge. The use of qualitative methodology to research the experiences of individuals has been discussed previously, and the arguments for using a qualitative rather than a quantitative methodology are not further rehearsed here. Within this broad paradigm, however, there exists a range of options for collecting and interpreting data which rest upon different epistemological assumptions.

One important dimension on which methodologies differ, is in the extent to which they take ‘at face value’ what participants say. A naïve realist approach, for example, will take participants’ responses or accounts at face value, and not seek to interpret or question them. This approach has been taken by some researchers in the interests of promoting ‘an egalitarian commitment of the researcher to the researched [demonstrating] an emphasis on democracy and acting against hierarchy’ (Hollway, 1989, p. 43) in accordance with the humanistic backlash against positivist methodologies that was taking place at this time. Within such research:

[A]ccounts must be taken to mean exactly what they say. It dictates that the researcher is limited to the role of setting down an organised description of what women (or whoever) say…they cannot broach the question of what it means because it can only mean what it says and what it says reveals women for who they are. (Hollway, 1989, p. 43).

This approach is considered problematic for several reasons. Firstly, a critical realist stance is not consistent with the assumption that a single account represents ‘the truth’. As discussed previously, participants’ accounts are contextual and an account given by a participant is perhaps best viewed as the result of the social and psychological processes pertaining at the time and represent what Parker (2005) calls ‘a particular account on a particular occasion’ (p. 67). Hollway (1989) says:

I have realised that there is no context, however private and searching, which could provide the account which tells the whole truth. The number of possible accounts is infinite. (p. 41).

Secondly, such an approach disregards the impact of the researcher, the potential audience and the purpose of the account, upon which narrative (of an assumed range of possible narratives) is elicited. I explore these issues further in Section 3.1.3.

Finally, it is assumed within this approach that participants have access to a full understanding of the processes that result in their behaviours. We have seen that people’s understanding of their own behaviour, or any aspect of their functioning, is, from within a critical realist standpoint, constrained by a range of factors. It therefore follows that participants may not be aware of some of the motivations and triggers for their behaviours. The critical realist position would question the validity of knowledge produced through approaches to data gathering and analysis based on the epistemological assumptions of the naïve realist position, such as questionnaire responses, closed questions, or tightly structured ‘closed’ interviews. If participants do not have access to knowledge about some of the processes driving their behaviour, the knowledge gained through such data-gathering process will not be effective in telling us what we seek to know.

Some theorists, for whom the aim of research is emancipatory, for example critical feminists such as Hollway (1989), would go further than emphasising the ineffectiveness of such research methods, and assert that they reproduce rather than challenge structural inequalities. She reasons that, as the discourses available to women are limited and shaped by the sexist ‘regimes of truth’ which prevail, and as their accounts will inevitably reflect these, the result of taking a non-questioning stance (while well-intentioned) actually serves to impede change rather than facilitate it.

This leads to a further epistemological dimension on which methodologies differ: the role of researcher interpretation in the generation of knowledge. I have already described how a naïve realist approach actively rejects any role for the researcher in interpreting participants’ accounts. Other approaches to understanding experiential accounts (such as phenomenological analysis in the tradition of Husserl, 1931) aim to describe rather than explain, and seek to minimise the impact of the research process and researcher by employing techniques such as ‘epoche’ (the bracketing off of researchers’ pre-existing knowledge and preconceptions) when listening to and reporting the accounts of individuals.

In contrast, the critical realist position assumes that the researcher has a role in ‘digging deeper’ to identify factors and forces that may be outside the individuals’ knowledge (which is, as we have seen, constrained by context and the discourses available to them). The raw data need ‘to be interpreted in order to further our understanding of the underlying structures which generate the phenomena we are trying to gain knowledge about’ (Willig, 2013, p. 16).

The critical realist position I adopt within the current research therefore explicitly recognises the role and importance of interpretation. From this position, themes are not seen as emerging naturally from the data itself, but as a product of the interpretations made by myself as the researcher. As Parker (2005) says:

The context is, again, reworked in a certain way by the teller of the tale, in a certain order to make sense of specific events. (p. 73).

This focus on the role of the researcher as an active agent at all stages of the research in determining the nature of the knowledge generated, is explored further below.

**The role of the researcher: Positionality**

The role of the researcher constitutes the third factor in a consideration of the study’s epistemological position. In Parker’s 2005 challenge to traditional psychology, he suggests that

[A]cademic standards usually treat objective knowledge as the only thing worth taking seriously, and the subjective aspect is assumed to be some kind of impediment that should be cleaned away before the report is delivered. (p. 25).

He urges researchers to turn the ‘merely subjective’ into a self-consciously and deliberately assumed position’ (p.25) and to make this visible to the reader, and this section represents my attempt to do so without, in the words of Parker, falling into the trap of ‘painstakingly teasing apart every aspect of the study as I describe it to you, [so that] all you will actually be left with is the sense of a tortured soul agonising about how difficult it all was’ (p. 153).

It is clear that as a researcher I am not exempt from the historical, cultural and psychological influences that are discussed above in relation to participants’ accounts of their experiences. We bring to all stages of the research task our own lens(es) - prior knowledge and understandings, pre-conceptions and biases, preferred professional conceptual frameworks. These will be reflected in the area we choose to study, how we set up the study, the questions we pose, the responses we make during interviews and the sense that we make of the data at the analysis and interpretation stages.

In my own case, I am conscious that the lens through which I access and interpret the data will reflect my interest and dominant professional framework – that of attachment theory and practice – at every stage of the research process.

Recognising how my own theoretical lens could both limit the scope and nature of participants’ accounts, *and* how it might enable me, through my interpretations, to support the production of knowledge that can make a difference, I have attempted, through constant reflexive questioning, to be explicit about when and where it has shaped the research process. For example, I have actively sought to reduce its potential impact when designing the semi-structured interview questions by not asking direct questions relating to attachment issues. In contrast, at the analysis stage I have explicitly drawn upon an attachment framework to interpret the content of what is said and draw inferences from the dataset. The factors that I identify from my analysis of participants’ accounts therefore include those explicitly articulated by participants (‘what I hate about teachers is….’), and those which I infer from the stories they tell and the behaviours they describe. For example, when a participant describes always returning to the office of a particular teacher when he was upset, I have interpreted this, through an attachment framework, as signifying the student’s need for a secure base, a concept prevalent in the attachment literature (Ainsworth et al., 1978). However, by taking both an inductive and theoretical approach to the thematic analysis carried out (Section 3.2.3), I have attempted to ensure that the analysis is not constrained by my dominant theoretical lens, but that the themes reflect what is relevant and meaningful to participants, whether or not they fit within an attachment framework.

In addition to personal reflexivity (a consideration of how my personal context and professional lens might impact on the research process), questions of epistemological reflexivity need to be addressed (how researcher choices and methodologies impact on the knowledge generated). I consider some of the issues that arise from these questions below.

In adopting a methodology that involves young people in talking about their experiences in semi-structured interviews, Wise (2000) points out that we are already limiting whose voices will be heard. As she states, using data from such methodologies ‘makes a basic assumption that pupils want to talk [and] can articulate their thoughts’ (p. 21).

This issue was powerfully highlighted for me, when I made the decision not to include one young person’s interview in the final dataset, as she was not prepared/able to articulate her thoughts in this way. The implications of this issue are profound, and I explore them further in Chapter Six: Conclusions.

At the interview stage, the role of the researcher is also foregrounded as an active agent in the research process. How we choose and frame the questions we plan to ask in our interviews, how we present ourselves, how we ask our questions, the responses we make during the interviews themselves (which in turn influence the responses of the participant) will all impact fundamentally on the narrative produced - what is discussed, what is expanded upon, what is closed down. As the architect of the encounter, my own role in shaping the narrative that emerges is recognised, and made explicit where it is apparent to me.

One way in which the researcher shapes the narrative is through his or her role as the ‘audience’ for the interview. Riesmann (2013), draws our attention to the importance of understanding interviews (and indeed all narrative accounts) as ‘performances’ in which speakers choose from the variety of identities they might seek to promote. This choice will be influenced by a range of factors, including the perceptions of the speaker of the nature of the audience. She points out that this does not make what is said inauthentic, but cautions us to be aware that what is said is always situated in a particular context. An example, as Parker (2005) points out, is that ‘[s]chool children are often likely to say what is expected of them to adults’ (p. 58).

The relationship of the interviewer with the interviewee (intersubjectivity) is another factor of crucial significance to the narrative that results from the interview process. It is the recognition of this factor that led me to take steps to establish rapport, and frame questions in a way which aimed to promote a sense of freedom and security which would enable participants to trust me, as a researcher, with their truths.

No matter how well this is done, however, the impact of the researcher’s position of perceived power (as an adult, invited into the school by the students’ teachers, smartly dressed etc.) will impact on the interaction. Parker (2005) notes that what is said will always reflect the power relations between interviewer and interviewee and will be constrained by this:

[A]n interview in qualitative research is always ‘semi-structured’ because it invariably carries the traces of patterns of power that hold things and place. (p.53).

Parker (2005) alerts us to the need to ‘restore agency to the author of a narrative’ (p. 72), and within this study I made explicit attempts to do so, through the design of the research process (for example enabling participants to determine the time and place of the interview and allowing them to decide on the refreshments to be provided), as well as during the interview itself. This was particularly important for the group of participants I was working with, as opportunities for exerting choice and agency are limited for looked after children.

Cooper (1993) suggests that when we ask a student a question (such as, ‘What do you think of this school?’), their response will be influenced by a number of variables including:

[T]heir perspective of who is asking the question, the purpose behind the question, the likely future audience of the response, and whether or not their response can be attributed to them. (p.129).

The ways in which I have tried to maximise the chances of garnering authentic responses within the interview situation, to create an ethos in which participants could experience the ‘freedom … to develop a narrative about their experiences and the security [to speak] about these things to you as researcher’ Parker (2005, p. 58), are outlined in Chapter Four: Research methods.

Finally, it is recognised in the literature (Willig, 2013) that the subjective lens of the researcher does not just affect the interview process itself, but the way in which we interpret the data. In analysing the data, we interpret the interpretation of the participant (a ‘double hermeneutic’). Only certain sections of text are selected for analysis and foregrounding and others are discarded. ‘In these ways the investigator ‘infiltrates’ her texts’ (Riessman, 2013, p. 176). Willig (2013) raises a number of ethical issues in relation to researcher interpretation:

[T]he interpreter has the power to shape what comes to be known about somebody’s experience, and with this power comes responsibility. (P.45).

In choosing to interpret participants’ accounts (rather than taking them at face value), I am conscious of the potential for misrepresentation, and take full responsibility for the interpretations I make.

In summary, the position of the researcher is recognised within this study as fundamental to what emerges from the research process. I view the knowledge represented by the study as being constructed from a number of ‘building blocks’ (the data from the interviews, themselves influenced by me as researcher in the ways outlined above), which could have been interpreted and put together in a number of different ways by other researchers. The nature of the data itself has clearly been constrained by the processes used to elicit it, and the interpretation and construction of meaning within the study influenced by my prior knowledge, beliefs, professional interests and theoretical lens.

Mindful of the impact of myself as the researcher, the steps I take to minimise the occurrence of some of the potential pitfalls are noted throughout the study, in particular in Chapter Four: Research Methods.

* 1. **Methodological Issues**

**Choosing a method for data collection: the semi-structured interview**

Having established the epistemological position, the benefits of using a critical realist approach to address the research question, and the type of results the research aimed to produce, I next considered a range of options for collecting the data.

I decided to conduct individual semi-structured interviews rather than use focus group discussions. While there are many advantages to using a focus group setting, (Kitzinger, 1995), Curtis et al. (2004) discuss the difficulties that can impact on the authenticity of individual views elicited through this process. They outline some of the challenges that researchers can encounter when working with students with BESD, such as their difficulty in taking turns speaking, the dominance of certain individuals and subsequent loss of the voices of those who are less dominant, the potential for within-group misunderstanding and aggression. They also point out that ‘round the table discussions’ are not always the most accessible or comfortable experience for many young people.

The semi-structured interview is used to generate ‘first person accounts of the quality and texture of individual experience’ (Lawthom and Tindall, 2011, p. 16). As the subject matter is what is salient to the individual, the semi-structured interview aims to create for participants the opportunity to talk about what matters to *them*, which may or may not accord with the researcher’s own pre-conceptions about what *might* matter. The semi-structured interview generally involves one or more face-to-face meetings, conducted using a small number of open questions, the answers to which can be explored in depth through prompts and clarifications, and which offers the flexibility for the interviewee to lead the discussion to an extent.

As with all methods of data collection, there are a number of limitations inherent in the use of semi-structured interviews. The limiting of whose voices are heard has been raised in the previous section, as has the impact of the interviewer on the scope, nature and authenticity of the data elicited. A number of researchers have sought to overcome these limitations through the use of other methods (see Nind et al., 2012, as an example of a study on the perspectives of girls with BESD through the use of digital visual and narrative methods, rather than discussion). While acknowledging these limitations, I considered the semi-structured interview to be the best fit for the current study given the practical limitations pertaining. The ways in which I addressed the potential disadvantages during the process are outlined in Chapter Four: Research Methods.

**Choosing a methodology for analysis**

Methodologies which aim to elucidate the processes through which participants’ knowledge is constructed, focusing on *how* participants arrived at their particular perspective (such as discourse analysis) and the structural factors that limit the discourses available to them, were not considered consistent with the type of knowledge I was seeking in order to address the research questions. Similarly, approaches (such as grounded theory) that require a putative ‘clean slate’ approach, free of theoretical pre-conceptions, were not felt to be feasible given my positionality and prior research in the field carried out. While the nature of the knowledge sought was of a phenomenological nature, I rejected phenomenological models for analysis on several grounds. Firstly, the need to ‘bracket off’ foreknowledge (in a manner reminiscent of grounded theory) I felt to be conceptually and practically problematic. Secondly, the approach requires each participant’s account to be analysed and interpreted without reference to the accounts of participants previously analysed, a requirement that I again felt to be conceptually and practically difficult. As Riessman (2013) points out, what we focus on is ‘strongly influenced by our evolving theories, disciplinary preferences and research questions’ (p.176). Thirdly, I did not feel that the aims of phenomenological approaches and the current research were entirely compatible, with this study aiming to compare explicitly participants’ accounts on key dimensions, rather than to develop an in-depth knowledge of the inner world of each participant.

Two methods were considered in depth as potential candidates – ‘narrative analysis’ and ‘thematic analysis’– after taking into account a range of factors: my epistemological stance; the research questions under exploration; the nature of the data that would be generated; my positionality and pre-existing knowledge; the practical conditions pertaining.

Narrative analysis was considered as an approach to analysing the data gathered, as the semi-structured interviewing technique adopted opened up the possibility for participants to tell their stories, and much of the information shared with me took the form of such stories. While many of the tenets underpinning narrative analysis were exemplified in my positionality, I ultimately rejected the approach as the central organising framework of analysis. The main reason for this was that the unit of analysis within narrative approaches is ‘the story’, and the structure of the narrative key in constructing an understanding of its meaning and relevance. For this reason, within narrative analysis it is important that the data from each participant is kept ‘intact’, rather than fragmented. This requirement conflicted with the need, in order to address the research questions, to explore whether key themes emerged across and between the accounts of all participants. The process of looking for patterns both within an individual’s account, and across the accounts of all participants necessitated the fragmenting of the individual stories contained within the accounts. This is because participants’ stories often contained several themes, and themes recurred in multiple stories.

Of the two approaches considered in depth, I therefore chose thematic analysis as the analytical approach, and it is described below along with my rationale for this choice.

When we decide upon a particular methodology, others are automatically rejected, and I am conscious of the questions and perspectives that are consequently laid aside and potentially lost. In choosing one approach over another we take the risk of losing ‘critical flavours’ (Riessman, 2013, p. 185).The selection of a method for chunking and analysing data necessarily involves the loss of interesting and important insights that might have been highlighted through looking at the data through an alternative methodological lens. The fragmenting of the participants’ accounts to enable coding and categorisation within the method chosen (thematic analysis) has meant the loss of participants’ stories as complete units, a loss that I particularly mourn.

**Thematic analysis**

Thematic analysis is a relatively newly recognised (or at least newly named) qualitative research method for recognising and organising patterns in content and meaning in qualitative data, developed by Braun and Clarke (2006), and its suitability as a method for qualitative analysis in psychology has been well established (e.g. Hayes, 2000; Boyatzis, 1998).

While there is some questioning of whether it does in fact constitute a method in its own right or more of a tool which can be used across a range of approaches to data analysis (Willig, 2013, p. 58), I felt that it offered several advantages for the current study.

It is suggested by its authors (Braun and Clarke, 2013, p. 78) that thematic analysis is independent of any particular theoretical position (unlike ‘discursive psychology’, or ‘Foulcauldian discourse analysis’) and therefore offers the researcher a flexible approach to identify and analyse themes and patterns which arise from the data. My epistemological position (outlined in Section 3.1) was therefore accommodated within this approach.

Furthermore, thematic analysis does not depend, as for example grounded theory approaches do, on the author having no pre-existing theoretical orientation, with the expectation that theory will be generated directly from the data. The feasibility of this position is much questioned in the literature (see for example Parker, 2005) as it fails to acknowledge the impact and subjectivity of the interviewer. My position with regard to subjectivity has been outlined in Section 3.1.3, and my perspectives and prior knowledge and interest acknowledged.

Finally, the approach allows for both the flexible use of existing categories and for the generation of new categories of meaning. In the case of the current study, this was important as the research questions included a consideration of commonalities and differences between the themes raised by my participants and those generated by previous studies, and it was therefore important to have the flexibility to use both themes that have been previously identified by research as salient, and new themes that might relate specifically to the group focused on in the current study.

Prior to the collection of the data, I considered a number of important issues outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006).

The first issue involved establishing whether the primary aim of the research was to provide a rich description across the entire dataset, identifying predominant themes, or whether it was to analyse one particular theme in more detail. At this point I established that my aim was to identify themes across the whole dataset, reflecting the broad nature of the research questions.

The second issue considered concerned the distinction between ‘theoretical’ and ‘inductive’ methods of identifying themes. An inductive approach resonates somewhat with a grounded theory approach in which the themes are identified without reference to prior research or conceptual frameworks, emerging entirely from the data. A theoretical approach on the other hand involves an analysis that takes into account the researcher’s prior knowledge, with the data being analysed according to pre-established categories, perhaps those that previous research has identified as salient. I aimed, in this study, to take a position between the poles of these two positions. I did not believe that it would be possible, having carried out the literature review, to use a purely inductive approach. However, as the nature of the research was exploratory as well as comparative, neither would it have been appropriate to attempt to shoe-horn the data that emerged into pre-set categories. As Willig (2013) asserts, it is not appropriate to use entirely researcher-generated categories for research that aims to explore meanings for individuals. The approach I decided upon therefore allowed for both theoretically driven coding and the inductive emergence of themes.

The third issue concerned whether themes would be identified at a ‘latent’ or ‘semantic’ level (Boyatzis, 1998, uses the terms ‘latent’ and ‘manifest’). I decided that it would be appropriate to interpret the data at both levels. At the ‘semantic’ level I would identify themes directly from what was said by participants, drawing upon the explicit or surface meaning of participants’ words, and at the latent level of analysis I would move beyond what was said to consider the underlying ideas or meaning that might be woven into the words used. This decision was consistent with my positionality regarding the interpretation of data.

The next chapter outlines the research methods I used in the study for data collection and analysis.

Chapter 4: Research Methods

**Introduction**

In the previous chapter I established the epistemological basis of the research, outlined key methodological issues, and offered a rationale for the choice of data collection and data analysis methods used. In this chapter I describe the processes involved in the data collection and analysis.

* 1. **Data Collection**

**Procedure**

I began the process of data collection in December 2013, following Ethical Approval for the study by the University of Sheffield Research Ethics Committee (Appendix 8), and permission being granted to carry out the study by the Interim Head of Education within the Local Authority. The procedure and time-line is shown diagrammatically in Figure 4.1, with each aspect described in detail below.

**Permissions and ethics**

Holland (2009) in her review of approaches to understanding looked after children’s perspectives, highlighted the fact that, in the majority of the 44 journal articles reviewed, there was ‘a paucity of ethical discussion’ even though ‘all the participants in the papers in this review can be classed as vulnerable…and the research topics under discussion….highly personal’ (p. 231).

I took a number of steps to ensure that the ethical issues raised by Holland and other researchers (e.g. Curtis et al., 2004) were addressed, given that the participants in my study could all be classed as vulnerable. These are described within the relevant sections below and include: the selection of the most appropriate way to invite young people to take part; ensuring that ‘informed consent’ was authentic; ensuring that confidentiality and issues around child protection were considered and that children were reminded of their rights to refuse to engage or withdraw from the study at any time. In addition, I took care to ensure that all participants were aware that support was available in the event of difficult or uncomfortable feelings being aroused through the discussion, and how to access this.

One of the issues raised by Holland (2009) concerns the ‘tendency to focus on LAC as problems [which] can mask the complexity of these individual lives, including the many aspects of their lives where they are successful’ (p.231). The questions put to participants in the semi-structured interviews aimed to avoid this tendency through offering them the opportunity to highlight areas where they were succeeding as well as where they were having difficulty.

Ethics approval

Permission granted from Director of Education

December 2013

Individual interviews organised

* Familiarity with school safeguarding
* Private room
* Arrangements for calling on staff
* Arrangements for support in event of student distress
* Recording arrangements

6 participants identified

\\

Parental permission obtained

Participant consent obtained

March – April 2014

Letter to all secondary schools (English medium)

+ Information sheet

January – February 2014

Teacher approaches students on list

Invites to initial meeting with JC

JC meets with designated member of staff (MOS) in each school

* Q and A
* List of students fitting criteria
* Briefing of teacher to approach students + inform about meeting with JC

March 2014

JC meets with interested students in school

* Information sheet read / given out
* Consent form explained and copy given
* Snacks/ time/place for interview discussed

Individual interviews take place

Information anonymised.

Kept in locked filing cabinet.

Electronic information password protected

Transcription

Analysis and coding

Theme generation, review and theme naming

May – July 2014

Write up of results

Copy to participants via school

Sept – Nov 2014

**Figure 4.1: Procedure**

**Participant Selection**

A letter was sent to the headteacher/behaviour lead of each of the English-medium Secondary Schools in the Local Authority, inviting them to take part in the study (Appendix 1). This outlined the context and purpose of the research, the commitment it would involve, and the practical demands that it would make on the school. A full information sheet was sent with the letter (Appendix 2) and I invited the schools to contact me for further information if required.

Four schools chose to engage with the project and I then discussed the study further with the Behaviour Lead for each school, requesting that they put together a list of potential student participants who fit the following criteria:

identified as having significant BESD/at risk of permanent exclusion

designated ‘Child in Need’ (CIN) or looked after by the local authority (LAC)

identified by school staff as displaying behaviours characteristic of attachment difficulties.

The first criterion involved the potential participant being on the school’s SEN register for BESD, and having had at least one exclusion (internal or fixed-term) since being at the school. While the second criterion is self-explanatory, the third merits some further explanation. The study aimed to explore the views of a group of students whose BESD are likely to result from attachment difficulties, with a view to supporting schools in developing policy and practice that effectively meets the needs of such students. The difficulties involved of establishing a group of students whose BESD are underpinned by attachment difficulties are outlined in the literature review. In the absence of a group of students diagnosed with RAD (Reactive Attachment Disorder), I asked schools to identify students who were considered to be experiencing attachment difficulties. As all schools (including the members of staff making the selection) had received recent training in recognising and working with students with attachment difficulties, this was felt to be the most appropriate process for the identification of participants, enabling those who knew them well to make the judgement.

The outcome of this process was a potential ‘pool’ of six participants who fitted the criteria for the study.

The first approach to students was made by school staff, following the briefing by me to ensure that they had all relevant information to hand (including the student leaflet: Appendix 3) and did not unconsciously or otherwise ‘meet…in a way which makes informed (or any) dissent difficult for the young people concerned’ (Curtis et al., 2004 p. 169).

I then met with each potential participant individually, on the school premises during the school day. Following introductions and a brief overview of the project, I gave the students the opportunity to ask any further questions they may have, and another opportunity to go through the student leaflet in order to ensure that they were fully informed of the purpose of the research, the procedures to be followed, the level of confidentiality, and their rights to withdraw their permission at any time. I explained that anything that I wrote about would be anonymised, and that information would be kept securely (password protected if electronic, or in a locked filing cabinet if hard copy). At the end of the meeting, I asked the potential participants if they would like to be part of the project. I then read out the student ‘informed consent’ form (Appendix 4) and discussed it with the students, offering a number of options for signing it: immediately if they felt able, following the meeting, after discussion with peers, teachers and/or family or at any point up until the deadline given. All the participants I met with in this way agreed to be part of the research study, and chose to sign the consent form immediately. Once they had agreed to take part, I discussed issues related to the interview itself, such as their preferred timing, location and refreshments with them. Parent/carer consent forms (Appendix 5), were then either given to the student to take home or sent by the school, according to student preference. Once all consent and permissions were obtained, I made arrangements with the school for the interviews to take place.

**The interviews**

In keeping with my critical realist position, the aim of the interviews was to elicit responses which were, within the constraints discussed previously, ‘’authentic’, as opposed to… contrived or simply plausible …defined as a spontaneous and honest account of the respondent’s thinking’ (Cooper, 1993, p. 129).

While, as Cooper points out, we will never know for certain if responses are contrived, a number of steps were taken to address the issues and potential pitfalls of the interview process identified previously (see Section 3.1.2 and 3.2.1). In summary, the measures taken aimed to reduce the impact of the power inequalities between me as the researcher and the interviewee, and give agency to participants where possible, to establish a positive relationship and to enable participants to feel comfortable and able to share their experiences freely.

Several of these issues were addressed through the selection process (outlined above): making sure that students understood the purpose of the study; ensuring confidentiality and anonymity; securing pupils’ involvement voluntarily. The section which follows documents the ways in which the issues were addressed in relation to the design and conduct of the interviews.

***Timing, location and refreshment***

In each of the four schools taking part, locations for the interviews were identified that were felt to be conducive to discussion, in which the participants could feel safe, which provided an appropriate level of privacy, and in which disruptions could be minimised. Participant preferences which I had identified during discussion with them, were taken into account and met where possible.

I had informed participants at the initial discussion stage that they would not be paid or otherwise rewarded for taking part in the study, although I had, as described previously, invited them to share their favourite snacks and drinks which I could then provide during the interview. My rationale for this was that it would demonstrate the value I placed on their input in a tangible fashion, increase a sense of agency, and contribute towards rapport building between me and the participants.

***Child protection/safety issues***

When seeking student views about an institution, it is not usually considered conducive to have a staff member who represents that institution present. However, in the interest of promoting participants’ feelings of emotional security, I offered all the participants the option of having an adult of their choosing present, should they wish to, although in the event, only one participant opted to do so.

As the students were all considered vulnerable, I worked with each school to ensure that plans were in place for all eventualities, and ensured (for my own protection, as well as that of the students involved) that:

Child protection protocols were known and followed at all times

The students knew that they were free to leave at any time

There was a system for calling for adult support

Arrangements were in place for students to have access to support if the interview aroused strong feelings, or if disclosures were made, and these were made known to the students.

***The interview process***

The design of the semi-structured interview and the interview style adopted was informed by Cooper’s (1993) guidance, which proposes utilising an ‘informant’ as opposed to a ‘respondent’ style (Powney and Watts, 1987 as cited in Cooper, 1993).

This involved ensuring that the questions for the semi-structured interviews (Appendix 6) were as open-ended as possible, to minimise the potential for leading questions. I was mindful of my own theoretical lens when designing the interview questions. The content areas covered therefore offered participants the opportunity to raise the themes that previous research in the field has identified as salient to young people with BESD, and to those with attachment difficulties but did not make direct mention of these, in order to maximise the chances of participants focusing on the issues most salient to them as individuals. I included a range of prompt questions that would enable me to be led by the participant, or to redirect the focus of discussion where appropriate. The focus of the questions was equally balanced between positive aspects of participants’ experiences, and those that were not so positive (being mindful of Holland’s, 2009, critique of research with LAC which focuses exclusively on problems).

I adopted an ‘informant’ style when carrying out the interviews, using the questions flexibly rather than a rigid blueprint, and allowing the course of the interview to be dictated more by the participant than by my own agenda, while ensuring that key areas were covered through prompts and redirection where necessary. The style of interviewing I adopted involved using pupil vocabulary, paraphrase and reflection, and I aimed to be empathic, interested, and non-judgemental, with the goal of supporting the creation of a positive relationship and of minimising the impact of the pertaining power-relations raised by Parker (2005), referred to previously.

Interviews were audio-recorded, and participants’ previously established choice of refreshments provided, and at the end of the interview I invited participants to add any further comments, either then or by contacting me at a later date. I explained that they would have the opportunity to view the way in which I had reported what they said when I had written it, and would be free to comment on this if they would like to. Finally I reminded participants that whatever I wrote would be anonymised and kept securely.

* 1. **Data Analysis**

I transcribed each interview (see Appendix 7 for an extract of a sample transcript) and subjected five of the six transcripts to the process of thematic analysis. After consideration, I made the decision not to use the sixth interview for the reasons outlined in Chapter 6: Conclusions.

The analysis procedure I followed broadly reflects the five stages of thematic analysis described by Braun and Clarke (2013).

**Stage 1: Familiarisation with the data**

I read and reread the anonymised transcripts in order to immerse myself in the data and develop a thorough and comprehensive knowledge of the content of the interviews. Comparing these with audio recordings as appropriate enabled me to clarify those aspects of the interview that are inevitably lost through the production of a written transcript, such as tone, emphasis, the length of pauses etc. I began at this stage to gain some initial ideas for codes and recorded these as well as general reflections on patterns identified across participants’ accounts.

**Stage 2: Generating initial codes**

I chose to conduct the coding of the data in hard copy, rather than electronically. This method ‘allows a different mode of interaction with data, and moves you into a different conceptual and physical space for conducting analysis’ (Bringer, Johnston, and Brackenridge, 2006 as cited in Braun and Clarke, 2013, p. 204). The aim of the process of coding is to allow the researcher to identify aspects of the data that may relate to the research question, and I chose to code all of the interview data (‘complete coding’ as opposed to ‘selective coding’ (Braun and Clarke, 2013, p. 206)) as I was using both an inductive and a deductive approach (discussed earlier) and therefore was not looking for information to fit exclusively within pre-determined themes. It was important for me to code all the data, in order to guard against the possible bias that my theoretical lens might introduce. I coded each interview systematically until the whole dataset had been coded, at which point I reviewed the dataset from the beginning, refining and developing my codes in an organic and evolving process.

**Stage 3: Searching for candidate themes**

At this stage I explored the codes I had generated, grouping them together in various ways (using paper and sticky-notes to offer maximum flexibility), and putting to one side those that related to factors outside of the remit of the study (those relating to variables outside of the school context and within-child factors). I was able to merge a number of codes, and found that these initial codes clustered into a number of groupings that I termed ‘factor level codes’ (e.g. ‘a safe space’; ‘other students’; ‘opportunities to be heard’; ‘being LAC’). These factor-level codes allowed me to generate ‘candidate themes’ (Braun and Clarke, 2013, p. 224), with the factor-level codes I had generated being conceptually linked to the theme. At the end of this stage I had constructed six candidate themes: ‘teachers’, ‘safety’, ‘belonging’, ‘feeling valued’, ‘having a voice’ and ‘fairness and justice’, each with several factor level codes which related to the central organising concept.

**Stage 4: Reviewing and revising candidate themes**

During this stage I reviewed and refined my six candidate themes with the intention of ensuring that the themes cohered, and that all the relevant extracts from the interviews across participants were considered. I collated a grid with all the transcript extracts relating to the factor level codes contained within the themes and the codes contributing to these. I then reread the entire dataset to ensure that nothing relevant to the theme had been omitted. At this stage three issues emerged.

The most problematic issue concerned the theme that related to the impact of teachers on participants’ behaviour. I use the term ‘teacher’ throughout the study to indicate any adult working in the school, following the use of this terminology by participants. In practice, it is likely that adults referred to as ‘teachers’ occupy a range of roles within the school, but as this did not appear to impact on the results reported (as the distinctions have little salience to participants), I have retained the participants’ usage of the word ‘teacher’. Initially it had seemed self-evident that this should constitute a discrete theme as it was clear from an early stage that the characteristics and behaviour of teachers formed the majority of the content of all five interviews and had the greatest saliency for all the participants in relation to their behaviour. This finding was very much in line with the results of the literature that I had reviewed, which explore the perceptions of students with BESD concerning factors impacting on their behaviour. Almost without exception, the reviewed studies identified relationships with teachers as a discrete theme, often the most salient one (e.g. Hart, 2012; Cefai and Cooper 2010; Pomeroy, 1999).

However, when reviewing the collated comments of participants, it became apparent that what had salience to the individuals were teachers’ characteristics and behaviour *as these related* to their sense of safety, belonging, feeling valued, the degree to which they felt that they had a voice, and their perception of fairness and justice. I realised that a more nuanced analysis of the role of teachers’ behaviour and characteristics was necessary.

While teachers’ characteristics and behaviours represented the most salient feature contributing to each of the themes identified, there were other contributory factors to each – physical spaces within the school, the influence of friends, other students and the procedures and systems that operate within the school – and my developing analysis suggested that it was the result of the interaction of each of these contributory factors that impacted on students’ behavioural choices rather than one element in isolation. I therefore decided not to designate ‘the impact of teachers’ as a discrete theme, but to consider the characteristics and behaviour of teachers as they related to each of the remaining themes, labelling teacher characteristics and behaviour ‘Features of teachers’, as shown in Figure 4.2, below. Some potential ramifications of this decision are considered in the introduction to Chapter Five: Results and Discussion.

**Figure 4.2: The relationship of ‘features of teachers’ to candidate themes**

Secondly, it became apparent to me during the process of review that three of the themes, ‘safety’, ‘belonging’ and ‘feeling valued’, were conceptually linked through the over-arching notion of ‘connectedness’. I therefore collapsed these three themes into a single theme (‘Connectedness’) as shown below in Figure. 4.3, with the six factor level codes each impacting in different ways on participants’ feelings of ‘safety’, ‘belonging’ and ‘being valued’. I have discussed the ways in which these factors relate to the broader concept of connectedness in Chapter Five, Section 5.1).

|  |
| --- |
| **CONNECTEDNESS** |
| **Feelings of safety A sense of belonging Being valued** |

**The Key Adult**

**A Safe Space**

**Other Students**

**Friends**

**Teaching and Learning**

**Features of Teachers**

**Figure 4.3: Theme 1: Connectedness**

The final issue that arose as a result of the reviewing process was a reflexive questioning of my original decision to include ‘personal responsibility’ as a factor contributing to participants’ perceptions of fairness and justice (my third theme). At an earlier stage I had coded participant statements that related to locus of control and attribution and collated them under the factor ‘responsibility’. I had noted that, when talking, all participants demonstrated that they were able to recognise that their behaviour was on occasions problematic, and to take responsibility for it, accepting the need to apologise or be punished:

Oh I would say that my behaviour is not good*.* (Pupil A: L561)

I'll attend [detention] cos I've done something wrong therefore I need to be punished. (Pupil C: L454)

Equally, all participants expressed an understanding of their own behaviours that related at least partly to internal factors, for example as a legacy of their past difficult circumstances (‘the reason I was being naughty is cos I get thinking about my past’, Pupil D: L280) , their personality or mood (‘I literally will not back down...I think it depends on the mood that I'm in when I come into school’ Pupil B L276; ‘cos I like I'm like a roller-coaster, yeah with my emotions’ Pupil E: L412), or their actions (‘I got mixing in with the wrong people and that’ Pupil D: L154), using words and phrases that signify an internal attribution such as ‘getting myself into trouble’ and ‘talking myself into a Stage 5’ (Pupil B: L194).

Initially I had made the assumption that the extent to which participants took responsibility for their behaviour would impact on their perceptions of feelings of fairness and justice (with an increased sense of responsibility leading to fewer feelings of unfairness). A careful re-reading of the dataset at this stage of the analysis, however, revealed a contradiction that alerted me to the fact that my assumption had been misguided. The contradiction was that, despite awareness and acceptance of responsibility for their behaviour at a general level, participants did not draw upon these perspectives when talking about their behaviour more specifically. In practice, the vast majority of incidents described by four of the five participants implicitly or explicitly attribute fault or responsibility to other factors (generally related to the school or teacher behaviours), and, even where a degree of personal responsibility was indicated, other factors were invariably cited alongside:

Yeah apparently I threatened-[a teacher] like which (.) I don't really deny I did but the man did pick me up off the floor I was only like a tiny little kid year 7. (Pupil A: L32)

I would apologise on my own terms y'know it's just the fact of (.) she said “apologise now here now over there” … Cos I agree when what I said wasn't right (.) but I shouldn't have been made to apologise I would have done it on my own terms. (Pupil C: L599)

I therefore concluded that personal responsibility did not, in practice, impact greatly on their views of justice and fairness and made the decision not to include ‘responsibility’ as a separate factor. This highlighted for me the importance of returning to the whole dataset at all stages of the process and being guided at all times by the data itself, rather than the assumptions we may make based on a limited sub-set of the data.

**Stage 5: Defining and naming themes and writing the report**

Braun and Clarke (2013) draw attention to the fact that they have previously (Braun and Clarke, 2006) separated this final stage of Thematic Analysis into separate processes: ‘defining themes’ and ‘writing the report’. The reason they give for now presenting these processes as a single stage is that, in practice, ‘writing is the process through which the analysis develops into its final form’ (2013, p. 249). This was my experience, with the themes being further refined and more fully defined as the writing progressed. It was during the writing stage for example, that I identified, for each factor contributing to a particular theme, a key phrase and a quote from the transcripts in an attempt to capture its distinctive flavour in the words of the participants. Some examples are given below in Figure 4.4.

|  |
| --- |
| **CONNECTEDNESS** |
| **Feelings of safety A sense of belonging Being valued** |

**‘I thought I didn't have no one’: The Key Adult**

I just like to come to school cos you know you got someone to talk to

(Pupil D: L59).

**‘I don’t really connect with them’: Features of Teachers**

When they treat you like not very nice and all that (.) then you all seem to kick off and you seem to get at that stage naughtier naughty and [you let] your naughty side out and you speak to teachers how you wanna speak to them and all that

(Pupil D: L353).

**’Sir, I’m home’: A Safe Space**

I came in at ten to twelve when I shouldn't really have been in till quarter past and I was just like “sir can I just come and sit in your room while you're in here” and he were like “sure” … I feel really comfortable (.)…when he comes in like I'm like “Sir I'm home”

(Pupil B: L352).

**‘But when they’re in a pack…’: Other Students**

Some kids are (.) incredibly hostile towards you (.) some kids just y'know instantly hate you it's just like no reason why? …some of them are nice (.) and some of them are completely like y'know dicks really (.)..when they're on their own they are like y'know timid cats really they won't go near you they won't chat they won't say shit to you (.) but when they're in like a pack it's pretty much like y'know they'll talk to you like you're utter shit

(Pupil A: L563).

**‘Most people know me’: Friends**

People didn't really like me at my old school cos really I was naughty…but like I don't really have many friends in this school neither

(Pupil B: L99).

**‘I can’t do it so…’: Teaching and Learning**

I used to love all my classes when I was younger cos they was different primary (.) then you get to the (.) to bits of it then you're like “oh I can't do this I don't know how to do this” I struggle with it and all that

(Pupil D: L333).

**Figure 4.4: Key Phrases and Quotes**

The definitions I arrived at through this process, along with the rationale for their selection, are included within the introduction to each theme in Chapter Five: Results and Discussion. The final themes selected and the factors contributing to them are shown below in the thematic map (Figure 4.5):



**A safe space**

**A key adult**

**Teaching and learning**

**Connectedness**

**Having a voice**

**Other students**

**Features of teachers**

**System failures**

**Fairness and justice**

**Features of teachers**

**Being LAC**

**Opportunities to be heard**

**Features of teachers**

**Friends**

**Figure 4.5: Thematic map showing final themes selected**

Chapter 5: Results and Discussion

**Introduction**

In this chapter, I have sought to describe and explore each of the factors that contribute to the three themes that I identified from participants’ narratives as impacting, either positively or negatively, on their behaviour at school. I have attempted to capture not only those factors that make behavioural incidents more likely, that trigger and escalate them, but also those protective factors that prevent incidents from occurring, de-escalate and help to resolve them.

I have chosen to present my results, and the discussion which is generated from them, together in this chapter. I have organised my research in this way (in contrast to many studies of this nature) in order to promote clarity, and ensure a comprehensive critical analysis of the many and varied factors which participants identified as impacting on their behaviour. In order to accord due prominence to each of the factors identified, and to avoid the unnecessary duplication of information, I have contextualised my findings within the relevant literature, comparing and contrasting the perceptions of participants in my study with those of participants in previous research which explores the voice of students with BESD. My aim in doing so was to identify commonalities and differences between my own and previous findings which might relate to the specific perspectives and needs of students whose BESD are underpinned by attachment difficulties, as this is the key difference between my study and the previous research. Where I have found differences, I have moved beyond the data and sought to explore whether such differences might be explained through interpretations which draw upon the theoretical framework of attachment. The chapter therefore contains three elements: a description of my findings, an analysis which contextualises the findings within the relevant literature, and a discussion which includes how the key differences might be interpreted in relation to wider theoretical frameworks, notably those that draw upon an attachment perspective. The key concepts referred to within this analysis are outlined in detail in Chapter Two: Literature Review.

The ways in which these three elements relate to the research questions are outlined below. I describe the factors contributing to the three themes that I identified as a result of the data analysis (described in Chapter Four), in order to address the first research question:

*‘What school related factors do students deemed to have attachment difficulties underpinning their BESD identify as impacting on their behaviour in the school context?’*

The factors described are grouped into three themes:

Connectedness

Having a voice

Fairness and justice

Each theme encompasses a number of factors which contribute to the central organising concept, and there are links between the themes. For example, participants’ sense of fairness and justice and the degree to which they feel they have a voice within the school context clearly impact on how valued they feel, and therefore on the overall sense of connectedness to school that they experience. The themes, and the interconnections between them, are illustrated in the thematic map (See Figure 4.5, Page 60). Each theme is described and defined in more detail in the introduction to the section related to that theme.

The descriptive content relating to the first research question is supplemented by extracts from the interviews, which aim to illustrate and evidence the narrative and interpretative comments I make. I have contextualised the findings within the relevant literature in an analysis which compares and contrasts the salient factors I describe with those identified in the relevant literature, highlighting commonalities and differences in order to answer my second research question:

*To what extent are the themes identified consistent with the findings of other studies investigating the perceptions of students with BESD?*

The key difference between my study and previous studies which draw upon the voices of students with BESD is that all the participants within my study are deemed to have attachment difficulties underpinning their BESD. A key aim of my research is to explore whether the specific nature of these difficulties (outlined in Chapter Two: Literature Review) might have implications for how such students experience school life, their responses to these experiences and, therefore, for how we might support them within school in ways that are different from, or additional to, the provisions and processes schools put in place for students with BESD more generally. For this reason, where differences between my findings and those of previous research are identified, I have considered how these might be interpreted within wider theoretical frameworks, notably those that draw upon an attachment perspective. It is through this discursive element of my narrative that I have sought to address my third research question:

*Can an attachment framework support our understanding of the findings and, if so, does this have implications for the strategies and processes schools put in place to support students deemed to have attachment difficulties underpinning their BESD?*

The implications I refer to here are considered in Chapter Six: Conclusions.

It is important to be clear about what the results of the study do not cover. The results I report here focus on *within-school* factors that impact on students’ *behaviour*. In the course of the interviews, participants did identify factors that impacted on other aspects of their school experience and factors that impacted on their behaviour which were outside of the sphere of influence of the school (such as changes in foster placement). While recognising that these factors represent important variables on the lives of participants, and are likely to interact with the factors I do report on, I exclude them as they do not fall within the remit of this study. While this may lay my study open to the charge that it oversimplifies a complex and multi-faceted issue, the aim of the research is to highlight and explore one aspect of the experience of students with BESD underpinned by attachment difficulties which has received little attention in existing research.

Within this chapter, I have presented the factors identified as contributing to each theme in all but one case in the order of saliency that they held for participants. Saliency is difficult to define and acknowledged to be subjective, but has been determined by taking a number of factors into account. These include the relatively straightforward measure of prevalence within accounts (the amount of time that participants spent talking about each theme or factor), and prevalence between accounts (the number of participants who raised a particular issue), but also include the degree of passion or outrage with which participants expressed their views. I have therefore included issues that were not raised by all participants, but felt strongly by one or two.

Before moving on to discuss each of the three themes in detail, I address below the issue raised in Chapter Four, regarding the potential implications of separating out the impact of teachers on participants’ behaviour across the three themes.

* 1. **The importance of the relationship with teachers**

I explained in Chapter Four that the characteristics and behaviour of teachers, while of the greatest salience to the participants, was not designated as a discrete theme, but considered as a contributory factor within each of the three themes, as shown in Figure 5.1.

**Figure 5.1: The relationships of ‘features of teachers’ to the three themes identified**

I recognised that this separation was potentially problematic. The relationship of students with teachers is arguably the factor that impacts most significantly on their behaviour, and this relationship is in reality more than the ‘sum of the parts’. Participants themselves tended to describe ‘good’ or ‘liked’ teachers in terms that suggest that they ‘get it right’ in a generic sense. The quote below is typical of participants’ responses to questions or prompts about teacher characteristics and behaviours:

[Some teachers] get it….others they just don’t get it (Pupil E: L122).

Teachers are experienced as a gestalt by students and it often appears to be to this that they respond, rather than to a particular quality or behaviour.

Despite these difficulties, and the possible artificiality of allocating the key characteristics and behaviour of teachers to different themes, I felt it was both feasible and worthwhile to attempt such a separation. In terms of feasibility, while much of what participants had to say about teachers did relate to generic qualities, they also provided (through their direct answers to questions, and through the examples and illustrations that their accounts provided) many more specific insights which allowed a more nuanced exploration of the precise teacher behaviours and characteristics as they related to one or more of the three themes identified, and their potential relevance to participants’ needs.

I felt it was worth doing, in view of the hoped for practical application of the findings to inform school and teacher practices. In order to be of the greatest possible use to practitioners, I believed that it would be more useful to isolate and define as specifically as possible what it was that participants found helpful and less helpful in terms of what teachers demonstrate, do and say in relation to the three key areas identified as impacting on behavioural choices – building a sense of connectedness, giving students a voice, and dealing with them in a fair and just manner.

Many studies, particularly those that focus on the experience of LAC, acknowledge the importance of teacher relationships on outcomes, but do not specify the characteristics or behaviours of teachers that contribute to these. For example, Gilligan (2007), identifies a theme that impacts on positive outcomes for LAC as ‘inspiration and support from teachers’ (p.139) but what that might look like is not explored. On the other hand there is much research on what students generally consider to be characteristics of a ‘good teacher’, and the lists of attributes generated is remarkably stable across time and location. Allen (1959), cited in Julies and Kutnick (1997), identifies teachers who are ‘competent’, ‘interesting’, able to ‘joke’, ‘approachable’ and ‘understanding’, and these characteristics continue to feature in more recent studies of what all students consider important (e.g. Woods, 1990) and those that focus on the views of students with BESD (e.g. Hart, 2012; Pomeroy, 1999; Garner, 1995). The danger of generating a generalised ‘list of characteristics’ is that teachers may attempt to adopt or emulate such characteristics without understanding their meaning or value to the student. The identification, analysis and interpretation that I offer in relation to teacher characteristics across the themes therefore represents a potential framework for understanding both the ‘what’ and the ‘why’ – linking particular teacher characteristics and behaviours identified by the participants to the function they may fulfil for them.

In view of the separation of teacher characteristics and behaviours across the three themes, two issues may usefully be noted. The first is that it is the sum of the characteristics and behaviours identified across the three themes (and probably other factors that were not identified in this study) that will define the overall relationship that a student has with a particular teacher. What counts is this overall relationship, and I discuss the potential importance of such relationships below in relation to behavioural outcomes. The second issue of note is that often particular characteristics or behaviours impact on more than one theme – for example teachers who listen to students are viewed as both contributing to their sense of ‘connectedness’, encouraging student voice and promoting a sense of fairness and justice. I have highlighted these links where relevant.

It is important that the significance of the overall relationship between student and teacher is not lost within the separation I impose for two reasons. The first is that for participants in this study, all of whom are deemed to have attachment difficulties underpinning their BESD, the relationship with teachers may be of more salience than for other students with BESD not underpinned by such difficulties. The second is that the relationship between students and teachers is perhaps the most significant school related factor impacting on students’ behaviour. Student-teacher relationships have been shown to impact on a range of behaviour-related outcomes, and may be a key factor in the maintenance, exacerbation, even genesis, of behavioural difficulties.

In relation to the first issue, while it is difficult to ascertain with certainty whether teacher-related factors impacted more on participants in the current study than on other groups of students with BESD who have been the subjects of studies (as the degree of saliency of the different themes for the young people are not calibrated within most studies) the work of Pomeroy (2000) offers some useful insights. Within her sample of 33 young people with BESD, she identified significant variation in the salience that relationships with teachers had for different students. She identified three groups:

[T]hose for whom interactions with teachers were central to their school experience, those who identified relationships with teachers as one of several salient features of their school experience, and those for whom teachers seemed to play a peripheral role. (p. 40).

In the current study, I found no such division, with all participants falling firmly within the first of Pomeroy’s categories. For my participants, teacher-related features were by far the most salient factor, with the role of friends, factors related to the environment and factors related to teaching and learning (all highlighted as significant for Pomeroy’s second and third groupings, and highlighted in other studies) far less salient. It is possible to speculate that, if Pomeroy’s findings are replicated amongst generic groups of students with BESD and, if my small sample is typical of students with attachment difficulties, that the overriding importance of relationships with teachers found in this study may relate to the attachment difficulties deemed to underpin participants’ BESD. This interpretation would be consistent with the literature which suggests that teacher/student relationships have a special significance for students with attachment difficulties, whose early experiences did not provide them with models of adults who prioritised their needs (Sroufe et al., 1983; Simpson, Collins, Tran and Haydon, 2007).

In relation to the second issue, research has identified the importance of relationships with teachers on behavioural outcomes for students at the level of the general school population (e.g. Roorda, Koomen, Spilt and Oort, 2011; Mihalas et al.,2009; Cornelius-White, 2007). The picture is similar when we look at the research involving students with BESD for whom the outcomes are even more significant. Mihalas et al. (2009) assert that ‘Positive teacher student relationships can help to prevent aggressive behaviours by students’ (p. 112), while Hamre and Pianta (2001), provide evidence that:

[C]hildren with signiﬁcant behaviour problems in the early years of school, who are nevertheless able to form relationships with teachers that are low in conﬂict and dependency, may be less likely to have continuing behaviour problems compared with their peers who, despite similar levels of behaviour problems, are less able to adapt to the social environment of the classroom. (p. 636).

A stronger position can also be found in the literature asserting that poor relationships between teachers and students can actually cause or exacerbate BESD. Cefai and Cooper (2010) draw upon a significant body of evidence in claiming that:

The relationship between teachers and students has been consistently identified by the international literature as being one of the main factors in the development of SEBD. Poor relationships...perceived as uncaring, autocratic, unfair and rigid, have been repeatedly found to lead to student defiance, disengagement and disaffection (Wise, 2000; Jahnukainen 2001; Baker 2005; Davies 2005; Cooper 2006). (p.193).

While it is outside of the remit of this study to consider whether this is true for the current participants, such a statement reminds us of the key significance of teacher/student relationships, particularly when considering the needs and support required for students with attachment difficulties for whom the relationship with the teacher might be the most significant factor in their school lives. The research (e.g. Sroufe et al., 1983) is clear that positive relationships with empathic and nurturing teachers can be a significant factor in bringing about change in the negative IWM of many students with attachment difficulties, through which adults are viewed as uncaring and unable to meet their needs. The importance of such relationships as a protective factor is highlighted by Dearden (2004) in his research of LAC (many of whom might be supposed to have attachment difficulties) who are found to do well despite adverse circumstances.

Having discussed the importance of the overall relationship between students and teachers, I now explore each of the themes identified in turn.

* 1. **Theme 1: Connectedness**

The overwhelming feeling I was left with after each interview was that of individuals who were, or had been, struggling within what they perceived to be a hostile and unpredictable environment pocketed with small oases providing some respite in which they could let down their guard, relax, and gather their resources.

On the one hand they spoke in strong terms of feeling unsafe, of being treated *‘like utter utter shit’* with teachers who *‘just walk on by with it’* and *‘just keep attacking and attacking and attacking you’*; of peers *‘in a pack’* who were *‘cruel and judgemental’* and would ‘*bite your face off’,* of being unwanted in lessons and ‘*screamed at when we don’t do anything wrong’*, rejected and alienated, *‘we don’t like people and people don’t like us’*. On the other hand all also talked about staff members who they trusted and who supported, understood and liked them, who gave them chance after chance and listened to their problems, about places where they felt safe, ‘*Sir, I’m home!’*, and of classes with a more egalitarian ambiance which were *‘chilled and relaxed’*, where students worked together and giggled and where they were treated with respect, and valued by teachers with humour, patience and compassion.

The theme that seemed to link both sides of these school experiences was that of connectedness. In participants’ accounts, connectedness was characterised by three elements: feelings of safety, a sense of belonging, and feelings of being valued – understood, cared for, respected and liked.

In the literature there is evidence of concepts similar to my use of ‘connectedness’ underpinning student outcomes, both behavioural and academic. It is acknowledged to be an area in which terminology is often not clearly defined (Hallinan, 2008; Bond et al., 2007), with researchers referring to ‘belongingness’ (Baumaster and Leary, 1995), ‘relatedness’ (Furrer and Skinner, 2003), as well as ‘connectedness’ itself (Bond et al., 2007). Hallinan (2008) suggests that terms such as these which define affective states can be differentiated from similar terms such as ‘engagement’ (Skinner, Kindermann and Furrer, 2009) and ‘attachment to school’ (Smith, 2006) which Hallinan conceptualises as the behavioural outcomes of these affective states.

The term ‘connectedness’ is used in the current study as the ‘best fit’ to encompass all of the elements of salience to participants, although it differs from Bond et al.’s (2007) use in including feelings of safety and emotional security in addition to a sense of belonging and being valued. None of the alternative terms discussed include this dimension.

While no student directly used the term ‘connectedness’ in relation to making positive or negative behavioural choices, its influence permeated the accounts of their lived experience at school. What was clear from their accounts was that, where they experienced a sense of connectedness, behavioural incidents were less likely to occur and, if they did occur, to be de-escalated and resolved and, where they did not, behavioural incidents were more likely to be triggered and escalate.

Sometimes this link was direct – when students felt unvalued, disrespected or belittled, the reaction was often immediate and extreme, ‘*y’know what? You can go fuck yourself’* (Pupil A: L347). Generally, however, the link between connectedness and behavioural choices was indirect. Where a sense of connectedness was low, participants experienced little engagement - they felt no incentive to conform to behavioural expectations, little interest in systems of rewards and sanctions, and no investment in maintaining the approval of teachers or relationships with them, and this context formed the backdrop to their behavioural choices. Cooper (2008) refers to the importance of this backdrop as the ‘seedbed for effective behaviour management approaches’ (p. 19), with his notion of the ‘seedbed’ similar to my use of ‘connectedness’.

This theme therefore attempts to identify those factors that were interpreted as promoting or detracting from participants’ feelings of being safe, belonging and being valued as key elements contributing to a sense of connectedness.

I identified six factors which impacted on participants’ sense of connectedness overall. Two factors appeared to have an exclusively positive impact (the ‘Key adult’ and the ‘Safe space’), two factors to have a negative impact (‘Teaching and learning’ and ‘Other students’), and two to be capable of exerting both a positive and a negative force, ‘Friendships’ and ‘Features of teachers’. Of these six factors, the most salient and prevalent across accounts were ‘Features of teachers’, followed by ‘Key adult’ (which was linked to the ‘Safe space’), the next most pervasive ‘Other students’. The final two factors, ‘Friends’ and ‘Teaching and learning’ were salient for some participants but not others, and in cases where they were raised as issues of lesser import. The factors are dealt with in order of their salience.

The Theme and factors contributing to it are illustrated in Figure 5.2.

|  |
| --- |
| **CONNECTEDNESS** |
| **Feelings of safety A sense of belonging Being valued** |

**I thought I didn't have no one: The Key Adult**

I just like to come to school cos you know you got someone to talk to

(Pupil D: L59).

**‘I don’t really connect with them’: Features of Teachers**

When they treat you like not very nice and all that (.) then you all seem to kick off and you seem to get at that stage naughtier naughty and [you let] your naughty side out and you speak to teachers how you wanna speak to them and all that

(Pupil D:  L353).

**’Sir, I’m home’: A Safe Space**

I came in at ten to twelve when I shouldn't really have been in till quarter past and I was just like “sir can I just come and sit in your room while you're in here” and he were like “sure” … I feel really comfortable (.)…when he comes in like I'm like “Sir I'm home”

(Pupil B: L352).

**‘But when they’re in a pack…’: Other Students**

Some kids are (.) incredibly hostile towards you (.) some kids just y'know instantly hate you it's just like no reason why? …some of them are nice (.) and some of them are completely like y'know dicks really (.)..when they're on their own they are like y'know timid cats really they won't go near you they won't chat they won't say shit to you (.) but when they're in like a pack it's pretty much like y'know they'll talk to you like you're utter shit

(Pupil A: L563).

**‘Most people know me’: Friends**

People didn't really like me at my old school cos really I was naughty…but like I don't really have many friends in this school neither

(Pupil B: L99).

**‘I can’t do it so…’:Teaching and Learning**

I used to love all my classes when I was younger cos they was different primary (.) then you get to the (.) to bits of it then you're like “oh I can't do this I don't know how to do this” I struggle with it and all that

(Pupil D: L333).

**Figure 5.2: Theme 1: Connectedness**

***‘I don’t really connect with them’*: Features of teachers**

When they treat you like not very nice and all that (.) then you all seem to kick off and you seem to get at that stage naughtier naughty and [you let] your naughty side out and you speak to teachers how you wanna speak to them and all that

(Pupil D: L353).

The characteristics and behaviour of teachers who promote or do not promote a sense of connectedness are considered below, as they relate specifically to the meeting of participants’ needs for safety, belonging and being valued. It is important to note that a sense of connectedness is also promoted when teachers provide opportunities for students to have a voice, and when they treat them with fairness and justice, and I explore these additional factors in Sections 5.3 and 5.4 of this chapter.

***Teacher characteristics and behaviour impacting on feelings of safety***

Participants spoke of a number of teacher characteristics and behaviours which I have interpreted as impacting on their feelings of safety. These included putting boundaries in place, being consistent and predictable in their interactions with the class, not shouting and yelling, and being reliable in providing help and support with learning without the risk to students of being put down or made to feel stupid. I return to the final factor in Section 5.2.6 as it falls more comfortably within the topic ‘Teaching and learning’. One teacher is identified as being liked, specifically because he is perceived as unthreatening:

Yeah but …I know [T11]'s joking and I know and he actually does (.) I mean he's like um not threatening (Pupil B: L34).

While some of these elements are consistent with the findings from other studies with students with BESD, for example the importance of boundaries (e.g. Hart, 2012), there are some key differences. Shouting, for example, is a feature of teacher behaviour which is regularly identified by students (both generally and among BESD populations) as impacting negatively on relationships, and it is generally viewed as relating to students feelings of not being valued or liked (e.g. Pomeroy, 1999). While I acknowledge the validity of this interpretation, I would propose that the significance of teachers shouting for my participants lies also in the threat that it poses to their feelings of safety.

In addition, a number of participants described the unpredictability of teachers as a problem, contributing to their sense of school as a hostile and unsafe environment:

Like one minute they can be really nice to you and you're like “ah y'know my thoughts on this teacher are completely y'know” it's y'know “she's actually quite nice or he's actually quite nice” and then come to a day then where there's a tiny little problem and they will talk to you like you are crap like you are utter utter shit. (Pupil A: L306).

I think she's [teacher of favourite subject] bipolar or something she loves me one week and then the next week I'm George [not his name] and she doesn't know who I am and she hates me and that (Pupil C: L107).

This unpredictability is not a factor that is highlighted in other studies, and may therefore represent an issue which is of particular pertinence to students whose BESD is underpinned by attachment difficulties. An attachment framework could account for participants’ focus on the unpredictability of teachers in terms of these students sharing an IWM that views adults as unpredictable and seeks confirmation of this, with teacher behaviours being interpreted through this lens (Geddes, 2005). It is worth noting that participants raise the same issue of unpredictability in relation to other students (again in contrast to similar studies), lending weight to this interpretation.

Safety (both physical and emotional) is not an issue that is unduly highlighted by students in other studies of students with BESD, in contrast to the current study in which participants return to the issue repeatedly in a number of contexts. An attachment framework would also make sense of the saliency of teacher behaviours that promote or detract from feelings of safety (such as shouting and being unpredictable) with reference to the concept of hypervigilance and difficulties conceptualising safety (Rees, 2005). As described in the literature review, one way that an insecure attachment often manifests itself in behaviour is in the individual being constantly hypervigilant. A feature of hypervigilance is the need to continually scan the environment for perceived threats, and it is this feature which may offer some explanatory power for participants’ focus on safety, and teachers’ behaviours which enhance or detract from this.

***Teacher characteristics and behaviour impacting on feelings of belonging***

The role of teachers in facilitating a sense of belongingness for all students is well documented (e.g. Mihalas et al., 2009; Baumaster and Leary, 1995). Lown’s (2005) research, which highlighted adult/pupil relationships as a key factor in the successful reinclusion of students with BESD, reports that ‘pupils viewed positive relationships with adults as having a direct impact upon feelings of belongingness and comfort within the school environment’ (p. 52), although the particular characteristics or behaviours that result in this are not explored.

Participants in this study described lessons in which they feel part of a group, a sense of belonging. The teacher characteristics and behaviours that contribute to this sense of belonging are highlighted in this section. One pupil described such a lesson, highlighting the importance for her of teachers setting practical tasks for students to do together:

In [specific lesson] you just chilled relaxed like (.) like everyone just gets on with their work and then you get to like … you do more practical things… and it's so much fun cos you get to bond with each other and you get to see what drama skills they got (.) which is fun (Pupil E: L176).

While the importance of making learning interactive and engaging is well documented as a factor impacting on student’s engagement with learning (e.g. Woods, 1990), the importance for this participant seemed to lie more in the opportunities such activities offered for social interaction, ‘bonding’. The same opportunities seem to be valued by Pupil A, who described a lesson in which feeling part of a group seems to be the central outcome:

Like I think my teacher [T6] y'know it's like me and my friend'll be joking around in there and she'll be like she'll get involved she'll be like “ah y'know” she'll just y'know get in on the joke and y'know it's nice y'know? When you can have that sort of relationship with a teacher y'know where it's y'know back and forth with the jokes and everything (Pupil A: L409).

Pupil D described a similar feeling of belonging in the following terms, again highlighting the important role of the teacher in creating the climate:

‘cos the teachers that are really nice and you get on with they have conversations with you with the whole class they get you all giggling and all that and you get out your work (Pupil D: L355).

Humour is a characteristic mentioned by a number of participants which seems to promote a sense of belonging, perhaps serving as an equalising function between teacher and student and between students. When I asked Pupil B the question, ‘what makes a good lesson?’, he immediately identified this quality in the teacher whose lesson he described:

[H]e’s not out of his expiry date where he can’t get low down with kids... it’s really he’s funny and he uses similar terms like we use like (Pupil B:L340).

The importance of humour in improving student-teacher relations at the level of the generic school population is documented in the literature (e.g. Goodman and Burton, 2010), and in relation specifically to students with BESD (e.g. Fovet, 2009). Pomeroy (2000) draws attention to the importance for the (BESD) students she interviewed of ‘a friendly approach and sense of humour’ (p.48) as do Hart, 2012; and Cefai and Cooper, 2010.

An interaction with a teacher with whom he has a good relationship is described by Pupil B. In this case it is the joint sharing of sweets, and perhaps again the ‘equalising’ treatment of the student by the teacher which contributed to a sense of belonging:

Yeah I mean like (.) earlier I was giving him wine gums and stuff and he was like “ah cheers [T11]” and I was like “Want wine gums?” “aw well I shouldn't really but ah yeah go on then” it's like “yeah cool” (Pupil B: L348).

Pomeroy (1999) encapsulates this feeling, so valued by my participants, when she talks about how her participants respond more positively to ‘those teachers who they perceived as breaking out of a more distant teacher/student relationship model to establish a certain type of friendship with the students’ (p. 471). I consider this sense of equality between teachers and students again in relation to the degree to which teachers promote student voice (Section 5.3).

Many of the behaviours and characteristics that are identified by my participants are also commonly raised by generic groups of students as characteristic of good teachers generally. What might differentiate students with and without BESD, is that the role of the teacher in promoting feelings of belonging has more significance for students with BESD as they are less likely to have supportive friendship groups, which, for other students, will enhance feelings of belonging, and render teachers’ behaviour less consequential (Bond et al., 2007). This certainly seems to be the case for participants in the current study, for whom it is overwhelmingly factors related to the teacher which determine the extent to which they felt a sense of belonging, with the role of friends or other students either not highlighted at all, or highlighted only as having a negative impact (see Section 5.2.5). I have previously explored the implications of this potentially increased salience for teacher/student relationships for students with attachment difficulties in the introduction to this chapter, in relation to Pomeroy’s (2000) findings.

The descriptions of times when they experience a sense of belonging are in stark contrast to lessons where this sense of belonging is not apparent. Pupil A described his feelings of alienation on entering such a class:

Well in a class that I don't really like I go in with a negative frame of mind like 'ah here we go soon as I open my mouth I'm gonna get bitched at” …Yeah like I'll go in there and think “here we go another day in this room” (Pupil A: L238).

He described an incident where he is actively rejected by the teacher who tells him to, ‘get out of my class’, and the teacher’s behaviour is seen as a deliberate attempt to exclude him from the group:

[S]he'll carry on going and carry on going and carry on going to the point that she goes “Get out of my class” …It's like she doesn't want me there so she does it on purpose really (Pupil A: L541).

*S*tudies of students with BESD commonly document students’ feelings of rejection and alienation generally within school, and I would propose that one of the reasons for these feelings is the failure of some teachers to instil a sense of belonging. The importance of the behaviours and characteristics of teachers I describe in this section therefore lie in their function as mediators of ‘belongingness’ – of particular importance to students with BESD, as noted earlier, in view of the reduced role of the peer group in fostering such feelings.

The attachment framework may help to make sense of the severity of the rejection felt by participants in this study (and their consequent behavioural reactions) when a sense of belonging is not engendered. It is interesting that the participant quoted above indicated his belief that the teacher’s actions were intentional and personally motivated. It might be that such rejection is more salient for and deeply felt by students with attachment difficulties, as it resonates with early rejection and confirms their IWM of themselves as unacceptable, arousing strong feelings of shame and humiliation (Lyddon, Sherry and Henson 2001).

Unfortunately, such instances of rejection are likely to be frequent for students with BESD. Cefai and Cooper (2010) state:

[I]nternational research indeed suggests that students with SEBD are usually the least liked and least understood students, with teachers preferring other students in their classroom, including those with learning difficulties (p.193).

This is likely to be even more the case for students with insecure attachments, as another key component of these difficulties is the challenge of forming relationships due to their IWM of others as unpredictable and uncaring, and themselves as unworthy of love or care (Golding, 2008, p. 28-29; Geddes, 2003).

***Teacher characteristics and behaviour impacting on feeling valued***

Of the three areas that I propose contribute to an overall sense of connectedness, that of ‘being valued’ is the one that provoked the most comment from participants. The word ‘valued’ is used here to include those experiences described by participants where they felt liked, cared for, trusted and respected. Teacher behaviours identified by participants as promoting feelings of being valued included: treating students with respect; showing caring behaviour; knowing, liking and understanding students as individuals; listening to them and their ideas and treating them fairly. The latter two behaviours are explored in Sections 5.3 and 5.4 respectively, as they relate more specifically to the themes ‘Having a voice’ and ‘Fairness and justice’.

Many of the characteristics and qualities of teachers identified by participants are of course important to all students (Woods, 1990), and similar teacher characteristics feature in the literature relating to students with BESD (e.g. Hart, 2012; Pomeroy, 2000).

Two underpinning conditions for feeling valued emerged from participants’ accounts: the importance of trust and authenticity.

Participants gave many examples of their lack of trust in teachers generally. In the excerpts below, teachers’ behaviours were perceived to be hypocritical and inauthentic:

To your carers or parents or guardians whatever (.) she'll be like “ah yeah he's a lovely boy ah we always get on y'know and we have all these like little jokes and everything but y'know he's an okay child but just has some problems y'know” but to my face she'll be a total bitch (Pupil A: L581).

It's well I dunno it's just the way she says (.) she's really two-faced she says she's “in it for the children” and y'know “trying to get your qualifications making you look good yeah” but no (.)…Because she's only like it with certain people (Pupil C: L36).

Trust in teachers, and the belief in their authenticity, was broken for two participants who both reported that teachers were talking about them behind their backs. Pupil E became very agitated when she told me that a teacher had been talking to a parent about her and that she had overheard the teacher saying:

don't bother with [Pupil E] she just causes trouble all the time”; oh yeah the teacher that was slagging me off was saying “oh no that girl again” and stuff like that (Pupil E: L158).

Pupil A referred on a number of occasions to his belief that the teachers in the school were ‘in league’ (united against him), and reported that when one teacher (his key adult) stood up for him, this teacher was then ostracised:

Because y'know all these teachers talk crap to each other really “oh he did this he did that” and I think [Key Adult] was like “I believe the kid” (.) but as soon as a teacher sort of like turns around and says something like “I believe the kid” suddenly all these teachers are like “[Grumble]” and almost every teacher in this school dislike him (Pupil A: L499).

It was difficult to identify the actual behaviours or characteristics that gave rise to a belief in the authenticity of teachers or inspired trust for the participants. One possible reason for this might be that it is not always the teacher’s actual behaviour that was the most salient factor, but their perceived motivation. One stated:

The thing is with her [liked teacher] is that at least I can tell her that she's *trying* to treat me how she ought to be (Pupil C: L383).

Another participant highlighted the importance of the perceived motivation for teacher behaviour in describing an incident in which he was in trouble and running away from one teacher, but agreed to go into the headteacher’s office to calm down. When I asked him why he was willing to comply with the headteacher and not the other teacher the first reason given was:

Uh it's just the fact that one he was not wanting to piss me off in the first place really (Pupil A: L367).

This could explain the fact that the same behaviour in two teachers was responded to in very different ways, as described by one participant:

Yeah and it is really funny but it like if [T11] did it I'll be like “ok” like half the times like I'll shut up [T11] like “you're doing my head in” but if [T12] had said it I'll be like “no that's just totally wrong” (Pupil B: L342).

This focus on trust and authenticity is not unknown in the literature. Mihalas et al. (2009) suggest that ‘the demonstration of authenticity, trustworthiness and affirmation of the dignity of students with EBD are essential ingredients to developing relationships with them’ (p. 117). It is not however explicitly highlighted by students with BESD in the majority of comparable studies (e.g. Hart 2012; Cefai and Cooper, 2010). It may be the case that trust and authenticity are particularly important to the participants within this study, as a predominant feature of attachment difficulties is a struggle to trust adults. This struggle to trust is underpinned by an IWM which views all adults as untrustworthy, as a result of early experiences in which adults proved themselves to be so (Geddes, 2006; Rees, 2005). It is as if the bar is set at a higher level for students with such difficulties – working against the assumption of untrustworthiness, adults have to work harder to gain trust. From within this model it is easy to see how what might be considered neutral (or irritating but inconsequential) acts for other students, can take on a negative bent, an enhanced significance, and confirm expectations generated through their IWM. This interpretation could also perhaps explain participants’ apparent need for an attachment to one significant adult (the key adult, explored later) who perhaps has the time and necessary qualities to reach the high bar set by participants.

Another teacher quality that was salient in relation to feeling valued was that of caring and compassion, and participants described good relationships with teachers who demonstrated caring behaviour, and poorer ones with those who didn’t. As a group, teachers were perceived by most of the participants (except Pupil D) as uncaring:

And y'know teachers do need some compassion but a lot of them just don't care. I get treated like utter shit and y’know all you teachers just walk on by with it (Pupil A: L210).

In contrast, Pupil A described how one teacher demonstrated caring for him by showing an interest and trying to talk to him:

I'm just not in a good place and I'm just like I can't (.) I'll just sit outside and she'll come up and is like “what's wrong [P1]?” and she'll try and talk to you and everything (.) and it's nice y'know cos she's not always horrible like some teachers in the school (Pupil A: L206).

This focus on ‘caring’ is commonly noted in research on what all students value in teachers (e.g. Woods, 1990). For some students a lack of caring contributes to a lack of connectedness which, I have proposed earlier, is linked to a higher likelihood of behavioural incidents occurring. Cothran, Kulinna and Garrahy (2003) interviewed 182 students in 14 schools, and found that students reported effective teachers as those that demonstrated ‘care’. When teachers demonstrated caring behaviour, students were more likely to respect the rules, as they describe below:

‘We like don’t mouth off to her. We try not to talk when she is talking and we don’t talk back. We try to listen and remember what she is telling us like directions and instructions and we don’t talk back to her and we aren’t whining about what she wants, what she has planned’…. Conversely, when teachers didn’t care, neither did the students. [Another student said]… ‘you can tell the difference and the teachers that don’t care don’t get respect.’ (p. 439).

Understanding was a teacher characteristic that was raised by all participants, by some as a general attribute:

He actually understands me and like I can talk to him about stuff (Pupil B: L350).

It was raised by others in relation to an understanding of their specific circumstances. Pupil A identified this as the single most important thing that schools needed to get right:

I would say they need to reach out to the kids be more understanding (.) cos they don't know what's going on in the kid's life (.) and it could be impacting their actual school life really (.) and some teachers like to pile the shit on top of that y'know (Pupil A:L575).

Because teachers find students with BESD challenging and difficult and are consequently more rejecting of them, as noted earlier, it is likely that there are few teachers who are willing to try to understand them and their needs. For students with attachment difficulties who struggle to view adults as capable of such understanding and consequent acceptance, this situation is likely to be exacerbated. In addition to this, students with such difficulties who are LAC have, by definition, experienced difficulties and challenges which require a more specific understanding of their lives (Gilligan, 2007). This issue is returned to in the next section, in relation to the role of the key adult.

The importance of respect was also raised by all participants. This focus is consistent with other studies of students with BESD, for example Cefai and Cooper (2010) who state that their Maltese students ‘underlined the common universal needs felt by children and young persons, namely the need to be respected, listened to and treated with dignity and understanding’ (p. 193). While the need for respect may be universal, the consequences of it not being accorded may be more extreme for students with BESD who have little connectedness to school, and in particular those with attachment difficulties for whom being disrespected may tap into deep feelings of humiliation, with encounters viewed through an IWM that sees themselves already as shameful and unworthy of respect (Lyddon, Sherry and Henson, 2001). Pupil A described how he felt disrespected, among other examples of being belittled and embarrassed by teachers:

He just like sat there taking the piss out of me really and the first time I was just like “oh yeah whatever that's pathetic” and the second time I was like getting really pissed off with him and I was just like I looked at him and I said “y'know what? You can go fuck yourself” (Pupil A: L347).

Two participants identified qualities relating to respect as the key thing that schools should get right in order to change schools for the better:

I think it's the way they speak to you and how they are (Pupil D: L355).

The way they treat their students I reckon…yeah and like if we give them respect they should give us respect…like they respect your feelings and they respect you in a way (Pupil E: L436).

The direct link between teachers who treat you ‘not very nice’ (perhaps a useful proxy indicator for where students do not feel a sense of connection) and students’ behaviour is made clear by Pupil D:

when they treat you like not very nice and all that (.) then you all seem to kick off and you seem to get at that stage naughtier naughty and [you let] your naughty side out and you speak to teachers how you wanna speak to them and all that (Pupil D: L353).

This link is eloquently encapsulated by another participant who offers an illuminating contrast between a lesson where he feels cared for (here understood as an indication of being valued), and where he doesn’t. The second incident described demonstrates how the perception of a lack of caring on the part of the teacher can directly trigger a behavioural incident.

If I go in and say I'm not feeling great he'll be like “ah try and do work” and if you are feeling really bad he'll be like “put your head on the table” so I'll be there and I'll be like (.) and then eventually I will try and do some work… but then in science the teacher'll just be like “Just do the work” and I'll be there and I'll be like “yeah but sir I've got a bad headache” and he'll be like “stage one”[a disciplinary sanction] and like “oh here we go again”(Pupil B, L336)

The characteristics and behaviour of teachers in a generic sense, while important, are not the only factors that impacted on participants’ sense of connectedness with the school, and the following sections explore these other factors.

***‘I thought I didn't have no one’*: The Key Adult**

I just like to come to school cos you know you got someone to talk to

(Pupil D: L59).

One factor that was identified as important by all participants in terms of promoting feelings of safety, belonging and being valued was having someone special to talk to in school, someone they were able to trust with their personal issues. This person is referred to as the ‘key adult’ throughout.

All participants talked extensively about their own key adults, and in two cases, the key adult was raised in the student’s first response to my first question, ‘What do you like about this school?’:

Well the teachers are nice and friendly so like if you got a problem you can go to them … Yeah so some like [key adult] (Pupil E: L4).

Pupil D mentioned his key adult in his first response to the question, ‘What is good about this school?’ and again when asked what single factor was the most important in the change-around in his behaviour he had described:

I'm not sure I think it was (.) hmm (.) I think it was when I started talking to [key adult] Yeah and then I started getting on with my school work (.) (Pupil D: L204).

The significance of the role that the key adult played in all five participants’ school lives was poignantly illustrated by the following statement which was typical of those made by all participants in relation to their key adult. The statement referred to a female teacher in Pupil A’s primary school, at the time that he was going into foster care:

It was just the fact that I was a kid that had no-one sit down and listen to them…She was like literally the only person I would talk to about my problems the only person I would trust really… y'know you kind of just you stick to them like glue really… we bonded. We were like brother and sister really (Pupil A: L66).

I noted earlier that the majority of studies focusing on the voices of students (both those with and without BESD) highlight the importance of good relationships with teachers generally, but few, even within the literature relating specifically to the voice of pupils with BESD, refer explicitly to the importance of having access to one key adult. For participants in this study this factor was of great salience, as illustrated by the extracts above. A possible explanation for this difference might be that much of the research that gives students with BESD a voice takes place when students are placed within specialist settings, when they have been excluded from mainstream schools (e.g. Michael and Frederickson, 2013; Hart, 2012; Sellman, 2009; Munn and Lloyd, 2005; Gersch and Nolan, 1994; Cooper, 1993). Within such settings we might speculate that there is less need for a specific key adult as there will be a greater number of adults available to students who are trained and/or experienced in meeting the needs of students with BESD than is the case in mainstream settings. A notable exception to this dearth of references to key adults in the BESD literature can be found in Cooper’s (1993) study of boys in residential settings, where access to a particular individual is identified by his participants as a key reason for their successful placement (and one missing within their previous mainstream environment). It is also interesting to note that in studies which focus on success factors related to reinclusion into mainstream settings following exclusion, the importance of a key adult has been highlighted (Lown, 2005; Gersch and Nolan, 1994).

The purposes fulfilled by the key adult were broadly similar for all five participants and relate to all three needs proposed as important to a sense of connection: to feel safe, to feel that they had somewhere to go where they felt they belonged and to feel valued.

Specifically they talked about the role of their key adult in listening to them, offering them support and advice, and ‘taking their corner’, functions that could potentially relate to all three needs. When I asked Pupil E whether she had gone to her key adult because she wanted some help, she said:

Nah just to talk to them like… Sitting and talking to a teacher. .that helps me (Pupil E: L119)

Pupil A illustrated the role of the key adult as someone ‘on his side’, to back him up in what he perceived to be an unsafe, hostile environment:

Yeah so you have someone y'know you have someone willing sort of like a powerful sort of stance really back your corner up. [Key adult] was that guy for us really (.) y'know if we needed like an hour…yeah y'know he was with me… I found it really helpful… (Pupil A: L521).

It may be that students with BESD particularly value individuals who they perceive to be on their side, as they have fewer good relationships with teachers overall and perceive the environment to be hostile, as noted previously. Again, this emphasis on the need for someone to ‘take your corner’ is not found within the research which focuses on the views of students within specialist BESD settings. I would suggest that this difference might be explained by the fact that, within specialist settings, the environment is explicitly set up to meet the needs of students with BESD and therefore will be experienced by students as less hostile, resulting in less of a need for someone to ‘take your side’.

Pupil B and Pupil A both emphasise the fact that they felt genuinely liked by their key adult and were keen to stress that the relationship went beyond ‘the job’.

I think I just need someone to talk to…it helps me get things off my chest like… having talked to him about things … I still see him in town actually sometimes (.) and we spend like half an hour just talking to each other(Pupil B: L421).

She was the only one that was actually y'know willing to sit down and talk to me y'know she is a support worker and that is her job and but she was willing to sit down and talk to me y'know (Pupil A: L78).

This sense of being genuinely liked as people, rather than just being part of someone’s job description might again be something that students experience more rarely in mainstream settings than within BESD environments. Cooper (1993) talks about the process of negative ‘signification’ where the behaviours of students with BESD come to be viewed by teachers as the unchangeable essence of the student themselves. He suggests that one of the factors that accounts for the enhanced connectedness and improved outcomes for students in many BESD settings is the opportunity that such settings offer for ‘resignification’ – for students to see themselves viewed in a more positive light by teachers. The focus of participants in my study on the importance of the key adult might be partly accounted for by the opportunities that the key adult offers them for such resignification. For students with attachment difficulties, who already see themselves through their IWM as unworthy of care and love, this opportunity might be particularly important. The process of signification is further explored in Section 5.4.1.

The attributes possessed by the key adults were also remarkably similar across participants’ accounts, with trust, knowing and understanding the individual, and caring high on their lists. While there is clearly an overlap with those qualities identified in teachers generally, in the extract below, Pupil C highlighted the fact that the characteristics of teachers liked at a general level, and those to be found in key adults may differ on certain dimensions. Talking about a teacher who was not his key adult, he said:

I have her and she yeah yet again she's another teacher that I like but she's not I couldn't speak to her about many things but she's y'know she's good at teaching (Pupil C : L291).

The importance of trust for students has been discussed previously in relation to teachers at the general level. It seems that it may be of even more significance within their relationships with their key adults. Two students felt let down by someone they had regarded as their key person:

You gotta trust em yeah (.) that's what happened with [T3] cos like she went off and told people then I lost trust for her then so I didn't go to her anymore (Pupil D: L534).

And then I just (.) I just refused to see er (.) cos y'know I told her not to and she did. (Pupil A: L95).

Mihalas et al. (2009) suggest that one way in which these qualities of trust and authenticity can be promoted is through the use of active listening, and the importance of being listened to has been noted as one of the crucial functions of the key adults identified by participants. It may be that the level of trust that participants need to feel in order to share difficult details of their past or present circumstances was promoted through their selected adult’s skills in this area. This links to a further characteristic of the identified key adults. Asked why he identified one teacher as special, Pupil C answered:

I think it's because she understands our situations more (.) like I feel more like I can genuinely speak to her about anything …Yeah and I can't even do that with my carers (.) the people that I live with (.) or my mother (.) in fact only well it's her and [F1] (laughs) I don't speak to many people about many things other than [F1] (Pupil C: L233).

In addition to these (potentially linked) qualities of being trustworthy, listening, and understanding their situations , the key adults were identified by some students as giving them multiple chances, of not giving up on them, perhaps demonstrating again that they did indeed genuinely care for and value the student, and that they could be trusted to be consistent and trustworthy. While all these characteristics are important, from within an attachment framework, the latter two would be of particular importance to those whose experiences have forged an IWM within which adults are not considered consistent or trustworthy, generating the expectation that adults will give up on you and let you down (Lyddon, Sherry and Henson, 2001). It is here that students with attachment difficulties may set the bar of ‘proof’ higher than other students who do not view the world through this lens, including some students with BESD not underpinned by such difficulties. The participants’ clear valuing of ‘stickability’ lends some support to this idea:

he said he believes in second chances and he's given me more than like two chances (.) he's probably given me like ten chances like he said that he's not one to give up and he actually ain't one to give up (.) he will actually help you (pause) if he's got something in his head then he will actually help you (Pupil B: L 417).

She helped me out quite a lot. She was one of the people that kept me in that school longer than they should’ve really (Pupil A: L174).

Relationships with key adults were not uniformly represented as positive, and just as the key adult was able to overcome ‘bumps’ along the way, so were the participants. Two described examples of when they had fallen out with, or had issues with their key adult, but got back on track.

Yeah I mean me and [T4] will have a few ups and downs (.) when I like (.) I mean there are some like issues like when I'm I dunno (.) I'm behaving badly at school then he'll come and get me (.) [I will say} ‘go away (X) I don’t wanna talk to you’ It seems that he's having a go at me but he's not he's actually not having a go at me (.) so I just like the support that he gives me (Pupil B:L59).

Three participants had had a key adult designated for them by the school, but this rarely worked out, and the students subsequently found their own key people:

And then with [T3] I used to go to her about certain stuff but then um well (.) when I was naughty an all that [T3] (.) well I didn't like to (.) well I got to the stage I didn't like [T3] anymore. (Pupil D: L72).

In one case at least, the reason that the participant identified for the failure was the fact that although it was his ‘job’, the adult was not the right person because he was not motivated by a genuine interest in the student. The importance of authenticity was highlighted in the previous section in relation to teachers generally, and is perhaps again of greater significance in relation to key adults whose role includes being entrusted with personal and difficult truths:

[I could go to T3]’ mulcher’ man [The school designated truancy officer] but he doesn't really do much, doesn't care (Pupil C: L550).

I have proposed in this section that the role of the key adult is of particular importance within mainstream settings. The lack of focus on this issue in much of the research which gives voice to students with BESD might be accounted for by the fact that much of it has taken place in specialist settings, in which the need for one key adult may not be so great. The reason I have proposed for this is that BESD environments are explicitly set up to meet students’ needs for connectedness, and contain more adults with the training or experience to fulfil the functions of the key adult, making a specific person less crucial.

The salience of the key adult for participants in my study may however also represent an important difference linked to the participants’ attachment needs, and one with implications for their schools and teachers. The key adult is a concept that is regarded as significant from within an attachment perspective, as contributing to the ‘secure base’ that an individual requires (Schofield et al., 2012; Ainsworth et al., 1978), if their attachment needs are not to drive their behaviour, ‘switching off’ the exploratory systems necessary for effective learning. Roorda et al. (2011) recognise the importance of the relationship as a secure base from which to ‘stimulate learning behaviour and support the child to deal with demands in the school context’ (p.459). A focus on the important role of the key adult can also be found in the literature documenting the needs of LAC, which is often framed within an attachment perspective. Dearden (2004) for example notes the importance of a significant positive relationship ‘a sense of having a secure base – secure attachments provide the child with a secure base from which to explore the wider world’ (p. 188) as does Gilligan (2000) when he says ‘even one positive relationship …may do much to combat a sense of failure in other spheres of one’s life’ (p. 41).

The final point to make in relation to the key adult is to note that often the chosen person is linked to a particular room or space that is perceived as ‘safe’. For the purposes of this analysis, the two elements which I propose support feelings of safety, belonging and being valued are separated out. The reason for this is that, while they were often linked in participants’ narratives, this was not always the case.

**‘*Sir, I’m home!’*: The safe space**

I came in at ten to twelve when I shouldn't really have been in till quarter past and I was just like “sir can I just come and sit in your room while you're in here” and he were like “sure” … I feel really comfortable (.)…when he comes in like I'm like “Sir I'm home” …he is really cool

(Pupil B: L352).

All participants indicated that they regularly accessed one or more ‘refuges’, and I interpreted this as a factor that promoted feelings of connectedness, through contributing to participants’ feelings of safety, belonging and being valued. All but one of the participants had either a school or self-designated safe place or refuge, and all participants described times when they needed to access such a place. The importance of this safe place is illustrated by the boxed quote above which encapsulates the sense of safety and belonging elicited for the speaker. It is resonant of the ‘secure base’ proposed from within an attachment framework (Ainsworth et al., 1978) to be necessary for students with attachment difficulties if they are to access learning opportunities.

In some cases, participants could access safe places when they wanted to, for example choosing to leave a classroom before a potential incident escalated, but in other cases, the participant’s exit to the safe place would be ‘unauthorised’, as a reaction to an incident, as described below:

She was just like full on turned around and shouted at me and she started like “you never shut up (.) you're so rude all you ever do is talk talktalktalktalk” and I was like “oh my god (.) why don't you shut up? Serious (.)” and I was like “why don't you?” and she just like “Go to [T3]'s room” and I was like “y'know what? I'm not having this I'm going to the nurse's room” and I just picked my bag up (Pupil A: L272).

In this example, it is interesting that the teacher directs the participant to one place, but he chooses to go to another. As with their key adults, it seemed that participants would find a way to choose their own safe space. The behaviour of Pupil A in overriding the teacher’s choice may represent a normal adolescent need to save face, or a characteristic specific to the individual, but would also be consistent with an explanation based on an attachment framework which proposes that young people with attachment difficulties can develop the need to feel in control at all times (Hopkins, 1990). This, it is suggested, arises as a result of the young person feeling responsible for meeting their own needs, as adults have proved themselves unpredictable or neglectful in doing so. This manifestation of attachment difficulties is further explored in Section 5.3, within the theme ‘Having a voice’.

In terms of the characteristics of safe spaces, these were related mainly to the adults that were associated with them. This is the case for Pupil B, in the boxed quote above, and for Pupil A:

Basically if I got really pissed off and I was like “I can't take this anymore I gotta go and (.)” I'd go to [key adult]'s room and he'd be sitting in and go “What you in here for now?” (laughs) He'd be there he'd sit there y'know and he'd listen to me (Pupil A: L503).

However, this is not so in every case. Pupil A for example mentioned several times that he had left lessons (during or after an incident) and gone to the Nurse’s office. Although he didn’t have a particularly close relationship with the Nurse, her office was clearly somewhere where he felt safe and could calm down when necessary:

It's not (.) I won't talk to them or anything (.) I'll just stay out by there (Pupil A: L276).

What seemed important to participants was that the space offered a quiet, safe environment. One participant (the only one who did not have a designated safe space) expressed a liking for the Internal Exclusion room, perhaps because it offered the opportunity for ‘down time’ on account of being quiet and experienced as safe:

Actually [it’s] quite nice. [you can] work better in there – you don’t talk to no-one you just work better…Yeah cos people aren't shouting at you or anything (.) it's just chilled and you're just sat there doing stuff (.) doing your work (Pupil E: L285).

Participants were equally vocal about the places that they didn’t like going, and their descriptions can give us some insight into the characteristics and functions of both liked and disliked places: Pupil B described his dislike of the Isolation Room (IR):

It's horrible I just don't like the feeling (.) (Pupil B: L172).

He detailed two characteristics relating to the place, one linked perhaps to a feeling of not being safe:

Yeah but it's really like claustrophobic and (.) it's cos you literally got like this much room in the cubicle and it's like [demonstrates small sise] and then when you've got two walls either side of you can't look either way cos you bang the walls it's just like ooh (Pupil B: L160).

The importance of safety as a particular issue for students with attachment difficulties has been previously highlighted. The other characteristic relates perhaps more to the sense of alienation and rejection that he experienced while there (the opposite of the feelings of belonging and acceptance that he experienced in his favoured safe space):

I don't like the IR room it's just… it's just like it makes me feel sick cos like (.) I can't talk which I love doing … I can't talk I can't (.) I'm basically I can't be myself (.) which kind of throws me off a bit (.)(Pupil B: L156).

While it might be proposed that Pupil B’s dislike of the isolation room related primarily to its function as a place of sanction, it became clear throughout the course of the interview that this was not the case – he explicitly states that he would be prepared to complete the sanction (which he accepted was fair) in another location – that that was not the issue. He described how he was able to calm down in his key adult’s room, but ‘kicked off’ when he had to move to the isolation room:

He'll let me go to his office first and eventually I'll end up calming down and then he'll be like “right let's go to IR then” and then that's when I start kicking off again cos I don't like going into the IR room and I'm like why can't I just stay? (Pupil B: L260).

An attachment framework can offer one way to interpret Pupil’s B intense dislike of the IR, and strong response to it. Safety, as noted previously, is a key component of a secure attachment, while those with insecure attachments can be perpetually hypervigilant, needing constantly to scan the environment for potential threats and danger (Rees 2005, Perry, 2004). Within the IR, Pupil B is not able to engage in this scanning, with a high level of anxiety resulting. Eventually this rising level of anxiety will catapult him into ‘fight or flight’ mode, and result in behaviours that remove him from the cause of the anxiety, regardless of later consequences. This interpretation is supported by Pupil B’s description of what happened when he was forced to spend time in ‘IR’:

I tend to do as much as I possibly can to get out of IR (pause) like I'll ask to go to the toilet every two minutes and they'll be like “no” and then eventually they'll end up calling someone to remove me from IR which I'm like “yes” cos then I get out IR cos I don't like it and then I've gotta do the extra hours in the morning (Pupil B: L156).

In concluding this section, it is noteworthy that the ‘safe space’ represented the only reference by participants to the physical environment of the school. No participant made reference to factors relating to the size or structure of the school, factors that have been highlighted in other, similar studies of students with BESD (e.g. Hart, 2012; Nind et al., 2012; Wise, 2000). It is perhaps surprising, given what we know about the focus on issues relating to their safety, and the hypervigilant state that many students with attachment difficulties experience, that the students in this study did not raise the issue of the size of the school or class sizes as a salient factor for them in relation to safety. One possible interpretation of this difference between comparable studies and the current one is that the existence of their ‘safe space’ offered sufficient refuge to these students within the school environment, offsetting potential issues related to other physical aspects of the school. Whatever the reason, the safe space was clearly an important survival mechanism for participants, and from within an attachment framework would contribute to the establishment of the ‘secure base’ commonly noted as necessary for young people with attachment difficulties in the literature (Ainsworth et al., 1978).

***‘But when they’re in a pack…’*: Other students**

Some kids are (.) incredibly hostile towards you (.) some kids just y'know instantly hate you it's just like no reason why? …some of them are nice (.) and some of them are completely like y'know dicks really (.)..when they're on their own they are like y'know timid cats really they won't go near you they won't chat they won't say shit to you (.) but when they're in like a pack it's pretty much like y'know they'll talk to you like you're utter shit

(Pupil A: L563).

One factor that was identified by all students as having an impact on their feelings of safety, belonging and being valued was that of other students (distinguished here from those students identified as friends). Participants’ accounts suggest that they made a significant contribution to their experience of school as a broadly hostile environment, and functioned as a factor that impacted negatively on their feelings of connectedness.

Whenever the issue of safety arose, participants talked negatively about other students, often characterising them ‘en masse’ as unpredictable and scary. Pupil E said that she felt ‘a bit’ safe in school (rating her feelings of safety as 6/10 where 10 was completely safe), and highlighted the role that other students played in her rating:

Well it's a bit dangerous with like everyone being around and that (.) you don't know what like they're going to do and everything (.) cos there's one (.) one time this one boy come …he brought in a knife into school (Pupil E: L348).

She talked in particular about fights, which she said happened two or three times a day and made ‘our school really bad’ (L328)*,* singling out the Gypsy Traveller children who she perceived as particularly unpredictable:

It is scary cos you don't know what (.) what they're all gonna come in with like (.) cos like if you pick a fight with a gypsy traveller they could bring anything in and probably do damage (Pupil E: L350).

Other participants also talked about the unpredictability of other students, and their impact on feelings of safety. When asked why he rated his feelings of safety in the school as a 3/10, Pupil C identified other students as the key issue:

Well mainly people and well (.) secondly I'd say the lack of restraint of some people (.)…) sort of they can do what they want and then get away with it (.) they can do anything they can (Pupil C: L435).

The characterisation of the social backdrop of school life is broadly in line with the perceptions of excluded students reported by Pomeroy (2000):

The social atmosphere at school was consistently described as being rife with conflict…. [participants] paint a picture of a volatile existence where emotional and psychological well-being is constantly under threat. (p. 72).

While fighting is highlighted as central to Pomeroy’s participants’ experience of school, her subjects viewed it as ‘integral’ to their school lives and there is no emphasis on the unpredictability of fighting or other behaviours as a key issue for her participants. This is in contrast to this study, in which it seems to be the unpredictability of students and the events (such as fights) that they bring about that the participants focus on specifically. As suggested previously in relation to the perceived unpredictability of teacher behaviour, an attachment framework would explain this as the result of the participants’ IWMs in which the world is unpredictable and full of threats. The promotion of ‘structure’ and ‘predictability’ and ‘consistency’ give rise to perceptions of safety (Perry, 2004, p. 16), and it these factors that are violated for participants through the reported unpredictability of other students’ behaviour, threatening their perceptions of safety.

In similar studies of students with BESD, issues relating to other students have been highlighted as impacting on their feelings of connectedness, and other outcomes, but the issues they raise have been centred around bullying. For example one of the four themes emerging from Wise’s (2000) study was ‘social problems’, defined by the participants as ‘bullying’.

In the current study, bullying (which might be viewed as a form of personally targeted hostility) was raised as a significant factor by only one participant. For Pupil D, it was bullying that had not been addressed which had been the primary reason for his early disengagement with school, resulting in an escalating pattern of truancy, and mixing with the ‘wrong kids’ as a protective mechanism. For this participant, the successful resolution of the bullying had contributed to his reconnection with school. One other participant mentioned bullying as an abstract possibility (‘cos we get bullied if we take anything different in school don’t we?’ Pupil B: L524) but not in relation to himself, and the other three participants did not mention it at all.

The fact that four out of the five students (all of whom were LAC) did not raise personal experiences of bullying as a significant issue is perhaps surprising in view of the research on students who are looked after, which suggests that bullying is a high risk factor for LAC (Gilligan, 2007). Dearden (2004) interviewed 15 LAC aged 13-19 and found that over half had been bullied to a significant degree. It would appear that it was a generalised sense of hostility and unpredictability which impacted on the participants, rather than a case of them feeling specifically targeted as is the case with bullying. This resonates with the findings of Cullingford and Morrison (1995) who comment in relation to how some students experience bullying in secondary school that:

Rather than clear-cut cases of bullies, who can be isolated and dealt with, there exists in schools an overall sense of gossip and malice. (p. 552).

It is perhaps this overall sense of malice that participants felt when they described their experiences with other students:

Cos there's basically some people in our class can be so cruel they can make nasty judgemental comments about you (Pupil E: L128).

Pupil A similarly talked in strong terms of the rejection and hostility of other students:

Some kids are (.) incredibly hostile towards you (.) some kids just y'know instantly hate you it's just like no reason why? No reason to just instantly hate you (pause) other kids can be extremely like sarcy and talk about like (??) behind your back (.) some of them are nice (.) and some of them are completely like y'know dicks really (.) like you find all these popular kids y'know quotation marks (.) it's pretty much like (pause) when they're on their own they are like y'know timid cats really they won't go near you they won't chat they won't say shit to you (.) but when they're in like a pack it's pretty much like y'know they'll talk to you like you're utter shit they'll take the piss out of you as much as they want really (Pupil A: L563).

While they may not have labelled such behaviour ‘bullying’, it was clear that their relationships with other students, in addition to detracting from feelings of safety, detracted from their sense of belonging and being valued, and therefore negatively impacted on their overall sense of connectedness to school. For many students the impact of a hostile social environment can be mitigated by the protective capacity of friendship groups, and I now explore this factor.

***‘Most people know me’*: Friends**

I didn't really people didn't really like me at my old school cos really I was naughty…but like I don't really have many friends in this school neither

(Pupil B: L99).

While for most students of secondary age, the role of friends in promoting connectedness with school is pivotal (Lown, 2005), their role as a factor promoting feelings of safety, belonging and being valued was not emphasised by the participants in this study, except in one case. Pupil D, who reported changing his behaviour from ‘disgusting’ to ‘good’, emphasised his developing friendships as a key factor in helping him make this change. He stressed the importance of being ‘known’ by peers:

Yeah it changed as soon as I started hanging around with people in my own year (.) and then people (.) and then everyone got to know me (.) I'm not boasting but most people know me (Pupil D: L377).

It may be that being ‘known’ for Pupil D equated to being accepted, to him feeling that he belonged. It would seem likely that being ‘known’ also related to his feelings of safety which changed dramatically at the time he made positive relationships with his peers in school. In response to the question, ‘Do you feel safe in school?’, he responded that now he feels ‘well safe now yeah yeah I reckon safest place part from home’ (L528), but indicated that this used not to be the case.

For Pupil C, friendships played a role in relation to his feelings of safety and belonging, although the saliency of this factor for him appeared to be quite low, meriting only a few sentences in the interview (which may have been elicited by the appearance of a friend who entered the room). In Pupil C’s case a few close friends, other ‘non-conformists’ (with whom he identified), provided something of an oasis in the face of dislike and rejection by the majority of peers:

People don’t like us and we don’t like people (Pupil C: L524).

For pupils A and E, friendships did not feature as a positive factor in their school experience. The final participant (Pupil B) mentioned friendships, but only in the negative context of not having them:

But yeah it's a bit like here (.) um I mean I didn't really people didn't really like me at my old school cos really I was naughty…but like I don't really have many friends in this school neither (Pupil B: L99).

For this student, ‘friends’ contributed less to feelings of belonging and inclusion, and more to feelings of isolation and exclusion, being portrayed as unpredictable, insincere and unkind. He reported:

In my old school I didn't really have friends it was just a couple of like boys who wasn't who I thought were mates but in a way they wasn't I'd see them as mates in school and then (.) like they'd (.) a couple of times I know boys were like (.) I probably thought were some mates (.) but we'd all like he'd sort of trick us and he'd be like “you coming to the cinema?” and I'd be like “yeah sure” and I turn up at the cinema and like they don't turn up. And then like I'd invite them to my party and stuff and they'd go like “yeah sure we'll turn up” and then they don't so I'm just there once again like with the cinema bowling all on my own (.) (Pupil B: L92).

These negative experiences are fairly typical of those found in other studies of students with BESD when talking about their current or previous mainstream placements (e.g. Nind et al., 2012; Wise, 2000). While it is commonly noted that students with BESD often have difficulty with peer relationships, Pomeroy (2000) urges us to be aware of individual differences between them in the way that they manage peer relationships. She conceptualises four different categories of student relationships that the students she interviewed experienced. These four categories are created by positioning participants on two key dimensions: the degree to which participants consider themselves to be an insider or an outsider (insider-outsider), and their level of comfort with their perceived position (comfort-discomfort). This concept is useful in considering my participants’ experiences with their peers and the potential relationship of these experiences to the attachment difficulties deemed to underlie their BESD. Within Pomeroy’s formulation, Pupil D might fall within the ‘insider-comfort’ category, while Pupil C would be more likely to fall within the ‘outsider–comfort’ category, with the remaining three students falling into the category of ‘outsider-discomfort’.

One explanation for some of the participants’ difficulties with friendships, commonly cited in the literature concerning LAC, involves the interrupted opportunities for developing and maintaining friendships which result from frequent changes of school. However, it may be that additional factors are operating for participants in this study due to their attachment difficulties. It is interesting to note the consistencies of three of the participants’ negative experiences of friendships with those commonly held to be characteristic of students with attachment difficulties, to which the label ‘outsider-discomfort’ might fit very well. From within an attachment perspective, a number of factors are viewed as contributing to the difficulties with relationships that children and young people with disordered attachment styles experience, outlined previously in the literature review.

***‘I can’t do it so…’*: Teaching and learning**

I used to love all my classes when I was younger cos they was different primary (.) then you get to the (.) to bits of it then you're like “oh I can't do this I don't know how to do this” I struggle with it and all that

(Pupil D: L333).

Issues related to teaching and learning represent the final factor that I identified as having an impact on participants’ sense of connectedness with school. Although issues relating to teaching and learning were touched on by the majority of participants, they uniformly received by far the least emphasis of any topic. While to an extent this might be expected (as participants were aware that the focus of the research was on behaviour rather than learning), several questions in the interview offered the opportunity for students to raise ways in which the curriculum might impact or contribute to the quality of their feelings of connectedness to school. Where participants did raise or touch on teaching and learning issues, their responses were overwhelmingly negative, with their experiences promoting disengagement rather than connectedness.

My findings in this area resonate with accounts from students with BESD in other studies that include references to their current or prior mainstream placements, (e.g. Michael and Frederickson, 2013; Cefai and Cooper, 2010; Hamill and Boyd, 2002) in the overall negativity of the students’ experiences relating to teaching and learning.

Only one participant was able to identify more than one lesson that they liked, and the following comment was typical of most that related to teaching and learning:

It's like they're throwing you in at the deep end it's pretty much like “Oh yeah, y'know you gotta take risks like this all this crazy math thing that you've never done before” (Pupil A: L110).

The references that were made to factors linked to teaching and learning seemed to have salience for the participants in relation to their sense of connectedness, in particular to their feelings of safety. It was the perceived riskiness of learning that was communicated, rather than concerns about their academic progress or achievement. This finding is consistent with the focus of participants on issues related to safety, discussed previously. Four factors appeared to contribute to this perceived riskiness: unfamiliarity with the work, a lack of confidence and belief in their ability to do the work, inaccessible teaching styles, and not feeling able to ask for help. Most of these factors have also been identified in other studies involving students with BESD, and I now discuss each in turn.

In relation to the lack of familiarity with the work, three of the participants had experienced a change of secondary school and for two of these the discontinuity caused problems:

When we came from PRU it was pretty much like y'know it's kind of like “ooh god” y'know and (.) you just didn't really know what to do(Pupil A: L529).

Pupil C had moved schools and talked about how the two schools had not managed the change-over well, with resulting disruption:

When I moved over to this school I didn't really move any of my work over with me so I had to start with redoing a year's worth of work and I was like “I'm not doing that”…yeah so I don’t do any work now (Pupil C: L147).

He expressed anger about this situation, although its salience for him would seem to arise less from any potential impact on his academic attainment, and more from the fact that, for him, it signified a lack of teacher or school caring – a factor impacting on connectedness that has been explored in Section 5.2.1.

The lack of familiarity with curricular tasks may feature more significantly for the participants in this study than for some other students with BESD, as their looked after status meant that they were likely to have experienced more changes of school. Changes of school are often raised in the literature relating to LAC as impacting directly on their academic achievement (e.g. Jones et al., 2011). The comments of participants in this study, however, lead me to an alternative (or possibly additional) interpretation in which discontinuities, such as failing to pass work on, impact on academic outcomes not through the curricular discontinuity itself, but through their significance to students as representative of a lack of caring. It may be that this decreases students’ (already low) feelings of connectedness with the school, and that this impacts on their motivation to engage with learning and therefore, ultimately, their achievement.

A lack of confidence in their ability to do the work set also seemed to underpin the perceived scariness of lessons. Several pupils made reference to this factor:

Um I don't really like history (.) I can't do it so... (Pupil B: L314).

I used to love all my classes when I was younger cos they was different primary (.) then you get to the (.) to bits of it then you're like “oh I can't do this I don't know how to do this” I struggle with it and all that (Pupil D: L333).

Sometimes you find you can work hard and sometimes again I could probably not be so like confident (Pupil E: L195).

Not being able to do the work set is identified as a feature impacting on behaviour in the studies previously referred to. Cefai and Cooper (2010) assert that when work is not matched to students’ current abilities, students may label themselves as failures, leading to a self-fulfilling prophecy resulting in ‘disengagement and consequent misbehaviour and absenteeism’ (p. 193). This resonates with the experiences recounted by participants in my study who offered examples of how behavioural incidents resulted from difficulties with curricular tasks (and teachers’ failure to support them):

Yeah it's like when you need the teacher to come and help you (.) and they're all they just do it (all on their?) computer or like that… Then that's when they think “oh god well they're not going to help me then why should I do work?”….. And then that's how they start getting and that's how the teachers don't like the pupils and the pupils don't like the teachers cos like they've always gonna be (JC: Sort of at loggerheads?) Yeah. (Pupil D: L361).

The teaching style of the teacher also appeared to be a factor that could enhance or reduce participants’ feelings of safety in lessons. Participants highlighted the difference between teachers who made the learning accessible (and therefore safer) and those who did not. When talking about the characteristics of a lesson that he liked, Pupil B drew attention to these features:

Yeah and he actually makes the lesson fun and enjoyable (.) um like and he'll explain it in a way that we'll all understand (Pupil B: L351).

Teaching style is a factor that is identified in other studies, in terms of its impact on academic outcomes (e.g. Hart, 2012; Cefai and Cooper, 2010). Through the lens of an attachment perspective, however, I would propose that it is not only the impact of teaching style on academic outcomes that is of importance to the participants, but the accessibility, as this renders the learning more or less safe to engage with.

Wise (2000) found that her participants often mixed up curriculum related issues with the teacher/student relationship, and the relative prominence of the final factor analysed below – the extent to which participants felt safe to ask for help and support – would suggest that this is equally true for participants in my study.

All five participants shared examples of times when they had not been given the support they felt they needed. Pupil A’s account was typical of these, encapsulating the sense expressed by many of the participants that the teacher’s refusal to help represented a deliberate slight:

Well one teacher [T10] …it's like y'know he loved to y'know make things worse cos like I was sat there waiting for some help and was like “Sir can I have some help?” and he was like “yeah I'll be there in a minute” (pause) he won't come and help me he'll go to the next person who asks just after me and the next person and then the next person and the next person and (.) (Pupil A: L453).

On occasions, participants had asked for help and were made to feel inadequate or otherwise uncomfortable:

Just like sometimes I don't ask like what to do cos like some teachers are a bit like dunno (funny and like that?) like one time I was asking the teacher what to do and she was just like “c'm'ere and I'll …” like “Come here and I'll explain to you (.) you don't get it I've told you this already you should know what you're doing” (Pupil E: L204).

Pupil D described being too scared to ask for help in Years 7, 8 and 9:

I used to always be scared cos I never in years seven eight and nine I used to never ask teachers for help…. I thought they'd pick on me or whatever like that and I thought they'd just laugh I don't know (Pupil D: L369).

In other research studies, a lack of support with academic work has been identified as a factor of significance, impacting on students’ behaviour (e.g. Cefai and Cooper, 2010; Wise 2000; Cooper, 1993). It was clear from the participants’ accounts however that it was not a lack of academic support per se which was of principle concern to them (stopping them for example from making academic progress); what mattered to them was how safe they felt in asking for support.

It may be that a willingness to help participants with their work is linked to a sense of being cared for and therefore valued. Although offering students support with curriculum tasks may be considered a key function of teachers, it seems that this was not the perception of all students. Pupil A stated, ‘You'd be surprised how many don't actually’ (Pupil A:L435). Pomeroy (1999) suggests that when teachers help students with their work, the importance for some students may lie more in the relational significance of the act (feeling valued) than in the degree to which it improves their academic endeavour. For students with attachment difficulties for whom the relationship with the adult may have more significance than for the majority of students (as noted previously), this will therefore have particular salience.

The findings discussed in this section, the overall lack of emphasis in participants’ accounts on teaching and learning and the foregrounding of issues related to safety and being valued, rather than academic progress, suggest that Wise’s statement in her 2000 study may be true for the participants in this study:

The goal of certain pupils with EBD in schools may be to simply maintain an emotional ‘peace’ and to survive with the minimum of embarrassment. Their concern with academic achievement or progress may be secondary to these concerns. (p. 50).

Interestingly, student concerns related to academic progress feature more prominently in the accounts of students in specialist BESD settings, and less in studies which focus on students’ mainstream experiences. Factors related to teaching and learning were identified as themes impacting on behaviour in several studies exploring specialist BESD environments. For example, Hart (2012) identified ‘Teaching and learning’ as one of her four themes, Pomeroy (1999) identified ‘School work, education provision and engagement’ as one of five themes, and Michael and Frederickson (2013) identified the curriculum as an enabling factor within the specialist setting. However, as Pomeroy (2000) says about the participants in her study:

[T]heir opinions about the importance of education and reports about their approach to schoolwork may not be the same at the time of interview as it was when they were in school. (p.114).

As students generally reported higher levels of connectedness within their specialist settings, we might speculate that this (along with other changes) resulted in increased engagement in learning and an increased salience in factors related to it, upon transfer to a specialist setting. A possible explanation for this might be found in Maslow’s (1943) ‘Hierarchy of Needs’. Maslow proposes that our behaviour and preoccupations are driven by our needs, which are arranged in a hierarchy, with higher order needs (such as self-actualisation, which would include engagement with learning) not being attended to unless more basic needs were being met. These basic needs include physiological needs, safety and security, love and belongingness, and being valued and respected. From within this framework we might see students within mainstream contexts being driven by their unmet needs at the basic level (which I have conceptualised as ‘connectedness’) with higher order needs, such as learning, remaining below their radar; while students within specialist settings (which aim to meet their basic needs more explicitly and, one might speculate, more successfully) motivated to attend to factors related to their higher order needs such as learning. Cooper (2008) suggests that ‘some children…may benefit from an environment…tightly focused on meeting their needs for emotional security’ (p.19). An attachment framework would complement this theoretical explanation, with its proposal that the behaviour of children with attachment difficulties is often driven by their striving to feel safe. The issue for mainstream schools therefore becomes whether it is possible to provide the necessary conditions to meet students’ basic needs, so that they can be freed up to focus on the issues related to teaching and learning. I return to this issue in the conclusion, where recommendations for mainstream settings are outlined.

* 1. **Theme2: Having a voice**

School was spoken of as *‘a dictatorship’*, a place where teachers’ voices are the only ones that count, where teachers issue orders without explanation, expecting unquestioning compliance to their rules, and punishing harshly when this isn’t accorded. Participants described a place where dissent is not possible, and student perspectives and opinions unsought and, when given anyway, ignored. Participants describe their desire to be heard, ‘*they simply refuse to listen’*, their need for choice and control, and sometimes their weary resignation to the inevitability to their lives being decided for them by adults who think they know best. Given this picture - the perceived supremacy of teacher voice and students deprived of choice and control - it is perhaps not surprising that school-life was characterised by participants as peppered with power-struggles, stand-offs and outright conflict as they found ways of making their voices heard and wrested back control where they could, *‘watch me!*’. But that was only part of the reality for the participants (albeit the most visible part for schools and observers), because for every confrontation they described other times when they have seethed silently, holding their feelings at bay, or simply left the arena, voting with their feet.

There was, however, another side to the picture painted above. All of the participants were also able to describe interactions with teachers in which they were listened to, where what they said or wanted made a difference. They reported times when behavioural incidents were addressed through an authentic dialogue in which students were given genuine choice and felt a degree of control. Inevitably, it was under these conditions that behavioural incidents were less frequent, averted or de-escalated.

The second theme that I identified as supporting or hindering positive behavioural choices was therefore conceptualised as ‘Having a voice’. Of course, feeling heard contributes to feelings of being valued, and therefore connectedness, and it is also linked to the third theme identified, ‘fairness and justice’. However, it is differentiated from Theme 1 and Theme 3 and is presented as a theme in its own right due to its independent salience for participants and the significant and direct impact it exerted on their behavioural choices. The salience of this issue is highlighted by the fact that two students identified issues related to this theme when asked for their opinions on the single most important thing that schools could change to make things better for students:

Ask them what they think they need rather than just like putting things in place (.) so like “we're going to put you on this this is what you need” and they're basically saying then that “we know what you need and you don't” but then like half the time we do know what we need but the school don't (Pupil B: L419).

I think they need to listen to their [students’] opinions (Pupil C:L677).

I identified two factors as contributing to the degree to which participants felt that they had a voice: the opportunities that were offered to them for having their say, for influencing outcomes; and teacher characteristics and behaviour which contributed to or detracted from students’ sense of being heard. While this second factor represented, again, the one most focused on by participants, this is explored after ‘Opportunities to be heard’ as I felt that it would be helpful to have a sense of participants’ understanding of the overall context in which teacher-related factors operate, in order to fully appreciate the effect that teacher characteristics and behaviour exerted for them. The theme and factors contributing to it are shown in Figure 5.3.

|  |
| --- |
| **HAVING A VOICE** |

**‘Don't walk away from me!’ Features of Teachers**

I would apologise on my own terms y'know it's just the fact of (.) she said “apologise now here now over there” … Cos I agree when what I said wasn't right (.) but I shouldn't have been made to apologise I would have done it on my own terms

(Pupil C: L599).

**‘They’ll decide’: Opportunities to be heard**

…and there's nothing you can change and nothing you can do cos no matter how hard you try you can't change anything (.) teachers are always gonna be that way (.) whether it's with you or other people y'know anyone (.) they're always gonna be like that (.) they will always revert back to their old self

(Pupil A: L553).

**Figure 5.3: Theme 2: Having a voice**

**‘*They’ll decide’:* Opportunities to be heard**

…and there's nothing you can change and nothing you can do cos no matter how hard you try you can't change anything (.) teachers are always gonna be that way (.) whether it's with you or other people y'know anyone (.) they're always gonna be like that (.) they will always revert back to their old self

(Pupil A: L553).

The comments made by several participants demonstrated their belief that it is teachers’ voices that dominate in school, with few opportunities for them to make their own voices heard or impact on outcomes. One pupil presents his views in powerful and emotive language, reflecting the strength of his feelings about it:

And this school's pretty much run like a dictatorship than anything … Yeah cos this school feels like more like a dictatorship more than anything (Pupil A: L351).

One participant suggested that it is only through engaging an adult that students have any voice at all; by itself, the student voice doesn’t count:

Students don't have a voice (.)It's why they go through the adults that you live with (.) y'know that's where you get your voice from (.) you have to go tell an adult It's just why do they go through the adults that you live with (.) y'know that's where you get your voice from (.) you have to go tell an adult (Pupil C: L657).

An example of the dominance of teachers’ voices is offered by Pupil B who described how it is ‘they’ who decide what is best for him, without input from him:

they’ll decide whether it’s safe for me to go back in the lesson…I mean if they think I should be allowed to go back in the lesson or if I’m going to play up even more… (Pupil B: L184).

Yeah um (.) they come outside and they explain what they think you've done wrong (Pupil B: L214).

Furthermore, participants felt that they were not able to question or challenge this dominance of teacher voice. Two participants explained why, the first at a general level, and the second in relation to a specific issue that she chose not to raise with the teacher concerned:

You can't y'know question it cos if you question it you're gonna get in more shit (Pupil A: L403).

No cos if I went and go see her like I'd auditioned for like [School Play]like she's in charge of it and if I was to say that she'd probably like cut me out of it (Pupil E: L162).

Teachers were not viewed as being concerned with seeking the views of participants, or regarding these as important. Despite a wealth of evidence that consulting with students relates directly to their engagement with school and their sense of personal agency (e.g. Fielding and Bragg, 2003) and a legislative culture that promotes such consultation, the views of participants represented here are common across the literature, and not just for students with BESD. McCluskey et al. (2013), drew on a large scale national study of (generic) pupil views on behaviour in primary and secondary schools in Scotland (Munn et al., 2009), focusing on their views of their own role in participating and negotiating within their schools. They found that the majority of the 316 secondary students surveyed (across eight schools) felt that they had few real opportunities for participation. While the majority of McCluskey et al.’s subjects were able to identify a number of forums for student participation (student councils, committees, discussions, questionnaires, surveys etc.), these were by and large regarded as being tokenistic - unrepresentative of student opinion, unvalued and with little concrete action resulting from their input. Real opportunities to be heard for students with BESD, who are often alienated and difficult to engage due to their resistance which can manifest itself in oppositional and defiant behaviour, are likely to be even fewer (Sellman, 2009).

In the current study, a small number of examples was given of times when participants were asked for their input, for example in reviews of behaviour plans or at meetings following behavioural incidents. Two participants suggested however that, when this was done, it was cosmetic, a case of schools paying lip-service to the concept of student voice. They suggested that no real change happened as a result of it. Pupil C described his lack of faith that his wishes would be acted upon, when describing a carer/teacher meeting that followed a period he had spent in isolation as a sanction:

**Pupil C** During that meeting they were like “oh do you have any issues?” and yeah I was like “yeah I have issues with (x) and (x) and (x)” um I think I mentioned maths and something else science maybe (.) and they were like “ok we can get you a like a learning assistant person” y'know like a teaching assistant (.) like follows you around your classes and goes like “right this is the…” Yeah it was like (.) ok and they were meant to do that and that never came through that was a few months ago

**JC** Do you think that would help to have someone like that for you?

**Pupil C** Yeah but not going to happen

(Pupil C: L264).

The consequences of not consulting (or in the example below, not sharing plans) with the student concerned can be significant. Pupil B described how he, by chance, caught sight of a plan relating to him about which he knew nothing. This led, perhaps not surprisingly (and just a little ironically) to a major behavioural incident:

It says on there “Don't allow yourself to be alone with [P1B]” and I was like “What? are you actually deadly serious? Why you being so doofish?” I didn't really question him I just ended up going mental all over it (.)And then it says “don't confront [PB]” or something or “don't get into an argument with him” And then it's like “if [PB] starts showing childish attention seeking” …I was like “that is low (.) that is really low” and then I proper kicked off and he was like “well see this is what I mean when I say it” (Pupil B: L281).

It is experiences such as these that may have led two participants to give the responses quoted in the introduction to this section, when asked to identify the single most important factor that schools need to get right.

While issues related to personalised plans may simply not arise for the majority of students, the resentment and potential disempowerment represented by such experiences are of very real concern to students with BESD, who are on the receiving end of decisions made about them, but not with them. Pomeroy (2000) draws attention to the existence of discrepancies between pupil and teacher perceptions of behaviours, and the fact that when teachers’ views dominate, the students’ sense of injustice and helplessness is fuelled. It may be that students who are LAC are particularly vulnerable to this. Several participants expressed the idea that their feelings of not being heard were exacerbated on account of being LAC. One student certainly felt this way:

They wouldn't let me do this when I first joined (.) I said “I don't like [T11] I want to change” and they wouldn't let me …cos I’m a LAC kid (Pupil C: L637).

One student displayed a strong awareness of the power that adults generally had over his life as a result of his LAC status. He talked about his motivation for changing his behaviour in school as being a desire to stay in his current foster placement, and the sense of others having control over his life permeated his words, illustrating the point that, for LAC, their powerlessness extends beyond the school gates:

Yeah so I gotta be good here not get kicked out so that I can stay with [current carers]…and the actual (.) my local authority [LA1] they've been they've literally gone and paid quite a lot of money for me to stay with [current carers] [If I’m not good] then I won't be able to stay there because it means that the local authority and stuff well my agency will be like “well it's he's sort of not really settling him in” (.) which means we may need to move him somewhere else (Pupil B: L403).

This sense of being the passive recipient of decisions made by others is highlighted by Stein (2005) who makes the point powerfully through drawing attention to the language used in relation to LAC:

For many young people entering care, their self-efficacy is very low, their lives seemingly controlled by others: **abandoned** by family, **excluded** from school, **put** into care, **sent** to a children’s home, **assessed** by social workers, **placed** with foster carers. (p.12, emphasis in original).

Participants displayed varying degrees of acceptance about their lack of voice in decisions which affect them, with some expressing resignation, a sense of holding their feelings of anger and resentment at bay, and one (Pupil A, for whom the issue had perhaps the most salience) expressing a grimly fatalistic view:

I just sort of follow I go with the flow (.) it really annoys me (Pupil C: L323).

I’m just like “yeah yeah whatever” (Pupil B:L216).

From my past knowledge people say that they're gonna do stuff like “oh what do you want changing? What d'youwanna do?” and there's nothing you can change and nothing you can do cos no matter how hard you try you can't change anything (.) teachers are always gonnabe that way (.) whether it's with you or other people y'know anyone (.) they're always gonna be like that (.) they will always revert back to their old self (.) (Pupil A: L553).

As will be seen in the next section however, participants’ perceptions of their lack of opportunities to be heard, when combined with not being given opportunities for choice and control by teachers, can lead to a range of more active and extreme behavioural responses.

Concerned as they are with such issues relating to their personal lack of voice and power, it is perhaps not surprising that only one participant mentioned any forum for participation or opportunities to express the broader views of the student population. Pupil C identified the School Council but quickly dismissed it as ineffective, inaccessible and irrelevant:

I mean we have the student council (.) but they literally all they do is “oh we'll put a slide” They just put like slides everywhere and new bins and… The students which are in the school council you're supposed to walk up to them as say “I think you should say this” and they're like “alright we will” and then they like don't say it (Pupil C: L657).

Unlike McCluskey et al.’s (2013) subjects who revealed an ‘underlying frustration about the lack of opportunity for active and authentic participation in discussions about [school policies on behaviour, rewards, bullying etc.] and other issues’ (p.296), the participants in my study appeared to be more concerned with the opportunities they had to influence their more personal and immediate environment. Other studies of students with BESD replicate this finding, with far less discussion generated on the wider school participation mechanisms than on how their lack of voice affects them specifically (e.g. Michael and Frederickson, 2013; Hart, 2012; Hamill and Boyd, 2002). Cefai and Cooper (2010) identify ‘oppression: no voice, no choice’ as a key theme emerging from their review of studies of students with BESD in Malta, but again, the concerns expressed by students relate more to individual interactions than the wider implications of student participation. This difference between students with and without BESD might be explained by the low level of connectedness to school that students with BESD experience, and the fact that they, unlike most students, are on the receiving end of a range of plans affecting their day to day school (and wider) lives – plans from which they feel excluded. For them, the broader issues of pupil voice in school decision making processes might seem remote and irrelevant. This proposed lack of relevance of school participatory mechanisms may also result from the fact that the mechanisms which are in place often require a high degree of buy-in to the overall culture of the organisation, reproducing structures and models from the adult world of which such students are rejecting (McCluskey et al., 2013), and demand the very skills (such as communication and team-working) with which such pupils often struggle (Sellman, 2009).

The focus of participants on their lack of voice in relation to personal and individual issues, rather than the broader opportunities provided to students for participation that I note in this study, chimes with research concerning the views of students with BESD on pupil voice (e.g. Pomeroy, 2000; Wise, 2000). One difference I propose here, however, is that the experience of being LAC may exacerbate the sense of powerlessness and the frustrations generated.

***‘Don't walk away from me’*: Features of teachers**

I would apologise on my own terms y'know it's just the fact of (.) she said “apologise now here now over there” … Cos I agree when what I said wasn't right (.) but I shouldn't have been made to apologise I would have done it on my own terms

(Pupil C: L599).

It is likely that many of the teacher attributes and behaviour identified in relation to Connectedness (Theme 1) contribute to, and overlap with, those which are identified in relation to giving students a voice. It is important, however, to be aware of the distinction between the two senses of ‘being listened to’ I use within this study. The sense of being listened to outlined in section 5.2 relates to students’ need to feel valued, and the importance of having someone to trust and share personal information with. Here, the principal concern of participants is the degree to which they can affect outcomes through being heard. Two areas were identified by participants in relation to teachers’ characteristics and behaviour in this area: the extent to which they were prepared to listen to student perspectives when dealing with behaviour incidents, and the degree of choice and control they offered students.

When behavioural incidents arose, participants differentiated between those teachers who were prepared to listen to the students’ side of the story and those who were not. Where they were not listened to, strong feelings were aroused and a confrontation and subsequent behavioural incidents often resulted:

It wasn't even my fault (.) ask anyone in that room” and it was like she just refused to listen she refused to (.) do anything really and I was like “y'know what? No” People like [T3] simply refuse to listen (Pupil A: L395).

Although ‘not listening’ does feature as a negative teacher behaviour in research on the views of generic populations of secondary school students (McCluskey et al., 2013), it does not appear to have as much salience as it does for students with BESD. This is not surprising of course, as BESD students will, by definition, spend more time in conflict with teachers over behavioural issues. The provocation of behavioural incidents through teachers not listening to the student’s side of the story is a common theme in the literature focussing on the views of students with BESD (Hamill and Boyd, 2002; Wise, 2000). Pomeroy (2000) differentiates between students questioning the ‘very basis upon which the hierarchy stands’ (p.63, perhaps more related to the issues raised in Section 5.2.1) and ‘**how** teachers managed their privileged position’ (p. 63, emphasis added). For her students, the emphasis was heavily weighted towards the latter, as was the case for my participants.

Participants contrasted their experiences of teachers who refused to listen to them with times when they were given the opportunity to explain their view of the situation, when teachers took the time to find out what had happened from all parties:

Yeah they dig deep down deep and find out and all that and then they find out and then they speak to you about it and then that's how they help you then but they sometimes they discipline you as well… send you to isolation and all that (.)…Yeah but they help you as well (Pupil D: L302).

It is important to differentiate here the experience for participants of having a genuine conversation about an incident, in which they have the opportunity to put forward their perspective, and the ‘conversations’ of the type reported by Pupil B, below, where teachers ‘talk at’ students about their behaviour without genuine dialogue. He recorded his response to this type of conversation:

Yeah (.) and even if they give you stage three [disciplinary sanction] they'll come out and they'll talk to you about why they've put you on stage three (.) and I'm just like “yeah yeah whatever” and I'm just like this. Yeah so I just switch off like (.) if I get bored I'll switch off and then I'm like “I can't be bothered” and then I'll just sit there playing on my phone (.) (Pupil B: L218).

Other teacher behaviours raised by participants and commonly identified in the BESD literature as contributing to behavioural incidents are those which are perceived as antagonistic (Hart, 2012; Pomeroy, 2000; Wise, 2000). Teacher behaviours that participants described as particularly provocative included the giving of direct orders. The following extract demonstrates how such teacher behaviour gives rise to a classic power-struggle:

like I remember this one time I'd got in trouble in her lesson while she was out (.) then next lesson she after half term she made me sit right next to her she was like “no you're gonna come sit by me” so “that's a bit harsh you're holding a bit of a grudge aren't you? It was two weeks ago can't you just give me a little bit of a break?” she was like “no you're sitting next to me” “fine I ain't sitting next to you” she was like “come and sit next to me” “I ain't sitting next to you I'd rather sit next to my mates” “I’m not having you sit next to your mates” so I went up there and sat next to her and I tried to join in with my mates and she was like “no you can go and work with one of the girls” I went “I don't wanna work with one of the girls though miss” she said “go and work with the girls” I said “miss I'm not being sexist I just wanna work with all my mates who are all boys” she's like “no you're working with the girls” I'm like “no I'm not” Yeah so she was like “c'mon then” and I was like “what am I doing? What have I done?” she was like “right you're going next door” and I was like “fine” (Pupil B: L360).

This particular teacher behaviour (the giving of direct orders with no room for negotiation or compromise) was illustrated time and again in participants’ accounts, and invariably resulted in a power struggle such as the one described. It has been suggested that antagonistic behaviours arouse such strong responses as they are emblematic of the hierarchy existing between students and teachers (Pomeroy, 2000). It is clear that they may also be perceived as reflecting a lack of valuing of the student, the impact of which has been explored earlier (Section 5. 2). However, I propose here that a further factor may be operating, at least for the participants in this study, and that factor is the denial of choice and control. Given the ubiquity of such events in participants’ accounts, some further exploration is warranted.

It seemed from participants’ accounts as if the giving of an explicit order represented a direct challenge to their sense of power, and aroused in them a need to wrest back some control. Participants almost invariably found a way to ‘win’ the struggle in the short-term (at least in the incidents they shared with me!). In the incident above, the participant did leave the classroom as requested but found a way to reassert control and save face:

I go up to the door and I go like [pulls faces] through the window and stuff (.) pop my head in and go (pause) and like make funny faces at people to make them laugh (Pupil B: L364).

Two further examples of this sort of response to a direct order were given by Pupil A who demonstrated that he was in control by choosing for himself where he went, in direct contradiction to the teacher’s instruction:

“I don’t care you're in isolation, you disobeyed a direct order” and I was like “no I'm not in isolation I'm in math” and I walked away then to my math class (Pupil A: L278).

He was just going “oh no well you can't go outside of school” and I was going “watch me!” (Pupil A: L323).

Once engaged in a confrontation, the participants did not back down. It seemed important that they demonstrated (to others and perhaps to themselves) that they had agency, that they were ultimately in control:

They know that they can't get in to an argument with me cos I will literally not back down (.) I just [] argue with them pretty much until I win (Pupil B:L272).

While of course, the student victory was temporary (the participants knew that their choices would ultimately result in negative outcomes for them), the urge to ensure that they remained in control in the face of direct confrontation seemed to be more powerful in the moment than any longer-term concerns about outcome, as this extract demonstrated:

I was meant to go for a blood test and like I was like “I'm gonna leave for a blood test” “no you can't you need permission from your mam” “er she isn't going” “ok well we're gonna chat with em” they couldn't get hold of either my mum or my carer (.) and I didn't go (.) I did go I left anyway I was like “ah fuck this sometimes you gotta go” (Pupil C: L58).

From these examples it would seem that the impetus for the resulting behaviour was the confrontative nature of the interaction itself, the assertion of the teacher’s voice over their own, rather than the specifics of the original argument. In the extracts below, both students recognised that their original behaviour had been inappropriate and were prepared to take full responsibility for it. This lends weight to my proposal that it was the issue of control itself that was at stake in these encounters, rather than a particularly strong feeling related to the issue around which the dispute originated.

say if I'm naughty I'll make it up like “ah the teachers done more than I have” but then afterwards I'm like “no the teacher was right I'm the one that's in trouble” but I don't end up figuring that out until (pause) I'm in IR and I go home and I'm suspended and I sit there and I like look at my carers and they know that I've been in trouble and I'll be like “my fault I shouldn't have done that” and then I've got to face IR in the morning and I'm like “no no no enough” (Pupil B: L212).

Pupil C had no problem with the act of apologising to a teacher he had insulted, but explained that the sarcasm he employed resulted from being given a direct order to do so, rather than being presented as something he could do ‘on my own terms’:

I was made to apologise… I was so sarcastic about mine (.) I went “Sorry well I'm not but I was told to say sorry so I am having fun with it” I would apologise on my own terms y'know it's just the fact of (.) she said “apologise now here now over there” … Cos I agree when what I said wasn't right (.) but I shouldn't have been made to apologise I would have done it on my own terms (Pupil C: L599).

When I asked Pupil C, ‘Does it feel like you don't have enough like choice or power?’, he stated categorically:

Control. I would like to have control yeah (Pupil C: L133).

Choice (giving the possibility of control) also arose as a key factor impacting on participants’ responses which concerned the way teachers dealt with disciplinary issues. The extent to which teachers offered choice to participants when dealing with a behavioural incident had a significant effect on the outcome of interactions.

Pupil D highlighted the importance of being given a choice when he talked about the way that teachers dealt with smokers in Year 11. He viewed the teachers’ approach as effective and fair, and as a result reported that few students made a fuss when approached in this way, when they felt that they had a choice.

 It used to be (a big confrontation) but now they cos some of the teachers like cos we're sixteen and all that they speak to us like adults and they tell us to put it out but if we don't put it out then they will report us (Pupil D: L252).

An incident related by another participant served to highlight the difference in the outcome of a behavioural incident according to whether students feel they are being given a choice or not. He contrasted the behaviour of one teacher with another (the headteacher) when dealing with a behavioural incident. In this incident the first teacher was confrontational, giving orders with no possibility of compromise or choices, and this resulted in non-compliance:

One day when [T3] was following me and she was going “[P1] don't walk away from me (.) don't walk away from me when I'm talking to you” and I carried on walking away (Pupil A: L359).

As this scenario was taking place in the corridor, the headteacher addressed the participant, inviting him to, ‘come in my room a minute’ (L359).

Despite the participant responding to the head ‘in a really shitty way’ (L363), the head repeated his invitation and the participant complied. In answer to my question, ‘So what was different then about the way that the head dealt with it and the way the first teacher did?’, he responded:

Uh it's just the fact that one he was not wanting to piss me off in the first place. Yeah well he kind of sat there and goes “what we gonna do then [P1]?” and I was kind of sat there going “uh what do you mean?” and he was kind of like “well are you gonna go back to your lesson or y'know what you gonna do?” I was like “I'm gonna go out and pretty much go to the nurse's for the rest of this lesson go to dinner and like go back to like my last lesson” and he was like “alright I'll just put in my notes this time” and left it at that (pause) like “what you gonna do then [P1] you gonna go home or something? Should I? Are you gonna walk off home now? What y'know what you gonna do?” “cos you can't just you can't just sit in the nurse's office for like three hours or seven” and I was like “nah nah I'm just gonna go in there for an hour really (Pupil A: L367- 373).

From this response, we can identify two key factors in relation to the head’s behaviour that may have been salient to Pupil A: firstly that the headteacher was not perceived by Pupil A as victimising him (student perception of teacher motivation has been highlighted in Section 5.1 as having an impact on behavioural choices) and secondly, and of particular relevance to this section, he did not tell him what to do but asked Pupil A what his choices were, effectively handing control back to the student.

While issues relating to power at the macro-level (such as pupil voice in school-wide decision making processes) may not generate prolific discussion and debate among BESD populations, it is clear that teacher behaviours which deny students a voice in issues that are immediate and significant to them as individuals do. Resentment of the hierarchy pertaining generates strong feelings and behavioural responses among these students. I suggest here that for participants in this study, all of whom are deemed to have attachment difficulties underpinning their BESD, issues of power at the individual level – being given choice and control – are of particular relevance, and have some explanatory power in relation to the behavioural incidents which arise when access to them is denied. It is possible that, for young people with attachment difficulties, the need to experience control is greater than for other students – including those whose BESD have different underpinnings. A greater than average need for control is recognised as a key feature of attachment difficulties, as outlined in the literature review previously. Where the need for control is threatened, in this case when teachers engage in the behaviours described (giving direct orders, dealing with incidents in an autocratic manner and denying choice to the student), strong feelings are aroused and extreme behaviours result.

* 1. **Theme 3: Fairness and justice**

The metaphorical cries of ‘it’s not fair’ rang out loud and clear from participants’ narratives. They spoke of victimisation by teachers – being picked on, treated unfairly in relation to other students, *‘it depends on who you are’,* blamed and sanctioned unjustly for behaviours that others got away with, ‘*everyone can talk except me’.* Teachers were described as making mountains out of molehills, *‘they have to take it one step further’*, escalating situations unfairly and unnecessarily*,* with participants feeling untrusted and hard done by, even branded liars. For a number of participants this apparent targeting was made worse because they were LAC, watched like hawks, and subjected to different (unfair) rules and different (unfair) treatment, ‘*cause we’re super special’*.

Interestingly, rules and sanctions were not viewed as inherently unjust, and the need for them, even in relation to their own behaviour, was accepted. While many rules were regarded as trivial and irritating, and sanctions totally ineffective in deterring or changing bad behaviour (leading to an endless cycle of ‘*here we go again’)*, participants’ real anger and resentment were reserved for when there were failures or inconsistencies in applying the systems that were supposed to operate. Perceptions of injustice were aroused when new rules were introduced suddenly and without consultation, when teachers were not seen to be subject to the same rules as students, and when communication failed – when participants had no idea what they were being punished for, found out unexpectedly that they were expected to go to the isolation room, weren’t allowed to leave a lesson using their time-out card as agreed or, worse, were not accorded a privilege they believed they had earned!

Again, the picture painted was mixed. Participants were able to identify times where they had been fairly dealt with, and a range of teacher characteristics and behaviours that did not give rise to feelings of injustice and unfairness – teachers who took a less punitive approach to wrong-doing, who were flexible and supportive, knowing them well enough to employ calming strategies that de-escalated volatile situations. And being treated differently was not always seen as a bad thing – even the unwelcome scrutiny that was felt to result from being LAC was seen to have positives, with teachers making allowances and giving flexibility not accorded to others.

The third superordinate theme that was identified as impacting on students’ behaviour was therefore ‘fairness and justice’. Again, the theme does not sit in isolation from the other themes – participants’ perceptions of fairness and justice impact on their sense of being valued (and therefore on their degree of connectedness to the school), and there are obvious links to the issue of ‘having a voice’, explored in the previous theme. It is presented here as a superordinate theme in its own right, however, due to its saliency for all participants and the role that perceptions of fairness and justice played directly for all participants in triggering and escalating, or averting and resolving behavioural incidents.

Student perceptions of justice and fairness matter. Gorard (2012) studied the experiences of fairness in school of around 13,000 Grade 9 students in five European countries and he suggests that their perceptions matter on moral, civic, academic and personal wellbeing grounds, citing evidence that perceptions of unfairness can impair the learning process, and students’ self-esteem. It seems from the evidence from my study, and previous research with students with BESD (e.g. Pomeroy, 2000; Wise, 2000), that perceptions of fairness and unfairness also impact significantly on students’ behaviour. Some authors go further and propose that unfairness may be one of the factors that can actually cause or lead to an exacerbation of behavioural difficulties (e.g. O’Connor et al., 2011; Cefai and Cooper, 2010). The various factors that I identified as impacting on participants’ perceptions of fairness and justice are explored below.

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| **FAIRNESS AND JUSTICE** |

***‘Here we go again’* : System Failures**

Well I can tell you what's meant to happen or what does happen

(Pupil C: L36).

***‘But I'm the one that gets told to shut up’:* Features of Teachers**

You do this now if you don't you're gonna get break time detention if you don't show up for that I'll give you a dinner time if you don't show up for that I'm gonna give you an hour after school if you don't show up for that isolation

(Pupil C: L381).

***‘Cos we’re special’*: Being LAC**

It seems like they're trying to form some kind of bubble around me (.) y'know protect me… nothing I do can be unpunished cos I need to know the difference between right and wrong cos I don't have parents to tell me so

(Pupil C: L375).

**Figure 5.4: Theme 3: Fairness and justice**

I identified three factors which contributed to participants’ sense of fairness and justice within school. By far the most prevalent across all participants’ accounts were teacher characteristics and behaviour, as has been the case in previous themes, with ‘systems failures’ of the disciplinary codes and practices that were supposed to operate within the school coming a close second. The final factor identified was the impact of being LAC on participants’ perceptions of fairness and justice, and although only three of the five participants raised this as an issue, for these three participants it had particular saliency.

Before I discuss the three contributory factors identified, it is important to be aware of the interactive nature of the discipline systems operating within the school and teacher characteristics and behaviour. Teachers’ actions when responding to behavioural issues are identified as arousing participants’ feelings of unfairness and injustice, but their actions will be constrained, and to a certain extent dictated, by the discipline systems and policies adopted within the school. For the purposes of this study, I have attempted to separate out these interacting elements, those that relate inherently to the discipline systems themselves, and those that relate to the application of these systems – the when, who, why and how. Participants did identify a number of factors that related to fairness and justice that could be regarded as residing inherently within the discipline systems themselves (or failures at a systemic level), and these are explored in section 5.4.2. Issues that I considered to be within the power of teachers to influence are discussed in Section 5.4.1 (‘Features of teachers’) and include the extent to which teachers listened to students’ side of the story (raised in relation to student voice), adopted a punitive rather than a pastoral approach to incidents, and brought progressively harsher sanctions to bear as a strategy for dealing with behavioural incidents. While these factors could be viewed as determined by the discipline policy operating, the fact that different teachers employed different strategies within the same school, and that examples were given of a range of approaches by every participant, foregrounded the role that teacher choice played in the adoption of different approaches.

***‘But I'm the one that gets told to shut up’*: Features of teachers**

You do this now if you don't you're gonna get break time detention if you don't show up for that I'll give you a dinner time if you don't show up for that I'm gonna give you an hour after school if you don't show up for that isolation

(Pupil C: L381).

Participants’ perceptions of the degree to which teachers were fair and just impacted on the other themes explored in this study, in particular on whether students felt safe and valued within classrooms and the school as a whole. Michael and Frederickson (2013) note the impact of perceived teacher unfairness on the quality of the relationship that students have with individual teachers, commenting that ‘unfair treatment was an important factor in negative relationships with teachers’ (p.415). The extent to which students felt they ‘had a voice’ also impacted significantly on their perceptions of fairness and justice.

The most salient factor for all students was the sense that they were treated unfairly, that they were victimised by teachers. Sometimes participants attributed the fact that they felt picked on or treated unfairly to the fact that they were LAC. This is explored further in Section 5.4.3.

The perception of all but one of the participants was that teachers did not apply sanctions fairly. They expressed the view that, whether or not you were given a consequence for a particular behaviour, and how severe the punishment was, depended on who you were:

If you're a good student and you lick teachers' arses they love you… If you're a chav it's “do what you want” you get the little minor punishment…well it depends upon who you are as to how severe your punishment is… (Pupil C:L535).

Four out of the five participants believed that they were blamed and punished unfairly. A common complaint was that a number of students would be misbehaving, but only the participant would be told off or attract a sanction, and that teachers would be quicker to give a sanction to them, than to others. The following extracts from two participants are illustrative, as all but one participant raised similar issues:

It's like (.) two kids [F2] and like [F3] they sit (.) they sit like quite near me (.) they're always talking ,,, But I'm the one that gets told to shut up y'know (Pupil A: L254-256).

If it happens I need to be punished because it's all my fault and the fact that I do get punished like that [clicks fingers] whereas other kids'll get one two “just give him this chance” I've heard em before in there when I've had detentions they've gone “right don't give him a detention this time but next time he does it just so he knows he can't do it again do it yeah?” “yeahyeah” y'know and it's just with me it's “yeah I don't care about that he's got a detention” (Pupil C: L365).

A further issue that aroused feelings of unfairness was the belief that, when they were caught engaging in a specific behaviour, they were punished more severely than other students guilty of the same offence. One participant drew attention to the fact that, when he truanted with a friend, the school phoned his carers, while his friend was not given any consequence. Of course, the probable reason for the call would have been to do with protocols that relate to looked after children, but what is important here isn’t the objective reality of the situation, but the fact that it aroused feelings of resentment in the student concerned:

Well like yesterday (.) I shouldn't have but I did I just sometimes feel (laughs) yeah I left for a few hours I was um I was with someone that I probably like I left with someone (.) and um well [F1] and um basically yeah I got a call home and they were all “bleurgh” and (??)She didn't get anything (.) no consequence came out of it for her whatsoever (Pupil A: L20-22).

The targeting was seen by some participants as deliberate and personal and the participants attributed this frequently to the fact that the teacher didn’t like them:

“I've been good all week I've had (.) what like (.) one problem and that's about it” “no your name's on the list so you can't go out” and just (.) he's done it to me so many times now it's like **he purposely** puts my name on there (pause) (Pupil A: L323).

They don't like me (laughs) I know [T2] doesn't like me (Pupil A: L32).

These findings are absolutely consistent with the vast majority of research exploring the views of students with BESD in a range of school contexts both nationally and internationally. It is frequently reported in the literature that such students see themselves as disliked by teachers, scapegoated and blamed for incidents that were not of their doing, punished more severely than peers, disbelieved, and the victims of unfair and inconsistent treatment. These perceptions are reported in studies of mainstream school (Cefai and Cooper, 2010; Munn and Lloyd, 2005; Hamill and Boyd, 2002), in PRUs (Michael and Frederickson, 2013), and in special and residential settings (Sellman, 2009; Wise, 2000). In many of the studies of PRUs and special settings, the fairness of most teachers within the specialist setting is contrasted with the unfairness of teachers within their previous mainstream schools (Hajdukova et al., 2014; Hart, 2012; Pomeroy, 2000; Cooper, 1993).

Wise (2000) suggests that students with BESD require a high degree of fairness from their teachers and have a heightened sense of injustice to which they respond quickly, ‘perhaps when already feeling insecure and different, they experience a more acute awareness of this issue’ (p.43). Pomeroy (2000) concurs, drawing attention to the constant scrutiny that teacher behaviour is subjected to by students with BESD and finding a high level of attunement to any teacher’s differential treatment of students (particularly when they were disadvantaged by it).

Such perceptions may result from distortion on the part of the students (Wise, 2000), or be grounded in reality. A study by Swinson and Knight (2007) suggests that pupil beliefs that they are treated more negatively by teachers are factually correct – borne out by the results of their study which showed that students with BESD did indeed receive more negative and less positive feedback than their peers.

However, research with generic populations of students suggests that such perceptions may not be wildly different from those of students without BESD. Gorard (2012) found considerable agreement across generic groups of students in their beliefs about what constitutes fair and unfair teacher behaviour and states:

A common view was that teachers had pupils who were their favourites, that rewards and punishments were not always applied fairly, and that certain groups of pupils were treated less fairly than others. (p. 136).

He found that in Year 9, only 39% of students in England agreed with the statement ‘I was always treated fairly by my teachers’ (p.7). Riley and Docking (2004), who sought the perceptions of 3291 secondary school students in mainstream schools, echo these findings with only 35% of students in Y10 agreeing with the statement, ‘Teachers in this school treat us fairly’. Interestingly in Y8 the authors found that 61% of students agreed with the statement, suggesting that we may need to be aware of the impact of age when considering students’ views on this.

The key difference between students with and without BESD may not therefore lie in differing perceptions, but in the action they are prepared to take when such unfairness is perceived. Participants in my study responded strongly to perceived injustices against them, ‘ah I'm not having this and just fuck this’ (Pupil A: L278), as did those in the other studies cited. Hamill and Boyd (2002) describe how the young people they interviewed were not prepared to simply accept unfair treatment, refusing to be passive victims. The link between perceived unfairness and behavioural incidents is commonly made in the literature (e.g. Michael and Fredrickson, 2013; Hamill and Boyd, 2002).

The concept of ‘reputation’ was raised by my participants in relation to teacher unfairness. Participants described how, if you are ‘known’ as a particular sort of student, teachers will be quick to judge. Two pupils raised this as an example of unfairness; the first, Pupil C, in relation to a friend, and the second, Pupil A, in relation to himself. Pupil A spoke about how in his previous school he was ‘branded a liar’ (L74) by teachers, pupils and other parents, and then got ‘blamed for a lot of things that weren't my fault’ (L28).

Yeah well there's [F2] gets in trouble for anything he doesn't do anything wrong but he gets in trouble for anything (.) if he's playing they believe it's him straight off (.)L 52 But it is “Oh yeah it was [F2]” but if we say it was someone else they'll be like “no it can't be him it's [F2] (Pupil C:L50).

Pupil C believed that he had a ‘reputation’ in school, and that this had led to a pattern of teacher responses towards him:

Well I think my major issue at the moment is that no matter what I do it seems to be wrong…Yeah it seems to be the same for everything that I do (Pupil C: L18).

Again, this issue is commonly raised in the literature relating to students with BESD. Hamill and Boyd (2002) describe how, when a reputation is established, it is extremely hard to change, and negatively influences some teachers’ attitudes and expectations, and this finding is replicated in Hajdukova et al.’s (2014) study. Such labelling resonates with the concept of ‘signification’ which Cooper (1993) describes as the situation when:

[A]n individual’s identity comes to be fixed in the eyes of others through particular behavioural traits, to the extent that a particular behaviour is seen to reflect the essential character of the individual. It occurs, for example, when teachers have reached a stabilised view of the pupil as deviant. (p.132).

The author explains that, by behaving in ways which reinforce the image, the teacher holding the view causes it to become internalised by the pupil. For a student with attachment difficulties whose IWM is already likely to reflect a negative self-image, this process is particularly dangerous. The process may represent one of the ways in which teachers unwittingly contribute towards the maintenance of BESD, as proposed in other studies (Riley and Docking, 2004; Hamill and Boyd, 2002). Nind et al. (2012) suggest that the residential setting that provided the educational context for the girls they worked with represented an opportunity to build a new identity, which was important as they ‘vociferously objected to the identities constructed for them according to files’ (p.652). I have previously suggested that my own participants’ focus on the importance of the key adult might be explained in the light of this as an opportunity to counter such signification – an opportunity for participants to see themselves reflected with a more positive signification.

The second variable on which teachers were seen to differ by participants in my study, was the degree to which they would listen to the students and take into account their perspectives before issuing a sanction for misbehaviour. The importance of teachers listening to students has been highlighted in relation to teacher characteristics and behaviour within Theme 2 (Section 5.3.2), and is again a common theme found within the literature (Hajdukova et al., 2014; McCluskey et al., 2013; Munn and Lloyd, 2005).

The third factor raised by participants was the extent to which a disciplinary approach was taken as opposed to a pastoral or supportive one. This was linked to teachers’ willingness to listen to the students’ side of the story, but represented a more fundamental difference which affected the extent to which participants’ sense of fairness and justice was appeased or affronted. Pupil A described teachers who took a rigid, escalatory and disciplinary approach:

They have to take it one step further (.) they have to every time (.) they could leave it at a tiny little problem but they decide to “y'know what” (Pupil A: L 337).

The difference was illustrated by the following two accounts, the first of which described a non-confrontational and conciliatory approach taken to an incident, which resolved the issue in a way that did not end in feelings of resentment and injustice:

“Yeah I know you shouldn't have said it ..I think it's just a little blip (.) and you and me get on great and like you were calling me an old man it's I don't really expect it I'm not going to take it in a personal way” and I was like “aw thanks sir” (Pupil B: L350).

In the second account, Pupil A eloquently described how the use of a rigid disciplinary approach led to a cycle of escalating threats which led to escalating behaviours, which in turn led to further threats and so on. He captured the flavour of anger, frustration and resentment expressed by many of the participants in relation to similar incidents:

“So (.) a pissed off kid has to go into your room where you're going to give him a lecture and bitch at him even more and get him even more pissed off” I said “whichever way you look at it (.) they don't win” (pause) and then was just looking at me then “I don't care you're in isolation” and I was like “no I'm not in isolation I'm in math” and I walked away then to my math class and she followed me and she was like “C'mon [P1] you gotta go to isolation” and then a kid in class (.) [F9] looked at me and said “what's- why you got isolation for?” and I go “for a totally bullshit reason and apparently like y'know I can't walk away when I'm annoyed and when it's total bullshit” and she was like “oh swearing now is it? That's another day in isolation” and I was just like “Are you kidding me right now? For a total bullshit reason you give me isolation and then for saying the word bullshit you are now giving me another day and then she was like “oh swearing again you're definitely going to have another day” and I was just like “ah I'm not having this and just fuck this” and then she was like “oh you got another day then” and I just walked down the hallway saying “fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck” (Pupil A: L278).

The dislike of rigid and authoritarian discipline is not restricted to students with BESD. Studies of generic groups of secondary school students identify it as a significant negative factor of school life (McCluskey et al., 2013; Gorard, 2012; Riley and Docking, 2004), with the key difference between these students and those with BESD being in the behavioural responses to it, typified by Pupil A above. What is clear is that the participants in this study are not alone in responding to displays of authoritarian power in the way that they describe. Cefai and Cooper (2010) describe such approaches as leading to an exacerbation of the problem, as do Michael and Fredrickson (2013), who found that ‘discipline which is overly authoritarian leads to conflict with staff and tends to result in poor behavioural outcomes’ (p. 419), and many other authors reiterate this key message (Sellman, 2009; Hamill and Boyd, 2002; Wise, 2000).

The students interviewed by Pomeroy (2000) comment on the difference highlighted by the participants in this study between primarily disciplinary and primarily pastoral responses to behavioural incidents. Her participants identify the ‘tone’ in which discipline is applied as important. They identify teachers as effective in dealing with behavioural incidents when they: hear both sides of the story; recognise the young person’s state of volatility; know the patterns that result in the young person getting into trouble; and know how to intervene in a way which does not escalate the situation (examples include ‘private chats’ and ‘diversionary activities’). These strategies are similar to those identified by my participants as effective, although they do not constitute, as Pomeroy points out, what adults generally consider ‘disciplinary’ actions. There is a striking resemblance to the strategies that the young people identify as effective, and those that the literature suggests are typical of the types of successful interventions used in special settings (Hajdukova et al., 2014; Hart, 2012; Wise, 2000).

What young people are referring to in these studies has been labelled ‘coercive power’ by Olsen and Cooper, 2001. Cefai and Cooper, 2010 describe how this relies on a relationship built on ‘fear, humiliation and oppression’ and, while it may appear to offer a ‘quick fix’, it has damaging long-term consequences, such as:

alienation, a sense of helplessness and eventually disengagement from a system instilling a sense of failure, disempowerment and punishment (p. 193).

It is important to note that, whatever strategies are used, they take place within the context of the student’s relationship with the teacher and their perceived motivation, and may be successful for a variety of reasons. One potential reason I would suggest, in view of the discussion above, might be the fact that pastoral approaches satisfy students’ basic need to feel cared for. As Sellman (2009) states:

It doesn’t matter what tool a teacher has at their disposal (reward, sanction, restraint), if the relationship is poor this tool can be misused. (p.42).

**‘*Here we go again*’: System failures**

Well I can tell you what's meant to happen or what does happen

(Pupil C: L36).

Factors relating to discipline systems in schools certainly played their part in contributing to participants’ feelings of unfairness and injustice, and were consequently highlighted as triggers for, and escalating factors in, behavioural incidents. As discussed previously, discipline systems are hard to disentangle from their application by staff, and so there are some links between the previous section on teacher characteristics and behaviour relating to a sense of fairness and justice and this one which relates to features of discipline systems that arouse resentful feelings of injustice.

Interestingly, the basic elements of the system – the rules, the use of sanctions to punish wrongdoing and rewards for good work and behaviour, the nature of the sanctions themselves (detention, isolation exclusion) – attracted few comments relating to fairness and justice. This is in line with the findings of research with generic groups of students (e.g. McCluskey et al., 2013) and with students with BESD (Sellman, 2009). The literature (e.g. Cefai and Cooper, 2010; Pomeroy, 2000; Wise, 2000) suggests that most students with BESD appear, like Sellman’s participants, to be ‘resigned to its [discipline system] existence’ (Sellman, 2009, p.41), even when the system is not liked. This may of course be because disciplinary structures are ‘taken as read’, part of the fabric of everyday life in school, to the extent that the possibility of their being questioned simply does not arise.

In common with much previous research (e.g. Cefai and Cooper, 2010; Riley and Docking, 2004) some of the rules of the school were viewed as trivial and inconsequential (rules relating to uniform, smoking, lateness, homework, truanting etc.):

she got kicked out yesterday cos she was holding an empty energy drink L520 There are like pathetic rules like (.) um (.) [P1C] has to stay here after school for mulching [truanting] (Pupil C: L444).

Students certainly got into conflict with the school over these – one participant for smoking, others for defying uniform restrictions, and another for truanting – but they did not arouse particular protestations of unfairness and seemed instead to be viewed as unavoidable irritations. Cefai and Cooper (2010) suggest that resistance to such rules represents a form of ‘symbolic resistance’ to school authority, signifying students’ anti-school credentials and, as such, it may be that the sanctions resulting are viewed as ‘a fair price to pay’.

In the same way, the need for sanctions was accepted by all of those participants who expressed a view, and neither the receiving of a sanction nor the nature of the sanctions attracted negative comment (except for one participant who intensely disliked the internal exclusion room).

Yeah I think that's perfectly reasonable [to be punished when I’ve done wrong] (Pupil C: L595).

While sanctions were not seen as inherently unjust, they were viewed by almost all participants as ineffective – both as a deterrent to bad behaviour and as an attempt to change student behaviour in the longer term. This should not perhaps surprise us. I have already suggested that the degree to which students are motivated to conform to behavioural expectations by sanctions and reward systems is dependent, at least in part, on their feelings of connectedness with the school and, if this is the case, the deterrent value and effectiveness of sanctions are likely to be minimal for the same reason. This supposition is supported by the evidence from participants. When I asked if the threat of a sanction would change their behaviour, two participants responded as follows, indicating that they would not:

I'll attend [detention] cos I've done something wrong therefore I need to be punished but it doesn't (.) it still doesn't affect me… I understand the morals behind it but it doesn't change my behaviour (Pupil C: L454).

No it wouldn't really bother me to be honest no (Pupil D:L484).

Two students went further than saying that sanctions were ineffective as a deterrent, highlighting also their ineffectiveness as a way to change behaviour in the longer term. In one case the ‘behaviour report card’ that was designed to support one participant in managing his behaviour was reported to actually cause problems as a result of it getting lost, or focusing teachers’ attention on what he did wrong, rather than on what he got right. The other talked about the ‘reflection room’ students are sent to in order to consider their behaviour following an incident:

I think the word implies reflection you're supposed to look back at your mistakes and go “I shouldn't have done that not going to do that again” (.) it's meant to be like the opposite of a punishment but it isn't….it doesn't make any difference to you if you're there… Yeah (.) doesn't really change the situation at all (Pupil C: L208).

It seemed that, in one school at least, the ineffectiveness of the ‘cycle of sanctions’ might be recognised by staff as well as students. When one particular teacher found himself in the position of giving the participant yet another detention, the exchange seemed to imply a weary acceptance of the pointlessness on both sides:

[A]nd then he'll be like “here we go again” and I'll be like “yeah here we go again (Pupil B: L276).

These findings are broadly in line with those found in other studies of the views of students with BESD in relation to the mainstream settings they have attended but, interestingly, contrast quite markedly with the views of students in some PRUs and specialist settings, where systems are seen to be both effective as deterrents and instrumental in changing behaviours (Hart, 2012; Wise 2000; Cooper 1993). This may be linked to the higher levels of connectedness that students tended to report within specialist settings in which relationships with teachers were for the most part significantly better, and engagement with systems, both behavioural and academic, consequently higher. The difference noted may also be a function of the different types of disciplinary steps taken by teachers, with specialist settings tending more towards the ‘pastoral’ style of interventions discussed above.

While participants in this study did not view ‘the system’ as inherently unfair, injustice and unfairness were perceived when the discipline systems failed – when they were changed without consultation or notice, were not communicated effectively, when they were not applied as intended, and when there was inconsistent application. I explore the impact of these systemic failures on participants and the ways that they gave rise to feelings of unfairness below.

Feelings of unfairness were aroused when communication systems were not effective. Participants reported feeling anger and resentment, often leading to behavioural incidents as in the case below when new rules were imposed unexpectedly:

(.) one time we was just like [F5] was just listening to her music in class and like we all do it but we still get on with our work and then she goes off “there is a new rule in class that all headphones and phones must be in bags” ….then um the teacher was like “[F5] take your earphones out now” and [F5] goes “what?” and then um “come here now” and then she goes all “This is our new rule [F5] called putting things away” [F5] went back in a bit of a strop so miss goes “come outside now” and [F5] was just like proper screamed at her (.) she goes “oh do you want to take this out to [Duty Teacher]?” (Pupil E: L267).

Such feelings and responses were also aroused when students did not know what they were being punished for, or found out unexpectedly that they had been given a punishment but not told about it:

It's happened to me before that the teacher kind of hasn't told me that I've had it and I haven't shown up for it and they're like “Why didn't you show up for your detention?” and I'm like “what?” and it's like (scoffs) (Pupil A: L387).

I was like “I didn't know” and like a lot of kids pull that out their bags so they instantly think you're lying and they're like “ah well you have an after-school now” like that [T1] incident on that Friday and on the Monday as well I had this teacher come up to me and say “why didn't you show up for your break-time detention?” and I was like “what?” and he was like “why didn't you show up for it?” and I was like “I didn't know I had one” and he was like “yeah for Friday” and I was like “oh well I'm not going to that one anyway” (Pupil A: L389).

A major incident resulting in exclusion was triggered for this same student when he had earned a reward (to go offsite) but when that information had not been communicated to the person supervising students leaving the site:

this one week apparently I was good the entire week (.) one time I'm on time every week and he turned round and said “ah yeah your name's on the top list right here for behaviour” he was just going “oh no well you can't go outside of school” and I was going “watch me” (Pupil A: L324).

This lack of communication also impacted on one of the participants who had been given a ‘time-out’ card which she could show to the teacher in order to be able to leave the classroom when she felt the need. Unfortunately not all teachers had been informed of this, and she was given a detention for walking out of a class, even though she had been told she could do this.

Only some of the teachers know about time out card… but I reckon you should tell every single teacher so they know. Yeah I was annoyed … I was gonna… gonna go off on a rage (Pupil E: L142).

A further cause of resentment at injustice was highlighted as being when teachers did not apply the systems that were supposed to operate within the school. When asked to describe how discipline systems worked in the school, Pupil C tellingly replied:

Well I can tell you what's meant to happen or what does happen (Pupil C: L36).

He spoke of rewards not being given out, although they are supposed to be given out in every lesson, and the discipline policy (as displayed in every classroom) not followed by teachers:

We don't often do warnings it's usually “get out of my class” (Pupil C: 442).

The most significant factor promoting feelings of unfairness was, however, the inconsistency of application of the discipline system. This took several forms, one of which, the inequity in terms of *who* attracts sanctions (with participants seeing themselves as unfairly targeted where others engaging in the same behaviours were not) has been discussed above. The degree of leniency/strictness applied in different classrooms was seen to vary significantly, as did the particular behaviours focused on. This last issue was seen to be motivated by the school foregrounding a particular issue (lateness, uniform, smoking) for a short period of time, then moving on to another. Two factors made this a source of resentment: the first was that what it meant in practice was that a behaviour that had been ignored for a period of time was suddenly and unexpectedly sanctioned, which felt unfair to participants; and the second that teachers didn’t really care about the particular behaviours:

They don't actually care (.)And not smoking (.) “don't smoke” “don't wear non school uniform” for the first two weeks then they don't really care (Pupil C: L480).

Combined with participants’ perceptions of victimisation, it is easy to see how this inconsistency could, in their eyes, lead to random and unfair sanctions being imposed on targeted individuals.

A final issue that was raised in relation to the unfair application of systems was that the same rules were not seen to apply to staff as to students. This is highlighted by one pupil, who draws attention to the fact that when an incident has occurred, it is only the student who is expected to apologise, make amends, and suffer a punishment, and not the teacher:

Yeah I think that's perfectly reasonable [to be punished when I’ve done wrong] but (.) I think there should also be (.) cos I think there should also be (.) something on the teacher's part as well because y'know it's (.) some teachers get away with murder (.) they can do what they want and if they say no (.) it's our word against theirs and nothing gets said about it (Pupil C:L595).

These findings again mirror those of previous research with students with BESD, where it is such failures of the (accepted) discipline systems and their unfair application that arouse feelings of injustice and resentment, leading to behavioural incidents, and potentially exacerbating students’ BESD. Cefai and Cooper (2010) suggest that these feelings leave students ‘with no option but to fight the system or disengage from it’ (p.190). Interestingly, Goodman and Burton (2010) found that it is not only students who express frustration with school discipline systems, but teachers too. They state that teachers found school systems ‘compromised by inconsistency and lack of clarity’ (p.228). If this is typical of secondary teachers’ views, it would suggest that at least part of the problem lies in the systems themselves, rather than in the application of them by individual teachers regarded for the most part as ‘the problem’ by students.

From the preceding analysis and discussion, it would appear that my findings are broadly in line with those of previous studies, reflecting the views of Key Stage 4 students generically, and those of students with BESD. One difference that was highlighted by some of my participants, however, arose from the fact that they were LAC, and I explore this factor below.

***‘Cos we’re special…’*: Being LAC**

It seems like they're trying to form some kind of bubble around me (.) y'know protect me… nothing I do can be unpunished cos I need to know the difference between right and wrong cos I don't have parents to tell me so

(Pupil C: L L375).

In comparison to other factors impacting on participants’ perceptions of fairness and justice, the issue of being LAC occupied relatively little interview time, although this did vary significantly between participants. One participant did not raise the issue of being LAC at all in relation to fairness and justice, and another raised the issue only in relation to teachers not understanding the situation of students in care, or having the wherewithal to help. In this case, the issue was raised briefly and without apparent judgements of unfairness being made:

Some teachers don't understand kids (.) like there's some of them that don't understand what it's like to be in care and they think they can help us but they really can't) it's just like (pause)(teacher) look like they pretend to like help (.) and it doesn't go like that (.) they don't know what it's like and then they try to help and they don't really understand the circumstances of exactly what's going on (Pupil E: L108).

On the other hand, for three students, their LAC status did impact on their perception of fairness and justice in the way they felt treated relative to other, non-LAC students. For two of these participants, the impact was entirely negative, and compounded their feelings of persecution (explored in Section 5.4.1):

y'know it's kind of like that (pause) they are really nice to them they're really patient with them but come to people like me (pause) no it's a totally different story it's pretty much like “oh yeah y'know” it's like everyone in this school gets treated differently for example if you're a foster kid y'know you get treated differently (.) if you're a gypsy you get treated differently (Pupil A: L335).

Well being a foster kid y'know they'll look at you in a whole different way (.)…When like (.) when you are y'know branded 'foster kid'… You get treated different to everyone else… Yeah as soon as you get that label you're treated you're treated in a whole different light y'know… It irritates me (.) I don't like it (Pupil A: L150).

Pupil C explained his understanding of why teachers treat LAC differently, and seemed to recognise that the motivation for this was well-intentioned (if misguided and patronising, in his view):

cos obviously looked after children are super special whereas other kids are just …yeah so it's just it seems like they're trying to form some kind of bubble around me (.) y'know protect me I can't (.) nothing I do can be unpunished cos I need to know the difference between right and wrong cos I don't have parents to tell me so (Pupil C: L375).

This he saw as resulting in different (unfair) rules, and therefore different (unfair) treatment. He gave an example of a time when he wanted to change tutor groups and wasn’t allowed to, although his friend, who wasn’t LAC, was allowed to. Again, he doesn’t suggest that the school’s intention was unfair, but that unfairness resulted:

They wouldn't let me do this when I first joined (.) I said “I don't like [T11] I want to change” and they wouldn't let me …cos I’m a LAC kid “and [T11] will do it best for me” Yeah if you're a looked after child everything changes (.) [F1] will tell you I have so many different rules (Pupil C:L637).

This participant gave an example of such unfairness, recounting how he was punished for truanting when his non-LAC friend, who had also truanted, received no punishment. Talking with me and his friend (who joined us at the end of the interview), he explained:

yeah I'll mulch [truant] with [friend] (.) um yeah whereas I got eight hours of detention (.) what did you get? (.) zilch (.) guess who's in care? Me (.) who's not in care? Cos we're special (Pupil C: L721).

What is interesting in terms of previous research exploring the views of students with BESD is that the issue of ‘being LAC’ as a contributory factor to behavioural incidents simply does not arise in the reporting of student accounts. There is no reference to students’ bringing up this issue in any of the studies I reviewed, despite it being highly likely that a proportion of the students interviewed would have been looked after, due to the disproportionately high number of LAC having behavioural difficulties (Melzer et al., 2003, p. 22). While there are few studies which focus directly on the educational experiences of LAC (Jackson and Hojer, 2013; Jones et al., 2011), where ‘being LAC’ *is* the focus of pupil voice studies, the students identify many factors that arise from their experiences of being looked after that they see as influencing their behaviour and progress at schools. These include: multiple changes of school; stigmatisation by teachers and pupils and the way this affects their expectations and attitudes; being conspicuous as a sudden arrival at school and, as such, a potential target for bullying; and being separated from friends (Harker et al., 2003). This contrast is puzzling – if we assume that many of the students interviewed in the pupil voice studies of students with BESD are or have been looked after, and we know that aspects of being looked after do feature significantly in students’ school lives, the question as to why they do not raise this as a factor in the studies reviewed arises. It may be of course that some students did raise issues related to being LAC but, because they represented only a proportion of the group, the authors of the studies focused more on factors that were of more general concern. Alternatively, it could be that, when discussion was focused on behaviour, other factors relating to their experiences seemed more pertinent to participants. It is interesting that, in some studies (e.g. Hajdukova et al., 2014; Munn and Lloyd, 2005; Wise, 2000), participants identified themselves as having a ‘reputation’ based on such factors as where they live, family connections, and on the fact that they are ‘known’ as difficult students, but in no study reviewed did any student mention a reputation as a result of being LAC. The fact that a few of the participants in the current study did spontaneously raise the issue in relation to fairness and justice, suggests that this is an area of concern that may have been previously overlooked, and may warrant further exploration in subsequent research.

A final factor related to being LAC that was brought up by one participant in relation to feelings of fairness and justice was the positive impact of being treated differently as a looked after student. He appreciated the fact that he was given ‘more flexibility’ as a result of the school’s recognition of the difficulties he had faced as a looked after student. He recognised that he was helped by the different arrangements made for him in his current school (such as a shorter timetable and his key worker being called to lessons to talk to him rather than him being sent directly to the isolation room as other students might be):

Like my old school like give me a bit more flexibility …like in my old school I was kind of treated like I was in primary school in a way which was pretty naff really but (.) I think it kind of did help me (Pupil D: L154).

He expressed some conflict however about this, as he believed that it impacted on the way other students viewed him – as ‘the special case’:

But then I'd always end up getting called the “special case” because I got away with what other people didn't (.) and then in this school as well cos I got a shorter timetable if I go to stage five then I'd only have to go there for three lessons in the morning instead of the five (Pupil D: L154).

This conflict is reminiscent of the contradictions that Pomeroy (2000) identifies in her participants’ conceptualisations of fairness and justice. She states that for her participants:

Justice meant equality and equality was closely tied to parity of treatment and reciprocity of behaviour. (p. 58).

This was similar to the views expressed by participants in my study; the strong belief that the same punishment should be given for the same offence (parity of treatment) and that, if teachers gave respect to them, they would reciprocate (reciprocity of behaviour). However, Pomeroy points out that this conception of justice only held true in cases when her participants saw themselves as disadvantaged in relation to peers. Like my participants, many of her students mentioned differentiated approaches and special privileges that they were accorded, and did not consider these unjust, being ‘exempt from judgement along the defined paradigm of justice’ (p. 61).

In conclusion, the issue of ‘being LAC’ was (in contrast to other studies of students with BESD) of enough relevance to some participants for them to raise it in relation to fairness and justice with both positive and negative outcomes attributed to this.

* 1. **Summary**

The interpretations of participants’ accounts that I have described, analysed and discussed in this chapter within the framework of three broad themes – Connectedness, Having a voice, and Fairness and justice – demonstrate many commonalities with previous research which gives voice to students with BESD. In discussing how my findings fit with, add to, extend and challenge the existing evidence base, I have identified some key differences, and offered some possible explanations for these differences, drawing on concepts underpinned by an attachment framework. In the next chapter, I present an overview of the results described here, and draw some tentative conclusions in order to offer a number of recommendations for schools and practitioners working with students whose BESD might be underpinned by attachment difficulties.

Chapter 6: Conclusions

**Introduction**

In this concluding chapter, I present a brief overview of my results, outlining the key commonalities and differences between these and those generated by previous research. I summarise my interpretations of the differences found, drawing on concepts from within an attachment framework. The reflections on the research process which follow identify some strengths and limitations of the study, and I then consider a range of potential implications for practice in schools (within the limitations outlined), and for future research.

* 1. **Key findings**

Overall, there are many commonalities between the three themes and their constituent components that I identify within this study, and those generated by previous research which explores the perceptions of young people with BESD. Key themes that students identify as impacting negatively on their behavioural choices common to my findings and those of previous research include: a lack of voice within a school hierarchy dominated by teachers; a sense of powerlessness; perceptions of unfairness, victimisation, stigmatisation and injustice; and an intense dislike of discipline systems administered in a rigid and autocratic manner. While some of these factors may have been exacerbated for participants in my study through being LAC (for example their lack of voice in school being felt perhaps more profoundly as a result of their perceived lack of power and choice across the broader canvas of their lives), these aspects of school life were not different in nature from those identified in other studies of students with BESD.

There are however a number of interesting differences between my findings and those of previous researchers. These are explored in detail within the previous chapter and summarised here. These differences include issues that had salience for students in previous studies but were not raised by participants in my own. These consist of factors relating to the environment such as the physical size of the school and class sizes; bullying; and issues related to their academic progress such as the irrelevance of the curriculum, and a lack of personalised learning. There were also issues that are raised by my participants which do not feature prominently in previous studies, the key ones being the high salience of issues of safety for participants in my study, the importance of the key adult and the significance of specific safe and unsafe spaces. Finally there were issues which are common to both my own study and many previous studies, differentiated by the degree of salience they held for my participants, or by the meaning which they attached to them. The behaviour and characteristics of teachers, and the importance of students’ relationships with them fell within this category, being of greater significance for my participants, as did the role of friends which is highlighted as a protective factor to a much greater degree in previous studies. Finally, while the majority of secondary school students take issue with the power relations that operate within school, issues relating to power, control and choice were found to have greater salience for my participants.

I have suggested that one way in which these differences might be explained is through drawing on concepts from within an attachment framework, given that all the participants within my study were deemed to have attachment difficulties. When considering these potential explanations, it is important to be mindful of the way in which the potential contribution of attachment difficulties to overall behavioural patterns and manifestations is viewed within this study. Attachment is considered here as one factor within a broader view of behaviour which is underpinned by a range of variables: biological, psychological and social, with the interplay between factors specific to each individual and context-dependent, as outlined in Chapter One: Introduction.

In particular, I suggest that the function of the key adult and safe space for students who may have attachment difficulties might relate to the need for a ‘secure base’ (Ainsworth et al., 1978). The emphasis placed by participants on safety might relate to the fact that young people with attachment difficulties often experience high (sometimes constant) levels of hypervigilance, rendering it necessary for them to scan the environment continuously for danger in an attempt to reduce anxiety (Perry, 2004), and leading them to interpret what for other students might be neutral or mildly annoying interactions and contexts as profoundly threatening and provocative. I propose that the sometimes extreme problems that students report in their relationships with staff and peers, and their often spectacular responses to perceived rejection, uncaring and humiliating teacher and peer behaviours, may relate to the participants’ IWMs which are shaped as a result of inadequate early relationships and experiences. From within these IWMs, adults are cast as untrustworthy, uncaring and unable or unwilling to meet their needs, the world as unpredictable and dangerous and themselves as deeply flawed, shameful and unworthy of love or care (Bowlby, 1969). These expectations colour all interactions and relationships and require high levels of ‘disproving’ before trust can be established and relationships develop. The extreme reactions that participants describe relating to situations in which they are given no choice, and in which they feel powerless, may also relate to the commonly noted need for control exhibited by some students with attachment difficulties (Hopkins, 1990).

These findings and interpretations give rise to a number of recommendations, and these are outlined below, in Section 6.3. It is, however, necessary to view these recommendations in the light of the strengths and limitations of the study and with due regard to the caveats outlined in the following section.

* 1. **Reflexive considerations: Strengths and limitations of the study**

The primary strength of the study lies for me in the richness and depth of the information provided by the participants regarding their school life. While I am conscious that they have told me *‘a particular account on a particular occasion’* (Parker, 2005, p. 67), influenced by all the variables outlined in the methodology (Section 3.1.1) – the power relations pertaining, their perceptions of me as the researcher and the potential wider audience, the tendency to say what is expected (Parker, 2005; Cooper, 1993) – I have confidence that the steps taken to maximise the authenticity of participants’ narratives (outlined in Chapter Four) resulted in the most honest and open accounts of their perceptions and experiences possible within this form of research. The fact that much of what they had to say concurred with previous research lends weight to my confidence in the integrity of the dataset on which the findings and conclusions are based.

I was struck, as many researchers have been before me (Cefai and Cooper, 2010; Sellman, 2009; Riley and Docking, 2004; Hamill and Boyd, 2002) by the capacity of the participants to articulate so many insightful and important messages related to the processes and features of school life, and the eloquence with which they did so, as well as by their willingness and enthusiasm to impart their views and perceptions, and to share private and often heart-breakingly difficult experiences. This underlined for me the importance of harnessing pupil voice in developing policy, procedure and practice in our schools, notwithstanding the fact that some of the implications of the issues they raised may be difficult for mainstream schools to address, and perhaps challenging for schools to hear. The clear-sightedness, insight and power of expression of the participants served to reinforce the aim stated in the introduction to act on the information provided by the young people, rather than regarding it simply as an opportunity to ‘give voice’ to a marginalised group. For this reason I have included a number of recommendations for schools which arise directly from the findings of the study. Such recommendations are not however unproblematic and some of the reasons for this are explored below.

The prioritising of depth rather than breadth in the study, common to qualitative studies involving pupil voice, was necessary to fulfil the aims of the research and to accord with my ontological and epistemological positionality, but inevitably compromises the generalisability of findings (and therefore the potential usefulness of the recommendations generated) due to the small number of participants and the fact that the study was conducted in only four schools within a single local authority. The themes that I drew out of the interviews relate of course to the particular experiences of the individuals within their particular schools, although the consistency of many of the findings with similar research (across time and place) confers a degree of trustworthiness on them, and suggests that the recommendations may be relevant for the schools concerned, and potentially transferable to other secondary schools given the broad similarity in nature of the policies, procedures and practices operating within them.

A wider question that arises concerns not the number of participants, but how representative they might be of ‘students with BESD underpinned by attachment difficulties’. It might be argued that my participants were not typical of this group for several reasons. They may be considered atypical by virtue of having remained in their mainstream placements, while more typical students may have been excluded and might therefore be found in alternative educational facilities. While this might have some validity as an argument, it must be weighed up against the strengths and benefits of a focus on mainstream experience. By selecting students within a mainstream context, I was able to elicit both positive and negative features of their experiences and potentially identify those factors that contributed to their having survived within the mainstream setting.

A further issue related to the question of representativeness involves the limiting of ‘whose voices are heard’ through my choice of the semi-structured interviews as the vehicle through which participants would give their accounts. I am aware that schools chose those students who they considered to be articulate and who they felt would be open to the interviewing process, thereby excluding those who might have offered a different perspective. Other researchers have attempted to address this issue through providing alternative means for students to participate, such as video diaries, photo-elicitation, digital comic strip formats (Nind et al., 2012), or through role-plays and games (O’Connor et al., 2011), and the exclusive use of the semi-structured interview in the current study could legitimately be viewed as a shortcoming. The impact was starkly brought home to me through my experience with one young person interviewed. While initially keen to take part, she became reserved and anxious when faced with the reality of the interview process and despite my best efforts to place her at ease, her responses throughout the (shortened) interview remained monosyllabic, and restricted to occasional agreement with the teaching assistant who she had asked to accompany her to the interview. In practice, this meant that the few views that she expressed were highly likely to reflect those of the teaching assistant and so I reluctantly made the decision to exclude this interview from the dataset, conscious that I had silenced a voice that no doubt would have yielded much rich and relevant information, had I selected alternative techniques for gathering the data.

The final caveat I would draw attention to is the extent to which my professional interest in attachment theory may have impacted on the framing of the research outcome (‘infiltrated’ my text, as Riessman, 2013 describes it). At each stage of the study, I brought a conscious awareness of the danger of shaping participants’ responses, of encouraging certain avenues of discussion while closing down others through my interview design, my responses during the interview, and through selectivity at the coding and interpretation stage. While this consciousness afforded some protection against potential bias and enabled me to take measures to guard against it (discussed in Chapters Three and Four) I remain aware that other researchers with different professional lenses may have elicited different narratives and interpreted these in alternative ways. There is not ‘one story’.

* 1. **Implications for practice and recommendations**

When planning for students whose BESD are considered to be underpinned by attachment difficulties, a number of recommendations that schools might consider arise from my findings. I recognise that the length of the list of recommendations is perhaps greater than normally found within research of this nature. I believe that the length and detail is however justified by the fact that each of the recommendations arose from the participants’ narratives, each was important to at least one participant, and most to the majority of them. It therefore seemed important, in order to do justice to the young people’s experience, not to filter these through the lens of which *I* consider more or less important. Throughout the study I have stressed the importance of it as a form of living research leading to practical outcomes for schools, and here I have attempted to distil the lessons learnt from the process as a set of practical recommendations.

It has already been noted that the recommendations should be read in the light of the strengths and limitations of the study outlined above, and it is important to emphasise that they are best considered as part of a wider planning process which takes into account the context and needs of the individual students and schools concerned. It should be noted that the attachment framework used in informing the recommendations outlined is one which takes account of the evidence base (critically analysed in Chapter Two: Literature Review) which suggests that environmental changes can and do impact on the IWMs, and therefore behavioural patterns, of students who may have attachment difficulties. This is in contrast to earlier interpretations of attachment theory which viewed the model as a deterministic ‘within-child’ explanation, a model which is actively rejected within this study. With these caveats in mind, schools might consider, when planning to meet the needs of students with BESD which may be underpinned by attachment difficulties:

Recognising the heightened need for safety and security that students may feel. This may be achieved through:

* + ensuring that teachers set clear boundaries, are predictable, and avoid shouting;
  + addressing potential sources of student anxiety in relation to teaching and learning which might include: a lack of familiarity with the work (particularly if a student has changed schools); a lack confidence in their ability; not understanding teacher explanations; feeling unsafe to ask for help (fearing ridicule or rejection).

Recognising the importance of actively promoting a sense of belonging. This may be achieved through:

* + providing opportunities for students to ‘bond’ within the classroom;
  + the use of humour to ‘equalise’ student-teacher relationships where appropriate;
  + ensuring that students are aware that any disciplinary action is not personally targeted or intentional, to avoid tapping into deep feelings of shame and humiliation.

Recognising the need to establish trust and demonstrate that students are valued. Adults may need to make efforts over and above those necessary to establish trust with other students, to ‘go the extra mile’ to connect with students who have often repeatedly had their trust in adults broken, and may be outwardly rejecting of teachers. This may involve:

* + adults repeatedly demonstrating that they do what they say they will do, making intentions explicit and finding ways to show that they genuinely know and care about the student;
  + finding ways to demonstrate that they like and understand students personally;
  + ensuring that students feel heard;
  + consciously treating students fairly and with respect.

Providing the student with the opportunity to access a key adult. The key adult should:

* + be somebody chosen by the student themselves where possible;
  + genuinely like the student;
  + have strengths in: being a good listener; being trustworthy, caring, compassionate and understanding;
  + demonstrate ‘stickability’, believing in the value of second chances and not giving up on the student.

Providing the student with a ‘safe space’ which can be accessed to provide ‘down-time’. The safe space should:

* + provide a quiet, safe environment where few demands are made of the student;
  + be somewhere chosen by the student;
  + be available to access preventatively (i.e. before a behavioural incident occurs);
  + be available during unstructured time when the student may experience other students ‘en masse’ as threatening and hostile.

Ensuring that the student is not asked to spend time, punitively or otherwise, in spaces that cause excessive anxiety, such as isolation or exclusion rooms which do not allow the student to scan the environment for danger. The student might be enabled to complete sanctions in alternative locations, in which their needs for safety can be met, and their hypervigilance is acknowledged.

Supporting children in making relationships with other students where necessary. For some students who are LAC, changes of placement that interrupt their opportunities for making and sustaining friendships may exacerbate the impact of their attachment difficulties, and support arrangements might be considered in relation to peer group relationships when the student transfers from one school to another.

Involving the student in a transparent process of formulating plans and reviews relating to them, and ensuring that the individual’s perspectives are sought, listened to and acted upon where appropriate. Students whose attachment difficulties are compounded by being LAC may lack a sense of self-efficacy and control over their life, and react particularly strongly when they don’t feel ‘heard’.

Ensuring that when behavioural incidents arise, adults genuinely listen to the student’s perspective before responding, and where possible adopt a preventative and more pastorally based response to meet the student’s needs rather than adopting a purely punitive, disciplinary approach.

Encouraging teachers to avoid direct orders and confrontation, which can challenge the student’s need for control. This may be achieved by:

* + offering the student structured choices and control (which are particularly effective in de-escalating incidents).

Recognising the student’s heightened sense of fairness and justice. This may be achieved by:

* + taking care not to be seen to be victimising or scapegoating the individual (punishing them more quickly or harshly than other students who are engaged in similar behaviours);
  + ensuring that adults are not making judgements based on a student’s reputation;
  + ensuring that young people who are LAC are aware of what actions are being taken and why, where protocols might dictate that certain actions are taken which would not be taken for other young people.

Tackling, at the level of policy, disciplinary systems which are unnecessarily coercive – sanction based, rigid, and escalatory. Thought might be given to the degree to which adults might have flexibility in the application of the behaviour policy for named individuals known to have BESD.

Ensuring that policy, procedures and practices related to discipline are transparent and known by all pupils and staff, not changed at short notice without consultation, and clearly communicated (so that the student is always aware for example that they are being given a sanction, and why).

* 1. **Implications for future research**

I have proposed in this study that students whose BESD are likely to be underpinned by attachment difficulties may view certain aspects of their school experiences through a particular lens, interpreting interactions and factors within the environment in a different way from other students with BESD. I further propose that, as a result of this, they may benefit from specific support mechanisms to meet their underlying needs that are different from, or additional to, those employed to support other young people with BESD. These proposals are by necessity tentative, as there is, as noted in the literature review, little research on the educational experiences and needs of this particular group. An initial step for researchers might therefore be to replicate the study using different groups of students who fit similar criteria, in order to establish whether the themes identified hold true for other students and in other mainstream schools. Developments might include ensuring that a more comprehensive range of views is sought from participants who might constitute a more ‘typical’ sample, for example those who have been excluded from school and/or are educated within PRUs and specialist schools. Such students could undoubtedly offer a range of useful insights through, for example, reflecting on the positive and negative aspects of their mainstream experiences, and identifying features of successful specialist placements that could be replicated within mainstream settings. I would suggest, however, that the focus of such research remain on students’ mainstream experience, as it is within this context that the vast majority of students with BESD underpinned by attachment difficulties are educated. This suggestion is underpinned by the belief that whole school approaches to the prevention and management of the difficulties this group of students experience can be successful in mainstream settings. Within an inclusive agenda, it seems appropriate to focus on preventative factors, and areas in which pupils are experiencing success as well as more problematic ones. As Cefai and Cooper (2010) state:

[I]t is more effective…for mainstream schools to promote such positive experiences from the start…students [from specialist settings] themselves have been reported as saying that they would have liked to have experienced the positive factors present in the special school…in their previous secondary schools. (p. 194).

For researchers who are interested in this area, further developments might include a consideration of how different forms of attachment difficulty, avoidant, ambivalent and disorganised (Ainsworth et al., 1978) impact on students’ experiences of school. While there is a range of literature that recommends strategies for these different groups of students (e.g. Bomber, 2011 and 2007; Geddes, 2006) there are, as noted earlier, no studies that seek to explore the effectiveness of these from the point of view of the students who experience them.

The need for researchers to devise innovative, creative ways with which to engage students with BESD has been noted previously in this section, and the work of O’Connor et al. (2011) and Nind et al. (2012) provide encouraging signs that this process is underway. It may be that this process is of particular importance in capturing the voices of students with attachment difficulties, given the particular challenges they face in trusting adults and in forming relationships.

While it is important to recognise that what students tell us represents only one piece of the jigsaw, with the views of parents and staff having valid and important contributions to make, I consider a continuing focus on student voice to be appropriate given the early stage of research in this area. This view is underpinned by my belief that research does not exist in a vacuum nor, by itself, make a difference to the lives of those it studies. However comprehensively the voices of students with BESD (with or without attachment difficulties), are researched and reported, however important the messages that they offer us, if such research is to achieve more than painting a picture of the school lives of marginalised groups of students, schools need to be prepared to take on the ‘unanticipated (and sometimes unwanted) messages’ (Sellman, 2009, p. 45) that such studies generate. While there are undoubtedly many barriers standing in the way of schools’ capacity and willingness to do this (Sellman, 2009; Hamill and Boyd, 2002), a first step towards encouraging schools to do so might be to provide evidence to tackle ‘the lack of belief amongst school staff that students may have anything worthwhile to contribute to the improvement of learning and behaviour’ (Cefai and Cooper, 2010, p. 196).

It is my sincere hope that this small-scale study might contribute some such evidence, and move us one small step closer to supporting schools in providing an environment within which students such as the participants in this study might develop a sense of connection, achieve and be happy.

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Appendices

**Appendix 1: Letter to schools inviting them to take part**

Educational Psychology Service,

Pearl House

Pontypool

Torfaen

Wales

E: [Julie.Casey@torfaen.gov.uk](mailto:Julie.Casey@torfaen.gov.uk)

T: 01495 766903

Date

Dear Name of Headteacher

**Re: Interviews with students for EdDPsy Dissertation (Spring 2014)**

I am writing to ask for your permission to invite between four and six students at name of school to take part in a research study I am undertaking as part of my doctorate in Educational Psychology at Sheffield University.

The title of the study is: *‘What school factors impact on the behaviour of secondary students deemed to have attachment difficulties? A pupil perspective.’,* and it aims to support secondary schools in meeting the needs and reducing exclusions for LAC and CIN students with behavioural difficulties that are thought to be underpinned by attachment difficulties. Further details of the aims and objectives of the research study can be found in the attached information sheet.

The study would take place in the spring term 2014, and involve me

* Talking initially to a designated teacher (this would probably be the behaviour lead, Senco or inclusion lead) for approximately one hour
* holding an initial meeting for students on the school premises (approximately 30 minutes)
* Interviewing up to 6 students during school time (for approximately one hour) on the school premises.
* Possibly holding follow up interviews for participants (depending on participant choice) of up to one hour.

Informed consent and parental permission would be gained for each participant. Ethical Approval has been granted by the University of Sheffield Research Ethics Committee.

If you would like to discuss the project further, I would be very happy to provide any information you require, either in person or by phone or email.

If you give your permission for me to conduct some or all of the study in name of school please could you inform me by email or post by date.

Many thanks for giving this proposal your consideration,

With best wishes,

Julie Casey M.Ed., C.Psychol

Senior Specialist Educational Psychologist

**Appendix 2: Information sheet for adults**

1. **Research Project Title:**

What school factors impact on the behaviour of secondary students deemed to have attachment difficulties? A pupil perspective.

1. **Invitation paragraph**

A number of students are being invited to take part in a research project which is being undertaken as part of a Doctorate in Educational Psychology at the University of Sheffield.

Before you decide whether or not you are happy to take part, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read or listen to the information that is written in this information sheet and discuss it with others if you wish.

You can address any queries or questions to the researcher (Julie Casey – contact details above) if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information.

If students decide that they would like to take part when they have heard/read the information in this information sheet or the student information leaflet, and had any questions they may have answered, they will be asked to sign an informed consent form.

1. **What is the project’s purpose?**

The project aims to find out what secondary school students who have sometimes been in trouble in school think about what makes a difference to their behaviour in school. We are particularly interested in the views of students who have faced challenges in their lives which have resulted in them being looked after (‘in care’) or designated a ‘child in need’ (CIN). The sort of challenges that students who are looked after (LAC) or ‘in need’ (CIN) have faced often result in what schools call ‘attachment difficulties’ as there have been many changes in their lives.

Using information from the students who participate, it is hoped that we will be able to identify factors which will begin to enable teachers to better support the needs of students and inform policy and practice within their schools.

1. **Which students will be asked to participant?**

The students who will be asked if they would like to participate will be those whose teachers believe have shown that they can do well in some lessons or areas of school life, despite sometimes having been in trouble. These students are well placed to give us valuable information about the things in school that help them not to get into trouble, and the things that contribute when they do get into trouble.

We will be working with between four and six students – from one or more schools in the area.

1. **Do students have to take part?**

It is completely up to the students themselves to decide whether or not they would like to take part. It will make no difference to any aspect of their school life if they decide that they do not want to.

For students who decide to take part, they will be given an information sheet to keep (and be asked to sign a consent form) and can still withdraw at any time, without having to give a reason.

1. **What will taking part involve?**

Students who have agreed to take part will be asked to talk to the researcher in school, during school hours. The interview will take place in the spring term, and the student’s teachers will know that they will be out of lessons. The researcher will ask a number of questions about what they find helpful and less helpful in school – what they like about different lessons and what they find difficult or don’t like. They do not have to answer any questions that they don’t wish to. It is possible for them to have somebody they trust with them during the interview if they would like to.

The interview will probably last about an hour, depending on how much the student wants to say! If they prefer, or have to go before the interview is finished, they may choose to have more than one interview. Snacks and drinks will be available during the interview.

The interview will be recorded on an audio-recorder, so that the researcher can remember what is said. Anything the student says will be kept confidential, and nothing will be shared with anyone from the school or with family/carers. The only exception to this is if I am told something that I believe puts the student or other people at risk of harm – I am obliged by law to share this information with the responsible adult in the school.

Information from the interview will be put together with the views of the other participants and the researcher will use the information from all of the participants to write up the study, identifying those things which students say stop them getting into trouble at school or make it more likely that they will. This will then be shared with the University and with the school. Individuals will not be identified or named at any time during the study as all information will be anonymous.

1. **What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?**

Sometimes people feel uncomfortable when they are asked to talk about their behaviour, or what they find difficult in school. If a student feels uncomfortable at any time during the interview or afterwards, they can tell the researcher or a member of the school staff. If any difficult experiences or topics come up during the course of the interview or afterwards, they will be offered the opportunity to talk about these with someone else and told how to get help if it is needed. Participants do not have to answer any questions that you do not wish to, and can stop the interview at any point.

1. **What are the possible benefits of taking part?**

Although there are no immediate benefits for the students participating in the project, it is hoped that by making their views known, the school will be in a better position to help students to get on well at school and achieve their potential.

1. **What happens if the research study stops earlier than expected?**

If for any reason the study stops, or doesn’t go ahead, all parties will be kept fully informed by the researcher or by school staff.

1. **What if something goes wrong?**

If there is anything that any party becomes unhappy about as a result of taking part in the study, they will have the opportunity to make a complaint, or get things put right. Participants can tell the researcher directly, or a member of school staff if they are not happy with any aspect of the process.

If they are not happy that the complaint has been handled properly, they can contact the project supervisor:

**Professor Tom Billington C.Psychol MEd MSc PhD FBPsS**

**Tel:** (+44) (0)114 222 8113  
**Email:** [t.billington@Sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:t.billington@Sheffield.ac.uk)

1. **Will what is said in the interview be kept confidential?**

Participants will not be identified by name or any other details at any stage of the project. Any quotations from what they say that are used will be anonymous.

Nothing that is said will be shared with anyone from the school or with family/carers. The only exception to this is if I am told something that I believe puts the student or other people at risk of harm – I am obliged by law to share this information with the responsible adult in the school.

All information relating to participants will be kept in a lockable filing cabinet, and also electronically, in a password protected folder. This information will be kept separately from identifying information about participants.

1. **What will happen to the audio-recording of the interview?**

Audio recording of the interviews may be listened to by university staff who are helping with the project, but not by anybody else (such as teachers or family/carers). The recording will be destroyed 12 months after the project has been approved.

1. **What will happen to the results of the research project?**

When the study is written up, a copy will be given to the school and students will be informed and offered the chance to read what has been written. They will not be identified in the study. The study will take several months to write, so may not be available until a while after the interviews take place.

1. **Who has ethically reviewed the project?**

The project has been ethically approved via the School of Education, University of Sheffield’s ethics review procedure.

**For further information**

**Contact Details for Researcher :**

Julie Casey

E: [Julie.casey@torfaen.gov.uk](mailto:Julie.casey@torfaen.gov.uk)

T: 01495 766903

**Contact Details for Project Supervisor:**

Professor Tom Billington C.Psychol MEd MSc PhD FBPsS

Tel: (+44) (0)114 222 8113  
Email: [t.billington@Sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:t.billington@Sheffield.ac.uk)

**Thank you for reading/listening to the information in this sheet.**

**You may keep this copy, and ask school staff or the researcher any further questions that you would like to. Participants who agree to take part in the project, will be asked to sign an ‘informed consent’ form and given a copy of this to keep.**

**Appendix 3: Student Leaflet**

**Student information leaflet**

**What affects your behaviour in school? Have your say!**

Hi there! My name is Julie Casey, and I am working on a project that involves talking to young people in secondary schools about their experiences of school – what helps them and what gets in the way of them being happy, confident and successful learners.

You can find out all about the project by reading this leaflet. If you decide you would like to take part, you (and your parents or carers) will be asked to sign a form and I will come and talk to you for about an hour in the spring term.

And don’t worry – nothing you say will be shared with anyone you know – teachers, parents, carers or friends – only myself and maybe my University tutors will know what you have said.

**The teacher to talk to in your school about the project is: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

**You can talk to this person to find out more, or you can contact me directly:**

**Julie Casey**

**E:** [**Julie.casey@torfaen.gov.uk**](mailto:Julie.casey@torfaen.gov.uk)

**T: 01495 766903**

**Thank you for taking the time to read this information.**

**What is the project called?**

The full title of the project is: *‘What school factors impact on the behaviour of secondary students deemed to have attachment difficulties? A pupil perspective’.*

**What is it about?**

The project is part of my Doctorate in Educational Psychology at the University of Sheffield. The project aims to find out what secondary school students who have sometimes been in trouble in school think about what makes a difference to their behaviour in school. We are particularly interested in the views of students who have faced challenges in their lives which have resulted in them being looked after (‘in care’) or designated a ‘child in need’ (CIN). The sort of challenges that students who are looked after (LAC) or ‘in need’ (CIN) have faced often result in what schools call ‘attachment difficulties’ as there have been many changes in their lives.

Using information from students we hope that we will be able to help teachers to do more of the things that help, and less of the things that get in the way of students being happy, confident and successful learners in school.

**Why have I been chosen?**

You have been asked if you would like to participate as your teachers believe that although you have experienced some difficulties in school, you have also shown that you can do well in some lessons or areas of school life. They believe that as you have sometimes been in trouble in school, you would be well placed to give us valuable information about the things in school that help you to not get into trouble, and the things that contribute when you do get into trouble.

We will be working with between four and six students – some may be at your school and some may be at other schools nearby.

**Do I have to take part?**

It is completely up to you to decide whether or not you would like to take part. You do not have to take part, and it will make no difference to any aspect of your school life if you decide that you do not want to.

If you decide that you would like to take part you will be given this information sheet to keep (and be asked to sign a consent form) and you can still withdraw at any time, without having to give a reason.

**What will happen if I decide to take part?**

If you decide to take part, you will be asked to talk to me, during school hours. The interview will take place in the spring term, and your teachers will know that you will be out of lessons. The researcher will ask you to answer a number of questions about what you find helpful and less helpful in school – what you like about different lessons and what you find difficult or don’t like. You don’t have to answer any questions that you don’t wish to. It is possible for you to have somebody you C:\Users\Julie\AppData\Local\Microsoft\Windows\Temporary Internet Files\Content.IE5\UZHBG31X\MC900199434[1].wmftrust with you during the interview if you would like to.

The interview will probably last about an hour, depending on how much you want to say! If you prefer, or you have to go before the interview is finished, you can choose to have more than one interview. Snacks and drinks will be available for you during the interview.

**Will what I say be confidential?**

What you say will be recorded on an audio-recorder, so that the researcher can remember what is said. Anything you say will be kept confidential, and nothing will be shared with anyone from the school or your family/carers. The only exception to this is if you tell me something that I believe puts you or other people at risk of harm – I am obliged by law to share this information with the responsible adult in the school. If you should tell me about criminal activity, drug or alcohol use I will keep this confidential, unless it contravenes the condition above.

What you say will be put together with the views of the other participants and I will use the information from all of the participants to write up the study, identifying those things which students say stop them getting into trouble at school or make it more likely that they will. This will then be shared with the University and with the school. ***You will not be identified or named at any time during the study as all information will be anonymous.***

All information relating to you will be kept in a lockable filing cabinet, and also electronically, in a password protected folder. This information will be kept separately from identifying information about you. The audio recording will be destroyed 12 months after the project has been approved.

**Will I be asked anything personal or anything that might be upsetting?**

The questions I will ask you are all about school, and it is completely up to you what you chose to share with me – you don’t have to answer any questions that you don’t want to, and you can stop the interview at any point.

Sometimes people feel uncomfortable when they are asked to talk about their behaviour, or what they find difficult in school. If you feel uncomfortable at any time during the interview or afterwards, you can tell me or an adult in school (there will be a member of staff on hand that you can talk to at any time if you are not happy with anything at all).

**What do I do if I am unhappy about what happens?**

If there is anything that you become unhappy about as a result of taking part in the study, you will have the opportunity to make a complaint, or get things put right. You can tell me directly if you are not happy with how you are treated, or if you would prefer to tell somebody else you can tell a member of staff or my supervisor at the university:

**Professor Tom Billington C.Psychol MEd MSc PhD FBPsS**

**Tel:** (+44) (0)114 222 8113  
 **Email:** [t.billington@Sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:t.billington@Sheffield.ac.uk)

**What will happen to the information you collect?**

When I have interviewed all the students I will write up what you have told me. A copy will be given to the school and you will be informed and offered the chance to read what has been written. You will not be identified in the study. The study will take several months to write, so may not be available until a while after the interviews take place.

**What do I do next?**

If you have enough information and would be happy to take part in the project you can ask the teacher who has given you this sheet for the ‘informed consent’ form to sign.

If you would like to find out more, you can

* Ask the teacher who gave you this sheet any questions you have.
* Contact me directly and ask me any questions – my contact details are on the first page of this leaflet.
* Meet with me in school to talk about the project before you decide. Your teacher will let you know when I will be in the school and available to talk.

**Before you do any of these things you might like to talk to other people, friends, family or carers.**

**If you think that you might like to take part, the informed consent form needs to be signed, and given to the teacher who gave you this leaflet by:**

**Date:**

**Thank you for reading this and I look forward to finding out what you have to say!**

**Appendix 4: Informed Consent Form (Student)**

**Title of Project:** ‘What school factors impact on the behaviour of secondary students deemed to have attachment difficulties? A pupil perspective.’

**Name of Researcher: Julie Casey**

**Participant Identification Number for this project:**

**Please initial box**

1. I confirm that I have read/listened to and understood the information sheet/student

Information leaflet dated *30th November 2013* for the above project and have had the

opportunity to ask questions.

1. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any  
   time without giving any reason by contacting Julie Casey, either through my school,

or directly (Email: [Julie.Casey@torfaen.gov.uk](mailto:Julie.Casey@torfaen.gov.uk); T: 01495 766903)

1. I understand that my responses will be audio-recorded and give permission for the

members of the research team to listen to this recording.

1. I understand that my responses will be anonymised before analysis. I give permission  
   for members of the research team to have access to my anonymised responses.
2. I agree to take part in the above research project.

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Name of Participant Date Signature

(*or legal representative*)

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Name of person taking consent Date Signature

(*if different from lead researcher*)

*To be signed and dated in presence of the participant*

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Lead Researcher Date Signature

*To be signed and dated in presence of the participant*

*Once this has been signed by all parties the participant will receive a copy of the signed and dated participant consent form, the information leaflet. A copy for the signed and dated consent form will be placed in the project’s main record, which will be kept in a secure location.*

**Appendix 5: Informed Consent Form (Parent/Carer)**

**Title of Project:** ‘What school factors impact on the behaviour of secondary students deemed to have attachment difficulties? A pupil perspective.’

**Name of Researcher: Julie Casey M.Ed., C.Psychol**

**Name of Participant: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

**Please initial box**

1. I confirm that I have read/listened to and understood the information sheet dated  
   30th November 2013 for the above project and have had the opportunity to ask

questions.

1. I give my permission for the above named student to participate in the project

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Name of Parent/Carer Date Signature

(*or legal representative*)

Contact Details for Researcher:

Julie Casey

E: [Julie.casey@torfaen.gov.uk](mailto:Julie.casey@torfaen.gov.uk)

T: 01495 766903

Contact Details for Project Supervisor:

Professor Tom Billington C.Psychol MEd MSc PhD FBPsS

Tel: (+44) (0)114 222 8113  
Email: [t.billington@Sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:t.billington@Sheffield.ac.uk)

**Appendix 6: Semi-structured interview questions and prompts**

**SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW SCHEDULE**

1. What do you like about being at this school?
2. Are there things that you don’t like about being at this school?
3. What is/are your favourite lesson(s) at school?
   1. *Why is this?*
   2. *Do you work harder in this class than others?*
   3. *Do you behave differently in this class from how you behave in other classes? If so, how? (What do you do differently?)*
4. What is/are your least favourite lesson(s)?
   1. *Why is this?*
   2. *Do you work less hard in this class than others?*
   3. *Do you behave differently in this class from how you behave in other classes? If so, how? (What do you do differently?)*
5. What does a ‘good teacher’ mean to you?
   1. *What do you think ‘good teachers’ do that the ones you wouldn’t call ‘good teachers’ don’t?*
   2. *What do you think not-good-teachers do that good teachers don’t?*
6. Are there any teachers that you get on particularly well with?
   1. *Why do you think this is?*
   2. *What is it about x that you like? (what does he/she say/do?)*
7. Are there any teachers that you don’t get on particularly well with?
   1. *Why do you think this is?*
   2. *What is it about x that you don’t like? (what does he/she say/do?)*
8. How would you rate behaviour in this school? (*use scaling aid if appropriate)*
   1. *What do you think helps pupils behave well in this school (discipline structures, rewards etc?)*
   2. *What do you think contributes to bad behaviour in this school?*
   3. *Are there any particular things that the school does that help children behave well or get in the way of them behaving well?*
9. How would you rate your own behaviour in school? How would you describe your behaviour (W*hat would x – preferred teacher - say, what would y – disliked teacher - say?)*
10. Do you think that there are certain things in school that make it more likely that you’ll get into trouble? *(Prompt if appropriate about specifics to school – people, places, discipline protocols etc.)*
11. What are the things that the school does that stop you from getting into trouble? *(Prompt if appropriate about specifics to school – people, places, time out, support in lessons etc.)*
12. What is the most important thing that a school needs to get right to help students behave well, learn and be happy in school?

**Appendix 7: Sample Transcript**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Speaker** | **L** |  | **Transcript** | **Time** |
| JC | 24 |  | And some of the teachers you said as well? |  |
| PB | 25 |  | Yeah [T1] he's cool |  |
| JC | 26 |  | Is he? |  |
| PB | 27 |  | Yeah he's really funny |  |
| JC | 28 |  | Oh good well we're going to come on in a bit onto what you think makes a good teacher or what you think makes you like some teachers so you can perhaps think about him when we do that one |  |
| PB | 29 |  | Mhmm |  |
| JC | 30 |  | Ok so he's good |  |
| PB | 31 |  | There's [T2] |  |
| JC | 32 |  | uh huh | 00:05:15 |
| PB | 33 |  | Who is my Drama teacher (.) um I dunno she's pretty awesome |  |
| JC | 34 |  | Is she? Yeah |  |
| PB | 35 |  | And then IT think I've got [T3] dunno actually his name I just call him sir half the time |  |
| JC | 36 |  | Yeah I know that's the thing it's 'Sir' or 'Miss' in school |  |
| PB | 37 |  | Yeah (.) so it's |  |
| JC | 38 |  | Ok so some lessons some teachers (.) anything else you like about being at [SS1]? |  |
| PB | 39 |  | The support that you get like off like (.) teachers like [T4] |  |
| JC | 40 |  | Oh yes what do you do with [T4]? What sort of support does he offer? |  |
| PB | 41 |  | Well me and him are starting to do this booklet called “Get It Right” it's like about getting my behaviour right at school so it's I think (pause) is it you that wrote it? |  |
| JC | 42 |  | I think it might have been I was just gonna say (laughs) |  |
| PB | 43 |  | Yeah I was gonna say you wrote it so I'm doing that booklet with them (.) |  |
| JC | 44 |  | Are you? |  |
| PB | 45 |  | Yeah |  |
| JC | 46 |  | Oh gosh |  |
| PB | 47 |  | So I think it's about |  |
| JC | 48 |  | You can say what you like about it you don't have to say it's good if (laughs) |  |
| PB | 49 |  | No it is good (.) I mean half the stuff I don't think we skip as such we just come back we just do it in different orders of the booklet |  |
| JC | 50 |  | Yeah of course you just pick bits that seem relevant to you really |  |
| PB | 51 |  | Yeah so we do all that (.) he explained what it's all about but I just basically go along with it and just think (.) cos it helps me get things off my chest like (.) I'm having talked to him about things |  |
| JC | 52 |  | So you have a chance to sort of sit and talk to him about how it's going |  |
| PB | 53 |  | Mhmm |  |
| JC | 54 |  | That's really good to have somebody in school (.) and you get on ok with [T4] |  |
| PB | 55 |  | Yeah I mean me and [T4] will have a few ups and downs (.) when I like (.) I mean there are some like issues like when I'm I dunno (.) I'm behaving badly at school then he'll come and get me (.) and I don't know I like to chant when I'm thing so I chant and then |  |
| JC | 56 |  | Yeah |  |
| PB | 57 |  | But then I had a chanting and I seen that he's having a go at me but he's not he's actually having a go at me (.) so I just like the support that he gives me so |  |
| JC | 58 |  | Ok so it's easy to see afterwards that he was trying to help you but at the time it feels (.) |  |
| PB | 59 |  | Yeah that he's having a go at me (.) and it's just like “go away [T4] I don't wanna talk to you” but yeah it is |  |
| JC | 60 |  | Ok we'll come onto that a bit more if we can that's an interesting one (.) ok so now you're quite interesting [PB] cos you've been to a different school up until July last year was it? Or? | 00:07:25 |
| PB | 61 |  | I think it was (.) it was I moved in October |  |
| JC | 62 |  | Oh ok so it's (.) you've had about sort of nearly six months here but before you were at another school and if you don't mind I'd be very interested in asking you like the same questions but about your other school as well |  |
| PB | 63 |  | Yeah |  |
| JC | 64 |  | So can I ask you what you liked about your other school and kind of how like it compares? |  |
| PB | 65 |  | I dunno I (.) again I liked the teachers and some lessons I mean I didn't really like the lessons (.) the only lesson that I *really* like is um (.) was (.) maths because and yeah [T5] my maths teacher he was just amazing (.) and me and him just like got along really well |  |
| JC | 66 |  | Ok |  |
| PB | 67 |  | I still see him in town actually sometimes (.) and we spend like half an hour just talking to each other |  |
| JC | 68 |  | oh that's really nice |  |
| JC | 69 |  | But yeah (.) and again some of the support at my school I didn't get as much as I get here but cos I was always in isolation there like I always got in trouble but (.) I never got suspended like or anything like I have been here (.) so it was pretty awesome um cos I could just talk to (.) [T6] |  |

**Appendix 8: Ethical Approval Letter**



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| --- | --- |
| Julie Casey DEcPsy | **Head of School**  Professor Cathy Nutbrown  School of Education 388 Glossop Road Sheffield  S10 2JA |
| 03 February 2014 | **Telephone:** +44 (0)114 222 8180 |

Dear Julie,

**ETHICAL APPROVAL LETTER**

*What school factors impact on the behaviour of secondary students deemed to have attachment difficulties. A pupil perspective.*

Thank you for submitting your ethics application. I am writing to confirm that your application has now been approved.

We recommend you refer to the reviewers’ additional comments (please see attached). You should discuss how you are going to respond to these comments with your supervisor BEFORE you proceed with your research.

This letter is evidence that your application has been approved and should be included as an Appendix in your final submission.

Good luck with your research. Yours sincerely

Professor Dan Goodley

**Chair of the School of Education Ethics Review Panel**

cc Tom Billington

Enc Ethical Review Feedback Sheet(s)

**Appendix 9: CD-ROM of interview transcripts**

All the interview transcripts (including the transcript from Pupil F which was not used in the research) can be found on the CD-ROM that accompanies this document.