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**Exploring staff perspectives of teacher-student relationships in an Alternative Provision, using focus groups guided by Appreciative Inquiry principles**

Thomas Holder

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**Abstract**

Pupil exclusions from mainstream schools are continuing to cause concern (House of Commons Education Committee, 2018; Timpson, 2019). Outcomes for excluded children and young people are typically poor, with great individual and social costs (Gill, 2017). Excluded children and young people are over-represented in terms of ethnicity, special educational needs, and disabilities (SEND) and socio-economic status (Graham et al., 2019) – linking this issue with inequality and social justice. Excluded pupils often access education in Alternative Provisions (AP) – a historically failing (Ofsted, 2011; Taylor, 2012) but latterly improving sector (Ofsted, 2016; HoCEC, 2018; Timpson, 2019). Significant differences exist between AP settings (Pirrie & Macleod, 2009) and provision is understood to be highly variable (Timpson, 2019). Publicly-funded research (Gill, 2018; Timpson, 2019) has identified a need to better understand ‘good and great’ practice in AP. A key aspect of this is teacher-student relationships (TSRs) – identified in previous research as an ‘enabling’ factor for pupils (Michael & Frederickson, 2013) – supporting improved developmental and academic outcomes (Cornelius-White, 2007; Roorda et al., 2011).

This research is interested in how such relationships are formed, developed, and maintained in an AP context. An Appreciative Inquiry (AI) framework is used to identify existing relational strengths in relationships between community members in an AP, to highlight possible augmentative changes in the context of relationships. Six members of staff participated in a series of five focus groups (semi-structured interviews) taking place via online video conferencing. An AI Learning Team model was used to structure and guide these group interactions. Data were transcribed, then organised and interpreted using Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

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**List of acronyms**

AI – Appreciative Inquiry

AP – Alternative Provision

DfE – Department for Education

EP – Educational Psychologist

EPT – Educational Psychology Team

HoCEC – House of Commons Education Committee

IfPPR – Institute for Public Policy Research

PAR – Participatory Action Research

PRU - pupil referral unit

RQ – Research question

SEBD – Social emotional behavioural difficulties

SEMH – Social emotional mental health

SEND – Special educational needs and disabilities

SLT – Senior Leadership Team

TA – Thematic Analysis

TCfSJ – The Centre for Social Justice

TEP – Trainee Educational Psychologist

**Introduction**

The exclusion of children and young people from mainstream schools continues to be a national concern, with exclusions continuing to rise (HoCEC, 2018). In the context of an increasingly competitive, marketised (Williams, 2016) and academised education system (Liu et al., 2019) schools are neither incentivised to include pupils perceived as challenging, nor held accountable for their progress or outcomes following exclusion (Timpson, 2019). Exclusion from mainstream education is associated with local, systemic, and social drivers (George, 2019; Ofsted, 2019). Excluded pupils are over-represented by specific groups, relating to ethnicity, special educational needs, and disabilities (SEND) including social emotional mental health (SEMH), and socio-economic status (Graham et al., 2019).

Outcomes for these pupils are typically poor (Atkinson & Rowley, 2019; Timpson, 2019). The cost of exclusions in both human and economic terms is significant (Gill, 2018; Stahl, 2017). This is an enduring educational, moral, economic, and social justice issue, with pervasive social consequences. Many excluded pupils transition to Alternative Provision (AP) settings, where learning takes place in environments that are qualitatively different to mainstream schools, providing alternative educational and social experiences. Positive relationships in AP, at their best, can provide transformational experiences for pupils (Capper, 2016) however, it is understood that significant variation exists between AP settings (Pirrie & Macleod, 2009) and that, while examples of good practice have been observed, there remains a lack of comprehensive regulation in the sector, and a lack of accountability for schools who choose to exclude pupils (HoCEC, 2018; Timpson, 2019). Particularly, there is a need for a greater understanding of what constitutes good and great practice in AP (Gill, 2018).

Previous research has identified that teacher-student relationships (TSRs) in AP settings are important, and highly beneficial (Michael & Frederickson, 2013). However, it has also been identified that the views and ‘voice’ of pupils, and front-line staff members working in AP – those who are experiencing these relationships – have not always been present or prominent in research about them (Children’s Commissioner, 2017).

**Research background and context**

This research fits within, and contributes towards, a collaborative piece of Research and Development work between a local area Educational Psychology Team (EPT) and a local academy, providing specialist education for pupils with SEMH needs. The aim of this work has been, and continues to be, supporting: The development of a relationship toolkit for systemic change in schools. This work has been projected as encompassing five phases, as follows:

|  |
| --- |
| Phase one: development of a rationale for relationship development in school, including a literature review carried out by EPT members. |
| Phase two: investigate relationships between members of the school community, and consider in relation to developing practice, in one of the settings in the academy.  |
| Phase three: consider feasibility of a pilot version of the toolkit explored with multiple settings in the academy; information drawn from these pilots to identify changes and adaptations to the final toolkit. |
| Phase four: final version of the toolkit trialled with another school or provision.  |
| Phase five: disseminate approach to other settings within, and potentially beyond the locality. |

**Figure 1. *The development of a relationship toolkit for systemic change in schools*, table.**

The possibility of my research contributing to this work emerged from a conversation with a University Tutor, who was also a member of the Educational Psychology Team (EPT) where I had been on placement, in my role as a Trainee Educational Psychologist (TEP). This was an unexpected, but very welcome development, as it provided an opportunity for my research to adopt ‘utility’ (Sandelowski, 2000) by potentially contributing to a wider undertaking, with both practical and systemic benefits. As such, this research project has focussed on contributing to phase two of the overarching piece of work described above.

**Rationale**

Positive relationships have been identified as a key strength, or ‘enabler’, for pupils accessing AP (Capper, 2016; Malcolm, 2018; Michael & Frederickson, 2013). However, it is understood that significant differences in practice exist between AP settings (Pirrie & Macleod, 2009; Ofsted, 2016) with a need to better understand good and great practice in the sector (Gill, 2018). There remains a need for a greater understanding of the specifics of relationships in AP, understanding that, in previous research, the direct views of those experiencing these relationships, adults and pupils, has been marginal (Children’s Commissioner, 2017).

This study is interested in relationships between front-line staff and pupils in an AP context. This includes how staff describe their work with pupils, how relationships are initiated, developed, and maintained; and subsequently how staff practices, and the school system might be adapted or developed with the aim of improving relationships in the setting. The setting itself has committed to developing practice by engaging in this research; staff at the setting therefore have a vested interest, and subsequent analysis and conclusions are of interest to the setting community.

It is anticipated that analysis from this research will contribute to the literature on alternative provisions, and teacher-student relationships. This relates to the work of Educational Psychologists (EPs) who have a key role in advocating for children and young people and promoting inclusion by supporting understanding and practice in educational settings. Analyses from this research might also contribute towards the development of a ‘relationship toolkit’ (as above) providing guidance for staff supporting pupils with SEMH needs, in a number of schools and settings.

**Research approach and methods**

A case study design informed an intensive and detailed (Mertens, 2005) focus on staff experiences of relationships in a particular AP setting. Qualitative data were collected from staff, about their views of the positive features of their relationships with members of the setting community. Focus group interviews were used as a method of data collection. This method was chosen due to its participant-centric orientation, driven by the research aims of foregrounding participants’ contributions. Sets of semi-structured questions, or prompts, enabled this, allowing conversations to develop more naturally than in a formal interview. My role in focus groups was as a facilitator, aiming to encourage and support free-flowing conversation.

Appreciative Inquiry, or AI (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005; Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2003) provided a framework that guided the research. Respective phases of AI informed the focus of group interviews. This approach was chosen as a means of participatory action research, or PAR, (Mertens, 2005) with an emphasis on collaboration, democracy, and empowerment for those involved. Interview questions were informed by the AI 4-D model (Figure 10, p.37) and included questions relating to participants views of the best of their current practices, and subsequent ideas and suggestions for improving staff and school practices in the future. According to the Social Constructionist paradigm, the AI model enables participants to share “stories … [in a group context] share ideas, create joint visions of the future, and prepare through conversations to activate and review them” (Gergen et al., 2004, p.4) with positive implications for future practice.

As a fully qualitative approach has been taken, the importance of reflexivity is understood, with an awareness of my position, as a participant in this research, in constructing meaning interpretively, as described by Willig (2008). Reflection in this context, also includes self-reflection (Mortari, 2015) and, to demonstrate examples of this, I have included ‘reflective boxes’ throughout this thesis, aiming to expose elements of thought and process, to ensure theoretical and methodological robustness. These boxes provide examples of when a ‘thoughtful eye’ (Mortari, 2015) has been applied to the research; both in terms of ‘personal reflexivity’, examples of when my “values, experiences, interests, beliefs, political commitments” (Willig, 2008, p.10) have been influential; as well as ‘epistemological reflexivity’ – relating to a critical approach to considering research design, approaches, and methods, relative to assumptions of the world (Willig, 2008) or ‘worldview’ (Reason, 1998).

**Research aims and questions**

The overall aims of this research are:

• To investigate how relationships are formed, developed, maintained, and repaired between members of the school community in an alternative provision setting.

• To identify potential changes in staff practices and school systems that would facilitate positive change within this school community with regards to the relationships that form the community.

The first aim includes the following substantive objectives:

To identify aspects of the school system and staff behaviour that facilitate the formation, development, maintenance, and repair of relationships between staff and pupils.

To identify values and approaches favoured by, and applied by staff in the formation, development, maintenance, and repair of relationships between staff and pupils.

My theoretical aim is to contribute to the literature for appreciative inquiry, case studies, and front-line staff voice, in the context of teacher-student relationships in alternative provisions for pupils with SEMH needs.

My methodological aims are:

To use an approach of Appreciative Inquiry, as a form of participatory action research; to explore positive features of teacher-student relationships, with staff working in an alternative provision; with an aim of identifying what is working well, and how this may be developed.

To use focus group interviews as a participatory method, to discuss and explore the topic with staff; with dialogues informing co-constructed suggestions and recommendations for changes and developments in practice that will positively impact on relationships experienced in the school community.

The following research questions (RQs) guided this study:

RQ1: How do front-line staff describe the positive aspects, the ‘successes and strengths’, of their relationships in an alternative educational provision?

RQ2: How do these staff describe their experiences of working with pupils?

RQ3: What are some of the values and approaches favoured by and recommended by staff in their work with pupils?

RQ4: What aspects of staff practices and school systems do staff suggest could be developed with the aim of improving relationships within the setting?

**Literature review**

**Introduction: Approach to literature**

This literature review discusses the importance of relationships in education, particularly for children and young people with ‘attachment’ or relational needs. It presents previous research in the area of teacher-student relationships, that demonstrates how the nature of these relationships is crucial to accessing, or re-accessing, positive educational experiences following exclusion from mainstream schools. It surmises that further research should focus on including the views of adults, and pupils in alternative provisions, to take both a staff and pupil-centred approach to informing future planning and development in AP.

This review has drawn on information and findings from multiple sources, including published articles, peer-reviewed journals, hard-copy books, digital records, and public policy documents. Research focussing specifically on relationships in alternative provisions, for pupils with SEMH needs, was identified, using combinations of keywords including: ‘teacher student relationship’, ‘alternative provision’, ‘SEMH’, and ‘inclusion/exclusion’; as well as topic and method-related terms, including: ‘power’, ‘relational’, ‘disenfranchised’, ‘marginalised’, ‘stigma’, ‘social justice’, ‘youth justice’, ‘appreciative Inquiry’, and ‘case study’. To help navigate the vast offering of literature in this area I used Boolean Operators (e.g. AND, NOT) to combine and exclude keywords, as well as quotation marks (“”) to search for specific terms, and enable a more focussed search. Sources that were peer reviewed, and/or had previous citations, were given particular attention, as well as relatively new research from within the last ten years. I followed-up citations and references in what I read, with reviews of previous literature (e.g. Carroll & Hurry, 2018; O'Gorman et al., 2016) being especially helpful. I used specific search criteria (keywords shown above) to explore the following digital libraries and databases:

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| --- |
| StarPlus (The University of Sheffield online library search platform) |
| Google and Google Scholar |
| JSTOR |
| E Theses Online (including White Rose) |
| British ‘Quality Press’ media platforms (The Times, The Guardian, The Telegraph) |

**Figure 2: examples of digital libraries and databases searched**

My approach to writing this review fits with narrative methods. A story has been created from my subjective interpretation (Allen, 2018) – integrating contextual information (relating to school exclusions) discursively (Greenhalgh et al., 2018) which were outside of the primary focus of relationships. As a process of engaging critically with multiple sources and constructing a subsequent argument (Boell & Dubravka, 2014) this review can be described as hermeneutic, and informed by a principle of ‘verstehen’; that is, a subjective, interpretative understanding, developed through critical reflection (Greenhalgh et al., 2018).

**The primacy of relationships**

The importance of relationships and social interaction in education is well established. Key social learning theories of the likes of Bandura (1977) and Vygotsky (1978) have been prominent and influential for many years, alongside Bowlby’s seminal attachment theory (1969). Bowlby, and Ainsworth (e.g. 1989), described the influence of early child-caregiver relationships on later social interactions; these relationships crucially informing a child’s beliefs and expectations, creating an enduring Internal Working Model, a ‘blueprint’, that guides future social interactions. Children experiencing difficulties at this early stage are considered at risk of developing less enabling, or ‘insecure’, attachments – being thus more likely to experience difficulties with language development, learning, and in their relationships with others (Moullin et al., 2014). While attachment theory remains influential it has evolved through criticism of cultural (Rothbaum et al., 2001) class (Hays, 1998) and gender (Tizard, 2009) biases, and deterministic positioning (Duschinsky et al., 2015). Contemporary perspectives of attachment are perhaps more balanced, and the concept of ‘good enough’ parenting, or care (Winnicott, 1965) is prominent in contemporary literature (e.g. Bombèr et al., 2020). Attachment patterns, or styles, are not seen as fixed (Crittenden & Dallos, 2009) as they once were, and research suggests that early insecure attachment descriptors do not necessarily predict an insecure adult attachment type (Doyle & Cicchetti, 2017; Main & Goldwyn, 1984).

**Relationships in education**

Positive relational experiences later in life can be seen as promoting resilience and helping to re-shape ways of relating (Tayler, 2015). This highlights the importance of relationships beyond the family environment, such as those that take place in schools, where interactions with additional ‘social partners’ (peers) and educators can promote positive adaptive behaviours, alongside learning and emotional wellbeing (Tayler, 2015). Learning facilitated through human relationships has been described as the ‘fundamental organising strategy’ in educational environments (Malaguzzi, 1993) suggesting attachment theory, as a way of understanding relationships, is highly relevant for educators. Teacher-student relationships, through qualities of emotional and physical proximity, offer the possibility for a connection that is similar to the primary caregiver relationship, enabling children to experience security, and protection from emotional stress (Kennedy & Kennedy, 2004). Attachment theory has previously been described as slow to impact psychology-informed practice in schools (Webster & Knotek, 2007) which jars with findings in Roorda et al. (2011) who suggest that a psychologically-oriented understanding of relationships supports positive outcomes – with this being especially pertinent for vulnerable pupils. However there is now an abundance of contemporary literature that highlights the role of school-based staff in supporting children and young people who have had difficult early childhood experiences (e.g. Bombèr, 2007; Geddes, 2017). Attachment-aware (e.g. Bombèr, 2014; Cozolino, 2014; Geddes, 2017) and trauma-informed (e.g. Cherry, 2021; Hughes et al., 2015; Perry et al., 1995; van der Kolk, 2014) literature has become more prominent and has informed resources that underpin the development of relational behaviour policies (Babcock, 2020; Siegel, 2018) which are being utilised by some schools, as an alternative to more traditional methods that focus on managing or controlling behaviour.

**Power in relationships**

Piro (2008) evoking Foucault, explains that schools can be seen as spaces that demand conformity, “designed for supervising, hierarchizing, and rewarding” (p.42) and where “power in its various regulatory forms flows” (p.44). There is an obvious power differential within traditional teacher student relationships, which are “involuntary … [and] collective rather than dyadic” (Pace & Hemmings, 2007) and which include elements of discipline, and control (Lodge & Lynch, 2004). Schools provide children’s first encounter with social authority (Shaffer, 1978) and this is often purposeful and supports the formation of ‘a solid social fabric’ (Piro, 2008); furthermore, rules and regulations can be understood as an essential feature of institutions such as schools, particularly in the context of complex modern education systems (Lodge & Lynch, 2004) which often aim to engage and integrate school community members from diverse language and cultural backgrounds (Loe, 2017). However, inflexible rules can be seen as restrictive in the context of relationships (Lodge & Lynch, 2004) and not sympathetic to the great social, cultural, and economic variation in personal circumstances that we know exists between children and young people (Bennathan & Boxall, 2013). A chaotic or unsafe home environment, especially in combination with insecure attachment, is recognised as increasing the likelihood of difficulties with conformity, or behaviour problems (Kennedy & Kennedy, 2004). This equates to social disadvantage in a school system that is experienced by many children and young people as ‘humiliating and oppressive’, potentially reinforcing inferiority, neglecting individuality and cultural capital, and positioning pupils as adverse to the system and its representatives (teachers) (Monbiot, 2020) defining them as problematic (Cosma & Soni, 2019). McNulty & Roseboro (2009) citing Foucault (1997) refer to the experience of power in relation to previous experiences, and identity. They describe the process of stratification in schools, where access to knowledge and learning processes are exclusive or discriminatory, and which pupils may resist or move against. Acts of rebellion (Pace & Hemmings, 2007) may be considered, in terms of behaviour, as destructive, or self-destructive (Bennathan & Boxall, 2013) rather than in more holistic terms that account for the full range of individual experience.

The way schools exercise authority and control may be viewed as disregarding individuality and in doing so lacking respect – potentially harmful for individuals (Lodge & Lynch, 2004). A narrow and monocultural curriculum offer (Piro, 2008) is one example of this, especially for children and young people who do not feel acknowledged by, or any resonance with what they are being taught; or that they do not have an equal opportunity to be successful within a stratified, hierarchical system. Khalifa (2010) challenges the concept of meritocracy in education and proposes that school systems can preserve social inequality. In an ethnographic study involving ‘at risk’ pupils attending an alternative educational setting, Khalifa found that traditional school leaders did not recognise the capital (identity) of their ‘hyperghettoized’ pupils – a failing which might be interpreted as a lack of respect. The concept of respect is also discussed by Pomeroy (1999) who recognises the unequal power distribution between adults and pupils in schools, but stresses this should not equate to disregard or disrespect.

**Humanist principles in relationships**

The nature of teacher-student relationships has been described as the most important factor in enabling children and young people to adapt to their school environment, and even more so for pupils who are ‘at risk’. This requires teachers to recognise their position as role models in relationships, and to understand their potential to help positively re-shape pupils’ views of themselves in social contexts (Kennedy & Kennedy, 2004). The concept of valuing and prioritising relationships, with a belief in supporting growth and development, resonates with a humanistic perspective. Humanistic psychology is, phenomenologically, interested in human experience. It has built on foundations that include Rogers’ (1951) person-centred theory, suggesting people are instinctively driven towards growth and self-development; and aims to consider the whole person, ‘holistically’, as a sum of constituent parts, a ‘unitas multiplex’, as described by influential psychologist and thinker Stern (Kreppner, 1992). In contemporary spaces humanist psychology offers an alternative view of individuals (DeRobertis, 2016) – contrasting with principles of conformity and reductionism in education, allowing an understanding of people as ‘social organisms’ – attuned to the behaviour of those in their social environment (Cozolino, 2014) and fitting with Wheatley’s (2008) description of people as ‘bundles of potentiality’ that only ‘become’ in relationships.

Humanistic psychology has been disparaged, and maligned as lacking in scientific objectivity (DeRobertis, 2016) and despite being recognised as the third force in psychology (following behaviourism) humanistic perspectives have been underrepresented in educational resources and programmes (DeRobertis, 2012). However it has endured from its early 1970s heyday (DeRobertis, 2013) and remains influential in psychotherapy; and in the field of positive psychology (e.g. Seligman, 2002) – which has built on humanist traditions and given new energy to the exploration of human flourishing, becoming, self-actualising (Proctor et al., 2020). Humanistic values of positive regard, warmth, empathy, and acceptance, echo parental feelings towards their children (Shaffer, 1978) and can be found in teacher-student relationships. Loe (2017) discusses the qualities needed to improve relational connections in schools, and identifies core values of honesty, justice, care, and respect – fundamentally humanistic principles. Carroll & Hurry (2018) in their review of literature around provision for pupils with SEMH needs, also identified the importance of non-coercive and humanistic approaches, including key values of trust and respect. They present additional findings that suggests the strength of relational connection within teacher-student relationships positively correlates with a reduction in school sanctions, including exclusions.

**Teacher-student relationships in alternative provisions**

Excluded children and young people often access education in alternative settings, or alternative provisions (AP). Described as “the last safety net to keep young people in education” (Capper, 2016, p.55) AP cater for pupils who are statistically more likely to have mental health needs, learning difficulties and low academic attainment; as well as experience of abuse or neglect, familial difficulties, and involvement with gangs or the criminal justice system (Gill, 2017; The Centre for Social Justice, 2020). Minority ethnic groups, including children from Roma and Traveller backgrounds, are over-represented (DfE, 2018). Boys are over-represented at 70%, compared with around 50% in mainstream settings (DfE, 2018). Children leaving AP are significantly less likely to access or sustain engagement with further education, training, or employment, and so become NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training) – their life and learning trajectories being thus impoverished (Timpson, 2019). They are some of the most at risk, the “hard to reach, hard to teach, most alienated, most vulnerable” (Cook, 2005, p.90) and for whom the need for positive relational experiences is greatest (Tayler, 2015). Relationships in AP are qualitatively different to those in mainstream education, with staff aiming to facilitate accelerated social, emotional and educational progress (DfE, 2018) and support the development of social skills (Tate & Greatbatch, 2017).

There is a growing body of research that highlights teacher-student relationships (TSRs) as a positive factor for supporting engagement and helping to improve outcomes for pupils. Meta-analyses by Cornelius-White (2007) and Roorda et al. (2011) are examples that share similar findings. Roorda et al. describe the affective, or emotional, aspects of TSRs – identifying empathy and warmth as important, and summarising that these qualities, within the TSR, are associated with social functioning, engagement with learning, and academic progress. Cornelius-White found that positive TSRs, including those involving humanistic, person-centred approaches, such as empathy, warmth, and collaboration, associated with positive outcomes for pupils. In an AP context, Michael and Frederickson’s (2013) case study found relationships to be a key ‘enabler’ to success – a finding which has been explored and supported in related research.

**Figure 3: Thematic map showing enablers, barriers, and ideas for change for pupils with SEBD/SEMH needs, in AP (Michael & Frederickson, p. 411).**

Cullen & Monroe (2010) identified positive features of relationships in AP, including respect – also identified by pupils in Pomeroy (1999) – a genuine approach and personal congruence. These humanistic values were also evident in Mooij & Smeets (2009) case study, exploring the teacher’s role in supporting successful school experiences for children with SEMH needs, which included showing a personal interest, managing environmental ‘stressors’ – also in Kennedy & Kennedy (2004) – and respecting the views and wishes of pupils. Cullen & Monroe (2010) additionally identified adults’ ability to recognise or acknowledge positive qualities in pupils; supporting the view of Nelson & O’Donnell (2012) that adults working with young people in APs should aim to empower them through relationships which recognise their resourcefulness and potential. Jones’ (2011) qualitative research considered ‘at risk’ young people in AP, finding that pupil engagement was encouraged through caring and supportive, person-centred relationships. This was also identified by McGregor et al. (2015) in two case studies focussing on excluded pupils’ views of (re) engagement in meaningful education, finding that AP staff valued knowing their students as individuals and working with them flexibly as key features of a personalised offer. Michael and Frederickson’s (2013) research into enablers and barriers also explores ideas for change. Pupils identified feeling understood and listened to as an important area for change – an idea that links with Byrne & Smith’s (2010) research, where young people said that not being listened to and feeling disliked were aspects of negative relationships with teachers, and a factor in leaving school early. Cosma & Soni’s (2019) systematic literature review describes views of pupils, with SEMH needs, who had been excluded, and found that they associated their exclusion with negative relationships and a sense of injustice or being wronged. This supports Pomeroy’s (1999) finding, also based on pupil voice, that public humiliation, including put downs, sarcasm, and shouting are all potentially negative features of TSRs identified by pupils.

Familial qualities in AP (O’Gorman et al., 2016) including the humanistic value of positive regard, is identified by McGregor and Mills (2012) who consider how learning environments (and TSRs within them) support engagement – finding that flexible and inclusive environments founded upon supportiveness, acceptance, and respect, to be effective, with student participants describing their school in terms such as ‘caring, community, family, respectful’. Antrop-González (2006) focussed on student voice and found that caring relationships, and the importance of familial qualities in the school environment were reported. This idea is also identified by Bloom (1995) – drawing on experiences of working with children who have experienced trauma and suggesting that school can be a safe and healing environment. Bloom and Sreedhar (2008) describe a ‘sanctuary model’ for schools, also discussed in O’Gorman et al. (2016), with a focus on growth, self-development, and a belief in positive change – supporting findings in Capper’s (2016) case study, that TSRs can provide safety, be a force for change, and potentially a transformative influence for pupils. Michael and Frederickson (2013) also found that the learning environment was one of the enablers of positive outcomes revealed in their research – supporting Jones’ (2011) view that qualities within the learning environment enable pupil engagement. Roelofs et al. (2003) focussed on physical features of learning environments and suggest that good lighting and acoustics enable concentration – particularly supportive for pupils with language difficulties, and that, furthermore, good quality furniture and equipment communicates respect and care to community members. The reverse aspect of this was explored by McNulty & Roseboro (2009) who take a social justice position in their ethnographic research, suggesting that physical AP spaces, if perceived as ‘second class’, have the potential to reinforce ‘stigmatized identity’ and subsequently ‘deviant behaviour’ by feeding stigma – where the image of a ‘caste-like’ education system, is realised in inferior, or sub-standard resources and provision.

Malcolm (2018) reviewing previous research on TSRs in AP, highlights a number of relational factors, many of them resonant with humanistic values, including being valued and respected, listened to, and being treated with kindness and care. Malcolm suggests that research involving staff in AP is limited and promotes the importance of understanding more about adult perspectives in this area. Alvarez-Hevia (2018) also highlights limited research involving educators in AP, particularly in relation to the emotional aspect of their work. Alvarez-Hevia’s small-scale ethnographic case study, conducted in a PRU, explored relationships between staff and pupils who had been excluded, or were at risk of exclusion, using the term ‘emotional geography’ to describe the concept of staff navigating shifting emotional terrain in their efforts to form positive relationships with pupils. Alvarez-Hevia suggests that, for many staff working in AP, their experiences represent ‘more than just a job’ – echoing Malcolm (2018) who found that AP staff were motivated (emotionally) by successes in their work. Alvarez-Hevia suggests that educators benefit from learning through emotional experiences and are able to create positive narratives from negative (another potentially transformative process) – offsetting some of the emotional demands in their working relationships. The concept of emotional demands is developed by Fitzsimmons et al. (2019) whose research involving TSRs, in a one-to-one AP context, considers the perspective of tutors, and, according with previous research, found that positive relationships are key to progress, with humanistic, relational values identified as crucial qualities in the TSR. This research also identified the high individual demands involved, describing relational work with excluded pupils as challenging and requiring a high level of emotional investment, with some tutors doubting their skill or ability to manage these relationships effectively (Fitzsimmons et al., 2019).

Trotman et al. (2019) presented findings from four commissioned evaluations of UK APs, using qualitative methods to elicit experiences of students and key stakeholders. They highlight the importance of pupil voice, and refer to previous research (e.g. Jones, 2004) which has suggested pupils’ views of their experiences can be effective for helping to inform and improve policy and practice in education. The researchers also highlight continuing problems with key phase/stage transitions and the consequences of this, as well as stating the benefits of multi-agency approaches. Atkinson & Rowley (2019) also discuss eco-systemic factors in relation to pupil reintegration. Their research had emancipatory aims, aiming to increase participation and empowerment of pupils (following successful reintegration) by establishing their views of ‘what works’. Alongside individual differences for how successful reintegrations were facilitated, common themes aligned with Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) eco-systemic model. Key findings relative to mainstream reintegration included that success is best achieved via systemic, as opposed to individual, responsibility, and that active participation, including pupil voice, is essential. They found consistency in positive reintegration factors cited by pupils, although some differences between age groups, as well as between individuals – indicating that a person-centred approach is essential.

There are high stakes involved in relationships in APs, given its position, often, as a last chance, for at risk children and young people. Much of the research included here promotes the importance of continuing efforts to understand positive aspects of relationships in APs, including the views of both staff and pupils. A number of recent theses have done just this, using Appreciative Inquiry (AI). This participatory method aims to explore human systems at their most effective (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2003) and offers a collaborative and strengths-based approach to working with groups of people. Cozens (2014) and Brooks (2015) utilised AI, respectively exploring staff views of how they support pupils with SEND, and of wellbeing in relation to the challenges of working in education – linked with staff retention. Pahil (2018) used AI within a case study exploring the concept of pupils ‘flourishing’ in a primary setting, based on a principle of challenging traditional, deficit-based perspectives on mental health in education. Lewis (2015) also combined AI with a case study approach, aiming to offer ‘voice and influence’ to pupils, and a platform to influence their learning (Lewis, 2015). Whitby (2018) explored restorative approaches in educational settings, facilitating AI with a staff group to explore and develop ideas of working restoratively with pupils.

**Context and costs of school exclusions**

The consequences of excluding children and young people from mainstream education is a prominent topic. It has been high on the public agenda for the past decade, and the subject of significant publicly-funded research (Ofsted 2011, 2016, 2019; Taylor, 2012; Timpson, 2019).

**Figure 4: timeline of key documents on exclusions over the past decade.**

The average cost of permanently excluding just one pupil is potentially up to £370 000; extrapolated to £2.1 billion for each excluded cohort in related education, health care and criminal justice costs (IfPPR, 2017). The latest exclusions data (DfE, 2021) indicated that the rate of permanent exclusions remained stable from the previous annum. However, following the period between 2006 and 2013, there were subsequent increases annually for over five years, with a 40% increase between 2015 and 2018 (Gill, 2018). Education commentators (e.g. Bagley, 2021; Dickens, 2020) have amplified narratives around exclusions in national media outlets, drawing a critical eye to the increase in fixed term exclusions and the rise in repeat fixed term exclusions – meaning that individual children have been more frequently out of school, and for longer periods, without being permanently excluded, and challenging the data that suggests exclusions have stabilised nationally. As Timpson (2019) suggested, these are the pupils least likely to demonstrate progress academically, whose needs require more time and resources to reach measurable outcomes (HoCEC, 2018) and who may not represent performance data ‘value’ for schools. As Munn and Lloyd (2004) suggest, it is far simpler to evaluate schools’ effectiveness based on academic performance, as opposed to broader outcomes relating to social welfare.

The tension between meeting attainment targets and responding to government policy on inclusion has been highlighted in research (Munn & Lloyd, 2004; Power & Taylor, 2020). Initiatives such as Future in Mind (Department of Health, 2015) as part of an ‘escalation in governmental initiatives and guidance’ (Monkman, cited in Williams et al., 2017) have raised the profile of SEMH but have also inferred responsibility to individual schools, and subsequently, teachers, who do not always feel equipped to meet the needs of pupils with complex needs, or able to work effectively with the emotional demands involved (Fitzsimmons et al., 2019). In an increasingly marketised, academised sector (Alexiadou et al., 2016; Noden, 2000) the accountability system, and Progress 8 – criteria against which schools are judged and compared – have been described as incentives to exclude pupils experiencing challenges and barriers to their learning, and where the cost of support may be considered disproportionate to potential quantitative gains. An increase in AP referrals has been linked to consequences of performative school cultures (Trotman et al., 2019). As Timpson (2019) concluded, it is not right that the current system might encourage schools to exclude pupils due to potential financial and performance benefits, and a lack of accountability for those pupils’ future outcomes.

Pupils who have been excluded from mainstream settings, even temporarily, such as those accessing placements in PRUs, or AP, are understood to face significant challenges with a return to mainstream education (Trotman, 2019). If leaving mainstream education is not exclusively a ‘one-way street’, there is a “revolving door effect” (Pillay et al., 2013, p.311) that suggests reintegration attempts can be short-lived. A range of literature (Baroutsis et al., 2016; Schaffer et al., 2013; Sellman et al. 2002) documents the link between permanent exclusion from school and social disenfranchisement, exclusion, or alienation; as well as depression, substance misuse, and prison (Atkinson & Rowley, 2019). The recently published Punishing Abuse (Chard, 2021) describes the relationship between childhood adversity, abuse, loss and trauma, and involvement in the youth criminal justice system. Gill (2018) also highlights the link between school exclusion and offending, with subsequently diminished opportunities for learning and employment; and Stahl (2017) describes a ‘prison pipeline’, as “the institutional practice of funnelling school students … often from disadvantaged backgrounds, into the criminal justice system” (p.92) – linking this with inequitable authoritarian practices in schools, including zero tolerance approaches to behaviour, policing approaches, and institutional racism.

**Progress, opportunities, ways forward**

Education in AP is a historically failing but latterly improving area. A decade ago, Ofsted (2011) reported on an AP sector that was largely uninspected and unregulated. This was supported by Taylor (2012) who critiqued AP practice and policy, highlighting systemic failings, and suggesting that the children and young people accessing AP had been peripheral in strategic thinking and planning. In 2016, Ofsted reported further concerns, including consistency and quality issues around teaching and learning, and monitoring standards. However there were also positive findings, with the “overwhelming majority” of pupils interviewed reporting positively on their experiences, and the impact on their “behaviour, attitudes, attendance and outcomes at school” (Ofsted, 2016). The Timpson Review of School Exclusion (2019) made further recommendations for improvement, as well as highlighting the role of senior leaders in promoting positive behaviour cultures. The national calls for continuing improvement (Timpson, 2019) and pressing need to better understand what constitutes good and great practice in AP (Gill, 2018) are based on the understanding that provision for the most vulnerable pupils in education, “should be of equal if not better quality than for children in mainstream schools” (TCfSJ, 2020, p.5).

**Summary**

There is a continuing need for improvement in the AP sector (Gill, 2018; Timpson, 2019). One aspect of this is in relationships. Previous research (e.g. Michael & Frederickson, 2013) has highlighted relationships as a crucial enabling factor in positive experiences for children and young people accessing AP – supporting change and improved outcomes, or even transformative experiences (Capper, 2016). Despite extensive research in this area it has been suggested that a focus on the nature and quality of AP providers has often neglected the views of children and young people (Children’s Commissioner, 2017) and that work remains in relating pupil voice to developments in policy and practice, where pupils’ views of their experiences can be effective for helping to inform and drive improvements (Trotman et al., 2019). Similarly, it is recognised that research involving AP staff is limited (Malcolm, 2018) – particularly around the emotional aspect of the TSR (Alvarez-Hevia, 2018).

A number of recent theses (e.g. Cozens, 2014; Pahil, 2018; Whitby, 2018) have used a method of appreciative inquiry to develop an understanding of positive aspects of practice in relationships. This research adopts a similar methodological position, drawing on principles of appreciative inquiry, and constructing an AI ‘learning team’ (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2003) with staff working in an AP setting, to explore ‘what works’ in regards to the relationships in their setting.

This is informed by principles of participatory action research, aiming to empower participants, within a “democratizing spirit of growth and change” (Rowell & Feldman, 2019, p.1) with an aim of augmenting practice and leading to suggestions for potential changes in the setting, which will build on existing good practice, and continue the development of positive relationships between members of the setting community. This aims to build on and develop some of the ideas introduced in the research presented above, and in doing so it is hoped that this will provide valuable reflective feedback for participants, and for the setting as an organisation; as well as contributing to the literature in an area where further insight and action is needed.

**Methodology**

**Introduction**

The following chapter provides a description of methodological and procedural choices, and subsequently how this study evolved and developed during the research process. Some of these choices, and certainly some of the more practical elements of the research were influenced by the context of the Coronavirus pandemic and its ramifications, with unavoidable compromises. To an extent, I did what I was able to do, in the circumstances, and aimed to make the best of the opportunities that were available to me.

One of the main drivers for this research had been to work directly with young people with SEMH needs, who had been excluded from mainstream education, and who had experienced learning in an AP environment. This was in recognising that there have been questions about how the voices of children and young people have been represented in previous research, with some studies including data which has not prominently, or authentically, represented the voice of young people, and where the focus has often been on the efficacy of teaching and service provision (Children’s Commissioner, 2017). It has also been suggested that the views of excluded pupils can be valuable, as they may provide insights that critique under-scrutinised aspects of the school system, and provide a critical commentary of schools, and wider society (Munn & Lloyd, 2004). Despite initially planning to work with both pupils and adults, it was only possible ultimately to work with adults. This is a lingering frustration; however, it is also a source of motivation to seek out future opportunities, with the intention that this work will be drawn upon.

One of the benefits, in hindsight, of certain logistical decisions being determined due to intangible, or arbitrary factors, as the consequences of the pandemic unfolded (there were, for example, no pupils in school during this period) is that the project oriented in a direction that was effectively more contained and straightforward. I do not want to dwell on sentiments of frustration or compromise and discuss aspects of this further in the Limitations section. I would like to take the view that in uniquely challenging and exceptional circumstances, it has been important to take a pragmatic and positive outlook and seek value in what was possible. I have described here what I did and was able to do, and a rationale for the decisions and choices made.

**Research philosophy and design**

Choosing research paradigms has been called one of the critical decisions in research, and which situates the study, including philosophical assumptions about the nature of the world (ontology) how it can be understood (epistemology) and with methodological approaches linked to these assumptions (Maxwell, 2005, p.223). Qualitative, Constructivist, and Social Constructionist Paradigms underpin this study, and have guided and informed subsequent design and methodological decisions. This research is fully qualitative, or ‘big Q’ (Willig, 2008) and recognises context, subjectivity, and interpretation as key concepts. In a constructivist sense this is based on a core understanding that meanings, interpreted through communication, are not absolute or objectively discoverable, but rather subjective and socially constructed, with interpretations dependent on individuals and context (Mertens, 2005, p.12). A constructionist perspective considers the multiple realities experienced by individuals, who use language, with its reciprocal features (such as negotiation, or mediation) to jointly create, negotiate, construct meaning – within “the limits of any particular tradition” (Gergen et al., 2002, p.83) – the socio-historical context.

This research is interested in human experience, with language positioned as crucial to socially constructed knowledge – also described by Burr (2003). In accordance with this, subsequent methodological choices are aligned with a constructivist ontology and epistemology. Within a constructivist ontology, reality is positioned as socially constructed, subjective, shifting; and therefore fits with a relativist perspective (Burr, 2003). Constructivist epistemology views knowledge as something that is constructed between individuals (Mertens, 2005) and in this case, within the researcher-participants dynamic. Subsequently, I understood that my methods would be active, and interactive, and that values, ideas, and meanings would be explored and constructed, in a participatory sense, between myself as the researcher and the participants. A single-case, case study design was used in an Alternative Provision educational setting. The setting representing the case *subject*, and teacher-student relationships, within the setting, the *object* of interest (Thomas, 2013).

Appreciative Inquiry (Cooperider et al., 2013; Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2003) was used as a framework to structure interactions with participants. Focus Group Interviews were used as a method for data collection. Transcribed interviews were analysed through Braun and Clarke’s (2006) traditional model of Thematic Analysis. These methods and approaches were chosen in accordance with the paradigms introduced above. The underpinnings of these paradigms felt like a good fit with my experience, preferences and beliefs about relationships, language, and human experience – my worldview, or ‘weltanschauung’ as “sets of basic beliefs about the nature of reality and how it may be known” (Reason, 1998, p.3).

**Identifying approaches and methods**

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| **Reflective box 1:**I would like to be open in saying that research philosophy has not always been at the forefront of my thinking. At times, conceptual factors have been peripheral to practical and logistical considerations. Repeatedly bringing theory back into focus, through reflection and evaluation, has taken conscious attention. The idea that there is “immense importance in educational research that the researcher feels undecided before latching onto a research design” (Mercieca & Mercieca, 2013, p.234) is reassuring. I can relate this feeling of uncertainty to my own experience, and that it has taken some time for my understanding of key concepts to become more certain. This may relate to ‘becoming’, as described by Attia and Edge (2017) in their conversation about researcher *reflexivity*, who say that “*becoming* probably involves a change of state” (Attia & Edge, p.34). ‘Change’ has been an ever-present feature of this research journey; logistically, in developing and adapting methods, and in developing an understanding of the project holistically, as I progressed with the write up. This fits well with Willig’s (2008) description of research as a ‘form of adventure’ – inferring an element of risk, associated with unfolding events that are initially ‘unknowable’. At earlier stages of planning, I was engaged in an “induction into the process of research … [which involved] exposure to a number of methodologies” (Mercieca & Mercieca, p.228). Considered alongside the idea that there are often “blurred boundaries” (Nakata, 2015, p.179) between paradigms, types of research, and between thought and action throughout the research process, this illustrates that the process is non-linear, and developing clarity can take some time. Although I ultimately settled on an appreciative inquiry approach, I had been interested in ethnography, and felt drawn to the idea of working within a particular context, with the insights this might offer; the idea that, through an ethnographic lens, the *general* might be inferred from the *particular*, “a world [perceived] in a grain of sand” (Hammersley, 1990, p.600). This also relates to a previous research experience in an AP setting, when I was a first year Trainee. My experience in this setting was very positive and I was aware of the potential for richness of interaction in a ‘live’ setting, which might enable “detailed exploration of the interwoven aspects of the topics or processes studied” (Yardley, 2000, p.215).  |

**Figure 5: Reflective box 1, describing uncertainty and progression in research journey.**

I was clear that this research would locate within the qualitative paradigm. I am attracted to the flexibility of qualitative approaches, which are considered less prescriptive than orthodox psychology methods (Marecek et al., 1997). Furthermore, as qualitative methods have become more prominent in social science disciplines (Hammersley, 1990) I felt reassured that this would meet quality requirements, while understanding that issues of generalisability, validity, replicability, ethics, audience, and subjectivity or bias, affect both qualitative and quantitative researchers (Marecek et al., 1997, p.632).

A qualitative approach fit with my aim of developing findings inductively without a fixed set of hypotheses, prioritising exploration and immersion (Marecek et al., 1997) which enabled me to focus on participants’ contributions and give precedence to their voice. As a qualitative researcher, I was aware of my role as an observer utilising material practices to construct a ‘world’ through interpretation – as described by Mertens (2005).

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| **Reflective box 2:**Mertens (2005, p.231) cites Lincoln and Guba who have observed a *hybridity* in research paradigms, and reflected on their own work as essentially constructionist, but influenced or informed by aspects of the transformative paradigm. I feel similarly about this research. The Transformative Paradigm shares ontological and epistemological assumptions with the Constructivist Paradigm, but with an additional consideration of historical factors, particularly in relation to oppression (Mertens, p.9/10). It is associated with participatory methods and has emancipatory aims. I feel that this applies to my research, or the way that I had planned it. My initial aim was to provide a platform, or space, to amplify the voices of those who have not been heard as clearly, or authentically, as they should be. *Oppression* is an evocative and emotive term, and I do not use it lightly, but feel it is appropriate for describing some excluded children – both historically, and in contemporary spaces. It might therefore be fair to say that I held transformative aspirations, although this did not ultimately play out.  |

**Figure 6: Reflective box 2, describing overlap between paradigms.**

**Methods:**

**Case Study**

The choice of case study was made for the following reasons: by following a qualitative pathway, I had decided on a ‘rich and deep’ approach and felt that the opportunity for depth offered by a case study, with a focus on the “nuances and textures of real life” (Marecek et al., 1997, p.632) would enable a nuanced, and detailed understanding. The idea that case studies can offer specific contextual insight into contemporary phenomena (Farquhar, 2012) also fit well – in the case of this research, relationships between adults and pupils in an AP setting being a contemporary phenomenon within the modern education system. There is also an understanding of individuality or uniqueness about a case study which fit well with the aim of working in a context where great variation between AP settings is recognised (Pirrie & Macleod, 2009).

Case study research has been called suitable for investigating ‘why’ questions (Farquhar, 2012) and two ‘why’ question are included within the four research questions here. Crucially, a case study should be of interest not only to the researcher but at a wider level (Farquhar, 2012) which situates this work within the literature and research context. It was anticipated that themes generated from the data would resonate with experiences across different settings working within similar contexts, as an ‘exemplar’ of a more general phenomenon (Willig, 2008, p.77) and could be considered in some way *instrumental*; however, the uniqueness of the setting and context defines this case study as *intrinsic* and primarily interesting in itself (Willig, 2008) – and for this reason precludes this research from being readily generalisable. This case study involving a real-world context, can also be called naturalistic (Willig, 2008). I aimed to approach this research with an open mind, without pre-formulated hypotheses – as described by Willig (2008) – and subsequent approaches to data analysis were predominantly inductive. I immersed in the data as openly as possible, and did not apply theory directly during the analysis, other than what I brought to the interpretation in a positional sense.

**Participatory methods**

Participatory methods define participants as active collaborators (Braun & Clarke, 2013) with participatory research underpinned by an awareness of hierarchy, power and knowledge orientation (Brown, 2021, p.3). An understanding of participatory research is supported by a continuum model, which demonstrates variability in this form of research, from minimally participatory to fully egalitarian, with most participatory research designs positioned between these binaries (Brown, 2021) – which applies to this research.



**Figure 7: Participatory research continuum (Brown, 2021, p.4).**

Participatory action research (PAR) as an example of this, includes all participants in the research process, with a clear awareness of power, aiming to empower or liberate ‘impoverished’ or ‘oppressed’ groups through dialogue, with the aim of enabling social change (Mertens, 2005, p.244). Some of these sentiments may be considered ambitious in the context of this research. Not all groups, or even the ‘oppressed’ group (pupils) were involved, however PAR remains relevant. Although ‘power’ was not as prominent a factor as it might have been, had pupils been involved, the absence of senior leaders enabled front-line staff to interact in a space without that hierarchical presence. In the context of “knowledge democracy … [as] a perspective on how knowledge is produced and disseminated” (Rowell & Feldman, 2019, p.2) knowledge in this research was produced by and within the participant group, and through subsequent researcher analysis. The following table includes key questions relating to the PAR approach, the majority of which I believe are applicable to this research, to varying degrees.

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| --- | --- | --- |
| **Question number** | **Questions related to Participatory Action Research**  | **Applicable to this research** |
| **1** | Was the research ‘problem’ originally identified by the community who experienced the problem? | **✓** |
| **2** | Was the goal of the research to fundamentally change and improve the lives of marginalised, oppressed groups?  | **✓** |
| **3** | Did the research process give power to participants?  | **✓** |
| **4** | Did the research participants belong to the group\* who experience the ‘problem’ being studied?  | **✓** |
| **5** | Will the participants experience increased consciousness, skill development and resources? | **✓** |
| **6** | Do researchers and participants share a peer relationship? | **X** |
| **7** | Can the results be used by and benefit the participants? | **✓** |

**Figure 8: Table showing questions related to PAR (adapted from Doe, 1996, in Mertens, p.244) and whether they are applicable to this research.**

\*Participants, as front-line staff members are involved in teacher-student relationships and so make up part of this ‘group’, with pupils being the other part.

**Appreciative Inquiry**

PAR recognises power within systems and relationships, and has transformational aims, aiming to prompt positive changes (Mertens, 2005). These principles fit well with Burr’s definition of appreciative inquiry, which is “not just to study some existing state of affairs but to change them for the better” (Burr, 2003, p.115). AI, as an inherently positive approach to personal and organisational change, seeks to identify and amplify “what gives life to human systems when they function at their best” (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2003, p.1). It involves *appreciating*, dually, as the act of recognising the best in people, or organisations; alongside growth, increasing (appreciating) in value – and *inquiring* – asking questions, exploring and discovering, seeking new possibilities (Cooperider & Whitney, 2005). This includes nuanced experiential factors that are meaningful for individuals, which can empower or energise the system (Ludema & Fry, 2011) and which are surfaced or explored in the AI process, dynamically, through participant interactions, where features of both appreciating and inquiring can have a catalytic effect (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2003) creating energy that drives change.

AI and its change-orientation locates within the social constructionist paradigm, and fits with a constructivist epistemology, in that it is facilitated through language, and concerned with the construction of shared meanings in social dialogue. As Gergen et al. (2002) explain, through appreciative inquiry “people can move toward the generation of new realities. By sharing stories of value, communalities are located … to create a sense of a new reality, which, in turn, lays the groundwork for alternative forms of action” (Gergen et al., 2002, p.96-7).

An AI approach is based on the following five core principles:

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| Constructionist | Constructive nature of language, ‘words create worlds’; shared understandings are created through social dialogue. |
| Simultaneity | Questioning, thought, and conversations are drivers of change. |
| Poetic | Language used by group members illustrates a worldview. |
| Anticipatory | Positive and hopeful images of the future equate to present-day action. |
| Positive | Positive expression, emotion, and social bonding; momentum generated through ‘amplifying’ positives.  |

**Figure 9: AI principles (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005).**

The diagram and table below illustrate the AI process.



**Figure 10: Appreciative Inquiry 4D model.**

**Figure 11: AI process(adapted from Martinez, 2017).**

**Define** the topic.

Phase 1: **Discover** – explore individuals’ positive experiences in the topic area; facilitate conversations with a focus on strengths and examples of positive practices, experiences, or reflections.

Phase 2: **Dream** – move from the ‘surfaced’ present to imagining the future and considering ‘what might be’, by visualising practice in times to come; consider a collective vision of the future in aspirational terms.

Phase 3: **Design** – move from an envisioned ideal to what could be called ‘positive and possible’, consider small steps, or larger steps of action that will build towards this future.

Phase 4: **Deliver** – consider and discuss how design ideas fit with practice and what needs to happen to make it so.

***The cyclical nature of the model demonstrates interactions between the phases, and that it is a dynamic and recursive process.***

AI has featured in research theses with a relational focus (e.g. Lewis, 2015; Pahil, 2018; Whitby, 2018) demonstrating its efficacy, and utility, as a participatory method for promoting positive changes in relationships within systems. The principles of AI felt like an ideal framework for this research, to support an understanding of relationships in the setting, with an aim of building on and developing existing good practice.

**Application of AI**

I drew on AI principles for the purposes of this research and adapted the format flexibly as the project progressed.From a ‘menu’ of different AI approaches, which vary in method and application, the item that fit most closely is an AI ‘Learning Team’; this being a small group of people with a specific project, aiming to collaborate in an evaluative and developmental context (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2003, p.32). However, it is important to be clear that, while I used the structure of an AI ‘learning team’ to plan and organise focus group interactions, I did not complete the full AI cycle. Time given to the Define phase in focus groups was minimal. The Discovery phase was given precedence, with less time for Dream and Design phases, and with the Delivery phase not possible to fully initiate. There are several reasons for this, as follows:

During initial conversations with participants it was apparent that they may not be able to attend every focus group session, due to work commitments. It was also apparent that sessions of an hour would be more straightforward for participants to attend, rather than longer sessions, of ninety minutes, for example. I felt as though it might be difficult to facilitate time and space for six participants to contribute equally within the limits of an hour session, particularly in the virtual context. I therefore planned to run initial sessions in two parallel groups of three (Group A and Group B – see Planned interview timetable, Figure 16). It was planned that participants would attend two initial focus groups in the smaller groups (of three) before coming together as a full group (of six) for the final session. I planned for the final session to be slightly longer, up to an hour and a half, to accommodate the larger group.

My aim was to undertake the Define, Discover and Dream phases in the initial smaller groups, and then begin the final whole group session by sharing feedback from the Dream phase; using the remainder of the final session to focus on the Design phase. I anticipated making changes to the groupings flexibly, when it became apparent who could, or could not attend particular sessions. If, for example, two out of three Group A or B participants had been unable to attend, I would have added the remaining participant to the other group (to make a group of four) – although, in the event, this was not necessary.

**Enactment of AI phases, questions used for each phase**

The following section describes how the AI was enacted, including questions relating to specific phases. Questions were informed by guidance from Whitney and Trosten-Bloom (2003) and the ‘six nimble questions’ (What led me here? What is my high point? What do I value? What is changing? What’s the best future I can imagine? What will it take to get us there?) suggested by Ludema et al. (2016).

As the interview timetable (populated retrospectively) in Figure 12 shows, the first two focus groups were fully attended (3 participants in each); the second two were almost fully attended (3 participants, and 2 participants respectively); and the final focus group was partly attended (4 participants – out of a possible 6).

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Order of interviews** | **Format** | **Participants** **(number in group)** | **AI Phases/s** |
| 1 | Group A, first group interview | Group A(3 participants) | **Define, Discover** |
| 2 | Group B, first group interview | Group B(3 participants) | **Define, Discover** |
| 3 | Group A, second group interview | Group A(3 participants) | **Discover, Dream** |
| 4 | Group B, second group interview | Group B(2 participants) | **Discover, Dream** |
| 5 | Groups A & B, whole group interview | Group A + Group B(4 participants) | **Dream, Design**  |

**Figure 12: Interview Timetable**

Phase 1, Define:

The topic of ‘teacher-student relationships’ in AP was defined prior to commencing research directly. This focus was established and agreed with a contact at the participant setting, prior to participants involvement.

*Define* questions used in focus groups:

1. Can you explain (briefly) your role, and work interests?
2. What are you hoping might come from our group discussions, and from this process?

Phase 2, Discover:

Some *discovery* was possible through speaking informally with participants, prior to formal data collection. I introduced some of the phrases and observations shared in these conversations in subsequent focus groups (see question 4, below). The Discovery Phase began in earnest with the commencement of focus group interviews and was the weightiest phase in terms of time allocated. After the first two focus groups it was apparent that participants had a wealth of insights to share, and that there were plentiful rich experiences to explore. I therefore made the decision to give more time to the Discovery phase. ‘Discovery’ featured in all focus groups.

*Discover* questions used in focus groups:

1. What were some of your first impressions [of this setting] when you started? What were some of the things that excited you?
2. What are some of the qualities and skills that you bring to working with young people?
3. Can you think of a particular time, or more than one time, when you felt good about your work, and your contribution?
4. [Name, group member] said: “If you’re interested in relationships, you couldn’t have done any better” [than this setting] – what do you think he might have meant by that?

Phase 3, Dream:

The aim of the dream phase is to disrupt the status quo by asking participants to consider future experiences – moving from the ‘surfaced’ present to imagining the future and considering ‘what might be’, creating a collective vision for times to come (Figure 10, Phase 2). Elements of ‘dreaming’ or considering the future were present in all focus group interviews, although became more focussed in the final focus group session, when all 6 participants discussed these dreams jointly.

*Dream* questions used in focus groups:

1. In the most positive, unlimited sense, what would your dreams be for relationships in the setting?
2. If you had three wishes, in the context of relationships, what would they be?

Phase 4, Design:

This phase involved considering some of the more practical aspects involved in planning steps towards a ‘positive and possible’ future (Figure 10, Phase 3). We began the Design phase as a whole group, and although this aspect of the discussion was relatively brief and preliminary, concrete suggestions for change were made, relating to possible changes at an organisational level in the setting, that were shared and explored between participants.

*Design* questions used in final focus group:

1. If we were to think in a pragmatic way, and scale back our dreams to something that might be called ‘positive and possible’, what might that be?
2. Are there any changes, or adjustments, in practice that might help to work towards those dreams?

Phase 4, Deliver:

This phase involves putting proposed changes from the Design Phase into action. Less formally, elements of ‘delivery’ may occur as a consequence of participant interactions. As an example, practices that have been highlighted as positive in dialogue between participants are more likely to be repeated in future practice, relating to the ‘anticipatory’ principle of AI (see Figure 9). A formal application of the Delivery Phase involves specific planning and actioning of next steps. As the research took place immediately before the setting closed for the summer holiday period, it was not logistically possible to arrange this immediately. It was considered essential, at this point, to involve additional members of the staff team, particularly at senior leadership level – those whose input is necessary to consider the systemic implications of possible changes, and who would be leading on it (see AI suggested changes – in the Analysis section). As such the Design Phase has yet to be fully enacted, and it is planned that this will begin during the process of disseminating analyses to the setting.

**Focus Groups**

Focus Group Interviews were used as a method of data collection. Kreuger & Casey (2014) describe focus groups as an interactive method of group interview, involving a guided discussion with a specific topic focus, with opportunities for sharing perceptions and perspectives. This method fit with my epistemological position, and specifically with appreciative inquiry, in that focus groups enable co-constructed meanings, created through collaborative dialogue, with a process involving participatory features of negotiation and mediation enabling consensus (Willig, 2008). Although the terms ‘focus groups’ and ‘group interviews’ can be used synonymously, there is an implicit difference, with interviews being more researcher-led, whereas focus groups position the researcher as a facilitator, whose aim is to ‘gently steer’ the discussion (Willig, 2008) – being researcher-facilitated but participant-oriented, and according with my aim to give precedence to participants’ ‘voice’. I prepared for and approached focus group interviews with sets of questions and prompts to generate discussion and guide the interview; recognising participant interactions as a strength of this approach, a key aspect of creating rich data (Willig, 2008) and so encouraging participants to elaborate, comment on, or develop ideas introduced by other group members. Further benefits of this method include its flexibility, enabling conversational flow; relatively few questions or prompts promoting creativity and spontaneity; a ‘safety in numbers’ principle providing confidence and reassurance for participants; synergy within the group enabling ‘snowballing’ of ideas; and the group situation being effective for including multiple voices (Krueger & Casey, 2014). Krueger (2003) and Krueger and Casey (2000) cited in Mertens (2005, p.386) provide the following guidelines for structuring focus groups, which I referred to when developing interview schedules: fewer than 10 questions; use of open-ended questions; avoidance of ‘why’ questions; context provided for questions (information provided to ensure understanding); and logical ordering of questions – general to specific.

The appreciative inquiry framework influenced the design of interview schedules, and subsequent questions, as described above.

**Thematic Analysis**

I used Thematic Analysis (TA) as a framework to guide the analytic stage of this research. TA as a systematic approach for identifying and analysing patterns of meaning (themes) across a data set (Braun & Clarke, 2013, p.178) is effective for working with qualitative data. It fits with participatory action research approaches, and the use of focus groups, as a means of generating qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2013). I used Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six-stage model of Thematic Analysis for analysing data transcribed from focus group interviews. A predominantly inductive, bottom-up and data-driven approach to the TA was taken. However, with positionality in mind, it is acknowledged that a purely inductive approach to data analysis is not possible; understanding that “data do not speak for themselves … [and] acquire meaning only within the framework(s) of theory and interpretation imposed by researchers” (Marecek et al., 1997, p.632). It is also important to demonstrate an awareness of the contention around use of the term ‘emerge’ or ‘emergent’ for themes identified in the data, which might negate the role of the researcher working with the data, in an active process, whereby themes are generated – this distinction has been made explicit by Braun and Clarke (2006 and 2018).

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| **Reflective box 3:**TA has been critiqued for a perceived lack of sophistication, especially in comparison with methods or methodologies that are more complex, and possibly more cryptic. But, as Clarke (2018) suggests, the suitability of TA for research, including research at a doctoral level, is corroborated by its extensive use and reference in published research; and further, any ‘sophistication’ in analysis is a contribution of the researcher, and not the method. As Clarke (2018) also highlights, the lack of more specific instructions for TA, in comparison with other methods, potentially shifts more responsibility to the researcher for developing rich and meaningful interpretations. It is also understood that Thematic Analysis, as a method of interpreting qualitative data, is considered to be a “foundational” (Braun & Clark, 2013, p.78) method of analysis, and to be used alongside additional interpretative frameworks. For this reason, it could be open to criticism for a lack of intellectual complexity. Despite this, its creators argue for its validity, and utility, and assert that Thematic Analysis “should be considered a method in its own right” (Braun & Clark, 2013, p.78). |

**Figure 13: Reflective box 3, critique of and support for thematic analysis.**

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| **Reflective box 4:**As may be apparent, I have been drawn to approaches that enable flexibility, as opposed to working to a specific ‘recipe’ or formula; and for this reason, primarily, I chose to use TA.While my interest in participant experiences perhaps recommends an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) methodology, I was persuaded by the flexibility of TA, being unbound to a theoretical position, that might be experienced as constraining. Using TA allowed me to accept and consider my own preconceptions, as opposed to trying to adopt a position of ‘bracketing’, for example, as is associated with IPA. |

**Figure 14: Reflective box 4, example of epistemological reflexivity.**

**Researcher Positionality**

As a qualitative researcher it is important to address the issue of positionality. This goes beyond Lincoln’s (1995, cited in Mertens, 2005, p.258) observation that all research is “representative of the position or standpoint of the author”, and includes the idea that qualitative researchers acknowledge the beliefs, values and experiences they bring (Marecek et al., 1997). It is therefore important to be clear about my position as a researcher, which includes my role as an active participant in the process of knowledge production. As a Trainee Educational Psychologist I occupy multiple roles. Initially as a Trainee student at the University of Sheffield. I am also engaged as a practicing Trainee, in the EPT that serves the area, and setting, where this research was based. I have benefitted from my role within the EPT, and the opportunity to develop this research builds on work initiated and developed by colleagues in the EPT. A relationship between key members of the setting’s Senior Leadership Team (SLT) and members of the EPT was already established. With this in mind, it was important to ensure that my approach fit with a participatory principle, or ‘collaborative inquiry’ with the needs and aims of the participants influencing the research (Gergen 1999, cited in Burr, p.155). This includes the needs and aims of individuals directly involved in the research process, but also the host setting at wider level.

This research, while negotiated and conducted as a discrete project in its own right, forms part of a wider and ongoing collaboration between the EPT and the AP academy where the research took place. Ideologically, it is important to state that I do not occupy a neutral position. My current and previous roles have heavily involved the inclusion of children and young people in educational settings. I am often required to advocate for young people in challenging circumstances, and I am very aware of the risks associated with educational and social exclusion. I am a doctoral psychology student, an Educational Psychologist in training, and so my views, perspectives, and practical experiences are informed by the application of psychology in relation to children and young people, within school systems; as well as wider educational and social issues relating to equality, and social justice. My roles in this research are, again, multiple, as both designer and facilitator, and subsequently as a ‘storyteller’ with an active role in interpreting data according to my own “cultural membership and cultural positionings … theoretical assumptions and ideological commitments” (Braun & Clarke, 2018, p.30) – as described above.

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| **Reflective box 5:**I had planned and hoped to develop something of an *insider* role in this research, through multiple visits to the setting, and by participating with staff and pupils in day-to-day school activities. Nonetheless, my role and positioning would have defined, and subsequently has defined my position as an *outsider* researcher. I had, maybe optimistically, thought that participating in the setting would offer some form of insider approach. On reflection, this was possibly overly ambitious. Had I been able to spend a month of Fridays at the setting, I feel that would have been enough time to support the development of communicative and mutual relationships with staff and pupils, however, my role, and my aims would have precluded ‘insider’ membership – although, maybe less of an ‘outsider’. I have considered Nakata’s (2015) view that it may not be helpful to view research as either *insider* or *outsider*, and that, more importantly, researchers should “delve deeper into their positioning, taking their background into consideration … speculate about their positions at deeper levels … situate their study within a broad research framework, and thereby take a critical look at their own research” (p.169) – which I have aimed to do. As such, I feel that my approach, while described as an outsider approach, contains some ‘insider’ elements, due to aspects of shared membership with participants, both ideologically, and as active participants in the AI.  |

**Figure 15: Reflective box 5, example of personal and epistemological reflexivity.**

**Procedure**

The following section describes the procedural aspects of the research process, including further details relating to participants and recruitment, data collection, and subsequent transcription and analysis.

**Background**

As a Trainee Educational Psychologist I have relationships with staff at my university, The University of Sheffield, and with colleagues at the Educational Psychology Team (EPT) where I am on placement. My interest in contributing to the research in this area began some time previously, however, through conversations with EPT colleagues, and with one of my university tutors, I discovered an opportunity to build on work that had already begun. Within the EPT, Research and Development (R & D) work is ongoing; and work in my area of interest had already been initiated. As such, I was able to develop a relationship with a setting that had already established a working relationship with the EPT. This enabled me to build on and contribute to work that had already started; with the product of this research considered useful in several contexts; as a research case study interesting in itself; as an AI, leading to qualitative feedback for the setting to be considered in relation to potential changes in their organisation; and also that there could be a tangible benefit for the EPT, with research findings contributing towards R & D outcomes.

**Setting**

This research was conducted in a large, metropolitan Local Authority in the north of England. The setting I worked with is one of three Alternative Provision settings forming a specialist academy. The academy has approximately 300 pupils on roll, aged 5-16, and around 200 members of staff. This academy is part of a wider Academy Trust, which oversees 23 academies, and promotes inclusive values and approaches to education. My initial point of contact in the setting was a member of the senior leadership team. Contact details for this individual were shared by a colleague, who had an established working relationship with them, and with the setting, through their work as an EP. This setting, within its own academy, was chosen due to their relational work with young people, and a focus on relationships, which is communicated explicitly in their ethos; alongside aims of developing practice by engaging in research.

**Participant sample**

Six participants were involved. Participants were all employed by the same educational setting, and were known to one another in a professional context, although not all working together directly on a regular basis. All six participants had full time positions in the setting. Three were female, and three were male. All six participants had ‘front-line’ positions that involved working directly with pupils and other staff members on a daily basis, and in this respect the group can be described as homogenous. Specifically their roles were:

* Three Teaching Assistants (one of these was a Higher Level Teaching Assistant)
* Two Teachers
* One Pastoral Team member

**Recruitment**

The process of recruitment was made more straightforward by the context; by the fact that I was not able to spend time on site, and so participant selection issues were avoided. I communicated with my contact in the setting via email, and followed up with a video call, to explain and discuss the proposed research, and provide an opportunity to answer any questions. I shared a Research Summary (see Appendices) and a personal One Page Profile so that potential participants would be able read about the research and also about me, briefly, as an individual, before registering any interest.

This enabled staff members to share expressions of interest with my contact, who then shared contact details (work email addresses) so that I could continue. Potential participants agreed to my contacting them via email, initially. I was then able to follow up expressions of interest with an offer of further communication via email, telephone, or video call conversation, to discuss the project and answer any questions potential participants may have had. Following this, I shared a Research Information Sheet (Appendix 2) and Participant Consent Form (Appendix 3) for potential participants to consider again, before deciding whether they would like to participate. From this process the six participants agreed to be involved with the research. They gave their consent verbally, and via the Participant Consent Form. Four consent forms were completed by participants and returned to me via email. Two forms were completed by me, electronically, at the request of these participants, and with their consent. All participants agreed to participate in focus group interviews via a video conferencing platform, Google Meet. Based on participant availability I developed an interview timetable. I created two separate groups, with three participants in each. I shared this timetable with participants, and with my contact in the setting.

**Data collection and analysis**

I facilitated five focus group interviews in total. The first four interviews were approximately one hour long. The fifth interview was slightly longer and was around eighty minutes. I considered that six participants may be too many to include in one group, with the interviews taking place online, via video calling, as it would have been harder to ensure equity of opportunities to contribute. So I created two subgroups, A and B, of three participants each. These subgroups, and I, met together twice each, and then joined together for the fifth and final interview.

The planned interview timetable is as shown:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Order of interviews** | **Format** | **Participants (number in group)** |
| 1 | Group A, first group interview | Group A (3 participants) |
| 2 | Group B, first group interview | Group B (3 participants) |
| 3 | Group A, second group interview | Group A (3 participants) |
| 4 | Group B, second group interview | Group B (3 participants) |
| 5 | Groups A & B, whole group interview | Group A + Group B (6 participants) |

**Figure 16: Planned interview timetable.**

The aim of this was to enable each participant time and space to speak, which might have been more difficult in a larger group. This was with an awareness of the risks or limitations associated with a focus group method, including relative passivity, reproduction of ideas, and imbalance between participant contributions. I took an active role in ensuring that all participants were given equal opportunities to speak and answer every question. Focus group interviews were conducted according to the above timetable. Timings for each interview were negotiated with participants, and participant groups, and took place within standard working hours. Each focus group interview took place via Google Meet and recorded as an MP4 file. Data files were stored securely on my University of Sheffield UniDrive and secured via encryption and password protection. The interview schedules provided a guide only, and it was important that conversations were able to meander and evolve naturally.

**Transcription**

Prior to formal transcription, I listened, and re-listened to each interview several times. I first did this during the data collection process, and, for example, I shared examples of thoughts or comments from previous interviews in subsequent interviews, both for the purpose of reflection and elaboration. I also did this across sub-groups, so the process of sharing ideas between groups happened in interviews three and four, and before all participants met together in the final group interview. In the process of listening and re-listening, I made hand-written notes which reflects the first stage of researcher reflection and analysis. Following this, each individual interview was transcribed formally, and hand-typed, as opposed to using transcription software. Although this was not especially time-effective, I appreciated this as an important part of the research process as it enabled me to truly immerse in the data, while transcribing over multiple listenings.

**Approach to Thematic Analysis**

As described, a primarily and predominantly (although not entirely) inductive approach was taken to working with the raw data. My aim was to begin with a bottom-up, data-led perspective, positioning the data as the driver in the identification and development of themes; while also acknowledging my “theoretical and epistemological commitments [as a researcher], and [that] data are not coded in an epistemological vacuum” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.84). I used Braun and Clarke’s (2006) traditional six-stage model, which is as follows:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Phase one | Familiarisation with data: including transcription; immersion involving multiple re-readings and recording of initial thoughts and ideas (largely instinctive). |
| Phase two | Generating initial codes: systematic coding of interesting narrative features as they occur across the data set; collation of coding data. |
| Phase three | Searching for themes: collating codes into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to each potential theme. |
| Phase four | Reviewing themes: checking if themes clearly relate to coded extracts (Level 1) and the entire data set (Level 2); creation of a “thematic map” of the analysis. |
| Phase five | Defining and naming themes: further refinement of the specifics of each theme, and the overall “story” of the analysis; development of clear definitions and names for each theme. |
| Phase six | Producing the report: final analysis; selection of vivid, compelling extracts and final analysis of these, analysis considered in relation to the research question and literature; final production of a “scholarly report” describing the analysis. |

**Figure 17: Six-stage model of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.87).**

This was enacted as follows:

Phase one: The familiarisation phase began during the process of data collection, with multiple re-listenings and re-watchings of the recorded focus group interviews. I made initial hand-written notes of each focus group and reflected on initial observations that I had made with participants, in subsequent focus groups. This enabled me to establish initial ‘working’ themes, and to use targeted questioning in subsequent sessions to develop descriptions and nuance. Following the completion of focus groups, I transcribed the interviews manually, in a traditional sense, rather than using software.

Phase two: I made several coding ‘sweeps’ of each of the five transcripts. I then collated codes from each sweep, for each data set, and listed them (see Appendix 5 for full list). There were:

* 44 initial codes in Data Set 1.
* 47 initial codes in Data Set 2.
* 44 initial codes in Data Set 3.
* 37 initial codes in Data Set 4.
* 25 initial codes in Data Set 5.

I had expected to see codes reducing in number, indicative of ‘saturation’, and they did indeed reduce towards the end. I edited some of these codes instinctively and made minor semantic amendments to aid clarity as I read through, e.g. “transitions – emotion” became “emotion of pupils leaving – transition”. I listed the codes for each data set as separate bullet points on a Microsoft Word document; then ordered them alphabetically by selecting the ‘Home’ tab, then ‘Sort’, then ‘Sort by’ to ‘Paragraphs and Text’, I then chose ‘Ascending (A to Z) and selected ‘OK’ to complete the sort. I scanned for codes that were obviously similar, or duplications, reducing the number of codes, while considering the meaning contained within, or suggested by, each code; and then combining codes with the same or similar meaning, and reducing the number of codes further.

Phase three: I collated codes from the five data sets and repeated the above process of sorting, comparing, and collating codes, resulting in a set of codes representing the entire data set. I then spent a significant period of time developing the codes into distinct themes. I experimented with different ways of viewing and presenting codes, including mind maps (Appendix 6) which enabled me to (literally) draw links between related codes, as they developed into themes. I used coloured sticky notes to record codes and themes; and experimented with ordering and grouping them in different columns, and clusters (Appendix 6). This stage of the process felt especially organic, iterative, and recursive, as recommended by Clarke (2020). I preferred to adopt this traditional, ‘manual’ method, rather than using analysis software. This was a deliberate choice as I wanted to work with the data in a hands-on way, being guided by my own thoughts and instincts. I decided on a set of main themes and associated sub-themes.

Phase four: With an established set of main themes and sub-themes, I returned to each data set and conducted another sweep to read for each sub-theme, to establish confidence that themes were linked with sections highlighted during coding. As this included approximately five main themes with five sub-themes for each, to be read against data from five individual focus groups, this equated to well over a hundred further sweeps, which took some time. However I was already immersed in the data and had a refined set of codes to refer to. My reasoning for multiple sweeps of the entire data set was that I aimed to continue developing a holistic overview of the data and remain both mindful and open to changing my mind, or to finding new pockets of meaning. I reduced my main themes from five to four, and sub-theme themes from around twenty five to eighteen, as a result of combining sub-themes. I created a new thematic map (Appendix 7) and adjusted the graphics to represent something more constellatory, compared with my previous graphic, which appeared harder, and more hierarchical. Taking a deductive approach: having developed these four main themes inductively, I returned to the data to develop three further analyses: In terms of the appreciative inquiry aims, I was interested in potential changes identified by the participants, and so revisited the data to draw out both direct and indirect references to change. In the process of the AI, and by design, the final focus group session included a specific focus on this aspect, although references to change were present in earlier focus group interviews.

Phase five: I relistened to each individual focus group interview, with themes in hand, as a means of double-checking my choices and conclusions. I reconsidered each theme and made some small changes and amendments to wording, in a process of refinement. I ensured that I was able to provide a description of each theme verbally (I practiced this out loud) and that I could talk about themes holistically as constituent parts of the ‘whole story’ told in the analysis.

Phase six: I returned to highlighted extracts for each theme and wrote up each theme and clustered sub-themes, illustrated by what I hope are “vivid, compelling” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.87) extracts, in the form of a narrative. I undertook subsequent analysis in relation to the research questions, and literature, and wrote this up in prose form.

**Ethics**

Ethical approval was agreed by the University of Sheffield, School of Education Ethics Panel, on 26th June 2020. This includes data protection, or General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) related to The Data Protection Act 2018; ensuring compliance for the protection of personal data, under the following principles, so that personal data is: used fairly, lawfully, and transparently; used for specified, explicit purposes; used in a way that is adequate, relevant, and limited to only what is necessary; accurate and, where necessary, kept up to date; kept for no longer than is necessary; and handled in a way that ensures appropriate security, including protection against unlawful or unauthorised processing, access, loss, destruction, or damage (https://www.gov.uk/data-protection).

**Consent**

Consent was sought on an ongoing basis. Information about the research project and participation was shared with all participants (Appendix 2) prior to their consent to participate. Participants were offered the opportunity to have a conversation, explore the project, discuss, and ask questions, prior to their agreement to participate. Subsequent agreement was formalised via Participant Consent forms (Appendix 3) which provided their informed consent. Consent was sought during every subsequent focus group interview. Participants were reminded of the principle of voluntary participation, and their right to withdraw their consent “at any time … [without having] to give any reasons … [and with] no adverse consequences [for withdrawal]”. I was vigilant for any signs of discomfort during group interviews, and was prepared to direct participants to further support, had this been needed (see below).

**Potential harm**

The nature of the research, and particularly the Appreciative Inquiry framework, as a tool for exploring positive experiences, meant that the potential for harm to participants was considered to be minimal. However I was prepared to support participants to guide them to further support within the school system, and more widely within the Council’s Children’s Services, had it been necessary.

Support within the school system, specifically, would mean a school Wellbeing Champion trained in adult mental health, a Line Manager, or a member of the Senior Leadership Team. Had any signs or indications of malpractice been spoken of during interactions with participants, I would have ensured procedures specified by the Council and Children’s Services of the setting were followed; any safeguarding concerns would have been directed by safeguarding policies of the Council and Children’s Services, and, again, I would have ensured these were followed.

**Data processing**

Participants consented to video and audio recordings. These were saved on my personal storage drive, UniDrive, as provided by the University of Sheffield. This storage system is supported by the University’s IT Services. It is protected and accessible via password, known only to me. Interviews have been watched, listened to, and transcribed only by me. Following transcription, anonymised data transcripts have been stored on a password-protected device which only I have access to. All video and audio recordings will be permanently deleted, subsequently. I have ensured that anonymised data do not contain any features that would enable identification of individuals or the setting. The anonymised data have been stored for analysis and write-up on a protected device that only I have access to. I have ensured that any excerpts of transcribed data presented in the analysis, and which may be shared with those outside of the research, do not contain any features by which individuals and/or the setting are identifiable.

**Analysis**

**Introduction: developing themes**

The analyses presented in this chapter summarise ‘patterns of data’, established as themes, through a recursive process of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). According with my aim of amplifying participants’ ‘voice’, this section of the analysis includes predominantly the words spoken by them. A critical view of the data and considering what it might suggest in relation to theory and literature, while beginning here, extends and deepens in the chapter following.

The analytic process operated over several stages, as described in the previous chapter. From inductive analyses across the complete data set, I identified four main themes, with either four or five sub-themes for each. Each main theme represents a central organising concept (Braun & Clarke, 2020) providing structure, and connecting sub-themes that cluster around the central theme, like a constellation, or a flower, as it has been described (Clarke, 2018). Related data have been grouped, refined, and included selectively; as opposed to ‘bucket’ themes, which aim to include all data relating to a specific idea or concept (Braun & Clarke, 2020). These four main themes are quite different, however, I found natural overlap between sub-themes. Numerous data extracts support multiple themes and sub-themes, and their positioning is necessarily selective. An additional fifth theme, relating to suggested changes elicited in the process of appreciative inquiry, is also included.

Throughout the analytic process I aimed to hold the research questions in mind, and consider what participants described as positive aspects, the ‘successes and strengths’, of their relationships in the setting; how they described their experiences of working with pupils; what values and approaches were being communicated by participants, both explicitly and implicitly; and what potential changes, within staff practices and the school systems, participants identified that could improve relationships within the setting. I have considered the order of presentation, and have aimed to create a sense of flow, with themes and sub-themes building on one another as a developing narrative, which I believe tells the story of the data as a whole.

**Main theme one: structures that enable**

**Figure 18: Main theme one, structures that enable.**

I originally named this theme ‘enabling structures’ but wanted to be clear that these structures, both literal and conceptual, physical and human, might enable or empower staff in their roles, as opposed to staff enabling the structures; although it is also the case that staff actively contribute to these structures within their work and approaches in the setting.

**Sub-theme one: empowering environment**

This sub-theme relates to the physical and human environment that supports the setting’s community.

*The benefit that we have of working in a brand-new purpose-built building, is that we can do and provide what we can because of our environment … there is nowhere anywhere that looks like [this setting] or that even has the same space, has the same light, all those little things that people just take for granted, the amount of light that comes in, the amount of heat in the room, the width of the corridors* (Focus group 5).

Significant financial investment has been made into the setting, and although this was not referred to directly, inferentially, I developed an impression that the physical environment conveys ‘value’ to pupils, and to staff, with the above example expressed in almost idealised terms. A further enabling factor is suggested by both continuity and practical factors that the space offers for flexible working, facilitated though the environment.

*Because we’ve got the new builds, it’s the way those buildings are spilt into four mini schools, so … the majority of pupils … only get to see the staff that are attached to their class team … we don’t have supply teachers … [pupils] know they can start to build … relationships with these people, because they are … always going to be there … it takes a lot of that pressure away* (Focus group 2).

And social opportunities:

*During break and lunch … you’ll round up three or four students and take them all to the gym together, they might not necessarily be in the same class, but then they get to socialise in the hall, as well as playing football together, and that enables the students … to get to know the staff members … have a general understanding of- “oh, actually I know that staff member, he’s done some boxing with me, or some football” … we’ll welcome all the students* (Focus group 2).

Positioned as advantageous in comparison with mainstream settings.

*It’s not that easy when you’ve got a class of thirty kids in a mainstream school, all with the expectations that have been set for them to achieve that grade … so as well as environmental problems you’ve also got resource problems* (Focus group 3).

**Sub-theme two: human resources**

This group of data communicates the idea that staff provide a resource for one another. There is a distinction between this and ‘teamwork’ (included within another theme) as this sub-theme perhaps suggests utility as opposed to reciprocity. Participants describe examples of literal and emotional support, which I have interpreted as an enabling structure within the setting. An example of emotional support:

*We’re in a high pressure situation a lot of the time, it can be highly stressful, and highly emotional as well, especially if you’re within one class set or whatever, every teacher and their TAs … they all get to know each other really well, and they’ll all look to one another for support as and when it’s needed* (Focus group 4).

Something more literal relating to a human intervention:

*We got a new TA to replace me, and she had the same problem with the child again not trusting a new adult in the classroom, couldn’t deal with it, and it went … to [them] attacking this adult instead … I was able to go up to him, while he would be in the middle of hurting this adult, and I would have to restrain him … [but then] he’d take my hand and walk out of the classroom* (Focus group 1).

An example of staff being commissioned as a resource to support the reintegration of a pupil:

*One of the teachers that he had … wasn’t the right teacher for him … that year he had a lot of issues … when he came back to school … he was asked which teacher he felt the most safe with, the most comfortable with … and he said me … he got to come back into my class and spend some time with me when he came back to school* (Focus group 3).

**Sub-theme three: trust**

This sub-theme communicates the importance of trust within the setting, which I have interpreted as having a pervasive quality, that exists between senior leaders and front-line staff, and between staff and pupils. Staff shared examples that demonstrate they are entrusted to work creatively and instinctively, as autonomous practitioners within the school system.

*[Members of the setting’s SLT] were really supportive, which you don’t get in a lot of mainstream schools because there’s … so many boxes that have to be ticked, and for me that was really exciting because it was like … being left to my own devices so I can come up with how I want to deliver things* (Focus group 1).

Further examples infer trust placed in staff, supporting pedagogical and relational spontaneity, and enabling staff to respond to the needs of pupils (being pupil-centred), without having to ‘tick the boxes’ associated with mainstream education.

*We do what works best for the students at that time … we do have a timetable and we do work to it, but … we’ve been able to alter what we do to suit the needs of the children at that time* (Focus group 1).

A further example which might infer trust in an individual staff member:

*One staff member in particular … it wasn’t quite working out, they [the leadership team] identified his strengths, moved him … and he’s been fantastic … we’re recognising what he’s good at, and that comes with confidence, and looking at things in more of a positive way* (Focus group 4).

I have interpreted trust as an enabling factor for setting staff, and something which may also feed into the setting community more widely with a ‘ripple effect’ between staff members and pupils.

**Sub-theme four: system in sync**

This sub-theme reflects an impression of cohesion and synchrony, relating to values, ethos, beliefs, and approaches. This also includes something less tangible – a spirit, or essence, of the setting that presented in participants’ conversations.

*There’s this culture that’s embedded in you from the start that all the staff here care … buzz terms like unlimited positive regard … encompasses many things but also encompasses the fact that all the staff here really do want what’s best for these kids* (Focus group 4).

Providing consistency, and how important this is for pupils, was referred to several times, by different participants.

*Consistency is key throughout the whole setting, and if you’re not consistent then it just falls apart and you don’t get the results you want and you don’t build those relationships within the classroom* (Focus group 1).

*Our pupils know the timetable … off by heart … we have it displayed at three different locations within the room, but they know “at this time we do this, at this time we do this” … so it’s good that you have that consistency, and we’re organised within that team* (Focus group 3).

Participants sharing similar examples, building on one another’s contributions, and returning to similar themes, around care, empathy, restorative, and pupil-centred approaches, gave me the impression that staff are ‘singing from the same hymn sheet’, with priorities of supporting pupil wellbeing and forming positive relationships.

*The ethos of the way [this setting] works is the shift [from mainstream education] … our shift is more about progress in the social and emotional side, so learning comes later, relationships come first, confidence building, self-esteem, wanting to attend, feeling happy, being safe, all that comes first* (Focus group 2).

The idea that staff hold a set of shared, values and beliefs, echoing aspects of the setting’s ethos, presented in participants’ contributions, with this synchrony providing a structural support, enabling at an individual level, while acting as a model for new staff especially, and supporting the setting as a whole.

**Sub-theme five: structural resilience**

This is an attempt to communicate, through metaphor, that flexibility within the setting is highly valued and embedded in practices; understanding that working with young people who have a high level of relational and SEMH needs will inevitably involve ‘relational tremors’ – potentially unsettling or undermining the system. With this in mind, structural flexibility might be seen as something that protects the system.

*If … [students are] less willing to engage … at that point in time…it’s having that flexibility to essentially play games with them … it not only helps them regulate, whereas pushing the paper-based learning may have caused an issue, they’re still … [learning] but they’re doing it through play, they think they have some level of control, because they have … [made a choice] … it seems to really work quite well even with the older children* (Focus group 1).

*At … [this setting] there is a flexibility to say what works best for your children, and if that works for your children then do it, do it that way* (Focus group 2).

*It’s understanding what the children need … and … just being creative, thinking outside the box, and thinking – what does this child need, how can we solve it?* (Focus group 5).

With a flexibility that extends to staff roles:

*My role is … academic … social, pastoral work … either providing support with the basic maths and English work, or if I need to leave the class for whatever reason, to [help a student] re-regulate, or calm down* (Focus group 2).

*Be prepared to take on different roles or be prepared to do different things … outside your comfort zone or be prepared to handle situations that might not be natural for you … stay open minded and learn to be able to deal with as many different personalities as you can and be prepared to face as many different situations as you can think of* (Focus group 4).

Being able to absorb relational difficulties with the flexibility to spontaneously adapt ways of working also relates to the previous sub-theme of trust. I would suggest that flexibility within the setting represents a child-centred approach, that enables the system to work with pupils (rather than against them).

**Main theme two: experiencing reciprocity**

**Figure 19: Main theme two, experiencing reciprocity.**

Reciprocity was a prominent theme that presented throughout the dataset. Although the words, ‘reciprocal’ or ‘reciprocity’ were not used by participants, I developed an impression that staff value one other very highly, and that participants were communicating their work in the setting is a continuous reciprocal experience.

**Sub-theme one: ‘teamwork makes the dream work’**

The most overt example of reciprocity relates to teamwork. There is a very strong sense of teamwork throughout the data; participants refer to the support of colleagues, how well staff work together and how important these relationships are.

*Teamwork is a key, massive factor … knowing that you’re not alone … going to and getting support, from colleagues next door, or SLT, or from staff downstairs, you know there is a wide breadth of support … it’s that cross pollination … it’s a really strong bond that we have that underpins everything that we do, because you know that you’re not alone and if you’re struggling there is somebody who will help you* (Focus group 5).

*Staff connectedness … is really special, and more so than anywhere else I’ve worked … at the end of the day you’ve all just got each other’s back … connectedness among staff is incredible* (Focus group 4).

Teamwork is related to flexibility, and deploying staff based on their strengths and skills:

*Not every staff is suited to some children, but is very well suited to other children, so we’re able to … move people about a bit so it really fits* (Focus group 1).

*As a staff we are all good at identifying each other’s strengths … if there’s a young person who needs that particular skillset … everyone is cool just to say “right, you go off and work with…” [whichever member of staff that might be] so I think that the staff are really, really good at that* (Focus group 4).

*[If a pupil] is not working brilliantly in that classroom today for whatever reason, but we’ve got a good relationship with this other teacher … let’s send him in there … and that relationship is there, that teamwork* (Focus group 5).

In terms of ‘the dream’ this can be related to collective aims and values, as described further.

**Sub-theme two: enacting collective values**

Participants often referred to attitudes and values, explicitly and implicitly, in descriptions of their work and approaches. This relates to supporting the education, development and inclusion of children and young people with SEND and SEMH needs, and pupils who are understood as being vulnerable.

*The way [the setting] works you work intensely with pupils … we shadow and protect the kids that we have with us all the time, and we cushion them and make sure they’re alright* (Focus group 2).

*We have to create opportunities for them to increase their social skills and their ability to take turns, and to listen for more than three minutes at a time … and once they’ve got those … they learn quicker* (Focus group 2).

*For us as a setting … you may have had a really bad day, or a bad morning, but you are coming back in, you are having a fresh start, whatever has happened in the past has happened in the past … rewriting and resetting … the values and the high expectations that we all have, it really works … the kids know where they stand and what is expected of them … what as a staff and as a team we will do* (Focus group 1).

As well as a sense of frustration that other settings do not represent these values.

*I wish there were other places that looked at social and emotional mental health as we do, it’s not just about behaviour and not being able to conform, there’s reasons behind that, and once those reasons are taken out and looked at individually, these pupils can actually do really well, they just need a very different approach to their learning and are supported* (Focus group 5).

The values held by staff were expressed explicitly and evident in the approaches they described.

**Sub-theme three: bonding and attachment**

This sub-theme, more overtly, highlights that staff recognise the difficult past experiences of pupils attending the setting, and how this affects their ability to access current relationships, subsequently informing staff approaches, which are evidently pupil-centred.

*There are lots of different mediums as well … different ways we can build those relationships with pupils … we have a variety of children with different needs … so it’s never a one-size-fits-all type of thing, we can do lots of different activities with them and build their confidence up in … ways that suit them, you know we’ll find out what it is that they like … lots of flexibility, lots of variation of what we can do with the young people to help build their relationship with us as staff* (Focus group 2).

*I was really proud that I’ve been able to develop that bond with the child … some of the students, and this one in particular had been in foster care so he’d had a lot of difficult relationships, so having experienced that unconditional love, that unconditional friendship, that unconditional “I’m going to be there for you” … some of these children have never experienced that* (Focus group 3).

*Speaking to home [about a pupil] they also said that he has never attached to anybody else other than the person at home before, so it was quite nice to see and hear how he attached to them and how he’s then attached to me … we’ve got a really good relationship now* (Focus group 1).

There is also recognition that forming close relationships can be problematic in some ways, for staff and pupils:

*When you get to the end of the year and they have to go on to a different class or they have to leave school, it is really painful* [*subsequent agreement within the focus group*] *it is horrible, oh my goodness* (Focus group 3).

*Some of these children … have never known that unconditional attachment, and so they can become too reliant on somebody and too attached, and they need to learn that actually you can move on and still form attachments, still keep those attachments to some extent, but it’s healthy to move on as well, otherwise it can actually be negative for them* (focus group 5).

Relating to the central organising theme, reciprocity is evident here, in the sense that both staff and young people in the setting are relationally and emotionally connected with one another.

**Sub-theme four: social and relational modelling**

‘Modelling’ in itself might have been a sub-theme, but I have aimed to be more specific. I developed an understanding that when young people arrive in the setting, from the outset, a process of staff modelling behaviours, and staff interactions, sets the tone and creates a positive atmosphere. Participants spoke about staff modelling for staff, staff modelling for pupils, and also pupils modelling for other pupils.

Staff modelling for pupils:

*These children don’t always understand … their behaviour … towards other people and it’s talking to them a lot about it and explaining to them that even though they are behaving in a certain way, we are still going to be loving and caring and kind and model positive behaviour* (Focus group 1).

*It’s calming … because if a student is having a really difficult day, and if an incident has already happened, in the classroom, they could already be slightly heightened, if the staff are modelling like, “oh, we’re calm’, you know, everything’s fine” … it’s preventing a student going from an already anxious state of mind to a crisis state of mind, it really does make a big, big difference* (Focus group 2).

*When ours do become dysregulated … we … ask them to put things right, but we also help them, so if, for example, they’ve … thrown six chairs over … [we] will say, “right, ok, you pick up that one, we’ll pick up these ones”, so it’s not such an overwhelming task, they know that we’re still there, we’re still going to help them* (Focus group 1).

Staff modelling for pupils, and also for new staff (‘setting the tone’):

*For us as staff … moving around the building with a group of students, when we meet staff on a corridor, the least we’ll do is smile at somebody else … we’ll smile and we’ll say “hello” and all the rest of it, and it just builds that nice atmosphere for children … we’re modelling the behaviours and what we need them to do, and also we’re setting the tone of the whole environment, so they see everybody getting on, and everybody being nice to each other … just saying, “hi, Miss” [exaggerated positive voice] as you’re walking past, or saying, “morning sir” and some people walk past and they’ll just salute each other, and kids get to see you doing that all the time, which is very, very natural for us* (Focus group 2).

Staff facilitating pupil-pupil modelling:

*I’ve said, “do you want to read a story to us all?” and they’ve felt like, “oh, I’m really good with the little ones” … they feel like they’re achieving something, and our younger ones are like, “ooh, it’s an older one” … and look up to them a bit more, so that helps staff but also helps pupils as well* (Focus group 5).

*Giving them that level of responsibility with the older ones can help them demonstrate more positive [interactions] … because they know they’re being a role model … one of mine last year … did a little bit of peer mentoring … and he could demonstrate at times some really inappropriate behaviours, but when he was with the students he sort of knew that he had to be that role model and demonstrate those positive behaviours because that was the purpose of what we were doing, I think it really benefitted them both* (Focus group 5).

A very reciprocal experience, a continuous process of modelling develops an atmosphere, influencing how the setting community functions as a collective.

**Sub-theme five: relational feedback and affirmations**

This sub-theme identifies how staff are very receptive to implicit, often non-verbal, relational feedback from pupils. There may be many situations where it takes some time before positive influences are evident in the behaviour of the pupils. This sub-theme supports the idea that staff are highly attuned, and always ‘on the lookout’ for indicators of positive steps.

‘Reading’ behaviour:

*We can read the students as soon as they come in, because we know our pupils, we can read their behaviour, as soon as they come in on a morning, and we know what will probably work best for them that day … from the first words that come out of their mouth, or actions* (Focus group 1).

*We had one student who used to walk straight in one door and straight out of the other door … because he didn’t want to be in a classroom full of other people, and you kind of knew that’s because he needed to talk about something* (Focus group 1).

Relational moments (affirmations):

*The moments that we treasure the most … you can’t capture … in an academic book … those little moments … [relating to] social and emotional development, they’re the things that mean the most to us … those little moments that make all the difference … we’re tuned to look out for those things* (Focus group 2).

Understanding pupils as individuals is key to this.

*We make ourselves very aware of what the students have been through in their past, and what it is that has made them end up where they are today, and we take into consideration things like traumatic experiences, and their family backgrounds … those things for us are very, very important because they are what shapes the child, and … what shape the way that we deal with that child* (Focus group 2).

Signs of positive relational connections are important to staff.

*Myself and another member of staff [were] walking back from a home visit … and two of the students came running up to the window, waving at us and wanting to talk to us … that happens to a lot of the staff … just that they [the pupils] see you there and want to interact with you* (Focus group 4).

However, important relational or affirming moments can also be commonplace.

*When it happens, you feel it, you sense it, you know it, you appreciate it, but it’s not like “oh my god”, because that’s what you go to work for every day, and those things happen every lesson, every session, every day, every day of the week* (Focus group 2).

Through attunement with pupils, staff are receptive to affirming relational feedback for their pedagogies and approaches; demonstrating that pupils feel safe, secure, confident, and are making progress in their relationships.

**Main theme three: emotional investment**

**Figure 20: Main theme three, emotional investment.**

This theme presents the idea that working with pupils who have a high level of relational and SEMH needs is emotionally demanding; staff invest in their work, and in relationships from an emotional perspective.

**Sub-theme one: rolling with the punches**

Summarising the idea that staff accept the challenges, conflict and situations involving physical and verbal aggression, including sexualised language, when they take a role in the setting.

*The children here … need to vent, because they have a lot of issues going on at home sometimes, some of them have mental health issues that they struggle to deal with, that they need support with, and they do need to vent, they do need to get angry sometimes* (Focus group 3).

However, this can take some adjusting to, a ‘baptism of fire’ that illustrates the challenges for new staff acclimatising to the setting; and again, reinforcing the idea that the setting is, in some ways, unique.

*It’s been a big learning curve for me … I kind of had a rough idea, because I’d worked with young people … with significant disabilities and mental health issues, before coming to [this setting] … and I think I underestimated how complex, the amount of trauma, and how vulnerable these kids are, and … the impact that will have on a student … at the start [it was] almost like a baptism of fire* (Focus group 2).

*Because they’re so young the children don’t understand how to express their emotions in any other way than hitting or biting … I’ve had one child who at the beginning … didn’t like me at all … he would very often bite and hit me, on a daily occurrence, in fact the very first day he punched me in my testicles and told me that my mum was a slut [laughing] that was my first experience, and quite like a “wow, a lot to take on board”* (Focus group 1).

Participants’ reflections suggest that involvement in these situations is ‘par for the course’, an important feature of their relationships with pupils, and that they employ approaches to help manage the emotional demands.

*When things do go wrong, which, they do go wrong, and you have fallings out with your students, there’s just some things which you can’t control, don’t take it personally, don’t take it to heart, bounce back the next day, talk- communicate with other staff members, that’s quite important* (Focus group 4).

*That comes with building a relationship with them, that comes with being there when they are dysregulated, and they are spitting at you, and biting you and hitting you, and remaining calm, and telling them that’s not acceptable but after it’s finished, and they’re calm again, continuing to be exactly as you were before and not changing your behaviour towards them* (Focus group 1).

Following on from this is the idea that evidence of progress can often take some time.

**Sub-theme two: playing the long game**

That the ‘fruits of (emotional) labour’ are not always evident, immediately, links with the idea that pupils at the setting, and especially new pupils, may be continuing to experience or process previous negative experiences from their education, or home lives.

The idea of investment and ‘putting in’:

*It is the time you have to build those relationships … it’s the investment that you have to put in, because … these children can be difficult to work with, being really honest, it’s not easy and you have to take the time to want to invest in these children … I think that is a massive thing in building relationships at [this setting] because you do invest a lot of time and energy* (Focus group 3).

Time, and patience:

*When a student first comes to [this setting] there is certainly some sort of adapting … they’re figuring everything out … they’ll try and test the boundaries of what they can get away with … they’ll usually form a key relationship with one member of staff … and then it’ll build gradually from them … I think that’s where it starts at least, the journey* (Focus group 2).

*A lot of our children … come in a lot lower in ability, as to your average mainstream child, where … you teach something and you move on to the next bit … ours actually need more, they need to step back, and that is allowed to happen* (Focus group 1).

*It was … a very long journey, it’s taken a lot to get to that stage … a lot of graft and a lot of hard work that we as a team had put in place … [then] he knew where we stood and if he did this his logical consequence would be this … that really worked for him* (Focus group 1).

A patient approach following a relational difficulty:

*Other staff members … can help to slowly start to repair that relationship with yourself again … it might be another day or another week, that young person will see your face and all they can think of is that last incident and … it’s back to square one with them, so having everybody else there to support you, and keep on talking to that young person, and slowly reintroducing yourself to them, I think that’s vital* (Focus group 4).

An aspiration for pupils, at the end of their time in the setting:

*The dream for these children is that they develop ways to manage their emotions in a healthy way, to be able to communicate … build positive relationships with people and to trust people, because a lot of my children don’t have that trust, because they’ve been so let down, I would love for that to happen, by the end of their … journey* (Focus group 5).

Considering these emotional challenges leads to thinking about how staff approach and manage the demands of their work.

**Sub-theme three: positive emotions**

Examples of positive emotions were communicated throughout the data set, and in every interview. My impression was that participants were very good-natured, prosaic, pragmatic; there was humour and laughter in all of the interviews. Within these conversations, a sense of the positive emotions staff experience in their work was communicated.

*I was very much determined and excited to get back into working with young people … feeling like I was making a positive difference … seeing those positive changes … every day I was going home, experiencing something different, and positive out of the day, because it can get really tough, but I was just really happy to go home and feel like actually … some positive things have happened today* (Focus group 2).

In response to a conversation about a staff and pupils Christmas video:

*[Producing the video] benefits twofold, because it’s for the rest of the children, but it’s also for staff as well … an opportunity … to do something collaboratively, and have a laugh, and you can always look back at it, I remember watching, the first one that we did, I watched it mid-year, and it was just one of those teary moments … we can come together as a whole school and just do something that is such fun … in a nutshell that is really what [this setting] is all about, if you watch … [you will] immediately get an essence, because it’s not fabricated* (Focus group 2).

A reflection about how ‘normal’ positive relational connections are:

*Something I found interesting yesterday … I was just thinking is this normal … myself and another member of staff walking back from a home visit, and we walked past a particular classroom downstairs, and two of the students came running up to the window, waving at us and wanting to talk to us … that happens to a lot of the staff … it really made me think how normal is this … that’s really quite special … for them to be naturally genuinely excited … not many areas of work, not many schools as well, give you that as a highlight of the day* (Focus group 4).

Within the data are many examples of positive emotions; participants speak positively about their work and there are references to a sense of pride. I feel that these positive emotions relate to what staff find rewarding and meaningful in their roles and might be something that helps to protect or fortify them, within emotional challenges.

**Sub-theme four: big little moments**

Participants’ reflections demonstrate attunement and alertness to any indicators that young people have learned, and made progress, academically and relationally. ‘Big little moments’ are superficially innocuous incidences which hold particular significance for participants, and may represent, in some ways, a return on an investment.

*[A] student [who] … was very challenging, to say the least … came in one day and … threw this piece of paper at me, and then ran out the door … it was a poem that he’d written to me saying, “I need you”, and each line was a different part of our relationship and why he needed me and that was really quite poignant, not just that class, but in my whole teaching career … even now, I do actually carry it in my diary* (Focus group 1).

*[When] a young person you might not think you’ve got that good relationship with … [has] been asking about you, asking how you’re doing … that’s what makes it all worthwhile … that’s what makes you want to go back to work the next day, even though you might have been spat on and called every … name under the sun [laughing]* (Focus group 4).

*Sometimes [a positive moment] … will literally just be, “I got a child to write a sentence” … one sentence can be a really positive thing* (Focus group 5).

A slightly different, but related, perspective:

*[Memorable positive experiences or connections] happen all the time … that is what we strive for, every day … those things happen every lesson, every session, every day, every day of the week* (Focus group 2).

Another link with emotional significance:

*There’s been times when something’s happened in my class, and I’ve cried … tears of joy … when something’s just happened and a tear has rolled down my eye because I’ve just been so happy, and so proud, of the fact, for that child, in that split second it was just a perfect thing* (Focus group 2).

These ‘little’ successes appear to be highly significant for staff, affirming their work with pupils, and communicating that their investments have paid dividends.

**Main theme four: repairing and offsetting**

**Figure 21: Main theme four, repairing and offsetting.**

This theme was developed with the understanding that working with young people who have had difficult life or educational experiences may involve, for the new adults working with them, aspects of redress, or offsetting previous negative experiences; with the aim of helping that young person to develop a more positive self-image, a better understanding of relationships and learning, a better impression of life. That staff are aiming to offset previous negative experiences associates with a concept of social justice.

**Sub-theme one: making a difference**

This was one of the more obvious sub-themes, developed with the understanding that staff who choose to work in an environment with a high level of emotional demands, a high level of investment, and sometimes a high level of risk, do so because they want to make a difference to the lives of young people who have experienced disadvantage; including aims of making a difference to pupils’ life, experiences, and education in a wider sense.

*I have a lot of compassion and empathy … that has allowed me to really empathise with children and people in general, one of the reasons that I wanted to work with children is because I wanted to give them opportunities I maybe haven’t had … I’ve never worked in the leafy lane schools because it’s never really appealed to me … I’ve always wanted to make a difference to children’s lives who maybe need it a bit more which is one of the reasons why I really wanted to come to [work in this setting]* (Focus group 3).

*I worked in mainstream for six years, and … decided to leave and try something different … I wanted to work with children that needed a bit more support … work somewhere where there was a bit more of a focus on wellbeing, rather than just academic grades* (Focus group 1).

*A lot of our students haven’t had the best experience in mainstream, so when they come to us, I’d like to think that their experiences are more positive, I know some of my students have told me about their experiences in mainstream provisions and they do sound completely different to what they have with us* (Focus group 3).

Another element of difference:

*They’re coming into an environment … which is, in many cases, stark contrast to their home lives … to use the metaphor that our vice principal uses, the shark-infested waters, they come into this safe space, where all our staff are happy, are wanting to engage with them* (Focus group 2).

Further:

*[This setting] is a pretty unique place, as far as how we deliver what we deliver, as far as how we interact with young people, because a lot of it is built on relationships first … I worked with a lot of youngsters in the past, where you … can just tell, look, this youngster … isn’t made for a mainstream school, but put them in a completely different provision, you’ll see them flourish, in a totally different way that mainstream school just cannot deliver* (Focus group 4).

Making a difference with new and enriching social opportunities:

*I do empathise with the students … I like to make a difference … because we are working with the most vulnerable students within [the region] [visiting] a restaurant … ice-skating, it’s giving those students the experiences they may never have had and would never get the chance to have outside of school … giving them the positive experiences and empathising with their situations* (Focus group 3).

**Sub-theme two: relational teaching and learning**

Data for this sub-theme was particularly expansive. I considered making this a main theme in itself, but felt it connected strongly with the idea of offsetting and repairing; with staff working relationally, teaching, and guiding new ways of relating.

*A lot of our students do come in with the negative attitude towards school because of their experiences in the past* (Focus group 5).

An example of challenging previously formed negative impressions, and ‘reframing’:

*[Pupils may] have it in their minds that they’ve failed [in mainstream] … whereas with us, we’ll come and tell them, “no, you haven’t failed at anything … it just hasn’t worked out”, it’s trying to get that negative mindset out of their head, which is what mainstream school will do to you, where if you don’t pass this test or if you’ve got this detention “right, you’ve messed up here” well “no”, let’s dig deeper into things now, build a relationship with a young person on a deeper level, which is what we do, you’ll realise that it’s not just a failure here, it’s something that we can fix … that’s essentially what [this setting] does* (Focus group 4).

*It’s about reintroducing [pupils] back into feelings of safety and comfort and trust … saying the same things all the time … having fun and being able to make them laugh … taking the seriousness out of education and getting them to feel comfortable and confident … then the learning just naturally takes place anyway* (Focus group 2).

Participants spoke about how they enable this, including trust (relating to a previous sub-theme) experiencing difficult emotions with pupils, and providing consistency:

*Trust plays a huge part … because if the children don’t trust you, you’re not going to get anything out of them … that comes with being there when they are dysregulated, and they are spitting at you, and biting you and hitting you, and remaining calm, and telling them that’s not acceptable but after it’s finished and they’re calm again continuing to be exactly as you were before and not changing your behaviour towards them, and letting them know that you’re always going to be there in that relationship with them* (Focus group 1).

Applying restorative approaches supportively:

*When ours do become dysregulated … we help them … if, for example, they’ve … thrown six chairs over … [we will help them] so it’s not such an overwhelming task, they know that we’re still there, we’re still going to help them* (Focus group 1).

Starting again:

*[When a] situation arises, we ask them what they might be able to do or we give them ideas for what they might be able to do, and then we just start afresh* (Focus group 3).

Relating to and underpinned by aspects of the subsequent sub-theme.

**Sub-theme three: family values, community spirit**

The idea of family values, such as empathy, care, nurture, ‘unconditional positive regard’, were expressed explicitly in some of the language that participants used; this felt aligned with a sense of community that was evident in conversations; it might also be evident in extracts across themes and sub-themes, that participants regularly communicated using terms of “we”, “our,” “my children”, and “our children”.

*You do see them as your family, and you care a lot about them, you care about their needs and when they’re upset you’re upset* (Focus group 3).

*Especially for our students, they see it as like an extended family, some of the students will come in, and they’ve had issues at home … [they] discuss things that have happened, decisions that have been made at home … they ask for our personal opinions … they feel comfortable … [with] ask[ing] those things, I do see my kids as my extended family and the staff as well, that environment is your extended family* (Focus group 3).

*All the staff here care, and … really do want what’s best for these kids* (Focus group 4).

*I think some people think that unconditional positive regard means that you let children get away with everything but that is not the case … it doesn’t mean that … [pupils] should be labelled a certain way forever, we can start again, we can move on* (Focus group 1).

Aspects of belonging to a wider family, or community:

*We have nurture breakfast on a morning, which I think is a huge thing for our children to really help them build a relationship with us ... as it does create that more family feel … we have breakfast every morning, we take the time to talk about how we’re feeling and we … support each other, so there is that real investment in each other* (Focus group 3).

*The communication element in school [is important] … you need to listen to what people who have been working in this setting for years and years are saying to you … we listen to each other within a whole team … problem solve as a team … and I think that’s something we do particularly well as a school* (Focus group 4).

*Here it feels more like an army, and you’re supporting each other … it’s full on, non-stop, you always have to be on it, you’re always looking out for stuff going on, who’s struggling, where do I need to be now, who needs my help?* (Focus group 4).

Participants spoke about staff relationships very positively; the connection and closeness between them was evident, the strength of community and the idea that staff are ‘singing from the same hymn sheet’.

**Sub-theme four: child-centred thinking**

This is one of the most important sub-themes in the data set. Participants did not use the phrase ‘child-centred’ or ‘pupil-centred’ at any point, but this was evident in what they were saying, and the approaches described, which include a high level of flexibility, with the emotional needs of pupils given priority.

Knowing the pupils:

*A lot of other schools are about control … [and] the students not having a voice and their feelings not being taken into consideration … we make ourselves very aware of what the students have been through in their past, and what it is that has made them end up where they are today* (Focus group 2).

I have one student where I know I can have a full conversation with them about reptiles because that’s what he’s interested in … personalising conversation really … taking the time to stop and have those conversations (Focus group 3).

Adapting to them:

*We do what works best for the students at that time … [we are] able to alter what we do to suit the needs of the children at that time* (Focus group 1).

Taking their lead when it comes to repairing relationships:

*It depends on the student … they always know that we’re there for them, but also if they are monumentally pissed off at us, we just kind of give them space, we don’t try and force it, we don’t try and say “no, we need to resolve this now”, if they need a day to go home and sleep on it, come back into school and then we’re still there saying going, “Oh hi, welcome back”* (Focus group 4).

Enacting flexibility to suit individuals:

*We do have a variety of children with different needs … [we work in] ways that suit them … we’ll find out what it is that they like* (Focus group 2).

Recognising the challenges to working in this way in mainstream schools:

*When you’ve got a class of thirty kids in a mainstream school … it’s so difficult to get to understand what’s going on in that kid’s life, what you can do to meet that kid’s individual needs at that point in time, because there’s simply not enough time, resources … you’ve got twenty nine other kids, you can’t spend five minutes taking a kid away just to find out how his weekend was … the values we put in … we are going to address them first and foremost, that is the priority, that is the goal* (Focus group 4).

The processes around restorative work, reparation, when there have been relational difficulties were described as sensitive and pupil-centred; one participant said that staff do not “force” the restorative process and interact supportively on the pupils’ emotional terms; which relates to an awareness of power, and how it might be experienced.

**Main theme five: AI, possible changes**

**Figure 22: Main theme five, AI possible changes.**

In response to focus group prompts relating to the ‘dream’ and ‘design’ AI phases, participants shared their ideas and suggestions for possible changes within their setting, and beyond. While the bulk of this data came from later focus group interviews, as the AI progressed to its latter stages, it is also important to highlight that focus groups interviews 1 and 2, both included dialogues relating to change, that had emerged more naturally (were not directly prompted) from within the conversation.

**Sub-theme one: working with parents**

*We’ve got this lockdown issue at the minute … but what has actually come from the lockdown situation is that the relationships with the parents are a lot stronger than they were before, we’ve had a lot more time to be able to communicate with parents, there’s been a lot of checking-in wellbeing-type things, so actually I feel like our relationships with them haven’t really been [negatively] affected* (Focus Group 1).

This sub-theme is an example of something that was shared without any prompting, although the topic did not surface again directly over the remaining interviews, which might beg the question of whether it can or should be included as a sub-theme. My feeling is that, even though this was not explored further, it is an important reflection, something that might be of interest to the setting, and worthy of further exploration.

The concept of relating to, or attitudes to, parents did return in a later interview however:

*Not all children have had difficult parental relationships, I’ve got … children in my class who have got amazing parents, I admire them so much, I think, “wow, you do so much for your children” and really try to provide so much, some of them do have mental health needs that affects the way they are behaving, and their needs, and some have amazing relationships, quite a few don’t unfortunately, but I thought I should make the point that, there are a lot of happy parents out there* (Focus group 3).

Interestingly, this extract was, I believe, a response to the participant mishearing something that I had said, mistaking ‘relational’ for ‘parental’ and leading to a response about parents. My interpretation is that this response takes an almost defensive position and challenges the view that parental relationships will necessarily be difficult for young people attending the setting. Although the data here is relatively minimal in quantity I believe its significance warrants inclusion.

**Sub-theme two: transitions and post-16**

This is a relatively large sub-theme and was a continuous topic of conversation throughout the focus groups. Tempering the strengths that staff identify in terms of relationship building is the feeling that transition points are often emotionally difficult and that school processes are not always as effective as they might be, especially when pupils leave the setting in a post-16 transition.

*The way [the setting] works you work intensely with pupils … and it’s really hard when it comes to the end of the road … they’re just expected to just say goodbye, walk away and leave … or that somebody else can just pick up those pieces, and manage, and sadly a lot of our kids because of that, they’re not successful when they move on, because … they need that gradual release, where it’s just the sharp drop, and it’s really sad* (Focus group 2).

Within-setting transitions for younger pupils were also described as problematic, both in terms of the emotional demands for staff, and the challenges pupils can experience when moving to a new class.

*When you get to the end of the year and they have to go on to a different class or they have to leave school, it is really painful, it is horrible, oh my goodness* (Focus group 3).

*However much I don’t want them to move because I have those really strong relationships, I feel like they need to move in order to take the next step, post-16 education, and they need … to know that we’re not always going to be there … change does happen … we’re worried at the moment, one of the students that left and came back to me, and one of the concerns is, is he going to think exactly the same if it doesn’t work over there, is he going to come back to us?* (Focus group 3).

A further example supports the idea of potential difficulties relating to managing change around close relationships (attachments) including risks around dependency:

*We’ve got a class in primary pod who have had the same teacher now for two years … [for] consistency … and they can become too attached … some of these children … have never known that unconditional attachment, and so they can become too reliant on somebody and too attached, and they need to learn that actually you can move on and still form attachments, still keep those attachments to some extent, but it’s healthy to move on as well, otherwise it can actually be negative for them* (Focus group 3).

Participants spoke about the need for a greater awareness of the issues affecting pupils following a post-16 transition.

*I also wish that there was a wider recognition of trauma and the impact of trauma and adverse childhood experiences … we’re quite unique … it’s not just about the academic for our kids, it’s also about the social and emotional side as well, and I do wish that there were other establishments, post sixteen [that understand this] … [some former pupils can be] put into … [a] bracket … seen as the naughty ones, or the ones that society has to do something with* (Focus group 5).

Which leads to a view that transition points, although unavoidably challenging in some respects, have been identified by participants as something that is risky or potentially problematic; and that further exploration of the transition to a post-16 environment especially would be valuable.

**Sub-theme three: pupil ‘toolkit’**

This is a relatively compact sub-theme that closely relates to the previous sub-theme. This involves the idea that staff would like to provide pupils with something tangible that will help to equip them for life after they leave the setting.

*It’s providing that toolkit for them to be able to use and access in the outside world when they do leave* (Focus group 2).

This idea returns in a later focus group.

*I also just wish that we were able to give them a failsafe toolbox, of things that they could learn, that could take them on further* (Focus group 5).

The idea of this ‘toolbox’ equipping, or enabling students was continued and developed.

*If I had a wish it would be that they would be able to take on board what skills we give them and what skills we help them with in school, so that they are able to, when they leave our school … pursue whatever they want to pursue … do everything that they want to do* (Focus group 5).

This was another interesting idea, and communicates a sense of protection, as well as wanting positive experiences in the setting to sustain, in an empowering or enabling way.

**Sub-theme four: de-brief process**

The setting has a de-brief process, where staff groups meet at the end of the school day to discuss the events of the day, individual pupils, and plan for the following day. This was introduced as a topic for conversation during focus group interviews. There were some different perspectives between participants as to how the de-brief works.

*Something that is really good for thinking about the positives that have gone on throughout the day is that debrief time … where we can all sit together as a classroom team and try to go through the day’s events and focus on what else needs doing, what needs doing for tomorrow, but also reflecting on the positives throughout that day … [however] it got reduced to just a tick-box exercise … I feel like it’s just as important to focus on … [things that made a] … positive difference to the day* (Focus group 2).

This is somewhat qualified by the subsequent comment.

*I think that’s where we are going as a school, we are moving in that direction, we’re still quite new in all of that* (Focus group 2).

The idea that de-briefs should retain a core positive element is repeated in a later focus group.

*Rather than sitting down at the end of the day looking at the debriefs going, “that went wrong, that went wrong, how do we stop this going wrong?”, you look at actually, that staff member did that thing at the time, and that worked really well, let’s make sure that that’s in place every day … it’s something which I’ve tried to do, but school-wide, I’m not sure it’s something which is around the whole school* (Focus group 4).

Further conversation around de-briefs developed in the final focus group.

*The debrief sessions – they’re invaluable, but they need to be done and done well … they can lose their focus sometimes, and I do think if, as a school, we try and focus more so on the positives … but also look at solutions, to make things better, or “what we’ve done today, let’s not do that tomorrow”, and reflection … so we’re always constantly building and improving* (Focus group 5).

Another group member continued the conversation and offered a different perspective:

*I just need to switch off [after the school day] because it is a really difficult environment to work in, so for me the debrief and the chance to have that vent, and then to say ok, but this was positive, works really well, because otherwise I wouldn’t have that chance* (Focus group 5).

Which highlights perhaps the multi-functionality of a de-brief session as both an opportunity to discuss and work through difficult feelings, and also to highlight positive experiences of the school day. Striking a balance appears to be tricky, but reflections shared by participants suggests that staff perceptions of this process could be explored further by the setting.

**Sub-theme five: sharing knowledge and skills**

As might be anticipated from conversations with educators, teaching and learning, and the sharing of skills and knowledge was expressed as important and valuable to participants. Participants spoke about learning from one another:

*I don’t think I’ve ever stopped and sort of considered the impact on relationships and what different people do in order to foster those relationships … it’s going to be really good to listen to other people [in the focus groups] and also how they perceive things* (Focus group 4).

This was followed up with examples of more formal learning that takes place within the setting.

*There have been cross academy training days … [with] workshops that are run, and everyone has to pick their workshops, and you do your workshop … the mainstream schools are able to access a workshop on restorative practice, which would be something we would use in [this setting]* (Focus group 5).

There were conversations around how staff at the setting work with other settings.

*We are sharing our knowledge of students, and it is going into the wider community … we’ve … had a link with … a school round the corner, which is predominantly an ASD school, so students can come there, and they’ve done a lot of work around speech and language, and that’s been invaluable for us … they’re coming to us as well … they’re learning about how we work … how we are using our space, and how our model works* (Focus group 5).

One of the participants reflected on a time when they were working in a mainstream setting, and the effectiveness of outreach work offered by some specialist settings.

*My first experience of [this setting] was [when] … someone from [the setting] came to our mainstream school to help us with two boys, two brothers in school we had that had very- SEMH issues basically … [a member of staff] came to our school … and gave us tips on how to create a better environment for them, and what was needed … and those two boys are still in mainstream* (Focus group 5).

A final extract relates to the AI set up and ‘virtual’ medium of focus groups:

*I think it’s nice, normally what you find, when there’s a platform for you to have discussions like this there’s a member of SLT as part of the group, which can sometimes prevent you from saying things that you want to say … we’re all like-minded colleagues, who can speak freely and openly about what we see and what we find, and I think sometimes when there are opportunities to sit and speak they’re normally led by a member of management, and sometimes your thoughts might be swayed a little bit by what their focus is* (Focus group 5).

**Discussion**

In this section I have revisited the data, re-introducing theory to develop a conversation about what the data might suggest in relation to the research questions and considering where analyses fit with an understanding of practices in alternative provisions, and wider discourses around exclusions.

**Research question 1:** **how do front-line staff describe the positive aspects, the ‘successes and strengths’, of their relationships in an alternative educational provision?**

The positive AI focus prompted many descriptions of successes and strengths. This included effective teamworking, relational work with pupils based on core values, and positive emotions associated with working in the setting. There are multiple examples of participants communicating that their work has been effective in accordance with their values, including empathy, congruence, and other humanistic principles; as identified in previous research, and associated with positive TSRs for pupils with SEMH needs (e.g. Carroll & Hurry, 2018; Cornelius-White, 2007). Approaches informed by these values are described by participants as a strength, enabling progress for pupils who are often trying to overcome difficult experiences. This links with the idea of reconnecting disconnected pupils, as described by Cook (2005) – where progress, in this context, is made through building meaningful connections, and supported by relational qualities within the TSR, alongside high levels of modelling. Participants describe high levels of pro-social, pro-community interactions and behaviours that set the tone for a positive atmosphere in the setting, and between members of the setting community – echoing Michael and Frederickson’s (2013) finding that the environment (both physical and human) is a ‘key enabler’ for positive academic, social, and emotional outcomes. In doing so participants describe their aim of promoting, often incremental, improvements in social functioning, engagement, and academic progress, previously described by Roorda et al. (2011) – seeking to make a difference to pupils’ education, and their lives more holistically.

*It’s tiny little bits that build up over time and you can then look back and go, wow, yes we have made a positive impact on this child’s life, we have made a difference* (Focus group 5).

The data communicates a strong sense of mutuality, at different levels, suggesting that how staff work with pupils is a significant strength – for example, ‘with them’ is a phrase used many times. This mutuality incudes both positive and challenging moments. In difficult moments, staff support and guide pupils while they experience strong emotions, allowing them to ‘vent’ when necessary, and creating opportunities for relational teaching and learning at an individual, interpersonal level, including restorative work, as described:

*When [pupils] become dysregulated … [we] help them, so if they’ve … thrown six chairs over … [we] will say, “right, ok, you pick up that one, we’ll pick up these ones”, so it’s not such an overwhelming task, they know that … we’re still going to help them* (Focus group 1). Descriptions in the data suggest that staff aim to offset implicit power imbalances in the TSR by talking to pupils, *On their level … trying to see things from their perspective* (Focus group 4).

This can be related to the concept of respect, as discussed in previous research, including Loe (2017) and another example of the personalised, pupil-centred approaches that participants describe – which can also involve making changes to the adult support around a pupil, reminiscent of Cook’s (2005) finding that a positive match between pupil and tutor, or teacher, is a crucial aspect of developing fruitful relationships. Participants’ accounts suggest that teacher-student relationships are developed patiently. Small steps of progress are sometimes needed, respecting pupils’ need for time and space. Recognising that pupils’ previous experiences may be associated with a sense of failure, participants described how they have introduced new, positive narratives, supporting the idea that their work can be transformative (Capper, 2016) – helping to ameliorate, or offset, previously negative educational and relational experiences.

*[Pupils may] have it in their minds that they’ve failed [in mainstream] … it’s trying to get that negative mindset out of their head … it’s not just a failure here, it’s something that we can fix … that’s essentially what [this setting] does* (Focus group 4).

The idea of challenging established views, or a worldview, relating to self-image, links with Mezirow’s Transformative Learning Theory (2008) which proposes that each individual’s view of the world is based on ‘paradigmatic assumptions’ or ‘frames of reference’ (Mezirow, 1997) developed through familial, cultural and educational experiences (Mezirow, cited in Christie et al., 2015). Participants spoke about wanting to ‘make a difference’ for children and young people in the setting, describing motivation for this as being where the need is greatest, and linking their work with equality and social justice principles (Keddie, 2012). This wish to provide something additional to formal education, including opportunities for social and relational learning, and access to enriching experiences – echoes Alvarez-Hevia’s (2018) suggestion that working with disadvantaged children and young people is often ‘more than just a job’, and holds a deeper significance for staff. Relational moments that infer progress, evident in pupil behaviours, might be experienced as affirming. These moments can be particularly poignant and might follow long periods of relationship building, or occur more frequently, although still hold a level of significance, as evidence of a relational connection within the TSR, as described by Alvarez-Hevia (2018) and Fitzsimmons et al. (2019) – providing affirmations for staff that their ‘investments’ have been fruitful. Participants describe positive emotions in relation to shared experiences within the setting community. They describe supporting one another in difficult moments, enabling new staff to prevail through a ‘baptism of fire’ when they first join the setting. They describe operating in envoy and bridging roles, supporting pupil re-regulation, restoration, and repatriation to cohorts and relationships. This is supported through effective teamworking, which is cited regularly as a strength throughout the data. Participants suggest that staff draw on support from one another, within a network of human resource. Individual staff members re-deploy if necessary, and may be commandeered for specific roles, based on their individual strengths and characteristics, and relationships with individual pupils. More literally, the physical environment is referred to as a strength, and an enabling factor for staff, supporting the views of McNulty and Roseboro (2009) who identified the importance of the physical environment for the values and meaning it communicates implicitly, and Roelofs et al. (2003) who stated that physical features of the environment can communicate implicit values of respect and care.

**Research question 2:** **how do staff describe their experiences of working with pupils?**

Participants describe their experiences in many ways, but especially in two key areas, linking with main themes of reciprocity, and the emotional aspect of working in the setting. Descriptions of emotional experiences include the positive emotions and challenges that are intrinsic to their work. ‘Emotional geography’ a term used by Alvarez-Hevia (2018) suggests that working with pupils who have experienced relational difficulties, including educational and social exclusion, and potentially trauma, involves an awareness of their needs, in relation to previous experiences; communicated directly in the data:

*We make ourselves very aware of what the students have been through in their past … what has made them end up where they are today … [considering] things like traumatic experiences, and their family backgrounds* (Focus group 2).

Relating to pupils in this context may involve navigating ‘emotional distance’ (Alvarez-Hevia, 2018) – especially for new pupils, in the process of developing trusting relationships. Importance is placed on individual and mutual relationships, as described in Malcolm (2018). Developing attachments with pupils who have experienced,

*a lot of difficult relationships … [and have not] experienced that unconditional love, that unconditional friendship* (Focus group 3)

often requires time, patience, and consistency, in the process of helping pupils to re-shape ways of relating (Tayler, 2015). Mezirow’s Transformative Learning Theory refers to the process of changing a pre-conceived frame of reference. Similar to attachment theory, is the idea that previous experiences shape thinking, assumptions and expectations for how future experiences will develop (Mezirow, 1997). Mezirow suggests that individuals are strongly inclined to reject concepts that are incongruous with established frames of reference, and experience moments of significant change, such as new relationships that are incongruous with a worldview, as crises, also called a ‘disorienting dilemma’ – which individuals may react against, highlighting again the emotional demands involved.

The high level of emotional investment needed for working with pupils with SEMH needs is discussed by Fitzsimmons et al. (2019) who describe the importance of managing difficult relational moments, or ‘disconnects’ alongside applying positive relational approaches which enable rapport building. This can be emotionally demanding for staff, and Capper (2016) refers to the ‘tireless’ efforts of staff, in relation to such demands. Difficult relational moments have the potential to test individual relationships and the structure of the setting, as a whole, highlighting the fluctuating, or ‘pendulumlike’ nature of the TSR in this context (Alvarez-Hevia, 2018). The need for flexibility, an awareness evident in this study, and the understanding that genuine pupil-centred work involves the system, and staff within that, adapting responsively to the needs of pupils. Furthermore, the idea that potentially negative or harmful experiences can be a ‘force for good’ (Alvarez-Hevia, 2018) also relates to the data here, and links with restorative and reframing approaches used by staff (as described above).

Reciprocity is another key theme in the data. There are multiple references to the familial and societal nature of the setting. This is idea is supported by previous research, which has identified familial characteristics in AP settings (e.g. O’Gorman et al., 2016; McGregor & Mills, 2012) including the humanistic value of positive regard; as well as to a ‘spirit’ or ‘essence’ that perhaps captures some of the values represented by the setting, which are embodied in approaches described by participants. Participants position themselves alongside the pupils they work with, sharing their time and experiences in a mutual sense, as opposed to something more hierarchical, and didactic, as might be associated with mainstream education. Mainstream education is positioned as quite different, or ‘other’, in several examples. Another aspect of reciprocity relates to ‘trust’, as an important feature of relationships in the setting, between staff members and pupils, and which:

*Plays a huge part when you’re working with these children because if the children don’t trust you, you’re not going to get anything out of them … it’s a massive trust part of it, that they know they can [experience dysregulation] but … still have that same relationship they already had* (Focus group 1).

More broadly, participants’ descriptions suggest that trust in individuals and in relationships extends throughout the setting. Participants refer to the support they have experienced in their relationships with members of the settings’ SLT, described as: *really supportive, which you don’t get in a lot of mainstream schools* (Focus group 1). Trust placed in staff members enables them to work creatively, flexibly: *everybody does whatever it is that they can do whenever they can do it, that’s just the job at the end of the day* (Focus group 2) and in response to the needs of pupils – which accords with previous research findings suggesting that flexibility in structure and curriculum supports positive relationships in AP settings (O’Gorman et al., 2016) – and furthermore linking with a Rogerian belief that schools who represent humanistic values enable practitioners to have “considerable latitude in selecting methods and curricula” (Shaffer, 1978, p.109) a sentiment very much evident in the flexible approaches described by participants in this study.

The concept of workplace trust is discussed by Joni (2004) who describes trust within systems or organisations at three levels: personal, expertise and structural, with personal trust relating to a belief in an individual’s integrity, and that they can be relied on to act in good faith. Joni suggests that trust in workplaces develops through shared experiences between colleagues, which can strengthen trust through group memberships, as described by participants –

*We’re all shop floor, and we’re all like-minded colleagues* (Focus group 5).

There is also a connection with positive teamwork, another significant strength described by participants. This was cited as an enabler to effective collaboration in the research context, but also, communicating an understanding that colleagues, as ‘teammates’ are committed to supporting one another. Participants referred to supporting one another in relation to workplace demands, *we’re in a high pressure situation a lot of the time,* *it can be highly stressful, and highly emotional as well* (Focus group 4) – which relates to Joni’s thoughts around pressured situations enabling inter-staff relational learning, suggesting that “from such crucibles as impossibly tight deadlines or shop-floor emergencies, we quickly learn on whom we can rely” (Joni, 2004, p.84).

**Research question 3:** **what are some of the values and approaches favoured by and recommended by staff in their work with pupils?**

Participants describe value-driven and practical relational approaches that demonstrate their understanding of individuals who often have complex SEND, SEMH and social needs. Examples in the data demonstrate the synthesis of this knowledge with practice – including restorative work, as previously explored by Whitby (2018) and with an awareness of the consequences of previously experiences, for current relationships. Participants’ contributions suggest that staff, through relational practices, embody caring, humanistic principles, as identified in previous research (e.g. Mooij & Smeets, 2009) and associate with theories of positive psychology (Seligman, 2004; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000) and transformational learning (Mezirow, 1997).

There are many examples of participants referring to, or inferring that, caring and being committed to ‘making a difference’ is a pre-requisite of working in the setting:

*There’s this culture that’s embedded in you from the start that all the staff here care* (Focus group 4).

This is in the context of implicit disadvantage and vulnerability for pupils in the setting, and motivation to provide a protective and reparative influence in their lives,

*The way we work is that we shadow and protect the kids that we have with us … we cushion them and make sure they’re alright* (Focus group 2).

Positive, strengths-based approaches chime with aspects of Seligman’s positive psychology (2000) aiming to shift attention from deficit, to focus on strengths-based qualities such as hope, optimism and being happy in the present moment. This also relates to ‘civic virtues’ and supporting individuals to develop an understanding of community membership, or ‘citizenship’, with values including responsibility, nurture and tolerance (Seligman, 2000) – values that are modelled in relationships in the setting community. Relationships carefully established through consistency and social modelling provide nurturing and enriching experiences for pupils, *experiences they may never have had and would never get the chance to have outside of school* (Focus group 3). Participants refer to inclusion, implicitly and explicitly, and express regret or frustration that attitudes to inclusive practices are inconsistent: *I wish there were other places that looked at social and emotional mental health as we do, it’s not just about behaviour and not being able to conform* (Focus group 5) – an idea continued by another participant,

*[It’s] like they’ve already been put into a little box and pushed to one side, and I find that really frustrating because there are ways to work around it* (Focus group 5).

Unconditional positive regard is directly referenced several times, as a humanistic concept, previously identified in related research by McGregor and Mills (2012) and linking with the Rogerian definition of positive regard as – warm acceptance, with an enduring positive feeling, despite any behaviour in the moment (Rogers, cited in Shaffer, 1978). This links values with some of the practices described by participants, including ‘fresh start’ approaches: *You may have had a really bad day, or a bad morning, but you are coming back in, you are having a fresh start, whatever has happened in the past has happened in the past* (Focus group 1) – and is an indicator that this particular value is a feature of the setting’s ethos.

Another humanistic value, ‘congruence’, was referred to indirectly. This captures the idea of acting or interacting without pretence, or ‘façade’ (Shaffer, 1798, p.82) –

*I just be myself and try and talk to them on their level … trying to see things from their perspective … [while] maintain[ing] that sort of professional relationship where I’ll still talk to you on a level but I’m still … a member of staff* (Focus group 4).

This is supported by another participant, who concurs, while explicitly highlighting the relational significance associated with being genuine: *you’ve got to try and be yourself, which is incredibly difficult to do, kids will pick up immediately if you’re not being yourself around them* (Focus group 4).

Explicit relational approaches that were spoken about directly, and which were also implicit in examples, include maintaining a positive and good-humoured outlook; authenticity and being genuine; empathy, compassion and understanding; being open-minded and non-judgemental; being pupil-centred in thought and action; and talking to pupils ‘on a level’, which might be related to valuing, respect, and a sensitivity to how power with the TSR may be experienced by pupils – reminiscent of Mezirow’s idea of ‘non-coercive dialogue’ (Christie, 2015) and Pomeroy (1999) who states that the unequal power distribution between adults and pupils in schools should not equate to disregard or disrespect.

Practical approaches described included many references to teamwork. Staff ‘envoys’ help new pupils to feel settled, and when there has been a relational difficulty between an individual adult and pupils, other staff members step in, in a ‘bridging’ capacity, helping to repair that relationship. Participants spoke about enjoying shared time with pupils, and that finding common ground, or shared interests was part of this reciprocal experience, and another example of ‘valuing’.

**Research question 4:** **what aspects of staff practices and school systems do staff suggest could be developed with the aim of improving relationships within the setting?**

This question differs from the others as it relates directly to the dream phase of the appreciative inquiry, captured in the AI theme (see Figure 22: Main theme five, AI possible changes, in results section) with a specific focus on potential changes suggested by participants. Subsequently, the following possible changes were suggested, implied, or both, during focus group interviews:

***Working with parents***

It was reflected that the period of time, during and after *lockdown* relating to the Coronavirus pandemic, when pupils were not on the school site, offered an opportunity for working more closely with parents:

*What has actually come from the lockdown situation is that the relationships with the parents are a lot stronger than they were before* (Focus group 1).

Participants did not specifically suggest that this is an area of practice that could be developed, but the positive (or improved) experiences of school-parent relationships in an atypical situation suggests that it may be, an idea supported by Atkinson & Rowley (2019) who advocate for an eco-systemic approach to support for pupils, with an understanding that the different systems around a pupil (including school and home) have particular roles and responsibilities to fulfil.

An interesting moment emerged during an apparent miscommunication (mishearing) in one of the focus groups, which led to what might be interpreted as a protective or defensive response from one of the participants: *Not all children have had the difficult parental relationships, I’ve got a couple of children in my class who have got amazing parents, I admire them so much … some of them do have mental health needs … and some have amazing relationships, quite a few don’t unfortunately, but I thought I should make the point that, there are a lot of happy parents out there* (Focus group 3). I have interpreted this as a response to a perceived assumptive, or judgemental attitude (from me) towards parents at the setting (although that had not been my intention). This perhaps links with a concept of stigma (Link & Phelan, 2001) associated with attitudes to excluded pupils, and with this participant in particular responding in the context of understanding that pupils and parents may automatically be judged negatively – with the participant challenging what may have been perceived as judgemental, assumptive, or biased thinking.

***Transitions and post-16, pupil ‘toolkit’***

There were several references to the difficulties faced by pupils leaving the setting, which participants observed as being the case for former pupils. There was a wish to provide pupils with something to help bridge the gap in support/provision when they leave, a ‘toolkit’:

*It’s providing that toolkit for them to be able to use and access … in the outside world when they do leave* (Focus group 3).

*I also just wish that we were able to give them a failsafe toolbox, of things that they could learn, that could take them on further* (Focus group 5).

*When they’re older, in the real world, change does happen, and we need to give them the tools to be able to manage those changes* (Focus group 3).

This was discussed particularly in relation to difficulties many pupils experience in post-16 environments, linking with the findings of Atkinson and Rowley (2019) and Trotman et al. (2019) and additional findings from Ofsted (2018) that highlight the lack of a clear pathway between AP and further education, training, or employment in a significant percentage of providers (TCfSJ, 2020). The concept of providing ‘tools’ for subsequent stages of life and learning also relates to Cook’s (2005) study of ‘disconnected’ young people, with Cook highlighting social skills, self-esteem, and confidence as essential for the workplace. While these skills may be developed steadily in time at the setting, there is an understanding that transition can undermine progress. Participants suggested that more needs to be done to ensure that positive steps of progress can sustain. What this ‘toolkit’ might include, and how it could be developed and implemented would be worthy of further exploration.

***Sharing knowledge and skills***

The sharing of knowledge and perspectives was referred to frequently during focus groups. *I really wanted to hear what [a colleague] said, and what [that colleague’s] opinions were* (Focus group 4). Learning and development was spoken about positively, and in relation to a collaborative relationship with another local setting: *They’re coming to us … they’re learning about how we work … and how our model works* (Focus group 5). One of the participants referred to a successful intervention experienced in a previous role, where staff from a specialist setting, *came and gave us tips on how to create a better environment … what we were able to do as a school really helped the children … and those two boys are still in mainstream* (Focus group 5) – highlighting the value of both outreach and in-reach collaboration. Participants expressed that they valued the time in focus groups where they were able to share perspectives and experiences with wider members of the staff team who they would not always work with directly. This willingness and interest suggests that further collaborative initiatives would be well-received.

***De-brief process***

The setting have a process that enables staff members to meet together at the end of the school day to ‘de-brief’ about the day’s events. This was described as,

*Really good for thinking about the positives that have gone on throughout the day* (Focus group 2) and, *invaluable …* [while qualifying that] *they need to be done and done well* (Focus group 5).

While participants agreed that the de-brief is an important and valuable feature of practice, there were some differences in perspectives and interpretation. There was a view that this offers space to ‘vent’ and process difficult experiences,

*I’ve had my moan and then I’ve said something good … and then I come home* (Focus group 5) – whereas another participant suggested variation exists in debrief practices, and that there may be scope for – *looking at things in more of a positive way* (Focus group 4).

Further exploration or evaluation of this process is something that might be of benefit to staff, and to the setting as a whole.

**Social influences, power, relational practices**

The continuing issue of school exclusions, and education in AP, is situated within a wider society where publicly-funded research concludes that mainstream schools are incentivised (DfE, 2018) to exclude challenging pupils, in an education system that appears to actively manoeuvre against socially vulnerable individuals (IfPPR, 2017) and where schools’ willingness and ability to adopt inclusive practices are challenged by practical dilemmas relating to government policy (Munn & Lloyd, 2004, p.205). While there is some evidence of systemic progress (Ofsted, 2018; Timpson, 2019) and it is promising that awareness of issues relating to exclusions, and education in AP, is no longer peripheral – as previously described by Taylor (2012) – familiar issues perpetuate. Inconsistencies exist between AP settings (Ofsted, 2016; Pirrie & Macleod, 2009; Timpson, 2019) with a continuing lack of accountability for schools who exclude pupils (Ofsted, 2018). Despite the breadth of publicly-funded research there remain challenges to establishing a sound understanding of practice in the AP sector, including how mainstream schools can work effectively with AP. Current systems of evaluation may not accurately capture the scale of problems (Menzies, 2019). There is a need for greater accountability for schools who exclude (Timpson, 2019) and for greater consistency in AP, understanding what represents ‘good and great’ practice in the sector (Gill, 2018).

Almost three years have passed since Timpson’s (2019) review paper. Progress on recommendations is recorded by IntegratED, a coalition of organisations, on their ‘Timpson tracker’, which suggests that, of 30 recommendations accepted in principle by the government, 6 have been implemented, with 12 partially actioned, and 12 not actioned at all (IntegratED, 2021). Rates of exclusions are troubling and damaging, never more so than at a human level, but also as a reflection of the values that inform policy and practice, with exclusion rates representing a ‘barometer’ of social inclusiveness for the whole education system (Power & Taylor, 2020). If schools are seen as ‘microcosms of society’ the current picture of exclusions may reflect the continuation of “society-wide stereotyping and discrimination, particularly along the lines of class, race, gender, and disadvantage” (Graham et al., 2019, p.6). What appear to be systemic discriminatory practices are contributing to the educational and social exclusions of vulnerable children and young people, most often from specific demographic groups, which themselves confer vulnerability to discrimination; typically placing them in *alternative* educational settings that should offer equal to, or better than, mainstream provision (TCfSJ, 2020) but that, in reality, remain inconsistent (Timpson, 2019).

These issues are represented in the complex nature of individual experience. Schools introduce children to authority (Shaffer, 1978) and social hierarchy, but access to knowledge and learning is not always equitable (McNulty & Roseboro, 2009). Staff can fail to recognise cultural capital, or identity (Khalifa, 2010) which may lead to pupils questioning the relevance of curriculum, or how it relates to them as an individual. Variation in quality of provision has the potential to perpetuate or reinforce stigmatized identity (McNulty & Roseboro, 2009). Pace and Hemmings (2007) discuss the concept of authority in education, describing hierarchical social relationships where chosen individuals are bestowed ‘legitimacy to lead’ – with the expectation that others will follow. However, this legitimacy may be questioned or challenged (Gregory & Ripski, 2008) through acts of rebellion (Pace & Hemmings, 2007) which can define ‘rebels’ as problematic (Cosma & Soni, 2019) and with ‘persistent offenders’ (‘persistent disruptive behaviour’ being the most common reason for exclusion) facing sanctions that result in impoverished outcomes.

This resonates with Foucault’s idea of ‘dividing practice’ (cited in Winslade, 2019) describing “where the lines fall in a social world that decides who will live a life of privilege and who will eke out an existence on the margins” (Winslade, 2019, p.285). The risks associated with school exclusion, in relation to further social exclusion, or alienation, have been identified (Mills et al., 2016; Schaffer et al., 2013; Sellman et al., 2002). Monbiot, political commentator and activist, has commented on this topic, reflecting on the exclusiveness of an archaic, narrow curriculum, where failure carries the risk of a pervasive, and potentially life-long expectation of failure (Monbiot, 2020) – a concept that staff in AP settings are keenly aware of. As one of the participants in this research commented, a ‘negative mindset’ *is what mainstream school will do to you* (Focus group 2).

Citing Waller, who wrote almost a century ago, Pace and Hemmings present a conception of educational settings as “instruments of mass education in which students are antagonistic to constraints imposed on [them] … [where learning is] unrelated to their own personal interests” (Pace & Hemmings, 2007, p.4) – the authors suggest that these issues around authority remain resonant. According to Waller, teachers should aim to “assert dominance over students … [which] is never ensured, because conflict and resistance are always lying in wait, ready to spring” (Pace & Hemmings, 2007, p.4). Despite this conjecture speaking from a bygone era, ‘dominance’ may be read as a particularly uncomfortable term in this context and may be related to “what is feared to be the spontaneous animalism or potential for unreason within human beings, forces which, we are encouraged to believe, are at their most pure, least controllable and most potent during childhood” (Billington, 2012, p.26). That children and young people are expected to accept a less powerful position because the system requires it, is necessary, and supports social structures (Piro, 2008); however, how the power dynamic is managed – certainly where ‘dominance’ is concerned – is of critical importance. Experiences of authority and power for children are subjective, relating to previous experiences, which act as unconscious frames of reference (Mezirow, 1997) – linking with attachment (e.g. Bombèr, 2014; Geddes, 2017) and trauma-informed theory (e.g. Cherry, 2021) that highlights the difficulties some individuals have with expected conformity, and which can result in behaviour problems (Kennedy & Kennedy, 2004). Sellman (2009) proposes that externalised behaviours in this context are related to insufficient language skills – research has identified a link between school exclusion and language impairment (e.g. Clegg et al., 2009) – and inability to effectively communicate needs alongside intentions and feelings which are difficult to understand, and even more difficult to articulate – suggesting that pupils with SEMH needs must find alternative means of making their views known. However, a lack of time, resource, or ‘incentive’ for schools, can prevent these views being understood, resulting in frustration, and the inevitable consequences of ‘persistent disruptive behaviour’.

Sellman (2009) discusses how teachers in mainstream schools may resist pupil empowerment initiatives, which can involve an unsettling renegotiation of power and control. Sellman suggests that this issue is magnified in relationships with challenging pupils, where teachers may be especially wary of ceding control, with the upshot that these pupils are relatively less likely to access democratic experiences, in comparison with their peers – an evidently unjust position. The concept of fairness, or justice, is important. As Winslade explains, children and young people often have “a built-in sense of fairness … [understanding] when particular actions are unjust and … capable of saying so” (Winslade, 2009, p.289). A perception of fairness has been identified as a key aspect of positive relationships between teachers and pupils (Pace & Hemmings, 2007); an idea supported by Cosma and Soni (2019) who found that pupils with SEMH needs, who had been excluded, associated their exclusion with injustice or being wronged; and furthermore by Munn and Lloyd (2004) whose research found that pupils often expressed a sense of justice and fair play, and believed they had been treated unfairly by their school, while also acknowledging that their behaviour, at times, had meant exclusion was a ‘reasonable consequence’. Staff in mainstream schools are in some ways protected by their status, and the implicit authority in their roles (Pace & Hemmings, 2007). In AP settings, there may be no such protection, where front-line staff meet with pupils in a relational no-man’s-land, involving risk, exposure, and vulnerability on both sides. Staff in AP are aiming to engage disconnected pupils (Cook, 2005) in relationships that are often more participatory, more mutual, more dyadic, in the process of trying to disrupt negative trajectories, reshape damaging frames of reference, and, *trying to get that negative mindset out of their head* (Focus group 4) – by working flexibly, creatively, and with sensitivity to how power in the TSR is experienced.

Downey (2008) discusses the issue of fostering resilience for pupils experiencing adversity, suggesting outcomes are not necessarily determined by risk, and that positive experiences, including those within teacher-student relationships, can help ‘defy the odds’ – echoing Tayler’s (2015) views on resilience, and developing new ways of relating. Trust within the TSR is an important feature of this and is also present in this research. This associates with previous findings that have identified developing trust, including the need for ‘earned trust’, as a key relational approach (Gregory & Ripski, 2008) – which is especially pertinent for children and young people who have experienced negative encounters with authority, or power, involving a loss of trust in the adults and systems around them, and where their reluctance, refusal, or *inability* to conform has led to negative consequences.

Time in AP can offer pupils transformative learning experiences – where staff work with individuals to challenge (negative) assumptions that inform their interactions. The hope of transformative learning is that ‘better’ individuals will ‘build a better world’ (Christie et al., 2015) – relating to positive psychology aims of supporting civic virtues and engagement, and community membership, as described by Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) who highlight the role of others, such as through social modelling, in demonstrating actions that lead to wellbeing, positive selfhood, and a place in a thriving community, with a life that is ‘most worth living’. However, there are challenges to assessing the efficacy of practice in AP. While it is recognised that time in the right school environment can provide safety and healing (Bloom, 1995; Bloom and Sreedhar, 2008) it has also been suggested that a key indicator of success for any school should be considered in relation to longer-term outcomes for pupils, as they become adults (Farrell & Polat, 2003). Participants’ reflections in this research describe relationships which are often fruitful, and poignant, while pupils remain in the setting, but with concerns expressed for continued positive outcomes following the post-16 transition, often a return to mainstream education; which is recognised as both challenging and problematic (Atkinson & Rowley, 2019; Pillay et al., 2013).

As Munn and Lloyd (2004) suggest, creating space to listen to ‘troubled and troublesome pupils’ might enable them to continue in mainstream schools, while highlighting that a focus only on school practices does not account for broader social and economic (political) factors that are positioning schools as increasingly accountable for wider social issues. Pirrie et al. (2011) have suggested that tackling complex social problems, such as the issue of exclusions, requires large-scale social reform, that goes beyond policy changes and initiatives. This is evidently a significant undertaking, which might benefit from looking beyond the borders of British education and considering examples of inclusive practices from a broader perspective. It has been reported that in Portugal, for example, 99% of children are taught in mainstream settings (Bagley, 2021) and that Italy, as the country with the highest rates of SEND inclusion in Europe, and where legislation underpins an inclusive school system (Ianes et al., 2020) has also taken a progressive approach to including pupils with special educational needs. This has been informed by a belief that widespread inclusion of all young people promotes learning through cohort diversity, with research highlighting the positive impact of an inclusive policy on the quality of life for those with disabilities, teachers’ attitudes, and variety in pedagogies that benefits all pupils (Ciambrone & Griffo, 2021). This perspective perhaps recognises that positive influences enabled through social and educational accommodations in the educational setting, can be ‘a force for meaningful change’ for young people with SEMH and relational needs, as described by (Carroll & Hurry, 2018) and may represent a forward-thinking view, underpinned by a commitment to facilitating inclusion for all children and young people, based on an understanding of, and provision for individual needs. Considering the challenges and strengths of such alternative systems might provide inspiration, and a fresh perspective from which to view educational policy and practice in a British context.

**Conclusions**

This research explored factors relating to teacher-student relationships in an AP context. It has been developed and conducted with the understanding that despite a decade of previous research and conjecture around school exclusions, and education for excluded pupils, problems continue, particularly around variation in the quality of AP provision. There is a need to develop a deeper understanding of the features of good and great practice in the sector (Gill, 2018) and ultimately to work towards addressing inequality (IfPPR, 2017) and discriminatory practices (DfE, Graham et al., 2019) relating to social justice principles (McNulty & Roseboro, 2009).

I aimed to investigate the positive aspects of relationships between AP community members – the practices and approaches favoured by front-line staff, as well as changes that might enable the development of relationships in the setting community. This produced themes relating to reciprocity, reparation, emotions, and the physical and human structures that enable staff in their relational work. A further theme, relating to possible changes, included suggestions for the setting community, relating to staff practices, and for an understanding of inclusive approaches beyond the setting.

Findings support the view that relational dynamics underpin the effectiveness of AP (Malcolm, 2018) and enable social, relational and academic progress for pupils (Cornelius-White, 2007; Roorda et al., 2011). Humanistic values, including (unconditional) positive regard, empathy, and respect, were evident in descriptions of practice, underpinned by principles of transformative learning (Mezirow, 1997) and positive psychology (Seligman, 2004). Findings acquiesce with previous research which has identified that the emotional aspect of this work is both highly rewarding and highly demanding (Alvarez-Hevia, 2018; Fitzsimmons et al., 2019).

Particularly interesting was the description of challenges around transitions, especially in relation to the post-16 transition when pupils return to mainstream settings, and which participants reflected on as being problematic based on their experiences. This echoes findings shared by Atkinson and Rowley (2019) and Trotman et al. (2019) who highlight difficulties in this area, alongside the need for holistic, systemic approaches for supporting excluded pupils, particularly in relation to transition and mainstream re-integration.

It is important that future work relating to understanding practices in AP considers the individual and demographic features of each setting. The diversity that is a recognised feature of education in AP (HoCEC, 2018) including the complex histories of settings (Pirrie & Macleod, 2009) might be considered a strength – and a helpful criteria for evaluating the efficacy of settings might consider longer term outcomes (Farrell & Polat, 2003) that focus on the trajectories of pupils as they become young adults.

**Limitations**

This small-scale study has limitations that include factors relating to the participant group, and to the structure of interactions. With no pupils in the setting during the research period, a relatively narrow participant group included front line staff members only. This research had emancipatory and participatory aspirations, understanding that previous research has often been unable to include the ‘authentic’ voices of children and young people (Children’s Commissioner, 2017) and that despite related research increasingly seeking the views of young people, those with SEMH needs are among the least heard (Michael & Frederickson, 2013). Without pupil involvement it was not possible address this, or to fully meet these aims, which is considered to be a limitation.

There was a need for flexibility during the research period, as it was understood that some of the participants would not be able to attend every session. As such, groupings were adapted flexibly based on who could attend. The two focus groups that some participants were unable to attend were affected by the absence of their ‘voices’.

It had been my intention to facilitate a full Appreciative Inquiry, although this was not possible due to procedural and methodological factors that presented during the research. It is also the case that AI phases were not evenly weighted, which in some respects enabled a deeper and richer exploration of experiences (in the Discovery Phase) but which also equates to a limitation, as the full AI was not possible.

It is hard to make a case that analyses from this small-scale study are readily generalisable. As only a small number of participants, with particular roles in a ‘unique’ AP context, were involved, their views may be considered exclusive, and caution should be taken when considering analyses in relation to the wider setting community, and with other contextually similar settings.

This research was developed as part of a wider Research and Development (R & D) project, which is ongoing, and has evolved since this research began. A possible limitation to working in this way is that the research is not as contained as a study facilitated discretely. There is also an expectation that this work will continue, taking time/resources to organise, and there is no natural closure – all of which are potentially limitations.

**Dissemination**

I am delighted to have the opportunity to continue working in this area through R & D time. I am currently part of a small R & D sub-group, within the Educational Psychology Team where I work. We have planned to work with several mainstream secondary schools, who have been actively implementing relational approaches for at least three years. We are aiming to investigate what this means for different groups in the schools – Senior Leaders, front line staff, and pupils. We have planned to introduce participants to a Photovoice activity (a creative qualitative method, using photographs to represent meaning) and use subsequent contributions as a stimulus for discussion in focus groups. This is also at Phase Two of the R & D project, and the aim is that findings will inform Phase Three, and lead to the development of a tangible relationship ‘toolkit’ that can be shared more widely.

I fed back initial findings to participants, and to my contact at the host setting informally. We have planned to disseminate findings to the wider staff team, beginning with the leadership team.

**Implications, and recommendations for practice and further research**

It is widely recognised that there should be further opportunities for pupils in AP, and particularly those with SEMH needs, to share their views and perspectives more frequently – which can be used to develop understanding, and inform improvements in approaches, practice and provision (e.g. Trotman et al., 2019).

The difficulty around transitions for pupils in AP, especially at post-16, has been highlighted in previous research, and again in this research. Participants in this research expressed dissatisfaction with current processes of transition. Further research could explore this issue, relating to longer-term outcomes for pupils who have accessed AP, as suggested by Farrell and Polat (2003). Participants spoke about a pupil ‘toolkit’ as a resource to support them when they leave – efforts to understand and explore this concept further would also be valuable.

Research to further understand the emotional aspect of working in AP is important, as highlighted previously (Alvarez-Hevia, 2018; Fitzsimmons et al., 2019) and supported in this research. This relates to retention of staff and ensuring that staff working in the AP sector access appropriate support and supervision in relation to the emotional demands of the role.

There are continuing challenges around how to establish relational practices within all areas of education (including mainstream schools) and how to develop a greater understanding of children with special educational needs, including SEMH, more widely. Initial Teacher Training should include a greater focus on understanding and supporting children with SEND, including input for working with children who have experienced difficulties in their relationships (relating to attachment, and trauma).

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**Appendices Appendix 1**

**Research Summary**

|  |
| --- |
| **Relationships in school: summary of proposed research** You may be reading this information following a conversation with [member of SLT] who I have been speaking with about research at [setting].Firstly, I would like to thank you for your interest, and for taking the time to consider whether being involved may be of interest to you. I would also like to be clear that this is a brief summary, aiming to provide a flavour of the research only.Reading this document does not imply any commitment to participate, and formal consent would be needed at a later stage, if and when your wish to participate is known.**What is this research about, and why [this setting]?**This research is seeking to understand more about how positive relationships are formed, developed, and maintained between students and staff in schools. Through talking with colleagues and looking at the school’s policies and procedures [this setting] is understood to place great value on relationships. The relational experiences of school community members are therefore of interest. The research aims to explore the perspectives of those with these experiences. **Why would I be involved?**A relatively small number of participants will be involved – around 6. It is hoped that this group will include school staff with different roles. It was initially planned to include students, but the circumstances around Coronavirus means this is not possible.Participation offers the opportunity to talk about positive aspects of your practice and experience of working with young people. This would involve group discussions and the chance to share your views, thoughts, and ideas with colleagues. While the structure and format of discussions may be familiar, the specific approach might be something new to you. Participation in research represents a CPD opportunity. **What would be involved if I choose to participate?**The research plans to use an Appreciative Inquiry approach. This aims to *appreciate* the best of *what is working well*, through a process of group discussion. Group members will be invited to share their views of how relationships between staff and students are formed, developed, and maintained to positive effect. Participation would involve joining in two initial group discussions of up to an hour each, and a final whole group discussion of around an hour. The aim is that this will take place over the last three weeks of term. **What happens next?**Please share expressions of interest with [staff member], who may also be able to answer any initial questions. More information will be provided, along with the opportunity to ask further questions, once a potential group has been established. Thanks again for taking the time to read and consider being part of this research.With best wishes [Name and role] |

**Appendix 2**

**Research Information Sheet**

**Relationships in school: Exploring what works, and what we can learn from what works**

Firstly, thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet.

You are being asked to be involved in this research project. Before you decide whether you want to be involved, please read the information below and if you wish, discuss it with others. If there is anything that you are not sure about, or if you would like any more information, please feel free to get in touch (email below).

***What is the project’s purpose?***

I know from talking with colleagues, and looking at your policies and procedures, that your school places a great value on the relationships in school.

I would like to take some time to explore this with school staff. I am interested in how relationships are formed, maintained, and repaired between pupils and staff. From exploring the positive experiences of a small group of staff I would like us to explore possible practices and changes to the school system that might help further improve relationships in school.

***Why have I been chosen?***

You have been chosen because you are a member of the school community and potentially have some valuable experiences to share in this research project.

***Do I have to take part?***

No. It is your decision whether or not you decide to take part. If you do decide to take part, this information sheet will be yours to keep and you will be asked to sign a consent form.

You can withdraw from the research at any time and you do not have to give a reason for making that decision. I will continually seek your consent to be involved with the research, verbally, at each stage of the project. If you wish to withdraw from the research, please contact me (see below for email address).

***What will happen to me if I take part? What do I have to do?***

If you are happy to participate in the research, it is important that you sign the informed consent form.

You will be asked to participate in three group interviews, scheduled to last for approximately an hour each, taking place over three different days. These will take place within working hours via group video calling.

The interviews will explore the group’s positive experiences of relationships in school and how we can learn from these experiences to strengthen the school community’s relationships.

***What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?***

There are no foreseen dangers or risks of participating in this study. However, if any unexpected discomforts or risks arise during the research, please let me know immediately. If you would like further support as a result of being involved in the research please let me know and I will be able to direct you to support within the school and from Children’s Services.

***What are the possible benefits of taking part?***

The aim of the research is to support the development of positive relationships within the school community of which you belong.

***How will the recorded media be used?***

The conversations during group interviews will be video and audio recorded. The recordings made during this research will be used only for analysis and will only be heard by myself. Anonymised excerpts will be used in presentations, and potentially academic publications.

***Will my taking part in this project be kept confidential?***

All the information that I collect during this research will be strictly confidential. You will not be identified in any reports or publications for any reason.

The interviews and transcripts will be stored in secure places.

Following completion of the research project the interviews and transcripts will be destroyed.

This will be with the exception of the unlikely event that indications of malpractice are spoken of during the interviews. These would not be kept confidential and would be followed up within the appropriate procedures set out by the school and Children’s Services which governs the school.

***What is the legal basis for processing my personal data?***

It is a requirement that I inform you that in order to collect, use and process your personal information as part of this research project, there must be a basis in law to do so. This research is serving “a task in the public interest” and “processing is necessary for the performance of a task carried out in the public interest” (Article 6(1)(e)). This is the basis on which I am conducting the research.

The results from the research will be made available as a final thesis and a copy will be made available to you. You will not be identified in any reports or future publications as pseudonyms will be used to protect your anonymity. Your school will be anonymised.

***Who is organising and funding the research?***

This research is organised by [name] Local Authority and the University of Sheffield.

***Who is the Data Controller?***

The University of Sheffield will act as the Data Controller for this study. This means that the University is responsible for looking after your information and using it properly.

***Who has ethically reviewed the project?***

The research project has received ethical approval from the University of Sheffield’s Psychology Research Ethics Committee.

**Thank you for reading this. If you have any questions please get in touch: tholder1@sheffield.ac.uk**

**Appendix 3**

**Participant Consent Form**

**Relationships in school: Exploring what works and what we can learn from what works**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| ***Please tick the appropriate boxes*** | **Yes** | **No** |
| **Taking Part in the Project** |  |  |
| I have read and understood the project information sheet dated / / 2020 or the project has been fully explained to me. (If you will answer No to this question, please do not proceed with this consent form until you are fully aware of what your participation in the project will mean.) |  |  |
| I have been given the opportunity to ask questions about the project.  |  |  |
| I agree to take part in the project. I understand that taking part in the project will include interviews that are recorded (audio). |  |  |
| I understand that my taking part is voluntary and that I can withdraw from the study at any time; I do not have to give any reasons for why I no longer want to take part and there will be no adverse consequences if I choose to withdraw.  |  |  |
| **How my information will be used during and after the project** |  |  |
| I understand my personal details such as name, phone number, address and email address etc. will not be revealed to people outside the project. |  |  |
| I understand and agree that my words may be quoted in publications, reports, web pages, and other research outputs. I understand that I will not be named in these. |  |  |
| **So that the information you provide can be used legally by the researchers** |  |  |
| I agree to assign the copyright I hold in any materials generated as part of this project to The University of Sheffield. |  |  |
|  |  |  |
|  |  |  |
| **Name of participant:**  | **Signature** | Date |
|  |  |  |
| **Name of Researcher:** Tom Holder  | **Signature** | Date |

**Appendix 4**

**Sample data extracts, with codes applied**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Data extract  | Coded as |
| I am a Primary Teacher, I work with the youngest children in the school, so I get the ones that have just come into school, that are a bit chaotic, I worked in mainstream for six years, and then I decided to leave and try something different, and I wanted to work with children that needed a bit more support, I wanted to work somewhere where there was a bit more of a focus on wellbeing, rather than just academic grades**Focus group 1** | 1. Beginning of pupil ‘journey’
2. Ethos/values, difference with mainstream
 |
| Oh don’t [laughing] such ribbing on the horrors of my hair, you should see [name] today though, that’s something that’s made me smile, yeah, I managed to catch him as he was getting into his car on the way back and he leapt out, step mum was definitely “thank god he’s seen you”, because like-Oh brilliant, I’m glad he got to see you [name], really good. They mentioned like, all he really wants is to see you as well, before we all leave there as well, yeah, it’s lovely. **Focus group 2**  | 1. Positive relationships between staff
2. Positive emotions, smiling, humour
3. Positive relationships between staff and pupils (and parents)
4. Emotion of ‘leaving’, transition
 |
| I personally think it’s because we’ve got a lot more flexibility, at [the setting] we’ve got the time to be able to invest in those students and we’ve got such a high staff to student ratio, with having such small class numbers, if one of our students is having a difficult day, we are able to take them out, we are able to go and sit with them to find out what’s going on, I feel like I have got quite a good knowledge of my students, and I feel like that because of the time we’ve been able to spend with them, for example, in a mainstream, I can only really compare it to mainstream, in a mainstream they don’t have that level of flexibility, unless your child has got a one to one helper, then from my perspective I don’t really think they have the time in mainstream to be able to dedicate to that, so yeah, I think it’s because we’ve got such small ratios.**Focus group 3** | 1. Time to build relationships, environment
2. Environment - ratios
3. Environment enabling relational ‘building’
 |
| I think there’s this culture that’s embedded in you from the start that all the staff here care, and they properly- the buzz terms like unlimited positive regard, and that encompasses many things but also encompasses the fact that all the staff here really do want what’s best for these kids, they really do want to form these really positive relationships and to help, and I think that is so wonderful to see, and because we’re used to it every single day, you forget how different that is from a mainstream school, how different and how special that is, and I think it’s something that definitely sets Springwell apart, one hundred percent**Focus group 4** | 1. Values/ethos, care, and genuineness
2. The setting as different, ‘unique’
 |
| for me, the dream for these children is that they develop ways to manage their emotions in a healthy way to be able to communicate, especially for my children, that really struggle to build relationships, to be able to build positive relationships with people and to trust people, because a lot of my children don’t have that trust, because they’ve been so let down**Focus group 5**  | 1. Relational teaching/skills, legacy
2. Vulnerability, repair, social justice
 |

**Appendix 5**

**Collated codes from two ‘sweeps’ (full data set)**

**Interview 1 codes**

* Active/mindful adult strategies – child feeling known
* Appeal of pedagogies – creative freedom
* Awareness of and managing relational sabotage
* Beginning of journey – different stages
* Bond between student and staff, and staff and staff
* Child at the centre – not the child having to fit the system
* Communicating the difference between ‘behaviour’ and individuals
* Consistency and what this communicates, predictability, united approach of staff, cohesion
* Doing *with* – teaching through experience
* Emotion from relational feedback/affirmation
* Emotional motivation
* Evidence of relational goal achieved, affirmations
* Find a common interest as a ‘way in’
* Government/M/S/Society positioned as negative
* How pupils feel given high value
* Idea of working at setting being a learning experience
* Implicit communication to pupils of their value and worth
* Importance of relational feedback
* Investment of time and emotion
* Knowing at a familial level, maternal
* Mainstream differences – positioned as negative
* Managed expectations/realism
* Meaning and emotion from student behaviour – interactions and ‘signs of success’ hold meaning for staff
* Meaning beyond ‘work’
* Patience, time, journey
* Personalities – people as individuals, staff and children]
* Positive emotions working at setting and challenge
* Professional/pedagogical freedom and autonomy
* Reading student non-verbal communications
* Relating on an instinctive level
* Relational honesty – maturity also
* Relational values, and engagement strategies
* Rolling with the punches here – consistency
* Rolling with the punches, challenges, physical attacks
* Social learning/modelling
* Staff implicitly communicating now is important past is not
* Structure (values, ethos, school system) as enabling
* Structure vs. flexibility, give and take
* Teaching through -difficult- experiences
* Values and motivations; M/S setting differences
* Ways and means of connection
* Wellbeing focus – wider values
* Working holistically

**Interview 2 codes**

* Affirmations for staff in pupil behaviour
* Attachment – hard to let go – frustration
* Awareness of power – this is implicit and accepted – or not accepted – in M/S
* Bespoke environment
* Building in extra-curricular opportunities – dual purpose
* Building strength – journey – child-centred
* Challenge and reward
* Challenge of letting go
* Child-centred awareness, relational prioritising
* Collaborative staff approaches, create reassurance and containment
* Collaborative support – staff modelling for staff
* Confidence/pride in setting
* Consistency and familiarity in staff members
* Damaged children – child-centred - individuals
* Deep emotion – familial aspect
* Difficult to capture or articulate relational ‘moments’
* Emotion of pupils leaving – transition
* Emotional challenges for staff
* Enjoyable/positive experience at the heart
* Enjoyable/positive experiences
* Genuine warmth, humanistic values
* Idealised environment not ‘real world’
* Journey – stages
* Journey for staff as well]
* Little moment – big significance
* Managing relational difficulties
* Mutuality – staff and pupils
* Normalising of significant relational moments
* Personal values and emotions
* Personal, emotions
* Personalising, child-centred
* Physical and relational challenges
* Positive as natural, embedded
* Post 16 transition
* Reducing relational load/demands, with fewer staff
* Relational connection
* Relational feedback – emotions of pupils as priority
* Relational protection
* Relational staff collaboration
* Resources available for staff
* Setting being unique
* Seeing these children as specific in some way
* Social and relational modelling
* Social learning – role models
* Staff relationships - humour
* Synergy in learning – academic and relational
* Values – ethos -culture

**Interview 3 codes**

* Affirmations and relational feedback – requiring attunement
* Affirmations are important to staff
* Affirmations, familial, relational meaning and continuity
* Being ready for sabotage
* Child-centred, mature reciprocal communication
* Child-centred, time
* Clarity around roles - expectations
* Company ethos
* Deep relational attachment]
* Difficulty – when children move on
* Drawing on personal experiences
* Emotional and relational challenges
* Emotional connection – relational attunement
* Enabling/disabling environments
* Enrichment, life experiences
* Environment - ratios
* Environment enabling relational building
* Environmental relational support
* Experience as a teacher
* Genuineness of staff wanting to make a difference]
* Giving something that has been lacking, social justice, personal emotions, rolling with it, riding the rollercoaster
* How staff are seen by children]
* Individual differences in staff
* Life after setting, challenge of attachment but not too attached
* Managing relational risk – change/temporality
* Personal emotions
* Personal emotions
* Personal emotions
* Philosophy, relational strategy
* Playing the long game
* Preparing for life after setting
* Relational sharing, modelling
* Relational strategies
* Relational tools
* Reparation, making amends for previous experiences
* Riding the rollercoaster
* Rolling with attack/rejection
* Sense of family – pupils looking at staff as family, but also as familial models]
* Social justice, empathy
* Social justice, particular types of children]
* Staff skills, approaches
* Staff values]
* Values – for these ‘different’ pupils, social justice Values, motivations]

**Interview 4 codes**

* Accepting breakdown/conflict, rollercoaster
* Accepting the ups and downs, separating out behaviour from individual
* Active ‘performance’ of staff
* Affirmations and relational feedback
* Being a ‘safe’ base
* Challenges
* Child-centred, power sensitivity, respect
* Child-centred, relationally responsive
* Connectedness and support
* Ethos and philosophy
* Flexibility, adaptability
* Genuine care and empathy
* Genuineness and values
* Genuineness, relational honesty, maturity
* Going the extra mile
* Hard to define relational skills
* Healing, reparation
* Holistic approach
* Individuals bringing different things to the party
* M/S challenges
* Making a difference to lives not just learning
* Meaning – more than a job
* Non-judgemental, human approach, relating to individuals not ideas
* Positive outlook, anti-deterministic
* Prepared for challenges
* Reframing and creating a positive mindset, healing
* Rolling with it, humour, outlook, philosophy
* Rolling with the punches
* Setting being different, unique
* Staff collaboration
* Staff collaboration to support relational repair
* Staff collaboration, and strength
* Staff connectedness, camaraderie
* The long game, affirmations
* Treating as mature, not talking down, power
* Type of child
* Values and drivers

**Interview 5 codes**

* Actions guided by values, ethos, philosophy
* Attitudes to inclusion/exclusion
* Creating opportunities, breaking down barriers
* Desire to share and teach others
* Fighting against determinism
* Frustrations, sadness, managing that
* Grappling with post setting ‘realities’
* Individuals children and staff
* Managing difficult feelings, a ‘cut off’
* Managing difficult feelings, systemic frustrations
* Pride in environment – humble and proud – humility and pride come through in all interviews
* Resisting othering or boxing of children with SEND, injustice
* Setting vs. M/S environment
* Social justice, vulnerability
* Social and relational role models
* Social justice, wish for change
* Social modelling and learning facilitated by staff
* Societal awareness, injustice, staff very aware
* Society, social justice and change
* Staff community, cohesion, collaboration
* Step by step, relational journey
* Systems within setting – environment
* Teaching skills for the future, legacy
* Teaching skills, legacy
* Uniqueness of setting

**Appendix 6**

**Initial Mind Maps and draft graphics**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Diagram  Description automatically generatedDiagram  Description automatically generated |  A piece of paper with writing on it  Description automatically generated Text, letter  Description automatically generated |

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Setting/environment** | **Values/philosophy** | **Knowledge/experience** | **Approaches** |
| Pedagogical flexibility/autonomy – creative freedom | Emotions of staff:excited by job, more than just a job; going the extra mile  | Mainstream systems | Working *with* (power) |
| Flexibility – space to access different areas  | Familial sense  | Theory: attachment, trauma, restorative practice  | Communicating value, worth, respect |
| Adapts to YP not vice versa | Seeking/responsive to relational feedback | Working at setting as a journey | Constant social and relational modelling: staff-pupilsPupils-pupilsStaff-staff |
| Consistency – staff; clarity around roles  | Separating behaviour and person | Being at setting as a learning experience for staff and pupils  | Managing relational sabotage  |
| Strong overarching ethos (staff ‘buy in’) | Bonding and attachment | Power  | Relational honesty, maturity – communicating ‘on a level’  |
| Routine/predictability  | Child centred | Relational affirmations and feedback  | Staff ‘envoys’ |
| Physical environment conveys value  | YP emotions prioritised | Staff resilience – rolling with the punches | Finding common ground |
| Bespoke setting – light, spacious | Unconditional positive regard | *Types* of children – damage  | Interchanging of staff roles |
| Setting as ‘unique’ ‘special’ | Social justice  | Mutuality of experience  | Time (YP centred) |
| Ratios – staff/pupils (compared with M/S) | Growth and learning | Understanding/realism that setting is protective, highly specialist; and that post-16 will be different  | Attunement – ‘reading’ |
| Positive sense of hierarchy, SLT – singing from the same hymn sheet | Repairing/making amends for negative experiences | Relational knowledge/understanding:Playing the long game | United approach of staff, cohesion |
| Resources available for staff – human/emotional and literal | Genuineness and care | Relational knowledge/understanding:Riding the rollercoaster  | *Teaching* through difficult experiences  |
| Environment is idealised, and not ‘real world’  | Teamwork; camaraderie  | Relational knowledge/understanding:Rolling with the punches | Compromise  |
| Confidence in staff and setting | Humanistic values: empathy  | Post-16; legacy; toolbox  | Implicit communication to pupils of their value and worth |
| Pride in staff and setting  | Building strength  |  | Investment of time |
|  | Investment of emotion  |  | Staff relationships; humour, modelling |
|  | Features of positive psychology evident  |  | Reframing; creating a positive mindset |
|  | Resisting othering or ‘boxing’ as per M/S |  |  |
|  | Attitudes to inclusion/exclusion  |  |  |

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Enabling structures** | **Reciprocity**  | **Offsetting power**  | **Riders on the storm**  | **Investments** |
| School environment: physical features  | Teamwork makes the dream work | Experiential compensation |  Conceptualising *behaviour* | Emotional capital |
| School system: tiers in sync (ethos, beliefs) | Travelling together (growth and learning) | Othering the mainstream | Teaching through experience  | Enacting values |
| *Trust* enabling pedagogical freedom | Relational feedback and affirmations  | Reframing, empowering | Rolling with the punches | Emotions first |
| *Human* resources (emotional, literal)  | Bonding and attachment  | Building strength  | Riding the rollercoaster  | Implicit communication |
| School system: consistency in practices and routines | Social and relational modelling  | Relational teaching | Emotional highs  | Resisting *fate* |
| Flex in the system |  | Disrupting patterns of relating | Travelling together  | Playing the long game |

**Appendix 7**

**Draft Thematic Map**



**Appendix 8**

**Final Thematic Map**



**Appendix 9**

**Ethics Approval Letter**



Downloaded: 10/03/2021

Approved: 26/06/2020

School of Education

Programme: DEdCPsy

Dear Thomas

**PROJECT TITLE:** Using Appreciative Inquiry to understand and develop relationships in a specialist educational setting

**APPLICATION:** Reference Number 034778

On behalf of the University ethics reviewers who reviewed your project, I am pleased to inform you that on 26/06/2020 the

above-named project was **approved** on ethics grounds, on the basis that you will adhere to the following documentation

that you submitted for ethics review:

University research ethics application form 034778 (form submission date: 25/06/2020); (expected project end date:

01/07/2021).

Participant information sheet 1079565 version 1 (18/05/2020).

Participant consent form 1079566 version 1 (18/05/2020).

If during the course of the project you need to deviate significantly from the above-approved documentation please inform

me since written approval will be required.

Your responsibilities in delivering this research project are set out at the end of this letter.

Yours sincerely

David Hyatt

Ethics Administrator

School of Education

Please note the following responsibilities of the researcher in delivering the research project:

The project must abide by the University's Research Ethics Policy:

https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/rs/ethicsandintegrity/ethicspolicy/approval-procedure

The project must abide by the University's Good Research & Innovation Practices Policy:

https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/polopoly\_fs/1.671066!/file/GRIPPolicy.pdf

The researcher must inform their supervisor (in the case of a student) or Ethics Administrator (in the case of a member

of staff) of any significant changes to the project or the approved documentation.

The researcher must comply with the requirements of the law and relevant guidelines relating to security and

confidentiality of personal data.

The researcher is responsible for effectively managing the data collected both during and after the end of the project

in line with best practice, and any relevant legislative, regulatory or contractual requirements.