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Relational and Ecological Perspectives on how Educators Understand and Respond to Children and Young People's Demand-Avoidant Behaviours in UK Schools

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Abstract

This thesis explores how educators understand (RQ1) and respond (RQ2) to demand-avoidant behaviours in schools, and how policies and culture shape responses (RQ3). It advances relational, ecological understandings of demand-avoidant behaviour, introducing a practitioner-informed framework that foregrounds relationships and highlights the need for systemic change to sustain support. Demand-avoidant behaviours (often termed 'PDA') have gained attention in UK educational and autism contexts (O'Nions et al., 2014a); however, research has focused predominantly on conceptualisation and aetiology, with practitioner perspectives and support strategies largely absent.

Five teachers and teaching assistants (two with dual SENCo roles) from one secondary, three primary, and one specialist setting in a single local authority took part in semi-structured interviews. From a social constructionist and relativist perspective, I used Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022) to develop themes reflecting participants' constructions.

Eleven themes were generated. For RQ1, participants understood demand-avoidant behaviours as anxiety-driven, involuntary responses shaped by neurodevelopmental and socio-environmental factors, while navigating conceptual uncertainty about classification and terminology. For RQ2, participants prioritised a relational approach characterised by trust, attunement, emotional safety, shared agency, and calibration of demands, constructed as mediating demand-avoidant behaviours and supporting participation. For RQ3, this approach was supported or constrained by behaviour policies, professional dynamics, leadership, and cultural expectations of schooling.

This research concludes that demand-avoidant behaviours are best understood within a relational, ecological framework, contributing to literature (Doyle & Kenny, 2023; Green et al., 2018; Milton, 2012) that challenges medicalised, within-child explanations and emphasises relationships and systemic factors in shaping demand-avoidant behaviours and practitioners' capacity to respond relationally.

Implications suggest Educational Psychologists should legitimise relational approaches; staff should recognise their interactions as central to CYP's safety, supported by a practice framework (Appendix V); leaders must embed relational

approaches, supported by a self-reflection tool (Appendix X); and national policy should reflect relational frameworks.

Please note that this thesis was completed across a period during which I changed my name from Emma Crowder to Emma Stubbs. Both names refer to the same person.

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List of Abbreviations

ACES - Adverse Childhood Experiences

ADHD - Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder

APA - American Psychiatric Association

ASD - Autism Spectrum Disorder

BPS - British Psychological Society

C&I - Communication and Interaction

CYP - Children and Young People

DA - Discourse Analysis

DAP - Demand Avoidance Phenomena

DfE - Department for Education

DISCO - Diagnostic Interview for Social and Communication Disorders

DSM-5 - Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th Edition

EDA-Q - Extreme Demand Avoidance Questionnaire

EP - Educational Psychologist

EPS - Educational Psychology Service

HCPC - Health and Care Professions Council

ICD-11 - International Classification of Diseases, 11th Revision

IOU - Intolerance of Uncertainty

IPA - Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

LA - Local Authority

NAS - National Autistic Society

NHS - National Health Service

NICE - National Institute for Health and Care Excellence

ODD - Oppositional Defiant Disorder

Ofsted - Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills

PDA - Pathological Demand Avoidance

PE - Physical Education

RQ - Research Question

RTA - Reflexive Thematic Analysis

SEN - Special Educational Needs

SENCo - Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator

SEMH - Social, Emotional and Mental Health

SEND - Special Educational Needs and Disabilities

SLT - Senior Leadership Team

TA - Teaching Assistant

TEP - Trainee Educational Psychologist

UK - United Kingdom

WHO - World Health Organisation

Chapter One: Introduction

This introduction provides an overview of the study and defines demand-avoidant behaviours, before outlining the gap in existing literature, the research approach taken, its key findings and the study's contribution. Demand-avoidant behaviours remain a contested area, and the literature review that follows engages with this contention without resolving it. I have therefore chosen to present the key contextual details and findings so that the reader approaches the literature review already oriented to the study's purpose and direction.

Defining 'PDA'

Demand-avoidant behaviours have gained increasing attention within educational and autism contexts in the United Kingdom (O'Nions et al., 2014a). The label Pathological Demand Avoidance (PDA) describes "a profile characterised by extreme avoidance of everyday demands, significantly impacting functioning in educational and social environments" (Newson et al., 2003). PDA does not hold formal status within the DSM-5 (American Psychiatric Association, 2013) or ICD-11 (World Health Organisation, 2018), and there is a lack of strong empirical data supporting a single, definitive ontological perspective on what PDA is (Green et al., 2018; Milton, 2017). While PDA is now commonly understood as a profile within the autism spectrum (Moore, 2020), this association has developed relatively recently, and debate continues regarding its relationship to autism, other neurodevelopmental presentations, and demand avoidance as a more general human experience (PDA Society, 2022).

Throughout this thesis, I use "demand-avoidant behaviours" rather than "PDA." This reflects the reality that CYP may not have formal diagnoses, yet schools still seek support (Green, 2024), and focuses attention on what educators encounter in practice, without requiring navigation of contested diagnostic categories. This choice, and the wider terminology debate, is discussed further in Section 2.2.

The Gap in Existing Literature

Whilst debates around conceptualisation and classification remain unresolved, the impact on CYP in schools is well documented and requires urgent attention. Research into the school experiences of CYP displaying demand-avoidant

behaviours, often labelled as "PDA" or "pathological demand avoidance," documents high rates of exclusion, misunderstanding, and a lack of support (Truman et al., 2021; Brede et al., 2017; Green, 2024). Doyle and Kenny (2023) found that over one in ten CYP were entirely out of education, with such experiences linked to serious mental health difficulties, including anxiety, depression, self-harm, and suicidal ideation (Truman et al., 2021). Yet, existing research has focused predominantly on the contested areas of conceptualisation, classification, and aetiology (Haire et al., 2024), with perspectives of school staff largely absent from this literature. A survey of professionals conducted by the PDA Society (2016) found that educators struggle to support CYP displaying demand-avoidant behaviours; however, there is little research providing insights into how they understand demand-avoidant behaviours, what approaches they find supportive, or the systemic elements that enable or constrain their practice.

Research Approach

Considering this gap, the study aimed to explore how school staff understand and respond to demand-avoidant behaviours within their professional contexts, and how school policies and culture shape their responses, informing contextually grounded approaches to support. A social constructionist positioning enabled me to amplify practitioner voices without requiring resolution of ongoing conceptual debates, focusing on the meanings they constructed and the contexts shaping their practice. I conducted semi-structured interviews with five practitioners, teachers (two with dual roles as SENCos) and teaching assistants across one local authority in the East Midlands of England, analysing data using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022). This qualitative approach suited researching a contested area, allowing focus on what practitioners do and what enables or constrains their responses, without requiring resolution of ongoing classification debates.

My professional interest in this research is discussed in the methodology chapter (Section 3.3.1), where I outline how prior experience as a practitioner and Trainee Educational Psychologist shaped my choice of topic and my approach to the literature.

Key Findings

The research found that practitioners understood demand-avoidant behaviours primarily as anxiety-driven and involuntary, requiring responses significantly different from traditional behaviour management. How they understood behaviour directly shaped how they responded. In their practice, relationships were positioned as the foundation for all other strategies. Participants described prioritising emotional safety, adapting communication to reduce threat, sharing control through authentic collaboration, and flexibly adjusting demands and environments to match CYP's fluctuating capacity.

However, practitioners' ability to sustain these approaches was constrained by competing negative narratives among colleagues, concerns about appearing "too soft" or unprofessional, and the absence of systemic structures to legitimise and support relational responses. Where the school culture aligned with their approach, practitioners reported being able to respond relationally and supportively.

As Lauren, one of the participants, stated in her interview:

"If the relationship's not there, none of the strategies matter."

I hope participating provides some recognition and validation for each of the practitioners' work.

Research Contribution

This study contributes to growing recognition that demand-avoidant behaviours are shaped by and responsive to context (Green et al., 2018; Milton, 2017; Woods, 2019), challenging medicalised within-child explanations. The research suggests that demand-avoidant behaviours are mediated and changeable through the immediate interactions and relationships surrounding children and young people (CYP), positioning everyday relational practice as foundational to support. Importantly, the research suggests that supporting CYP relationally requires systemic change and alignment across multiple ecological levels (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006), from behaviour policies and school leadership practices through to wider cultural expectations about schooling, compliance and how demand-avoidant behaviours are viewed and responded to.

In light of the findings, this research offers practical resources to support school staff. I provide a framework showing what relational practice looks like in practice when supporting CYP displaying demand-avoidant behaviours in school contexts (Appendix V), and a self-reflection tool designed for senior leadership teams and staff to reflect on provision and support for CYP displaying demand-avoidant behaviours at individual, relational, environmental, and organisational levels (Appendix X).

While existing literature presents predominantly problem-saturated narratives of school experiences for CYP displaying demand-avoidant behaviours, this research offers a more hopeful perspective. It suggests that when adults prioritise genuine relationships based on power sharing, adapt how demands are communicated and delivered, provide co-regulation and emotional support, and create flexible learning environments, CYP are more likely to be able to participate and cope in school settings, positioning school staff as having agency to transform the experience of education for CYP through their every day interactions. However, sustaining such practice requires whole-school systems that legitimise, resource, and support relational responses to demand-avoidant behaviours.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

2.1 Chapter Introduction

This literature review explores conceptualisation (origins, classification debates, diagnostic tools, and language); aetiology; theoretical models; experiences of education; and support strategies. This structure represents the current evidence base, which has prioritised conceptual and aetiological questions over practical support strategies (Haire et al., 2024). By exploring these areas, the literature review establishes the need for research that prioritises school practitioners' voices in exploring what effective support looks like in school contexts.

2.2 Terminology

In this literature review, I critically engage with existing research on demand-avoidant behaviours in CYP. Some language used, such as "deficits," "impairments," "traits," "Conduct Disorder," "Asperger's syndrome," and "Autism Spectrum Disorder," reflects the terminology employed in the studies under discussion, commonly aligned with medical or positivist models. I refer to "Pathological Demand Avoidance" (PDA) as it is conceptualised in the literature, applying terms such as "PDA presentations," "profiles," "characteristics," and "demand-avoidant behaviours" to reflect the lack of consensus and support critical engagement with these concepts.

Throughout this thesis, however, I adopt "demand-avoidant behaviours" for several reasons. I recognise 'PDA' as a label, given that PDA does not hold formal status in the DSM-5 (American Psychiatric Association, 2013) or ICD-11 (World Health Organisation, 2018), and there is a lack of strong empirical data supporting a single, definitive ontological perspective on what PDA is (Green et al., 2018; Milton, 2017). In the LA where this research takes place, local diagnostic practice recognises "autism with demand avoidant features," consistent with PDA's absence from formal classification systems. Using "demand-avoidant behaviours" focuses on what educators encounter in practice without requiring navigation of contested diagnostic categories, reflecting the reality that CYP may not have formal diagnoses, yet schools still seek support (Green, 2024). It also aligns with this research's social constructionist orientation (Woods, 2022).

2.3 Origins and Early Conceptualisation

A substantial body of literature has focused on conceptualising PDA by examining behaviours, underlying causes, and its prevalence (Gillberg et al., 2015; O'Nions et al., 2014a; Reilly et al., 2014; Stuart et al., 2020). The concept of ‘Pathological Demand Avoidance’ was first introduced in the 1980s by child psychologist Elizabeth Newson. Whilst assessing CYP for autism at her clinic in the 1970s, Newson observed a group of CYP who displayed some features of autism but not others (Christie, 2007). Newson considered these CYP "atypically autistic" and described their behaviour as "puzzling" (Newson et al., 2003). An autism diagnosis wasn’t considered as fitting, due to their imaginative abilities, particularly in non-echolalic role play, unusually sociable presentation including "social manipulation," language development that differed from typical autism, and "an obsessional avoidance of the demands of everyday life" (Newson et al., 2003). At the time, diagnostic classifications like "Pervasive Developmental Disorder Not Otherwise Specified" (DSM-IV) and "atypical autism" (ICD-10) were used to describe the presentation (Newson et al., 2003). After six years of assessing CYP for autism, twenty-one CYP who shared these behaviours were diagnosed with "atypical autism." As referrals of CYP displaying these behaviours grew to 150 CYP (75 males and 75 females aged 4 to 16), Newson and colleagues conducted a discriminant functions analysis, comparing 50 CYP with "atypical autism" to 20 with "classical autism" and 20 with Asperger's syndrome. A sub-sample of 18 CYP was followed into early adulthood to examine the long-term robustness of the criteria. From this study, Newson proposed Pathological Demand Avoidance as a distinct entity within pervasive developmental disorders, arguing that it would provide specific recognition for those previously diagnosed with "Pervasive Developmental Disorder Not Otherwise Specified," facilitate referrals, improve professional understanding, and ensure effective support (Newson et al., 2003).

The diagnostic criteria identified by Newson et al. (2003) were as follows:

- Passive early history in the first year
- Continues to resist and avoid the ordinary demands of life
- Surface sociability but apparent lack of sense of social identity, pride, or shame; lability of mood, impulsive, led by need to control
- Comfortable in role play and pretending

- Language delay, seems result of passivity
- Obsessive behaviour
- Neurological involvement

Newson (2003) described this profile as distinct from typical autism presentations, characterised by 'reliance on routine and sameness,' 'limited social motivation' and 'focused interests on objects.' In comparison, Newson (2003) noted the 'PDA profile' as characterised by a need for 'novelty and spontaneity', 'surface sociability' and 'focused interests on people' (Eaton et al., 2018; O'Nions and Eaton, 2020), which she argued warranted recognition as a distinct subgroup.

Despite its impact, Newson et al.'s (2003) research has noteworthy limitations. It lacks systematic information on how the diagnostic criteria were developed, raising concerns about reliability and validity (Kildahl et al., 2021). Data were collected over 25 years (1975-2000), yet it is unclear whether the criteria remained consistent throughout. Green et al. (2018) highlight that the exact analytical methods were not specified, arguing that the circular approach of starting with a predefined syndrome and demonstrating how it differs from others lacks contemporary robustness. They further argue that since subsequent studies, including screening tool development, are substantially based on Newson's criteria, validation employing replication in a large independent dataset is necessary, and that evidence of both discriminant and predictive validity remains outstanding. This contested evidence base highlights the need for qualitative research exploring how demand-avoidant behaviours are constructed by those working directly with CYP.

2.4 Classification and Recognition

The classification and recognition of demand-avoidant behaviours remain among the most contested areas in the field. This section discusses current debates about diagnostic categorisation, the relationship to autism, approaches to identification, and terminology.

2.4.1 Debates Surrounding 'PDA' as a Distinct Diagnostic Profile

The understanding of PDA as a distinct syndrome (Newson et al., 2003) has provoked considerable debate, with researchers arguing that further study is required to establish consistent, evidence-based criteria (Green et al., 2018; Woods, 2020a). Controversy persists over whether it represents a subtype within autism, a

separate profile, or behaviours appearing across several conditions (O'Nions, 2014b; Gillberg, 2014). Whilst some advocates view PDA as a unique neurotype or neurological variation (NAS, n.d.-a), Green et al. (2018) found current evidence insufficient to justify categorising it as a unique syndrome, noting it is unlikely to be acknowledged as an independent diagnosis. Sanchez (2019) characterises it as a transitional or descriptive category that offers applied usefulness while lacking solid scientific grounding, highlighting parallels with how terms like Asperger's Syndrome and the female autism phenotype drew attention to overlooked groups within existing autism frameworks. Thus, fundamental questions about its status as a distinct diagnostic entity remain unresolved.

PDA is not recognised as a standalone diagnostic category in the ICD-11 or DSM-5, where it is classified as a profile of autism (Gore-Langton and Frederickson, 2018). The DSM-5's replacement of "Pervasive Developmental Disorder" with "Autism Spectrum Disorder" has amplified questions over PDA's place within ASD.

Several scholars note that behaviours associated with PDA also occur in other conditions. Gillberg (2014) argues that demand-avoidant behaviours are not exclusive to autism and occur in individuals with language disorders, ADHD, selective mutism, anorexia nervosa, and certain genetic and neurological syndromes. It has also been suggested in the literature that PDA behaviours exist in personality disorders (Eaton, 2017; Egan et al., 2020). Egan et al. (2020) found a strong correlation between self-reported PDA scores and ADHD, with the correlation between PDA and autism notably smaller. Soppitt (2021) suggest a formulation of PDA including co-occurring ADHD, trauma, and sensory processing issues alongside autism, framing PDA as a behavioural profile cutting across neurodevelopmental and psychiatric conditions. Eaton et al. (2018) argue that ADHD-like traits in this population may represent compensatory needs for stimulation due to early-life sensory deprivation as opposed to a neurodevelopmental condition.

PDA behaviours have also been observed in non-autistic individuals. Research samples have included participants with attachment disorder and minimal autism traits (Reilly et al., 2014; O'Nions et al., 2016), suggesting PDA-like behaviours may stem from causes other than autism (Woods, 2020b). Gillberg et al. (2014) propose that "PDA"-like behaviours may occur in up to a few percent of the human

population. Woods (2020b) suggests that if behaviours associated with PDA occur in non-autistic individuals, PDA may not fit as a profile of autism, raising the possibility that it could represent a new disorder, with some urging for non-autistic people to be able to obtain a diagnosis.

O'Nions et al. (2014a) compared profiles of PDA, autism, and conduct disorder, finding behavioural similarities but differences in underlying motivations and manifestations. Individuals with PDA exhibited a drive to control comparable to those with conduct disorder, but stemming from anxiety, not intentional personal gain. Building on this distinction, Gore-Langton and Frederickson (2018) characterise PDA as a "triple hit" of autism, conduct problems, and anxiety, noting anxiety as a defining component differentiating PDA from conduct disorder. O'Nions et al. (2014a) concluded that whilst CYP with PDA share some characteristics with those diagnosed with autism and conduct disorder, their behaviours appear distinct in social motivation and imagination, evidenced by differences in roleplay and engagement in fantasy. Limitations comprise a lack of standardised diagnostic algorithms, reliance on parent-report questionnaires, small sample sizes, and insufficient representation of girls.

To summarise, PDA classification remains complex and highly debated. Whilst some consider it as a distinct syndrome, others argue it is a behavioural profile occurring across multiple neurodevelopmental and psychiatric conditions. Criticisms of existing research highlight the need for larger, standardised studies to establish consistent criteria, with operationalisation of the construct and agreement on criteria remaining key issues (Mols and Danckaerts, 2022).

2.4.2 Demand-avoidant Behaviours and Autism

Christie (2007) noted that shifts in conceptualising autism have led many to consider PDA as part of the autism spectrum, with some local authorities developing formal position statements to reflect this (NAS, n.d.-a). Eaton and Weaver (2020) state that many CYP assessed by Newson (2003) would today meet DSM-5 autism criteria, as understanding of autism as a spectrum has advanced and behaviours formerly seen as atypical are now recognised as common autistic variations. The Department for Education and PDA Society (a charity established in 1997 to support families of CYP with PDA) currently understand PDA as a profile on the autism spectrum (Moore,

2020), though understanding and research remain at early stages (PDA Society, 2019), and the construct is still debated.

The PDA Society calls attention to the need to distinguish demand avoidance in autistic individuals, those with a PDA profile, and as a common human behaviour (PDA Society, 2022). O'Nions and Eaton (2020) distinguish between demand avoidance commonly seen in autistic CYP and the PDA profile. They note that many autistic CYP resist requests during childhood due to identifiable triggers such as difficulties with executive functioning, processing demands, or anxiety about uncertainty and transitions. In contrast, Eaton and Weaver (2020) found that CYP exhibiting a PDA profile display persistent and often illogical demand avoidance from early in life, resisting enjoyable activities, without clear environmental triggers. Whilst none of the identified behaviours were unique to CYP with ASD and PDA, they occurred more frequently and presented in particular ways within the PDA group, though further investigation with larger samples is required. Newson et al. (2003) argue that this distinction has practical significance, with CYP identified as having PDA experiencing high exclusion rates when supported using general autism strategies. However, Woods (2019) refutes the argument that different approaches justify a new category, highlighting that strategies described as helpful for PDA are likely useful across all neurodivergent populations. Haire et al. (2024) support this position, suggesting that the need for distinct categorisation remains contested even when practical support implications are considered.

The PDA Society (2022) have revised Newson et al.'s (2003) characteristics, identifying key features including:

- Resistance and avoidance of ordinary demands
- Use of social strategies as part of avoidance
- Surface sociability but lacking depth in understanding
- Excessive mood swings and impulsivity
- Obsessive behaviour, often focused on other people, and comfort in role play and pretend, sometimes to an extreme extent.

Features originally defined by Newson et al. (2003), including passive early history, language delay, and neurological involvement, have been excluded, illustrating

evolving conceptualisations of PDA, though it remains unclear what informed these changes or whether these elements are still considered relevant.

2.4.3 Diagnosis and Diagnostic Tools

A major challenge in identifying PDA is the absence of agreed-upon, standardised criteria, meaning who receives a diagnosis and on what basis varies considerably depending on the clinician, the tools used, the geographical area, and family resources (Moore, 2020; Summerhill and Collett, 2018). Woods (2021a) argues that this lack of consensus has significant implications for research and practice, as different diagnostic thresholds yield substantially different populations, prompting questions about whether studies using different tools examine the same construct at all.

Several tools have been developed to support identification. The Extreme Demand Avoidance Questionnaire (EDA-Q) (O'Nions et al., 2014b) is the most widely used parent-report screening measure for identifying demand-avoidant traits. The Diagnostic Interview for Social and Communication Disorders (DISCO) (Wing et al., 2002) has been adapted to incorporate PDA-specific items, used by Gillberg et al. (2015) in their prevalence study, though these items had not been formally validated. O'Nions (2016) notes that different cut-off values for DISCO items are used across studies, including discrepancies with Gillberg's (2015) work, further compounding inconsistency. More recently, the PDA Society (2022) published clinical guidance to support practitioners in identifying demand-avoidant presentations.

Reliance on parent-report measures is a recurring limitation, with assessment perspectives rarely extending beyond caregivers, which may introduce bias (O'Nions et al., 2018). Despite growing demand for assessment (Green et al., 2018; Stuart et al., 2020), the English education system does not require formal diagnosis to identify and meet special educational needs (Children and Families Act, 2014; Green, 2024), and no research has examined whether formal identification makes a considerable difference to outcomes for CYP (Green, 2024). The assessment landscape remains inconsistent, contested, and inequitably accessible, reflecting the lack of consensus in the field.

Since PDA is not recognised in the DSM-5 or ICD-11, it cannot be formally diagnosed as a standalone condition, and there is no standardised definition (Gillberg et al., 2015), which reflects the ambiguous state of PDA within current

diagnostic and clinical frameworks. Despite this, NICE Guidance on autism in Under 19s includes demand avoidance as a behaviour to look for, noting an "unusually negative response to the request of others" (NICE, 2011). The framing of responses as "unusually negative" positions neurotypical compliance as the standard, potentially pathologising legitimate expressions of distress or self-advocacy when measured against culturally constructed norms of appropriate social behaviour (Milton, 2012; Moore, 2020; Woods, 2022).

2.4.4 Consideration of Language

Newson (2003) coined the term ‘pathological demand avoidance,’ arguing that existing terms did not capture the distinct challenges of the presentation. Green et al. (2018) note that the term helpfully recognises a significant range of co-occurring challenges that can have a considerable impact on CYP and families, often validating their difficult experiences.

Over time, the term ‘PDA’ has been subject to debate and "emotively argued differences of opinion" (Eaton & Weaver, 2020). For some, ‘pathological’ accurately represents the ‘compulsive’ element of their experience (PDA Society, 2022), whilst some maintain it leads to an overly individual-focused interpretation of difficulties, overlooking transactional factors (Green et al., 2018), with various alternative terms being suggested. Milton (2013) advocates for "rational demand avoidance," viewing behaviours as rational, adaptive responses to overwhelming demands, underpinned by the Social Model of Disability discussed later in this literature review. Gillberg (2014) prefers "extreme demand avoidance," emphasising the objective nature of "extreme" whilst noting that "pathological" is subjective and contentious, though this term has encountered criticism within the PDA community for potentially trivialising the involuntary nature of demand-avoidant behaviours (Sally Cat, 2019). Woods (2019) suggests "Demand Avoidance Phenomena" (DAP) as an alternative, whilst Eaton and Weaver (2020) questions the practicality of adopting terms that lack recognition in clinical frameworks. Other suggestions include Demand Avoidant Behaviour (Brede et al., 2017), Newson's Syndrome, and Autism with PDA Traits (Woods, 2020c).

Among proposed alternatives, "Pervasive Drive for Autonomy" has gained recognition within the online community, with advocates like Wilding (2020) emphasising that it better reflects the intense need for self-determination that defines

PDA and invoking questions about how systemic structures may produce or amplify behaviours (Woods, 2021). Achieving consensus on a name remains difficult in a community that values independence and individual viewpoints (Sally Cat, 2019).

Terminology debates have tangible consequences, determining how organisations communicate about demand-avoidant behaviours. The National Autistic Society's decision to withdraw "Pathological Demand Avoidance" and "PDA" from its website, replacing them with wider references to demand avoidance as behaviours in some autistic individuals, typified by pervasive resistance to everyday demands (NAS, n.d.-a), suggests that consensus is not emerging.

These debates sit within wider tensions surrounding SEND labelling. Whilst diagnostic labels can aid understanding of behaviours and facilitate access to support, with funding for local authorities often dependent on formal categorisation (Arishi et al., 2017), concerns exist that categorising may obscure individual needs and reinforce deficit-focused perspectives (Lauchlan & Boyle, 2007). Indeed, tensions surrounding the language of PDA link to questions about its usefulness as a construct in personal, clinical, and academic contexts (Sanchez, 2018). Clinicians and researchers continue grappling with its lack of clear diagnostic criteria and conceptual consistency. Some argue it is time for research to move beyond the question of what to call it and address the practical challenges of identifying, understanding, and supporting individuals who display demand-avoidant behaviours (PDA Society, 2019).

2.5 Explaining Demand-Avoidant Behaviours

A substantial body of research has focused on aetiology (what causes or drives demand-avoidant behaviours) (Haire et al., 2024). This literature varies in where it locates causation, shaped by unresolved questions about whether demand-avoidant behaviours arise within an autism framework, as a standalone condition, or across multiple neurodevelopmental presentations. Some explanations emphasise neurological and psychological mechanisms, and others attribute adverse experiences, trauma, and disrupted attachment.

2.5.1 Anxiety and Intolerance of Uncertainty

Literature suggests that demand-avoidant behaviours, when considered within the context of autism, are anxiety-driven and rooted in threat perception (Newson et al.,

2003; O'Nions et al., 2014a), with the need for control stemming from this (Johnson and Saunderson, 2023; White et al., 2023), though it is noted that White et al.'s pandemic-era data collection may have influenced anxiety levels. O'Nions and Eaton (2020) propose that everyday activities can provoke intense anxiety in CYP with PDA presentations, with continued adult pursuit of demands escalating distress. Demands trigger avoidant behaviours that relieve anxiety, reinforcing future avoidance (O'Nions, 2019).

Stuart et al. (2020) link this anxious need for control to intolerance of uncertainty (IOU). CYP experience intense anxiety in response to uncertain or demanding situations, triggering demand-avoidant behaviours, such as withdrawal into fantasy, as attempts to regain control, with 'meltdowns' occurring when anxiety peaks. Stuart et al.'s (2020) work builds on Boulter et al.'s (2014) proposal that IOU explains high anxiety prevalence in autism. Boulter et al. suggest a causal pathway in which autism leads to higher IOU, which in turn increases anxiety. Johnson and Saunderson (2023) found that IOU mediates the relationship between anxiety and demand avoidant behaviours in adults, indicating that they are specifically triggered by uncertainty rather than generalised anxiety, with implications for intervention approaches such as exposure therapy that may be too demanding. (Williams, 2026).

The IOU model explains restricted and repetitive behaviours in autism as seeking predictability to reduce anxiety. In PDA, however, anxiety often manifests through socially dynamic avoidance of perceived demands, suggesting Boulter's model may not adequately account for PDA behaviours (Rodgers et al., 2012).

2.5.2 Trauma and Attachment

An alternative perspective locates demand-avoidant behaviours within adverse experiences and disrupted attachment. Woods (2020) suggests demand-avoidant behaviours may stem from aversive experiences or trauma, which can lead to chronic hypervigilance and fight, flight, or freeze responses.

McElroy (2015) highlights that PDA behaviours such as intense demand avoidance, need to control situations, and social communication challenges could indicate attachment disorder, noting similarities in presentations. Echoing this, NICE guidelines (2015) suggest characteristics describing PDA could equally apply to disordered attachment, and Milton (2018) notes reluctance to include PDA in the DSM-5 stems partly from concerns about misidentified attachment disorder. To

address this diagnostic overlap, the Coventry Grid (Moran, 2010) was developed to distinguish autism from attachment difficulties and later adapted to support the identification of demand avoidant presentations (Eaton et al., 2018). However, McElroy (2015) argues these similarities warrant further investigation.

Critically, Milton (2018) warns that explanations emphasising attachment and parenting can unfairly place blame on parents, a concern echoed in families' perspectives (Doyle & Kenny, 2023). It is important to note that whether demand-avoidant behaviours reflect neurological difference, trauma, disrupted attachment, or some interaction between all three remains unresolved.

2.5.3 Polyvagal Theory

PDA has also been understood through polyvagal theory, a model of the nervous system proposing hierarchical states (Porges, 2011). When humans feel safe, the ventral vagal system (promoting safety and calm) is active; however, when the nervous system perceives a threat, the ventral vagal system shuts down, activating the sympathetic nervous system and triggering autonomic responses to stress. In this context, demand-avoidant behaviours are constructed as automatic and adaptive, generated by the autonomic nervous system and below conscious awareness (Dana, 2024). Demands may be perceived as threats that trigger the sympathetic nervous system, leading to fight, flight, or freeze responses (Haire et al., 2024; Sally Cat, 2023). This framework suggests that neurodivergent individuals may have particularly sensitive threat response systems, with demands activating stress responses more readily than in neurotypical populations.

Sally Cat, an advocate identifying with PDA, in her blog, describes four further threat responses: fawn (people-pleasing to appease threat); flop (fainting or collapsing); funster (playing the clown to deflect threat); and fib (telling lies to escape consequences) (Sally Cat, 2023). Whilst these are gaining acceptance within the PDA community, they require further research. Sally Cat notes a limitation of polyvagal theory in that it cannot explain why removing the sense of demand significantly reduces avoidance, since if nervous systems are simply more attuned to detecting threats, the presence or absence of a demand should not drastically alter threat perception.

2.6 Theoretical Frameworks

Several theoretical frameworks have been applied to demand-avoidant behaviours, each offering a lens through which to understand their nature and origins and, fundamentally, shaping how they are positioned and where intervention should be directed.

2.6.1 Medical Model

PDA is predominantly understood through the medical model, which frames it as "atypical" behaviour requiring clinical categorisation. Much of the research focuses on classifying and conceptualising demand-avoidant behaviours, calling for investigation into neurocognitive and biological factors (O'Nions, 2014a). This reflects a positivist orientation in which PDA is approached from a biological or medical perspective, and its existence is sought to be determined or detailed. Such frameworks position PDA as a syndrome or cluster of symptoms and interpret demand-avoidant behaviours as deficits relative to neurotypical norms (Moore, 2020). The framing is evident in PDA measures, which include items such as,"I am good at getting round others and making them do as I want" (Egan et al., 2019, p.485), and terms such as "manipulative" appearing in research and practitioner guidance (Christie et al., 2012; Newson, 1983), reflecting pathologising constructions woven into the field. This locates demand-avoidant behaviours as internal "problems" (Moore, 2020), potentially overlooking influences such as adverse childhood experiences or trauma (Johnson, 2024) or transactional factors (Haire et al., 2024). This individualist framing persists in the limited research seeking to understand lived experience, where demand avoidance is treated as a fixed, internal characteristic of the CYP (Doyle & Kenny, 2023; Gore-Langton & Frederickson, 2016; Truman et al., 2021).

2.6.2 Social Model of Disability

Milton (2018) challenges the medical model's framing of PDA, proposing that demand-avoidant behaviours reflect "differences" rather than "deficits", resulting from the interaction between neurodivergent experience and their environment, critiquing the notion that social skills exist independently of social context and arguing that this view overlooks how social norms define acceptable behaviour. Moore (2020) extends this argument, highlighting that the PDA label risks pathologising avoidance of genuinely overwhelming demands. Indeed, the National Autistic Society (n.d.-a)

emphasises considering the suitability of the environment alongside social, sensory, and cognitive sensitivities when understanding autistic experience.

Supporting this, Milton (2012) describes the double empathy problem, a phenomenon of communication breakdowns between neurotypes. Dialectical misattunement theory suggests that repeated misalignments can lead to divergent communication styles and escalating challenges, with ineffective responses to CYPs' distress heightening isolation and increasing reliance on avoidant behaviours (Bolis et al., 2017; Kildahl et al., 2021). Milton (2018) argues that labelling expressions of autistic agency as pathological is disempowering and dismissive of genuine attempts to communicate and advocate for themselves, with focus directed towards fixing behaviours in place of understanding them. The social model of disability holds that disability is primarily created by societal barriers and attitudes, with individual impairments secondary to the environments and structures within which people live (Oliver, 2013), therefore repositioning demand-avoidant behaviours as understandable responses to environments failing to accommodate need (Milton, 2013; Woods, 2018).

2.6.3 A Transactional Perspective

Building on the social model's repositioning of disability as created by barriers in society, modern perspectives on demand-avoidant behaviours have increasingly adopted a transactional approach (Sameroff, 2009), which examines the dynamic, bidirectional interaction between individuals and their environment (Astle et al., 2022; Fidler and Christie, 2019; Green et al., 2018; Milton, 2017). From this perspective, demand-avoidant behaviours emerge from the encounter between the CYP's individual features and the demands, relationships, and contexts they navigate (NAS, n.d.-a), with Woods (2019) noting that two-thirds of distress behaviours are caused by demands or requests from others. Scholars question the adequacy of purely biological or medicalised perspectives, with Doyle and Kenny (2023), Johnson (2024) and Kenny et al. (2016) advocating for bioecological perspectives to hold the complexity of demand-avoidant presentations.

Some question whether debates over diagnostic subtyping are productive. Green et al. (2018) suggest it limits focus on contextual, social, and environmental factors, despite growing recognition that demand-avoidant behaviours are shaped by and responsive to these conditions. Woods (2017) argues that PDA is a UK-based,

culturally bound concept shaped partly by the interests of those who benefit from its promotion, including the commodification of autism through organisations offering chargeable training and clinicians providing private diagnoses to fill gaps in NHS provision. He contends that PDA represents a manifestation of "looping effects" (Hacking, 1995), where diagnostic categories evolve through the interplay between people identifying with labels and the "autism industry" that profits from their proliferation, ultimately undermining autistic self-advocacy by pathologising legitimate expressions of self-determination as ‘demand-avoidant’ behaviour. Woods (2021b) proposes a transdiagnostic approach, removing diagnostic boundaries to foster a more nuanced understanding that accommodates biopsychosocial complexity. Woods (2022) argues PDA should be understood as a social construct, consistent with Critical Autism Studies perspectives that challenge deficit-focused constructions and engage with relational and contextual complexity (Davidson & Orsini, 2013).

2.7 Educational Experiences of CYP Displaying Demand-avoidant Behaviours

CYP displaying demand-avoidant behaviours face significant challenges accessing consistent educational provision. High rates of formal and informal exclusions are documented (Brede et al., 2017; Green, 2024; Truman et al., 2021), with Green's (2024) master's dissertation surveying 375 “PDA CYP” and 704 parents across 153 local authorities, finding the majority experienced persistent attendance difficulties and extended periods without educational provision. Doyle and Kenny (2023) found 11% of CYP received no education at all.

These difficulties appear linked to systemic factors. School systems often lack flexibility to meet needs (Gore-Langton and Frederickson, 2016). CYP perspectives identify distress from overwhelming sensory environments, rigid demands and punishment for anxiety-driven behaviours, and loss of autonomy (Green, 2024). A recurring theme is misrecognition of needs, with demand-avoidant behaviours misconstrued as choice or refusal, overlooking distress, students reporting conflict with staff and inappropriate responses including physical restraint (Brede et al., 2017), with parents and CYP attributing exclusion to this misrecognition (Brede et al., 2017).

The research also suggests challenges with peer and adult relationships. CYP report bullying and misunderstanding from peers and staff (Brede et al., 2017; Green,

2024). These difficulties have significant mental health consequences, including anxiety, depression, self-harm, and suicidal ideation (Truman et al., 2021), with Green (2024) documenting trauma and autistic burnout in CYP as young as eight. Truman et al. (2021) identify negative impacts of masking behaviours, in which CYP suppress difficulties at school, leading to increased distress at home.

Parents frequently attribute difficulties to educators' lack of understanding and report feeling blamed for their CYP's difficulties, which compounds the emotional and social impact on families (Brede et al., 2017; Truman et al., 2021). The majority rated interventions in education and healthcare settings as limited or ineffective (Doyle and Kenny, 2023), indicating a significant unmet need. It is important to note that recruitment through support groups and online communities may skew samples toward those with negative experiences (Green, 2024; Truman et al., 2021), though the consistency of findings, particularly direct accounts from CYP (Brede et al., 2017; Green, 2024), is nonetheless concerning. While these studies highlight systemic failures, they also reflect the challenges educators face in effectively supporting CYP, highlighting the need for research into how they understand and respond to demand-avoidant behaviours.

2.8 Support Strategies for Demand-Avoidant Behaviours

Research has given little attention to practical support strategies in school contexts (Haire et al., 2024; O'Nions et al., 2018). However, a small number of studies examine which approaches are experienced as helpful by those supporting CYP, and whilst the evidence base remains limited, consensus emerges that anxiety-based, low-demand approaches are more effective than traditional behavioural strategies. Gore-Langton and Frederickson (2018) emphasise that CYP displaying demand-avoidant behaviours require tailored support strategies differing significantly from those used for autistic CYP, with general autism strategies frequently ineffective and counterproductive.

O'Nions et al. (2020) investigated strategies used by mothers of CYP with high emotional reactivity and demand avoidance. Accommodation (lowering expectations and avoiding known triggers) and reducing uncertainty (advance preparation, transition warnings, and predictability) were prevalent. Mothers reported that reinforcement, traditional reward and consequence-based approaches, often recommended by professionals, were ineffective and sometimes harmful,

maintaining or escalating demand-avoidant behaviour. Collaborative and accommodative strategies were more effective when CYP experienced demands as threats to autonomy or sources of intense anxiety. Building on this, O'Nions and Eaton (2020) propose a low-arousal approach with reduced demands (McDonnell, 2010), for which evidence is accumulating within the autistic adult population (White et al., 2023). However, the absence of school practitioner perspectives means the transferability of these strategies to school contexts, where relational and organisational factors differ, remains uncertain.

Brede et al. (2017) conducted semi-structured interviews with autistic students, the majority displaying demand-avoidant behaviours, alongside parents and staff in a specialist reintegration setting. Teacher interviews provided evidence for relational and low-demand approaches. Successful reintegration was associated with trusting relationships, staff understanding of behaviours without judgement, environmental adjustments, and prioritising emotional wellbeing over academic progress. All students reported feeling happy and secure, but the small sample, specialist context, and resource-intensive nature limit transferability to mainstream settings. The absence of a comparison group makes it difficult to determine whether experiences and outcomes are specific to this population or reflect more general patterns of educational exclusion.

One frequently referenced framework, the PANDA approach (PDA Society, 2021), encompasses picking battles, anxiety management, negotiation and collaboration, disguising and managing demands, and adaptation (see Appendix B). The framework appears to be developed from practitioner experience, case studies, and anecdotal contributions (Christie, 2007), though direct origins are unclear. Johnson (2024) notes EPs commonly recommend PANDA alongside individualised environmental adaptations and fostering collaborative child-adult partnerships grounded in equality and mutual trust, recommending approaches that reduce physiological threat responses and prioritise relationships. Authors have published practitioner guides emphasising flexibility, autonomy, choice, and positive, trusting relationships as central to creating a sense of safety (Christie, 2007; Fidler and Christie, 2018; Kerbey, 2023); however, the evidence base remains limited, with interest and anecdotal evidence continuing to outpace formal research (Woods, 2022).

2.9 Conclusion of Literature Review

Research into demand-avoidant behaviours has grown considerably, yet remains predominantly concerned with conceptualisation, classification, and aetiology, with little attention given to practical support strategies (Haire et al., 2024). Research shows limited use of qualitative methods, resulting in a lack of in-depth exploration of how demand-avoidant behaviours are experienced and responded to in practice, and a reliance on criteria over 20 years old that may not reflect the complexity of contemporary presentations.

Much of the literature operates within a positivist framework, prioritising neurological explanations and framing behaviours as deficits, with a notable absence of socio-cultural reflection on the conditions shaping demand-avoidant behaviours (Haire et al., 2024). As this review illustrates, the field lacks consensus, with questions about the nature, classification, and aetiology remaining unresolved (Green et al., 2018; Mols and Danckaerts, 2022; Woods, 2021). Whilst this contested landscape has generated valuable debate, it has been slower to consider transactional influences on how demand-avoidant behaviours arise and are sustained (Fidler and Christie, 2018; Milton, 2017; Woods, 2022), and the subjective experiences of those involved, such as educational practitioners and CYP, remain underrepresented in the literature (Haire et al., 2024). Limited attention has been given to what effective support looks like within educational settings (PDA Society, 2023). As Haire et al. (2024) note, regardless of where debates settle, the challenges faced by CYP displaying demand-avoidant behaviours are pressing and require attention.

2.10 Rationale for current research

Growing recognition that demand-avoidant behaviours are shaped by and responsive to the conditions in which they arise (Green et al., 2018; Milton, 2017; Woods, 2019) suggests attention needs to be given to school contexts. Yet a PDA Society (2016) survey found many educators had limited knowledge of helpful approaches. Doyle and Kenny (2023) found that only 37% of practitioners felt they understood demand-avoidant behaviours well, suggesting practical knowledge is frequently absent. Educator perspectives remain largely absent from the literature. Brede et al. (2017) included staff perspectives but only in a specialist setting. Doyle & Kenny (2023) explored educator perspectives but drew on insights from a single

secondary school teacher, lacking detailed accounts of practice. Teachers and TAs play a critical role in supporting CYP who display demand-avoidant behaviours, yet no studies have explored TAs' experiences or what effective school-based support looks like from practitioners' perspectives. Further, no studies have addressed the systemic conditions that shape their practice.

This research addresses these gaps by focusing on how school staff make sense of and respond to demand-avoidant behaviours, and how school policies and culture shape these responses, seeking to contribute contextually grounded, practitioner-informed understanding to an area where it is currently limited.

The research aims to address the following questions:

- RQ1: How do teachers and teaching assistants understand CYP's demand-avoidant behaviours?
- RQ2: How do teachers and teaching assistants respond to demand-avoidant behaviours, including the supportive strategies and approaches they use, and the adaptations they make to the educational environment?
- RQ3: How do school policies and culture shape the ways in which teachers and teaching assistants respond to demand-avoidant behaviours?

Chapter Three: Methodology

3.1 Chapter Introduction

Given the absence of school practitioner perspectives in existing literature, this research sought to understand the meanings school staff assign to demand-avoidant behaviours, how they respond to them in practice, and how school cultures and systems influence their responses. I conducted semi-structured interviews with five teachers (some with dual SENCo roles) and TAs, to explore their understanding and responses to demand-avoidant behaviours. I designed a flexible interview schedule with ten open-ended questions and follow-up prompts, allowing participants to expand on the details most relevant to their experience. I audio-recorded all interviews with consent, transcribed them, and recorded reflective notes after each interview to capture initial thoughts and emerging reflections. I analysed data using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA), following Braun and Clarke's (2022) six-phase approach. In this chapter, I establish my reflexive and philosophical positioning, detail the research design, including participant sampling, recruitment, and interview procedures, address ethical considerations, present my rationale for adopting RTA, and describe the six-phase analytic process (Appendix L), before addressing quality and rigour using Yardley's (2000) framework.

3.2. Reflexivity in Research

In qualitative research, the researcher's perspective inevitably shapes analysis, and researchers are never neutral (Braun & Clarke, 2023). Reflexivity is therefore a central principle of qualitative research, referring to the ongoing process through which researchers critically reflect on how their perspectives influence knowledge production (Finlay, 2002). Researcher subjectivity enriches interpretation and supports rigorous engagement with data, examining how values, assumptions, and positionality influence all research stages (Parahoo, 2006; Willig, 2013). As Nightingale and Cromby (1999, p. 228) highlight, it requires "critical examination of the researcher's role in the construction of meaning," acknowledging how social, cultural, and personal factors shape interpretation. Reflexivity ensures rigour, quality, and trustworthiness in qualitative research (Kimberley, 2021; Teh & Lek, 2018) and functions as a methodological safeguard, allowing me to interrogate assumptions

and remain transparent about how meanings are co-constructed with participants (Darawsheh, 2014).

Reflexivity is often discussed in relation to both epistemological and personal dimensions (Willig, 2013). Epistemological reflexivity involves considering how methodological choices and analytical decisions determine knowledge production, as discussed later in this chapter. Personal reflexivity refers to how experiences, values, and social positioning influence how the research topic is approached and interpreted (Finlay, 2002; Willig, 2013). I address personal reflexivity in section 3.3.1. I have also included a reflexive diary in the appendix, referred to throughout this thesis, to make personal reflexivity explicit. This provides readers with a clear understanding of the research journey, illustrating the decisions made and how interpretations developed. The reflections remain closely connected to the analysis, illustrating ongoing interpretation of the dataset and the researcher's reflexive engagement.

3.3 Positionality of the research

Research is underpinned by philosophical assumptions shaping how we understand reality, produce knowledge, and approach inquiry (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Schwandt, 2014). My background, experiences, and values, as I detailed in chapter 1, guide how I interpret knowledge and construct meaning. Research paradigms provide a perspective through which to view phenomena, offering an overarching framework of assumptions, values, and beliefs guiding every research stage (Flick, 2018). The position I take as a researcher informs methodological decisions from design and data collection to analysis and interpretation, shaping how findings are understood and communicated (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Teh & Lek, 2018). Adopting a social constructionist approach allows me to investigate how knowledge and interpretations of demand-avoidant behaviours are co-constructed through interactions, professional experience, and cultural norms.

3.3.1 Axiology

Guba and Lincoln (2005) highlight that researchers’ values are integral to shaping the research process, a concept referred to as axiology. Axiology involves the principles and beliefs a researcher holds about what is important or beneficial to humans and society (Biedenbach & Jacobsson, 2016). My positionality, determined

by professional practice and experiences, has influenced key decisions throughout this research.

Key values and experiences which have shaped this research include:

- Earlier in my career, I worked as a TA in a primary school supporting a CYP described as "demand-avoidant." Staff frequently described the CYP as "manipulative" and "hard to reach," with their difficulties framed as mental health problems. I felt disempowered, unsure how to respond within a system that interpreted the CYP as manipulative and defiant, once being told, "Good luck, you're probably the 100th TA that's tried and failed to work with this child." Only when I let go of the control I was clinging to, drawing on low-arousal approaches (McDonnell, 2010) and adopting a more flexible, collaborative approach, did I begin to see shifts in behaviour. However, without buy-in from the school system, sustaining these strategies remained challenging, which elicited a sense of helplessness as a person within the system with little power or influence. This experience highlighted how individual practitioners' efforts can be undermined by school systems and cultures, consequently informing Research Question 3.

- As a TEP, I observed that teachers and TAs frequently report uncertainty about how to support CYP who display demand-avoidant behaviours, encountering the same behaviours understood differently by individuals and across school contexts. These observations confirmed the importance of capturing professional perspectives and highlighted the need for research that informs practice in contextually relevant ways. This variability prompted engagement with the literature, where I found ongoing conceptual debates, contested terminology, and strongly held yet differing positions. Navigating the debates felt overwhelming. I worried about inadvertently denying the lived experiences of individuals and families who found the 'PDA' label meaningful, while simultaneously having concerns about pathologising language and the absence of conceptual consensus (Green et al., 2018; Woods, 2021).

- Reading for this thesis, including literature challenging medical model framings (Milton, 2018; Woods, 2022) and advancing transactional perspectives (Section 2.5.3), led me to consider 'PDA' through a critical

viewpoint, considering it as a socially constructed label that can pathologise anxiety-driven responses to environments structured around neurotypical norms (Green et al., 2018; Milton, 2017). I consider avoidance as a potential expression of a CYP's agency and struggle for autonomy, resonating with alternative framings such as 'Pervasive Drive for Autonomy' discussed in Section 2.3.4.

- Remembering the children I worked with, whose distress was misunderstood and whose needs went unmet, and my own helplessness as a practitioner lacking the knowledge or systemic support to respond effectively, kept me committed to this research. The significant research gap in practical support strategies (Haire et al., 2024) and the PDA Society's (2023) calls for further research confirmed the need. Yet, I worried that, in a field so contested that researchers do not agree on what demand-avoidant behaviours are, how can I study them at all? Adopting a social constructionist epistemology allowed me to sit with the complexity without attempting to resolve contested debates. My positioning, influenced by reading on the social model of disability (Oliver, 2013) and critical perspectives challenging deficit-based understandings (Milton, 2017; Woods, 2022), views demand-avoidant behaviours as socially constructed phenomena shaped through interactions, professional discourse, and cultural contexts (Burr, 2015).

These experiences have strengthened my commitment to explore how school staff make sense of and respond to demand-avoidant behaviours. My experiences have illustrated the value of understanding them in context, and it was important that my doctoral research aligned with this focus. **(See Reflexive Diary Entry 1 - Appendix C)**

3.3.2. Ontology and Epistemology

Building on the axiological position outlined above, the values and experiences shaping this research informed the philosophical assumptions underpinning how reality and knowledge are conceptualised. Ontology refers to the nature of reality and what can be said to exist (Crotty, 1998; Willig, 2013). Epistemology concerns the nature and sources of knowledge, including how knowledge is created, validated, and interpreted (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Crotty, 1998). Together, ontology and

epistemology inform research design, the questions posed, the methods chosen, and the interpretation of data (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). In writing this chapter, I found it difficult to separate epistemology and ontology into distinct sections, as they are closely intertwined. How I understand reality shapes how I conceptualise knowledge, and my assumptions about knowledge influence how I interpret reality. This overlap highlights the interrelated nature of these philosophical components and reflects the complexity of the decisions made throughout the research process.

I rejected a positivist stance, which assumes a single, objective reality measurable independently of context (Willig, 2013; Schwandt, 2014). As the literature review outlined, much existing research on demand-avoidant behaviours operates within such a framework, locating difficulty within the individual and framing behaviours in medical or pathologising terms (Haire et al., 2024; Moore, 2020). This approach would be incompatible with exploring how educators interpret and respond to these behaviours in context, as it overlooks the social, relational, and systemic factors shaping experiences.

This research adopts a relativist ontological stance. While ontological positions are often presented as a binary between realism and relativism, many qualitative researchers conceptualise these positions as existing along a continuum (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Within this continuum, this research corresponds most closely with a relativist orientation, recognising that realities are multiple, subjective, and socially constructed, emerging through individual experiences and interpretations (Burr, 2015; Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Schwandt, 2014). Within the context of conceptual uncertainty, this research does not seek to identify an absolute truth about what demand-avoidant behaviours are. It endeavours to explore how school staff make sense of and respond to demand-avoidant behaviours in their professional practice, whilst acknowledging that my own beliefs and experiences may influence this interpretation (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020).

Teachers' and TAs' interpretations and strategies are influenced by professional knowledge, personal experiences, interactions with CYP, colleagues, parents, and broader institutional and cultural norms (Dodgson, 2019; Nightingale & Cromby, 1999; Teh & Lek, 2018). Their perspectives are shaped by the contexts within which they operate, meaning multiple subjective truths exist. By adopting a relativist

stance, I explore these perspectives, recognising the value of diverse views without privileging any one over the others.

Epistemologically, this research aligns with social constructionism, which views knowledge as co-constructed through social processes (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Burr, 2015). 'Demand-avoidant behaviours' is understood as a socially constructed label applied to observable behaviours, reflecting ongoing debates about classification outlined in Section 2.3.1 (Green et al., 2018; Mols & Danckaerts, 2022; Woods, 2021). CYP displaying these behaviours have diverse experiences, strengths, and needs, which vary between individuals and emerge in response to specific environmental, pedagogical, and social contexts (Section 2.5.3) within historically and culturally bound understandings (Burr, 2015; Gergen, 2015).

Given the absence of strong empirical consensus, what is known about demand-avoidant behaviours and approaches to supporting them is constantly evolving, shaped by professional dialogue, research practices, and wider social and cultural narratives, including interpretations of autism; an association that emerged from the mid-2000s (Section 2.3.2; Woods, 2022). Behaviours now described as 'demand-avoidant' may have been interpreted differently in the past and will likely continue to evolve. Just as societal views on neurodivergence have shifted over time, interpretations of demand-avoidant behaviours may change as knowledge and cultural perspectives develop.

Teachers' and TAs' roles are also constantly adapting, shaped by evolving pedagogical practices and socio-political factors within education (Kemp & Hall, 2017). By framing this research as historically and culturally specific, it encourages the researcher, participants, and readers to critically reflect on current conceptualisations of demand-avoidant behaviours and consider how alternative understandings and practices may emerge in the future (Gergen, 2015).

By explicitly adopting a relativist ontology and a social constructionist epistemology, this research explores participants' perspectives while critically examining how knowledge is co-constructed, interpreted, and represented (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). This stance values multiple perspectives, situating participants' understandings within their complex social, educational, and cultural contexts, and avoids reductive, medicalised interpretations of behaviours. **(See Reflexive Diary Entry 2 - Appendix *C*)**

3.4. Research Methods

3.4.1 Qualitative research

Historically, psychology prioritised positivist traditions emphasising objectivity, measurement, and generalisability, often marginalising qualitative methods (Madill & Gough, 2008; Smith, 2015). However, contemporary viewpoints recognise that qualitative research provides critical insight into human meaning-making, where individual and contextual factors are central (Willig, 2013). Qualitative methodology values depth, reflexivity, and interpretation (Creswell & Poth, 2018) and is particularly relevant within Educational Psychology, where understanding lived experiences within complex educational systems is central to practice (Sewell, 2016).

Given my ontological and epistemological positioning, this research adopts a qualitative approach, supporting exploration of how school staff interpret and respond to demand-avoidant behaviours, recognising the wider contexts shaping them (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Creswell & Poth, 2018), whilst facilitating flexibility to explore their understandings and the meanings they attribute to their practices.

3.4.2 Initial methods considered

Methodology is guided by the research questions and the type of knowledge sought (Frost, 2021). RTA was selected as the analytic approach, with the rationale discussed later in this chapter.

During early research design, discourse analysis was considered given my interest in how labels such as "pathological demand avoidance" are constructed within educational discourse (Gee, 2014; Potter & Wetherell, 1987). However, as research questions developed to focus on educators' interpretations and practical strategies, an approach allowing exploration of both meaning making and practice such as RTA became more appropriate. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis was also considered, but its idiographic focus on very small numbers of cases (Smith et al., 2009) was less aligned with identifying patterns across multiple practitioners' perspectives. **(See Reflexive Diary Entry 3 - Appendix C)**

3.4.3 Reflexive Thematic Analysis

I selected RTA (Braun and Clarke, 2006) as the analytic approach. RTA aligns with the positionality, research aims, and methodology of this research, providing a

flexible yet rigorous framework for identifying and interpreting patterns of meaning across interviews (Braun & Clarke, 2022). This approach facilitates exploration of how participants make sense of their professional practice while enabling consideration of contextual factors, such as school policies and cultures. Themes capture patterns of meaning across the dataset, allowing both individual experiences and wider systemic influences to be examined (Braun & Clarke, 2022). RTA is particularly suited to researching contested topics, as it does not require pre-defined categories or consensus on definitions, making it appropriate for exploring demand-avoidant behaviours given the ongoing debates outlined in the literature review.

RTA aligns with the social constructionist epistemology underpinning this research, allowing patterns of meaning to be constructed while situating them within specific contexts, and presenting findings as interpretations developed through the research process (Tuckett, 2005). By creating patterns of meaning, RTA supports transferability, facilitating readers' assessment of the relevance of themes to their own contexts (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Connelly & Peltzer, 2016). While some have noted concerns about the flexibility of RTA possibly leaving researchers uncertain about standards (Nowell et al., 2017), Braun and Clarke (2022) emphasise that RTA provides structured guidance while allowing room for interpretation, enabling systematic yet creative engagement with data.

Whilst my six-step approach to data analysis is detailed in Appendix L, here I discuss my orientation to inductive and deductive analysis, and how my positionality shaped this process. Braun and Clarke (2022) highlight the need for researchers to consider their orientation to data analysis; that is, considering where and how meaning is noticed. An inductive orientation stays close to what participants have said, with meaning generated from the data. A deductive orientation, by contrast, is shaped more directly by the researcher's theoretical position, with existing frameworks, models, or literature actively informing how the data is interpreted (Pearson et al., 2025). However, inductive and deductive analysis are better understood as sitting on a continuum, rather than as a strict binary and analysis can incorporate both. Purely inductive analysis is not possible, since subjectivity means researchers inevitably bring theoretical and experiential perspectives to their meaning-making, and who we

are shapes what we notice in data and the stories we construct from it (Byrne, 2022; Fine & Deegan, 1996).

My own analysis sat towards the inductive end of this continuum, prioritising participants' meaning-making by developing themes from the data. Conducting exploratory research, it was important for me as a researcher to "give voice" to participants by emphasising their experiences, perspectives, and meanings (Braun & Clarke, 2022), and so being grounded in the data formed the starting point for the analysis. However, at the coding stage, my judgements about what counted as relevant were inevitably shaped by frameworks I already carried, including my relativist, social constructionist position and a transactional view of behaviour, alongside prior reading, such as the PANDA approach (PDA Society, 2021), relational approaches, and my own professional experience, meaning codes were inevitably developed through engagement with the data and these existing frameworks, rather than through the application of predetermined categories. This lens was present from the outset, shaping my research questions, interview approach, coding decisions, and interpretation of data, which is expected in qualitative research; no researcher approaches a study as a blank slate (Braun & Clarke, 2019).

Braun and Clarke (2022) state that theory is important in reflexive thematic analysis due to the "analytic power" it provides. I actively engaged with theory and existing literature to interpret and deepen understanding of the patterns I had identified at later stages of analysis, situating and interpreting the write-up of findings within existing research and theory relating to key themes and concepts. For example, I drew on Bronfenbrenner and Morris's (2006) bioecological model to organise and present findings across individual, relational, and systemic levels, offering a coherent structure for communicating the interconnected nature of the findings. **(See Appendix N - Reflexive Diary Entry 8)**

I sought to remain reflexively accountable to the influence of my positionality throughout the analysis process. I named my positionality explicitly in the axiology section and kept a reflexive diary throughout the research process to surface these influences as they arose (see Appendix C). I also engaged in regular supervision to discuss and challenge my interpretations, and returned to the data repeatedly during

analysis to check my developing codes and themes remained grounded in participants' meaning-making. Methodological safeguards taken throughout the analysis process are detailed further in Appendix L.

3.5 Research Design

3.5.1 Participants and Context

I used purposive sampling to recruit participants from schools served by the Educational Psychology Service where I was on placement as a TEP, in a local authority in the East Midlands of England. To situate the research, I outline below relevant features of the local authority and its service context.

The EP service operates a consultation model of service delivery, in which EPs act as agents of change by working with and through other people, using conversations to help those involved see a child's situation differently and bring about positive change for the child. The service is non-traded, with priorities determined jointly with school SENCos through planning meetings. Other SEND support services in this local authority also operate on a non-traded, need-based model. Funding in this local authority is not linked to Education, Health and Care Plans (EHCPs), meaning schools can access funding for additional support based on identified need rather than requiring a child to have an EHCP.

Recruitment was limited to this LA, as the EPS supporting the research sought findings directly relevant to their local context. This focus also enabled exploration of how demand-avoidant behaviours are understood and responded to within a shared local-authority context. Purposive sampling ensured participants had characteristics and experiences directly relevant to the research focus (Palinkas et al., 2015; Robinson, 2014).

Five practitioners participated in this research: Lando, Lauren, Evelyn, Clara, and Frances. I wanted to acknowledge the important contribution each participant made to the thinking in this thesis, as well as to humanise them and the deeply personal stories they shared with me.

Consequently, I introduce each participant here:

Lando gave me the impression that she enjoyed working 'on the ground' with CYP as a TA. Whilst describing working with CYP displaying demand-avoidant behaviours

as "tiring," her descriptions of co-regulating and being present with them in difficult moments conveyed someone who thrived in the intensity and unpredictability of the role. I was particularly grateful for her insight from a specialist school.

Lauren spoke with pride about her primary school's relational approach, providing perspective from her SENCo and class teacher roles. It really felt like she enjoyed talking about the work happening in her school, the teamwork, consistency, and how staff support one another. When discussing what they'd built together, her voice wavered slightly and she became emotional, which affected me too.

Evelyn, a primary school TA, spoke with passionate conviction about reframing demand-avoidant behaviours. Her comment, “this isn’t the hill to die on?", considering whether a demand to use the same door as peers was worth the potential distress and relationship damage, was poignant. When discussing creative learning opportunities, her body language shifted, eyes lit up, gestures animated, suggesting she found joy in creating learning opportunities that met CYP where they were at.

Clara offered both SENCo and class teacher perspectives, providing insight into supporting whole-school development of consistent approaches. Her reflection that, "you've got to trust your instincts and professionalism" resonated. She spoke about doubting herself when trying approaches that felt right but uncertain yet described positive impacts when she persevered.

Frances, a secondary school TA, struck me with her perseverance and patience. She spoke about "coaxing both sides," students and teachers, which made me wonder whether advocating for her approaches was a normal part of daily practice. Frances seemed troubled when discussing a relationship breakdown with a CYP, clearly valuing the trust she'd worked to build.

In most interviews, practitioners made some reference to systemic barriers that got in the way of relational practice, suggesting these issues weighed heavily on participants' minds. Several practitioners also expressed hope that their contribution in the interview was valuable, asking whether what they shared had been “helpful.” This uncertainty from professionals whom I perceived as highly skilled prompted me to reflect on what kind of ‘expertise’ is valued, or not valued, in educational

discourse. I wondered whether this represents wider cultural devaluation of relational approaches in systems prioritising performativity and accountability.

Participant pen portraits, detailing their school context and experience are presented in Appendix D.

Participants were eligible to take part if they met both of the following criteria:

- They were currently employed as a teacher, TA, or SENCo within an educational setting (mainstream schools, mainstream schools with resource provisions, alternative provisions, local authority special schools, independent schools, and independent specialist schools)

- They had current or prior experience supporting at least 2 CYP who displayed demand-avoidant behaviours.

Teachers, TAs and SENCos were considered well-placed to provide rich, detailed insights as they maintain sustained and direct contact with CYP. Creswell & Poth (2018) note that individuals with direct experience of the phenomena under investigation provide detailed accounts that are critical for qualitative research. SENCos were included as their combined classroom and strategic responsibilities allow them to observe patterns across multiple CYP and implement or oversee support, aligning with research question three. While I hoped to include a range of practitioner roles to capture different professional perspectives, previous TEPs' experiences of recruitment challenges within school contexts suggested that participation might be difficult to secure. Recruitment, therefore, remained opportunistic within the purposive sampling framework, with participants included where they met the eligibility criteria outlined above.

Participants were required to have supported at least two CYP displaying demand-avoidant behaviours to allow reflection on a broader range of professional experiences. This criterion was chosen to reduce the ethical risk associated with focusing on a single CYP, as concentrating on one individual could increase the likelihood of identifiability. Drawing on multiple experiences enabled a more generalised discussion without compromising confidentiality or requiring parental consent. This approach aimed to protect anonymity while capturing meaningful insights into professional practice (Orb et al., 2000).

Participants did not need to have supported formally diagnosed CYP. Given the absence of standardised criteria (Moore, 2020; Woods, 2021), professional perception of behaviour was prioritised. Participants were encouraged to use their own judgment to decide whether their experience was relevant, aligning with the social constructionist epistemology of this research. This supported the exploration of multiple perspectives without privileging a single “objective definition” of demand-avoidant behaviours (Patton, 2015).

Staff from a range of educational contexts within the LA were included, as no single setting is ideal for CYP displaying demand-avoidant behaviours (PDA Society, 2018). Braun and Clarke (2022) argue that there can be flexibility in dataset composition, with RTA accommodating heterogeneous datasets, enabling the capture of diverse professional experiences and strategies to support research transferability.

3.5.1.1 Sample Size

RTA has no definitive rules on sample size, as this is determined by the research's focus, depth, and practical scope. Braun and Clarke (2013) suggest that for small-scale qualitative projects, between six and ten data items may be appropriate; however, they emphasise that adequacy is determined by the richness and relevance of the data. For this research, I aimed to recruit between four and six participants, a decision informed by the scope of a doctoral research project and a review of previous Educational Psychology theses. The number of participants required is influenced by whether data is 'thick', rich, detailed, and conceptually dense, or 'thin', offering less depth (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

I remained open to the possibility that participants might vary in the depth and breadth of their responses, and so this recruitment aim remained flexible. I adopted the principle of information power (Malterud et al., 2016), which suggests that the more relevant and information-rich the data, the fewer participants are needed. Throughout data collection, I engaged in ongoing reflection on the adequacy of the data in relation to the research aims. Consistent with Braun and Clarke's (2022) approach, I used reflexive judgement to determine when the dataset was sufficiently rich and conceptually developed to enable meaningful interpretive thematic analysis.

3.5.2 Procedure

3.5.2.1 Recruitment

Recruiting within the local authority where I was on placement enabled me to leverage existing professional relationships of EP colleagues. I avoided approaching staff in schools where I was the designated link TEP to prevent overlap between professional and research roles, maintain ethical boundaries, and protect participants from potential pressure to participate.

Recruitment took place between July and October 2025 using multiple strategies (see Table 1 for timeline). Initial recruitment through EPs disseminating materials to SENCos yielded limited response. I therefore simplified the process by having EPs contact potential participants directly during school visits and contacted the Local Authority Communication and Interaction SEND support service, who suggested school staff with relevant experience. Following four participants, I considered whether the dataset had reached sufficient information power (Malterud et al., 2016). The interviews had generated rich data across RQ1 and RQ2, but RQ3 was addressed to a lesser extent. One additional participant was subsequently recruited, leading to five participants in total. **(See Reflexive Diary Entry 4 - Appendix C)**

Table 1.

Timeline of Recruitment

Time Period	Recruitment Strategy	Approach	Outcome
July 2025	Initial recruitment via EPs disseminating to SENCos/SLTs	Recruitment poster (*Appendix E*) with QR code to expression of interest form (*Appendix F*) shared by email with EPs.	2 expressions of interest; sent Participant Information Sheet (*Appendix G*) and consent form (*Appendix H)*, but did not progress
September 2025	Simplified approach: EPs shared all materials together and contacted participants directly during school visits	Removed expression of interest step. All recruitment materials provided together - participant information sheet and consent form. Google Forms and Word document consent options provided	3 participants recruited
October 2025	Direct contact via Communication and Interaction (C&I) Team	C&I Team suggested potential participants. I made direct email contact to potential participants.	1 participant recruited
Late October 2025	Response to additional expressions of interest	As above	1 participant recruited

3.5.1.2 Semi-structured Interviews

I selected semi-structured interviews as the primary method of data collection because they provide a flexible yet purposeful way to explore participants' experiences and professional perspectives in depth (Braun & Clarke, 2013). This approach allowed participants to reflect openly while ensuring discussions remained focused on the research aims. Semi-structured interviewing enabled an interactive exchange between the researcher and the participant, allowing questions to be adapted in response to emerging ideas and to probe areas of relevance (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015).

Given the exploratory nature of this research, such flexibility was essential for capturing the complexity of participants' experiences (Mason, 2018). While focus groups can generate dialogue and comparison between participants, individual interviews were considered more suitable. One-to-one discussions offered participants greater freedom to share views without concern about disagreement, professional judgement, or disclosure of sensitive experiences (King & Horrocks, 2010). This format also preserved confidentiality and minimised the potential influence of group dynamics. Interviews were also more feasible given that participants were from different educational settings across the LA, coordinating a focus group would have posed logistical challenges.

The interviews took place over six weeks from mid-September to the end of October 2025. The interview schedule (Appendix I) comprised ten open-ended questions, supported by follow-up prompts designed to elicit elaboration and encourage reflection. Developing this schedule in advance ensured that interviews remained aligned with the research questions while allowing sufficient flexibility for participants to shape the discussion (Roulston & Choi, 2018).

The schedule was structured around three categories: core, depth, and optional questions. Core prompts ensured each participant was asked about central topics aligned with the research questions, maintaining consistency across interviews (King & Horrocks, 2010). Depth prompts extended responses by inviting participants to elaborate on their reasoning, share specific examples, or explore implicit meanings. Optional prompts were supplementary, designed to allow flexibility to pursue areas of potential interest when relevant or to omit them if time constraints arose. This structure balanced coherence across interviews with responsiveness to individual

participants' responses (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). **(See Reflexive Diary Entry 5 - Appendix C)**

Participants were informed that interviews would last up to one hour. Each lasted approximately 55-65 minutes and was conducted to create a conversational, supportive atmosphere, enabling participants to discuss their experiences in their own words, consistent with social constructionism, which values the co-construction of meaning through dialogue (Burr, 2015). One interview ran slightly longer than planned. The participant was asked whether they were happy to continue, and they gave permission.

Participants were offered the option to interview in person or online via Google Meet. Offering both options acknowledged that digital interviews could facilitate participation, reduce time and cost constraints, and yield rich data while maintaining participant comfort (Saarijärvi & Bratt, 2021; Thunberg & Arnell, 2022). Given staffing and time pressures in schools, the flexibility of scheduling an online session might've made it easier for participants to fit the interview around their workload.

One participant chose an online interview. I confirmed at the start that we could hear each other clearly. The participant was asked to turn off their camera during recording, as only audio data was required. The absence of visual cues required me to be more mindful of pacing, allowing extra time and space for responses before interjecting, which helped maintain a natural conversational flow despite the lack of non-verbal feedback.

3.5.3 Ethical considerations

Ethical approval for this research was obtained from the University of Sheffield, School of Education Ethics Committee (Appendix J). I adhered to the conditions outlined in the approved ethics application and upheld the ethical principles and professional standards set by the British Psychological Society (BPS, 2021) and the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC, 2024).

Given that engaging in dialogue about experiences with CYP who display demand-avoidant behaviours could evoke emotional responses, safeguarding participants' psychological well-being was important. Participants were fully informed about the research before providing consent and were reminded of their right to pause, withdraw, or terminate participation at any stage without explanation or

repercussion. Given the potentially sensitive nature of the topic, this was reiterated at the beginning of interviews to ensure participants felt a sense of agency. Following each interview, participants were provided with a debriefing document (Appendix K) that summarised the research aims and detailed relevant support services.

I considered how to manage situations in which participants might share negative constructions or experiences. I planned to acknowledge such responses as valid elements of their professional perspectives, in line with the social constructionist framework guiding the research. To ensure interviews remained clearly bounded as research over therapeutic spaces, I communicated at the outset that the discussions would be focused on professional practice.

Following data collection, participants were provided with anonymised transcripts to review and invited to amend or redact any content within two weeks. None of the participants chose to do so. Confidentiality and pseudonymity were supported by using pseudonyms for all participants, schools, and CYP. Participants chose their own pseudonyms, except for Clara, who asked me to choose hers. While every effort was made to minimise the risk of identification, complete anonymity cannot be guaranteed. Where contextual details inadvertently identified places or people, further redactions were made.

3.6 Analysis Approach

As described previously in this chapter, RTA (Braun and Clarke, 2022) was the analytical approach for this research. The process consists of six interconnected phases: familiarisation with the data, generating initial codes, constructing preliminary themes, reviewing and refining themes, defining and naming them, and producing the analysis. Although often presented as linear, Braun and Clarke (2021) emphasise that RTA is flexible and iterative. In practice, I moved fluidly between phases as understanding deepened (Byrne, 2022). While the six phases provided a general structure, each stage was revisited as needed to ensure a rich, coherent, and thorough interpretation of the data. A detailed account of how I approached each phase is provided in Appendix L.

3.7 Quality in Research

This research was guided by Yardley's (2000; 2008) four principles for assessing quality in qualitative research: sensitivity to context, commitment and rigour, transparency and coherence, and impact and importance.

3.7.1 Impact and Importance

Traditionally, quantitative research quality has been judged through generalisability, or the extent to which findings can be applied to other settings (Willig, 2013). However, this concept is problematic within qualitative paradigms, given the small and context-specific nature of qualitative datasets (Payne & Williams, 2005), and is incompatible with social constructionist approaches, which emphasise contextually situated knowledge (Burr, 2015). Within RTA, transferability is viewed as a more appropriate indicator of quality (Braun & Clarke, 2022), recognising that findings are interpretative and grounded in specific contexts. By providing descriptions of the research context, participants, and analysis process, this research enables readers to consider the relevance of findings to their own professional contexts. RTA supports transferability by situating patterns of meaning within their context while generating insights that may inform reflection and practice (Connelly & Peltzer, 2016).

This aligns with Yardley's (2000) principles of impact and importance, as the findings aim to offer insights that may support practitioners working with CYP who display demand-avoidant behaviours. While strategies for supporting demand-avoidant behaviours have been proposed in the literature (Gore Langton & Frederickson, 2018; Woods, 2019), this research extends existing knowledge by exploring how practitioners understand these behaviours and the strategies they enact in real school contexts. The research also provides insight into the types of advice and support EPs may offer when working collaboratively with schools and families.

3.7.2 Transparency and Coherence

Maintaining transparency and coherence throughout the research process is central to ensuring quality in qualitative research (Noble & Smith, 2015; Yardley, 2000). This involves making the rationale underpinning methodological and analytic decisions visible and traceable, often through an audit trail documenting how interpretations develop over time (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Chowdhury, 2015). This principle reflects

the epistemological reflexivity discussed earlier in this chapter, requiring explicit attention to how theoretical frameworks, methodological choices, and analytical decisions shape knowledge production.

In this research, transparency was supported through articulation of my positionality, reflexive commentary throughout the thesis, and documentation of decisions during the analysis process. Supporting materials, such as the final code list, thematic maps, and reflexive notes, are included in the appendices to illustrate how themes were constructed and refined across the dataset.

3.7.3 Commitment and Rigour

This principle (Yardley, 2000) was addressed through sustained engagement with the dataset and a systematic analytic process. This included multiple stages of familiarisation with the data, iterative rounds of coding, and repeated review and refinement of themes to ensure they captured coherent patterns of meaning across interviews. Reflexive engagement with the data was maintained throughout, acknowledging the researcher's interpretive role in the analysis process.

3.7.4 Sensitivity to Context

The research demonstrated sensitivity to context throughout (Yardley, 2000). This principle was particularly important given the social constructionist epistemology underpinning this research, which recognises that meaning is contextually situated and co-constructed (Burr, 2015).

The research design acknowledged the complex educational, organisational, and socio-cultural environments within which practitioners operate. Research Question 3 explicitly explored how school cultures and systems shape practitioners' responses, reflecting this commitment to understanding contextual influences on practice.

During data collection, sensitivity to context informed practical decisions, such as offering both in-person and online interview options. I am aware of the significant workload and time pressures that school staff face. Offering flexibility in interview format aimed to reduce barriers to participation and accommodate participants' professional contexts.

Despite my own experience working in schools with CYP displaying demand-avoidant behaviours, I recognised I could never fully understand

participants' realities, shaped by unique contexts, histories, and positionalities. This recognition informed how I approached data analysis with curiosity and openness, attending to the situated nature of their meaning-making.

3.8 Conclusion of Methodology

This research sought to understand how school staff make sense of and respond to demand-avoidant behaviours in practice, and how school systems and cultures shape their responses. To do this, I needed to speak to the people working directly with CYP displaying demand-avoidant behaviours in school contexts. A qualitative methodology using semi-structured interviews and Reflexive Thematic Analysis was the most appropriate way to access this knowledge, allowing patterns to emerge from their interviews. This approach supports transferability, enabling readers to assess the relevance of findings to their own school contexts and informing practice. Semi-structured interviews allowed me to ask the questions I needed to elicit this information whilst ensuring participants could reflect on their experiences in their own words.

Chapter Four: Analysis

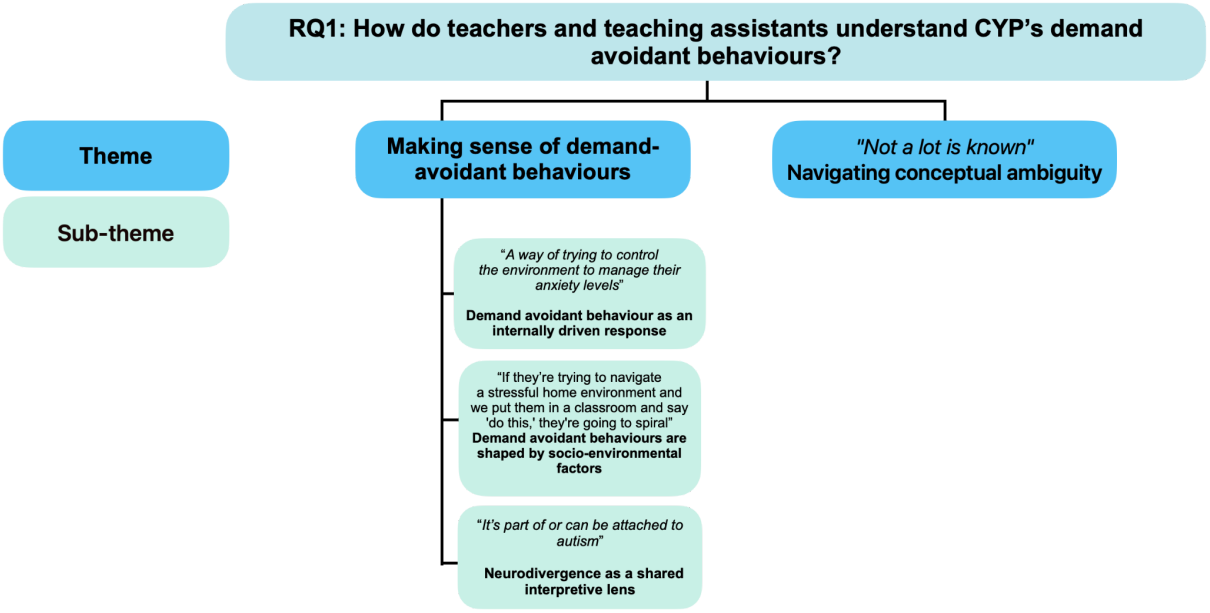
This chapter presents a RTA of transcripts of semi-structured interviews with five school practitioners, including my interpretation of the dataset and links to relevant literature.

Braun and Clarke (2022) acknowledge that researchers make different choices about whether to integrate interpretation into the findings or to separate the analysis and discussion sections. I chose to integrate interpretation throughout this analysis chapter. This approach aligns with RTA's interpretive nature, in which themes represent the researcher's interpretation (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Integrating interpretation alongside data presentation keeps the analysis process visible, showing how meanings were constructed through my active engagement with interviews. It also enables connections to relevant literature to be drawn as they become salient during analysis, enriching the thematic narrative and demonstrating how participant perspectives relate to existing theory and research. The discussion chapter (Chapter 5) then situates these interpretations within theoretical frameworks and explores their implications for policy and practice.

This chapter is organised using thematic diagrams for each research question. Each section begins with the relevant thematic diagram, followed by a report of the themes, with participant quotations used throughout.

RQ.1 How do Teachers and Teaching assistants Understand CYP's Demand-Avoidant Behaviours?

For this research question, I created two themes, with theme one having three subthemes, as shown in the thematic diagram. Participants explained their understanding of demand-avoidant behaviours, which served as the basis for these themes.



Theme 1: Making Sense of Demand-Avoidant Behaviours

Participants described the internal experiences of CYP displaying demand-avoidant behaviours, the wider contexts shaping them, and the neurodevelopmental frameworks they used to make sense of what they observed. This is explored across three subthemes.

Subtheme 1.1: "A way of trying to control the environment… to manage their anxiety levels" (Evelyn) - Demand-Avoidant Behaviour as an Internally Driven Response

This subtheme explores how participants constructed demand-avoidant behaviours as arising from internal emotional, psychological, and physiological processes.

Participants consistently described anxiety as the primary driver of demand-avoidant behaviour, with control (attempting to influence one's environment or circumstances) as the way in which CYP regulated distress. Frances and Lando described demand-avoidant behaviour as being caused by anxiety, and Clara conceptualised it as stemming from "*an internal fear of losing control,*" arising from "*anxiety and uncertainty.*" Reiterating this understanding, Evelyn articulated the link between control and anxiety, describing demand-avoidant behaviours as "*[a] way of trying to control the environment… to manage their anxiety levels*" in response to "*everyday things which they feel are too much.*" Here, Evelyn positions seeking control as a way of managing overwhelm when perceived demands exceed coping capacity. These descriptions resonate with research suggesting demand-avoidant behaviours

are underpinned by intolerance of uncertainty, which increases the need to exercise control to mediate anxiety (Boulter et al., 2014; Johnson & Saunderson, 2023; Stuart et al., 2020; White et al., 2023). This fits with transactional perspectives, which emphasise the interaction between individual characteristics and environmental contexts (Woods, 2021), and alongside theories that position autonomy as central to regulation when under stress (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Like Frances, Lando and Clara, Evelyn positioned demand-avoidant behaviours as adaptive responses to perceived threats (Newson et al., 2003; O'Nions et al., 2014). Clara described these threat responses as self-reinforcing, where avoidance regulates distress momentarily while maintaining or amplifying anxiety in the longer term (Patriarca et al., 2022), suggesting that she saw demand-avoidant behaviours as part of a vicious cycle with adaptive origins that served to reduce anxiety in the moment.

However, while participants described anxiety driving the threat responses, framing them purely as psychological experiences overlooks the possibility that they are involuntary, autonomic reactions (Porges, 2011). This has implications for practice, as approaches to anxiety, such as exposure, may be counterproductive if they do not account for physiological arousal and the process of exposure becoming a demand (Williams, 2026). Considering participants' focus on anxiety, I wondered whether understanding the neurophysiological basis of these threat responses might encourage practitioners to prioritise supporting CYP to feel safe in their environment and co-regulation over interventions focused on altering the psychological components of anxiety.

Central to the understanding of anxiety, participants explicitly challenged interpretations of demand-avoidant behaviours as intentional refusal, emphasising their non-conscious and automatic nature. Evelyn described an *"internal driving force,*" reflecting that "*it's an urge they can't hold… they feel compelled… it's just too much pressure*," suggesting diminished capacity to attend to outside expectations under anxiety. Frances noted that demand-avoidant behaviour is not purposeful aligning with Siegel's (2010) "hand model of the brain," in which heightened arousal reduces access to reflective processes. This was reflected in descriptions of CYP wanting to engage but being unable to do so, with Lando describing demand-avoidant behaviours as "*a mental block"* where CYP *"physically can't do it,*" and Lauren sharing that "*it was almost like her body was telling her she can't, even though she wanted to,*" suggesting intention and action become disconnected

(O'Nions et al., 2016; Haire et al., 2024). Framing demand-avoidant behaviours as involuntary, positions adults as morally obliged to act in supportive over disciplinary ways.

Participants also distinguished between external and internal demands. Lando reflected that "*if someone tells you to do something, even if you like it, you don't want to do it anymore*." Evelyn illustrated this distinction through a situation where a CYP could not engage in a preferred activity once suggested by an adult: "*from the outside in… it doesn't make sense… But it was because it was a demand… like there was a massive force bearing down on her.*" She emphasised that a CYP would use the trampoline "*on her own terms*" which corresponds with conceptualisations of demand-avoidant behaviours as perceived loss of control (O'Nions et al., 2016) and research describing that the need to argue with oneself to complete tasks where wanting to do something was insufficient under perceived demand (Ward et al., 2026). This understanding appeared liberatory, freeing the CYP from blame and creating space for adults to respond compassionately.

Participants also distinguished between underlying ability and moment-to-moment emotional capacity. Lauren explained that although a CYP may be cognitively able to complete a task, engagement fluctuates depending on whether they are "*feeling able to,*" while Lando described how a single demand could occupy self-regulatory resources for varying lengths of time "*depending on how they're presenting on the day and the level of anxiety,*" suggesting fluctuating thresholds where the same expectation may be tolerable at one point and incapacitating at another. Lando and Lauren's ideas are consistent with research on performance being shaped by CYPs capacity to regulate their stress response system as well as cognitive ability (Arnsten, 2009), which, in turn, suggests that such involuntary behaviours have a neurophysiological dimension. Descriptions of behaviour overriding intention, bodily shutdown, and urgent escape attempts resemble threat-based stress responses such as fight-or-flight (O'Nions and Eaton, 2020), in which threat constrains higher-order reasoning and prioritises survival regulation (Porges, 2011), suggesting a temporary loss of conscious control when the autonomic nervous system is activated. Evelyn reported CYP "*doing anything they could to distract you,"* suggestive of the "fawn" response (Sally Cat, 2023) where CYP attempt to manage demands through socially mediated strategies, or saying, "*I can't read because I don't have eyes*" or "*physically flopping to the floor*" reflective of what Fidler and

Christie (2018) describe as physical incapacitation. However, Frances also described "*explosive physical behaviours*" illustrating variability in presentation. This range could be interpreted via polyvagal theory as a reflection of different autonomic states due to varying threat levels and regulatory capacity (Dana, 2018; Porges, 2011).

A neurophysiological understanding also helped to explain the intensity of demand-avoidant behaviours. Evelyn reframed apparent "*overreacting*" as "*fully proportionate to their experience,*" with Markram and Markram (2010) noting heightened autonomic reactivity in autistic individuals, explaining why demands feel 'bigger.' This supports conceptualisations of demand-avoidant behaviours as rational responses (Woods, 2018); when the nervous system experiences demand as more intense, and when "*the world feels so unsafe*," avoiding demands and seeking control establishes "*that reasonable level of control*," (Evelyn) making avoidance an adaptive regulation strategy. This corresponds to Milton's (2012) double empathy problem, highlighting that distress arises through misattunement between autistic individuals and their environments.

Subtheme 1.2: "If they're trying to navigate a stressful home environment and we put them in a classroom and say 'do this,' they're going to spiral" (Lando) - Demand-avoidant Behaviours are Shaped by Socio-Environmental Factors

Participants described how CYPs' capacity to tolerate demands was shaped by wider social and environmental factors.

Frances and Lando reflected on how family circumstances, such as parental separation, impacted on CYPs' capacity to cope with school demands. Moreover, Lando emphasised how stress carried from home can interact with classroom demands, causing CYP "*to spiral*" (see subtheme title for full quotation). Combined, Frances and Lando suggested that demand-avoidant behaviours emerge when demands are introduced into contexts of existing emotional strain. Their perspectives are consistent with ecological and transactional models (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Sameroff, 2009), that shift responsibility from CYP to adults adapting their expectations.

Stressors were also described as accumulating across the school day, with unmet needs reducing capacity for demands. Evelyn noted that mornings were harder when CYP were "*tired or hungry,"* while Lando highlighted the importance of being *"fed and watered*" and *"warm"* before expecting engagement. These quotations frame

demand-avoidant behaviours as state-dependent, shaped by basic physiological and emotional readiness (Maslow, 1943), in which adults play an important role.

Some participants considered experiences of trauma as relevant when making sense of demand-avoidant behaviours, echoing literature suggesting that demand-avoidant behaviours can be understood through trauma-informed formulations (Kildahl et al., 2021; Woods, 2020b). Evelyn suggested that telling CYP who've "*experienced ACES*" "*what to do*" can "*feel threatening very quickly,*". This suggests a trauma-informed understanding in which experiences of threat shape how demands are perceived. Lando suggested that many demand-avoidant behaviours are due to trauma, but also that "*there are so many ways that it could be understood,*" positioning trauma as one of several possible lenses. Perry (2006) and Porges (2011) highlight how repeated experiences of unpredictability can sensitise stress-response systems, causing heightened vigilance and reduced tolerance for externally imposed control, potentially intersecting with neurodevelopmental differences given autistic individuals' increased risk of traumatic experiences (Hoover and Kaufman, 2018; Williams, 2026). Lando and Evelyn's tentative references to trauma suggested they recognised that what appears as demand-avoidant behaviours in the present may be rooted in past experiences of unsafety.

Lando reflected on home influences as relevant, noting "*it's the pressure building on the parents, and that rubs off on them*," reflecting a conceptualisation that stress within family systems impacts demand-avoidant behaviours (Porges, 2011; Tronick, 2007). This "*pressure*" may reflect wider systemic demands consistent with critiques of the responsibilisation of families and parental practices within SEND discourse (Goodley, 2013; Runswick-Cole et al., 2016). This framing positions stress within the family as relevant without attributing demand-avoidant behaviours to parenting failures, locating families within wider systemic pressures and recognising the strain on families.

Considering the school context, several participants reflected on how everyday educational demands, such as learning and teaching (Clara) or unmet learning support needs (Lando), shape CYP's capacity to engage. These perspectives are consistent with research on anxiety in school contexts that highlights avoidance in response to everyday learning situations (Keen et al., 2016). Participants' descriptions may also reflect challenges in executive functioning, where difficulties in

cognitive processes supporting goal-directed behaviour (Miyake et al., 2000) intersect with difficulties in emotional regulation under heightened anxiety (Goodson, 2018; Shields et al., 2016). Considering Lando's reflection on unmet learning support needs, I wondered whether these experiences might also shape CYP's perception of themselves as learners, including their sense of self-efficacy and mastery and their belief in their own capacity to succeed (Bandura, 1997). This perception might interact with demand-avoidant behaviours, with CYP potentially avoiding demands that outweigh their perceived capacity. Affective and metacognitive factors, including how CYP understand their own learning, ability, and resilience, may therefore also mediate the experience of demand. Interestingly, cognition and learning processes have received comparatively little attention within existing conceptualisations of demand-avoidant behaviours (Johnson, 2024; O'Nions et al., 2014a). Overall, curriculum delivery and classroom expectations may need to accommodate varying levels of nervous system arousal and cognitive demand. Attending to CYP's sense of competence as learners, through scaffolded opportunities to experience success, may also support their capacity to engage with academic demands.

Alongside learning demands, participants also considered sensory environments. Evelyn described how "*sensory stuff*" such as lights, noise, and smells could make school spaces intolerable, while Frances illustrated this in relation to PE, where the sensory qualities of clothing and noise in changing rooms led to demand-avoidant behaviours. Lando described sensory input as an ongoing background load that reduces overall capacity, likening cumulative demands to "*adding an extra weight on*" a spring until it "s*tretches beyond its limit,*" suggesting that demand-avoidant behaviours are more likely when expectations are introduced into situations where CYP are already overwhelmed by sensory input. Although sensory sensitivities remain underdeveloped in the literature, emerging research suggests that sensory reactivity may significantly impact engagement with demands (Gore Langton & Frederickson, 2018; Rai et al., 2026). Participants' framing of sensory input as an ongoing demand suggests that environmental adaptation is essential to supporting CYP, as discussed in subtheme 7.3.

Subtheme 1.3: “It’s part of or can be attached to autism” (Clara) - Neurodivergence as a Shared Interpretive Lens

Finally, across interviews, participants situated demand-avoidant behaviours within neurodevelopmental understandings, most commonly referencing autism. Clara, Frances and Lauren referred to “*autism profile*” and “*autism traits,*” even where autism diagnosis was not formalised, while Evelyn noted that demand-avoidant behaviours seemed more prevalent “*in children with autism*." These comments suggest that autism is the primary framework through which demand-avoidant behaviours were understood. Moreover, Evelyn reflected on how social communication needs could make school stressful, where CYP are dealing with social situations, social cues and “*not being able to figure people out,"* sharing that these social elements added a further layer of demand to an already overwhelming environment. This is consistent with dominant conceptualisations that position demand-avoidant behaviours within the autism spectrum (PDA Society, n.d.-a; Truman et al., 2021).

Lando placed demand-avoidant behaviours within a wider neurodevelopmental context, mentioning "*that co-morbidity*" and "*a lot of other… SEN needs.*" She also wondered if "*ADHD medication"* might play a role when several needs are present at once. This suggests she sees demand-avoidant behaviours as arising from a mix of neurodevelopmental and contextual factors (Soppitt, 2021).

Theme Summary

Across interviews, participants understood demand-avoidant behaviours as anxiety-driven, control-seeking, and shaped by neurodevelopmental and socio-environmental factors. However, as I will continue to explore in the next section, these framings scaffolded practice without explaining or clarifying demand-avoidant behaviours.

Theme 2: “*Not a lot is known*” (Lando) - Navigating Conceptual Uncertainty

Participants described dealing with uncertainty about what demand-avoidant behaviours are and how to understand them.

Several participants recognised demand-avoidant behaviours before having access to a formal label or framework. Evelyn had noticed demand-avoidant behaviours in her work with other CYP but "*didn't really have a name for it… it was more just 'oh,*

that's tricky' and figuring things out as you go." Likewise, Lando noted that "*PDA" "came more into light when working alongside them,*" reflecting that previously she'd never heard anyone refer to "*PDA.*" This resonates with literature which describes demand-avoidant behaviours as an emerging and contested construct, with understandings developing unevenly across professional discourse and practice, often outside formal diagnostic systems (Green et al., 2018; O'Nions & Eaton, 2020). Quotations suggest that understanding developed retrospectively through lived experience, with formal terminology applied after behaviours were already recognised and navigated in practice.

Training shaped how demand-avoidant behaviours were named and understood. Both Frances and Evelyn encountered the term during training, with Frances commenting that this led her to wonder if such behaviours might be "*deeper than just refusing*." Meanwhile, Lauren described how her practice changed due to longer term input from the LA's Communication and Interaction SEND support service. Evelyn and Lauren also drew on wider professional and public discourse, such as books and websites, suggesting understanding is developed iteratively through accessible sources.

For Lauren, 'PDA' functioned as a pragmatic working label. She characterised it as a shared language, explaining, "*PDA is the language that we use… I think most staff in the school, including midday [supervisors] would understand it as that,*" suggesting it functions as a common reference point supporting communication and consistency despite its contested diagnostic status (Green et al., 2018; O'Nions et al., 2016). However, shared meaning was less stable outside of professional contexts, with Evelyn questioning parental use of the label and Lauren conveying uncertainty about diagnostic status: "*I don't even know if it [PDA] is diagnosed now?*" reflecting variability in recognition across local authorities and ongoing debate about diagnostic status (Moore, 2020). Use of the term 'PDA' was also varied across participants, with Frances describing similar patterns of anxiety and demand-avoidant behaviours without consistently naming 'PDA', suggesting recognition does not depend on adoption of the label, consistent with Doyle and Kenny (2022).

Several participants described navigating unclear boundaries between constructs, with PDA, autism, and anxiety experienced as overlapping and difficult to disentangle. Clara reflected that she did not "*100% know the difference between*

pathological demand avoidance and demand avoidance," while Lauren questioned whether to "*support her as a child presenting with PDA or… highly anxious and autistic*," concluding "*it's all connected… intertwined anyway."* Here, Lauren appears aware that framing would influence the support offered, which is consistent with literature regarding conventional autism strategies being counterproductive when supporting CYP labelled 'PDA' (Gore Langton and Frederickson, 2018; PDA Society, n.d.-b).

Evelyn differentiates between CYP who avoid specific demands where they relate to anxiety triggers and CYP who avoid all demands simply because they are demands, suggesting that practitioners use intensity and pervasiveness to distinguish between selective anxiety-related avoidance (Eaton, 2018) and an "*all-encompassing*" pattern extending across contexts (NAS, n.d.-a) in the absence of formal diagnostic clarity.

When faced with uncertainty, both Lauren and Lando described how they adopt a needs-led response stating, respectively, "*we don't always look at the label" and* "*not a lot is known… we just have to work with the behaviours we're seeing*." This recalls literature emphasising professional judgements when formal frameworks are unstable (Doyle & Kenny, 2023). Meanwhile, Evelyn's reflection that "*ODD was how it was described at the time,*" suggests that the behaviours have remained consistent whilst the frameworks and terminology used to make sense of them have evolved (Gillberg, 2014; Malik and Baird, 2018). This reflects adaptive professional sense-making within an area characterised by conceptual change (Woods, 2022; O'Nions et al., 2016), leading to responsive, needs-led approaches (explored in RQ2).

Alongside uncertainty around conceptualisation, Evelyn reflected on the moral and relational consequences of language, expressing concern that "*pathological*" may be interpreted as "*something medically wrong,*" making others "*scared or wary," "seeing the child as naughty… [as if] there's something intrinsically wrong with them.*" This suggests Evelyn considered language as actively shaping how CYP are perceived. She described being drawn to alternative framings such as "*persistent drive for autonomy,*" shifting emphasis towards agency (Wilding, 2020). Evelyn's considerations reflect debates about the impact of diagnostic labels on demand-avoidant behaviours (Green et al., 2018; NAS, n.d.-b), suggesting she was

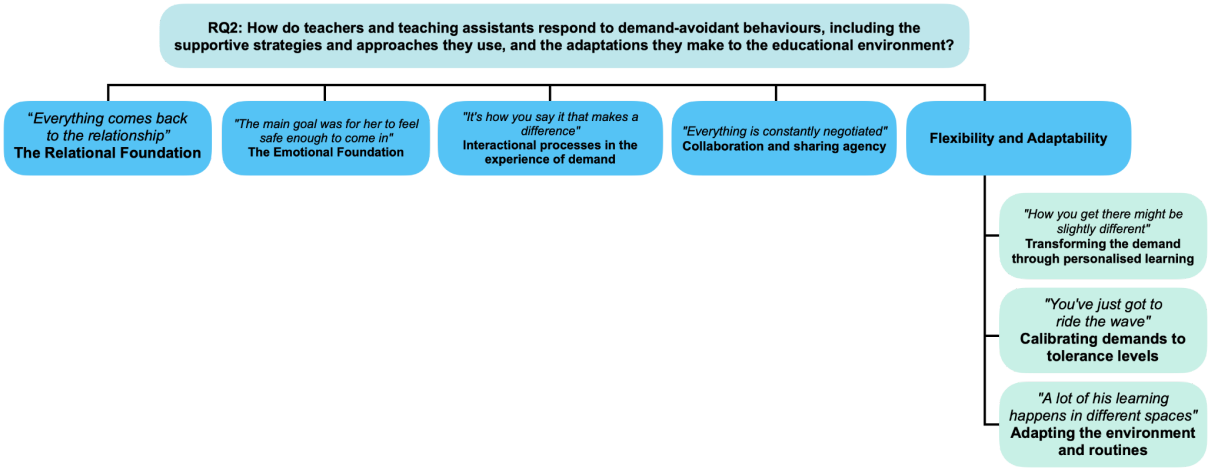
consciously navigating these debates in her professional practice by choosing language that preserved CYP's dignity.

Theme Summary

Participants managed uncertainty about demand-avoidant behaviours, noticing behaviours before using formal terms, with understanding growing through training and experience. 'PDA' functioned as shared language, though boundaries between 'PDA', autism, and anxiety remained unclear with uncertainty about diagnostic status. However, needs-led, responsive practice was prioritised over gaining clarity, focusing on the observed behaviours and how to respond, with conceptual uncertainty prompting flexible, individualised strategies based on professional judgement. These understandings shaped the relational responses and adaptations discussed in Research Question 2.

RQ.2 How do Teachers and Teaching Assistants Respond to Demand-Avoidant Behaviours?

This section addresses Research Question 2. I created 5 themes, where one theme had three sub-themes. The thematic diagram is below.



Theme 3: "*Everything comes back to the relationship*" (Evelyn) - The Relational Foundation

This theme captures how participants positioned strong relationships as the basis of effective support for demand-avoidant behaviours.

Lauren stated, "*if the relationship's not there, none of the strategies matter*," echoed by Evelyn, who noted, "*everything comes back to the relationship*" and that without

feeling "*safe*" or "*understood,*" CYP "*won't engage… no matter what strategies you put in place.*" Frances described support as dependent on "*how strong your relationship is*" and shared that "*you can create something, when you have good relationships with them*". Also, Frances described her relationship with a CYP as "*reciprocal.*"

These quotations position support as shaped by the quality of relationships, where engagement depends on trust, safety, and being understood (PDA Society, n.d.-f.). Within 'PDA' literature, Kerbey's (2023) conceptualisation of demand tolerance suggests that stronger connections and trust are associated with reduced anxiety and greater capacity to engage with demands, whereas an absence of trust makes it harder for CYP to engage with new experiences or adapt their behaviour (Nisponska, 2022). This corresponds with a relational approach in education that highlights the importance of adult responsiveness and attunement (McNamee, 2025), with support co-constructed through ongoing interaction within relationships (Gergen, 2009).

Relationships also served as the basis for CYP being able to communicate their internal states. Lauren described how relationships enabled CYP to feel "*safe enough to share how they're feeling,*" "*be honest*," and "*trust us with that,*" providing the context to communicate needs and signal when demands become overwhelming. The phrase "*trust us with that*" may refer to adults attuning and adapting their responses, creating a safe forum for emotional expression (Ginott, 2003). This reflects a dialogical perspective in which experiences are "*heard empathetically*" within interaction (Anderson, 1997) and frames relational practice as listening without CYP needing to repeatedly justify difficulties (Whiting & Johnson, 2025).

Without this relational foundation, adults may lack the understanding required to calibrate demands appropriately. Evelyn and Clara emphasised that knowledge of CYP enables practitioners to recognise triggers, fluctuating capacity, and prevent escalation, while Lando described how she could recognise subtle bodily changes signalling relaxation or tension. This suggests that capacity fluctuates and requires attuned awareness developed through relationships. This attuned emotional responsiveness aligns with Christie's (2007) account of keyworker practice, in which detailed knowledge of the CYP develops over time and supports moment-to-moment

judgement about when to reduce or maintain demands. Such depth of knowledge can be essential for recognising when to adjust demands and prevent escalation.

For Clara, developing understanding of CYP depended on the same adult having consistent contact with them. She identified having a key adult as vital, noting it "*made a huge difference for him [CYP],*" likening the arrangement to "*a security blanket*" and describing it as *"life changing,"* suggesting that consistency supports safety and predictability. Guidance emphasises prioritising relationship-building before expecting engagement with demands (Syson & Gore Langton, n.d.; Doyle & Kenny, 2023), and Christie (2007) highlights that adults should reduce demands and avoid rushing the process as trust develops. Clara indicates that consistency is particularly important for CYP who display demand-avoidant behaviours, as relationships take time to build and are easily disrupted. The emotional labour involved in being a key adult is discussed in Theme 11.

Participants described trust as vital, yet fragile. Lauren noted that when a CYP does not feel "*understood*" by adults, "*behaviours worsen or become harder to manage,*" suggesting that demand-avoidant behaviours are relationally mediated. This is consistent with research linking being misunderstood to mistrust of adults (Green, 2024). The instability of trust was illustrated in Frances' recount of a rupture, where her use of humour undermined trust, leading her to perceive the relationship as *"damaged*" despite having been "*built up*." Her response, apologising and stating, "*I won't do that again*," can be understood as an equalising move (PDA Society, n.d.-c) that addresses power relations. This aligns with relational and restorative approaches, which emphasise transparency, humility, and rupture and repair as central to relational dynamics (Morrison, 2007; Tronick, 2007). Such ruptures may also reflect misattunement shaped by differences in social communication associated with autism, in which meanings may not be shared, and humour can be experienced as confusing (Crompton et al., 2020; Milton, 2012). These ruptures may be more enduring and therefore may require proactive repair.

Evelyn described how sustained trust became reciprocal, with adults' consistency enabling CYP to engage more readily and fostering what Lauren described as "*fairness*". This connects to Theme 1.1 about perceived threats and loss of control. When adults consistently follow through, they create predictability and shared control (explored further in Theme 6), potentially reducing the perception of threat that can

trigger demand-avoidant responses, therefore positioning adult consistency as vital to CYPs sense of safety.

Frances and Evelyn noted that relationships with CYP varied between adults, with some staff establishing stronger rapport than others based on relational compatibility. While this aligns with 'PDA' literature, which notes that CYP can have preferences for specific adults (Fidler & Christie, 2018), attributing differences in the quality of adult-CYP relationships solely to personality or compatibility overlooks what adults can actively do to build connection, thereby overlooking interactional and environmental factors (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). These remarks suggest that the quality of adult-CYP relationships develops through interaction, shaped by communication style, shared experience, and attunement. This is significant, as conflictual staff-child relationships have been linked to school exclusion (Sproston et al., 2017), highlighting the need to actively build, sustain, and repair relationships.

Theme Summary

Participants identified relationships as central to effective support, with CYP's ability to participate depending on trust, and feeling safe and understood in relationships. Consistent relationships enabled CYP to communicate their internal states and signal when demands became overwhelming. Knowledge of the CYP developed over consistent contact enables adults to notice subtle changes in tolerance and prevent escalation. This relational foundation appeared essential to all other strategies. Within the context of strong relationships, participants prioritised emotional safety, as highlighted in the next theme.

Theme 4: *"The main goal was for her to feel safe enough to come in"* (Lauren) - The Emotional Foundation

This theme illustrates how participants prioritised emotional safety, recognising that CYPs' capacity to handle demands depends on emotional readiness and regulation.

Clara emphasised the importance of "*meeting social and emotional needs before cognition and learning,"* consistent with literature prioritising emotional wellbeing over academic achievement (Brede et al., 2017). When emotional needs were unmet, learning demands would "*lead to dysregulated behaviour.*" The interview discussion referenced Maslow's hierarchy, which Clara confirmed as a shared framework underpinning her focus on emotional readiness before increasing demands (Maslow,

1943). Lauren conceptualised progress in terms of emotional wellbeing, defining success as a CYP feeling "*safe enough to come into school,*" and positioning emotional safety as the "*main goal.*" This perspective is consistent with Doyle and Kenny's (2023) assertion that engagement depends on reducing fear, and with Gore-Langton and Frederickson's (2015) finding that parents often prioritise emotional safety over academic progress. However, Clara also described how some parents questioned this prioritisation. The tension between emotional and academic priorities reflects wider considerations about the purpose of schooling, which are explored further in Theme 8.

Participants also prioritised the development of emotional awareness and regulation. Clara described a period when targets were "*mainly very social and emotional"* because the CYP "*couldn't access the universal assessment systems.*" Evelyn supported CYP in recognising "*what anxiety feels like*," while Lando focused on helping them make sense of emotions to achieve greater "*control*." Although fostering emotional understanding is valuable (NEN, 2016), Lando's focus on supporting CYP to "*control"* their emotions may place sole responsibility on CYP, inadvertently neglecting relational and environmental elements that influence anxiety (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

However, participants indicated that teaching emotional regulation as an isolated individual skill was ineffective, and that emotional regulation developed in the context of relationships. Evelyn described adult-directed emotional literacy activities as overwhelming, stating, "*If it comes from me, it's like no, I'm not doing that.*" Later, the CYP engaged spontaneously, underscoring how adult-imposed approaches can seem to lessen autonomy (Wilding, 2020), and that structured emotional support is more effective when CYP set the engagement terms (Fidler & Christie, 2018). Lauren described CYP using visual aids to indicate difficulty, prompting staff to "*go easy,*" demonstrating that emotional awareness enables CYP to convey internal states and adults to adjust responses. Emotional regulation, therefore, is developed through co-regulation and attunement between adults and CYP (Lu et al., 2025; Tronick, 2007).

Despite acknowledging its importance, Clara was uncertain about prioritising emotional foundations, noting that staff questioned whether the CYP would "*ever be able to engage in learning in the same way.*" Nevertheless, she insisted it was *"the*

right thing'" as it reduced anxiety and later enabled participation. This reflects a relational perspective, placing the CYP's well-being at the forefront, even when outcomes are gradual; a process that requires sustained trust in relational practices (Chilokoa, 2025). When a parent raised concerns about academic progress, Clara described reassuring them that the CYP "*wasn't ready to learn in the same way*" at the time. She paused, then clarified that phonics, literacy, and maths remained part of his routine. This suggested that she was adapting demands to match the CYP's capacity (Fidler & Christie, 2018) while remaining mindful of accountability to the curriculum. While some literature cautions against diminishing academic aspirations for CYP with SEN (McGregor et al., 2015), participants described sequencing goals differently, starting with emotional safety, aligning with person-centred approaches that stress acceptance and responsiveness (Rogers, 2012).

Sustained prioritisation of emotional safety prompts questions about what it means when CYP need ongoing support simply to feel safe, potentially indicating that the educational context does not fit their needs (Oliver, 2013). However, Clara's description complicates this perspective. She shared that a CYP spent nearly a year primarily outside the classroom in child-led one-to-one learning. She described this as a "*bit of a waiting game,*" but the CYP is now "*fully back in the classroom.*" Lauren also discussed two CYP in which reintegration plans were collaboratively developed with the CYP and their parents, resulting in "*full-time return"* and "*success.*" These examples suggest that sustained attention to emotional safety, providing autonomy and consistent relationships can facilitate later engagement, although ongoing support needs may persist.

Theme Summary

Emotional self-regulation was developed through relationships, with CYP expressing internal states and adults responding accordingly. Participants prioritised a sense of safety, introducing learning demands only when CYP were emotionally ready. This prioritisation conflicted with academic expectations and posed challenges for meeting curriculum requirements. Nevertheless, participants maintained a relational perspective, prioritising well-being even when academic outcomes were delayed, which supported later re-engagement.

Theme 5: *“It’s how you say it that makes a difference”* (Lauren) - Interactional processes in the experience of demand

Some participants indicated that maintaining relational and emotional foundations, as discussed in Themes 3 and 4, depended on adults’ moment-to-moment interactions with CYP. They reported that the way adults communicated demands influenced how CYP experienced them. As Lauren summarised, "*it's how you say it that makes a difference*."

Evelyn described CYP as highly attuned to adults' emotional states, expressing a preference for "*nurturing, calm, gently spoken*" adults. She explained that CYP are "*hypervigilant,*" detecting slight changes in adult emotional states that increase their anxiety. This suggests that adult self-regulation is a prerequisite for CYP regulation (Perry, 2006), consistent with conceptualisations of demand-avoidant behaviours as threat responses (Theme 1.1). Lando noted that "*the minute you're too firm… you've lost,*" consistent with guidance discouraging emotionally charged delivery (PDA Society, n.d.-d) and perspectives positioning sternness as a threat cue increasing arousal (McDonnell, 2010). Therefore, Evelyn and Lando position adults as having agency in reducing demand-avoidant behaviours by managing their own emotional states and responses.

Participants noted how indirect or declarative phrasing influenced the experience of demands. Clara described using "*WIN language" ("I wonder," "I'm imagining," "I'm noticing*"), contrasting this with, "*you need to put your shoes on.*" She reported that this made a "*massive difference*," shifting communication from authoritative to collaborative and invitational. Lando and Lauren described keeping requests "*loose*," which signalled flexibility and reduced confrontation while maintaining expectations, aligning with guidance that advocates declarative language to reduce perceived threat (Fidler & Christie, 2018). Evelyn described "*frilly, indirect*" language, positioning herself as needing help to invite the CYP into competence and redistribute control (Ryan & Deci, 2000). This approach illustrates socially complex language (Fidler & Christie, 2018), in contrast to more general autism guidance that emphasises simplification.

Participants' quotations reflect the principle that "*every interaction can be an intervention*" (Treisman, 2016). Although this concept originates in trauma-informed practice, and I am not seeking to imply causation, it resonated in this context,

indicating that minor adjustments in everyday communication can influence whether a demand is perceived as safe or threatening.

Humour functioned as an interactional strategy to reduce tension and strengthen connection, consistent with guidance that emphasises playfulness as a means of reducing anxiety (Christie et al., 2011; PDA Society, n.d.-e). Lando described how self-deprecating humour could "*break through that wall,*" serving as a relational leveller that reduces power dynamics and builds a connection. Frances described humour as "*bringing down a situation that might start to get a little bit heated*," positioning it as a de-escalation strategy. These quotations resonate with emerging research suggesting that humour can support emotion regulation for autistic individuals (Manfredi et al., 2026). However, the effectiveness of humour as an interactional tool depends on moment-to-moment attunement, as described by mentalisation theory (Fonagy & Target, 1997). In the dataset, humour functioned as a powerful way to strengthen connection when attuned but required sensitivity and ongoing responsiveness to prevent it from becoming a source of rupture, as described by Frances (Theme 3).

Theme Summary

For participants, the manner in which demands were delivered influenced whether CYP experienced them as threatening or safe. Adult tone affected perceptions of demands, with calm communication supporting engagement, while frustration or firmness increased anxiety and avoidance. Indirect, declarative language shifted demands from directives to invitations, redistributing control and reducing confrontation. When attuned, humour supported de-escalation, lowering tension and strengthening connection. Overall, the communication style adopted by adults seemed to influence the emergence of demand-avoidant behaviours.

Theme 6: "*Everything is constantly negotiated*" (Frances) - Collaboration and Sharing Agency

The previous theme explored how participants described communicating demands. This theme explores how participants described sharing control in those interactions. They used collaborative approaches that made CYP active partners, therefore reducing hierarchy and threat.

Evelyn deliberately repositioned herself as a learning partner rather than the "*dictator*", framing interactions as, "*let's do this together… 'we', so we're partners,*" asking whether CYP preferred to "*do it together" or "on their own."* Working alongside CYP reduces the adult-child divide and builds a shared learning space where autonomy is maintained and participation is supported. This corresponds with perspectives that view learning as socially mediated through interaction (Vygotsky, 1978), enabling adults to scaffold learning within a CYP's Zone of Proximal Development.

Building on the idea of partnership, Evelyn reflected, "*If we're seeing it as a battle, then we've already lost… I don't want it to be me vs them… I'm on the same team as the child*." Evelyn's reference to a "*battle*" suggests an alternative perspective on guidance encouraging adults to "pick battles" (PDA Society, n.d-e.). Her stance rejects confrontation altogether and prioritises partnership across all interactions. Positioning herself "*on the same team"* transforms imposed requirements into collaborative efforts, redistributing control and reducing the sense of loss of control identified in Theme One. This is consistent with the PANDA approach (PDA Society, 2021), and Self-Determination Theory, which associates autonomy and relatedness with greater engagement and reduced resistance (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Preserving partnership required authenticity, as CYP quickly detected when collaboration masked attempts to secure compliance. Frances noted they are "*very astute*" and "*know what you're trying to do*," while a CYP perceived Evelyn as "*trying to be sneaky.*" When CYP perceive manipulation, trust is compromised and interactions feel unsafe (Davis, 2025), requiring practitioners to actively restore genuineness in negotiation. Evelyn's response, "*How would you suggest we go about it?*" demonstrates this. By returning decision-making to the CYP, she attempted to reestablish authentic collaboration rather than continuing a compromised partnership.

Frances described how, in practice, "*everything is constantly negotiated,*" demonstrated by Evelyn negotiating "*where we do the learning... how long for... are they going to write it, am I scribing,*" maintaining learning goals while flexibly sharing control. In Lauren's interview, providing meaningful choices, "*which ones should we try?" "Either one is okay*" supported authentic agency (Fidler & Christie, 2018). Lando broke learning into "*very small steps with a reward [of their choice] at the*

end," so it would "*feel manageable,*" supporting engagement by giving autonomy and building competence (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Frances also negotiated the value of learning with a CYP who *"questions everything about school*" and perceives school as unimportant. Frances responded by recognising this viewpoint while offering alternative perspectives on the value of school, an approach consistent with autonomy-supportive practice that validates CYP perspectives and makes learning feel relevant (Reeve, 2009). This positioned both the adult and CYP as active contributors in building understanding (Forde, 2025) and showed that participants were also negotiating fundamental questions about the purpose of schooling, a tension further explored in Theme 8.

However, negotiation was not always effective. Frances reflected "*it often doesn't work… it depends where they're at*," with responses like, "*a really blunt, no go away,*" or, as Lauren described, a CYP "*shaking their head*." This shows that negotiation depends on emotional state; when anxiety is high, even flexible and collaborative approaches can feel too demanding (O'Nions et al., 2014a; Siegel, 2012). Lauren also talked about asking, "*What do you think about this… and kind of be led by them*," using CYP's perspectives to shape support. For some CYP, however, being asked to reflect and contribute may feel demanding, especially when anxiety is heightened. This reinforces the need for attunement in determining when to collaborate and when to reduce that expectation.

Theme Summary

Participants described collaborative approaches that positioned CYP as active partners and reduced adult-child hierarchy, thereby reducing perceived threat. This involved prioritising partnership across all interactions. Collaboration needed to be genuine, as CYP perceived disguised attempts at compliance with adult-led agendas. Participants engaged in ongoing negotiation regarding when, where, and how learning would occur, extending to its value. However, negotiation depended on the CYP's emotional state. When anxiety was heightened, negotiation could become overwhelming. Implementing this collaborative approach entailed continuous flexibility and adaptation, as discussed in the next theme.

Theme 7: Flexibility and Adaptability

This theme explores how participants used flexible, adaptable approaches to support CYP who displayed demand-avoidant behaviours.

Subtheme 7.1: "How they get there may be slightly different" (Lauren) - Transforming the Demand through Personalised Learning.

This subtheme builds on Theme 7 by focusing specifically on how, in interviews, flexibility manifested as personalisation during the learning process.

Participants maintained consistent learning objectives while varying delivery methods. They noted that the task format affected CYP's perceptions of demands. Evelyn described embedding learning within creative activities or gamification. For example, hiding vocabulary for treasure hunts, using beanbags for times-tables, or framing tasks in Minecraft language as missions which "*depersonalised*" demands and shifted the experience toward play. A CYP "*didn't even realise he was learning*," because "*[learning] isn't as obvious as it would be if you plonk down their maths book*." When implementing Harry Potter-themed challenges with "*golden snitches*" hidden around the school, the CYP "*absolutely loved it*," illustrating a shift in the experience of demand. Embedding learning in imaginative contexts helps reduce pressure and fear of evaluation on CYP while keeping them challenged, as shown by research on symbolic play (Elbeltagi et al., 2023; Russ, 2003). Responding "*in role*" may feel less threatening, exposing and therefore less demanding for CYP, consistent with guidance highlighting roleplay and indirect approaches as demand-reduction strategies (PDA Society, n.d.-e). As Evelyn reflected, "*it turned the task into a game rather than a demand*."

Personalising learning relied on knowing CYP well. Clara designed activities around an interest in Sonic, indicating that adaptations must be meaningful and relevant to be perceived as supportive (Christie, 2007). Lando described the necessity of making in-the-moment decisions, asking, "*What do I do? Do I whip the game out?*" However, the effectiveness of these strategies was inconsistent. Evelyn emphasised the importance of continually generating new ideas, noting that "*what works one day doesn't work the next… [you're] constantly thinking on your feet*," which means practitioners have to handle uncertainty and keep adjusting (Fidler & Christie, 2018).

Participants also adapted the methods used to evidence learning. Lando explained that learning was often demonstrated through discussion, with evidence collected via notes or photographs, "*I still need to get the evidence… we do it in a different way.*" Frances prioritised the purpose over the task format, asking, "*What are we actually aiming for?*" and Lauren affirmed that, although "*how they get there may be… slightly different*," the expectation to *"achieve and do well"* persisted. These quotations suggest that decoupling learning objectives from adherence to more formalised learning methods enables adjustments to demand without compromising learning outcomes.

Subtheme 7.2: "You've just got to ride the wave" (Evelyn) - Calibrating Demands to Tolerance Levels.

This subtheme captures how participants described making ongoing adjustments to demands in response to fluctuating capacities, responding to the variability and anxiety-driven nature of demand-avoidant behaviours described in Subtheme 1.1.

Evelyn said, "*you've just got to ride the wave,*" recognising that "*on certain days, learning demands may not be realistic.*" Frances noted it "*can be so different day to day as to what demands they can cope with*." Engagement was conceptualised in relation to current capacity, with incremental progress considered significant when emotional demands are high (Kerbey, 2023).

Participants adjusted demands according to emotional regulation. When CYP arrived dysregulated, Evelyn explained "*you reduce the amount of things you put on them… they just need time to regulate and feel safe*." Frances noted that when tone changed, "*there is absolutely no point*" in persisting. Access to learning was linked to regulation, with demands reduced to prevent escalation, consistent with polyvagal theory and low-arousal approaches (McDonnell, 2010; Porges, 2011).

Participants adjusted demands to manageable levels. Lauren explained, "*If there are five questions… we'll say, let's just do these two,*" while Clara noted learning tasks could be postponed if CYP were not ready. Evelyn described flexing expectations responsively by increasing challenge on calmer days or hours while recognising that urgency heightened pressure. Delaying expectations could "*take away some of the pressure,*" preventing complete disengagement (Christie et al., 2011; Newson et al., 2003). When the pace of demands exceeded capacity, CYP disengaged, consistent with autism research on processing speed and time perception (Casassus et al.,

2019; Hedvall et al., 2013), meaning practitioners may need to pay attention to the timing of demands.

To support demand calibration, Lauren used home-school communication, with parents sharing recent events to guide "*how to approach their morning.*" Evelyn said knowing "*what kind of morning or weekend they've had*" informed decisions about demands. This collaboration facilitated proactive adjustment to prevent escalation, positioning families as essential partners in understanding and responding to fluctuating capacity (Fidler & Christie, 2018; Johnson, 2024).

Participants also described recognising when tolerance had been exceeded. Evelyn reflected that "*no matter what you try you can't get through to them*," with Clara noting that increasing demands "*led to dysregulated behaviour… he would hit out… even his safe person*." Here, Evelyn and Clara positioned refusal and escalation as signs the CYP had reached their limit, informing decisions about when demands could be increased, reduced, or paused, with behaviours understood through perspectives that considered the CYP's internal world (Carr, 2025).

Subtheme 7.3 "A lot of his learning happens in different spaces" (Clara) - Adapting the Environment and Routines

Building on the previous discussion of demand calibration, this subtheme highlights how flexibility extends to adjusting physical spaces and routines for emotional safety.

Participants saw classrooms as places with many sensory, social, and behavioural demands, and some said learning often happened outside the classroom. Lando referred to "*breakout rooms where they need to go and do their work separately,*" and Clara explained, "*a lot of his learning happens in different spaces… a lot of outdoors.*" Moving to different spaces helped reduce demands and support regulation, with classrooms seen as demanding places even without considering the lesson content (Sproston et al., 2017).

For some CYP, dedicated nurture spaces reduced demands. Lando described a nurture provision taking "*a whole different approach,*" involving *"smaller class sizes*" and "*supporting their independence*," with "*strong relationships… belonging*" also emphasised. This suggested participation was supported by reduced sensory and cognitive load, with relational connection likely to have made a difference as well. This corresponds with Brede et al. (2017), who identify small, predictable spaces as

supporting re-engagement. As well as dedicated spaces, Frances described the flexible use of existing environments, where pupils could "*move out into a corridor or go to a side room*," suggesting that inclusion was seen as supporting capacity to learn, which may not always be in the classroom. This positioned environmental adaptations as responsive and ongoing, with adults adjusting spaces to match CYPs' current capacity.

Participants also described spaces intended to support regulation. Frances referred to a sensory room with "*bean bags… very plain walls*," and Lauren described a tent for a CYP who "*couldn't cope*" in the classroom, reducing sensory and emotional load to support re-engagement, consistent with RQ1 findings that link demand-avoidant behaviours to higher sensory sensitivity (Brede et al., 2017) and the idea that behaviour comes from the interaction between the CYP and their environment (Milton, 2013).

Flexibility was also evident in routines and transitions. Lauren described adapting lunchtime arrangements when "*going into the hall is very overwhelming*," and Frances talked about adapting timetables for CYP "*not coping well*," with routines "*shaped very differently*" to enable partial participation where full engagement was too much. This resonates with Gore-Langton and Frederickson's (2015) finding that parents often defined a successful placement in terms of the school's capacity for flexibility in its routines and responses.

Theme Summary

Participants described flexible approaches that constantly adapted to fluctuating capacity. Learning was personalised through play and interests, and demands were continuously adjusted to tolerance levels, with home-school communication supporting this adjustment. Environmental adaptations included relocating learning, reducing sensory load through accessing dedicated spaces, and changing routines to match current capacity.

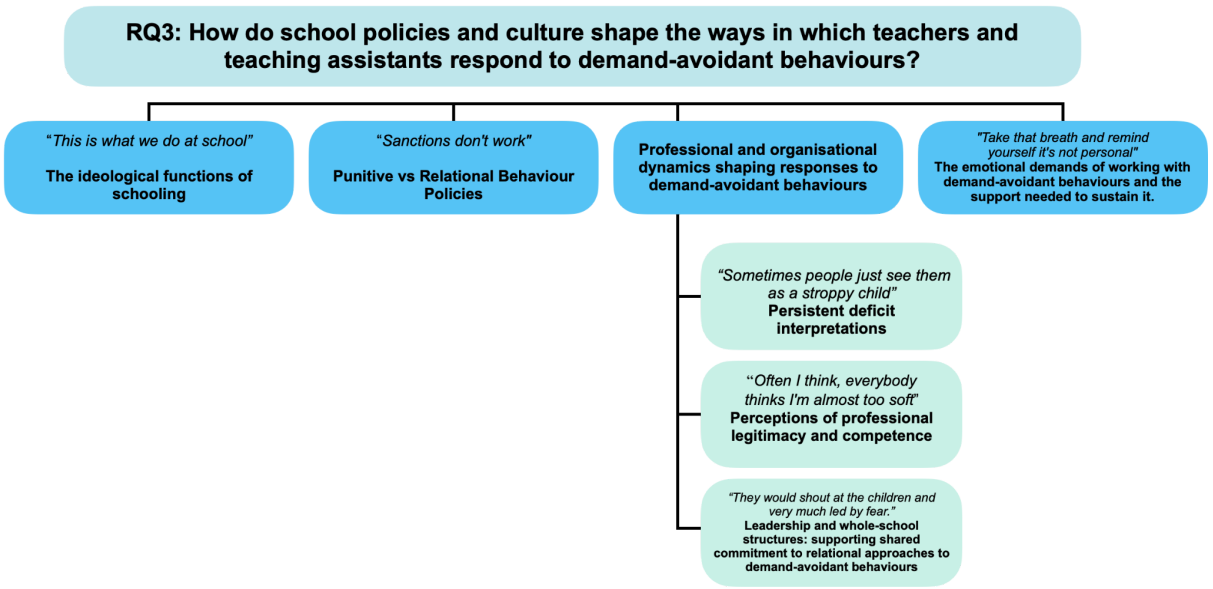
A note on terminology - "Relational Practice"

Across the themes addressing Research Question 2, participants described building strong relationships, attending to emotional needs, adapting interactional approaches, sharing agency, and modifying the environment. I noticed that relational practice (Gergen, 2009; McNamee, 2025), characterised by trust, attunement,

responsiveness, and sustained knowledge of the CYP, emerged as a consistent thread underpinning their responses. Drawing on the literature, relational practice can be understood as how practitioners act in interaction, including how they respond in the moment to CYP (Aspelin, 2022), and how relationality is experienced emotionally by CYP in terms of safety, understanding, and recognition as a sense-making individual (Reeves & Le Mare, 2017). Given its prominence within the dataset, the term "relational practice" is used within the RQ3 analysis to refer collectively to the approaches described by participants under RQ2.

RQ.3: How do School Policies and Culture Shape the Ways in which Teachers and Teaching Assistants Respond to Demand-Avoidant Behaviours?

This section explores how school policies, organisational structures, and cultural expectations shaped how participants responded to demand-avoidant behaviours. Interviews also highlighted how the strategies and approaches described under RQ.2 were influenced by the contexts in which they were working. I created 4 themes, where one theme had three sub-themes. The thematic diagram is below.



Theme 8: "*This is what we do at school*" (Lauren) - The Ideological Functions of Schooling

This theme addresses participants' reflections on schooling's ideological purposes and how these appear to have shaped responses to demand-avoidant behaviours. Participants described tensions between relational approaches and institutional expectations for practitioners and CYP.

Participants reflected on the purpose of schooling. Frances stated, *"In my role… my job here is to make sure that they achieve their potential… and as an educator… we are here to be educated,"* indicating that through accommodation, Frances held expectations for engagement and progress, also suggesting schooling is structured around participation in learning and visible academic progress (Fisher, 2025). Evelyn noted CYP are expected to *"sit in class and do the work"* because *"they're here to learn."* Lauren observed that institutional norms, such as *"this is what we do at school,"* did not necessarily influence whether CYP engaged. This suggests awareness of fixed expectations regarding achievement, compliance, and participation (Bernstein, 2000), which may not accommodate individual differences.

Frances observed that *"the school environment…can be extremely stressful and it doesn't suit everybody,"* suggesting practitioners operate within systems assuming engagement, tolerance of demands, and task completion as baseline expectations (Biesta, 2010), making responsive practice challenging. Evelyn described instances where a CYP left the classroom when distressed, which *"caused problems because it was at times when teachers didn't see it as appropriate,"* highlighting how institutional norms determine which behaviours are legitimised and problematised (Ball et al., 2012).

When behaviour is problematised, it may also be framed through the perspectives of safeguarding and risk management. Frances acknowledged competing priorities, stating, "*you want to keep everybody safe,*" thereby situating decision-making within a broader system of collective responsibility, where tolerance of behaviours is balanced against perceived risks to the school community. Research on exclusion indicates that decisions to exclude are shaped by such systemic pressures and tensions between care and control (Gill et al., 2017; Parsons et al., 2018), dynamics that Frances appeared to be navigating.

In the dataset, responses to demand-avoidant behaviours were shaped by accountability and attainment imperatives. Frances described staff problematising a CYP who "*refused to complete work by certain deadlines*," with their self-advocacy interpreted as argumentative. In environments oriented toward accountability, deadlines and visible productivity serve as indicators of pupil progress and practitioner effectiveness (Ball, 2003). These criteria define legitimate learning and influence how pupils are categorised as successful, resistant, or problematic (Foucault, 1977). Thus, responses to demand-avoidant behaviours are situated within institutional imperatives that prioritise engagement and behavioural regulation, shaping staff perceptions of CYP who resist such demands.

Participants, however, recognised strengths in CYP displaying demand-avoidant behaviours. Clara described *"leadership qualities"* because *"they really know their own minds and are really insistent."* Lauren observed they were *"decisive"* in articulating their needs, while Frances characterised a CYP as entrepreneurial, stating they had *"shaped their life exactly as they wanted to."* These perspectives suggest participants held alternative framings of demand-avoidant behaviours as expressions of autonomy or identity (Milton, 2012) co-existing with opposing institutional narratives.

External accountability systems influenced the legitimacy of responses to demand-avoidant behaviours. Clara recounted a situation where *"OFSTED… really saw and validated the methods we were using for that child,"* experienced as positive affirmation. This suggests relational practice may be perceived as more legitimate when recognised within accountability frameworks (Ball, 2003; Ofsted, 2025), with professional identity becoming closely linked to being seen as effective within such frameworks (Wilkins, 2011).

Evelyn reflected that *"it's the nature of life that you can't just put your own needs first all the time,"* while Lando commented that *"that's not life… we're being told this needs to be done,"* drawing on schooling's socialisation function whereby CYP are prepared to participate in wider social and economic systems (Biesta, 2010). This highlights tension between supporting autonomy and preparing CYP for systems structured around compliance, which participants framed as an inherent aspect of life, therefore problematising demand-avoidant behaviours. What is naturalised as "life," however, reflects neoliberal ideologies where human worth is tied to

productivity and the capacity to meet externally imposed demands (Ball, 2003), reflecting the wider systems within which practitioners are embedded.

Theme Summary

Participants' responses reflected awareness of societal expectations of schooling, which shaped how demand-avoidant behaviours were perceived and addressed. Participants navigated tensions between upholding these expectations and responsively supporting CYP.

Theme 9: "*Sanctions don't work*" (Frances) - Punitive vs Relational Behavioural Policies

Where Theme 8 focused on perceptions of the wider ideological purposes of schooling, this theme focuses on how behaviour policies translate assumptions about behaviour and authority into practice, shaping which responses to demand-avoidant behaviours are considered legitimate and creating tensions between compliance-based systems and relational practice.

For context, in England, schools are required to maintain formal behaviour policies, many of which draw on behaviourist principles that assume behaviour can be shaped through reinforcement and consequences (Skinner, 1957), as reflected in national behaviour guidance (DfE, 2024).

Evelyn described how her previous school applied a punitive behaviour system "*followed to the T*" requiring CYP to "*sit on their own and reflect on what they did*." She also described a situation in which a teacher entered into "*full-blown arguments*" with a CYP who refused to go through the "*correct door*" at playtime, saying, "*this isn't the hill to die on,"* when the CYP was "*already dysregulated*". She described how this incident escalated until the CYP "*lashed out… and got suspended.*" This illustrates how behaviour policy can prioritise rule enforcement over de-escalation, intensifying the sense of coercion that underpins escalation.

Evelyn and Frances rejected sanctions. Evelyn reflected that introducing *"more discipline… let's put in this sanction"* simply *"doesn't work… it never works,"* while Frances dismissed *"those traditional sanctions"* as ineffective for CYP displaying demand-avoidant behaviours. Christie and Fidler (2018) observe that CYP displaying demand-avoidant behaviours may not readily connect actions with consequences

and may attempt to diminish their impact. Clara critiqued punitive approaches, suggesting consequences *"are about making the person dealing with the incident feel better, they're not about actually helping the children,"* implying such measures primarily restore institutional order (Carter, 2025; Jean-Pierre & Parris, 2019). Evelyn noted that *"the adult needs to be reflecting too, really,"* indicating punitive systems place responsibility for change solely on the CYP. This reflects single-loop learning, which corrects behaviour within existing rules without questioning underlying assumptions (Argyris & Schön, 1974).

Behaviour policies are underpinned by assumptions regarding how behaviour should be addressed. The expectation that a CYP should "*sit on their own and reflect"* presumes that behaviour is deliberate and cognitively mediated. However, findings from RQ1 conceptualised demand-avoidant behaviours as anxiety-driven responses to perceived threat (Gore-Langton & Frederickson, 2018; O'Nions, 2014). Elevated arousal reduces access to reflective and executive functioning (Perry, 2009; Siegel, 2012), suggesting that solitary reflection may be incompatible with CYPs' emotional states and, as Evelyn noted, may "*make the child feel worse and more isolated*." This implies a tension within behaviour policies, where fairness is often equated with consistency in response. However, equitable practice may require differentiated responses based on individual need (Perry-Hazan & Lambrozo, 2018), making flexibility in behaviour policies necessary but challenging to legitimise.

Participants also questioned the effectiveness of positive reinforcement systems. Lando observed that public praise systems, such as "*shout-outs, don't always work for them*" and Evelyn described reward charts as creating "*too much pressure*" (Truman, 2021). For CYP whose avoidance is rooted in anxiety related to control, externally imposed incentives may act as additional demands. Behaviourist systems, whether punitive or reward-based, may therefore inadvertently reinforce the dynamics that sustain demand-avoidant behaviours (Fidler & Christie, 2018).

In contrast, participants described shifts towards relationship-based behavioural frameworks. Clara reported that *"our behaviour policy became our behaviour and relationship policy,"* foregrounding principles such as *"connect before correct"* (Siegel, 2011). Punitive consequences were replaced by restorative conversations focused on understanding impact and repairing relationships (Morrison & Vaandering, 2012; Thorsborne & Blood, 2013). Lauren described guiding CYP

through restorative questions, emphasising that *"we're not telling them"* and that the CYP leads the narrative. This reflects a collaborative exploration of behaviour consistent with low-demand principles that prioritise autonomy and co-regulation (Fidler & Christie, 2018). Frances noted that safety-related boundaries remained non-negotiable yet were framed and enacted to preserve connection and avoid punitive enforcement. Clara observed that adopting a restorative approach had been *"really positive,"* with CYP increasingly repairing relationships and apologising *"off their own back,"* and Lauren reported reduced *"behaviour incidents."* These changes may reflect a shift from correcting wrongdoing to guiding CYP through the process of limit-setting and repairing relational ruptures through dialogue and connection.

Behaviour policy, therefore, legitimises specific interpretations of behaviour and corresponding responses. Relational policy frameworks prioritise connection, dialogue, and emotional regulation, while compliance-based systems legitimise sanctions and corrections. This distinction is particularly significant for CYP who display demand-avoidant behaviours, as lowering perceived coercion and supporting autonomy are emphasised as key strategies for minimising threat responses (Brede et al., 2017; Fidler & Christie, 2019).

Theme Summary

Participants described contrasting behaviour policy contexts. Punitive systems utilising sanctions were viewed as ineffective and misaligned with the needs of CYP displaying demand-avoidant behaviours, whereas relationship-based policies were seen as a better fit.

Theme 10: Professional and Organisational Dynamics Shaping Responses to Demand-Avoidant Behaviours

Theme 9 outlined how relational behavioural policies formally endorsed relational practice grounded in autonomy, collaboration, and flexibility (Fidler & Christie, 2018). However, participants indicated that responses to demand-avoidant behaviours also appeared to be influenced by professional and organisational dynamics within the school. Professional dynamics encompass the beliefs, professional identities, and peer expectations that inform staff interpretations of behaviour and their confidence in enacting relational practice. Organisational dynamics function at a systemic level, including leadership practices, training opportunities, and whole-school structures that legitimise specific approaches to behaviour.

Subtheme 10.1: “Sometimes people just see them as a stroppy child” (Lando) - Persistent Deficit Interpretations

Participants described how deficit narratives of demand-avoidant behaviours as wilful misbehaviour persisted among colleagues, affecting how demand-avoidant behaviours were understood and responded to within the staff community.

Participants noted deficit-oriented interpretations persisted despite relational policies. Evelyn observed that some *"old school staff"* continued to prioritise compliance. Lando remarked, *"Sometimes people just see them as a stroppy child… as a kid that needs to learn the meaning of no, but… It's not as simple as that."* Clara highlighted that colleagues viewing CYP as *"needing a grilling"* conflicted with the school's relational ethos, representing operational narratives where stories within staff communities shape behavioural interpretations and influence practitioners' sense of safety when enacting relational responses (Carr, 2025). The persistence of such narratives suggests dominant behavioural frameworks, once established, exert significant social influence, challenging the legitimisation of alternative approaches (Hillman et al., 2022). Restorative practices do not necessarily replace punitive responses if underlying beliefs about authority and control remain (McCluskey et al., 2018). Consequently, practitioners worked within divided staff communities, where implementing relational practice required navigating conflicting interpretations, with Frances describing having to *"coax both sides."*

Lauren described a *"learning curve as a school"* in shifting from viewing behaviour as *"defiant"* and *"sanctioning."* Clara reflected, *"We do our best until we know better, and then we do better,"* indicating changes in practice required gradual shifts in staff attitudes and shared understandings. This reflects the persistence of established narratives, with previous interpretations resurfacing after new frameworks are introduced. Socially validated stories maintain institutional momentum (Hillman et al., 2023), with new policy frameworks often filtered through existing belief systems, resulting in blended practices (Fullan, 2007; Doyle & Kenny, 2023; Spillane et al., 2002).

For CYP displaying demand-avoidant behaviours, such inconsistencies can be destabilising. Lauren noted that developing "*shared language and shared understanding*" among staff fostered predictability, explaining that inconsistency "*can just throw everything back and increase their anxiety.*" When deficit narratives

persist, CYP may experience punitive, behaviourist responses that undermine safety and trust within relationships, which were identified in RQ2 as essential for engagement. Guidance underscores consistent relational approaches to reduce anxiety and maintain trust (Christie et al., 2011; PDA Society, n.d-f), while psychological research indicates predictability and coherent adult responses contribute to safety (Porges, 2011; Siegel, 2012). Persistent deficit interpretations, therefore, affected how demand-avoidant behaviours were perceived and led to reputational concerns about working relationally, explored in the following subtheme.

Subtheme 10.2: "Often I think, everybody thinks I'm almost too soft" (Lauren) - Perceptions of Professional Legitimacy and Competence

Participants expressed concerns that relational approaches to demand-avoidant behaviours affected perceptions of their professional competence, because they went against traditional expectations of being authoritative.

Participants reported anxieties about implementing relational practice. Lauren expressed concern that colleagues perceived her as "*too soft,*" and Evelyn described "*panicking*" about "*what are people going to think if it looks like I'm just letting them get away with doing nothing.*" Lauren also noted that TAs sometimes remarked, "*Oh, they won't be able to do this for me. They're only going to do it with… with this person.*" This suggests that staff feel their credibility depends on CYP visibly complying, with co-operation from the CYP as an indicator of their authority and effectiveness as practitioners. When relational practice diverges from visible control, practitioners may worry that their methods will be perceived as inconsistent, permissive, or ineffective. Consequently, the school functions as a "site of struggle" (Apple, 1993), where definitions of "good" practice are constructed, negotiated, and sometimes contested. Manning-Morton (2006) contends that care-oriented practice, despite its complexity and skill, is often regarded as personal, not professional work. Thus, concerns about appearing "*too soft*" may reflect wider cultural constructions of professionalism that value authority and control over building relationships. This mirrors how parents using accommodative approaches report feeling judged and blamed for their children's difficulties (Brede et al., 2017; Truman et al., 2021), suggesting that both practitioners and parents face similar scrutiny when departing from traditional, authoritative expectations, reflecting cultural assumptions about what constitutes effective support.

Lando made her concerns explicit by twice expressing fears of appearing "*unprofessional"* when physically being "*on the same level"* as CYP and using humour: "*I know that's not how everybody does it, and it might make me look really unprofessional.*" The repetition of this concern suggests that such approaches carry perceived reputational risks within staff communities, affecting practitioners' confidence in enacting them.

Evelyn reflected, "*You want to feel like you are in control of your classroom, don't you? You don't want to feel undermined,*" indicating that directive responses may serve as behaviour management strategies and help staff feel competent. From a Self-Determination Theory perspective, perceived threats to practitioners' sense of competence may increase the tendency toward controlling interpersonal styles in response to demand-avoidant behaviours (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Practitioners must navigate competing pressures between autonomy-supportive, relational practice and expectations of authority, consistency, and visible control (Reeve, 2009). Disciplinary practices can also function as mechanisms for reasserting power within institutional contexts (Foucault, 1977), with the restoration of order reinforcing the adult's authority and professional credibility (Assor et al., 2002; Reeve, 2006). This dynamic suggests that reverting to controlling approaches when feeling professionally vulnerable is understandable, although it creates tension between adults' need to maintain authority and CYP's need for emotional safety in relationships.

Participants reported seeking external professional validation for their approaches from support services. Clara described requesting EP involvement, stating, "*We have asked the EP for their involvement to support us with that because it's tricky,*" in addition to support from LA SEND Support Teams. This external validation appeared to play a significant role in legitimising relational approaches.

Subtheme 10.3: "They would shout at the children and very much led by fear." (Clara) - Leadership and Whole-School Structures Supporting Shared Commitment to Relational Approaches to Demand-Avoidant Behaviours

Expanding on the tensions regarding professional legitimacy, participants emphasised the role of leadership and whole-school structures in determining whether relational approaches to demand-avoidant behaviours were collectively supported and sustained within the school.

Endorsement from leadership was identified as a key factor in legitimising relational practice. Clara emphasised the importance of SLTs in communicating understanding and validation of relational approaches by framing them as skilled practice. She contrasted her current school's focus on "*SEMH and relationships"* with the previous head's approach, characterised by "*shouting at children*" and "*leading by fear,*" suggesting that changes in leadership can fundamentally alter the whole-school approach to demand-avoidant behaviours.

Sustaining this shift required consistent leadership involvement. Evelyn described leadership participating in "*a lot of conversations*" that challenged entrenched attitudes among staff who continued to prioritise compliance-driven approaches. Lauren noted that responses to demand-avoidant behaviours were explicitly discussed in SLT meetings to promote consistency across the school. By establishing relational responses as a shared priority, SLTs influenced interpretations of behaviour and consistency of approach, indicating that school leaders play a central role in translating policy into practice and shaping collective norms regarding behaviour and pedagogy (Leithwood et al., 2004; Vanlommel et al., 2024).

Leadership further supported relational practice by embedding structures for ongoing professional learning. In her SENCo role, Lauren incorporated reflective dialogue into appraisal meetings, prompting TAs to consider "*what's going well within my role… anything I'm finding tricky… [and] is there any further support or training that you feel would be necessary*?" By making reflection and training part of regular practice as an SENCo, Lauren appears to be sending the message that seeking support is a sign of professionalism, not incompetence (Edmondson, 1999; Stoll et al., 2006). However, research indicates that training is unlikely to transform practice without support at an organisational level, as its impact depends on school ethos and leadership buy-in (Cajkler et al., 2007). Without this, learning may be inconsistently applied (Blatchford et al., 2004; Tucker, 2009).

Since formal training has these limitations, the informal peer learning Lauren described was especially important. She explained that new staff shadowed experienced colleagues to observe interactions with CYP displaying demand-avoidant behaviours, helping them to see that the approach was *"a bit different to the way we'd work with other children.*" Lauren shared that this process built confidence and demonstrated that relational responses could be effectively

enacted by multiple adults. Such informal peer learning aligns with Wenger's (1998) concept of communities of practice, in which practitioners develop a shared understanding through participation, observation, and collaboration, a process considered more impactful than formal training. For one TA, witnessing progress was described as "*really rewarding,*" challenging the assumption that only certain staff could work effectively with the CYP. Clara supported staff in implementing restorative approaches "*so that they can see for themselves the positive impact,*" indicating that experiential evidence facilitated shifts in interpretation and practice.

Through these processes, leadership promoted consistency across the school. Lauren described developing a "*regulation plan*" that included specific phrases for staff to use, aiming to reduce mixed messages and reflect a collective understanding that this CYP required a particular relational approach. This approach positioned consistency as a means of reducing anxiety (see subtheme 10.1) and legitimising relational practice within the staff community by establishing shared expectations for addressing demand-avoidant behaviours.

Theme Summary

Participants reported conflicting interpretations of demand-avoidant behaviours within their settings, with deficit framings persisting alongside relational understandings and contributing to inconsistency that increased CYP's anxiety. Practitioners expressed concerns about being perceived as "too soft" or unprofessional when employing relational approaches to demand-avoidant behaviours. Leadership and whole-school structures influenced whether relational practice was legitimised and sustained by supporting these approaches, embedding reflective practice, facilitating peer learning, and fostering consistency through shared frameworks.

Theme 11: "*Take that breath and remind yourself it's not personal"* (Evelyn) - The Emotional Demands of Working with Demand-Avoidant Behaviours and the Support Needed to Sustain it.

Participants described the emotional demands of sustaining relational practice. The dataset reflected how organisational structures shaped practitioners' capacity to manage the emotional labour involved in supporting CYP who displayed demand-avoidant behaviours.

Participants emphasised the emotional intensity of their work. Clara described it as work that *"takes its toll;*" Evelyn felt as though she had "*aged 10 years in one week*," and Lando summarised it as "*tiring,"* reflecting guidance on emotional strain experienced by staff supporting CYP with demand-avoidant behaviours (PDA Society, 2018).

Emotional labour was evident in the constant judgments practitioners made about calibrating demands. Evelyn described not wanting to "*contribute to that level of stress*" or push a CYP to "*burn out,*" yet Frances acknowledged that despite trying to "*pre-empt so many situations,*" something would "*slip through the ne*t." This ongoing judgment appeared to be consistent and demanding. Lando described going home and replaying interactions, "*I should've, or shouldn't've done that*," suggesting practitioners continued to carry the burden of interactions after the school day had ended. Clara described herself as "*a real reflective practitioner*" who is "*very critical of my[her]self as well*," corresponding to Knight's (2017) account of the "negative emotional impact on self" experienced by school staff, suggesting Clara was internalising responsibility as personal accountability.

The volatility associated with emotional escalation further intensified the emotional labour required of practitioners. Frances characterised CYP as "*so much more unpredictable… so much more explosive*," and observed, "*your own anxiety goes up… you want to keep everybody safe.*" This description suggests that the anxiety experienced by CYP was mirrored in the adult's emotional state. According to Bion (1962), the adult assumes a containing role, absorbing and processing CYP's distress to return it in a more manageable form (Manning-Morton, 2006). However, effective containment necessitates support for the practitioner; in the absence of such support, the emotional burden may become overwhelming (Obholzer & Zagier-Roberts, 2019), underscoring the need for support for staff.

In alignment with literature on emotional dissonance and emotional labour (Hargreaves, 2000), Evelyn described consciously regulating her emotional responses: "*you can feel it building in yourself… you've got to just take that breath and remind yourself it's not personal.*" This process resembles Winnicott's (2000) concept of the "moment of hesitation," the interval between feeling and action, here considered in the context of the adult practitioner. Conceptualising demand-avoidant behaviours as anxiety-driven and unintentional, as outlined in RQ1, appeared to

influence the nature of emotional labour, necessitating ongoing attunement and self-regulation by practitioners.

Regular supervision and support at an organisational level enabled practitioners to better manage the emotional demands of their roles. Lando highlighted the value of regular one-to-one meetings with her line manager and "*having time to discuss it when it gets too much*." Evelyn described how the SENCo acknowledged her challenges, and offered collaborative problem-solving, which indicated shared responsibility. Lauren demonstrated a solution-focused approach, stating, "*things don't always work, but we never kind of take that as anything would have been wrong… [we see it as] a bit of a learning curve of what else we can do.*" She also described practical strategies for distributing emotional responsibility, such as assigning different TAs to work with a CYP in the morning and afternoon, thereby reducing the emotional demand for individual practitioners (Fidler & Christie, 2018). Frances observed that immediate leadership presence "*checking everybody's okay*" during a CYP's "*physical outburst*" suggests leadership acted as a form of secondary containment, supporting the adult so they could continue supporting the CYP (Stivaros, 2024).

Conversely, when a single practitioner bore responsibility without collective support, the emotional toll became isolating. Clara recounted the experience of a one-to-one TA who, despite recognising the CYP's progress, left her role because she "*couldn't do it anymore.*" This example suggests that one-to-one provision may unintentionally intensify emotional burden unless supported by a collective approach, reflecting Ramvi's (2017) observation that emotional burden becomes individualised when colleagues unconsciously "turn a blind eye."

In addition to formal supervision, participants highlighted the significance of peer relationships in fostering resilience. Lauren observed that *"the relationship between staff members is just as important as the relationship between the child and the staff member,*" describing a culture in which staff members feel like "*we're all in it together*" and "*support each other*", suggesting that emotional support is shared among colleagues (Kaihoi, 2022; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001; Van Maele et al., 2015).

Participants reported both difficulty and reward associated with their work. Lando reflected, "*It's so rewarding when you crack it… It's brilliant*." Evelyn described CYP

as "*remarkable,*" and Clara referred to "*success stories in their own right*," indicating that practitioners found the work emotionally demanding yet purposeful (Salzberger-Wittenberg et al., 2005). Importantly, the ability to notice and sustain positive moments appeared to be socially supported. Lauren shared that staff openly discussed "*wins as well as struggles*," which reinforced the positive impact of relational work and counter-balanced emotional strain.

Theme Summary

Participants described supporting CYP displaying demand-avoidant behaviours as emotionally demanding work. When practitioners had regular supervision, peer support, and distributed responsibility, the emotional demands became more manageable. When responsibility fell to a single adult without collective support, it felt isolating and overwhelming.

Conclusion of Analysis

My analysis of data in this chapter suggests that practitioners understand demand-avoidant behaviours across different layers of CYP's experience, focusing primarily on internal experiences of anxiety and a related need for control, and neurodevelopmental framings (most commonly autism), whilst also considering influences across relational, environmental, and systemic contexts (RQ1). They engage with these frameworks pragmatically, navigating ongoing conceptual ambiguity about how demand-avoidant behaviours should be classified, while, in practice, prioritising relational responses based on collaboration, flexibility and redistribution of control (RQ2). However, responses were shaped by tensions between these relational approaches and constraints operating within the school context, policies and cultural expectations, alongside the emotional labour involved in sustaining relational practice over time (RQ3). As I will demonstrate in the next chapter, these understandings are removed from the medicalised, individualising perspectives found in the literature and show how demand-avoidant behaviours are mediated by interactions, relationships, and systems.

Chapter 5: Overall Discussion and Conclusions

5.1 Chapter Introduction

The previous chapter outlined themes developed to address the research questions identified in the literature review. These were:

The research questions are:

1. How do teachers and teaching assistants understand CYP's demand avoidant behaviours?
2. How do teachers and teaching assistants respond to demand-avoidant behaviours, including the supportive strategies and approaches they use, and the adaptations they make to the educational environment?
3. How do school policies and culture shape the ways in which teachers and teaching assistants respond to demand-avoidant behaviours?

Drawing on relational practice and Bronfenbrenner and Morris's (2006) bioecological model as organising frameworks, the chapter considers the theoretical and practical significance of the dataset, exploring their implications for Educational Psychologists, school staff, SLTs, and policy makers. The chapter then reflects on the strengths, limitations, and future research directions before presenting concluding remarks. **(See Reflexive Diary Entry 11 - Appendix U)**

5.2 Relational Practice in Response to Demand-Avoidant Behaviours

Across the dataset, the adult-CYP relationship emerged as underpinning all other strategies and approaches. Participant responses relating to Research Question 2, exploring how practitioners responded, spanned interactional, collaborative, environmental, and emotional elements of practice. However, relational practice emerged as the consistent thread running through all approaches. Participants did not use the term "relational practice" and may not be aware of it as a concept. Here, I clarify that "relational practice" is my interpretation of their descriptions of the interactions and approaches in their practice.

Taylor and Scorer (2025) describe relational practice as prioritising connection, empathy, nurture and genuine collaboration that attends to power imbalances. Within the dataset, each of these elements were present: trust-building and rupture repair, the co-construction of emotional safety, the careful calibration of tone and language,

the negotiation of shared agency, and the personalisation of learning through sustained knowledge of the CYP (Themes 3, 4, 5, 6, 7), each describing a different expression of relationality. This relational approach was underpinned by practitioners' understanding of behaviour as automatic and instinctive (subtheme 1.1), an interpretation that oriented them to avoid consequence-based responses, and use attuned, relational approaches, a connection between interpretation and response that existing literature has tended to leave implicit.

Some of the approaches described resembled the PDA Society's PANDA framework. Whilst practitioners did not explicitly reference this framework, the approaches they described, such as negotiating expectations, managing and adapting demands, attending to anxiety, and authentic collaboration correspond to its principles (PDA Society, 2021), providing practitioner evidence for approaches consistent with PANDA and contributing to an evidence base that has previously relied primarily on anecdotal and parental accounts (Grahame et al., 2020; Haire et al., 2024; Kidahl et al., 2021). The PDA Society (n.d.-g) caveat that approaches such as PANDA should be understood as relational processes, where "the real work happens through connection, curiosity and trial and error," and this research supports that claim. As Lauren reflected in her interview, "*if the relationship's not there, none of the strategies matter*," capturing how approaches could feel supportive or threatening depending on the relational context in which they were delivered, with application of strategies in isolation frequently falling short. Consistent with McNamee's (2025) critique of formulaic approaches within school contexts, strategies were only effective when embedded in relationships.

The data indicates that merely altering prescribed strategies or applying standalone techniques is insufficient. Practitioners may adopt relational models as performative scripts without real investment in the relationship (Davis, 2025). For CYP who require safety and connection, interactions strategically intended to produce compliance can undermine trust within the relationship and diminish psychological safety. Frances observed that CYP recognised when collaboration was used to promote compliance, underscoring the importance of authenticity in effective practice (Davis, 2025). Consistent with Davis (2025), the data suggests that effective support requires a non-dual perspective, shifting from viewing adults and CYP as separate or opposing entities, to understanding them as interconnected and co-constructing meaning within interactions (Blackstone, 2006; Gergen, 2009). This is reflected in

Frances' reflection of her relationship with a CYP as *"reciprocal"* and Evelyn's statement: *"I don't want it to be me vs them… I'm on the same team as the CYP."* Moore (2020) contends that the term "demand" in "pathological demand avoidance" highlights the unequal power dynamic between adults and CYP. To demand or expect compliance implies a relationship of authority that lacks mutuality or reciprocity. Therefore, effective support for CYP displaying demand-avoidant behaviours requires reframing from the adult as the sole giver of demands and the CYP as the receiver, to an approach based on mutual negotiation and shared agency, where adults work alongside CYP.

Additionally, Murdoch's (1970) concept of unselfing provides a valuable framework for understanding the enactment of relational practice in the context of demand-avoidant behaviours. Unselfing involves decentring one's own perspective to more fully attend to another's reality. Clara's description of setting aside academic demands to prioritise emotional safety and allowing the interaction to determine subsequent actions exemplifies this approach. Unselfing shifts the focus from managing behaviour to engaging relationally within interactions, with adults recognising their influence on how demands are experienced (Theme 5). Importantly, practising in this manner within institutions structured around compliance and authority required practitioners to challenge the positional power inherent in their roles (Theme 6) (Foucault, 1977) as discussed further in Section 5.3.

However, this is not to suggest that participants abandoned learning expectations entirely, as everyday demands persisted and practitioners described working towards engagement in learning and school routines. Lauren reflected that the expectation to "*achieve and do well*" remained, but how CYP got there looked different. The key difference was in how expectations were held and communicated (Themes 5 and 7), with engagement understood to emerge from emotional safety and trust (Theme 3), and authority replaced by authentic collaboration (Theme 6). The aim should be to promote environments where safety, autonomy, and mutually negotiated engagement can flourish, which differs from the aim of increasing CYP's tolerance for being educated in ways dictated by adults (Milton, 2013). This approach appears to support the de-escalation of the anxiety-threat response described by participants in subtheme 1.1.

The relational emphasis described here also has implications for how the

‘effectiveness’ of school staff support is understood. i.e. What does it mean to be effective in their role? It could be argued that effectiveness is traditionally measured through visible compliance and behaviour management (Jones et al., 2024), which appeared to be on practitioners' minds (Theme 8, 10.2). However, the research advocates for an alternative perspective in which effectiveness is understood in terms of reduced anxiety, increased sense of safety, and the gradual co-construction of engagement, shaped by the interaction between CYP and practitioners. Tronick's (2007) work on dyadic regulation, in which adults and CYP jointly regulate behavioural, emotional, and physiological states, offers a theoretical foundation for this, explaining why relationships are the precondition for effective support, with demand ‘tolerance’ shaped by connection and trust (Kerbey, 2023). Practitioners' acceptance of CYP's experience of demand without attributing blame (Theme 1.1) or demanding compliance (Theme 6) is consistent with unconditional positive regard (Rogers & Freiberg, 1994). By entering the CYP's world and treating their distress as meaningful and adaptive, practitioners made accommodations for them, which Milton (2013) contrasts with forcing conformity to neurotypical expectations.

Where relational practice was embedded and sustained, practitioners described more positive outcomes, reduced episodes of dysregulation (Theme 9), spontaneous relationship repair (Theme 9), and gradual re-engagement with learning (Theme 4), which contrasts with the literature's predominantly negative account of school experiences for CYP displaying demand-avoidant behaviours (Brede et al., 2017; Gore-Langton & Frederickson, 2016; Truman et al., 2021). This suggests that the negative experiences reported may reflect the absence of relational practice in school structures, not the inherent incompatibility of education in general with the needs of CYP displaying demand-avoidant behaviours.

Cornelius-White's (2007) meta-analysis identified person-centred relational qualities in teachers as among the strongest predictors of positive outcomes across all CYP, and Woods (2021b) argues that strategies identified as supportive for CYP displaying demand-avoidant behaviours replicate broader good practice across all neurodivergent populations. This suggests that the relational approach described in this research may have wider relevance for educational practice, offering a more relational understanding of what effective teaching and support require in general.

5.2.1. A Framework for Relational Practice with CYP Displaying Demand-Avoidant Behaviours

I developed a framework for relational practice with CYP displaying demand-avoidant behaviours in educational settings (see Appendix V), synthesising what participants in this research described as important elements of support. The framework contributes to existing guidance by positioning understanding of demand-avoidant behaviours as anxiety-driven responses as essential, reflecting my interpretation of the dataset that how behaviour is understood shapes how practitioners respond. It also contends that strategies are effective only when based on authentic connection. Additionally, it attends to what practitioners need around them to sustain relational approaches, an element not adequately addressed in existing guidance. It is important to consider that every CYP will differ, requiring individually tailored responses; however, this research suggests that relational practice may function as an anchor to guide practice.

Whilst I hope this framework can be useful for school staff supporting CYP displaying demand-avoidant behaviours, it represents only one level of the system. The dataset demonstrated that practitioners' ability to enact relational practice to demand avoidant behaviours was shaped by the interacting ecological systems surrounding them, from how behaviour was understood at the individual level, through to school policies, leadership, and wider cultural expectations about schooling. The discussion, therefore, turns to interpreting the dataset through a bioecological lens, exploring how immediate and wider contexts shaped both demand-avoidant behaviours and practitioners' capacity to respond relationally.

5.3 Understanding Demand-Avoidant Behaviours and Practitioner Responses in School Contexts through a Bioecological Lens.

Whilst practitioners primarily understood demand-avoidant behaviours through internal experiences of anxiety and neurodevelopmental framings, I interpreted the dataset as reflecting an implicit ecological framing. Individual factors emerged as continuously shaped by, and responsive to, the relational, environmental, and systemic contexts in which CYP and practitioners were embedded. The bioecological model (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) provides a framework for articulating this, placing the CYP at the centre with their development and behaviour understood as

shaped through dynamic interactions between individual factors and the surrounding ecological layers, therefore offering an alternative conceptualisation of demand-avoidant behaviours to the medical model (Gillberg et al., 2015; Newson et al., 2003).

Where the bioecological model (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) was developed as a framework for understanding human development, I apply it here to understanding how the dataset conceptualises the emergence of demand-avoidant behaviours within ecological systems and how those same systems shape practitioners' responses to them.

Figure one maps elements from the dataset onto the layers of the bioecological model (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006), illustrating how these influences interact across levels. The sections that follow discuss the significance of each layer in shaping demand-avoidant behaviours and practitioner responses. A mapping of participant quotations onto each ecological layer is provided in Appendix W, to ground the model in the dataset.

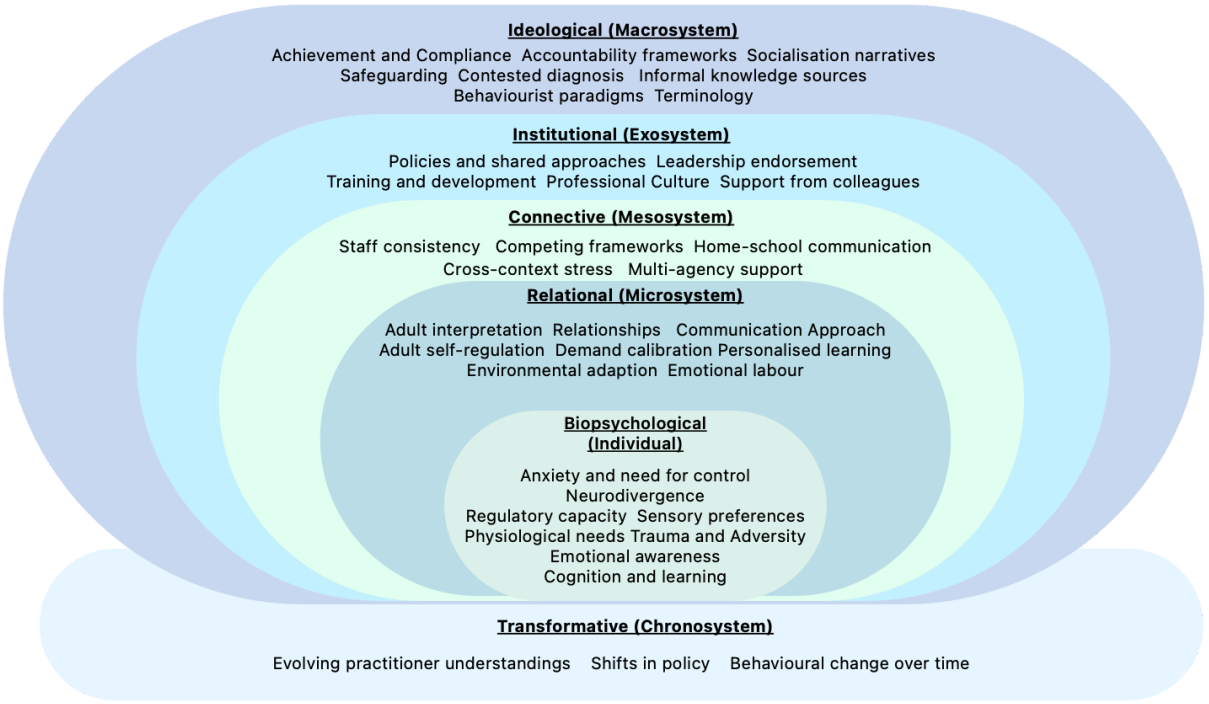


Figure 1. A bioecological model (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) of demand-avoidant behaviours in school settings.

The descriptors for each level of the bioecological model (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) have been adapted to reflect the dataset: the individual level is framed as biopsychological, capturing the factors the CYP brings to each context; the microsystem as relational, reflecting the centrality of practitioner-child interactions and responsive adaptations; the mesosystem as connective, attending to the dynamic connections between and within settings, including staff communities and home-school relationships; the exosystem as institutional, capturing the organisational structures in schools shaping practice; and the macrosystem as ideological, considering the wider social and cultural assumptions that filter down through the inner systems. The chronosystem captures the influence of time across all levels.

The following sections discuss the significance of each ecological layer in turn, considering how the elements of the dataset mapped in Figure 1 interact across layers to shape demand-avoidant behaviours and practitioner responses, and situates this within broader debates in the field.

5.3.1 Biopsychosocial (Individual)

The individual level of the bioecological model captures the factors that the CYP brings to their environment. In the dataset, practitioners understood demand-avoidant behaviours as linked to internal biopsychological factors such as neurodivergence, anxiety-threat responses, sensory preferences, capacity for regulation, emotional awareness, and constructions of learning needs, which interacted with the ecological systems around them to shape how demands were experienced and the behaviours CYP displayed in response.

Participants understood demand-avoidant behaviours as occurring mainly within autism. Given that uncertainty leads to anxiety in autism (Stuart et al., 2020), the need for control identified in the dataset (Theme 1.1) becomes understandable as an attempt to reduce uncertainty. Several autism-related factors may intensify this uncertainty. Differences in social imagination compound unpredictability (Theme 1.1), while differences in social communication make relationships harder to interpret, what Evelyn described as "*not being able to figure people out*" (Theme 1.3). Heightened sensory experiences (Theme 1.2) place additional demands on an already overwhelming environment (Moore, 2020). Collectively, these interacting

factors may intensify uncertainty, explaining why control-seeking emerges as an adaptive response.

I then consider a distinction in how demand-avoidant behaviours were described by participants. Some participants described avoidance arising from cumulative load or specific anxiety triggers, where misalignment between the CYP and their environment creates overwhelm. Others described a more pervasive presentation (Theme 2), where avoidance extended to preferred or self-initiated activities. While the autism and uncertainty framework outlined above helps explain the former, it does not appear to fully account for the latter, which suggests a more generalised sensitivity to any perception of external control, regardless of the activity. This distinction reflects wider classification debates that remain unresolved (O'Nions et al., 2016; Moore, 2020), debates that Clara appeared to be navigating when she questioned the difference between "*pathological demand avoidance and demand avoidance*" (Theme 2).

Further to this, practitioners described demand-avoidant behaviours as serving a self-regulatory function operating below conscious awareness and as an attempt to restore safety and control in an overwhelming world (Theme 1.1). This idea of a regulatory function resonates with Woods' (2018) conceptualisation of "rational demand avoidance" which positions behaviours as reasonable responses to overwhelming contexts (Moore, 2020). However, whilst this is unlikely to be Woods' intention, I wonder if the term "rational" may inadvertently imply conscious deliberation, which sits uneasily alongside practitioners' reflections of behaviours as below conscious awareness (Subtheme 1.1) and perspectives emphasising their compulsive nature (Milton, 2013). The behaviour may serve a genuine functional purpose without the CYP having conscious access to that purpose, suggesting "adaptive" demand avoidance may better capture what the dataset describes and support more empathetic understandings. However, as the PDA Society (2019) argues, it is time for research to move beyond terminology debates and address the practical challenges of understanding and supporting CYP. Such decisions should be identity-led, respecting how individuals choose to describe their experiences.

Understanding behaviours as functional (Theme 1.1) was important because it positioned practitioners as able to make a difference through how they responded. This shifts away from viewing demand-avoidant behaviours as fixed deficits (O'Nions

et al., 2013) and aligns with neuro-affirming perspectives that recognise neurodivergence as “natural variation rather than deficit” (Oliver, 2013; NAS, n.d.-b). However, not all staff shared this interpretation. In the dataset, interpretations of behaviour as oppositional, characterised by seeing CYP as “*stroppy*” or “*needing a grilling*” (Theme 10.1), were associated with more controlling responses. For autistic CYP, such misinterpretations are significant (Milton, 2012). Without considering the autistic person’s experience of the world, behaviours can be seen as fixed pathology, positioning practitioners as powerless to alter the CYP's experience (Milton, 2012). In contrast, Evelyn's reframing of demand-avoidant behaviours as a "*persistent drive for autonomy*" illustrates how recognising function can shift interpretation. Without awareness of CYP’s experience, self-advocacy can be labelled as defiance, as reflected in Frances's allusion to colleagues interpreting resistance to deadlines in this way (Moore, 2020; Woods, 2018). Clara, Lauren, Frances, and Evelyn each recognised agency and capability in the CYP they described (Theme 11) and seeing behaviour as functional, seemed to directly shape the relational approaches they used. This underscores the importance of practitioners centring CYP's lived experience in their interpretations.

Moving on, the neurological impact of adverse childhood experiences and trauma was also identified as a factor contributing to demand-avoidant behaviours. Evelyn reflected on how ACES could sensitise threat responses, impacting how CYP experience demands. While trauma originates in the environment, I have positioned it at the individual level because it was described by participants as an enduring neurological factor shaping the CYP's threat response system, which then interacts with current environmental demands. While some research suggests demand-avoidant behaviours are rooted in trauma (Kildahl et al., 2021), this remains contested (Eaton & Weaver, 2020). From my experience as a TEP, I have encountered demand-avoidant behaviours in CYP with trauma histories, though the more pervasive presentation some participants described, where avoidance extended to preferred and self-initiated activities, differs from what I have observed in those contexts, aligning with Eaton and Weaver's (2020) suggestion that it is the “obsessive”, “all-encompassing resistance” that distinguishes those labelled as displaying 'PDA' behaviours from trauma-related demand-avoidant behaviours. Despite this debate, I noticed that the approaches participants described closely resembled some elements of trauma-informed principles (Bomber, 2007), suggesting

that supporting emotional safety, prioritising empathy and genuinely supportive, attuned relationships are essential regardless of aetiological contentions. However, labels such as ‘PDA’ should not obscure experiences of adversity requiring additional and distinct support (Johnson, 2024), and practitioners need to remain open to the multiple factors interacting with individual factors that could be shaping demand-avoidant behaviours for each CYP.

To conclude this section, given ongoing uncertainty around how demand-avoidant behaviours are understood, I argue that it is how surrounding systems understand and respond to individual factors that shapes outcomes, determining whether these factors become barriers or enable CYP to engage in school life, as described in the following sections.

5.3.2 Relational (Microsystem)

The microsystem, as the ecological layer closest to the CYP, exerts the most significant influence on development and behaviour (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Proximal processes within the microsystem, defined as regular, bidirectional interactions through which development occurs, include engagement with environmental objects (such as tasks, resources, sensory conditions, time, and space) and symbolic features (including language, tone, interpersonal interactions, and relationships) (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Stivaros, 2007). Each aspect of a CYP’s experience within the microsystem contributes to developmental and behavioural outcomes.

The dataset demonstrates this dynamic across Themes 3-7. When interactions and approaches were attuned, relational, and autonomy-supportive, CYP were more able to participate, indicating that such practices mediated levels of anxiety (an individual factor), therefore impacting on demand-avoidant behaviours. Conversely, in the absence of attuned responses, the microsystem heightened the CYP’s threat response (an individual factor) (Theme 9). For example, Evelyn recounted an incident in which neglecting a CYP's experience during a minor disagreement escalated to suspension, thereby intensifying the behaviours. This suggests that adults can either mitigate or exacerbate demand-avoidant behaviours, with their interactions serving as a mediating factor and therefore supporting the rationale for a relational approach to demand-avoidant behaviours as outlined in Appendix V. Evelyn’s recount also emphasises the necessity for adults to possess shared,

detailed knowledge of CYP, which relies on consistent information exchange across the mesosystem.

Whilst the dataset demonstrates that practitioners' relational responses can mediate demand-avoidant behaviours, it also suggests that behaviours result from wider interacting factors (Themes 1 and 2) that no single practitioner can control. Whilst the quality of relationships within the microsystem is something practitioners can meaningfully influence, directly affecting CYP's school experience, practitioners should not bear sole responsibility for outcomes. The data showed that when responsibility was concentrated in one person without wider support, it became emotionally unsustainable (Theme 11). This influence often comes at a personal cost. Supporting CYP who exhibit intense and sometimes physically challenging demand-avoidant behaviours imposed significant emotional demands on practitioners (Theme 11). Thus, interactions within the microsystem serve both as a support system for CYP and as a source of emotional labour for adults. Whether it becomes overwhelming is shaped by the exosystem as discussed later.

5.3.3 Connective (Mesosystem)

In the dataset, staff within the same school held different understandings of demand-avoidant behaviours. Some understood them as anxiety-based, requiring relational responses, while others viewed them as oppositional (Theme 2; Theme 10.1). Where these competing frameworks coexisted, they produced inconsistent responses to the same CYP, and Lauren explained the consequence, noting that inconsistency, "*throws everything back and increases their anxiety.*" In my view, this is a predictable consequence of asking staff to reach shared understanding in a field that is debated and controversial (Johnson, 2024). Disagreement within staff communities is almost inevitable, and it appears to be the CYP who is impacted by this. Training can introduce new frameworks (Theme 2), but narratives already circulating within staff communities carry social weight that are harder to shift (Hillman et al., 2023), highlighting a problem that individual schools may not be able to overcome without wider systemic support; a point that I return to in the macrosystem discussion.

The dataset indicates that home-school collaboration is important. Due to cumulative demands carrying across contexts (Theme 1.2), sharing information was deemed

essential for understanding a CYP's capacity for demands, which directly shaped how practitioners approached the CYP within school (Subtheme 7.2). Without this information, as Lauren and Evelyn suggested, demand calibration becomes less informed, increasing the likelihood that the CYP will be placed in demand situations that exceed their capacity, therefore triggering the anxiety-threat responses described at the individual level. Research also documents how parents often feel misunderstood (O'Nions et al., 2020) therefore highlighting the importance of schools working collaboratively with families in ways that recognises and understands their experiences.

Considering other elements of the mesosystem, some participants described drawing on multi-agency support, including the Educational Psychology Service, to provide training and work collaboratively alongside them in supporting CYP displaying demand-avoidant behaviours, reflecting a systemic approach. This is notable given that EP involvement with demand-avoidant behaviours is often positioned primarily within assessment (Johnson, 2024), which can limit continuity of support. However, in this research context, the non-traded nature of the local authority service appeared to enable more sustained involvement with schools. This suggests that access to and continuity of multi-agency support is shaped by macrosystem structures that enable or constrain collaboration, with potential indirect implications for the CYP, as discussed in Section 5.3.5.

5.3.4 Institutional (Exosystem)

In the dataset, when school leadership and policies endorsed relational approaches, practitioners were able to implement them with CYP displaying demand-avoidant behaviours, demonstrating how exosystem-level organisational structures indirectly shape CYP's experience within the microsystem. Lauren described SLT involvement in shifting understanding and approaches to demand-avoidant behaviours, while Clara described how a relational behaviour policy legitimised prioritising connection and reducing punitive approaches, directly impacting what practitioners felt able to do in their everyday interactions with CYP.

Where policies were based on behaviourist approaches, practitioners reported the need to work against them. Evelyn described her previous school as implementing a punitive system, which made it challenging to justify relational responses she

considered effective. The dataset suggests that such factors undermined practitioners' confidence in their approaches. Furthermore, ambiguity within the macrosystem (Theme 2), such as the absence of formal frameworks for understanding demand-avoidant behaviours, seemed to compound these challenges by leaving practitioners without a robust basis for explaining or defending their practices.

Practitioners reported navigating situations where acting in the best interests of CYP required accepting potential disapproval from colleagues, as illustrated by Lando's reflection on professionalism. This is consistent with Manning-Morton (2006), who characterises relational practice as precarious within performance-driven systems. Such concerns may have led practitioners to second-guess or moderate their use of relational approaches, thereby affecting the quality and consistency of interactions and influencing CYP's experiences of anxiety and demand-avoidant behaviours. While existing literature addresses the emotional labour involved in working with demand-avoidant behaviours (e.g. Emam & Farrell, 2009; PDA Society, 2018), the dataset suggests that emotional labour also arises from navigating expectations within the exosystem and microsystem, sometimes requiring practitioners to challenge established norms, as reflected in Evelyn's concern about being perceived as, *"letting the CYP get away with nothing*." The dataset further indicates that CYP were highly attuned to adult emotional states (Theme 5), suggesting that practitioner anxiety generated by these tensions may be perceived by CYP, potentially intensifying their own anxiety and triggering demand-avoidant behaviours at the individual level. This underscores the importance of alignment between exosystem values and those of practitioners.

Furthermore, the dataset showed that the elements practitioners require to sustain relational practice, such as feeling heard, understood, consistently supported, and having their approach valued (Themes 10 and 11), closely mirror the elements CYP need to engage with demands and feel safe. This suggests that relational environments necessitate alignment across all levels of the system. When the school system models the relationality required by adults, sustaining such practices with CYP becomes easier.

5.3.5 Ideological (Macrosystem)

The dataset highlighted a persistent tension between the ideological expectations embedded in the education system and the specific needs of CYP displaying demand-avoidant behaviours. Evelyn observed that CYP are expected to "*sit in class and do the work*" because "*they're here to learn*", and Frances noted that the school environment "*can be extremely stressful and does not suit everybody.*" Bernstein (2000) contends that schools structure learning through tightly controlled systems, where timing, pacing, and expectations are institutionally determined. Foucault (1977) conceptualises schools as disciplinary spaces organised through routines and systems of control that shape CYP to fit social, labour, and governance systems, and aim to train them in the self-regulation required for such systems. The dataset suggests that these structural aims directly conflict with the autonomy and flexibility required for CYP displaying demand-avoidant behaviours to thrive (Theme 6).

For CYP whose anxiety is heightened by control (Theme 1.1), the routine demands embedded in school structures intensify the triggers of demand-avoidant behaviours, as reflected in participants' descriptions of rigid behavioural expectations (Theme 9) and academic expectations (Theme 1.2). These structures also constrain the relational practices participants identified as essential (Themes 3-7). Consequently, even highly skilled and relationally attuned practitioners operate within systems that may be organised in ways that are counter to the needs of the CYP they are supporting.

Attributing difficulties to the notion that "*school doesn't suit everybody*" (Theme 8) implies that the problem lies within the CYP. In contrast, the social model locates the issue in the organisation of the school system (Oliver, 2013), thereby implicating the macrosystem as responsible for change. England's national behaviour guidance is grounded in behaviourist approaches (DfE, 2024), and the National Curriculum is structured around standardised attainment and age-related expectations, both of which contradict the relational, flexible, and autonomy-supportive approaches consistently identified by participants as effective. The dataset indicates that responsibility for managing this tension lies with individual schools and practitioners, contributing to the emotional labour described in Theme 11 and indirectly shaping CYP experiences in school. This suggests that effective support for CYP displaying demand-avoidant behaviours requires macrosystem-level change that enables

schools and practitioners to adopt relational approaches, as discussed further in the policy implications section.

In addition to macrosystem-level tensions within the education system, the contested diagnostic status of demand-avoidant behaviours presents further challenges for practitioners. Setting aside debates about diagnostic classification systems (Moore, 2020; Runswick-Cole et al., 2016), demand-avoidant behaviours lack formal recognition in the DSM-5 or ICD-11. This absence results in no statutory diagnostic pathway, inconsistent NHS Trust policies, and unclear professional remits (Doyle & Kenny, 2023; O'Nions et al., 2016), as reflected in Lauren's uncertainty about whether pathological demand avoidance (PDA) "*is even diagnosed now*" and Lando's observation that "*not a lot is known.*" The dataset indicates that practitioners acquired knowledge about demand-avoidant behaviours through ongoing experiential learning, informal channels, and training from external support services (Theme 2). This contributes to variation in understanding and response across practitioners and schools. In this context, Lauren's pragmatic focus on meeting CYP needs, irrespective of diagnostic labels, is understandable and the dataset implies that this is conducive to meaningful support.

While the classification debate persists, CYP and their families may experience inconsistent access to support, with no clear pathway for multi-agency involvement. Doyle and Kenny (2023) document a disconnect between education and health systems, resulting in families frequently falling between services and continuing to be blamed (Truman et al., 2021). Although participants referenced support from specialist services such as the Educational Psychology Service, access to sustained multi-agency support is shaped by macrosystem factors including whether services are traded or non-traded, and local authority resources. This creates significant inequity, with the quality of support for CYP displaying demand-avoidant behaviours depending on staff knowledge, school culture, and whether specialist input is accessible. The SEND white paper (DfE, 2026) aims to strengthen multi-agency working, which offers some promise. However, positioning external support as “experts at hand” (DfE, 2026) may inadvertently reinforce a medicalised, within-child narrative which this research argues against, locating difficulties in the CYP and solutions with external specialists. The research also suggests that meaningful change is most effectively enacted within the microsystem through everyday relational practices, attunement, and adaptations by practitioners working directly

with the CYP. Therefore, careful consideration is needed regarding the positioning of multi-agency support.

Another tension at the macrosystem level concerns how demand-avoidant behaviours are constructed within dominant expectations of schooling. I noticed that qualities such as insistence, strong-mindedness, and resistance to external control, often viewed as challenging in school contexts, were recognised by participants as positive attributes (Theme 8). This suggests that participants associated demand-avoidant behaviours with strengths, even when these behaviours were framed as problematic within the institutional context. Moore (2020) contends that the expectation that CYP accept school demands as reasonable reflects a construction of childhood compliance as natural and expected, with institutions tending to locate the problem in CYP when compliance breaks down. Thus, behaviours categorised as pathological in CYP often reflect actions that challenge adult-centric assumptions about compliance, which are naturalised as childhood obligations but not applied to adults.

These observations prompt reflections regarding the aims of schooling. While skills such as setting boundaries, self-advocacy, and negotiation are valued in adulthood and may reflect valuable assets, these same behaviours are often regarded as problematic when exhibited by CYP in school settings, suggesting that schools may be suppressing qualities that may benefit CYP in later life. Yet even if CYP develop these qualities, as adults, they will enter a macrosystem that continues to marginalise neurodivergent ways of being (Oliver, 2013). In neoliberal systems that prioritise productivity and standardisation, individuals whose preferences diverge from these norms may remain devalued. Research indicates that workplaces must display flexibility and accommodation to mitigate negative experiences of work among autistic adults (Doyle & Kenny, 2023), indicating that the same systemic barriers CYP face in schools may persist into adult work environments.

5.3.6 Transformative (Chronosystem)

The dataset indicates that practitioners' understanding of demand-avoidant behaviours has evolved over their careers, shifting from deficit-based interpretations to anxiety-based and relational perspectives. Evelyn reflected on earlier “*ODD*” understandings rooted in purposeful defiance; Frances noted that training prompted her to reconsider previous interpretations as "*deeper than just refusing.*" Lauren

described this process as a "*learning curve.*" However, this change has been inconsistent, with Evelyn observing that, "*old school staff still want that compliance*", illustrating how negative framings persist alongside emerging relational approaches (Wedell, 2008). This contributes to inconsistency in support across the mesosystem and exosystem. When behaviour is understood as distress, the quality of interactions shifts, directly affecting CYP's experience of safety and understanding. This shift is increasingly reflected in policy changes oriented toward relational approaches (Theme 9), although implementation remains inconsistent (Theme 10.1).

The dataset suggests that changes in microsystem factors were associated with reductions in demand-avoidant behaviours. For instance, Clara described a CYP who, following a sustained period of relational and autonomy-supportive practice, felt sufficiently safe to engage in classroom learning. Lauren reported two collaborative reintegrations with CYP and families that were "*really successful,*" indicating that sustained relational support tailored to the CYP's experience can support CYP's sense of safety and produce transformative change. However, such positive developments in attitude and approach at the individual school level (exosystem) have not been matched by chronosystem change across the macrosystem, as discussed in section 5.3.5.

5.4 Summary of Relational and Bioecological Perspectives

The dataset indicates that effective support for CYP displaying demand-avoidant behaviours requires relational approaches and alignment across all layers of the bioecological model. While relational practice within the microsystem was most directly influential, it was also the most constrained by surrounding ecological layers. Where CYP were understood non-pathologically, interactions were relationally attuned, staff and parents shared information, leadership provided containment and legitimacy for relational approaches, and behaviour was viewed as adaptive, there was evidence of reduced demand-avoidant behaviours, suggesting that school was experienced as more manageable.

Achieving this requires simultaneous change across multiple levels: a microsystem that enables moment-to-moment attunement, exosystem structures that legitimise relational approaches, and macrosystem narratives that redefine effective schooling and the construction of demand-avoidant behaviours in society. Without systemic alignment, practitioners will continue to face tensions across ecological layers,

hindering the sustainability of consistent, relationally attuned practice and the inclusion of CYP who display demand-avoidant behaviours. This means that the quality and consistency of support may continue to depend on individual practitioners working against systemic norms.

This research also invites reconsideration of Newson et al.'s (2003) characterisation of demand-avoidant behaviours as ‘extreme avoidance of everyday demands, significantly impacting functioning'. This research suggests that whether these behaviours significantly impact functioning depends on the capacity of adults and systems to work relationally with CYP, provide safety, flexibility, and genuine collaboration, positioning functioning as emerging through transactions between the CYP and context.

5.5 Implications for Practice

I will now present the implications of this research for practice. This research also aims to contribute to wider discussions regarding demand-avoidant behaviours and will be disseminated within the EPS, with other services, and potentially through publication.

5.5.1 Implications for Educational Psychologists

5.5.1.1 Supporting Meaning-Making and Challenging Deficit Narratives

This research suggests that practitioners make sense of demand-avoidant behaviours within a context characterised by conceptual ambiguity, competing explanatory frameworks, and the existence of deficit based narratives within staff communities. Therefore, EPs can facilitate reflective conversations that support school practitioners in exploring the meanings attached to demand-avoidant behaviours and the experiences that lead to the use of labels such as 'PDA'. Such work should support the development of needs-led formulations grounded in the CYP's internal experience, which challenge deficit interpretations and inform responses that reduce perceived threat and support autonomy. EPs are well-positioned to slow down meaning-making, helping staff to hold complexity and tolerate uncertainty without feeling pressure for definitive answers about causation (Corcoran, 2024). EPs should support staff to hold multiple hypotheses simultaneously and demonstrate that uncertainty need not prevent action by working

collaboratively with school staff through assess-plan-do-review cycles while understanding continues to evolve.

In the dataset, whilst participants demonstrated understandings of demand-avoidant behaviours as grounded in anxiety, their colleagues often did not. Therefore, EP work needs to address collective understanding, helping whole staff teams develop shared relational and ecological frameworks for understanding behaviour. EPs may also need to support critical reflection on underlying assumptions (Argyris & Schön, 1974) to make beliefs about behaviour and control visible.

5.5.1.2 Advocating for and Legitimising Relational Practice

Participants consistently positioned relationships as foundational to effective support, yet also described concerns that relational approaches affected perceptions of their professional competence. This suggests that relational practice, despite its effectiveness, requires legitimisation within school systems.

EPs can therefore play a key role in legitimising relational practice grounded in power-sharing, attunement, and flexibility through consultation, supervision, and written advice, positioning it as psychologically informed and professionally credible (Kristof, 1996).

EP work in this area should extend to organisational-level support with behaviour policies, reflection on the messages conveyed about control and compliance, and support for the development of shared relational frameworks (Macready, 2009). EPs should reframe how effectiveness is understood within schools, encouraging staff to recognise reduced anxiety, increased emotional safety, and engagement built through collaboration and negotiation as indicators of effective support. EPs should also support practitioners in reflecting on their interactions, drawing on the non-dual perspective described in section 5.2, which views adults and CYP as interconnected and co-constructing meaning rather than as separate or opposing entities. EPs should extend the focus from, "what strategies should we use?" to "how are we relating to this CYP and what does our response communicate?" Supporting staff to understand themselves as the primary relational resource may require sustained organisational work that challenges macrosystem narratives that position relational needs as deficits (Goodley, 2013) and reframes relationality as fundamental to learning and development.

5.5.1.3 Supporting the Emotional Sustainability of Relational Practice with Demand-Avoidant Behaviours

Participant responses suggested that emotional demands are intensified where support is absent, secondary containment is unavailable, and practitioners navigate ecological tensions alone. The dataset indicated that when such structures were present, emotional demands became manageable, whereas without collective support, the work appeared unsustainable, with one TA leaving the role.

EPs can support staff in their work through individual or group supervision, offering structured opportunities for reflection, sense-making, problem-solving and processing emotional responses (Farouk, 2004; Hulusi & Maggs, 2015; Ramvi, 2017). EP consultation should attend to consultees' emotional and cognitive experiences alongside solution-focused problem-solving, as both are important for sustaining practitioners' capacity for care (Crothers et al., 2020). Through supervision, EPs can support staff to process anxiety and return to reflective functioning: the practitioner contains the CYP's distress, the EP contains the practitioner's (Bion, 1962). As external professionals, EPs can provide a confidential space to explore difficult emotions, uncertainty, and moral tension, especially when practitioners experience conflict between relational values and organisational expectations. Without them, blocked care may occur (Hughes & Baylin, 2012), and practitioners' relational capacity becomes depleted, undermining their ability to remain attuned and responsive.

However, Stivaros (2025) argues that practitioners can only sustain their role when embedded within supportive organisational structures. EPs should therefore collaborate with SLTs to embed reflection, problem-solving, and emotional support within organisational structures. Embedding these structures ensures that relational practice becomes a collective responsibility and does not depend solely on individual practitioners' resilience or on external professionals.

5.5.2 Implications for School Staff

This research has several implications for teachers and TAs working with CYP displaying demand-avoidant behaviours. A key finding is that how behaviour is understood directly shapes how it is responded to, and so school staff need to actively develop person-centred frameworks for understanding demand-avoidant

behaviours, grounded in anxiety, need for control, and experiences of threat, whilst remaining curious and open to ongoing reflection. School staff can draw on the framework for relational practice with CYP displaying demand-avoidant behaviours (Appendix V), which brings together the key elements participants identified as effective. Applying specific approaches in a tokenistic manner should be avoided, as this creates a dynamic in which adults apply techniques and CYP passively receive them, failing to establish genuine partnership.

Staff should expect that working with CYP displaying demand-avoidant behaviours will require constant in-the-moment adaptation, as what works one day may not work the next. Approaches require experimentation, recalibration, and trial and error (PDA Society, n.d.-b), which should be recognised as skilled professional practice requiring ongoing reflection (Schön, 2017)

Importantly, where practitioners used relational approaches sustained by shared understanding, consistency among adults, and supportive organisational structures (Ainscow, 2005; Wenger, 1998), they reported positive outcomes, including fewer “behaviour incidents”, spontaneous relationship repair, and successful reintegration into classroom learning. This offers a hopeful message that individual practitioners can create meaningful change and therefore practitioners should recognise themselves as vital resources.

However, the research highlighted emotional labour involved in working with demand-avoidant behaviours. Attempting to carry it without collective support may lead to emotional exhaustion, undermining capacity for relational work. Staff should therefore attend to their own emotional experience within interactions and see reflectivity as a professional resource. Participants described how CYP displaying demand-avoidant behaviours were highly attuned to practitioners' emotional states, meaning that unprocessed anxiety or frustration could be detected by CYP and intensify their own anxiety (Theme 5). Therefore, noticing difficult emotions offers information that can inform more attuned, responsive practice (Mercieca, 2011). Where staff notice sustained depletion in their capacity to engage relationally, this may signal a need for support from colleagues and reflective space. It is important that staff view this as an integral part of professional practice, and it should not be seen as a reflection on their competence (Hughes & Baylin, 2012). School staff should therefore actively seek support in order to sustain relational practice, and

their approaches should be validated and recognised as skilled, legitimate professional work.

5.5.3 Implications For Senior Leadership Teams

This research demonstrated that SLTs represent a significant exosystem influence, shaping whether relational practice can be legitimised and sustained across the school. Therefore, based on this research, I developed a self-reflection tool designed for use by SLTs, SENCos, and staff teams to support schools in reflecting on provision and approaches to demand-avoidant behaviours at the individual, relational, environmental, and organisational levels (see Appendix X).

Participants described how behaviour policies either enabled or constrained their practice. Therefore, SLTs should review behaviour policies and consider how they might more explicitly legitimise relational responses to demand-avoidant behaviours (Macready, 2009). SLTs need to actively challenge narratives described in Theme 10.1 and promote shared language and consistent modelling of relational approaches (Hillman et al., 2023). Participants expressed concerns about appearing "too soft" or "unprofessional" when using relational approaches. SLTs therefore need to foster psychological safety (Edmonson, 1999), in which practitioners feel that organisational values support their practice, enabling them to work relationally with confidence. This cultural shift requires sustained investment in professional development and reflective structures (Wedell, 2008).

This research highlights that where relational practice became concentrated in one adult, the emotional burden became unsustainable. SLTs therefore need to distribute relational responsibility across staff teams, balancing key worker approaches (Christie, 2007) with small, consistent teams to support continuity and sustainability. Facilitating structures for secondary containment, supervision, reflective spaces, and protected time for collaboration is an organisational responsibility (Stivaros, 2025). Meeting CYP's needs requires equal consideration of the needs, capacity, and support structures of the adults within the system.

5.5.4 Implications for Policy Makers

The present research carries important implications for policymakers. The dataset suggests that relational practice is emerging within schools but continues to sit alongside, and at times conflict with, dominant behaviourist paradigms embedded in

policy and practice (Taylor & Scorer, 2025), positioning it as a challenge to established professional and policy norms. Practitioners were navigating systems in which norms of compliance, standardisation, and behaviourist approaches are historically embedded and reinforced through policy and professional socialisation, indicating that relational approaches require corresponding shifts at the national policy level to be sustained.

The emphasis on punitive responses in current behaviour guidelines (DfE, 2024) creates a conflict, as schools are expected to be sensitive to individual experiences while operating under frameworks that prioritise control (Anderson et al., 2014). Despite policy developments that invoke CYP's rights, well-being, and inclusion, including UNICEF (1989) and Every Child Matters (DfE, 2003), schools continue to reproduce practices that lead to social exclusion (Foucault, 1977) and do not fully reflect a relational orientation in practice (Billington et al., 2024). Relational approaches to demand-avoidant behaviours, therefore, remain inconsistent and reliant on individual practitioners. Within a bioecological understanding, systemic influences carry lifelong consequences (Doyle & Kenny, 2022), meaning that misalignment between a CYP's experience and what educational systems provide potentially has enduring impacts on wellbeing, participation, and life outcomes. Policy makers should commission research (Fletcher-Watson & Happé, 2019), develop guidance that acknowledges conceptual uncertainty while promoting ecological and relational perspectives on demand-avoidant behaviours, and fund dedicated training to build the necessary structures for relational practice at scale.

The proposed SEND reforms (DfE, 2026) suggest a shift towards greater inclusion within mainstream settings; however, this research suggests such reforms may promote inclusive and relational practice while leaving intact the structures that make it difficult to sustain. For genuine change, policymakers should explicitly recognise and legitimise relational approaches within national behaviour guidance, develop training frameworks that embed ecological and relational understandings within statutory professional development, and ensure inspection frameworks reward relational practice and flexible provision alongside academic outcomes. Every CYP has the right to education that does not cause distress (UNICEF, 1989), requiring reform at the macrosystem level (Anderson et al., 2014).

5.6 Strengths, Limitations and Future Research

This research presents several strengths and limitations, with the identified limitations highlighting directions for future research.

This research contributes to the growing body of literature that conceptualises demand-avoidant behaviour within relational and ecological frameworks (Doyle & Kenny, 2023; Green et al., 2018; Johnson, 2024; Milton, 2012), challenging within-child, medicalised explanations and emphasising the role of relationships, interactions, and systemic factors in shaping both the emergence of demand-avoidant behaviours and practitioners' capacity to respond relationally. The research suggests that everyday relational interactions within the microsystem directly shape CYP's experience of demand and their capacity to participate.

A key strength lies in addressing an under-researched area. As far as I can establish, this is one of the first qualitative studies in England to explore school staff perspectives on demand-avoidant behaviours, drawing on the meaning-making of practitioners within school contexts previously underrepresented in the literature, which has relied predominantly on parents (Gore-Langton & Frederickson, 2016; Truman et al., 2021).

The research makes several further contributions. It demonstrates how relationships are foundational to effective support, showing that approaches work through genuine partnership, grounding the PDA Society's (n.d.-g) claims that support needs to be relational in nature in evidence from school practitioners. It applies Bronfenbrenner and Morris's (2006) bioecological model to present an understanding of both how demand-avoidant behaviours emerge and how ecological layers shape practitioners' capacity to respond relationally, contributing to recent ecological perspectives (Doyle & Kenny, 2023; Green et al., 2018; Johnson, 2024; Milton, 2012). It extends the literature on the emotional demands on practitioners (Emam & Farrell, 2009) by situating emotional labour as both a response to working with demand-avoidant behaviours and a consequence of systems that fail to support relational practice.

In response to these findings, a practitioner-informed framework is introduced that prioritises relationships as foundational when supporting CYP displaying demand-avoidant behaviours (Appendix V). The research also provides a

self-reflection tool to support schools in reflecting on their approach and provision across individual, relational, environmental, and organisational levels (Appendix X). However, the research indicates that improving outcomes for CYP displaying demand-avoidant behaviours requires skilled relational practice alongside institutional, policy-level, and ideological transformation across the exosystem and macrosystem, to legitimise, resource, and sustain relational approaches in educational settings.

It is important to note that participants were self-selecting, likely attracting practitioners with experience and confidence in supporting demand-avoidant behaviours. This brings valuable perspectives to a field characterised by problem-saturated discourse documenting negative school experiences and practitioners' difficulties (Brede et al., 2017; Truman et al., 2021) and contributes hopeful narratives suggesting that relational practice can make positive differences. However, experiences of practitioners finding this work persistently difficult, where CYP's experiences remain predominantly negative, or where provision has broken down, are likely underrepresented. This is notable given high exclusion rates (Green, 2024). Participants may also have inadvertently presented the practice more favourably, given that the research was conducted within my employing local authority. Despite these limitations, practitioner reports of effective support remain an important contribution within an under-researched area (Green et al., 2018; Stuart et al., 2020). Future research could further explore these experiences to understand barriers to effective support, including SLT perspectives.

A further limitation relates to conceptual ambiguity. Without standardised frameworks or agreed criteria, demand-avoidant behaviours do not represent a fixed category, making consistency in and across research difficult (Haire et al., 2024). Consistent with social constructionism, behaviours were understood through participants' interpretations, which may have led them to refer to differing presentations.

All participants were recruited within a single local authority, which may have led to shared training, networks, and therefore, understanding. Several participants noted that they had first encountered the concept of demand avoidance through the local authority's Communication and Interaction Support service, situated under an autism-specific umbrella, which may have shaped their understanding of demand-avoidant behaviours as inherently linked to autism. This local diagnostic

practice, which recognises "autism with demand-avoidant features," may have further reinforced this framing, impacting how participants understood the aetiology of demand-avoidant behaviours. My use of the term, "demand-avoidant behaviours" may also have influenced how participants described experiences and terminology used, including one participant's lack of clarity around the distinction between demand-avoidant behaviours and PDA.

The local authority's SEND support services also operate on a non-traded, need-based model, which allows these services to work closely and intensively with schools and individual children over a prolonged period. This may have supported participants' exposure to, and confidence in, relational approaches to demand-avoidant behaviours, and their capacity to sustain these approaches in practice. Practitioners in local authorities with traded models may have less exposure to this kind of intensive, relationship-based input, which may in turn shape their understanding of demand-avoidant behaviours and their capacity to respond relationally. This is further supported by the local Educational Psychology Service, which advocates for a relational approach and provides relational training to schools, and by funding not being linked to EHCPs, which may allow schools greater flexibility to fund additional staff to work closely alongside CYP. These aspects of the local context may make participants, and schools in this authority more likely to notice, value and have resources and capacity to enact relational approaches. This is significant for this research, as it suggests that participants' strong endorsement of relational practice, and their apparent capacity to enact it, may be shaped by the local infrastructure.

A significant limitation is the absence of CYP voice. Helpful approaches were practitioner-constructed; how CYP experienced these approaches, whether they felt genuinely collaborative, and whether they made meaningful differences remain unknown. Future research should include CYP perspectives alongside those from clinical and specialist services (Green, 2025).

This research reflects UK contexts and predominantly Western literature. Demand-avoidant behaviours are a UK-derived "culture-bound concept" (O'Nions et al., 2020) that is not consistently recognised internationally. Also, identity through Social Graces (Burnham, 2018) remains underexplored (Johnson, 2024), and future

research should examine how culture, identity, and Social Graces intersect with ecological systems to shape demand-avoidant behaviours and responses to them.

Finally, the role of the 'PDA' construct warrants further exploration, including how it is understood across contexts, whether it is experienced as helpful or limiting, and what role formal identification or labelling plays in securing support (Truman et al., 2021).

5.7 Concluding remarks

This doctoral research explored how five school staff members in one local authority understand and respond to demand-avoidant behaviours, and how school culture and policies influence their capacity to implement supportive practices. The research adopted an exploratory approach, seeking to move past ongoing debates regarding the concept of demand-avoidant behaviours and to focus on how CYP are understood and supported within educational contexts.

Reflecting on my initial apprehension about researching this contested area, I am glad I pursued this work. A picture of dedicated professionals striving to understand and meet CYP where they were at emerged. Practitioners appeared to demonstrate a commitment to building relationships, and creativity in adapting their practices to support CYP. When the school ethos aligned with their relational values, practitioners were able to sustain approaches perceived as reducing anxiety and supporting participation. This provides a hopeful counternarrative to the predominantly problem-saturated accounts of school experiences in the literature. However, the perspectives of CYP remain notably absent from this research.

However, I contend that for school systems to become genuinely responsive and child-centred, meaningful reform must address underlying cultural assumptions regarding demand-avoidant behaviour, authority, and what it means to include CYP who need control, flexibility and relational safety to participate. If education systems prioritised listening to what CYP communicate through demand-avoidant behaviours, such as expressions of anxiety, perceptions of threat from demands, and the need for autonomy to feel safe, as the practitioners in this research did, rather than focusing on controlling behaviour, many responses constructed as 'demand-avoidant' may be reduced.

Importantly, by conceptualising demand-avoidant behaviours through a relational and ecological lens, this research suggests that practitioners can positively influence

CYP's experiences. The most significant resource appears to be the practitioners themselves, given their capacity for attunement, relational presence, and responsiveness to CYP's experiences. This positions educators as active agents capable of transforming school experiences. Moving forward, the priorities should be to create the macrosystem and exosystem conditions where this becomes the norm, not the exception, so that supporting CYP who display demand-avoidant behaviours relationally becomes the accepted standard practice, no longer requiring going against the status-quo or being seen as “too soft”.

A participant quotation that feels poignant to end on is:

> *“If we’re seeing it as a battle, then we’ve already lost. I don’t want it to be me vs them… I’m on the same team as the child and I want them to feel that.”* - Evelyn

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Appendix

Appendix A: Interview Transcripts

Lando

EMMA: Okay, great, we are recording. Can you start by telling me about your experience, your school experience to date please.

LANDO: So, I started off as a TA, erm two, nearly three years ago. I've done two years at special school, and that was classroom-based TA. and then working here at this special school for the past year.

EMMA: And what does that day-to-day role look like?

LANDO: Well, it's dealing with the behaviours in and out of the classroom, so like if children are out of the class, it's dealing with that in the moment, so say they are in speech marks, erm…. “misbehaving”, that's when I step in, to get the TAs back in the class so they can help the other students, and that they can also deal with the behaviours in the moment for them, for the student that is struggling.

EMMA: mhm, yeah

LANDO: Yeah, so it's helping them to be a point where they are able to go back into their lesson or find an alternative way for them to access the learning.

EMMA: Yeah. And is there any particular age groups or particular needs that that you work with most?

LANDO: Erm… I spend at the moment… it's a lot of time with the nurture ones, so that's our year seven group. And then our year tens. So yeah. Their group has a few characters that will just shutdown. And sometimes it does feel like you’re headbutting a brick wall, but in the end, you do eventually get there. So that’s where my time is taken up at the minute.

EMMA: Erm so, just to start with then, I want to ask some questions about your understanding of demand avoidant behaviours. So I was wondering, can you explain the term demand avoidant behaviours? Could you define it? You know, what kind of things comes to mind?

LANDO: So it's like meeting the everyday demand, isn't it? And it's like where it causes them that much anxiety, that will just shut down and do everything they can

to not do and meet what they feel is a demand on them. And I know that it can vary from things as simple as you need to brush your teeth to sitting down in the classroom and doing the work.

EMMA: You mentioned there a few of the demands that they might struggle with. Can you tell me more about that?

LANDO: So I've had… in my past job, there was… meeting the demand to literally go into the classroom and doing the task at hand, whether it would be colouring, whether it would be their spellings… No, it was a no.

EMMA: mhm

LANDO: And they also… it was the getting on, on the transport in the morning. It was like, it was asking them to almost like, to them it's like, you're asking them to chop their hand off almost, whereas to us it's just getting on… onto a bus?

EMMA: Yeah

LANDO: Whereas for them, they physically could not bring themselves to do it. Yeah. So it was kind of really, a really big difference in perception between the demand level and once they're in that state, that one small thing you're asking of them… it could even be, I've had one young person where washing their hands… no… that's it. You've asked them to wash their hands, they're expected to wash their hands. You're not getting anything else out of them, whether that be for a good hour or whether that'll be for the rest of the day. Yeah…

EMMA: So what makes the difference as to whether, you know, it's for an hour or the rest of the day?

LANDO: It's about the child and how they, they're presenting on the day and how they're able to meet what, what is asked of them… and the level of anxiety it's causing them and why they're feeling that much anxiety around it. And obviously that varies from day to day.

EMMA: What do you think it is that's driving that anxiety?

LANDO: It's that they can't navigate the world, can they? They struggle to navigate the world and then when they're asked to do something that we perceive as simple, it's like their bodies and their mind just goes into a complete meltdown and it's too much for them, isn't it?

EMMA: mhm yeah

LANDO: It's that overstimulation and overwhelm. Ask them to wash their hands and if it's not on their terms, then it can be seen as they're someone who just doesn't like being told no. But I know there's so much more to it than that... but that's how it presents to someone looking in. That is just a kid saying, "no I'm not doing that." Or "I want to do it my own way". They might not understand. You see it… sometimes people just see them as a stroppy child… as a kid that needs to learn the meaning of no, but… it's not as simple as that. And sometimes it's like, oh just accept it, but I know it's not as easy as that.

EMMA: Yeah, yeah. And how do you see the behaviours, like how would you explain it to people who see it like that?

LANDO: I understand… I don't know how much I can say this, but myself, from my lack of diagnosis… I've got to adulthood and it's been missed.

EMMA: okay, yeah

LANDO: But, and the waiting list is that long, despite being told that I've clearly got the need. But… one thing can just send you over the edge. You've got that much shooting across your mind. And if they've got the overstimulation from all the sensory input from around them, whether that be coming to a new school, actually getting on the bus in the morning to come to school and then someone just says, look, you need to clean your teeth… yeah, it's a lot. It sounds so simple, but it's not that simple. Oh, cooking. That's another one… everything seems to feel like a chore. And if you've got that mindset, that everything's like a chore, that's when you struggle to then meet that ask, because it's like… there's that much pressure for you… you feel that much pressure to do it that you flake and you can't do it. You like, crumble. And that doesn't always show as crumbling, but like, rather than shutting down and just going into yourself, sometimes it does show up as more extreme behaviours.

EMMA: Yeah, yeah. And where does that that pressure come from?

LANDO: I think it's self-implied. So I know that's the case for a lot of the students, it's that self- implied pressure that they're feeling. And obviously, as staff, and as parents and carers, you're not intending on that, you're not intending on them feeling pressure. It's coming from a place of care to meet their basic needs. But if they've got…if they're getting over stimulated by surroundings and noises, and just coping with every day- sensory inputs and they're being asked to then do something on top of that, on top of just surviving, it's it kind of like adding an extra weight on, isn't it?

EMMA: mhm yeah I hear what you're saying

LANDO: So there's only so much capacity. It's just the survival and then you're adding things to it. It's like… erm, there's a way I thought of describing it that I can't think of... oh, you know it's like in science when you have the spring, and you add the weights to it and see how much it can hold until it drops… where the spring stretches beyond its limit…

EMMA: Yeah I think I remember that.

LANDO: It's like that. It's constantly adding… there's a limit, and that… yeah… I think from the students have worked with that it varies.

EMMA: Yeah.

LANDO: But some of them you know… that's a no go today. That's not happening. So you try and you work with it, yeah. But also you've got to try and work against it, in terms of… to help them, because obviously, that's not life. Like, we're being told, this needs to be done… it needs doing that way. That's something you get told in life daily. Like in a job, you get told what to do. And if you can't deal with being told what to do, that like closes so many doors.

EMMA: Yeah

LANDO: You've got to try and help them get, get through that essentially, haven't you? Help them navigate it by reframing how you do it, how you ask them.... It's the wording. I find that the wording of it is a big thing.

EMMA: Okay yeah, that's really interesting. I'd erm definitely like to come back to that because I'm interested in how you interact with young people displaying demand avoidant behaviours. This is all really, really insightful. So you mentioned as well that sometimes the children go within themselves or sometimes there are bigger behaviours. I was just wondering, if you'd tell me a bit more about that… how that demand avoidance shows up, like, what else might you see if you were a fly on the wall?

LANDO: Okay if you were a fly on the wall, I've had one where it looks like they're throwing a paddy in the supermarket, you know crying, screaming. Like I say, to an onlooker, it's like they've been told to chop their right arm off in terms of the scale of the reaction. Whereas others, they'll shut down, go mute, go silent, and you don't get anything out of them for good….two hours? Yeah, if not longer, until they're ready to come round. It's very much on their terms, whether that's consciously on their terms or unconsciously on their terms. But that's, that that. They feel like there's a demand there, even if to others it doesn't. So from a staff perspective, you're literally, they've come in fine, you put their work on the table, you go through it, they're fine… the minute they have to do the work, it's like there's ten times more pressure on them

and…that's it. They just can't can't do it. It might be an outright, “no”, “I’m not doing that”… “Why should I do that?”, “I'm not doing it I said no”… and then I've had sitting on their chair, a rocking chair, that was the chair they had in the classroom, rocking back and forth and not speaking. Refused to move... completely refusing to move. Complete shutdown.

EMMA: Yeah

LANDO: There's also the explosive behaviours, but I feel like that comes… there's more to it than just the, the PDA itself. I think that's other needs that need meeting as well.

EMMA: So what kind of, what kind of other needs would you say?

LANDO: Sometimes there are sensory needs behind it… and their educational support needs, their learning needs, being able to do the work, might be the reason for the avoidance and that. Yeah, there’s a lot more to it.

EMMA: Yeah

LANDO: One young person dressed up as a cat and the reason I think they did that was trying to avoid the demands of everyday life. It’s very… not strange, strange is the wrong word, I can’t think of the word… it might look like that, but like it’s interesting to be honest, like what goes through their minds to think, well, if I'm going get these demands of me as a human being, I’ll be a cat…. So to avoid the demands of being a human… yeah.

EMMA: And do you have, like do you have any thoughts about what is going through that young person’s head, how might they be feeling, what might they be thinking?

LANDO: confused? Overwhelmed? I think confusion's a lot of it. You’ve got to think all these kids are going back and forth to (*unable to make out on the recording*), to psychologists and yeah, they're lucky in the sense they're getting the help, but also… it's being told you need to then try this, try this, try that by different adults and they're hitting a brick wall, aren't they? So that's going to be frustrating in itself, like it’s not quite fitting. And if they don't understand why they're being asked to do all of these things, because they can't tolerate the general day to day inputs, and then they're being asked to do something else and they don't see the point or understand the point, like, we’d get frustrated. Like if I asked you to take your shoes and socks off right now, you’d be a bit confused as to why I’m doing that. You know whether it’s a child trying to navigate a mainstream school when they’ve got SEN needs, or whether that be trying to navigate in a specialist provision, it’s hard… and then

you've got to deal with other children around you that have also got needs, there's a lot to navigate, basically.

EMMA: Yeah, yeah. I'm wondering how you are feeling towards them because I'm hearing you're saying, right, you know, if I was asked to take off my shoes, how would I feel?

LANDO: I'm quite empathetic at times. At times it is frustrating because you just want to help them and you know what you're asking of them is something that's going to help them and they're not seeing that and you just feel frustrated, but you're not frustrated at them. It's more you're frustrated at the situation.

EMMA: Yeah, that sounds hard.

LANDO: Or not always knowing what to do… It is when they're mute that's the hard one, yeah. When they shut down and you can't do anything. But you learn how to deal with it, whether it's giving them time, or it literally sounds so unprofessional, but just cracking the odd joke… to try and break, break through that that wall that they've put up, or even.. even making a bit of a tit out of yourself.

EMMA: Yeah, okay. Can you tell me more?

LANDO: So with my old student, he was at my old school. He was one of the older students that would go fully mute. He'd only ever speak to me really and his class teacher. Brilliant personality. He went to the football with his dad, like, he was great, you couldn't ask for a better kid. The minute he felt that there was some form of demand on him and he couldn't see the point in it, you'd lost him. So you'd be sat there thinking, right, what do I do? You'd be thinking, okay so they're not going to take to it if I'm saying it for the positives of getting out of here and then going to be able to get a job and things. That's just going to add more pressure to him. So right, what do I do? Do I whip the game out? He was a bit of a cards whizz like I am.So whether it be something like that, something he's interested in, or do I put myself at the forefront of a joke here and try and crack the wall down that way?

EMMA: Yeah, yeah. And what was the impact of the jokes?

LANDO: It didn't always work but not more often than not eventually it would.

EMMA: And what do you mean when you say it worked. What does working look like for you?

LANDO: They're relaxing. You see them relax. You see the body relax because they become quite tense and you can see it. And like, you see it in their eyes as well. Like you know if you're stressed or something is wrong and you're about to cry, or they look angry, and then it's like their eyes soften.

EMMA: Yeah

LANDO: And that's how you know you're getting somewhere. Even if you get to that point, it's better than not getting anything. You know, them being relaxed… being calm. So yeah, humour, it depends on the student or the child or the individual but that can, I've found does work. Or phrasing it in a way to benefit them rather than benefiting you.

EMMA: Okay, can you say a bit more?

LANDO: So if they feel like it's at their benefit rather than someone else's, sometimes they're more likely to do it. Or… so if you phrase it as you're really going to help me out doing this, it gives them a role of why they're doing it and a bit of a purpose rather than I'm doing this because I'm being forced to do it. And it's more, I'm doing this because I want to do it and I want to help… they're helping you. They like that helping role.

EMMA: Okay.

LANDO: So today, they were asked to do a little piece of work. If they weren't going to do the cooking to prep for the macmillan coffee morning, they needed to do some signs and posters and decorations.. erm so this boy… under the table, shut down. Stormed off, shut the door in my face, like no matter what I tried to try and help them. That was it. Stormed out and then.. I went to him, I was like, "I really need your help to do this. Like if I'm going to have a stand and greet parents, I can't do that on my own, I need your help."

EMMA: mhm okay interesting

LANDO: So yeah if they realise it's going to help somebody else. So like I was wondering.. I was also trying to figure out if it was the reason they'd shut down and the pressure they felt was because of the topic of MacMillan… it wasn't that.

EMMA: right

LANDO: But sometimes they do relate to you on a personal level, not being too personal because you can't do that, but saying like, I understand, it's a difficult topic. Like, I've dealt with loss to cancer too, it's a brilliant charity and what we're doing is a

really good thing. Nobody's forcing you. *We're* doing it together. No one's forcing *us* to do it. We're doing it because *we* want to raise money, because it's something that means a lot to a lot of people. They then got tearful and was able to realise that they can do that work, but it also brought out the reason why they weren't doing it in the first place… because they felt it wasn't purposeful, but talking to them about this showed them the purpose.

EMMA: Ah that's really interesting. So it sounds like finding a sense of purpose, or making the task like, erm… feel meaningful helped them to be able to engage?

LANDO: Yeah, like it wasn't going to solve it straightway, you know what I mean? Like. it wasn't going to be a quick, come on, do it kind of thing… it doesn't work like that. Some students react really well to, right that's it.. it'll be a phone call home, and you'll do it at break time and that's fine, that works, but not with demand avoidant, they don't respond to that. They need time you know.

EMMA: Okay, yeah I hear you. You've talked me through a few things there, you know, things that you've found useful in your approach. What else then has been helpful? Are there other times where you felt you've been successful in managing demand avoidant behaviours?

LANDO: If they're involved in a group, sometimes that can help because it feels less pressure on them. So it gives it another purpose, from like from a team building perspective. But then again, that can also add more to it and make it harder. So it's, it is… I've found it's very student dependent. No student is the same as the next, you have to really know them.

EMMA: Yeah.

LANDO: Because it is quite black and white with them if they don't want to do it, they're not doing it. Yeah…

EMMA: And in those moments, where okay they're saying I'm not doing it, you're seeing the demand avoidant behaviours whatever they look like, like what would you be aiming for kind of in that that moment? what's your.. what's your kind of focus as the adult in that situation?

LANDO: So it would be the engagement in what you're asking them to do with the ultimate goal, or even slight steps towards it. Like even if it's, alright, you're not going to do the full thing… do the first couple of bits.

EMMA: Yeah

LANDO: Or even the task in a roundabout way.

EMMA: Yeah, tell me more about that…in a roundabout way. What does that look like?

LANDO: So like doing the work but not doing the work at the same time, putting it into more of a conversation, maybe? And like, if you can wangle it into a game, changing the dynamic of the task. So if it's not going to be a written thing, I still need to get the evidence that they've done it… we do it in a different way so I make the notes in the book of what we've spoken about in the conversation at the same time. I've done it before where I've entered up with stuff on a whiteboard. I've took a picture of it, printed it out, and put it in the book because like… that's the way we went around it instead.

EMMA: Mhm yeah

LANDO: Even if it's trying to find something really remotely related to what's being asked.

EMMA: And what was it that was helpful about like what you did there with the whiteboard or the conversation.

LANDO: It's softening the task isn't it? It's not as… it's not as… instructive, directive. It's more… loose.

EMMA; Yeah, yeah. Can you say more about what you mean by softening the task?

LANDO: It's free-er for them... there's more than one way of doing things.

EMMA: Okay, and does that, that freedom… does that show up in any other ways that you, you know, you work with these young people?

LANDO: Well, like to make things work, it's like… right, you need to do the baseline assessment. How are we going do this? Right, we'll take you out and do the activity. We'll take a sheet. We'll walk around school and do it and identify things that way. So it's taking them out that classroom environment, movement can sometimes help.

EMMA: mhm

LANDO: Because sometimes being in the classroom itself puts so much pressure on you because it like, that neurotypical person sitting in the exam. It's completely different and you flake out, don't you? I mean like you crumble under this pressure and you're like, I know the answer to that. Why can I not find their words? So… and I guess that's what it's like for them, but on a much bigger scale. So it's kind of you're going about things really, like there's an objective, how do we get to it?… but also, I think that if you've been asked to do something but there's so many different ways you can do it, that can also cause them to then think, woah, I'm not doing that… I can't decide so I can't do it. I'm not doing it. I'm not engaging. I'm just going to shut down. So if it's more clear, a few options, but like I say, phrased differently too

EMMA: mhm yeah

LANDO: It is a reward, preferred activity at the end of the task as well. Sometimes that's quite beneficial. A lot of the staff here do use the now and next, or now next then. So it's, 'now we do that, and then we do that or that… something they choose' So it's like you work towards it and there's that sense that it's achievable at every step rather than the long slog to get to the end. But very small steps with a reward at the end. Like it should feel manageable. That's been helpful in supporting them to do the work.

EMMA: and you've talked a bit about kind of the language and how you frame things. Can you talk more about that?

LANDO: I find that sometimes ,not always , don't be too soft, but being too stern can add insult to injury. The minute you're too firm.. It's like… It's like to say the first time you raise your voice in an argument, you've lost.

EMMA: Yeah

LANDO: And it's true… the minute you get remotely or show any, like, not anger because you're not angry at them. Frustration maybe or it's authority, isn't it? It's that big issue with authority. If you can make them realise you are just as much on their level, like we're all equal partners here, it does make things a lot easier. But obviously you then can't do that too much because then they're going to think.. authority is authority, isn't it? I'm like, I'm just going to go against every rule in the book. But if you do it carefully and show that there are times to have a laugh in a joke and be flexible, but also there's there's boundaries… yeah, I think, it's an element for trust as well.

EMMA: Okay. You've talked about quite a few things there that I'd like to understand more about.

LANDO: haha yeah there's a lot to it, sorry

EMMA: no please don't apologise, you're right there is a lot to it and it's all really interesting to hear your perspective. You said about being on that level, equal partners I think. Can you say more about that like what does that look like?

LANDO: Yeah like physically I get down on the floor with them. I know that's not how everybody does it and it might make me look really unprofessional, but if I get down to their level, I'm not stood looking over them, there's less authority. I've come down to them. I'm not having to raise my voice. They see me eye to eye, whether they've got the head wrapped in a blanket or not, I'm there and to our level. It's… I think it just kicks in that this person is a human. They're not robots.

EMMA: Yeah, yeah mhm… are there any other way you show that you're equals?

LANDO: Yeah, doing it alongside them sometimes, like, you do it, I'll do it, let's do it together kind of thing, you know, '*we*', *we'll* do it. If it's an assessment it's a bit different, like that's a whole different ball game. Yeah…

EMMA: And tell me a bit more about trust, I think you mentioned it earlier.

LANDO: Trust makes a difference, just because these kids, a lot of them have got that many friends. A lot of them have been passed from pillar to posts through professionals, told one thing, sent to school, schools failed them, but I think a lot of these parents have been failed as well, like there's just been a lack of understanding of the needs. it's…yeah, it's the pressure building on the parents and that rubs off on them. You know, sometimes parents are like, 'I'm not doing that, why do they need to do that? I don't need to send them to school, why do I need to force them to get them on the bus?"

EMMA: yeah, I wonder what that's about?

LANDO: It's stability, if the child doesn't feel like they're in control they're not going to want to do it, are they? So it's that… needing that element of control. Okay so, we have school jobs for them. Okay, it's not targeted specifically for PDA, but it gives that sense of purpose, and that gives them that sense of authority as well. If they've got a responsibility for something, they are expecting us to meet something. So if we want them to meet something, it makes it that bit more… amicable, is that the word? I think that's the wrong word…

EMMA: Erm.. let me think

LANDO: on the same level… parallel. It's showing that you trust them and they trust you and… and trusting you helps lower their anxiety which means then you can ask them to do more… because they trust you.

EMMA: Yeah. Okay. I get what you mean.

LANDO: and yeah, another student, his behaviours, he becomes very loud if anything is expected of him, even if it is just being in the classroom. But there's a lot of background work going on there to support him, like support workers, things like that to try and pinpoint what's going on. And they display demand avoidant behaviours, but to the point like, you don't always feel like it's a success because you can't always get them to engage in the work. To be fair, that's going to happen when there's so much going on.

EMMA: It sounds like… you're maybe talking about engagement in the work being like a bit of a marker of success. I mean, erm.. are there.. I'm wondering if there are other ways you've kind of come to see or measure success with children who you see as demand avoidant?

LANDO: If it's sitting in the classroom and just remaining in the classroom not being vocal and disturbing everybody else and feeling calm and comfortable then that's a win itself and it's an extra bonus if they do any… Even if they do the date and the LO, I mean, that's something. So you can meet them in the middle and then eventually, some days that middle gets more towards the end than it is the middle. Some days the middle isn't possible, some days it is.

EMMA: Okay, that's really interesting. Erm, and I was wondering what you think is kind of the most important consideration or principle that you keep in mind, in terms of your interactions and your responses in situations like that and others.

LANDO: Keep it professional, but keep it fair. Like you've got to approach it knowing whether this is like a PDA type thing or whether it is just someone not doing it, because they do go through their phases as they're just becoming teenagers, yeah, and pushing boundaries and thinking I'm not doing that. Like why should I do that? Yeah, so it is kind of being aware

EMMA: Yeah

LANDO: Yeah, it's that awareness. Like that awareness of their needs, but also what's going on around them.

EMMA: Can you tell me a bit more about what you mean?

LANDO: So like… if they're trying to navigate a stressful home environment, for example, and we put them in a classroom and say "do this", they're going to spiral. But if we try and make it that bit more friendly and soften it for them, so they still can

do the work and they're still able to then carry that on for when they're in a more able state, then they're able to then meet the expectations but in a way that feels ok, and that's good. Yeah…

EMMA: Yeah, that makes sense so it's about softening things so the demands feel more manageable?

LANDO: Yeah, exactly and we have things like sensory breaks. So, like they need movement, things like that, whether that helps reset them to try again. We've got breakout rooms where they need to go and do their work separately.

EMMA: Yeah

LANDO: And then obviously you got staff members like myself and the pastoral team that are there to support them. I feel like you also work with the parents. It's a whole team approach. It's not just one for one and one for the other you know.

EMMA: And what is the impact of working alongside parents, like what difference does it make?

LANDO: Consistency. If you're not consistent in how you approach or understand things it just confuses them more and then they're more resistant to do what they need to do.

EMMA: And what does that look like for you as a school then in terms of your interactions with parents? How do you ensure that like, shared approach.. understanding.

LANDO: Some parents like to have a communication book. So we record the behaviours, if there's been any sticking points or contact home, erm… phone calls home, emails. Sometimes it's not, it's not the right thing to do to always contact the parents, it doesn't change the behaviours. Erm…. also it's always helpful if you know what's going on at home, but you don't always know what's going on at home. But when you have that more perspective, yeah it's helpful. So, like if there's changes in the houses they're going to, or who's picking them up, dropping off, it makes it into a chore for them going home doesn't it. And if things feel like a chore, like if things feel… draining, you don't want to do it. It's like, I like cleaning when I've got a cleaning head on, but if you said to me now, go home and absolutely scrub your kitchen and your air fryer right now, I wouldn't do it.

EMMA: why do you think that is?

LANDO: it’s just that thing isn’t it where if someone tells you to do something, even if you like it, you don’t want to do it anymore.

EMMA: okay

LANDO: I mean you get that feeling on the opposite end of spectrum as well, don't you like saying don't press that red button and you want to press it.

EMMA: haha yeah

LANDO: That's another thing that comes into it, though, isn't it? It's like sometimes if they’re being told not to do something they're to do it just to get the reaction and almost like meet their own need in that sense.

EMMA: And what need would you say that is?

LANDO: Like satisfaction… that relief… it’s that control again isn’t it. I mean there’s not a lot known about PDA Is there? Like we just have to work with the behaviours we’re seeing and it differs day to day. Yeah, it’s that co-morbidity as well isn’t it, as you see it alongside a lot of other like… SEN needs.

EMMA: can you say more?

LANDO: So like if they’ve got ADHD as well and they're showing PDA behaviours who's to say that the ADHD medication isn't contributing to that? Because you know it affects things like eating patterns, sleeping patterns. Who's to say that it's a counter intuitive effect… they given stimulants basically to people who are overstimulated to calm them down then they're shutting down their like hunger systems and things like that and… if you feel a bit hungry and then you've got nothing in in you, but you can't physically can't eat because of your medication, you're going to be more resistant to do things, aren't you? Like your basic needs are not met, because you physically can't eat and it makes everything else harder.

EMMA: Yeah, that’s an interesting point what you’re saying there. And are there any other ways that you’d understand demand avoidance?

LANDO: It’s just that element of control. So if there’s a lot going on at home, you haven’t got control in other areas of your life, you turn to something else to try and gain that control, whether that be defying somebody else, not looking after yourself in a way where I guess you could see in things like eating disorders as well, where you have to meet your own need with yourself like having control of the situation when they have no say over other things.

EMMA: Yeah

LANDO: Control in a world where you feel like you've not got any. Yeah… nothing is stable, predictable. So it's creating that element of stability in school.

EMMA: And what does that bring to them? What does that control and creating stability bring?

LANDO: A sense of belonging… safety.. like emotionally, in that control. Yeah…

EMMA: Okay thank you for that, that's all really helpful hearing your perspective and insights. So I'm going to move us on slightly if that's okay?

LANDO: Yeah sure

EMMA: So I'm just interested to hear about what it feels like for you working with demand avoidant behaviours?

LANDO: For me or for them?

EMMA: erm…whatever comes to mind really

LANDO: Well for them, there's an element of severe frustration, like they can't always express…they can't always find the words to say why they're not doing something or why something is so hard, or why they can't grasp the concept of why they're being asked to do it or yeah, they can't tell you why they can't do it… They can't always tell you why, because I think a lot of the time, they don't know themselves sometimes. I remember a student telling me that it's like a mental block, almost like sometimes they want to cooperate but physically can't and something prevents them.

EMMA: mhm

LANDO: Yeah, so there's that, and then it's the emotional side of it in terms of… well it affects their emotions that they feel negatively and it's like going back to the stability thing and that sense of security. I feel like that's a big factor, like they want to feel understood but don't always feel that.

EMMA: How do you go about making them feel understood?

LANDO: Yeah, sometimes I respond in a certain way and it has the complete opposite effect. And you think…what now? if you to go at it from a completely different angle and sometimes you don't know what that's going to be, or you go home and think ahhh, I should've, or shouldn't've done that

EMMA: Have you got any examples of this?

LANDO:. Erm sometimes just leaving them, not in the room on their own, but just leave it, drop any expectations for some time and they'll come out it…until the next time. Yeah... it's knowing when to push it and when to not.

EMMA: And does working with demand avoidant behaviours impact you in any way?

LANDO: It's tiring. But then it's so rewarding when you crack it…It's brilliant.

EMMA: aww nice

LANDO: Or they come in one day and you think, they're not going to do that, and then you work with them you know indirect language, on their level, and they defy the odds and you're like woah.

EMMA: Aw that sounds lovely I can see how that is rewarding.

LANDO: yeah

EMMA: Is there anything that you usually do to kind of manage or cope with the emotional demands of working with demand avoidant behaviours?

LANDO: Who, me?

EMMA: Yeah

LANDO: Oh that's a whole different story….

EMMA: …okay. I mean, is there any kind of formal and informal support available in school?

LANDO: So, you know, we've got line managers. With my role I have regular one to ones, because obviously I've got the safeguarding responsibilities as well. So it's

then managing, what's working for certain students, what's not working, what's going on at home. What are we doing to help that?

EMMA: And is there anything out of that that you value the most or you think is the most important for you to be able to work with demand avoidant behaviours?

LANDO: It's having that time to discuss it when it gets too much, and… training.

EMMA: Have you had any training on demand avoidant behaviours?

LANDO: No… I think.. I can't remember as we have a lot of training. But because it's so… not misunderstood, but so not understood, it's hard to do.

EMMA: Yeah, yeah. Okay. I mean, erm when and how was it that you first learned about demand avoidant behaviours?

LANDO: just like hearing about it when I was doing my studies, and then came more into light when obviously when you're working alongside them… but it's only recently emerged to be known so it's hard.

EMMA: yeah, yeah.

LANDO: So when I was, when I was at school, like you never heard anyone say like oh they've got PDA. Like, because I wasn't naughty at school that's why it's gone a miss, but you saw me out there on the phone, like tell me I've not got it? But yeah, it's through studies and doing psychology and then working with young people that you learn about demand avoidance and partly my experience around the elements of control, like lived experience.

EMMA: okay, thankyou so much for sharing that… and I'm interested in, erm…how does that shape, or does it shape the way you approach supporting young people?

LANDO: You've got to do it from a distance. You can't ever tell them that oh, look….like that happened to me oh my god we are the same. You can't do that, that's not professional and that breaks that boundary in so many levels, but it's knowing how they might feel and using that and having the awareness of would that have helped me in that situation? Absolutely not. It's kind of knowing… knowing what it feels like, you get them screaming at you… "You don't understand!" but inside you're like… I do

EMMA: Yeah I hear what you're saying.

LANDO: You've got to think of it as well. A lot of these kids have childhood trauma, and that's going to make them feel like…there's the whole control thing and like if they yeah… there are so many ways that it could be understood. But I know that, you know when you just feel like sometimes, there's something that you can't quite understand…and I'd love to be able to pinpoint it. Yeah, like because you think why are they… what's being a cat going to do? But then you think if that's helping them escape the demands of being a human being right now, then yeah…

EMMA: mhm, okay yeah… you said there that it might help them like escape the demands of being a human being. Erm, what does that maybe bring for them, what kind of purpose is that serving?

LANDO: Ease… it's more comfortable. But it's hard because sometimes you've got to be uncomfortable to get by in the world. So it's finding the balance really of like the things they need for life, but like keep that stability.

EMMA: Yeah, thank you for that. Erm, I'm also interested to know about your school as a whole. So you've told me about the strategies and approaches that you use individually, but are there any kind of specific school policies or whole school approaches or the culture that erm kind of shaped how you respond to these behaviours?

LANDO: We have our five core values, so we've got ambition, resilience, integrity and endeavour and… inclusivity, so they're a big factor playing into it, guiding us. We're very down on the zones of regulation as well. So, like, I think if they then can recognise and like, understand their emotions, if we can help them learn about their emotions, they're more likely to understand themselves and have more control over their emotions… and help them understand what need isn't being met and what to do. And so that's like a whole school approach.

EMMA: Yeah, is there a particular value there that you think guides your response the most?

LANDO: Resilience I think, having that ability to bounce back, and understanding that things don't always pan out the way we expect, or can control, but stick at it.

EMMA: and is there anything else?

LANDO: Yeah, we have shout outs every day, with recognitions there but again that doesn't always work for them so you have to do it subtly sometimes… and we have TA's that work closely alongside the students in their class.

EMMA: Yeah, I see

LANDO: And we have got the nurture, the nurture group, so it's a whole different approach for them.

EMMA: Yeah, yeah, and what is that ap-?

LANDO: It's the first school I've worked at that's had a nurture side… a lot of these children I work with are part of that nurture so thinking about their emotions, having strong relationships… belonging. Smaller class sizes, and like, supporting their independence.

EMMA: Finally, I just kind of wanted to ask you, erm about the language or the terms that are used within your setting to talk about to demand avoidant behaviours. So how is it understood, like how is it framed?

LANDO: Yeah. Avoidance of demands because of that underlying anxiety. But it's figuring out who's saying no just to be difficult or because they don't want to do what they're being asked to do. Challenging behaviour is a term that's often used.

EMMA and how do you differentiate between…

LANDO: You can usually tell when it's a choice and when it's not a choice.

EMMA: How would you distinguish between that?

LANDO: When you've worked with the kids for so long, you tend to just know. You just know them really well. It's hard to explain. So you know for example you could be really sad right now, but I'm looking at you, and thinking oh, she's so happy. But if I was like a good friend of yours who knew you well, they might think, well she's just putting it on, she actually wants to cry.

EMMA: Yeah I see what you're saying

LANDO: Yeah. But yeah, knowing them well, relationships play such a big role in it. And also it's that consistency again… but also trying things differently if something is not working.

EMMA: and…

LANDO: You've got to think you've got to make it a secure place for them because sometimes they're going home to something you wouldn't even want to imagine. So it's that sense of safety.

EMMA: How do you do that in school? Like support that sense of safety for the children who show demand-avoidant behaviours.

LANDO: I mean well firstly it's meeting their basic needs so like making sure they're fed and watered like they're not going to want to engage in anything if they're hungry and thirsty, they're warm, and then it's just you build on that… Maslow's hierarchy comes into it.

EMMA: yeah I was just thinking of that as you were talking.

LANDO: and it's just meeting them where they're at really.

EMMA: Yeah and…

LANDO: And also we teach life skills here. I think that helps them realise that things aren't always to put pressure on them for the sake of it, it's a necessity sometimes for life like some demands you can't avoid in life, there's a bigger purpose. So also if you target life skills, if you support their independence as well, that helps as they're doing things on their own terms.

EMMA: Can you say a bit more about that like, what…

LANDO: The independence like I think that if you target it from a teaching them independence perspective as well

EMMA: mhm

LANDO: then that's motivating for them and they're doing things on their terms and that's what they want to be able to do. If they've got that independence rather than being wrapped up in cotton wool and molly-coddled which some of them are… some of them aren't, but a lot of them are, that's really important.

EMMA: Yeah

LANDO: and if I phrase it like, "I need you to do this because I need you to help me right now…Otherwise I'm going to go insane", like obviously I don't say it like that, or like using a bigger reason why they need to do it, you know it's not just me saying it,

they will eventually do it rather than sitting there with their head on the desk . Being indirect works.

EMMA: Yeah yeah

LANDO: Sometimes you feel you need to be more direct though but I feel like that can sometimes, more often than not, I feel like you're adding fuel to the fire, you're setting yourself up to fail in terms of helping them, you're setting them up to fail.

EMMA: and how do you kind of communicate that, you've told me a lot about the strategies and approaches you use with demand avoidant behaviours, like, how are helpful approaches shared across the school?

LANDO: I don't know, I think we learn by example like watching others… Yeah. I probably need to do more on it, if I'm honest.

EMMA: okay, thank you for that. I'm just aware of the time, so it'd be good to draw it to a close now. Thank you so much for all your insights. Do you erm, feel there's anything that, you know, you haven't had the opportunity to say, anything else that you want to share?

LANDO: No that'll come to me at midnight tonight.

EMMA: Of course it will haha it always does, it always does. Right, in that case then I'll stop the recording.

Frances

EMMA: Right, that should be recording. There we go. Fantastic. So just to begin with then, erm can you summarise what your, kind of, classroom experience is to date?

FRANCES: yeah so erm… so I did French and German degree level, then I did PGCE, and then I've taught for 30 years. Secondary for… uh 19, 20 years, then primary for nine, and now I've been a TA in a secondary school for a year.

EMMA: Okay, lovely, a lot of experience there. Is there a particular year that you teach or support with at the moment?

FRANCES: So as a TA in this role we can be assigned to students with special educational needs between years seven to thirteen. So generally I work with years seven to ten.

EMMA: and what does your, kind of, day-to-day role look like then?

FRANCES: So erm I also am a key worker, so I have eight assigned students

EMMA: mhmm

FRANCES: erm all with varying different needs and so I may work with them in a day or I may not, but I get the timetable at the start of my day at 8:30…erm…five subjects are listed and then it indicates which students I'm assigned to in each of those periods and over a break time… erm, I might need to do a meet and greet at the start of the day, might need to escort them out to buses at the end of the day.

EMMA: mhm

FRANCES: but every day varies. So there is some consistency where…erm…. because some staff are full times, some are part time. So, I have students that I work with more every week than others, but yeah, it can vary quite a lot.

EMMA: There's usually quite a lot of variety then.

FRANCES: Yes

EMMA: It sounds like it’s keeping you busy.

FRANCES: It is really busy, plenty of variety and it means that our young people kind of are working with different adults, but not too vast a range which is important too. Yeah… but so they kind of have that comfort of knowing the faces that they're working with, but it's not the same person all the time.

EMMA: mhm

FRANCES: because that's quite demanding for both child and member of staff as well.

EMMA: Okay, that's really helpful background. Thank you for that. Erm…So I just kind of want to start by asking if you can explain the term demand avoidant behaviours or if you… if you can define it. What does that term mean to you?

FRANCES: So… erm, I would understand it as, erm, that it's….part of or can be attached to, erm autism. That it's where…. an individual needs to feel that they have some control, erm, in an autonomous way about what their day looks like, what their life looks like. That they can struggle with, kind of, the typical… the kind of ordinary things that might come up in any part of their daily routine, in the school routine. Erm… that they find those things very challenging and that…. because of that, anxiety is kind of there bubbling away most of the time.

EMMA: mhm

FRANCES: erm and then it's how that is displayed and that can be through…Yeah, sometimes quite different types of behaviour, whether it's physical outbursts or verbal outburst or being withdrawn, erm not willing to communicate, overcommunicating, but it's just… yeah, a struggle, a challenge for them to…yeah, to cope with day-to day. Yeah, expectations of others on them.

EMMA: Okay, so you've mentioned quite a lot there. So you… you talked about control and autonomy. Can you tell me a little bit more about that?

FRANCES: Yeah, it's kind of… you know school puts erm a lot of demands, a lot of expectations

EMMA: mhm

FRANCES: on a young person erm before they arrive at school, obviously the time that they need to arrive, right through to the timings during the day, to what they need to wear, erm, where they eat, how they eat, who they interact with, lesson routines…erm… So the school environment, it can be extremely stressful and erm

yeah, it doesn't suit everybody. And I think there's so many places, so many ways then that the young person will try and resist or push back in order to feel like they are having some say in how their their day goes..

EMMA: mhm

FRANCES: or what they do and who they do it with and where they go to do that with to feel in control and reduce stress and yeah… They're shaping…

EMMA: yeah

FRANCES:…they want to shape erm their interactions and their day in some format whilst knowing that they also need to try and align and fall in with school expectations…yeah, where they can, because schools have rules and so it's… yeah, this kind of balance, erm, that us as staff are trying to gain with them whilst aiming to keep them… making sure that they can feel comfortable to come into school, to then keep them in school and then for it to be a positive as possible experience and also, you know, they are, you know, they aim to be in school is to make some progress academically, but also socially.

EMMA: mhmm

FRANCES: So, yeah…

EMMA: You also mentioned about physical and verbal outbursts and withdrawal. I mean, can you explain a little bit more about what that looks like? And if there is anything else, you know, that you do see behaviour wise in response when the demands of the day are too much?

FRANCES: Yeah… so we have several students, so, it's say, student A, I work with generally every day between sort of one and four hours… erm and then there is constant erm negotiations going on all the time, pushing back. It's quite… I've got a very strong relationship with student A and a lot of trust has been built up which helps. So, I don't tend to see aggression towards me. um I don't see verbal outbursts, but there's a lot of shut down. So their way of dealing with things that feel too much is a lot of shutdown. Student B erm… is also autistic as student A is, but erm… I haven't been.. I've worked with them for a year as well, haven't had as much contact with them, but their way of dealing with it is really explosive, shouting back, a lot of no, go away, hasn't used swear words towards me, but has used swear words to others… but also very physical. If it's outside, break time… they will pick up something and throw it. We'll try and get that physical distance, you know.

EMMA: Yeah:

FRANCES: and then yeah, they’re totally different what they do in order to get their own way.

EMMA: So there's quite a contrast between the behaviours displayed between the two children that that you work with.

FRANCES: Yeah.

EMMA: I mean, have you got any thoughts about.. I mean…how do you interpret that contrast between them?

FRANCES: erm… it could be down to erm…kind of student A is kind of nurtured a lot more at home. They are completely different characters. They're much more child-like. So they still believe in Santa, still believe in the Easter bunny but are also very grown up about things. And they are very physical, like they enjoy sports and can be physical to other children. But I don't know, there seems to be a bit more respect or understanding that, I don't know.. that there's different relationship with adults. Student B from a home life perspective, I know there is…there's separation between the parents. erm yeah, this student is struggling more with everything I think both at home and in school. Erm so… and again their timetable has been shaped very differently to student A because they're not coping well with the requests being made of them on a day-to-day basis.

EMMA: Yeah.

FRANCES: So yeah, I think they are very different individuals, different circumstances, but interestingly, they are drawn to each other quite a lot, but also not drawn to… So there’s quite a lot of friction between the two as well.

EMMA: So that's interesting. We might come back to that. Erm…and so in terms of when they are showing those demand avoidant behaviours, are there certain kind of situations that they appear the most?… certain kind of triggers or, you know, what are the demands that lead to that?

FRANCES: the expectation of going into a classroom. So student A has chose certain subjects to go into last year. So erm maths… they felt quite secure in maths and uh, DT and PE eventually. Erm…but what my observations were that whenever they went into a classroom that it was like having erm.. just they were on high alert the whole time.

EMMA: mhm.

FRANCES:

So they couldn't focus on what was happening at the front or on the board. It was constantly just looking around the classroom, seeing who else was in there, erm really hypersensitive to any noises that were in the classroom or outside the classroom.

EMMA: mmm

FRANCES: Erm they wouldn't actually be able to focus too much on what the lesson was about because of their anxiety was so high about just being in that environment. Erm… they would bring in any kind of past history altercations that they'd had with students that were in the room and those would sort of be still hanging over them…. So yeah, so they might sort of last a few minutes but then retreat.

EMMA: mhm

FRANCES: The other student, B, was actually only very rarely in classrooms last year, started off quite well, but then within a couple of weeks, two to three weeks, that was it, they were hardly in the classroom again…. just, I don't know, they're a more dominant character and.. finds it harder to adapt to the expectations compared to other students. They just didn't want to be in there.

EMMA: It sounds like there's different levels of demands that you're saying they can tolerate. And you mentioned that, erm… they might be… erm…in the classroom, for a few minutes and then that that would be it. I'm wondering… what would you notice… what would you see that would indicate to you that okay, they're struggling here, the level of demand is too much?

FRANCES: Yeah, um lots of tearing at nails, so hardly any nails, biting at nails, tearing at nails, erm lots of kind of fiddling, lots of rocking back on the chair, turning around, just constantly, looking at all corners of the room, the doorway…

EMMA: yeah

FRANCES: ….not really interacting with me or the work, so you're constantly trying to get that focus from them, and kind of they're just too overwhelmed by external factors really. Um… and there's just so much at the start of a lesson, which might be just getting everybody to settle down or giving books out. But it's too long, too much, they're all demands. They need, kind of, to be doing something physically.. I don't know. I just feel like the setting isn't what they need… as soon as they walk in, there needs to be that, kind of, engagement. So again, as a TA you think, right, I'll try and get them focused on something but then you realise you're battling with all the other stuff that's happening in the room. So yeah…

EMMA: Can you erm…say a bit more about that?

FRANCES: Yeah, yeah all the routines are too much for them. Yeah erm.. I mean in music, the anxiety that shoots up as soon as that child walks in because they don't sit at desk they just sit around the external edge of the room so everybody is facing inwards looking at each- other. The teacher is over in the corner. They wouldn't put their foot in, couldn't go through the door even, in a classroom like that. Erm PE, there's the challenge of changing, so both students come in wearing kit in order to avoid all the interactions within the changing room. Student B was getting very aggressive, erm… about changing and so came in their kit. it was too much. Student A was just too anxious about being in changing rooms. So it was like, I'm not going to do PE, so we're making kind of erm, that adaptation so that they can come in and at least engage in the lesson to some extent which is important.

EMMA: mhm

FRANCES: So both students were then allowed to come in PE kit, but they weren't wearing the proper kit. So again, it's like negotiating what kind of shorts would be at least acceptable or as plain a T-shirt as they could wear. But again, it's all the sensory stuff, PE kits are very synthetic and so, yeah….

EMMA: Yeah

FRANCES: So it's like, I can't go into the changing room because of the noise or they won't wear PE kit because it's the sensory side, then they will wear the kit, but it's on their own t… it's only what they are comfortable with and then it's like, well, let's now look at that and adapt where we can. Yeah…

EMMA: So the erm.. the sensory demands of the PE kit as well as everything else you've talked about.. the changing room.. are adding layers to what's.. to what's going on for them.. You've touched on anxiety quite a few times. I guess my next question that I was going to ask you is why do you think some children are avoidant to demands…you know, what.. what might be going on for them? Is anxiety the explanation or way of understanding that makes the most sense to you?

FRANCES: I do see anxiety as what's kind of driving the behaviour. Student A just says, I just hate school, I just hate school. They don't always present as hating school but we've done like a survey, that's been really useful actually. Erm, it was kind of middle of the summer term and there was a really long 50, kind of, question survey, but I made sure I sat with them and we went through it. And it actually stunned me how negative they still were by the end of the school year, even though they appear to have made some quite good progress, you know, and overcome some barriers. Erm, the general feeling is they just hate school. And I think that's where the anxiety comes, whether it's the worry about being picked on, the worry about being forced into a classroom and the worry about… um having to sit and eat

with a group that they don't want to sit with…noise…. yeah, it's just it's a lot of different factors that that are contributing to the anxiety.

EMMA: mhm

FRANCES: But they don't talk about anxiety. They don't talk about it. But when you do something like a survey and they get that opportunity and you say, you can be honest. We want you to be honest. That's when it really floods out and you kind of go, wow. it's just giving you quite an insight into what's going on for them, how they're feeling and stuff. But I don't know if they'd recognise it as anxiety.

EMMA: Mhm yeah and…

FRANCES: We have a lot of contact with parents because we're all assigned keyworker children, then every half term we have contact directly with parents for a formal review, which is good, but we also have day-to-day meet and greets with these key students as well.

EMMA: And what impact would you say those things have?

FRANCES: Because obviously the demand avoidance, anxiety isn't just happening at school. It's happening a lot at home too. So it's again, joining up… how can we ease things in school so things at home ease too.

EMMA: yeah.

FRANCES: So yeah, they tend to drop them off in the morning, so my student A doesn't often come in on time. Again, mum will bring in student A, erm.. we'll talk through how the evening's been, what's worked, what hasn't. They're on medication for ADHD, have they taken it? Have they not? How many hours has she had to kind of spend two-ing and fro-ing.

EMMA: mhmm

FRANCES: Yeah, and just talking…just talking through the morning or just general talk about family life, just to kind of ease the student in and just be able to talk about stuff that's not just school or make links with the families has been really important… So it's like we know where they're at in the morning because it can be so different day to day as to what demands they can cope with, or with their autism, they might not share at school and then they take it home, have a complete outburst about something and then the parent will ring and say…when we have had no awareness of that at all…

EMMA: mhmm yeah

FRANCES: It's just they masked it completely and then they've gone home and just completely let it all out. So, yes, it's really important. So that communication between home and school is something that massively important so we know where they're at.

EMMA: Okay thank you, that's really helpful to hear about. Erm and just kind of coming back to the demand avoidant behaviours, what do you feel the purpose and the function of those behaviours are in the moment. So, you know, when that child is avoiding demands in that classroom, what are they, you know, what are they trying to communicate or achieve?

FRANCES: erm….. to get out of the room, like, well yeah.. to avoid… so… So can they create something… a situation where they can then be taken out of that situation. They don't want to be there. It's too much for them. But so that's, that would be one.. erm part of it, I think. um yeah,can you say the question again?

EMMA: you've kind of answered the question there… you're saying they're wanting to avoid….

FRANCES: yeah so yeah, it's like, they're just not comfortable whatsoever. In their heads, it's unnecessary and why do I, you know, they just question, why do I have to go through that? Because school isn't necessarily the setting they want to be and they're not liking it. Student A questions everything about school all the time and has sent me emails where they have found things on YouTube to explain to me why school is not important and why it's not essential…

EMMA: oh really?

FRANCES: which I found really interesting.

FRANCES: And then I found videos and clips to send back to say, well, this is the other side where it can be valuable. So that I found really interesting. It's like, okay, you are going to, you know, make a scene kick off, just walk out, pack all your stuff away, go…. But yeah, student A has got really strong opinions why I don't actually need to be in there or be putting up with this because I don't need it. And yeah… they told me today that I will only see them for the next two years because they're going to leave early and go to college because they know that they don't have to stay in school forever.

EMMA: mhmm interesting.

FRANCES: So there's a lot, you know, and they are listening and observing and picking up a lot of things around.

EMMA: I wonder what are your thoughts on that… their perspective.

FRANCES: Erm… I can see both sides completely, erm, I could see both sides and I try to sympathise with them and say, I hear you and I understand that can be the situation. I also think that you need to be aware that you need to give yourself as many opportunities as possible and that, you know, if we can manage to do this, then that will help you.

EMMA: yeah I get you

FRANCES: I will acknowledge both, but in my role, my job here, you know, is to make sure that they receive, you know, they achieve their potential in whatever way that might be. And as an educator, you know, I'm a trained teacher, it is kind of in me to say, well, we are here to be educated and this might be your best time to be educated for free.

EMMA: mhm

FRANCES: and you might gain something so let's just try and be open minded. But yeah, but I do listen, I do respond and, and with humour as well, I give some humour back, but I know it's not going away. That thinking is also underlying all the time. They're not going to act or change their perspective from what I say, so I know that perspective, it's still there guiding them.

EMMA: Yeah

FRANCES: It's a.. but I just have to forge on and make the best of each lesson each day.

EMMA: erm moving on then, erm, how did you first learn about demand avoidant behaviours?

FRANCES: It was, erm, I was head of sixth-form, we had a young man in sixth form and he hadn't got a diagnosis of anything as far as I was aware, but staff were coming to me because I was in a student support role saying that he was refusing to do work by certain deadlines, that he wouldn't submit work in a certain format, that he was quite argumentative in class. And I was looking at him, seeing that he was quite assertive, that he had strong viewpoints. He was interested in politics. He was doing law, um but that was just, that was his nature. That was him, but also trying to support them and say, okay, I'll work with him to get the work done. And… and it was

only then through, I think we had some autism training and erm, is ODD the same thing as, erm, PDA?... I think ODD was part of the training… erm so ODD was mentioned and that, I think, made me think, oh, this young man kind of makes me think of some of these things.

EMMA: mhmm

FRANCES: I remember ODD being up on the screen... and now..I, I think, yeah, he was displaying PDA, and I think he was later diagnosed with autism, and it's like yeah, okay… So he was my first where I thought it's.. it's yeah, it's deeper than what staff are seeing, it's deeper than just refusing, there's something else kind of going on.

EMMA: Yeah

FRANCES: And he's gone on to forge a very, kind of, he's shaped his life exactly as he wanted to, he's set up… he's very entrepreneurial, but he wasn't willing to bend, to shape himself to what others were wanting of him. He was like,no, I need to set myself up in this way. So yeah...

EMMA: That's really interesting… And is there anything that's further shaped your understanding since then or?

FRANCES: Yeah, a lot of autism training.

EMMA: okay

FRANCES: So then when I was in primary, I worked with a young lady, yeah, who then went on to a special school with an EHCP who had autism, but erm yeah, so I had a lot more training because I was working directly with her and we wanted the classroom to be as fully inclusive, and I really wanted my class to really understand her as much as possible and understand… when she's not doing something… that doesn't mean that it's on purpose, but yeah… yeah she was wanting to do her own thing, because of anxiety… So yeah, that kind of yeah, increased my awareness.

EMMA: Okay, thank you. Erm, I'm going to move us on to think about how you respond to demand avoidant behaviours. So I wondered whether you could talk me through, erm, an episode or a time in your practice recently where you felt you were successful or that it went well in responding to demand avoidant behaviours. Is there anything that comes to mind?

FRANCES: Erm…. Yeah… I think, yeah, maybe with the first student A with PE, because they were absolutely adamant they weren't going to do it, absolutely

adamant. Erm… and I think I said, well, I'm going to go out, I'm going to take another student out and I'm just going to find out what sport they're doing and come back to you.

EMMA: mhmm

FRANCES: But and I'm sure because they wear canvas shoes… they're not going to wear leather school shoes, they wear canvas. So I said, I think, you know, there might be a way that you could… if it's running, you'll be all right with what you're wearing, but let me just go and find out. Then I went to find out and interestingly as well, the teachers…kind of, were a little bit taken aback that I wanted to bring this student out because having seen them in their first year and how they were and they didn't engage and they were quite, erm, aggressive around other people and erm not willing to... and I was like, could you just give them a chance? Because this could be a key opportunity.

EMMA: Yeah

FRANCES: So I kind of had to coax both sides, both the student and the teachers to… can we just try and let this happen? Erm… and there's also a student out there that had had a physical altercation with student A, who they also wanted to avoid, they were like, well, I'm not going out there if they're there, so that was another reason they didn't want to do it. And I said well like, well, but they're part of the group, so I will have to figure out how to manage that as well.

EMMA: mhm

FRANCES: So I went out and spoke to the teacher, said that I really, really wanted to give them this opportunity that I would go nowhere, that I would be with that student, erm, could they also be, you know, in a separate group to the individual? And they said, yeah, that's fine. I'll give it a go. Went back in, then explained how it would look before they went out there, that they could just sit and observe if they wanted to, but it would be really good if they could join in because one of the teams were down by one so it would really help balance it out, and so student A agreed to come out and it was rounders erm…so yeah, and the teacher made no comment about what they were wearing, they were very welcoming, said, oh maybe going into this team?, kept them away from the other student and um yeah, I think the attraction of having a bat in the hand straight away. So, it was like, there you go. You can go straight to the front. And then it was amazing. Erm… managed to get a full rounder.

EMMA: oh wow

FRANCES: So again there was, there was an immediate engagement, a hook, a celebration straight away. The other person was on the other side. And I think again that it's kind of that adrenaline starts going straightway and then they're engaged and

it, from that lesson, they then went out, yeah, to a lot more lessons, not every lesson. But there were also two different PE groups and that PE group was a lot smaller than the other one and it was mixed, whereas the other one was just boys.

EMMA: yeah

FRANCES: And it was really, really positive. And the teacher was just like, I'll do anything for them. If they want to carry on and do you know, this sport with a different group, and they were immediately willing to be more flexible as well with that student in the next half term after seeing the impact of what it can do.

EMMA: And you said that you, you managed to coax the young person. Can you tell me more about what that looked like? Is there anything that you said or did to, kind of, support them?

FRANCES: I tend to, kind of, get quite, you know, close, on the same level, one-to-one, quiet and calm and just, erm be really, like, small steps, you know, say I haven't really had the opportunity to see PE, so this is for me, and I know that you run a lot and so kind of encouraging them gently. Erm… no bribery, but lots of kind of… trying to draw on their skill set, could we try? And also we were trying to build up slowly… so we have been giving choices and saying, look, you're not really coming into any lessons, which ones should we try… these are the things that you're good at, we think you can run so would PE be a possibility?, it'd be a good one, but um, yeah, that kind of coaxing like in terms of encouragement… 'you can do it'. We also make sure that when they go out there, it's what they want it to be as well. So yeah, what was out there was what I'd promised, whatever you say it is going to look like, you want it to look like that…

EMMA: mhmm, yeah I hear you

FRANCES: So that their trust is there before they go out and it's maintained and then it's also more positive to think, oh, next time, you know, it'll be that way as well so makes them feel more comfortable next time, it's predictable.

EMMA: and erm, you also mentioned about negotiation previously as well. Can you tell me a bit more? What does that look like?

FRANCES:

There's a lot of it, I'm trying to think even like today, it's like just everything is constantly negotiated. Like erm yesterday it was like, oh, so it was lunchtime. It was my lunchtime.

I didn't need to go downstairs, but they wanted to go down, student A wanted to go downstairs and eat their lunch, which again is a massive thing to actually have that confidence now to go down and sit at the table publicly and eat as it's been too much

for them previously. So you really want it to happen, but I'm like, okay, well, if we go down, I will come with you, but I'm going to come back up and have mine. I'm not going to stay with you. But then I get down there and then they're just messing about, you know, and saying that they haven't got their lunch with them. I'm like, okay, well, I'll go with you and buy your lunch, and then they're like well actually I do, haha I've got my lunch, so I'm like okay, there's quite a lot of play that goes on, but again I think it's like, they're thinking, I'm going to distract you for as long as possible to make sure you stay with me, but I'm like, right, I've had two minutes extra down here. I need to go back now. So it's kind of like I will for so long, be flexible, but at the end of it because I've got this to do and you need to do that, So yeah… erm quite often, you know, they might not want to go into a lesson, but it's like, well, they like to do music on the corridor. So they have had no music lessons, no form of music lessons, but it's like, they both like music. They both have a good natural ear for piano.

They like to hit the drums, they like to yeah, just experiment. So they can both be encouraged. So right, if you do that, then we might go down and we can go to the music room and you can have ten minutes on the drums.

EMMA: So it's like a preferred activity that's…

FRANCES: yeah

EMMA: coming after.

FRANCES: Yeah, that works quite nicely but it's like, but you really do need to do this in order, but it, often doesn't work it depends where they're at, suddenly there's no negotiation and it's not going to work at all, you just get a really blunt 'no go away.'

EMMA: and how do you make sense of those differences, like, times when negotiation does work and when it doesn't?

FRANCES: erm it depends where they're at really, erm… like the last couple of days have been quite tricky for Student B, I think coming back after five weeks, five and a half weeks holiday, just a real struggle to come back into a school environment

EMMA: right yeah…

FRANCES: and it's like, no I'm just not doing it, computer's on in front of them. So for student B, their kind of decompression is to go on the computer. But once they're on a computer, it really helps. Student A, their decompression is you can choose a period of the day where there's no requirement of you to go to any lesson. You can be independent in the inclusion base, which is left to your own devices, you can do yeah, do whatever, so yeah.. they have time to just be.

EMMA: And erm.. so how do you decide kind of how much demand to put on that young person? Is there anything that you know makes you think, oh now I think I can ask you to do this, or maybe it's the not the right time?

FRANCES: So with student B erm, I'll go up and say, oh, it's science soon, then I'll write how many minutes before we go and then I'd say 'we' to include both of us, we're doing it together, and then sometimes they might say, "no I'm not going." And I'll say, "oh, but come on, because they would be really exciting", and then they go, "NO" and then you think okay this isn't going to happen. Then I say, well, I could go up and get the work. I could bring it back. So yeah, we do have that freedom to say, I will go and I'll get it and I'll bring it back to you. You bring it back, sometimes student B will not even look at the work, sometimes they will, sometimes you might get a response… Sometimes they will let me scribe it, so then that something gets done.

EMMA: yeah

FRANCES: So there's different ways you can get then get some response to it… or you might involve another child and say, "oh, what do you think this answer is, or can you explain it, because I'm not sure that I can explain this to student B", and then student B will be like, oh, I know what that means. So it's just like playing them without them realising it. They don't want somebody else to answer so then they will answer because they don't want them to do it. But as soon as it's really blunt and their voice starts to increase in volume and get more aggressive and it's like, I'm not going to stress you, there is absolutely no point. I go and tell a line manager and say, right I've tried this and this, they're not in the right place, the mood for it.

EMMA: And what would you, what would they be doing instead in that moment whilst you know, they're not ready to engage in anything. What kinds of things seem to support them in you know erm… regulating in those moments?

FRANCES: So yeah like I said, student B, just yeah on the computer is definitely the biggest help. We've got, erm, a sensory room that we've just set up so that's quite good… we've just got bean bags on the floor, very plain walls, you know classic sensory things. But yesterday student A was in there, and they were gradually sticking things together and then using a ruler and slicing through bits of plastic and I'm like, yeah we need to go. But yeah we do use the sensory room, I kind of go, just go, you might want to, it might help. But then sometimes it becomes something… yeah, they create something else out of it, and it becomes something much more distracting again. I'm supposed to be using it in this way, to calm, should we now just come out and go for a bit because it's not doing that… so yeah…

EMMA: So erm, it sounds like sometimes the sensory room can serve a, sort of, regulatory purpose, but at other times it can kind of take on a different role or become more of a distraction and you're trying to navigate that?

FRANCES: Yeah exactly…

EMMA: Okay, just kind of thinking about then what you feel is the most important consideration or principle that you keep in mind, you know, in terms of your interactions and responses with children when they are displaying demand avoidant behaviours? Obviously you've talked quite a bit already about how you interact with them. But is there anything that you think is the most important thing to bear in mind?

FRANCES: Erm…I think it's what, you know, whatever they're expected to be doing, what is the most important aim of that activity? What are we actually aiming for? And how do I help them to reach their aim in the calmest and most, you know, helpful way to them? There's different ways of getting there. and erm, and we might not get to meeting that full aim at all, but that doesn't matter.

EMMA: mhm

FRANCES: as long as we have, kind of, encouraged them.. okay and so if we were going to a lesson and it's DT and we're making something, it's kind of helping them to feel secure about walking in the classroom that there's positive interaction between them and the member of staff, that they're seated somewhere, that they're comfortable and have had a say in, where their angst is at a minimum, that they know that that's their place and again, can feel comfortable… that they know what the main aim is, that they feel that they can do it, and making sure they've got the tools to do that, but also explaining, you know, we need to be safe here. So, if it's a DT room, if you're going to access equipment, you need to know how to use that equipment. And you know…you're not going to go straight onto a sewing machine or you're not going to go and get tools up.

EMMA: mhm

FRANCES: So again, safety is really important because they can be pushing back about these safety based things, but again, it's just saying, uh, I can hear what you saying, but it's got to be done in this way because of safety. So, yeah, safety is really big and we can, yeah, that's got to be thought about on all different levels.

EMMA: Yeah

FRANCES: And then…sanctions don't work, you know, those traditional sanctions. So again it's understanding that they are going to, probably create something in their own way, that they want to do, and we have to be accepting of that, we can't be sanctioning it, but we can try and still maybe include the skills that are being taught so well, let's adapt the task, that's absolutely fine, but we still need to be incorporating these skills to make and show progress. So it's just, again, that flexibility is really important… like, also flexibility, it's nice to obviously stay within the

classroom when we can, but we also have that freedom to, you know, move out into a corridor or go to a side room or go to inclusion base or say, is there any chance that we could come back at a quieter time or, you know, they've got a lesson where they're not going to do, can they be working, you know, separately. So, yeah, the staff are really good at understanding that, yeah, it's not always going to work at that time in the classroom with a big group.

EMMA: Yeah so the classroom isn't the only option

FRANCES: I mean, we did some cooking just the two of us, student A and myself, but we went and we met the cookery teacher beforehand we explained what recipe we had, we explained what we'd like to do. She listened really closely to the student and then said right, that's fine you can come in and do it, but you need to be aware of the switch, of this, that, these are my expectations. So and then again, I've been asked today by student A oh, can we do some cooking again like we did last time? So they don't want to go into a classroom with a whole group, but they want to cook what they want to cook, but they do know that will only happen if we follow the rules of the cookery room.

EMMA: So you've kind of got those boundaries in place

FRANCES: yeah, yeah, non-negotiables, but there is also flexibility, like when they do it, the recipe they're cooking, how you reach that outcome as such. Because I'm working with, you know, high profile SEN students, a lot of the PDA is obviously, big behaviours, erm.. these are students that can go in and out of classrooms with a lot of freedom and a lot of flexibility whereas other students might be, you know, displaying PDA in the classroom, but I'm not working with them, maybe as much. So, you know, I think it's amazing how much flexibility we're able to give these students, that are the really high profile ones, so that their days are as calm as possible.

EMMA: And what would you say is your main aim then when you are putting all these strategies and erm, adjustments in place, and you're interacting in a certain way..

FRANCES: To keep them calm yeah, you just want them to go home and want to come back again the next day and yeah… and student A has had such a different year eight to their year seven. They've now come back into year nine…erm yeah, and it's really positive start.

EMMA: Is there anything else that you've not already talked about that you think has helped with that change?

FRANCES: Relationships. Relationships are really important and there's a lot of us in the team and and you can see that some of the TAs, yeah, who are able to establish stronger rapports with some of the students. So, yeah, I know who I have strong

relations is really interesting. You can create something, when you have good relationships with them, that you can't create with other students… So it does come down to personalities as well, what blends and what doesn't.

EMMA: Yeah, mhmm…that's interesting. What kind of personalities do you think work well with children who are displaying demand avoidant behaviours?

FRANCES: Yes, I mean, humour. Erm…some people make these assumptions around autistic children that you… that they don't get humour or they haven't got a sense of humour or erm that they can't be creative. And actually, it's like they can be really super creative and they can roleplay and they do have a great sense of humour. So definitely drawing on those is really important.

EMMA: mhmm

FRANCES: Yeah… I…. I see humour and hear humour a lot, um and it definitely works and definitely to… kind of bring down a situation that might start to get a little bit heated.

EMMA: Okay. So you're kind of using humour then to kind of diffuse the situations where you're thinking, okay, this could escalate into something quite big here?

FRANCES: But they're also, they're very astute and they know when you're trying to… they're not daft at all. But again, it's acknowledging and saying, yeah, I know you know what I'm trying to do with you but that would be really nice if you would. Okay… you're going to love it.

EMMA: haha so they can see right through you haha.

FRANCES: haha yeah they're not daft.

EMMA: haha I bet. Okay so… You know, some people find working with children displaying demand-avoidant behaviours emotionally demanding at times. Sometimes it's rewarding. You can feel differently at different times. So I'm just interested in your experience, really, and does working with demand devoid behaviours have any personal or emotional impact on you? And if so, how?

FRANCES: Again, it definitely depends on the student and how strong your relationship is and how, how they are. So student A I feel I know really well and I work with them probably the most each day and each week and that we've got a really good level of trust. I did break that trust one time. I'd learned from it because I tried to use humour and it went wrong. So that was it. So, erm where they said, do

you want to know what I did last night? And I said, no, and they looked really quite hurt and they went ‘really?’ and I went ‘no’. And then they said, ‘oh’, and then they asked me, ‘when did you last wet the bed?’ So I said, ‘oh, I now know what you did last night’ and then I laughed and they said, ‘I can't believe you've just… I said I wasn't going to tell anybody’. Erm, and I went ‘no, I was laughing at the fact that you've just asked me the last time I wet the bed and that was probably a long time ago’, erm but then they carried on to tell with the whole story and the panic around it. But that was really interesting and there was a lot of anxiety over that, but I said to them, I won't do that again. I spoke to the mum as well. They hadn't gone home and relayed any of it, but I was really panicked, I really felt like, oh my gosh, I really established this really strong trust and it’s now damaged. But… it hadn’t actually done any damage because they didn't even bother to tell home. So I was like, oh, okay it's not as bad as I thought, but I did apologise a lot, I thought, I won’t do that again.

EMMA: How did that feel for you?

FRANCES: Yeaaaah, I felt really bad, like I've worked so hard with this young person to make them feel safe as much as I can in any situation and then I've just gone and, you know… but if I'd known what they were going to say was so traumatic for them.

EMMA: mhm

FRANCES: and they obviously wanted to understand why it’d happened and to find out whether that had happened to me. So yes they’ve got a really high level of trust, but with student B the same level of trust is not there. I don't feel I know them that well… I'm also much more wary of them. They're so much more unpredictable and much more physically aggressive when they don't want to do something. There's so much more explosive physical behaviours.

EMMA: mhmm

FRANCES: And I know that as a team, we've raised it… as… we don't always feel safe. And erm….we will not push that student, you know, it is not our aim to make them do something that they don't want to do, but it is our role to try and encourage them. And… yeah… and it's gone too far sometimes, student B has responded in literally smashing up computers and throwing chairs.

EMMA: that sounds difficult

FRANCES: and we, you know, we get everybody out of the room, one or two people will stay in there with that student and again, you know, sit on the floor, sink down low, try and breathe. And they always end up sobbing absolutely in bits… erm… They’re saying, “I hate this” and, “I hate me” and all that comes tumbling out, but yeah, that student has a lot more impact.

EMMA: Yeah that sounds hard

FRANCES: yeah, you just feel your stomach's tight, your chest is tight… yeah, your own anxiety goes up. You don't know what's going to happen. You want to keep everybody safe.

And when I was outside with that student, they'd gone out already really upset and that's when they lifted a paving slab and dropped the paving slab. You try and get everybody back but you don't leave them because you're assigned to them and you want to make sure they're okay, but my student A came running down and came outside to come and protect me and defend me, which I didn't realise, but that's what they told me later and said, erm I heard them shouting at you. I saw what they were doing. Do you realise that I came down to protect you? And I was like, thank you but no, no, you don't do that. I can look after myself. But that was really interesting… And that's happened twice when they've come and said, I don't like you being shouted at, and I was like, no. So yeah, that, that I found I was really surprised by that and I was like, you can't, please don't put yourself in that position.

EMMA: Why do you think they did that?

FRANCES: I think because we have developed a really strong bond. They know that I'm there for them in any situation. And, you know, I will make sure if they need to vacate a classroom, I'll help and do that. I'll help be their voice. I will do anything they need me to, obviously within reason. But I've been there for them, maybe they feel like well, you're there to back me and I'm there to back you when I see things that I don't think are right. And it's quite like, this is a bit of a reciprocal relationship… But I was like, yeah, I need to talk to you about that.. please don't do that. Thank you but… yeah.

EMMA: And when you are seeing the big physical behaviours you described, is there support in place for you as staff members?

FRANCES: Yes, its amazing. When Student B has had the really physical outbursts, literally you know, the office is there for SENCo but if staff hear a raised voice, because it's not as common, staff will come straight away to see who's shouting or what's happening. So you are aware that other people will just come away. My manager will just come straight in and go, you don't need to deal with this, go out, or I need you, can you just… but it's immediate.

EMMA: mhmm

FRANCES: The head teacher comes straight away as well, just to check that everybody's okay. So, yeah, I've seen it a few times and every time there's been other staff presence to keep them safe, you know, monitoring and making sure that,

yeah, the environment is safe and that the student, whoever is upset is keeping themselves safe, but it's impressive… very much so.

EMMA: Yeah mhm, and how important do you think having that kind of support is for you?

FRANCES: Oh definitely, very important. You just don't want to be in a situation where something could yeah, escalate really quickly and somebody gets really badly hurt. Yeah…

EMMA: And what else do you think is important then from erm.. a like whole-school level when working with children with demand avoidant behaviours. So I'm kind of thinking about the, you know, like the overall school culture, like the values and norms, the ways of of doing things in school.

FRANCES: yeah,…Some have cards, so that this was all revamped at the end of last year. There are some who will refuse to wear a tie, refuse to tuck their shirts in, refuse to wear a blazer. So all that is discussed at home and in school, and it is considered how vital it is for that student. Is it something they can overcome or not, if they can overcome it, let's help them overcome it. If they can't, then they will be given the card that explains so that they're just not given, you know, those constant questioning or detentions or whatever. So it just again… alleviates their worry when they walk down a corridor that they're not going to be… that they just have to show something. So that works really well.

EMMA: Yeah

FRANCES: Student B has been given a erm…much more flexible timetable, so they don't come in at all on a Wednesday so that they get that decompression time because two days of school is enough to be coping with, then they have a day off and then they'll do a few more days. That's helped the student and the staff and the family to get much more of a balance as well.

EMMA: Is there anything else about the whole school's approach?

FRANCES: I think the children and the other students have got used to it. They know the systems are in place. They know that the card system's in place. Staff know if somebody puts something on the desk or hold something up, you know.. then they don't go and question that person or discuss it. It's for valid reasons and it's not their place to know the reasons why. And we will also, you know, do that for our key worker students, and if somebody is going 'Whyyyy do they…' it's just like, it's not your business, focus on what is in front of you, but you don't need to know the reasons why.

EMMA: and how do you kind of ensure in school that all staff know about the adjustments children displaying demand avoidant behaviours need?

FRANCES: So we use a provision map. So for any student that's got any additional needs really, anything that's different for them, it's erm really clearly laid out. So erm…. it's like what you need to know about me, what my teacher can do for me, what support staff can do for them, and any other thing that you need to know about me to bond with me. So yeah, you can go on, and there's also a spreadsheet with all the different categories of card and who's got one and how long the date is for and when it's reviewed and so, all that is shared.

EMMA: And in terms of the demand avoidant behaviours, from what you've been saying, I can hear that you see them in in a certain way and you interpret them in a certain way, how do other staff see or interpret the behaviours? Do they see them in the same way as you or in a different way?

FRANCES: So you can email just the teachers of a student. We've got another student who's just been diagnosed over the summer with ADHD, autism, PDA. They had a hellish time last year because they had no diagnosis of anything, and it was just going horribly wrong from lesson to lesson to lesson. They were just in crisis at home, it was just the worst. But the amount of… I mean, there was daily interactions between the key worker and the family. We were in every single lesson like young person to try and help them work the way through to communicate to staff. Emails were sent out to the key staff that worked with them, but then obviously you get a cover teacher that comes in and it doesn't matter what you've put in place, they don't know that young person. It's really important that we're assigned that we can be there to kind of explain the behaviour or say, you know, sometimes you say, we're here will deal with it and um yeah… you try and erm pre-empt so many situations, but you can't always, there will be something that slips through the net or that young person decides to go a long route gets to the next lesson, and then all kinds of things have happened on the corridor. But yeah… we worked really closely with the family. We even got erm… another mum to come in to talk to that mum about their child and their own experience with ADHD and PDA and medication, and how they've managed to overcome a lot of things they were displaying and how different their child they are now with the input of, you know, GP paediatric input and medication.

EMMA: Ah so you've been connecting parents with each other for support.

FRANCES: Yeah, yeah.

EMMA: What's been the impact of that?

FRANCES: We got parents to talk to parent and so I was in on that meeting with the key worker and it was amazing. You know, there was a lot of sobbing from parent of the child, but they were so relieved to hear that they were not isolated, they were not alone. To see there are other families going through this, and without that, it's really hard for them to see that… and also to know that the school completely backed their child, and that they needed to make some massive adjustments so that student was going to survive in school.

EMMA: Yeah

FRANCES: But it's like actually for the last week of the summer term, they're not going to survive, you just let them come in and do mornings. We don't want permanent exclusion here, at the moment they cannot control it, it's just pushback after pushback. They're not paying attention to any instruction at all now. You know, can we just limit you know… their pain. We don't need to put them through it.

EMMA: mhmm

FRANCES: So you do end up having some very sensitive conversations and say, you know, and they are sometimes seeing that their child is being victimised to some degree and like they can't help this before, you know, before they've been administered their medication and it's like, we know, but we have to help everybody and when the impact is that great on the students around as well and yeah… But seeing two parents talk to each other, their childrens' profiles and how similar they were, but then also how different the other child was with all the input they'd had, that was so different with all the input they'd had. It's like, there is light at the end of the tunnel. It was the first time we'd done it, but it was at such crisis point, that we felt we need to do something different, and it was really helpful.

EMMA: Yeah so sharing their story.

FRANCES: yeah, light at the end of the tunnel.

EMMA: Okay thank you so much for sharing that, I'll have to draw it to a close in a moment, is there anything that we haven't talked about that you think, okay, that's been really important to mention? Or I've not had the chance to say that.

FRANCES: No, not really.

EMMA: Okay, brillant, thank you. I'll stop the recording now.

Evelyn

EMMA: okay I've started the recording now. I wondered if you could erm… if you could start by talking through and erm summarising your classroom experience to date please.

EVELYN: Yeah sure, so erm, I've been working as a TA for erm, about 25 years. Erm… I'm currently a TA in primary. I've been here for… what... 3 years now I think and I've worked with most year groups but currently working with Year 4. I'm a 1:1 with a child you'd probably say fits that demand avoidant profile as he need support with lots of things really, learning, emotional regulation and yeah erm… it's in his EHCP plans that he need support for that so that's my job.

EMMA: Okay, lovely, thank you. Have you always been in primary then?

EVELYN: Yes always primary… but I have worked in different schools before here, not in this area in _____ we moved just before _____.

EMMA: And did you have a similar role then?

EVELYN: Yes I've always been a TA but when I started I was a bit more of a general class TA you know helping most of the kids, a bit of display making, laminating ha but we don't really have time for that as much anymore. I was allocated 1:1 for a child with autism and erm…PDA and worked with them for a few years but then they went to a special school… and since then, yeah, I've supported various kids with SEN needs… on the SEN register, have EHCPS… a few kids you'd say were yeah… were demand avoidant.

EMMA: ah I see, yeah thanks for that erm that's really helpful just to contextualise your experience. So I wondered if I can ask you to explain the term 'demand avoidant behaviours' or can you sort of… define it?

EVELYN: erm yeah of course so erm… demand avoidant behaviours I'd say are like behaviours that… that children do to avoid demands, so like requests, sometimes not even requests, just everyday things, which they feel are too much for them… that are like, more than they can cope with. So like… it's their way of trying to control the environment and control what they engage with to manage their anxiety levels sort of thing.

EMMA: Yeah. Can you tell me a bit more? You've mentioned, control, anxiety, demands being more than they can cope with there.

EVELYN: Yeah sure… erm yeah like I've seen it most from our children with autism and if you think of what the world is like for them… like, it's unpredictable, it's scary… overwhelming. it's just too much for them to cope with sometimes… like… you, you know you've got all the sensory stuff, lights noise, the dinner hall… smells etc, all the social side of it like… you know, trying to deal with social situations, trying to pick up on social cues in the playground and stuff like not being able to figure people out.

EMMA: Yeah

EVELYN: and then of course learning… learning is a huge demand… especially for the children that have additional learning needs, so that's hard.

EMMA: Yeah

EVELYN: And then you've got all the demands before they get to school, putting on uniform, brushing their teeth, all them routines before they even get to the school gate and then yeah… sometimes they, they come in already on edge because of all the demands of the morning. So yeah, stuff we might see as a simple request is just, just tipping the bucket for them, it's too much, too anxiety provoking on top of everything else…

EMMA: Yeah

EVELYN: Then yeah… they can't hold it and so to try and erm control that level of anxiety by controlling the world around them.. they erm, yeah, they avoid stuff, just to try and like you know, make the world more… more predictable I suppose you could say. And yeah erm, sometimes I think it's like If a child has experienced things where they didn't feel safe… you know… experienced ACES, then being told what to do can feel threatening kind of very quickly

EMMA: Yeah, yeah… and what purpose do you think making the world more predictable serves?

EVELYN: Yeah, like when you think about it, it doesn't come across as it, it's not obviously that, and you can forget it when you're in the darkest depths of dealing with it, but it's a reasonable, like, function isn't it. We all want to feel safe.

EMMA: Yeah I hear what you're saying… can you erm, can you expand a bit on that?

EVELYN: erm let me think… so like if you think about an autistic person's erm… experience… the world feels so unsafe that avoiding demands and trying to be in control is, you know, just serving the purpose of trying to get that reasonable level of control, reasonable level of autonomy over their day… over their erm world and

experience that say someone with autism doesn't have and… and takes for granted… I think it's a, a natural human drive to want to have that… sort of… that control over our lives.

EMMA: Yeah

EVELYN: but that it's hard isn't it because that comes across as oh this kid is being defiant… not doing, not, not following rules, being rude or whatever but like yeah…for me, I see it as they're not doing it on purpose… it's not like they're thinking, oh I'm going to be difficult today for the sake of being difficult, it's erm…. the P in PDA, it's pathological in the sense that, they like erm.. what's the word I'm looking for… you know, it's an urge they can't hold… they feel compelled to do it… so yeah…it's just too much pressure sometimes.

EMMA: that's really interesting... can you erm, can you kind of tell me more about that idea of them feeling compelled, as opposed to it being sort of, a choice, on purpose.. I can't remember your exact wording.

EVELYN: Yeah like, we all avoid doing stuff don't we, like… I absolutely cannot stand ironing so I'll put it off as much as I can…

EMMA: haha I feel you

EVELYN: my husband hates going to the dentist, so he'll avoid it and, you know, I'm sure there were all stuff we avoided in school.

EMMA: Oh yeah of course

EVELYN: PE for me because I was absolutely… absolutely… just terrible for want of a better word. But that avoidance makes sense doesn't it?…

EMMA: yeah

EVELYN: like, you know… it's avoiding it because we don't like the thing we have to do or are being asked to do. But like yeah, for these kiddies, it can be something… it can be something that they want to do… like for example erm one pupil I worked with, her parents said she loves the mini trampoline at home… never off it in the garden, helps her calm down, so we thought okay let's get one in school, it might like you know help with those sensory needs too… and did she use it when we asked her or suggested it? No, she didn't,

EMMA: Yeah

EVELYN: she didn't, which just like,,, you know, looking from the outside in… it, it doesn't make sense.

EMMA: Yeah

EVELYN: You're like, what, but she loves it. But, it was because it was a demand and even though she most likely wanted to do it she couldn't do it, like there was a massive force bearing down on her stopping her from being able to go on it when an adult said... And she'd use it on her own terms, when she decided, which yeah… obviously caused problems in school because it was at times when teachers didn't see it as appropriate, like wanting to leave the classroom during teaching input or something like that.

EMMA: mhm

EVELYN: and another child for example we put in place sensory circuits in the hall with loads of equipment that we know he likes, a ball, skipping rope, hula hoops, erm… balancing beam, and we even put in time with the deputy head who he got on with and looked up to but you suggest it and it's like… it's a big no… a sort of… refusal, even though you know they like what it is they're being asked to do.

EMMA: Yeah

EVELYN: And that can be quite frustrating because you're thinking well I'm trying to help you here… I'm trying to help you but you're not accepting it, but it's understanding that even the things we erm think are most helpful are sometimes too much of a demand, even if it's coming from a place of erm, a place of lo…care and support.

EMMA: Yeah

EVELYN: So yeah, I think it's like… you know, sorry I'm going on a bit here.. there's demand avoidance because you don't like what you're being asked to do and mostly yeah.. I'd say that's like… that's a conscious decision, then there's… there's avoiding demands which is because of the actual like… the actual concept of a demand being a demand… if that makes sense?

EMMA: Yeah, yeah, it makes sense.

EVELYN: and then course autistic kids are going to avoid things that are anxiety provoking for them like it just makes sense.

EMMA: Yeah, and erm, what are your thoughts on the term pathological demand avoidance?

EVELYN: I'm not sure you know… I erm… I think I feel a bit torn. There's demand avoidance you see in autistic kids which like I said just, it just makes sense to avoid something that makes you anxious but yeah, you see PDA used online and in the books and stuff, so you think well if the professionals are calling it that then maybe I should, but yeah… parents… parents will say oh erm my kid is PDA and it's like well what do you er, what do you actually mean? Yes he's autistic and therefore he will you know will try and not do the things that make him anxious okay yeah, I get that but then with this child, it's not got that like, that sort of all-encompassing element to it that you see with other kids who just erm, who don't want to do any sort of demand, not just the ones that make them anxious.

EMMA: Yeah

EVELYN: like erm… pathological. Unless you've… unless you've read up on this sort of stuff, I think if you surveyed 100 people they'd see pathological as like you know… a pathological liar, or pathological as in something erm… something medically wrong, and I think it kind of has like… the potential to make people scared or wary of the child, or see them as erm, maybe like… naughty, you know it's their fault, there's something… there's something intrinsically wrong with them. Which I think impacts on the way that they might get treated in school.

EMMA: In what ways?

EVELYN: Like people treat them differently, you know… maybe like more cautiously like people say they're treading on eggshells sometimes… which I get, but then… I think like that can sometimes impact on the quality of relationships that they're able to like, develop with them which makes it worse.

EMMA: Yeah

EVELYN: but what you really need is that unconditional care and positivity towards them. Like yeah, everything comes back to the relationship really and you know, that's really important.

EMMA: mmm yeah

EVELYN: or sometimes yeah sometimes I think people think, okay what this child needs is more discipline, there's not enough boundaries at home, you know, they get away with murder, yeah… I think they assume the child is deliberately being difficult and it creates almost… difficult feelings and make people jump to okay, I'm losing control here, I need to be stricter, like it did for me… lets like say put in this sanction or this p… this punishment but that doesn't work… it never works and I think it just makes the child feel worse and like more… more isolated really.

EMMA: mhm and…

EVELYN: and also, sorry… and also it makes the adult feel worse because like you want to feel like you are in control of your classroom don't you, you don't want to feel undermined.

EMMA: Yeah, that all sounds difficult. And is there a way of understanding it or seeing it that you'd want the people with those particular, sort of erm… views or approaches to hear or understand?

EVELYN: I saw on tiktok, yes I know probably not the best of places to get stuff and I know there's disinformation around SEN but actually there's quite a lot on there about PDA. I think it was a special needs teacher that called it erm what was it… erm…persistent drive for autonomy and I thought yeah okay, I like that. Yeah… and its been in a few books I've read too. I'm really interested in this stuff.

EMMA: What was it that you liked about it?

EVELYN: like, I think, it just erm.. it's kind of saying to us that yeah, okay there's a rational real reason for this behaviour… it's not to be, you know, difficult., not to be…. defiant, but it's so they can have that control…

EMMA: mhm

EVELYN: That control over a world that can feel terrifying for them

EMMA: Yeah. You also mentioned the word rational there?

EVELYN: well it is rational isn't it… that's another thing I read. They're erm, they're doing their best to try and feel safe…which makes sense doesn't it? You might think okay they're overreacting here, like this level of reaction just is so…its so over the top compared to what I've just asked you to do, but in their head, to them, to their kind of… to their experience it's fully proportionate as it's creating that level of anxiety.

EMMA: Yeah I hear you're looking at It from a real child-centred perspective

EVELYN: yeah, but yeah… persistent drive for autonomy, persistent is a nicer word than pathological isn't it? I mean… as I said we all want control really don't we but we don't often, we don't often give kids it. I just think that it helps you to look at the kiddies with a bit more empathy and understanding. You can be like, okay their behaviours are difficult to manage, of course I'm not denying that, I mean I go home sometimes feeling like I've aged 10 years in one week, but, you know, there's a real… erm… there's a real viable reason why they're acting like this and it's not just to piss off…. sorry I probably shouldn't swear… oops… to annoy, to specifically upset me or the teacher or make life hard.

EMMA: haha don't worry, thanks for sharing that, I'm really feeling the empathy from you in the way you erm, in the way you're talking. And so now erm I guess I'm just wondering about what those erm behaviours that you're talking about look like. How do demand avoidant behaviours show up, or how have they, sort of, shown up in your day-to-day work?

EVELYN: So yeah, erm sometimes you see… erm…. erm well that's quite a big question because every child is different and I think their behaviours look different depending on… depending on, you know, where they're at, like what else has gone on in the day or how they're feeling, how full their anxiety bucket is already.

EMMA: Yeah I'm hearing what you're saying.

EVELYN: So erm… sometimes we see outright refusal, like just saying no I'm not doing that and just not engaging in something and being quite persistent with it but that being it. And yeah no matter, no matter what you try you can't get through to them and you know even if you push them in the slightest bit it's going to end in tears.

EMMA: Yeah

EVELYN: Sometimes… sometimes we see massive explosions of anger that just seem to come out of nowhere, you know like a big meltdown, throwing chairs, hitting out, screaming…. hurting themselves, hurting staff or other kids

EMMA: mhm

EVELYN: like those sort of situations where you need to remove the other kids from the classroom because there's a good chance they could get hurt, and yeah… you get hurt sometimes too, and that's always, that's always really hard because you're trying to take care of the kid who's in crisis but protect the other 30 kids in the class too and make sure they don't end up hurt.

EMMA: Yeah, that sounds tough.

EVELYN: Then yeah there are other times where it's like… like a bit more erm… a bit more subtle.

EMMA: What do you mean when you say subtle?

EVELYN: So erm like I remember when I first started working with a child that I think at the time they said had ODD yeah ODD was how it was described at the time. I don't think there was any diagnosis or anything but it was the way erm yeah, the way they were described at the time. And yeah, you know, they would just do anything they could erm to distract you, like erm, like ask you about your hair, give you compliments, ask about your like, lipstick colour, your rings, you know, ask about something going off outside and it'd be genuinely sometimes like quite interesting stuff that they'd talk about and so you'd erm, you'd get pulled into the conversation and then be like.. oh crikey, hold on a second, look at what is going on here… and it always tended to be like when some work was given, or they were asked to write something or just a basic classroom routine kind of thing, and you'd have to erm, you'd have to pull yourself back because they would be really quite endearing if you know what I mean.

EMMA: Yeah, so, so it sounds like there's the quite obvious forms of avoidance and then maybe the less obvious. Are there any other ways demand avoidant behaviours show up? What else might I see if I was a fly on the wall?

EVELYN: Erm yeah so like subtle… so like yeah… erm there was another child and they would just quite literally flop onto the floor and like say I can't move, or my arm doesn't work, or I can't read that because I don't have eyes. Like absolute nonsensical stuff and that was really, erm, that was really hard.

EMMA: mhm yeah

EVELYN: They will try and talk their way out of it… or just not talk at all, just sit there staring into space… yeah, it was like the world around him… like te world around him didn't exist. But then also sometimes he'd just blow up out of nowhere.

EMMA: Yeah, and erm I'm wondering what do you make of those differences in presentation… the differences in reaction to the demands?

EVELYN: erm… what do you mean like what I think to them?

EMMA: Erm yeah maybe erm what do you make of why there are different reactions, either you know different children responding in erm sort of different ways or differences between one child like day-to-day.

EVELYN: erm potentially, I think it depends on say how many other, other demands they've had put on them and, you know, do in the day and like how many they've had to avoid. It's kind of like the stress bucket thing… if it's erm, if it's overflowing and they've not been able to open the taps it's all going to overflow isn't it.

EMMA: mhm yeah,

EVELYN: and their stress bucket is a lot smaller than maybe someone who isn't neurodiverse, and usually most of the stuff they want to do to like open the taps, like go on the ipad or gaming or something isn't what the teacher wants them to do so it all just makes it worse.

EMMA: Yeah

EVELYN: But yeah, other times it is more subtle. Erm yeah… like one child, he would be like, I just need to go and sharpen my pencil, and then spend absolutely forever at the bin sharpening the pencil and you'd try and, you know, coax them back but they'd be adamant they needed to sharpen their pencil… and it wasn't ever quite right or the right level of sharpness.

EMMA: Yeah

EVELYN: and then it'd break off or he'd have to pick up the shavings off the floor. And then yeah, if it wasn't the pencil, it was something else… or he'd then want to sharpen all the pencils in the class

EMMA: yeah really delaying it

EVELYN: Oh I just need to do this first... you write it, oh my foot is hurting, my hand is hurting, or stomping around the classroom roaring saying he's Hulk and knocking things off the side… and it goes on and on and on. But there was always, always some reason why he couldn't do it and it…

EMMA: Yeah

EVELYN: and you'd try and coax them but ultimately it was like, if they don't want to do it, they won't and they'll do it when they decide they want to because again yeah, it's that control isn't it… that safety in, in managing their environment, keeping the control in their hands.

EMMA: Okay and…

EVELYN: And like.. oh sorry.

EMMA: No go on.

EVELYN: I was just going to say it's like, that anxiety that they're feeling and the desire to control what's going on around them because of the anxiety completely, completely, you know, trumps any authority or rules or whatever.

EMMA: Can you say more?

EVELYN: Like, there's no acknowledgement that right, I'm the adult, and the teacher, and they're the child and therefore the child should follow instructions from the adult and do my work when I'm told to do it, I don't even think that's a thing that is a factor for some of these young people…. it isn't a thing and I think that's a hard thing to get your head around. My mum, god bless her, always used to be like, you know, "I'm the adult, you're the child", but that doesn't wash with them… not at all… Like one child I worked with just used to question everything like why are YOU allowed to do that and I'm not? Why do you get to write with pen and I don't? Why are there rules… why are there rules for me and not rules for you sort of thing?

EMMA: Yeah

EVELYN: You know, yeah, I just think, that need to control their experience is the, is the primary thing for them I think… yeah, I'm not sure that's always a conscious thing either but just like, yeah… an internal driving force like yeah, nothing else matters. What the adult wants them to do is irrelevant really…

EMMA: mmm

EVELYN: It's not on their radar.

EMMA: yeah, yeah, and are there erm any particular situations where demand-avoidant behaviours tend to show up more?

EVELYN: Erm… what have I not said… erm… again it's different for every child but sometimes for some kids it's worse in a morning, like you, you notice it especially when they've had a stressful morning, or they're tired or hungry, you know, we get parents saying oh it's been tricky this morning they've not wanted to get dressed or eat their breakfast and then you know to be like, okay, we need to give you a really slow, stress-free start and you reduce the amount of things you put on them because

you know it won't end well and erm they just need time to regulate and feel safe… and calm.

EMMA: Yeah

EVELYN: So they might just spend some time with me or another TA doing something they like, that they've chosen of course ha, or helping out in the school office, so you're just constantly adjusting all the time.

EMMA: Yeah

EVELYN: And then other times it might be towards the end of the day or after lunchtime when they've just had enough, like all the demands have stacked up and they just can't do it anymore… or if something has happened at playtime or dinner time like often the kids I work with are having issues socially and it can erm, it can all kick off and you have to help them problem solve that, and then yeah… it might be something expected of them after dinner that's the straw that like, that yeah… breaks the camel's back.

EMMA: mhm yeah

EVELYN: and so you're constantly thinking, okay what is too much like what is the right level of challenge, what do I think they'll be okay with but you, you know… you don't always get that right, erm yeah… more often than not in the afternoon they need some time where demands are stripped back, but yeah, it can change from one hour to the next, one day to the next… it depends what's happened too.

EMMA: mhm and what does that look like when demands are stripped back?

EVELYN: Oooh sorry I've just thought of something else can I just say before I forget?

EMMA: oh yeah of course, go ahead.

EVELYN: So like I also think, when it comes to them doing work, you think, okay is it too hard… is it too hard for them? Do they feel they're not say… capable of doing the work they've been given, so you think right, you know, let's break it down, let's give them something I know they can do, just to try and help them out that way a bit, build their confidence, but yeah, more often than not you still get them doing everything they can to avoid doing it, even if I know they can do it. Even if it's like something that they're very capable of.

EMMA: Yeah

EVELYN: So I think it's… you know, it's less about can they do it… and more about who's in charge of them doing it, who's asked them to do it. If it feels like, you know, it's a demand that I've like asked of them, something I've asked them to do, they resist. If they come to it.. if they come to it in their own way, sometimes they can surprise you, or if they've had a bit of time during the day where we aren't asking too much of them.

EMMA: Yeah, and what does that look like then you know those points in the day where you're not asking too much of them.

EVELYN: Again, it's different for every child but it usually erm… it usually helps to mix in, to build in times of the day where they can do things that they want to do or build in some quiet time away from the classroom as the classroom environment, like the noise and the sensory over load and stuff can be a demand in itself and can be the difference between whether they can like cope with a demand or not, like if they can do the work or not.. Yeah it can make all the difference sometimes having that time out, well multiple opportunities for them to relax.

EMMA: Yeah and are there any sort of ways that you help them to relax?

EVELYN: So yeah there is …we erm, we have one child… obsessed with Minecraft, and that's his way of relaxing at home. So we try and incorporate times during the day for him to go on the computer, but then that in itself can be hard, because yeah, number one, once the other kids see it they're like oh why does he get to do that, that's not fair sort of thing you know and trying to explain that to the children in a way that.. in a way that they understand is tough, and also sometimes the staff don't get it, you know like why are you giving him a reward?

EMMA: yeah

EVELYN: And B, once he's on Minecraft, he doesn't want to come off it. That can actually lead to a meltdown if you just say, 'right, time's up now,'… so we've learned to… learned to sort of judge when he's in the right place to negotiate when to come off… If he's calmer and more regulated, we'll kind of, we'll work with him to like help decide on erm the next step.

EMMA: How do you work with him in that sense?

EVELYN: like giving him a pictoral countdown or being like, deciding together like what to do next.

EMMA: Yeah

EVELYN: So it's not like okay next we have to do this, it's more like, okay, today we've got these jobs, learning jobs to do together, but leave it up to them so to say, like give him some freedom as to what order, when he does them so he feels that he's got that control and it takes away some of the pressure of, you know, this needs to be done right now.

EMMA: Yeah, so you're giving him choice in the order, when he does it so to say.

EVELYN: Yeah exactly… so it's like, once we've done this learning job, then, you can choose something to do.

EMMA: You talked about Minecraft, erm, using the young person's interest. Is there any other ways that that, their interests sort of help you?

EVELYN: We also try to use it as a hook to get him into the work. Sometimes that works, sometimes it doesn't.

EMMA: How do you mean?

EVELYN: So for example, we've made worksheets with Minecraft characters on them, or linked maths to building blocks and measurements, really sort of practical stuff, so it feels more like part of his world.

EMMA: Yeah

EVELYN: Erm yeah there's that and then we've erm also done things like reward charts where the prizes are Minecraft-related but you've erm you've got to be careful with rewards as sometimes that is too much pressure on them so it's child-dependent really.

EMMA: Yeah

EVELYN: I also do try to use Minecraft language, so like if you finish this job, you've unlocked the next stage or… we've got a mission to do today and I speak to him like he's the character, not him. Don't get me wrong, you know, it doesn't always guarantee he'll engage, sometimes it's still like, no, not today, but when it works, I think it makes it feel less like a demand coming from us and more like, you know, something he's chosen to take part in, like something exciting and fun… it's almost erm… learning disguised.

EMMA: Ah okay, yeah I see. What is it about that that you think means you have some success with it?

EVELYN: Erm… erm… it's not the real world is it, like maybe it feels like less of a demand as they're like dictating the story and what's happening in the game, or erm I don't know, maybe it's like you know, just more motivating with it being something they like, and the learning isn't obvious as it would be if you plonk down their maths book and they're sat reading sums off the board.

EMMA: Yeah, I get what you're saying

EVELYN: Oooh also putting Minecraft characters on a worksheet can be a good way of helping him to get on as well.

EMMA: Yeah.

EVELYN: That works for him, but then I think some kids are wise to it like one child I used to work with loved Animal Crossing, you know the game.

EMMA: Yeah

EVELYN: and so I tried to kind of weave that in and she just saw straight through it, like she saw what I was trying to do and she was just like, "that's not going to work Miss" so yeah I think she definitely saw it as a sort of yeah, a sort of disguised way of like, getting her to comply and do what I wanted her to do.

EMMA: Yeah, so it sounds like it's not always successful.

EVELYN: No

EMMA: Are there any other times when using interests has helped?

EVELYN: erm, let me think… erm, I think it's just really… I think sometimes you can use them as a bit of an 'in', like a way of sparking interest in learning. Like, I'd rather them be practicing their writing skills writing something about erm an interest, yeah like Harry Potter, than them kind of refusing to do any writing at all… even if it is completely unrelated yeah, there's still something they're going to take from it erm yeah… you've just got to ride the wave with them and not try and fight against it so to say.

EMMA: And are there other kinds of strategies or adaptations you've found helpful beyond say, sort of, leaning into interests? Do you like have any erm any examples of like when you've felt you've been like successful in managing erm demand-avoidant behaviours?

EVELYN: Erm yeah so… when you say successful, successful in what? Like, managing the meltdowns, like, you know, the emotional side of it, or like getting them to engage in the work or?

EMMA: That's a good point. Erm, I mean… I suppose it's however you would define success in your role. Like what would that look like for you?

EVELYN: Well the first thing is always to have them regulated isn't it and feeling, you know, safe and secure enough in school and sometimes on the more difficult days where they're erm… they're just really struggling, don't want to be here you know emotions all over the place, you know those really unpredictable big behaviours, getting them calm is success. Like some days, you know you're not getting any learning out of them or minimal… yeah… some days them doing the date or title is a win, or even just being in the classroom for a sustained like period of time, or even if they're not in the classroom, just being in school and being calm

EMMA: Yeah

EVELYN: and it's about adjusting that expectation and being ok with that because you do panic… you do panic thinking, oh my god what are people going to think if it looks like I'm just… just letting them get away with doing nothing all day or playing on a game or like drawing, but then at the same time, the last thing you want is pushing them so much that they burn out and then don't come to school at all… like I don't want to be contributing to that level of stress.

EMMA: Yeah

EVELYN: But yeah, you then think well, you know, what are they at school for?... to… to learn and to make progress and so I'd be doing them an injustice if I didn't support their learning and try and get them learning and… and get the best out of them…

EMMA: mmm

EVELYN: so yeah, it's just hard to find that erm, that balance sometimes with making sure they're calm but also putting that erm, that sweet spot of pressure so to say, well not pressure, but demands on them to push them just the erm, just the right

amount and give them positive experiences of actually being able to do something well and… and feel good about themselves.

EMMA: Yeah

EVELYN: So yeah… to me that is, you know, if I can get some output out of them learning wise whatever that sort of looks like but also keep them calm and okay about it. But like yeah, you know some days it is not, it's not realistic for them to finish a learning job and other days it is.

EMMA: yeah, thank you, that's helpful, and erm, how do you judge when it's sort of the right moment to add a bit more pressure or increase demands, and when it's better to not?

EVELYN: Erm, I look at their body language, yeah, their tone of voice, how they're moving. If they seem tense, fidgety, or if they're like not really erm engaging with me,

EMMA: mhm

EVELYN: withdrawing from the world, it's a sign… it's a sign to hold back so to say, but if they seem engaged or calm, and things have been going well, you know, I might step things up a little. Or erm if we've been having a laugh and things don't feel tense.

EMMA: Yeah

EVELYN: I erm, I also think about how they've been say earlier in the day or week. If they've already had a few explosions or they've been really, 'no I'm not doing this', ignoring me, and being like visibly stressed, I won't pile on more demands. But if it's a calmer day, or hour even and things seem to be going okay, I might… I might introduce kind of a bit more challenge.

EMMA: Yeah

EVELYN: But yeah, there's no real set formula so to say. It's a bit trial and error and you don't, you don't always get it right, but you do try and judge it… and I guess… the longer you've worked with them, the more you know them and their limits and what it looks like when they're reaching their limit and when you can like push a bit more.

EMMA: mhm

EVELYN: and something yeah, erm… you just can't help but mull it over and it goes round and round in your head, and you know, you just adjust don't you… but then yeah, you… you've cracked it one day, but then the next day you haven't and you feel like you're back at square one and what works one day doesn't work the next, but then you know it might work the next day or the week after, and yeah, ern constantly thinking on your feet is the best way to say it, like you know, how am I going to approach this?

EMMA: Yeah, so you're constantly adapting?

EVELYN: Yeah, exactly

Emma: I wonder then if you could erm talk me through any more examples of times then where you felt you've been successful in working with demand-avoidant behaviours, whatever that, whatever that success looks like.

EVELYN: Ooooh yeah I'll tell you what has been helpful. So for one pupil, having visuals for him to communicate to me where he's at and what he needs from us as staff and also like, what he can do to help himself. I mean I don't think he always has an awareness of where he's at but we're, we're, you know, trying to use erm zones of regulation to be like right now I'm in the red zone, this is how I'm feeling, this is what I need, or I'm in the blue zone, I'm bored or tired or yeah… erm I'm feeling green right now, where you think okay… maybe now I can increase the demands. But it's tricky because, you suggest a calming strategy or an alerting strategy and if it comes from me, its like no, I'm not doing that, that's too much of a demand… it's on erm my terms.

EMMA: Yeah that sounds hard, are there any ways you've manage to overcome that?

EVELYN: Erm yeah like giving a few choices sometimes works but not always.

EMMA: mhm yeah

EVELYN: And then another thing that's tricky, is you want to be able to support them to understand the feelings, like what's going on in their body and stuff, what anxiety feels like, so that they can learn to manage them themselves, which you know, they erm will need to do as adults, and to like figure out their own strategies… how they know they're going from bubbling to exploding. We have an ELSA in school and she had erm, she had space to work with him but it's erm it's too much of a demand isn't it if we say, you know, right, this time on a Wednesday is your time to go to ELSA. He's having absolutely none of it… But then we'd been trying to get him to go for months, and then erm one day he decides he wants to go, just sort of out of the blue

and so erm you have to try and work with that and go with it… but she didn't always have the erm capacity for him to come in as and when he decided he wanted to so yeah, navigating that has been hard.

EMMA: yeah so it sounds like, the challenge is erm… is in offering support but also like balancing that with letting them have control over when, when and how they access it?

EVELYN: Yeah and you want to, you want to give as much control as possible but sometimes it's hard.

EMMA: Are there any other strategies and approaches you find helpful? So we might be thinking in terms of interactions, or sort of adaptions you make, or just things that you feel erm, make a positive difference?

EVELYN: Yeah erm.. erm yeah… okay so a pupil, little girl I used to work with she was really demand-avoidant any time it came to doing anything really and something that used to work for her, she used to carry this cuddly toy bunny around and then bring in other various toys, I don't know, I think it was a bit of a comfort for her. And anyway, one day I was trying to get her to do some of the English work, it was a writing task and she was like, just point blank refusing, shaking her head…and so, I erm… I started talking through the bunny and making it do actions like, 'Oh hey, name of the child, my name is (Bunny's name here) and I erm I really need some help with this sentence, I wonder if there's anyone that can help me please' in a really like, childish, squeaky voice, and then she'd laugh, yeah, she'd find it hilarious…

EMMA: Awww

EVELYN: and then I'd get the bunny to, to write the erm the first few words, well me holding the pen but in its paws… are they paws?... well whatever you want to call it, and then the bunny would give her the pen, she'd erm, she'd pick it up and write the next few words and I remember me and the class teacher being like, hallelujah praise the lord… and I got more work out of her than we had done for weeks… it was brilliant.

EMMA: Oh that sounds great, yay for the bunny… what do you think it was about that, about that approach that helped, like helped with her engagement?

EVELYN: I think it was… it made the whole thing feel less like a demand, you know? Like, it wasn't coming from me telling her what to do, it was coming from the bunny, the cuddly toy asking for help, so I don't know, maybe she felt like she had a choice or it like, sort of depersonalised it a bit?

EMMA: Yeah

EVELYN: It was fun, a bit silly, and we had a bit of a laugh and you know... Oh and like her and the bunny were doing it together so it wasn't as much put on her and that was something, yeah… that was often quite helpful actually.

EMMA: mhm

EVELYN: It might be, it maybe erm also distracted her from the anxiety so she could do the work without feeling as pressured, like yeah, I think it's helpful when things, when things feel like a bit of a game… not just with her but with other kids It's like it turned the task into a game rather than a demand.

EMMA: Yeah. Do you have any examples of when you've made it feel like a game?

EVELYN: All the time, literally every day of my life. You have to, you really have to get really creative and keep it fresh. A lot of the kids I've worked with who I'd say are demand avoidant do not, absolutely do not thrive in a classroom, sat down with a worksheet copying from the board, they just don't. So you know, you have to think a bit outside the box.

EMMA: How so?

EVELYN: So with erm with one pupil, everything had to be a bit of a game or a bit of competition, so like who can do the funniest walk back in from playtime when he didn't want to come in or I'd say, 'I bet you can't get to the door before me', 'I'll race you' sort of thing,

EMMA: Yeah

EVELYN: he loved a bit of competition, but I'd always have to let him win otherwise that'd be hell, but then, yeah… I would also have to look like I'm genuinely putting in the effort otherwise he'd see straight through that.

EMMA: Yeah

EVELYN: Ooh and also I'd erm I'd go and hide things around the school, like hiding vocabulary in the library, in the corridor, erm… the hall, and get them doing a treasure hunt, or erm, like having to throw beanbags into hoops for times-tables and

just yeah, you know, just really getting creative with it and taking it outside of the classroom.

EMMA: Yeah

EVELYN: And another child, he was Harry Potter obsessed, and I mean… obsessed. So we would go around the school, pretending to wear an invisibility cloak and being Harry Potter looking for golden snitches which were basically those polystyrene balls I'd spray painted gold and hidden in different places.

EMMA: wow that's really creative

EVELYN: and on each snitch I'd like put a learning challenge, like something achievable on there sort of related to what we were, what we were doing, and then to capture the snitch, he had to do the learning challenge and yeah, it really really worked.

EMMA: that sounds really fun

EVELYN: Yeah, it was. We even made our own cloaks and that was a nice opportunity to practice using scissors and glueing, sticking and stuff you know all those fine motory things. All the staff… I was pleased as all the staff they really got on board with it too like pretending they couldn't see us when we were roaming around the school in our cloaks and yeah he just absolutely loved it… you know, thrived off it… he would go home and tell his parents about it, and yeah, you know, I don't even think… I don't even think he realised he was learning.

EMMA: Yeah

EVELYN: And with stuff like that, you can erm you can like extend it as much as you want, so like yeah, the most amount of learning I got him to do in English was when we wrote spells, all again in character as Harry Potter… wearing our invisibility cloaks of course haha.

EMMA: haha amazing

EVELYN: And yeah, the writing task that the teacher had set wasn't to write a spell, but it was erm, another way of, you know, teaching him the same skills but just in a way that, that he, that appealed to him. So yeah, it's a case of thinking well, you know, what do we want them to learn, and how are we… how are we going to get there, and that's, that's not always… if very rarely, you know, the sort of conventional route that the rest of the class might be doing.

EMMA: Yeah

EVELYN: Like the way I see it and I've explained in this way before, I mean you may not find it helpful at all, but if… if you want to, lets say you want to get from ____ to ____ you can get the direct train can't you, and that… that makes the most sense to most people, but you could also stop off a few places, and take a few detours and get off at different stations along the way and get on a different train.

EMMA Yeah

EVELYN: Yeah okay it takes more time and it's not the route that… it's not the simplest, and you need to have patience, but it still gets you there.

EMMA: Yeah I see what you're saying, I love that analogy.

EVELYN: hahaha I mean it makes sense to me

EMMA: So, erm, I guess with that analogy, it sounds like you're saying, it's about, erm, being flexible in how you achieve the learning objectives?

EVELYN: Yeah exactly, you erm… you just can't be too rigid and expect them to erm… to conform to the way you expect they should do things otherwise yeah, it's not going to work. You have to almost let go of the way you think they should be doing things and just go with the flow.

EMMA: and how else does that going with the flow show up in your approach? What does that kind of look like in practice?

EVELYN: Erm, every day is going with the flow.

EMMA: Yeah

EVELYN: Like, erm, yeah…I'm going to carry on the train analogy, I hope this doesn't turn out me talking a load of rubbish but anyway I'm thinking on my feet it could be a train wreck.

EMMA: haha a train wreck, I'm sure it won't

EVELYN: So, you know, it's erm, it's sort of being prepared to get on one of many trains, and not like forcing them to get on a particular train, but maybe erm yeah like, also… also giving them time to decide, maybe which train to get on, because yeah actually… being short of time can add extra pressure and make it feel… make it feel more taxing, and then yeah, you run the risk of them leaving the train station completely

EMMA: Yeah

EVELYN: which might be what they actually need at that point in time

EMMA: mmm

EVELYN: and yeah… sometimes also maybe deciding together, you know, negotiating almost which train to get on… gently encouraging them to get on the train sometimes because erm there's times… there's times they don't actually want to get on the train

EMMA: haha this analogy is endless

EVELYN: or sometimes you might just sit back and see which train they get on and go and sit alongside them on it.

EMMA: okay I see

EVELYN: Or...or, wait, you might even be letting them drive the train but you feel ok in knowing that actually, this train is going towards a destination we both want.

EMMA: Okay, erm I'm hearing what you're saying, there were quite a few things in that but I guess what I'm hearing is that you're kind of I guess erm, meeting the child where they are at.

EVELYN: Yeah exactly

EMMA: So erm, what does it look like in practice, so how are you erm translating that analogy in to how you, sort of, work?

EVELYN: Erm, yeah so there's always a lot of negotiation involved, like how can we make this work for the both of us? What are we both, you know, what are we both going to be happy with?

EMMA: Yeah

EVELYN: And I think that's important for when they leave school and are out in the world, because it's, it's erm, it's giving them the skills to communicate their needs, you know sort of express when things are erm… when things feel like too much, and make choices that… that erm work for them and for the other person too because it's the nature of life that you can't just put your own needs first all the time.

EMMA: Yeah

EVELYN: But if I want them to do that then I have to do that too.

EMMA: Yeah

EVELYN: so it's just sort of yeah, sort of helping them sort of understand that we don't … don't always see things the same

EMMA: mhm

EVELYN: So it might be like negotiating where we do the learning or when, how long for, how we complete it, so you know, are they going to write it, erm… am I scribing or do we just have a chat about it for 5 minutes and then I can do a summary of what we, what we spoke about in green pen. When we do it, so are we doing it now or after dinner… If we do that, then we can do this.

EMMA: mhm

EVELYN: If we get this job done, then we can do something you choose

EMMA: yeah

EVELYN: And when you've got that…you've, you've, you know, built up that trust with them, and you show that you keep to your side of the deal, your like side of the bargain so to say, then I think it helps them to keep their side of the bargain too, so you know, I've done this for you…now you do that for me… and it feels a bit of a mutual thing where we are helping each other out.

EMMA: Yeah

EVELYN: Oh and then also the language you use, yes, gosh the language you use is so critical.

EMMA: can you say more?

EVELYN: So you want to be really sort of like, you know, frilly… indirect. So you're like, 'oooh I wonder whether we might be able to'; 'oooh I'm wondering if you can help me out with this'…'ooh I'm not sure how to do this'. They love that… they respond so well to that unless they're at erm they're at complete capacity… when you're the one that needs help, or another child that needs help, so you know, like erm, letting them take that teacher role, again it's that control that it's coming down to isn't it?

EMMA: Yeah the control is in their hands

EVELYN: and framing it as… framing it as, okay I'm not asking you to do this, let's do this together, 'we', so we're partners, I'm not putting myself up there as the… as the dictator but you know, we are, we're going to give it a go together.

EMMA: Yeah that's all really interesting.

EVELYN: or even saying to them do you want to do it together or do it on your own? Sometimes I'll do the work next to them, like have my own sheet as well.

EMMA: Yeah

EVELYN: The same child I spoke about earlier though was like oh I know what you're trying to do, he could see me trying to be sneaky about it ha so I'd be like, okay what am I trying to do?, and he'd say, oh do the work so then I'd say well how would you suggest we go about it and try and put the power back in his hands.

EMMA: Yeah, thank you for that.. it sounds like he was erm maybe very aware of the kind of, level of authenticity.

EVELYN: Yeah

EMMA: okay I'm just aware of the time, so… I'm going to erm move us on if that's okay as ermI'd like to talk about a few other things.

EVELYN: Yeah sure gosh that's flown!

EMMA: It has hasn't it. So I guess I'm just interested in how your school as a whole sort of approaches demand-avoidant behaviours? So are there like any kind of

policies, values, like ways of doing things in your school that shape the way you, erm you or others, sort of respond to demand-avoidant behaviours.

EVELYN: Yeah, so I think we work, we work really relationally as a school, and we make sure everyone's on the same page. So like we've got really strong communication between teachers, TAs, erm pastoral staff, and of course the families too…

EMMA: yeah

EVELYN: it's about that joined-up approach.

EMMA: Why is that important?

EVELYN: because the families are such a big part of it too. If we're saying one thing in school and parents are erm, parents are trying something totally different at home, it like it just doesn't work does it… and the parents, they are so knowledgeable about their children and just hearing from them sometimes oh like you may want to try this, or that, or this is particularly helpful for us at the moment.

EMMA: mhm

EVELYN: Also just knowing what kind of morning or weekend they've had can be helpful just in terms of knowing… knowing how much demand to put on them or yeah if they erm need some time to regulate and calm… and that can be the difference between avoiding a full-on meltdown or not.

EMMA: Yeah

EVELYN: So yeah keeping those lines of communication open is important.

EMMA: Yeah. You also talked about taking a relational approach? What does that...what does that sort of mean to you? What does it look like?

EVELYN: erm, a relational approach…. A relational approach, I guess a few things really like we know that if erm, if a child doesn't feel safe or like if they feel that the people around them don't understand them, they're not going to engage no matter, you know, no matter what strategies you put in place.

EMMA: mhm

EVELYN: So that's kind of at the heart of what we do… building trust, knowing the child really well, because like the more comfortable these kids feel around you, it can ease anxiety you know and just make things feel easier.

EMMA: Yeah

EVELYN: I mean it's hard isn't it for kids to feel comfortable around all staff and especially the demand-avoidant children I've worked with will usually take to some and not others and you notice like, you notice a physical difference in them, you see them more tense… but, but yeah, they need to have a trusted adult in school…ideally more.

EMMA: yeah, and erm, what do you think it is like about those staff that they feel more comfortable with? Why do you think they feel more comfortable with them?

EVELYN: erm yeah, I think it's just their whole approach… like some of us are more relational than others. I think they like erm they're like nurturing, calm… gently spoken, don't really raise their voice or show those, those big emotions like if they're cross or annoyed. I think these kids are so… they're so hypervigilant to everything, and do pick up on slight changes in, you know, your persona, or tone of voice, like if you're feeling abit off erm… I think they can tell… and yeah, I think that can make them feel more anxious.

EMMA: Yeah

EVELYN: So sometimes I just say to them oh I'm having a bad day because of x y z, so they don't think it's anything they've done.

EMMA: mhm

EVELYN: I think they also like the staff they can have a laugh with, just the ones that yeah, the ones that don't take themselves too seriously and can be a bit silly.

EMMA: mhm yeah

EVELYN: and of course it's a big no to the ones who insist on everything being done in exactly the way they want, all of the time.

EMMA: can you say more?

EVELYN: yeah so it's like pick your battles. What's actually important and what's not here?

EMMA: Yeah

EVELYN: So in my old school, the teacher would get into full blown arguments with a child about things they really, just things they really didn't need to, it was quite frustrating actually… so it was stuff like… like whether they went out to playtime through the door they were supposed to, or… where to keep their book bag. And I'd just be thinking, this isn't the hill to die on, you know? The child's already dysregulated and now… now we're escalating things over something that in the grand scheme of things is insignificant.

EMMA: Yeah

EVELYN: And then the behaviour policy which was based on consequences and rewards type of thing is literally followed to the T and erm the child has to sit on their own and reflect on what they erm, what they did for a bit but what's, you know, what's that doing really?" I think the adult needs to be reflecting too really.

EMMA; Yeah

EVELYN: And then you… you know, you've lost them before you've even got to the actual learning. And I remember on one occasion, the child lashed out, hit the teacher in the face and got suspended. But it didn't really need to get to that. Erm, so yeah, in my school at the moment we pick our battles.

EMMA: Can you say more?

EVELYN: Yeah… so you know… actually erm… I'm saying pick your battles, but actually, if we're seeing it as a battle then… then we've already lost. I don't want it to be me vs them and that mentality is just going to raise anxiety across the board. I'm erm, I'm on the same team as the child and I want them to feel that.

EMMA: Mhm, and do you feel that's sort of a shared mindset across the school, that sense of being on the same team?

EVELYN: Yes for the most part now. Some staff who are more how should I say it… old-school still want that compliance, they see following rules as the main goal. And it's like okay so, at the end of the day, they're expected to sit in class and do the work and they're here to learn. That's the expectation. So yeah I guess erm, I guess you could say it's taken time, and a lot of conversations to get everyone on board, and SLT erm SLT getting involved in those conversations, and I don't think we are quite there yet. But I'd say now, yeah, it's much more consistent now.

EMMA: Is there anything that's been helpful in ensuring that consistency?

EVELYN: I think erm, primarily I think it's having a relationship based erm, relationships behaviour policy to follow but also erm, I think people learn off each other and like watch, like learn what works really. We had a meeting about one particular child to agree on approaches to certain behaviours because we were all, we were all kind of responding to things differently and sometimes it was escalating behaviours, and it was just… it was chaos, it was just you know… all over the place like the child didn't know where he stood, and it was difficult… it was really difficult for staff to feel sort of confident in their approach and you kind of felt like you had to justify why you were doing what you were doing, you know… I think some people do worry about being judged like oh are they going to think he's just played all day.

EMMA: Yeah

EVELYN: So erm yeah we erm, we all sat down and said, right okay, what are the non-negotiables, and how do we agree, how do we agree… how we are going to respond to keep the child and us safe, and then where can we you know have some flexibility, and how are we going to respond to these other behaviours, and you know. And we shared what works and what's helpful and that was positive.

EMMA: Yeah that makes sense, so it sounds like having those discussions and agreeing as a team really helps?

EVELYN: Yeah completely

EMMA: And is there anything else in school that you feel is kind of supportive for you when you're working with children with demand-avoidant behaviours… What helps you do your job I guess?

EVELYN: Yeah, so like we usually have quick check-ins, like in the morning or at playtimes, just casual chats, you know…nothing massive, just to make sure everyone's erm… aware of what's happening.

EMMA: Mhm

EVELYN: We also have shared notes on the system, so any sort of, erm sort of key strategies are logged and visible to everyone working with that child. Plus, you know erm, just informal chats, like you know… those check ins with people feels important.

EMMA: What is it about them that erm, makes them important?

EVELYN: Erm, yeah erm, how do I say it, because yeah working with PDA…demand avoidance, can sometimes be... it can be emotionally draining. You know, erm obviously I don't want to talk bad of these kiddies because they truly are, they truly are remarkable and have so many amazing qualities and we have some great moments, but… at the same time, yeah, erm at the same time, you're constantly thinking on your feet, you know, you're yeah… trying different things, and sometimes yeah… things just don't work. You can spend ages preparing resources or planning an activity, and they're not interested…

EMMA: mhm

EVELYN: and yeah, you know, sometimes when the anxiety is really high, I've got hurt and they've always been so remorseful after, but if it's been a particularly bad week, just yeah, it can take its toll… And a lot of the time you… you can feel it building in yourself as well… but you've erm… you've got to just take, just take that breath and remind yourself it's not personal.

EMMA: Yeah, that sounds really hard and not easy at all.

EVELYN: So yeah, having that support from, from colleagues… and from SLT is what helps me get through those days, those weeks sometimes… it's like, my SENCo is coming to me saying I understand what you're dealing with, how can we, how can we like work together, what do we need to think about to make sure we can reduce this happening and you know, offering me a biscuit ha, I'll say no if it's a plain digestive but other than that ha

EMMA: Haha yeah that's a poor choice of biscuit

EVELYN: and yeah erm, just… just knowing you're not going to be criticised for letting them in quotations "do what they want" like I felt in my old school, you know. People who get it. Like, there's really something about not getting judged for not being able to control a child.

EMMA: Yeah

EVELYN: and feeling like you have permission, not permission but you know what I mean, to do things differently.. unconventional almost. And it's also like important to make sure that the other kids… they know why other kids get to do things differently as it's yeah, they can see it as a bit of an injustice and oh why are they getting to have fun and I'm not

EMMA: Yeah

EVELYN: but the kids here don't really tend to bat an eye lid at it really, we've explained it to them in terms of we give people what they need… equity and all that.

EMMA: I'm erm, I'm just aware of the time, are you okay to continue for 5-10 minutes more or…?

EVELYN: Oh yeah more than happy. Gosh I can talk can't I?

EMMA: It's great, there's a lot to say.

EVELYN: yeah there is.. I'm really interested in this

EMMA: The interviews always go really fast haha I'm really grateful for your insights. So very quickly then, erm, I'm just interested in what kind of erm sources of knowledge or experiences have influenced your understanding of demand avoidant behaviours the most?

EVELYN: Erm, mainly experience, I've been a TA for 25 years and I've learnt a lot in my time, a lot of trial and error and getting things, getting things really wrong.

EMMA: and when did you first hear about demand avoidance?

EVELYN: Hmm, I think the first time I properly heard the term was about 2 or 3 years ago when we had a training session on it from, I can't remember who it was, an Ed Psych or an autism specialist or someone similar.

EMMA: Yeah

EVELYN: But, before that, I'd seen plenty of children showing those kind of behaviours, but I didn't really, I didn't really have a name for it or like you know… a framework. It was more just… "oh, that's tricky" and sort of figuring things out as you go… but it sort of gave me validation that this is why I do things the way I do things.

EMMA: Yeah

EVELYN: and since then I've read quite a few books specifically for teachers, TAs on how to work with PDA and yeah I guess you could say they've helped to add a few new things to my toolkit.

EMMA: Yeah, and have your views or understanding changed over time?

EVELYN: Yeah, I mean… I think it was erm… when I first started, I probably, I think I probably just saw it as children being difficult or oppositional, the term ODD flies around quite a lot.

EMMA: mhm

EVELYN: But over time, with experience and… you know, and learning more about PDA, you know, it's not about defiance or being a naughty child at all is it?

EMMA: What is it about?

EVELYN: It's them trying to cope with… to cope with a world that feels overwhelming.

EMMA: okay thank you. I'm wondering if that feels like a suitable point to draw this to a close if that's okay?

EVELYN: yeah certainly

Lauren

EMMA: Okay, so that's recording now. So just to begin with then, I'm wondering if you could summarise your classroom experience to date, you know, what your current role is, what your previous roles and experiences have been in school?

LAUREN: Yeah so I've been teaching for 14 years, erm, and I've been SENCo… six, seven years now. Erm mainly key stage one, most of my experience is in year one.

EMMA: mhm

LAUREN: but I have taught all year groups other than early years and year six, never delved into them, neither extremes

EMMA: right haha yeah both extremes

LAUREN: and yeah, the last couple of years I was the year three teacher, I've been back in year one this year. So I'm full-time teacher in the in the classroom and then SENCo as well

EMMA: Right

LAUREN: and that is sort of half, half a day a week. Erm, that's the SENCo allowance and at the minute that's…it's quite overwhelming. We're looking potentially in the future to maybe reduce time in class

EMMA: Yeah

LAUREN: but at the minute it's, it is just manageable and we are a very supportive team. The head teacher does give me a lot of extra time for things if I need it. But yeah, I've been at this current school, erm… for 14 of those years and then just I did my NQT year elsewhere. Erm but yeah.

EMMA: Lovely thank you, so you've got quite a bit on then with the SENCo and the teaching role?

LAUREN: Yeah, and then I'm the deputy DSL as well, erm and the head teacher does take on most of that. But like I said, we started off a very small school I think it was when I started, I'd say 120 pupils, we're nearly 200 now.

EMMA: Right

LAUREN: So our school has grown obviously since the time I've been here and we have had extensions and things. So erm, so yeah, that increases the work load quite a bit.

EMMA: okay yeah

LAUREN: I mean we are noticing a lot more, particularly in the last few years, we are having a lot more children with maybe more complex needs that are coming to us.

EMMA: mmm

LAUREN: and I think… I feel we are very inclusive as a school and the staff are amazing. I think a lot of people kind of hear that and then want their children to come to our school, which is amazing and the biggest compliment that we can get, but it is then sort of stretching even further in terms of meeting everybody's needs in the best way that we can.

EMMA: Yeah, okay, lovely so that's really helpful to hear a bit about your background and context. So next, I just kind of want to get into your understanding of demand avoidant behaviours. Could you explain the term demand avoidant behaviours? You know, could you define it? What does it mean you?

LAUREN: So for me we we've seen it present a lot in children that potentially are autistic as well, not necessarily with the diagnosis, but maybe have similar… those traits of autism as well and that's kind of part of that. Erm...we've had a range of children from year groups from early years for children that we've seen those, sort of, demand avoidant behaviours, up to year six.

EMMA: mhm

LAUREN: Erm and we kind of understand it as, and obviously I don't know whether this is right or wrong but kind of for us, we see it as it's digging beneath the surface, kind of, real extreme anxiety, and that then can present in a way of not being able to, kind of, complete tasks or not be able to follow instructions or demands, obviously.

EMMA: Yeah

LAUREN: So a lot of children that we've seen, if we tell them to do something and be quite direct with that, they just can't and they won't be able to do that. And I think we've come on a big learning curve as a school to not kind of see that as… erm… just doing the wrong thing or being erm… defiant type thing and then kind of erm… sanctioning them for that.

EMMA: mhm

LAUREN: And I think we've looked at the behaviour policy over the last few years to kind of reflect that a little bit as well, because on the outset, yeah, absolutely, and I can see why, you know, even staff can come to me and say, well, they just refusing to do that. And it can be quite frustrating, even as a member of staff when you're asking a child to do something and they just won't. But I think our understanding has come a lot further… that they're, they're really struggling and it can present as that, that they're just not doing what they should be doing. Erm, but actually it comes from a place of real high anxiety and they just are unable to and we've noticed that when we unpick that further and try and support them with that, we see the positives and it obviously kind of shows to us that, that is what they're struggling with… yeah

EMMA: okay thank you for sharing that understanding… and you erm mentioned about your behaviour policy and that broader understanding across staff. So we will come back to that as I am quite interested in obviously what, you know, not just what you do, but what your school does as a whole when erm, when responding to children displaying demand avoidant behaviours.

LAUREN: okay yeah

EMMA: So in terms of the kind of behaviours that you see then in response to demands, what does that look like? if I was a fly on the wall, what would I see?

LAUREN: I think it presents so differently in different children. Erm so I'll just kind of think of one specific example when I'm talking. Erm so we've got one young person, erm it could be, erm this is a big thing we are we're struggling with at the minute… even being unable to come into school potentially because they have to come to school and the parents have said, you know, we have to come to school, and that can be too much for them and then they refuse to even come into school.

EMMA: Yeah

LAUREN: and then it could be even as simple in the classroom when you've asked them to get started with their work and they just say no, or they can shake their head and say no or… I'm trying to think of some other examples, erm it's time to go out for playtime now…I'm not going. They're just kind of almost refusing erm when they've been asked to do something, if that makes sense?

EMMA: Yeah, so it's kind of when it’s a direct demand?

LAUREN: Yeah so it’s when they're being told to do something and they'll just either refuse or some children that we worked with might just almost freeze and not, not do anything that they’ve been asked.

EMMA: and what does that freeze look like?

LAUREN: Erm, almost for some children it could be just like glazed over and just not, not communicate in any way in that sense, or some children we've had that may then just kind of huddle into a ball and not be able to move or go under a table and just kind of want to hide away from it all really, and then not engage with any with anybody really.

EMMA: So it sounds like there's some different kind of ways that that demand avoidance shows up. Are there any particular times when you might see less or more of the demand avoidant behaviours, you know, what might be happening?

LAUREN: I don’t want to get too much into strategies as that will probably be coming up but say maybe for one child if the learning is too much of a demand for them and we kind of tweaked the day for them when they've got a kind of task that, they enjoy doing, or that they’ve chosen themselves, whether it's like with Lego, whether it's drawing, we’ve got a lot of children in particular that are really creative and love making things with the play doh, so we timetable that in throughout the day. For this child, it was actually after completing a task. So they knew once they'd finished this, they could then go on to doing that. For some children that actually helped doing this before to kind of regulate them a little bit before having the capacity to follow a demand or do learning. So, if they ask, maybe making something with the clay, if we'd ask them, oh, “can you pass me the pink clay”, they'd be more likely maybe to follow that demand in that context, in the context of something they like and is a bit more like open, rather than maybe in the classroom setting and they'd be asked to do something formal, like formal learning maybe, if that makes sense.

EMMA: Yeah that makes sense, so in the context of a preferred activity that isn’t like, a formal learning task.

LAUREN: Yeah, yeah

EMMA: Okay erm, one of the things I’m wanting to understand is how you understand, you know, the function of demand avoidance. What function might it be serving and what the purpose of it is. So I wonder if you could tell me a little bit more about that?

LAUREN: For some children, it can be kind of maybe more like global anxiety where parents have kind of said to us that they see a lot of it at home as well or if they're out in the community, um and they're avoiding things and are anxious more generally.

EMMA: mhm yeah

LAUREN: And for some of our children, it can be very much related to school, kind of like that school and school related anxiety, erm, or it could be specific things within the day, whether it's going to assembly, that's just something that makes them highly anxious or whether it's, you know, going out for playtime or certain lessons even. So I think it can be quite specific to them or it can be more general, depending on the child and what needs that they've got.

EMMA: Yeah.

LAUREN: and I think the key to it is really getting to know that individual and a lot of the thing that we've looked at as a blanket, works for one child amazingly and then doesn't have the same effect on the other child, even though they could present very similar in terms of the avoidance, so I think they key to it is really unpicking what is going on so you can help them with what they need.

EMMA: Yeah, yeah and how do you go about that as a school?

LAUREN: I think one of the biggest things that we do is work closely with the parents and the families and the child themselves, but often sometimes the children either don't know why they're responding in a certain way or don't know why they find things so difficult or they can't do that. So the parents, I think, have got that real true insight into their child obviously they know them better than anybody else. And I think a lot of our children that we've supported with demand avoidance, parents often do see that at home as well and they have their own struggles at home and it's working with them as to what works, what doesn't work for them and their child as well.

EMMA: mhm yeah

LAUREN: So the biggest thing is erm the parents and the families, but also, because I'd done some mental health lead training last year day before we've got some really nice like people voice questionnaires type things, so depending on the age of the child, a lot of them have like a rating system as well, and I think we've that that's quite a good insight and sometimes it doesn't necessarily show us anything that we maybe don't know.

EMMA: Yeah

LAUREN: But sometimes we've done it with a couple of children, because some of the questions are really quite specific, it can really actually, I hadn't realised they felt like that about a certain thing, so maybe delve further into that with them as to exactly what that is. And there's questions about school, about home, about themselves, kind of everything, and I think that's quite an important tool to get their voice and like children maybe can't always verbalise that. But when asked questions that they have to raise, it can be a bit easier for them to share and to get an insight into what what's going on for them.

EMMA: And what has been the impact of that?

LAUREN: yeah, obviously the first thing we do is to have a look through it. Erm I am considering, we've just been put in in there a policy for AI erm and I am wondering if there's even tools, you know, for something like that that even IT can help us, obviously all completely confidential. But it can help us kind of analyse that because when you do get them, it's quite overwhelming, there's a lot to look at, but what we do is kind of pick out those ones that have been rated either sort of strongly agree or strongly disagree, depending on what that is, and then put them down as like a separate thing

EMMA: Mhm

LAUREN: and then delve into them further through conversations, and then to help kind of make a bit of an action plan from it. And we do use another document that is like a stress and triggers questionnaire type thing. The erm, communication and interaction team actually shared that with us and for children that she supports us with us well. She actually analyses that herself and she has more experience doing that and then provides a bit of a profile for us from that, which has been really helpful.

EMMA: Yeah

LAUREN: So it's going to be using that information to then inform an action plan in terms of right what can we do next kind of thing and trying to involve a child in as much of that process as we can, particularly for the children who are demand avoidant, I think if we almost took that away and said right this is what we're doing, that could obviously be quite challenging for them and anxiety provoking, so it’s almost like, look, we’ve noticed this, what do you think about this and kind of be led by them with it as well so that they feel in control of it.

EMMA: Yeah, yeah

LAUREN: so yeah, it’s been really positive. We've had children who display those sorts of demand avoidant behaviours that have been on a reduced timetable because of the sort of extreme levels of anxiety or not being able to cope in school. And then through this and then a very, very carefully planned re-integration plan done with them and parents, they’ve then come back into school full time and we've had two cases of that that have been really successful and we've got two at the minute that are on the reintegration plan that is going well. So I think that's, that's really positive.

EMMA: yeah it really sounds it thank you for sharing that. You erm, you talked about working with parents and that being important in terms of supporting children displaying demand-avoidant behaviours. What does that look like day-to-day? Have you got any examples of how you work with parents?

LAUREN: So generally, as a SENCo, I meet with parents, at least termly to review the support plans, but for some specific children that that are either on a reintegration plan or that are having a lot more support and we need to keep a close eye on them, we meet with parents every other week. Formally every other week with myself and a class teacher, sometimes a head teacher as well. Erm, and then for some children, it can even well, for a lot of children who show demand avoidance that we've got at the minute, it's even like a meet and greet every morning, then we kind of hand over with the parents, either verbally or for some children, that's too intense to listen to adults talking about them.

EMMA: Yeah

LAUREN: So we've got home communication books where our parents kind of write down, because for some children, it's even really important to know what happened five minutes ago, on the way to school, you know even in that morning or the evening so that we know how to approach their morning, so writing that down can we really helpful… and we do the same then before they go home for parents to see, kind of, what day they've had and, and that kind of thing.

EMMA: mhm yeah

LAUREN: So I think again, it is very much led by the child, whether it's kind of a written thing with parents daily, a handover verbally, and then for some parents, I mean, my email is pretty much open, rightly or wrongly to a lot of parents that, that I'm really kind of working with… erm even if I'm not directly working with them. So erm they kind of can get in touch quite regularly with myself if there’s like the, there's bits and bobs that they need throughout the week.

EMMA: mhm

LAUREN: I have done feedback forms and things in terms of my role as SENCo and how I can develop that further and, you know, I almost say this for myself, but they're generally so, so positive and parents are very appreciative and very, erm, very happy, happy with that, and even some parents that are erm.. for children that are further up the school because, because I've taught often in the year one, year three, I've taught a lot of these children myself, so I've got that relationship with parents as the teacher as well as then the SENCo, so they already know me.

EMMA: Yeah

LAUREN: And a lot of parents have said, one yesterday said that she almost feels safe talking to me. There's never any judgment. We believe what they say and as some parents have said before that erm potentially elsewhere and things that because necessarily we might not see as much in school or things that they get that feeling that they're not believed. But I think even just, you know, saying like, wow, I hear you, and that sounds really difficult, erm let's work together. I think that instant relief and the relationship that can be built from that, I think is, is really important.

EMMA: mhm

LAUREN: And then even if difficult conversations come up, it's easier to have and they feel more accepted of that because we've got that relationship and they know we all want, you know, the same thing.

EMMA: Yeah, yeah, so I'm hearing that you work hard to look after and sort of help parents feel heard and understood and working alongside them.

LAUREN: yeah, definitely, we do.

EMMA: Okay and then moving on slightly to think about how you first learned about demand avoidant behaviours, you know, when did you first kind of come across it? Erm what sources of knowledge or, kind of, experiences have influenced your understanding?

LAUREN: I think it was… I mean… erm… it, it must be maybe six, seven years ago, I would say, erm we had a child come to this school that joined us in Year five or six and the parent had said they've got PDA and I was like what?... that's one acronym I'd not really, not really heard of a such.

EMMA: Yeah

LAUREN: So I think it wasn't diagnosed for the child and I don't even know if it is diagnosed now? I think in terms of a country though we are quite far ahead than

other country in our recognition of it potentially. But yeah, so after this parent kind of said that, I looked into it more generally. Erm and then obviously over the years, it's become more of a term that we use and when we're talking to other SENCOs… it's a term that we can use. Erm and then the communication and interaction team actually came in maybe three or four years ago and did some whole school training on demand avoidance, and that feeds through to what we do now

EMMA: Yeah, mhm

LAUREN: and last year we had understanding autism training and it was quite a hefty part of that, quite a big part of that session was looking at children with demand avoidant behaviours… PDA. So yeah, through formal training, but also and I think sometimes for us, we don't always look at the label almost and like whether it's because, is it because they're autistic? Is it because they've got ADHD? It's almost like what are the behaviours? and then looking at it that way and how we respond to what we are seeing rather than what might be the label if that makes sense.

EMMA: Yeah, yeah, and what sort of language is used within your school? I know you mentioned that you don't focus on labels and you're focusing on the behaviours, so as well what sort of understanding of the behaviours do people have.

LAUREN: We have had conversations recently with a member of staff for a young person that's finding it really difficult and we think potentially because she's autistic and, and highly anxious, and it's the member of staff saying, I think it is sort of more PDA. And I kind of feel like it's all connected… like do we support her as a child presenting with PDA or do we support her with being highly anxious and autistic? Whereas it can be all intertwined anyway. So, PDA is the language that we use and it is like I say, it's how do we manage supporting this child? But I almost don't care what it is, does that make sense? So yeah it is something that we kind of talk about and we look at a lot of things online. I think that helps us when working with a child that has got, sort of, PDA. It might be strategies that we've used with other children with a range of needs, yeah so often it's not going to be brand new things, it might be things you pick up and take from working with other children and trying things out.

EMMA: Okay, erm that's really helpful, and kind of thinking more about how you respond to demand avoidant behaviours, the strategies and the approaches that you use? So erm, I wonder if you could kind of talk me through maybe a time in your practice recently where you felt you were successful or you feel it went well in responding to demand avoided behaviours?

LAUREN: So I think because it's just quite fresh because it's happening at the minute, erm… a young person that's really struggling to go into their classroom. Erm… they struggled quite a bit at the end of last year and I think the change, particularly with moving to a New Year group, erm, a new number of staff and things has really heightened that.

EMMA: mhm

LAUREN: Erm she will kind of not do anything that is asked, she will just shake her head erm and not, won't be able to do that. So big things like even coming into school but even when she's in school, even offering her even a choice of things that she likes to do, things that we know she likes, she's unable to kind of make that choice and will just kind of just, just shake her head.

EMMA: mhm

LAUREN: So we, we tried to speak to the child, but she didn't really know. She is very, you know, articulate and is able to verbalise a lot of things when she's feeling safe but she didn't know why she didn't want to come into school. She didn't know why she can't do this and I believe that she genuinely didn't, her body was just, was almost telling her she can't.

EMMA: Yeah

LAUREN: So erm, so we meet with parents as well and they, they gave us more of an insight that, you know, over the holidays she was really anxious about coming back to school and erm, where is she going to put her lunchbox, you know, all of these little things that can build up to, to make such a big thing. So I met with parents and then we tried to start the year just by, let's just see how it goes, erm and it didn't really work at all. So there were, there's a couple of times where you didn't even come into school. Parents were trying to get her in and we were trying to kind of manage her in physically, which was just kind of really distressing for everybody. It didn't work.

EMMA: Yeah

LAUREN: So we sat down together with parents without the child at this point, erm I kind of had more of like a meeting together with myself and the parents and the class teacher, erm… and a TA that is working with them as well, and kind of put a plan together. Erm… so the plan was quite an extreme plan potentially, but erm coming in full time. But she actually comes through my classroom door in year one and I kind of meet and green erm because I know the child and the family through an older sibling that that we did a lot of support with.

EMMA: Yeah

LAUREN: Erm so when we asked the child who were their safe people in school, she suggested one of them was myself. So myself to meet and greet her on the

playground come into class one, and then she spent some time, she loves the younger children, and that's a real validating thing for her that she's helping and that makes her feel really good about herself… so she'd spend some time in the year one with me til around, around playtime, even if she came in settled, you know, erm, that would be the plan.

EMMA: Yeah

LAUREN: And then after that time we've got like a bit of zones of regulation thing with visuals and she'd share how she was feeling as response to those numbers. And depending on the number if she was feeling okay, number one she could go into Year 3 and sit with her partners and just carry on. if it was maybe two or three, there's a little desk in the classroom for her to sit that's kind of away from her peers that she chose. And if it was maybe a four or a five we' got like a jungle area off, off the classroom that she could stay in there for a little bit and kind of listen to what they were doing and, and that kind of thing.

EMMA: mhm

LAUREN: And it's only quite new and, but it is it's having a positive impact. She's been in every day. Erm some mornings is a little bit tricky to come in, but we' just take our time. And I think it's very easy when we have a bad day like the other day to say the plan's not working. Like we need to change it and actually just be consistent with that to see erm and I think then after then things started picking up again. So I think consistency is key as well but being flexible within that consistency if that makes sense.

EMMA: Yeah

LAUREN: And yeah, it's still early stages with this child, but it's definitely made a huge impact the fact that she's been in school every day compared to not being in.

EMMA: Yeah I can really hear the impact there… and in terms of, you know, when I said talk about a successful time, what does successful mean to you in that situation? So what was the key outcomes that, you know, you were hoping for?

LAUREN: So for the child to, to feel… to feel safe enough to come into school so it would be that she's able to talk to us verbally. Erm, it would be that she's able to erm engage in a conversation because when she's not feeling that way, she can't do that. So if she's engaged in conversation, that's a real positive sign. Erm if she's then able to erm to, even for this child to show how she was feeling, she was able to do that now, whereas before she, she couldn't she just wasn't able to say anything. And some days it might just be pointing to the number rather than verbalising, but that we see that as a success that she's able to do that, to share, to share that. And even,

even then if she does manage to make it into the classroom, then engage in with the peers, erm because that's obviously a real positive she's able to do that, and that's a real bonus.

EMMA: And I'm wondering, I'm wondering how you kind of think about success over time with her… does it, does it…

LAUREN: I think it kind of builds, we build on it. So obviously the main goal was for her to feel safe enough to come in and and, and engage not even necessarily in the conversation or anything else, but just to be able to come in and feel safe. But I think once that's established, which we're almost getting to that point now, and we don't want to rush anything too quickly, but then it might be that the success looks like she's able to verbalise how she's feeling rather than pointing to that. And it kind of maybe builds on what we're doing. It just builds onto it and eventually it might be at a point maybe that then she's able to come into the Year three classroom and, and do what her peers are doing, but I think it's just small steps and getting the foundations there first.

EMMA: Yeah, and erm has this taught you anything about erm supporting children with demand avoidant behaviours. Have you learned anything from this experience that you will take forward?

LAUREN: I think the biggest thing for me is supporting staff with that as well erm because we've got obviously lots of different members of staff erm…and I think there's, there's still, if I'm honest, like a bit of a preconception that these children are just being erm… like rude or erm… being stubborn and they can do it, and they're just choosing not to and I think it's really hard because I mean our staff are so supportive and I think it's about training them erm… to, to really see why they're presenting that way because they're not choosing to do it that almost.

EMMA: Yeah

LAUREN: and often I think everybody thinks I'm almost too soft and I'm and this but it, it works and it's not nothing to do with me. And obviously I'm grateful for the training that I've had and the experiences I've had that others haven't and it's about, I think, supporting the team to have that shared language and that shared understanding because for some children, if that's not consistent in between members of staff, it can just throw everything back and increase their anxiety. Erm…so that's kind of the next step for me with it, which is still very, very much needed, I think, is to share that, those successes with staff and empower them to really understand those behaviours and how to help them.

EMMA: Yeah I'm hearing what you're saying… have you, have you thought about how you might do that?

LAUREN: Yeah, so even erm last week and it's only a something really small at this stage, but it was just erm, sharing it in our morning briefing, erm and handing out just a little literally a one page like overview type thing with some real strategies that I just kind of found myself.

EMMA: Yeah

LAUREN: erm…and it has been brought up in our senior leadership team meetings that I attend as well, kind of as a whole school approach that we want to prioritise, getting this consistency in how we work with demand-avoidance. Erm…so it has been brought up and then obviously getting people to come in to deliver the training, the understanding autism training with demand avoidance. But I think for a lot of stuff, even having that training, it's great, but then it's applying it to those individual children… that's the next step for us.

EMMA: mhm

LAUREN: But even watching others, erm so another child erm… the TA who provides one-to-one support was moving away from the child this academic year and so we wanted to introduce a new member of staff, so they kind of, at the end of last year kind of shadowed them to see their relationship with them, how they interacted, and kind of watched to kind of see what that looked like. and then the next step potentially is for them to maybe work with that child for five, ten minutes with the really confident familiar member of staff being there.

EMMA: mhm

LAUREN: and we are very safe like that, we're safe enough to have a go and people watch and learn from each other and make mistakes and that's really important. But it's like can you see how you said it this way, can you see how that might not be the best way to speak with the child, maybe try this way… and staff are so good at responding really positively to that.

EMMA: Yeah

LAUREN: and that's been a real success for this one child in particular, the adult that is really familiar to this child that all of this just really works, and she still with her in the afternoons, but the other adults are now working with her too rather than just her, and there was a little bit of… of learning I think for the other adults, and now it's it's really, really positive.

EMMA: Yeah

LAUREN: and the approach of the adult that's working with them in the afternoon is the same as kind of the morning because it can sometimes be a bit different to the way we'd work with other children. So that's going to keep that consistency but then also you've developed that learning through observation… yeah, I think staff feel quite empowered that, that they're achieving the same thing with the child as the other TA, because they almost said, oh, they won't be able to do this for me. They're only going to do it with… with this person. But now understanding that actually they are and one TA in particularly said, you know, we're having really good mornings now and I feel really erm, you know, it's really rewarding that they're able to do that.

EMMA: And you said there that sometimes it might be approaching it in a different way, I'm wondering what you think are… or are there any sort of things that make staff feel they won't do something for them?

LAUREN: It might be maybe they've not had as much experience, the unknown maybe, and I think particularly children with these kind of behaviours, it can be quite… not aggressive… but it can seem maybe erm… it can feel like you are fighting a losing battle almost type thing or they won't do what I say, so it's kind of scary to then try and get them to achieve something when you thinking they're not going to do it,

EMMA: mhm, yeah

LAUREN: and then almost reflecting on yourself… is that because I'm not doing it right? and you know, I can imagine that's quite erm… quite difficult for staff to even feel okay enough to kind of approach it... so experience definitely is, is one thing. I think… erm… even their own experiences potentially and their own personal views, erm sometimes staff can share things that they maybe don't necessarily agree with… maybe how parents are managing the situation and if this was my child, it could be this way. Erm, and it's kind of breaking out of that and looking at what is going on and not really kind of putting your own…your own erm like opinions to it and giving it a go and being open-minded and a lot of staff have said, you know, at first I thought there's no chance, but I have kind of took a bit of a dive into it and it's been really, really positive and then I think it only builds on from that then.

EMMA: Yeah, so it's kind of giving it a go then it's that experiential learning, that experience of success?

LAUREN: yeah and equally not being afraid to say actually this really didn't work. Will you help me pick out what happened there and reflect on it. Our early years team are really good for that, not necessarily for individuals, but as a bit of a team reflecting on each other's practice and sharing that together. It's all about the learning and sometimes to get it right we might get things wrong first and it's kind of knowing that… that's okay.

EMMA: And have there been any times that come to mind where something hasn't worked or it hasn't been successful, where it’s been challenging when responding to demand avoidant behaviours?

LAUREN: yeah, I think one, one boy in particular, was quite complex and he was autistic, and definitely has the demand avoidance profile. He could be quite aggressive erm, with… with his behaviours as well, verbally and physically.

EMMA: mhm

LAUREN: Erm so we kind of thought about one-to-one support, he wasn't in the classroom at the time as he couldn’t cope in there, but we set up like a room for him he had a tent in there, you know, lots of things that would really help meet his needs. and the TA was very, very confident. She was working with his child in this room and she felt isolated in that room, and she was working one-to- one with him all day. And although it was kind of having a positive impact for the child in that he was calmer, she found that very difficult for herself.

EMMA: mhm

LAUREN: And it's not something, completely wrongly, that I'd even considered, that actually, how's the adult feeling? You know, I was thinking everything about the child first as well what we could put in place for him to help him feel safe and calm, but then for the adult, even though the provision really worked for him. the child… so we, we kind of met and the TA luckily, she was kind of erm honest enough to share how she was feeling.

EMMA: Yeah

LAUREN: So we kind of put in regular breaks and then kind of looked at who was working with that child and mix that up a little bit, even something as small as having a walkie talking in there, so she can kind of just call out if she just needs to go and have a break. So we were able to then adapt it then. But at first, I think we tried that and it did really work for the child, having the one consistent adult, but I hadn't anticipated how that would be for the adult. So we, we reviewed that and, and made those changes and that was positive.

EMMA: and what was the impact of that, you know, for the young person?

LAUREN: I mean this child had worked previously with a lot of different members of staff anyway. And I think with these needs, the relationship with the adult is obviously vitally important, and he was kind of doing things that was not with an adult , if anything that triggered him more and he wanted to explore his environment independently.

EMMA: Yeah

LAUREN: So we had visuals so he knew what adult was going to be with him at different times and, and things like that anyway and made sure we were quite consistent in terms of how the adults were with him. Erm, so I think all of that work definitely helped but it didn't have like a detrimental effect in the support for him anyway. But it was quite, like it was quite positive for the staff.

EMMA: Okay, erm and then just kind of thinking about the way you're interacting every day with the young people. Is there anything that you or your staff keep in mind in terms of how you respond, how you interact with young people that are displaying demand-avoidant behaviours? Like what have you noticed that is really important or really vital?

LAUREN: I think for a lot of our children, it's the adult been really calm, erm… and patient, erm.. but then even things like the language they use, not just the language but how it's being said. . um which, you know, for some children we put together like a bit of a regulation plan where we write specific sentences, ways of phrasing to use, particularly if the child is working with different members of staff or sentence starter type things, so it's that shared language that they use them with them and it might be something like erm, you know, "I can see that you're feeling this way", "I wonder whether we might.." or it might be giving them choices to do something rather than telling them what to do. So erm, "would you like to do this or this", or for some children, you know that can be too difficult, but "oh this looks really good, would you like to help me?" or "would you like to do this?" and kind of keeping it quite loose.

EMMA: mmm

LAUREN: But like I say, how you say that that makes a difference, if you said right, "do this or this" you know, that can make such a difference.

EMMA: mhm yeah

LAUREN: So erm and on the regulation plan will put a lot of detail. So even when they're in the green zone and everything is looking okay, how to keep it that way and then we'll have kind of moving into the the next zone erm like, yellow, what the behaviours look like and what to say. So even things like for this child, it's ensure minimal use of language, don't talk lots to them like I'm doing now, use a calm voice when talking to the child reassure him, distract him, erm… remind him of his safe spaces, where he can go to leave the situation. Erm and… this, this child often responds well, if you put your hand out to them so they can just hold your hand and that kind of thing.

EMMA: Yeah

LAUREN: So, and this is shared by everybody and then if we go into kind of maybe that red zone when the behaviours erm are more difficult and what to do in that situation and I think for staff, they feel safe having that as a tool, a shared way of working. So even though they might have seen it, observed it with other members of staff, having that is helpful. Erm… it might be just bullet points on there that they can refer to, so using that shared language, keeping calm, even coming down to their level when they're talking… and these things are so obvious, but erm, but it really does make any difference.

EMMA: Yeah so again it's sounding like it's having that shared, kind of almost agreed approach?

LAUREN: Yeah, yeah

EMMA: And is there anything else that comes to mind in terms of approaches that you use when working with demand-avoidant behaviours?

LAUREN: We do often use choices, for some children it could just be verbally or it could be having a visual as well like the now and next with choices for the next. And it's also making sure the demand feels manageable, like can they manage it and how can we make it manageable. So maybe let's give this a go for five minutes and then we're doing this, so that they know what's happening beyond the task rather than just saying right we're doing this, it can be too much sometimes. So we just breaking that down

EMMA: Yeah

LAUREN: And for some children we'd have the 'my choice, your choice' type thing. For some children it might be, "I'd really like us to do this", in fact, I probably wouldn't even say it as direct as that but explaining that this is what *we* are doing now, and then after it's your choice

EMMA: mhm

LAUREN: and for some children they have a choice board so it might be Lego, it might be playing out with the football. And they're usually the children with one-to-one support as well as we can facilitate that and have that flexibility to have that give and take.

EMMA: Yeah

LAUREN: But even in the classroom it might be erm, “oh they have some jobs to do in the classroom, so *we'll* do this first and then that”. So yeah, it's kind of just depending on, on the support of what, of what that looks like.

EMMA: And what is the impact of those adjustments then, what difference does it does?

LAUREN: I think for the children, they're able to, to complete their learning or even just give it a go more so than if they’d just been given that as an open task to do erm… I think they feel safer in knowing that once I've done this, I can do that, it gives them maybe more of a reason to do it rather than just are they just telling me to do it, and I don't want to do it. But actually, if I do this, I get to do that and the kind of feel that's fair and equal. I, I think for a lot of our children, that sense of fairness is important, that why should I, why should I do it? Like what do I get out of it almost?

EMMA: Yeah

LAUREN: And sometimes it's well, this is what we do at school, but that doesn't make any difference. So it's actually, well, we do need to do this. But I know if we can do… and for some children say if there's five questions, you know, absolutely they're not going to do five or even show them, them five. Right, *we’re* going to do these five questions, but do you know what, let’s just see if we can do these two… and then you can do that. And actually in our head we're probably thinking, we'll only expect them to do two anyway, but to them it feels like, oh brilliant, this feels more manageable. Fair enough, I'll have a go at these two. And it's making them feel like almost that they're… erm… does it make sense?

EMMA: Yeah, yeah it does

LAUREN: because they feel like I can probably do that because actually I was meant to be doing five, but now I can do two and it feels for them more achievable and manageable and they feel like yeah, I can do this you know they feel more in control of what they’re doing.

EMMA: Yeah, yeah

LAUREN: and by doing that, that relationship with the teacher will build almost as well because actually, she’s asking me to do five and there’s no chance but actually, she’s being quite kind there asking me to do two… and that erm, that probably feels like less pressure and shows they understand that okay, this isn’t easy for you and

I'm trying to help you and maybe then…then they're more, more able to engage rather than erm, rather than freeze as such.

EMMA: Yeah, I hear what you're saying, and are there any other ways that you might adapt your approach?

LAUREN: I think I mean, even for some children erm, they can be very academic and very able with their work. It's not necessarily that they, they're unable to erm, to do the work. It's not often not even like anything cognitive, but they're still unable to access if if they're feeling that way, if they see it as too much of a demand.

EMMA: Yeah

LAUREN: But obviously for some children it's making sure that the work is appropriate at their level and even for children that are really academic, I think it's, it's scaffolding it with support so they're able to do that or feel that they're able to do that.

EMMA: mhm

LAUREN: And that might look different depending on how they're feeling on different days. So one day they might be able to sit and do the morning maths and that's absolutely fine. The next morning, even if we know absolutely they are able to do it, if they're not feeling able to, then that that can be difficult for them. So it might be that they can sit with the teacher to do that. It might be that they might need resources with them that day even though they didn't need it the day before, and that's fine or it might be like I said that they maybe don't do as much and just expect them to do something a little bit, rather than… rather than nothing.

EMMA: Yeah

LAUREN: It's just kind of changing the expectations day by day depending on where. where they're at. For some children we have a little like rating system for when they come in so they can share how they're feeling so they don't even have to tell us and we can use that to indicate, right.. they've put them, I mean children like different things for the rating systems, but for example, they've put themselves down at the red face. So actually I can see they're probably not going to feel like doing much this morning. So I'll go easy or I'll just say, do you know what, this morning just do that one for me? But they're still doing it a little bit, rather than just putting the expectation that they do have to, to do.

EMMA: okay so you're constantly adjusting then in terms of how much demand you can put tn them today, depending on where they're at?

LAUREN: yeah, yeah, and how they are feeling. And I think that children have that relationship with staff so that they're safe enough to share how they're feeling and they'll be honest with that as well and they know they can trust us with that.

EMMA: mhm

LAUREN: And I think, yeah, I think we've never really had any instances where children would use that to their own advantage almost because that they're just they just don't. I think all children want to kind of do what they should be able to do or they want to do well, it's just that sometimes they can't and aren't able do that.

EMMA: Yeah, so it's not a choice as such.

LAUREN: Yeah, yeah exactly that.

EMMA: And you mentioned there about erm, relationships. Can you tell me a bit more about relationships?

LAUREN: Yeah, I think to be fair, that's probably one of the key things erm, is relationships with erm, particularly with staff, obviously they're the ones that are putting a lot of these demands on the children. Erm, and I think the biggest thing is them feeling understood and erm… supported and, you know, they spend so much time with staff in school, erm, at this point in the year, there might be staff in school that they might feel more comfortable with, when they've got a new teacher potentially that they don't know.

EMMA: Yeah

LAUREN: so it doesn't happen overnight it can take a while to build up that relationship. I mean we're quite lucky in the sense of our school that everybody does know everybody. All staff do assemblies over the week, so it's not like erm, in a secondary… I can imagine that's a lot more difficult when they might not have that relationship with you. But I think obviously the teacher is with them most of the week, most of the time. and I think if a child doesn't feel like they're understood by that staff member…it's a lot more difficult for them. And then often we see the behaviours potentially worsen or like become harder to manage if they don't feel that or if there's a been a breakdown in the relationship.

EMMA: mhm

LAUREN: So it's even little things you know, even telling the child that they understand, you know, something as obvious as that or, you know, thanking them for sharing how they're feeling, you know how hard it is, responding to them and being consistent with that so they know how you're going to respond, I think, and for us, making sure that we keep calm all the time.

EMMA: mmm

LAUREN: even when things are really difficult… them not, them not feeling like we're getting stressed by their behaviours or we're not feeling like they're… we're not being like that, like our tone of voice is calm. Erm, and I think for them then to reach out to the staff member when they are feeling that way erm… is, is vital. Yeah, just being there consistently.

EMMA: Yeah

LAUREN: And I feel like we can get a lot more from the children. This feel safe enough to erm have a go at learning and things and share how they feel because of that relationship that's been developed.

EMMA: Yeah, that makes a lot of sense. It sounds like relationships really sort of underpin like, underpin what you do and how things, how things play out day to day.

LAUREN: Yeah it's one of the most important things. If the relationship's not there, none of the strategies matter.

EMMA: Yeah, okay. Erm, so before we move on, is there anything else in terms of your approach, your strategies, or like the adaptations that you make that you think are really important that you've not had a chance to talk about?

LAUREN: I think the other thing is erm…for these children, it's making sure that they kind of feel in control of the situations. Erm so they're not kind of being told what to do or we're not saying it's because we want them to do it as the adult. They need to feel like they're in control of it, which is why the choice thing is really good because obviously we can give them those options and either one is okay for us but they feel like they're choosing… they're choosing it and so they're feeling like… that they're in in control if that makes sense and it sort of helps them feel safer and less sort of anxious.

EMMA: Yeah

LAUREN: I mean also the day-to-day things… if it is with a learning task it's, 'we can do this, or we can do that.' Erm, for some children, erm, going into the hall is very overwhelming at lunchtime. So for some children we give them the choice of whether they go to the hall or not. I do lunch club every day and some children come into my classroom and eat their lunch. And for some children they come in every day because that's what they need and for some children, they can choose some days they have like an open pass to come and do that. It was a child that actually just left us for secondary, but it would be a really good indication for me of how things are going and if I've seen them every day that week in lunch club, you know that they might be finding things quite tricky, and towards the end of the year, I didn't see them at lunch time at all in a really positive way, but I think even open choices like that, not necessarily specific, but erm letting the child feel in control of that, actually, you can choose if you feel like you can manage it.

EMMA: mhm

LAUREN: You know the older they get, I think that's easier. You know, if you can manage that today or if you can't and if you can't, here's an option rather than feeling like you have to force yourself and then explode later or.. or feeling like there isn't any other option and having to do it anyway and holding it all together… that's when we can see them struggling.

EMMA: Yeah

LAUREN: So even bigger open choices, things like that. So it's kind of like knowing that, oh, I don't have to kind of force myself to do it. I'm not going to get in trouble. Even assembly is another one like going to assembly can be difficult so it could be well today you can go into assembly or you can come and do this job with me but it's, it's giving them the control to decide.

EMMA: That's really helpful, thank you. Just moving on slightly then, as I'm aware of time. What is your experience like, working with children who display demand avoidant behaviours?

LAUREN: Yeah, definitely I think I speak for all staff to say that because obviously we all care so much and we want what's best for the children when sometimes things maybe aren't working, or obviously if we're seeing these kind of behaviours, we're thinking, well, what's, what's going on?, what are we doing wrong? We do and can take it personally and feel that we've let them down, or that we're not we're not doing right by them.

EMMA: Mhm that sounds hard

LAUREN; But I think as a staff team, we're very good at talking to each other. Erm, you know, we're all very, very close, erm professionally, but a lot of us also personally and things, we reach out to each other. Erm… and there's a sense of that, we're all in it together and even those erm TAs that might work more closely with some children, erm, can feel open enough, you know, to talk about it and to say if there are things, or they are finding it difficult or things aren't working, erm… to say that and to reach out,

EMMA: Yeah

LAUREN: Erm and I think staff, the relationship between staff members is just as crucial as the relationship between the child and the staff member, erm, because it doesn't always go around and things don't always work, but we never kind of take, we try not to take that as anything would have been wrong and see it as a bit of a learning curve of what else we can do, what we can try differently.

EMMA: mhm

LAUREN; So I think that's, that's a real positive that relationship between, between us as a staff.

EMMA: And what does that kind of support look like in school? Kind of formally or informally.

LAUREN: TAs have appraisal meetings with the deputy head, erm and they have like erm, and some of the TAs come to me to help them think about that. We'll reach out to me to help so they'll say can you help me like look at these forms? I've got to write down what's going well within my role, anything I'm finding tricky. Is there any further support or training that you feel would be necessary? From a formal side of things they meet with the deputy and equally then to look at their progression and things like that to make sure they're feeling valued, in terms of their pay but also in terms of, you know, other things. And so formally it's done that way in terms of the appraisal cycle, but I think informally as well, it is just, I mean, I said to the headteacher the other day I should have a camera outside my classroom because of the amount… I mean my classroom has actually moved. I was right in the middle corridor, I moved down to year one and I did think, I wonder if you know, I'll have less traffic from staff it's not…

EMMA: haha they come and seek you out

LAUREN: haha it was convenient in a good way but yeah staff do generally day to day, literally, erm come down to talk about things. But they talk about wins as well as struggles. You know, it is like a nice balance of "can I just tell you this, this was amazing today". and that kind of thing.

EMMA: Aw lovely

LAUREN: but within the mini teams as well, particular early years team or even like upper key stage 2, erm, they'll kind of talk to each other and support each other that way. Erm, and even, you know, I'm finding that bit of time tricky, can you help me with it, and can you cover me with this, and there is that kind of flexible approach to that where possible, but I think yeah… staff feel… I do believe staff generally feel supported in their role.

EMMA: Yeah

LAUREN: And then that empowers them to keep going with them when things do feel hard, when things are trick.

EMMA: yeah, yeah it's kind of helping with their resilience then.

LAUREN: Yeah exactly

EMMA: and then just kind of thinking about your wider school approaches. So erm, you know overall school culture, your values, your norms, your policies, just the ways of doing things. How does that shape the way that people respond to demand-avoidant behaviours? I know you previously mentioned about your behaviour policy so I wondered if you wanted to say more about that.

LAUREN: obviously we have all these things in place that we want every child to achieve and want them to be able to do and things like that, and we kind of try and look at it that that we want that for every child, regardless of their need to achieve and do well, but how they get there may be, it may be slightly different

EMMA: mhm

LAUREN: So it might be erm that they need that support. It might be that it might look slightly different, but they're still, still being able to achieve that. Erm, and then thinking about our behaviour policy, we moved away a few years ago from, I mean, it wasn't a few years ago, but like the visual erm thing of moving children's names down, traffic lights, things like that. We've moved away from all of that because it's quite shameful and, you know, for some children they might not be at a point where they can do what the traffic lights, things like that sort of ask of them. So erm now, we've got quite a holistic approach in the terms of we'll always remind the children about the expectations first. We want to support them with that. So the next step might be thinking about are there any external things that's making them behave that

way in the classroom or outside, move seats, what's influencing the behaviour and what are they, what is it communicating. And then we have erm actually, actually we call their reflection book. Erm so it might be that when they're calm they look at it on their own and then they'll, they'll sit with a member of staff to go through it, so it's like what's happened? How are you feeling at that time? Who was affected by it? to really understand the behaviours and then sort of, what could we do differently or what could we do now and how are you feeling now at the end? So it's like first of kind of reflecting on what's happened, but making the child in control of that and leading that, so we're not telling them, you did this and this needs to happen. It's right, what did happen? And then they tell you that, and that's only been the last couple of years and we've found that really, really effective.

EMMA:What has been the impact of that for the children you'd say display those demand-avoidant behaviours?

LAUREN: We've seen behaviour incidents reducing, genuinely the head teacher's got a hold of figures and stuff. They have shared that in meetings that behaviour incidences have reduced significantly. Erm… and erm, I think even the pupil voice, they like to talk about what's happened after because they know, you know, they're not we're not just going to shout at them. Obviously there's often a consequence potentially for what for what has happened. Erm, but if the same recurring behaviours do happen, then they go on something called our behaviour plan and it's broken down into every aspect of the day, so it's like a timetable type thing. so it's not just the day because I know for some children it might, something might happen in the morning and then they just think… well, that's the whole day ruined now. So it's broken down and it's sort of these green, red and yellow faces and then SLT review that every day and we meet with parents to share that as well. and we focus on a specific target. So rather than just saying right, we need to be good or we need to make the right choices ,for some children, they know what the right choices are, well that's too broad. So it might be a really specific. So for one child at the minute it is not get too close to somebody's face when talking to them because they get quite intense and that is what the chart is looking at. So then if something different happens, we don't necessarily record it on there, we might talk to them about that, and then once that target, they feel like they can do that, then we might then look at something different but keeping that really specific so they know what we're looking for, and I think that's been really positive.

EMMA: mhm, and is that the same for say all SEN children, children displaying demand-avoidant behaviours?

LAUREN: for some children, they have their own regulation plan, erm so they might not necessarily go on the behaviour plans…that is quite more general for most of the school. Erm and I think the key point in that, is that we share with parents how things are going.

EMMA: mhm

LAUREN: So for, for a couple of our children, you know, if their behaviours are quite extreme, erm, we will share that with parents it wouldn't necessarily be… it would all be logged, but not treated the same way in one sense, not necessarily treated as a choice and we would still be looking at what we can put in place to support them and what, erm, what they need, but the outcome would still be the same that parents would be informed and, and does that make sense?

EMMA: yeah, it does, yeah. So again, it's the involvement of parents as well throughout all of this. Erm, and then again just still thinking about the wider school approach, policies, the culture. Erm, you mentioned SLT a few times, just what are the role of senior staff in terms of, you know, show you in support or influencing how staff in general approach dealing with demand avoidant behaviours?

LAUREN: I think erm… it's quite a small, erm, SLT team so we've got the head teacher and then the deputy head and then myself, not officially but I go to meetings. Erm… and there was a training I went to before and they were saying how the SENCo should almost certainly be part of the senior leadership team, and if not… to have an advocate. And I think for me, I'm not officially but… but there is that sense in our school that I don't need to be, because we often all share the same, same goals anyway, the same vision that I know, you know, if I'd suggested something really needs to change for a child, I'd have the full support of staff, and then equally if not, it's safe enough to say actually, I'm not sure about that… I don't know if that would work because of actually… yeah

EMMA: mmm yeah

LAUREN: One child at the minute who is struggling we're suggesting alternative provision and looking in to that and the conversation we had last week was maybe this isn't the right thing and why, and it's made my opinion change and I think that was quite valid.

EMMA: yeah

LAUREN: So it is, I think well working together and sharing our own opinions and then coming up with solutions that are right for the child, and each different member of the team offer something different. So often the finance manager is there as well, and she's got a great insight into…she's the finance manager, but like the business manager as well so she has that perspective, and erm yeah, I think it's a really nice like team that share the same core goals that, you know, we want every child to achieve. We want every child to feel included erm..but for some children, especially children with the behaviours we're talking about, we might need to do that slightly different to support them with that, erm and then that's filtered down.

EMMA: Yeah

LAUREN: But there's just a shared message across the whole school generally anyway.

EMMA: What I'm hearing is that you've all got shared values and your vision, but then there's that discussion and that healthy debate around how do we get to that and what does that look like for each child as well?

LAUREN: Yeah, and all views are always well respected and even things I've suggested maybe hasn't necessarily been agreed, but then it's come back with, why not? and the reason is really valid as to why that might not be the best thing for the child, and then we…we'll kind of do it together. But yeah, I mean, I feel so lucky to work in an environment like that and I'm not just saying that, hence why I've been here for so long. I've seen a lot of the staff when we say, you know, we'd have a very low turnover of staff because… it is just the best place to work because of that, you know, when things are tricky it's having that that helps you keep doing your best for the children. Oh I'm getting emotional…

EMMA: Yeah, yeah aw, I can certainly hear it in in terms of everything that you've been talking about how that, how that support from colleagues makes a difference to your resilience.

LAUREN: Yeah.. yeah

EMMA: so erm I'm just aware of the time. I think that's pretty much kind of everything that I wanted to to ask you. Erm, is there anything that we haven't talked about that you think is important to mention in terms of, you know, how you erm understand demand avoidance or how you respond to it?

LAUREN: I think it is just making sure we reduce their anxiety as much as we can, by doing all of the things that kind of we've talked about erm… and making them feel empowered of their own kind of self, that they're able to manage the busyness and environment of being in school and and life in general.

EMMA: And what does what would that mean for them? What does that bring them?

LAUREN: That reduction in anxiety that control. When they're feeling control and that anxiety is reduced, they feel obviously happier, they feel included, they feel heard, listened to, supported and just, yeah, just happy and able to contribute to the school and beyond. I think obviously they can be very erm… I don't know what the word is, but erm… just decisive in one sense and like find that strength erm to share what they…what, what they need and what they want and, maybe they can't always help that, but it shows that actually, if they believe in something enough that they'll, they'll

go for it and now almost their body is telling us, well, I can't do it. They range from, from, you know, really confident children that we see, maybe the anxiety isn’t as obvious, to really shy, quiet. So I don't even think it's a general like a personality trait that we see there. For the one young girl, she’s always talking to her peers at playtime and, and enjoying that social time, and for another child, he was always out there chatting to his friends. That was not a problem for him and they were quite confident in doing that.

EMMA: Yeah, yeah.

LAUREN: So yeah, I think ultimately, we want them to feel part of it and to be able to achieve, you know, the same as their peers and feel empowered and in control.

EMMA: Lovely, thank you. I’m just going to stop the recording there if that’s alright?

LAUREN: Yes

Clara

EMMA: Right. Start recording. There we go. So the recording has started now. So to begin with then, can you summarise your classroom experience to date?

CLARA: Yeah, so I've been a teacher erm I believe it is 13 years erm but I do lose track

EMMA: haha

CLARA: and for the last three years, erm, I've been SENCo at my current setting. Erm, so I've had varied experience in different schools erm, and different areas as well. So I've got a fairly good understanding of the curriculum. I tend to be placed in lower key stage 2, in Year 4 so I know the Year 4 curriculum really well.

EMMA: So you said you're a SENCo and a teacher role at the moment as well.

CLARA: Yeah

EMMA: How does that split work then. Is it equally split then or

CLARA: That's changed actually over the last three years since I took on the role of SENCo. In the first year, I was teaching three days and out one day. But due to the demand in workload… As I'm only part-time as well, I was in class one day and out of class two days doing the SENCo role.

EMMA: mhm

CLARA: I am teaching on a few afternoons a week and that's to Years 3, 4, 5 and 6 so I'm doing the SENCo role for one full day and two mornings a week.

EMMA: mhm yeah, I can imagine that time is needed with all the demands of the SENCo role, but sounds nice that you still get to have that time in the classroom too.

CLARA: Yeah, yeah

EMMA: Okay thank you. That's really useful background to hear about. Okay so moving on then, can you explain the term demand avoidant behaviours or erm, can you define it? What does it mean to you?

CLARA: Erm.. so I mean… if I'm completely honest, I don't 100% know the difference between pathological demand avoidance and demand avoidance. Erm… I tend to talk about pathological demand avoidance as SENCo erm… and my understanding of it is that it can present erm a PDA profile can present as part of autism… erm, but I believe it is starting to be recognised as it's own entity I believe… erm, but my understanding of demand avoidance is erm… erm… based on anxiety. It's.. we've also had some PDA training as a whole staff actually, so it's like an internal, erm… fear of losing control and not being in control and… and not being able to comply with demands erm, and what I learned from the training actually was that it's not just external demands it can be internal demands as well. So really wanting to do something but not being able to do something because of like that profile… is my understanding.

EMMA: Can you say more about kind of what you mean by internal demands?

CLARA: So erm… wanting to do something. So for example like oooh erm… I want to go on a fairground ride, but then when it comes to it, not being able to because of the anxiety. So it's something that they might want to do. And that really surprised me, as I didn't realise it was internal demands, I just thought it was external demands that you know that people with PDA profiles struggled with. Erm… so that was quite interesting.

EMMA: And when you say kind of external demands, are there certain kind of demands that you've seen children struggle with? Is there anything that tends to come up in your day-to-day work.

CLARA: Yeah definitely, it tends to be erm… adult demands, erm teacher demands. Erm… so you know, work and learning and teaching demands kind of thing. So when you're asking children to do a particular activity or join in with a class discussion and that kind of thing.

EMMA: mhm, and is there anything else as well?

CLARA: Yeah to be honest, erm… it tends to be erm, the adult led erm… demands. I can't, I'm trying to think actually because of never throught about it before as I'm talking to you but I've never noticed when it's peers. If a peer puts, you know, I've never noticed demand avoidance if it is a peer that's putting a demand on another child. I can't say I've ever noticed that but it's something I'm going to look out for in the future.

EMMA: yeah, yeah. When you're saying a peer putting a demand on them, what kind of demands are peers putting on them?

CLARA: Like if a peer asks, like obviously you know children speak to eachother in class all the time. I've never noticed PDA, or demand avoidance if it is a child that's asked another child. Even the children that I think present with a PDA profile.

eMMA: Yeah

CLARA: I can't say I've ever noticed them becoming overwhelmed or dysregulated by a peer demand.

EMMA: Yeah so if it's a peer that's asked them to do something as opposed to an adult?

CLARA: Yeah, yeah. I know we've got a particular child who has got a diagnosis of autism and PDA, and ADHD and he… he erm… he's got the demand avoidance of internal and external demands so he will sometimes want to play with the peer, but then, but then can't because of the demand avoidance.

EMMA: Yeah

CLARA: But yeah, just thinking about it and talking about it out loud, I've never noticed demand-avoidance when it's a peer that's asked him to do something.

EMMA: That's really interesting. I mean, have you got any thoughts about why that might be?

CLARA: I guess possibly the person in the classroom who puts the most demands on them is the teacher, in terms of teaching and learning. You know other than sort of asking to pass or use resources, children don't tend to put a lot of demand on eachother in the classroom I don't think so perhaps that's why.

EMMA: mmm

CLARA: Unstructured time, I think in most schools when children can really erm.. can be really difficult for some children with specific profiles. So I guess that maybe that is the time when peers do put more demands on eachother. So it's certainly something that I'm interested in now I'm talking about it, like I say it's something I've never thought about before and that I'm interested to find out and have a look into.

EMMA: Yeah, it'd be interesting to be a fly on the wall in those peer interactions at playtime just to see how they're responding to each other you know if they're asking them to play a game or something like that, how that child who you see as demand avoidant would respond?

CLARA: Yeah

EMMA: Okay, so you mentioned erm that your understanding of demand avoidance is that it is driven by anxiety. Can you say a little bit more about that?

CLARA: …Erm… I think from my experience of demand-avoidant behaviours, you can see that… that… the avoidance is from a place of anxiety and uncertainty and losing control.

EMMA: mm

CLARA: Erm… so I think that really comes across, you can really actually observe that erm… yeah, and I think erm you know for some of our young people, demand-avoidance comes from anxiety but also it can cause a lot of anxiety.

EMMA: And what do you tend to see, you said you can observe that anxiety? What might it look like? Like how does the demand-avoidance show up?

CLARA: Erm, I've written myself some notes about children I have worked with and that varies depending on the child. So we've got one child who when they're asked to do something, can become really really upset, and you know, you see the really big big erm, big out burst of emotion and behaviour. Erm… but then we've got another child who is very much the opposite, if you put a demand on them, they will shut off and withdraw. And again you can almost see, you know, you can almost observe that, and you're thinking oh no I've said the wrong thing, and you can see it happening, them becoming really introverted.

EMMA: Yeah, yeah so that anxiety response shows up differently in different young people?

CLARA: Yeah, yeah. Because the child who I said… their demand-avoidance tends to be mostly around toileting, specifically. And erm… there are times when he can go the other way, he can become really dysregulated and distressed so yeah, it's not always consistent.

EMMA: And what are your thoughts on those differences like how do you make sense of those differences in the kind of demands that, that are being avoided?

CLARA: I think it's just really individual and really personal. I think it's erm, it's just a matter of really really knowing your children really well and understanding them and

developing that relationship with them so you do recognise the triggers and can almost stop the triggers before they happen.

EMMA: So that kind of like early intervention knowing when it's bubbling?

CLARA: Yeah

EMMA: So you've talked about control, anxiety and you've used the term PDA. In your school, how is demand-avoidance referred to and understood?

CLARA: So we use the term PDA and… erm, I think most staff in the school including middays would understand it as that. As SENCo… erm, I've been to speak to the midday supervisors as I know they were having some difficulties at lunchtime, so that unstructured time with children specifically with demand-avoidance as the middays were…were putting demands on them and then getting unfavourable responses.

EMMA: yeah

CLARA: So there was a bit of learning to do there, a bit of erm… professional development to do with that specific team so you know, we do use the term PDA and I think most staff would know what it is and we also use, erm… WIN language erm, so I've really tried to encourage staff that when they're erm wanting a particular ourcome, rather than putting a direct demand child, that they use that, 'I wonder'; I'm imagining, I'm noticing' so that WIN language, using that acronym as well as it's quite easy to remember.

EMMA: What is that acronym sorry, did you say WIN?

CLARA: Yeah, WIN. So I'm Wondering, I'm imagining, I'm noticing.

EMMA: Ah I see, is that something you've come up with as a school

CLARA: No that came from the PDA training which I believe was through the communication and Interaction team. It's really simple actually isn't it but it makes a huge difference.

EMMA: Ah does it?

CLARA: And I've spoken to parents about it too and they've said yeah we've seen a huge difference between we've said 'oh you need to put your shoes on' and 'oh I'm wondering how long it'll take to put your shoes on.' Just rewording it slightly but it has made a massive difference at this particular setting.

EMMA: Nice, so is that something that the whole school have adopted as part of their approach?

CLARA: Yeah, yeah

EMMA: And have the midday supervisors noticed a difference there as well in terms of using that WIN language?

CLARA: Yeah. I've had some really positive feedback and they've said that the sessions have been really useful and since they've adopted that language, they're getting the desired outcome instead of the demand-avoidance.

EMMA: Yeah and what kind of demands were they putting on children when they were noticing that pushback when using the direct language?

CLARA: So it might be erm, put the stick down, or go and line up, or you know that kind of thing... Yeah

EMMA: And so you've mentioned training. Is there erm, is there anything else that's kind of helped, your or the wider team in understanding demand-avoidance or that has influenced your approach?

CLARA: Erm, yeah so we had some whole school training erm… based on Paul Dix, who erm, you know who wrote, When the adult changes everything changes.

EMMA: Yeah I do yeah

CLARA: So yeah, so fogging, so it's a change of vocabulary, it's a change of language. So fogging, is erm, acknowledging how a child feels, erm, but still sort of requesting the same outcome if that makes sense. So 'I can see how me asking you to do that piece of work has made you feel cross, and it's still got to be done.' But also, an element of choice, so you know, you can do it now or you can do it…. So they've got that choice. So that gives them a bit of control, so removing some of the anxiety from the situation. So if they're not ready to do it there and then, they can do it at a later time when maybe they're more regulated.

EMMA: And what kind of things do you give them choice over. What does that look like?

CLARA: Erm… erm… I mean we use now and next but we do quite you know we've got quite a few different strategies that we have got from different places that we

incorporate so I guess predominantly, learning tasks yes, erm… so sometimes the choice will be with the now and next, you know the choice might be, if you do this little bit of work then you can do something of your own choice. Yeah... And what it tends to be depends on the specific child and their interest. So we've got a child who is interested in, he's got a really really big interest in Sonic, so he might want to do a Sonic wordsearch or a Sonic colouring sheet. So again, very child specific, very individual.

EMMA: Yeah, yeah

CLARA: Another child might want to do something practical like lego or mecarno so really leaning into their interests and having the preferred activities after.

EMMA: Yeah, yeah, and what tends to be the impact of that then, what do you notice about how that helps?

CLARA: It depends on the child as I don't think it works for every child every day, but overall, but it usually has a positive impact.

EMMA: and are there any times, when you know, you say it doesn't work every day, like what might be different about those times? What do you make of why things don't work every day?

CLARA: I think there are just so many different factors. It might just be a child who has not had breakfast, and if that's the case it doesn't matter what you do that day, they just need something to eat but they're not always able to verbalise that so you might not find that out til later in the day. Erm… yeah, so there are just so many different things that can affect the way a child presents at that time, and their emotions. So yeah… it's not always consistent but you do know, you know, you've got some children where things will work 9 out of 10 times but other children you just need to change it. For example there's one child, when I was working with them a few years ago I just had to have so many different tools and strategies up my sleeve as I had to change it all every day. What worked one day didn't work the next day. It might work the next week, but you just had to try different things all of the time. It was a massive learning curve.

EMMA: haha yeah

CLARA: But now haha he is different again as he is really settled now, so I'd like to think that what I did a few years ago that was so draining actually had a positive impact on him overall.

EMMA: haha yeah I can hear what you're saying. And I was going to ask how that feels for you… How does it feel for you as someone working with children displaying demand-avoidant behaviours?

CLARA: I think sometimes you can really doubt yourself. And that actually was really difficult as you're having to find something that motivates them, that works for them… erm… something different every, literally every day. So it's really really hard, and you know, you can't help but think, is it making a difference? Is it working? Is it working for them, you know?

EMMA: Yeah

CLARA: And sometimes yeah, you've got to trust your instincts and professionalism, you know, it's nice when it does turn out to be a success story, but you know, at the time you're not really, you're not always sure but you really do have to rely a lot on your instincts and that.

EMMA: Yeah, I can understand that, just kind of trusting yourself with it. Was there anything that you know, you felt helped you to keep going during those times?

CLARA: Yeah, yeah… I think external validation definitely helps. I think learning walks, like if the head has been in and they've said, I can really understand what you did there, why you did it and I can see that it was in the child's best interest. You know that definitely helps. I am you know, I am a real reflective practitioner and I am erm… very critical of myself as well so I think definitely having that external validation helps and having your little sort of networks as well, so having the family SENCo network is really helpful to talk about things and get different people's perspectives and advice erm, and so yeah, erm… collaboration and networking help with different support groups.

EMMA: Yeah

CLARA: And we had OFSTED at that time, and they really saw and validated the methods we were using for that child and that was a real positive.

EMMA: Yeah, so having that external validation and external support as well as the support for your approach within the school?

CLARA: Yeah, and what we've developed over time in my current setting is erm… we've got a really good pastoral team, which we call the _____ team as we didn't think everyone understood what pastoral meant so we work very collaboratively now, and we have regular meetings where we discuss individual children and talk about the support and interventions and strategies that are in place and that is so useful

and erm, you know to just check in with each other and check on the impact, and check on the progress that those things are making so…

EMMA: Yeah. What would you say is the most useful part of those meetings or why are they important for you?

CLARA: because I think specific people see the children in specific environments and in different ways. I mean part of that team is the mental health support co-ordinator, and then we've got the ELSA as well. So when she's working with children erm… during the ELSA sessions, that's very different to how I might see a child in the classroom or as SENCo so I think just having those different perspectives helps you to see the bigger picture of the individual children.

EMMA: Yeah so bringing together that knowledge of them in different contexts and different settings

CLARA: Yeah, yeah and having that holistic overview.

EMMA: And what do you think the impact of that is for the young person you know who might be displaying those demand-avoidant behaviours?

CLARA: I think it has a positive impact because we erm… we work very open and transparent with the young people. You know we say that, we speak to each other in that team and we share, erm, information. Erm, I mean ELSA is a bit different as those sessions are confidential so we have to, we have to be respectful of confidentiality but erm… but other than that you know we tell the children and we are very transparent in what we say and what we do and that works quite well for the children because erm… the ELSA specifically, for a lot of children is their key person so knowing that there is a wider team, and the ELSA talks to the wider team, so we all know what is happening and what is working or them and we're hearing their voice and their input, erm… is a bit of a safety net for them, because then they know that if the specific person, their key person isn't in like the ELSA isn't in one day, they've got that team to come to

EMMA: Yeah

CLARA: so it has been quite a positive impact on the children, they quite like knowing… erm that they're a team.

EMMA: Yeah that's great, thank you it's really interesting to hear about. I'm going to move us on slightly then to think about responding to demand-avoidant behaviours. You've spoken a bit already about your WIN language, acknowledging how a child feels and offering choice, I'm just wondering if you've got any particular erm, times in your practice in mind where you feel like you were successful in responding to

demand-avoidant behaviours? You know, have you got any examples where you felt things really went well?

CLARA: Erm yeah definitely, I've got a few examples, some of them I've spoken about already. So yeah the child I spoke about, we've really used that interest in Sonic to support them. When they started with us, they were so anxious just being in school, so to start, it was just making them feel that school was a safe place, erm you know, we didn't put any demands on them at that time erm… and that took quite a long time actually. But just you know, enabling school to feel a safe environment for them. Erm… and then, erm… and then we slowly started introducing erm… learning

EMMA: Yeah

CLARA: More sort of academic learning because we started with social and emotional learning. When we started introducing academic learning targets and steps, erm… we used Sonic to sort of take the demand away from them and reduce the anxiety. So we wouldn't say, "Oh can you say these phonemes", we'd say "Oh I wonder if Sonic can?"

EMMA: Ah okay

CLARA: And then they would also answer in third person. So they would say, "Yes, sonic can say A for Ant"

EMMA: Ah okay how interesting

CLARA: So the learning was done through Sonic and they'd got the physical toy there as well, so that really really helped them erm… and you know a lot of the learning that took place was in the same way.

EMMA: Ah yeah, nice. And was there anything else that was helpful for him?

CLARA: Erm, yeah… I think it was just going at his pace and being very child-led, and… erm, just seeing how he presented each day.

EMMA: Yeah

CLARA: I think what's key, what's always key is the children having a key person specifically to work with them on a 1:1 basis. Now we do erm… we do regard ourselves as an inclusive school, so we don't like 1:1 practice where it can be avoided but we recognise that some children need that 1:1 person and that erm, that made a huge difference for him. Erm, and their curriculum was very very

personalised and adapted to his profile and their needs and they spent, erm, almost a full year last year out of the classroom completely and that was very child-led erm, and they were just sort of engaging in learning on their own kind of terms. And it was a you know, a bit of a waiting game to be ready to engage in the classroom. Erm, and now they're is in the classroom all of the time. So I do think it is really knowing the child well, them feeling safe in the school environment, them feeling safe knowing they've got a key person that's their person and then just sort of… enabling them to… erm, when they feel ready erm, and just encouraging that at their pace.

EMMA: Okay so it was child-led in terms of him going back into the classroom. Can you tell me a bit more about that transition like how that kind of came about, what that looked like?

CLARA: It came from them. Erm so we've got a couple of things in place for them. So yeah, like I say, a lot of his learning happens in different spaces in school, a lot of outdoors and they would come to school early as well because they used to get anxious about erm, all of the children coming in at the same time. So they would come in early and that helped them for a long time, because they liked coming in and erm… he always found it difficult leaving mum in the morning anyway, erm, but that helped them as there were other children sort of around. Erm… but then one morning they just said, "I want to come in at the same time as everybody else and I want to stay in the classroom".

EMMA: Yeah

CLARA: Don't get me wrong we were constantly trying to encourage that and support that but erm, ultimately it came from them in the end.

EMMA: And In terms of working with that young person, is there anything in particular that you learned from it, or you know, is there anything that has been a key learning point for working with children displaying the demand-avoidant behaviours, anything you've taken from it?

CLARA: I think erm, using the child's interests was really helpful, and erm, adapting learning based on interests, and also using the third person so we weren't putting the demands on them directly but on the toy. Erm, so I think that was a really useful thing and it is something that I would use again.

EMMA: And then, are there any kind of particular times that come to mind where maybe things haven't felt successful?

CLARA: Erm… I mean, I think we were all quite surprised when they said I want to come in at the same time as everybody else. To give you a bit of context that CYP has an EHCP and funding alongside it and quite a complex profile, and we did sort of

wonder if he would ever go into the classroom and engage with the lessons like they are. They have almost exceeded our expectations which sounds really bad as we always have high expectations of children but genuinely, they exceeded our expectations. We didn't expect them to be in the classroom like they are all of the time now. So…I think there was challenge up to that point, where you know, and I know mum was really… when we had meetings with mum, she was like, oh you know will they ever learn anything academic you know because of all of his learning was sort of… I mean ther was the phonics and literacy that we tried to incorporate, maths as well.

EMMA: Yeah

CLARA: Erm, but you know, they couldn't at the time access the universal assessment systems that we've got in place. Erm, you know, we were using the, what's it called, the AET progession frameworks but their targets were mainly to begin with very social and emotional and mum was really anxious about that herself because you know she was like, he is getting left behind with his learning. The Educational Psychologist was involved and so were the SEND Inclusion support Team and you know, we needed to reassure their mum that they weren't ready to learn in the same way as the other children.

EMMA: Yeah

CLARA: And what we were doing was right for them as if we'd have increased the demands at that time, it just, putting demands on them at that time read to the dysregulated behaviour. There was a lot of physicality, he would hit out… hit and kick the other pupils and the adults working with them as well, even his safe person you know erm… when he was in that state and when he'd escalated to the point of crisis. Yeah… so I think you know we were all sort of like, what's going to happen here? We know, well we feel we are doing the right thing for them, but will they ever be able to engage in learning in the same way that their peers are, and you know, you are questioning yourself erm… so you know that was a real success story that obviously, you know, we helped them to cope and reduce the anxiety so they felt safe enough to be able to join in with everybody else.

EMMA: So your priority then there was to make sure he was feeling safe in school?

CLARA: Yeah, we have a real focus on SEMH. We recognise the importance of meeting erm… the basic needs and the social, emotional needs yeah, before we sort of address the cognition and learning needs to be honest.

EMMA: A lot of what you're talking about there reminds me of Maslow's hierarchy in terms of basic needs, physical, emotional safety, belonging as sort of foundations to self-actualisation.

CLARA: Yeah we do actually refer to it and use it as a tool in school.

EMMA: Ah nice, and erm in terms of them being in the classroom now, is there anything that's helping them to be able to engage in the classroom environment. What does that support look like?

CLARA: They made a friend and that has been life-changing, absolutely life-changing. But we are having to erm, support them with that because that friendship really is the be all and end all for this young person, and obviously we have got another young person involved so we have to really balance the needs of both children really.

EMMA: mhm

CLARA: And again we have asked the EP for their involvement to support us with that because it's tricky. So things aren't perfect you know, we've still got… we've still got that to kind of work on, but as I say, from where we have come from to where we are now, they've made massive progress with the strategies and approach we've put in place to help them feel safe.

EMMA: Yeah definitely I can really hear that, it's lovely to hear that story so thank you for sharing that. Thinking about then, any other ways that you respond to demand-avoidant behaviours then, is there anything else that really comes to mind that you've not already said, so that might be again how you interact with the young people, any reasonable adjustments or changes that you've made for them within school that you feel is important to say?

CLARA: Erm, I think where we have identified that there may be some demand avoidance, we've ensured that there is a key person in place for that child and that they know who that key person is, and I think that has been erm… that has had *the biggest* impact. One child, their key person was the ELSA and she was also the TA in their class last year, they were clearly very anxious that she wasn't going to be the TA this year. And also there were times when she wasn't in class because we don't tend to have class TAs as such. So what we did is put a timetable of where the ELSA would be throughout the week so that the child knew that if she wasn't in class and they needed her he would know where to go to find her. Not once did the child go and find her but it was enough to reduce anxiety, knowing where she was.

EMMA: Yeah

CLARA: This year, she is not in the child's class at all, but he has still got her timetable so they know that if they need her, where they can go and get her. So it's just like having a security blanket in that relationship, and knowing that they've got that key person if they need her and knowing where to find her, yeah, it's life changing.

EMMA: Ah so knowing where she was provided enough safety for that child that's a really nice idea.

CLARA: Yeah

EMMA: Okay thank you, just moving on then, I would like to think about how it feels for staff you know such as the ELSA and teachers and TAs working with children displaying demand-avoidant behaviours?

CLARA: Yeah erm, I think it does take its toll sometimes. One child who is demand-avoidant, their TA has left recently because she said she couldn't do it anymore, and even though she saw that they were making such massive steps of progress, she just said she felt it was too overwhelming for her and despite, erm, putting support in place, she just felt it wasn't right for her. Erm… so you know, that obviously definitely had taken it's toll and erm… it is, it is difficult. It is really difficult. You know, there is another erm amazing lady who works with another child, and… erm…. she'd not sort of signed up to work with children on a one-to-one basis and it can, you know, she says sometimes it can feel isolating because the child struggles to access the classroom and so isn't in there very often. So a lot of the time it is her and them, and even though she can see what she is doing is having an impact and working on the bigger picture of them being able to engage with the classroom full-time eventually, it's you know, the here and now is really difficult, and you know, she feels quite isolated like I say a lot of the time because she's on her own with them. So it does definitely, definitely take it's toll and we do try and support each other as a team.

EMMA: Yeah

CLARA: And remind each other that yeah, we are doing a great job and we can really see these success stories but it does take a lot of energy and a lot of time to get to that, to sort of get to the point of real success where we can really see that impact on that young person where it has really made a difference. Erm.. yeah.

EMMA: What does that support for staff tend to look like within your setting?

CLARA: I mean, that specific, the child I've just been talking about, his EHCP is in the process of being changed to a specialist setting, so he's predominantly out of the class because he finds erm… the classroom too anxiety inducing. Erm… we've managed to support him to tolerate one or two other children for a short amount of time erm… but his timetable is very very personalised and adapted to his needs.

EMMA: Yeah

CLARA: So he will spend a lot of time in the hall with the peanut ball and erm, equipment to help him with his sensory profile erm, and learning will take place in our ____ room which isn't used by a lot of people throughout the day so again based on his needs, a lot of the work for him is done around nursery rhymes which is his interest at the moment. We've just had a sensory report so we've tried to put in all OT recommendations in place for him, so yeah, his timetable looks very, very different to the other children.

EMMA: So again, it's that very personalised approach, working in different areas of the school and just making things kind of fit for him.

CLARA: Yeah

EMMA: Okay I'm just aware of time so I'm going to move us on if that's okay. Time goes so fast doesn't it there's always so much to talk about. So I just want to move us on to finish up with talking about whole school approaches. We've talked about it a bit already but I just wanted to talk about how your school has a whole responds to demand-avoidant behaviours. So if there are any policies that guides responses or you know, how the school culture, that erm, that shared way of doing things shapes how you or others respond to demand-avoidant behaviours?

CLARA: So I mentioned before about the whole school training, erm, it wasn't actually Paul Dix but it was based on his approach. So after that, we all got erm, made some scripts erm, which had bits of card that we can wear around our lanyards so that we are all saying exactly the same things erm when we come across demand avoidance so that we're doing that fogging… so part of the script might be, "I can see that's making you feel really frustrated, however…". I'm just trying to find my lanyard actually… so we've got the WIN language which is whole school, so like I say all staff are using that I'm wondering, I'm noticing rather than can you, will you or you need to.

EMMA: Yeah

CLARA: This has influenced our behaviour policy as well. So our behaviour policy became our behaviour and relationship policy because we recognise the importance of that connection.

EMMA: What were the changes to that, that have been most helpful or poignant in like, guiding your approach?

CLARA: So scrapping punitive consequences completely, and taking the personal out of erm, dealing with… erm… behaviour or an incident. Erm… because I think you know, very often erm, consequences are about making the person dealing with the incident feel better, they're not about actually helping the children.

EMMA: mm

CLARA: So we've worked a lot taking the personal out of incidences and our behaviour policy now is about restorative conversations and learning. So the consequence is that the children will have a conversation together to help them understand the impact of what they said or did on another person and we found that that's been really really positive.

EMMA: Yeah, yeah, okay and in terms of how that sort of works with children you see with demand avoidant behaviours, you know obviously when we're seeing those big behaviours, what is the sort of immediate response in that moment when they're struggling with the demand you know when they're not sort of ready to engage in the conversations?

CLARA: Erm, I mean it depends doesn't it? There are times when we need to evacuate the classroom if we think the other children are unsafe due to the emotional response of the child with the demand avoidance. So it's, it's specific isn't to each incident isn't it I guess, but we use distraction, erm so, you know that's in our policy, trying to distract the child.

EMMA: Yeah

CLARA: Usually based on their interests. So you know, I wonder if we could find ten ladybirds outside so you know that kind of thing, to remove them from that immediate situation. Erm, so I'm just looking at my lanyard. So we've got examples on credit card sized cards of what to do on there as well as the WIN language so for example, connecting and diffusing, offering choice. So instead of, "go and get your reading book" it's "which book would you like to read today". Sharing responsibility so "us, we, let's, together". Describe and say what you see… "I'm wondering if you feel sad today, you seem very quiet?". So we've got those scripts that we all wear around our lanyards. And then fogging is, "I hear what you're saying and yet…"; "I understand, and yet….". So we've got those scripts.

EMMA: Yeah

CLARA: We've also got one for the restorative questions to help them with that.

EMMA: What difference then has it sort of made, if any, if any to staff responses?

CLARA: I mean we've come along way as well, it's been a real change in mindset because a lot of the staff have been there a long time.

EMMA: Yeah

CLARA: And when I first started at this setting, the headteacher had only been there a year before me and they work, I mean our ethos and values very much align, so we are very SEMH and relationships focused, more than the previous head, no disrespect. They would shout at the children and very much sort of led by fear. Things are very different now and you know, even sometimes the odd member of staff will say, “Oh they really needed a grilling!” and it will make my skin crawl you know I’m like that’s not our ethos at all.

EMMA: oh gosh oh yeah

CLARA: So it still, it still really is a work in progress even after all of this time. Erm and you know, I think we still sometimes slip into those bad habits but again we have a whole school phrase that we refer to and we keep saying it at every opportunity and every inset and briefing and staff meeting that is, we do our best until we know better, and then we do better, and we keep referring back to that.

EMMA: Aw hundred percent. You do your best with the understanding and information you have at the time and that, that learning I guess continues to shape your approach. I see what you’re saying.

CLARA: Yeah, yeah.

EMMA: And is there anything you know, that you think has helped bring the people on board, you know the ones that are saying, oh they just need a grilling or the ones that might be more punitive in approach?

CLARA: When they actually see the impact of the restorative practice, you know, when they do actually see the children learning and children that previously refuse to say sorry have said sorry off of their own back as they’ve realised how they’ve made a child feel, I think that’s very empowering.

EMMA: mhm yeah

CLARA: And it’s erm… reminding them of that as well and helping them and supporting them to put it into practice so that they can see for themselves the positive impact that has.

EMMA: Okay so that experiential learning as such?

CLARA: Yeah, exactly. And then we've got some posters up in the classroom, and then periodically I will just you know, quote it, I think it's quite powerful. I will send it on the bottom of my emails to keep feeding those messages. Erm, so things like 'connect before correct' and 'correction before connection feels like rejection' and that kind of thing you know.

EMMA: ah so nice little quotes to stick in peoples' heads.

CLARA: Yeah, yeah

EMMA: Okay thank you so erm yeah, just before we start wrapping it up then, I was wondering what are the positives of working with children displaying demand-avoidant behaviours?

CLARA: I think erm, to a degree erm, they've got some leadership qualities haha because a lot of them do really know their own minds haha you know, and are really insistent.

EMMA: Haha yeah

CLARA: So I would say to parents, you know, oh I know it's frustrating so let's just think about these leadership qualities that they've really got and I think it's helping them because like, you know, like we keep saying, demand avoidance is often due to anxiety and the child doesn't really want to feel anxious, because anxiety makes us feel unsafe.

EMMA: mhm

CLARA: So I just think when you can make a difference for those children, it is so rewarding, and you know, a lot of the children that I've spoken to you about today, I'll say in the meetings and things that they are success stories in their own right as they have come such a long way, and it is trial and error putting these strategies in place for them but when you get it right, you know you've got it right, and when you see that young person thriving. Seeing the child I spoke about interacting with another child in the way he is, it's so positive, it's… it's just so rewarding making a difference to children and young people's lives.

EMMA: I can really hear that in your voice there and how you're talking there and everything you've said just how important that is to you, so thank you for that. Is there anything that you've not had the chance to say that you think is important before we finish?

CLARA: Erm yeah, you asked me and I didn't go back to it before

EMMA: Yeah

CLARA: We have got a child and there is definite demand avoidance with them but it makes a huge difference when parents are on board. For this child, they are really struggling to get started on learning tasks and we have tried several things, we are still working on it… I don't feel like we are there with them yet. I feel like you know we are feeling the struggle and feeling challenged with it to help them help themselves because they really struggle to get started. And then when they're finally into it, and it's time for everyone else to wrap it up, they struggle with that and get upset because they're like, 'oh no, we've only just started, we want to finish' but then it's playtime or something else and that's really difficult for them. But the crux of what I'm saying is, is that their parents aren't on board yet. We've tried to approach parents and speak to them about our concerns and that there's some support we want to put in place, but they're not on board with that so we don't have permissions and that, but I do think it makes such a huge difference when school and home are working in collaboration and you're consistent as well because I think that helps children feel safe and less anxious, when home and school are consistent so that's really important.

EMMA: Yeah

CLARA: And things like visual timetables, we use widgits at school and parents are taking them home as well and using them at home too so the children are seeing the same things and have the same expectations at home and at school and the boundaries feel safe, and it really does help. So it is quite sad when, you know I've not given up, we keep working on it, but we've not quite got those parents on board.

EMMA: yeah that must feel quite frustrating

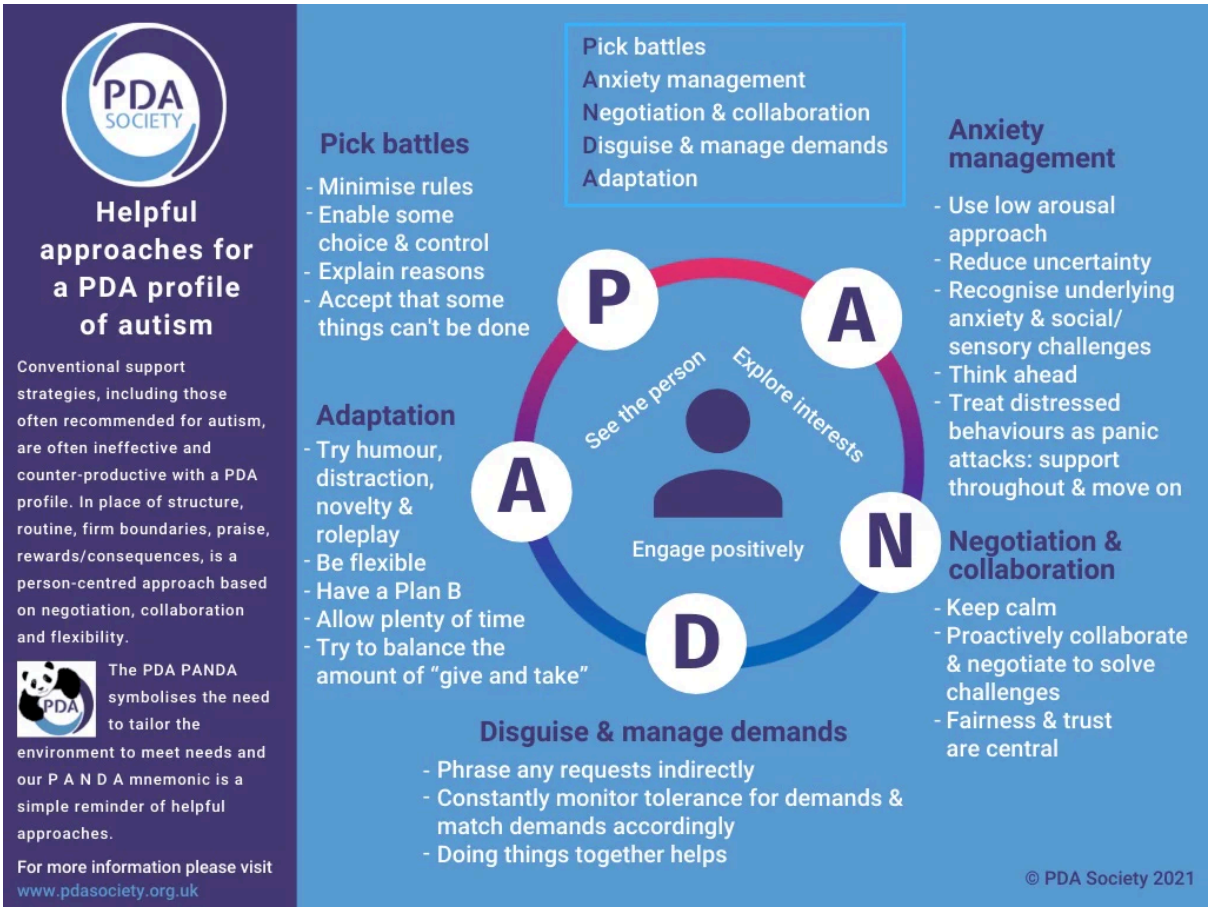
CLARA: Yeah, yeah, you know, initially they were quite angry that we dare to contact them, but we've, we've nurtured a relationship with them but we are not quite there yet haha.

EMMA: Okay is there anything else before I stop the recording?

CLARA: I don't think so no, I think that was everything.

EMMA: Lovely thank you, I'll stop the recording now then.

Appendix B: PANDA Approach



PDA Society. (2021). *Helpful approaches infographic: PANDA approaches*. https://www.pdasociety.org.uk/resources/helpful-approaches-infographic/

Appendix C: Reflexive Diary Entries Related to Methodology

Reflexive Diary Entry 1

Personal Reflexivity

I was conscious that my professional connection to this topic carried both value and potential challenge. My previous experiences supporting children displaying demand-avoidant behaviours have shaped what I believe matters in these interactions and approaches. This positioning afforded me an insider perspective (Berger, 2015), enabling empathetic understanding of the complexities faced by educators and pupils. It also heightened the need for reflexivity, as my interpretations and assumptions would inevitably influence knowledge production (Finlay, 2002b).

My earlier experiences of facing systemic barriers when implementing relational or low-demand approaches influenced my interest in contextual factors shaping practice and strengthened my commitment to inclusive practice and understanding how schools can better support CYP displaying these behaviours. I recognised this background might make me especially attentive to participants' experiences resonating with my own, including descriptions of systemic factors constraining or enabling the way they wished to work. I remained mindful of how my experiences and values might shape which aspects of participants' narratives I attended to and gave weight to in analysis.

Simultaneously, I recognised elements of outsiderness (Berger, 2015) in my role as researcher and TEP, engaging with staff in different schools and contexts. This created helpful distance, and reminded me to listen attentively and avoid assumptions of shared meaning. I consciously approached each interview with curiosity, reminding myself that participants' experiences might diverge from or challenge my existing beliefs.

Reflexive Diary Entry 2

Ontological Positioning

When deciding the ontological positioning of this research, I initially considered critical realism, grappling with the idea that observable behaviours might exist independently while our interpretations of them differ. From this perspective, demand-avoidant behaviours could be understood as a set of real responses described differently across contexts. This thinking was influenced by reading how clinicians like Elizabeth Newson outlined behavioural profiles and by engaging with studies attempting to conceptualise these behaviours.

Through reflection, reading and conversations in supervision, I began to recognise how experiences are continuously shaped and reshaped through different social

and cultural contexts, producing multiple interpretations of the same event. This led me away from the idea of a single objective truth. Aligned with Milton's (2013) argument, I came to see that behaviours are labelled "demand avoidant" or pathologised through the lenses we apply where personal, societal, and cultural perspectives shape what we recognise and name.

From this standpoint, context and interpretive frameworks construct what becomes understood as demand-avoidant behaviours, and there is no fixed reality waiting to be uncovered.

Reflexive Diary Entry 3

Considering Research Methods

I felt nervous about ensuring that the ‘golden thread’ of alignment between my research questions, methodology, and analysis was clear, something that was emphasised in the research methods seminars. My understanding of qualitative analysis developed through supervision, engagement with key texts, and reviewing examples of previous research. Reading *Qualitative Research in Psychology* (Willig, 2013) alongside a thesis that employed a similar analysis approach provided valuable insights into how to ensure coherence between my research aims, methodology, and data analysis. This process helped me feel more confident in selecting an analysis method that aligned with my research aims and philosophical underpinnings.

Reflexive Diary Entry 4

Recruitment

At the outset of my research, I was aware of potential challenges posed by gatekeeping in participant recruitment. Gatekeepers, such as Educational Psychologists, SENCos and Senior Leadership Teams, control how research information is shared, which can limit access to eligible staff (Robson & McCartan, 2016). I was concerned that recruitment materials might be overlooked due to busy schedules. However, Educational Psychologists (EPs) within my placement service proactively engaged in direct conversations with school staff about the research, using their pre-existing relationships to ensure that it was on their ‘radar’, which I think supported recruitment significantly.

Another concern I had related to the Being Misunderstood report (PDA Society, 2018), which indicated that around 70% of children labelled as having ‘PDA’ are out of school. I worried that this might limit the pool of staff with relevant experience or understanding of how to support them effectively. However, discussions with colleagues helped me reframe this concern, recognising that the remaining 30% of children in school were likely supported by staff with relevant experience.

Reflexive Diary Entry 5

Developing and using interview schedule

In developing the interview schedule, I received feedback from my supervisor about the large number of sub-questions. I explained that it was not my intention to make the interview overly structured. My reasoning for including multiple sub-questions, alternative phrasings, and optional prompts stemmed from my worries about being a novice researcher. I was nervous about the interviews and felt that having different ways of asking questions would provide a degree of security given my limited experience with qualitative interviews. I worried that if participants responded briefly or if conversation stalled, I might struggle to generate follow-up questions in-the-moment. The sub-prompts served as a safety net, ensuring I had options to draw upon if needed.

However, I was aware that the schedule could be interpreted as overly rigid and structured, which would be inconsistent with the flexibility required for reflexive thematic analysis. It was designed as a guide and I did not plan to ask all sub-questions systematically, but rather to have them available as potential routes into deeper conversation depending on what participants raised.

In reality, I did not need to worry about participants not having much to say. My core questions generated in-depth responses, and I used responsive probes that emerged naturally from participants' contributions. A lot of the predetermined sub-prompts were not used and depth came from following participants' narratives, asking "Can you say more about that?", "What does that look like?", in response to what they had just shared.

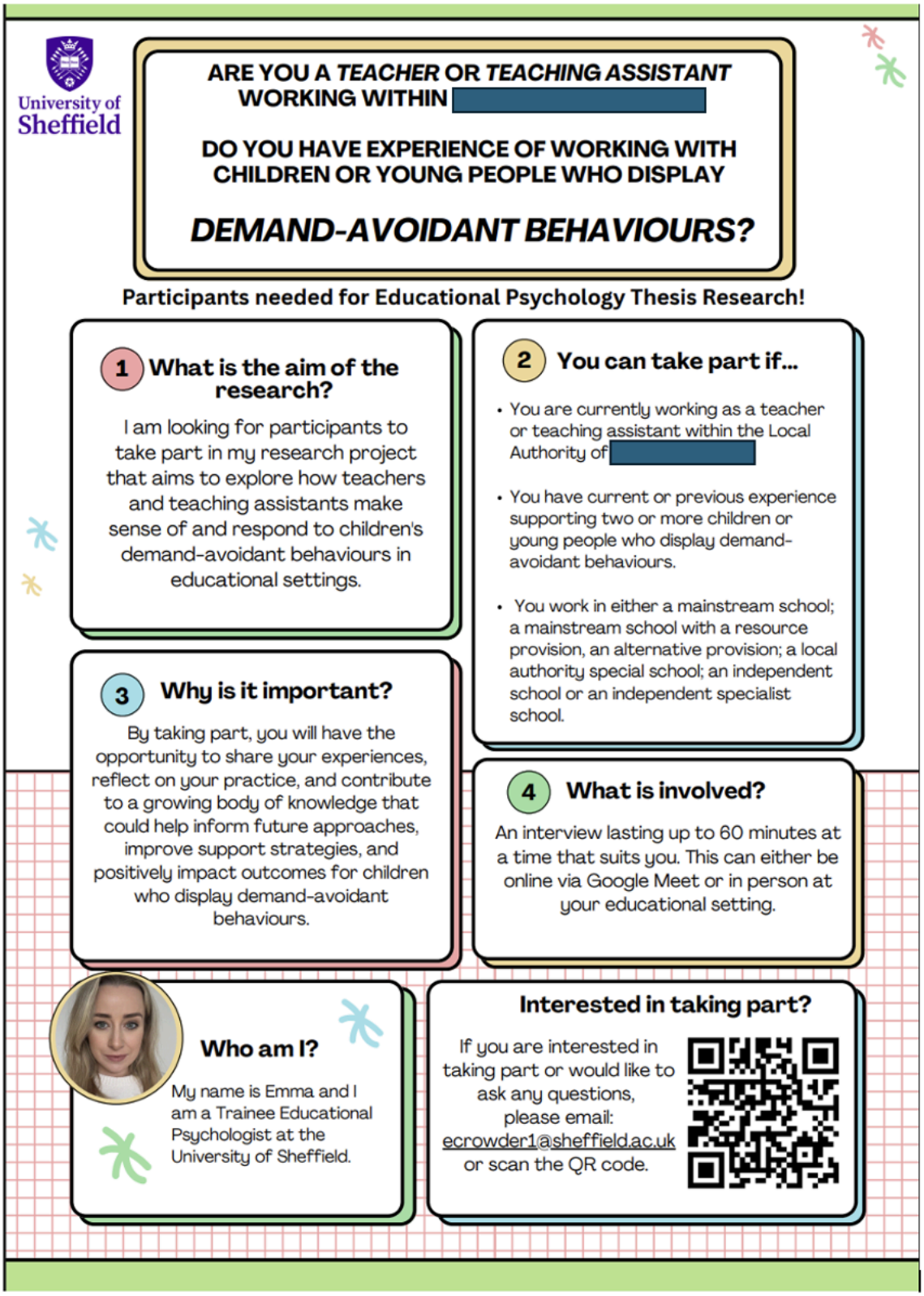
In preparation for the final interview, I made minor adjustments to the structure of the interview schedule to allow more space for questions relating to the third research question. These questions were positioned towards the end of the schedule, and in previous interviews there had sometimes been less time for participants to elaborate on these areas. Reflecting on the earlier interviews, I noticed that due to time constraints, I sometimes asked fewer follow-up questions or moved on more quickly when discussing topics related to RQ3. While the questions themselves remained unchanged, the structure was adapted to ensure greater opportunity for participants to discuss issues relevant to the third research question in depth.

This flexibility felt appropriate for reflexive thematic analysis, where the aim is to explore participants' perspectives. A key benefit of the schedule was its role in ensuring I covered key areas across all interviews. Participants had a lot to say, and I was aware of needing to manage time to ensure all research questions were addressed. The schedule ensured this structure while allowing participant-led conversations to unfold. If I were to conduct this research again, I would 'trust the process' more and feel confident entering interviews with fewer written follow-up prompts, relying on my ability to respond in the moment to what participants share.

Appendix D: Participant ‘pen portraits’

Pseudonym	Current Role	School Context	Background and context	In person or online interview
Lando	Teaching Assistant	Specialist School	Teaching assistant with three years experience; currently supports pupils with SEN across the school, including responding to episodes of dysregulation and supporting pupils to return to learning. Works with Y7 nurture group and Year 10s currently.	In person
Frances	Teaching Assistant	Secondary School	Approximately 30 years’ experience in education, including around 20 years as a secondary teacher and nine years in primary education. Currently works as a TA supporting pupils with special educational needs across Years 7-10.	In person
Evelyn	Teaching Assistant	Primary School	Approximately 25 years’ experience as a TA. Currently working 1:1 with a Year 4 pupil with Education and Health Care Plan (EHCP) described as displaying demand-avoidant behaviours. Previous experience supporting pupils with autism and demand-avoidant behaviours.	In person
Lauren	Teacher (and SENCo)	Primary School	Approximately 14 years’ teaching experience, including six to seven years as SENCo. Has taught across most primary year groups and currently works as a full-time Year 1 class teacher alongside SENCo responsibilities.	In person
Clara	Teacher (and SENCo)	Primary School	Primary school teacher with 13 years’ teaching experience and three years dual role as SENCo. Previously a Year 4 class teacher and currently works part of the week as SENCo, and takes classes across Key Stage 2.	Online (due to the interview being conducted in the school holidays)

Appendix E: Recruitment Poster



Appendix F: Expression of Interest Form

Registration of Interest – Demand-Avoidant Behaviours DEdCPsy Thesis Project

* Indicates required question

Full Name *

Your answer

Email Address *

Your answer

I would like to register my interest in taking part in this study and consent to being contacted by the researcher via email with further information.

☐ Yes

Any questions or comments?

Your answer

Appendix G: Participant Information Sheet

Participant Information Sheet

Project title: An exploration of how teachers and teaching assistants make sense of and respond to children's demand-avoidant behaviours in educational settings.

Researcher: Emma Crowder (Trainee Educational Psychologist)

Project supervisors: Dr David Shannon and Dr Francine Wint

Invitation to participate

Thank you for expressing interest in this research project. Before you decide whether or not to participate, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Please ask if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you would like to take part. Thank you for reading this.

What is the project's purpose?

Demand avoidance, sometimes known as Pathological Demand Avoidance (PDA), is characterised by a strong, often overwhelming resistance to everyday requests or demands, which can significantly impact a child's ability to engage in both school and social settings.

Research indicates that children and young people displaying demand-avoidant behaviours often experience poor outcomes, including high rates of exclusion, significant mental health challenges, and difficulties accessing appropriate support. There is growing recognition of the need to better understand how educational environments, approaches, and practices can be adapted to better support these learners. This research aims to explore how teachers and teaching assistants make sense of and respond to children's demand-avoidant behaviours in educational settings, including the supportive strategies and approaches they use, the adaptations they make to the educational environment, and the factors that influence their practice. It will also consider how school policies and culture shape the ways in which teachers and teaching assistants interpret and respond to these behaviours. It is hoped that participation will give staff the opportunity to have their voices heard, reflect on their practice, and contribute to knowledge that could help improve support and outcomes for children displaying demand-avoidant behaviours. This research is being undertaken as part of the requirements of the Doctorate in Educational and Child Psychology course at the University of Sheffield. It will be completed in July 2026.

Am I eligible to participate?

You are eligible to take part in this research if:

- You are currently working as a teacher or teaching assistant; and
- You have current or previous experience supporting **two or more** children or young people who display demand-avoidant behaviours.

You do not need to have supported children with a formal diagnosis (such as Pathological Demand Avoidance or Autism). What matters is your own professional perception of the child's behaviour. You are encouraged to use your judgment to decide whether your experience is relevant to this research.

You may be working in any of the following educational settings within the local authority of _____:

- A mainstream school
- A mainstream school with a resource provision
- An alternative provision
- A local authority special school
- An independent school
- An independent specialist school

Do I have to take part?

It is entirely your choice whether or not to take part in this research. If you are interested, please complete the electronic consent form. Please note that submitting the form does not guarantee your participation, as selection will be on a first-come, first-served basis, depending on the number of responses received. If you are selected, you will be informed by email. You have the right to withdraw from the study at any time before the interview. Following your interview, you will be sent an anonymised transcript via email within four weeks. You will then have two weeks to review the transcript, approve its contents, and request the removal (redaction) of any information you do not wish to be included. After this two-week review period, your data will be incorporated into the analysis and it will no longer be possible to withdraw your data.

There will be no negative consequences for withdrawing within the above time-period, and you do not have to provide a reason. If you wish to withdraw from the research, please contact the lead researcher, Emma Crowder, by email on ecrowder1@sheffield.ac.uk

By participating in this research, you are not entering into any legally binding agreement or any form of employment with the University of Sheffield.

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

If you agree to take part, you will take part in a one-off interview, lasting 45 minutes to an hour. This will take place in a way that is most convenient for you (either online

via Google Meet, or in person at your educational setting). During the interview, I will ask open-ended questions about your understanding of demand-avoidant behaviours, your experiences working with children displaying these behaviours and how you respond to them (including the supportive strategies and approaches you use, and the adaptations you make to the educational environment). We'll also talk about how the policies and culture at your school guide your response to these behaviours. I may ask follow-up questions to explore your responses further, such as "Can you tell me more about that?" or "Could you give me an example?" This will allow us to discuss your experiences in more detail.

Will I be recorded, and how will the recorded media be used?

The interview will be audio recorded for transcription and data analysis purposes. No other use will be made of them without your written permission, and no one outside the project will be allowed to access the original recordings. If you are being interviewed remotely via Google Meet, before the recording starts, you will be asked to turn your camera off. This is to ensure that the focus remains solely on the audio content of the interview and to further protect your privacy. The audio recording will be transcribed, with recordings deleted after transcription. Once data analysis is complete, you will receive a summary of the findings and have the opportunity to discuss them with me.

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?

If you choose to meet online, the virtual aspect of the interview may be tiring or cause eye strain. To minimise this comfort breaks can be taken wherever needed. You may also feel disadvantaged by taking time out of your day to complete the interviews. Please discuss this with me as I can be flexible and arrange interviews at a time that is convenient for you.

Talking about your experiences with children and young people who show demand-avoidant behaviours has the potential to elicit difficult emotions. Please consider whether discussing this subject might be uncomfortable or distressing for you before agreeing to take part. During the interview, you are welcome to take a break at any time, or stop the interview altogether without any consequences. I will also be available after the interview to speak to if you would like. The conversation will be confidential and not be part of the research.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

Whilst there are no immediate benefits for taking part in the research, it is hoped that this work will contribute to an area that currently has very little research and your insights will contribute to knowledge that could help improve support and outcomes for children displaying demand-avoidant behaviours.

Will my taking part in this project be kept confidential?

All the information that is collected about you or your setting during the course of the research will be kept strictly confidential and will only be accessible to members of the research team. If you agree to me sharing the information you provide with other researchers (e.g. by making it available in a data archive), then your personal details will not be included unless you explicitly request this.

If, during the interview, you raise concerns about the safety or welfare of a child or young person, I will advise you to follow your setting's safeguarding procedures by reporting the concern to your Designated Safeguarding Lead (DSL), as you would in your usual professional role. In addition, I have a legal and professional responsibility to follow the University of Sheffield's safeguarding procedures. This means that I may also need to share the information with the School of Education's Designated Safeguarding Lead, Dr Rebecca Lawthom (r.lawthom@sheffield.ac.uk).

Is it okay to share examples from my experience with specific pupils?

During the interview, you may naturally refer to specific children you have supported. While it is expected that you will draw on real experiences, the focus of the research is on your broader reflections, strategies, and professional insights, rather than detailed accounts of individual children. There is a potential risk of harm if identifiable information about these children is accidentally disclosed. To protect their privacy and ensure ethical safeguarding, you will be asked not to use real names, and to avoid sharing highly specific details (such as school names, unusual circumstances, or other identifying context).

All interviews will be transcribed with any identifying information removed or anonymised. You will also have the opportunity to review your transcript and request that any content be redacted if you later feel it may compromise a child's anonymity. These measures are in place to minimise risk and uphold confidentiality throughout the research process.

Data Protection

All your data will be kept confidentially and securely stored, and identifying information will be removed within 14 days of data collection. While you may recognise your own contributions in the research, I will take all reasonable steps to reduce the risk of others being able to identify you i.e. personal details or any potentially identifiable information will be removed from transcripts, Google Meet recordings will be deleted after transcription and only the research team will have access to the data which will be securely stored in the lead researcher's University Google Drive. Despite this, it may be possible for people who know you to work out which transcript is yours. Please be aware of this when sharing information and only share information that you feel fully comfortable discussing.

You will be assigned a unique participant code, which will be used for file naming and data storage. I will not collect demographic information in order to further reduce the risk of identification. Any names, locations, or other identifiable details mentioned during interviews will be changed or removed during the transcription process. At the start of the interview, you will be given the opportunity to choose a pseudonym, which will be used in the transcript and in any reporting of the research. Following your interview, you will be sent an anonymised transcript via email within two weeks.

You will then have two weeks to review the transcript, approve its contents, and request the removal (redaction) of any information you do not wish to be included.

All data will be handled and stored in accordance with the University's data protection policy. Audio recordings will immediately be saved to my individual University Google Drive (which can only be accessed via password and multi-factor authentication) using your participant code to keep the information anonymous. The raw and analysed data will be transferred to my supervisor at the end of the project.The data will then be stored securely for 5 years, the standard University of Sheffield retention period for assessed work.

The researcher may publish an article about the project in an academic journal. The anonymised data may therefore be deposited in the University of Sheffield repository, ORDA, where it will be made publicly available for 10 years.

What is the legal basis for processing my data?

This research is carried out 'in the public interest' in accordance with data protection legislation. Further information can be found in the University's Privacy Notice

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.

What happens to the results of the research?

The data collected during this research will be analysed using reflexive thematic analysis which is a qualitative method designed to find themes and meaning across a data set. This analysis will be reported within the final thesis. A presentation of the findings will be given to other Trainee Educational Psychologists and academic tutors at The University of Sheffield in July 2026. The final thesis will also be available via https://etheses.whiterose.ac.uk/. I may also use parts of my thesis to write journal articles which may be published in academic journals at a later date. People who may read the thesis will include my supervisor, other academic tutors at The University of Sheffield and external examiners. The information could be published in academic journals, be presented at academic conferences, or used for teaching purposes. The results of the research will be shared with you via email in July 2025 in the form of a 'poster' which will summarise the main findings. All your data will be de-identified before sharing.

Who is organising and funding the research?

The research has been organised by myself. There is no additional funding.

Who has ethically reviewed the project?

This project has been ethically approved via the University of Sheffield's Ethics Review Procedure, as administered by the School of Education.

What if something goes wrong and I wish to complain about the research or report a concern or incident?

If you are dissatisfied with any aspect of the research please speak with me in the first instance. If you wish to make a complaint, please contact my research supervisors, Dr David Shannon or Dr Francine Wint. If you feel your complaint has not been handled in a satisfactory way you can contact the Head of the School of Education, Professor Rebecca Lawthom at r.lawthom@sheffield.ac.uk. If the complaint relates to how your personal data has been handled, you can find information about how to raise a complaint in the University's Privacy Notice: https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/govern/data-protection/privacy/general

If you wish to make a report of a concern or incident relating to potential exploitation, abuse or harm resulting from your involvement in this project, please contact the University's Designated Safeguarding Lead, Dr Rebecca Lawthom at r.lawthom@sheffield.ac.uk and/or the University's Chair of Ethics, Dr Lauren Powell at edu.ethics@sheffield.ac.uk. If the concern or incident relates to the Designated Safeguarding Contact, or if you feel a report you have made to this Contact has not been handled in a satisfactory way, please contact the University's Research Ethics & Integrity Manager, Lindsey Unwin at l.v.unwin@sheffield.ac.uk

Who can I contact for further information about the research?

Research Lead:

Emma Crowder

Trainee Educational Psychologist

ecrowder1@sheffield.ac.uk

Research Supervisors:

Dr Francine Wint

f.wint@sheffield.ac.uk

Dr David Ben Shannon

d.b.shannon@sheffield.ac.uk

If you wish to talk to an independent representative within the university and someone who is outside of this research study, please contact:

Professor Rebecca Lawthom

Head of School

r.lawthom@sheffield.ac.uk

School of Education, The University of Sheffield, The Wave, Faculty of Social Sciences, 2 Whitham Road, Sheffield. S10 2AH.

What happens next?

Please think carefully about whether you wish to take part in the study. If you do wish to be considered to take part, please complete the electronic Google Form. If you are selected, you will be contacted and informed.

You will be given a copy of this information sheet and, if you decide to participate, a signed consent form to keep.

Thank you for considering participating.

Appendix H: Participant Consent Form

Please tick the appropriate boxes	**Yes**	**No**
Taking Part in the Project		
I have read and understood the project information sheet.		
I have been given the opportunity to ask questions about the project.		
I agree to take part in this research. I understand that I will participate in an interview.		
I agree that whilst I am participating in this interview, an audio recording will be made. I agree to being audio recorded and for a transcript of this anonymised audio recording to be used in the research. I understand that I will be given the opportunity to choose a pseudonym to be used in the transcript and in any publications or presentations arising from the research.		
I understand that by choosing to participate as a volunteer in this research, this does not create a legally binding agreement, nor is it intended to create an employment relationship with the University of Sheffield.		
I understand that my taking part is voluntary and that I can withdraw from the study at any time before the interview date. 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 before the interview.		
I understand that following your interview, I will be sent an anonymised transcript via email within four weeks. I will then have two weeks to review the transcript, approve its contents, and request the removal (redaction) of any information that I do not wish to be included. After this two-week review period, my data will be incorporated into the analysis and it will no longer be possible to withdraw my data.		
I understand that if I raise a concern about the safety or welfare of a child or young person during the interview, I will be advised by the researcher to follow my setting's safeguarding procedures. I also understand that the researcher has a legal and professional duty to follow the University of Sheffield's safeguarding procedures and may share the concern with the School of Education's Designated		

Safeguarding Lead, Dr Rebecca Lawthom, r.lawthom@sheffield.ac.uk		
How my information will be used during and after the project		
I understand that my personal details such as my name and email address 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 outputs unless I specifically request this.		
I understand and agree that other authorised researchers will have access to this data only if they agree to preserve the confidentiality of the information as requested in this form.		
I understand and agree that other authorised researchers may use my data in publications, reports, web pages, and other research outputs, only if they agree to preserve the confidentiality of the information as requested in this form.		
I give permission for the recording of my interview to be saved in a secure Google Drive managed by the University of Sheffield. The data will then be stored for 5 years, the standard University of Sheffield retention period for assessed work.		
I give permission for the anonymised transcript that I provide to be deposited in the University of Sheffield's repository (ORDA) where it will be kept for 10 years.		
So that the information you provide can be used legally by the researcher:		
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: Signature: Date:

Project contact details for further information

Research Team:

Emma Crowder

Trainee Educational Psychologist

Project Supervisors:

Dr Francine Wint

Dr David Ben Shannon

If you would like to speak to someone outside of the research team in the event of a complaint, please contact:

Professor Rebecca Lawthom

Head of School

r.lawthom@sheffield.ac.uk

School of Education, The University of Sheffield, The Wave, Faculty of Social Sciences, 2 Whitham Road, Sheffield. S10 2AH

Appendix I: Interview Schedule

Hi, and thank you so much for agreeing to take part in this interview today. I really appreciate your time and willingness to share your experiences.

As a reminder, the aim of this research is to explore how teachers and teaching assistants make sense of and respond to children's demand-avoidant behaviours in educational settings. I'm really interested in hearing about your own experiences, insights, and reflections of your professional practice.

Before we begin, I just want to confirm a few things:

- You've received the Participant Information Sheet and have signed the consent form - is that right? Are you still happy to proceed?
- The interview is anticipated to be around 45 minutes to an hour - might move us on from certain bits if we need to.

This interview will be audio recorded so that I can transcribe it accurately. The recording will be stored securely and deleted after transcription. Is it still okay with you that I record today's interview? Ask you to turn your camera off and I will too as I just need audio recording

Please avoid using real names or giving any information that might identify individual children or your setting. If you do mention anything identifiable, I will remove and pseudonymise it during transcription. You'll also have the opportunity to review your transcript and ask for any part to be redacted if needed. You will be sent it via email within two weeks of the interview date and you will then have an additional two weeks to approve its contents, and request the removal (redaction) of any information you do not wish to be included. After this review period, the data will be incorporated into the analysis and withdrawal will no longer be possible. Also ask for pseudonym. .

There are no right or wrong answers - I'm simply interested in your professional perspectives, experiences and views. If there's anything you're not comfortable answering, feel free to skip the question. Participation in this research is entirely voluntary, and you can stop the interview at any time, and let me know if you feel you need to move on or have a break.

Do you have any questions before we begin? Ask to turn off camera if online. I'm going to start the recording now.

Probes:
Can you tell me more about that?
Can you say more about that?
I wonder if you could expand on that
Can you clarify what you mean by that?
Can you give me an example?

<u>Warm up questions (2 mins)</u>

Could you summarise your classroom experience to date?

- What is your current role and how many years have you been teaching / in that role?
- What year do you currently teach in?
- Have you always taught your current phase/school type (i.e., Primary, Secondary)?

(20 mins) 1: Understanding Demand-Avoidant Behaviours

Q1. Could you explain the term 'demand avoidant behaviours'?

- What does it mean to you?
- How would you describe the behaviours you associate with demand avoidance?
- What does demand avoidance tend to look like in your day-to-day work with children? / How do these types of behaviours tend to show up?

When do you tend to notice these behaviours emerging?

What kinds of situations do these behaviours tend to show up in?

Are there certain situations or contexts where you notice these behaviours happening more often?

Q2: What are your thoughts on why some children respond in this way?

- What might be going on for a CYP when they are displaying demand avoidant behaviours
- How do you make sense of why a child might respond in a demand-avoidant way?
- What function or purpose might demand-avoidant behaviours be serving for CYP?
- How do you personally make sense of why these behaviours happen?
- How do you interpret the meaning behind the behaviour?

Q3. Can you tell me how you first learned about demand-avoidant behaviours?

- What sources of knowledge or experiences have influenced your understanding the most? (e.g., training, reading, colleagues, direct experience with children)
- Was there a particular experience or situation that significantly shaped your perspective?

(20 mins) 2: Responding to Demand-Avoidant Behaviours

Example - Successful time

Q4. Can you talk me through an episode / time in your practice when you were successful or feel it went well in managing demand-avoidant behaviour **OR** Can you give me an example of a time when you were successful in managing demand avoidant behaviours?

Depth (to unpack strategies and reasoning)

- What kind of strategies / approaches did you find most helpful?
- What made you choose that particular strategy / approach in the moment?
- Were there any other approaches you considered?
- Did you adapt anything about the environment or your own behaviour?
- How did you feel during this situation, and did that influence how you responded?

Depth (to prompt reflection)

- Asked you about successful time.. what made it feel successful to you in that moment?
- If you had to name the key outcome you were aiming for there, what was it?
- What outcomes mattered most to you in that situation?
- What outcomes do you think mattered most to the child?
- Why do you think that approach worked in this situation?
- What did you learn from that experience about supporting the child (or others)?

Example - Challenge

Q5. Can you talk me through an episode in your practice when you found it more challenging to manage demand-avoidant behaviour? / Can you describe a more challenging time?

Depth (to unpack decisions and context)

- What made the situation feel challenging for you? What made it difficult?
- Were there strategies you tried that didn't work as you hoped?
- If you had to name the key outcome you were aiming for, what was it? (de-escalation, safety, connection, engagement, regulation, learning)

Depth (to prompt reflection):

- Looking back, was there anything that could have helped you more in that moment?
- Were there things that helped you cope or adapt your response?
- Is there anything that you've learnt from this situation
- How did you feel during this situation, and did that influence how you responded?

Interactions and Responses

Q6. What would you say is the most important consideration or principle you keep in mind in terms of your responses to children displaying demand-avoidant behaviours? What do you think matters most?

- What do you think is most important when choosing how to respond to and interact with a child who displays demand avoidant behaviours?
- Why is that important?
- What impact does this kind of response or way of interacting have?
- What do you usually aim to achieve with that kind of response?
- What do you try to keep in mind when choosing how to respond / interact?
- How do you decide what kind of response to use in different situations?

Reasonable adjustments

Q7. Can you describe any differentiation in your teaching or adaptations you've made that have helped you to support children showing demand-avoidant behaviours?

- Why did you make those changes?
- What impact were you hoping it'd have?
- How would it improve things for the child?
- What kinds of challenges or barriers in making or maintaining these adaptations? How did you handle them?

Impact

Q8: Some people find this kind of work demanding, others rewarding, and for many, it can feel different at different times. I'd like to hear about your experience.

What kinds of emotional or personal challenges, if any, do you encounter in this work?

(10 mins) 3: School Policies and Culture

Q8: How does your school as a whole tend to respond when children show demand-avoidant behaviours in the classroom or wider school context?

- Are there any specific school policies that guide your response?

- How does the overall school culture - that is, the shared values, norms, and ways of doing things in your school - shape the way people respond to these behaviours?
- What do you feel helps you most when working with children displaying demand-avoidant behaviours in your setting?
- Are there any factors that make it harder for you to respond in the way you would like to?

Language

Q9: How would you describe the language or terms used within your setting to talk about these behaviours.

- What are your thoughts on those terms?

4: Closing

Is there anything we haven't talked about that you think is important to mention?

I'm going to stop the recording now - Thank you for taking the time to talk with me today.

Is there anything from the interview you would like to ask or discuss further?

Closing Statements

Thank you so much for taking the time to share your thoughts and experiences with me today. Your insights are incredibly valuable to this research. The recording will be stored securely and deleted after transcription. After this interview, you will be sent a debrief sheet via email. This will include information about where to access further support if you feel you need it after our conversation. You will be provided with a summary information sheet with the main findings once data analysis is complete, alongside an opportunity to discuss the findings with me.The findings will be also presented within my thesis and will be publicly available to read. I may publish the research at a later date, and the findings will also be fed back in service development days and may be used to inform professional development activities. Thank you again for your contribution.

Appendix J: Ethical Approval

Dear Emma Louise

PROJECT TITLE: An exploration of how teachers and teaching assistants make sense of and respond to children's demand-avoidant behaviours in educational settings
APPLICATION: Reference Number 067693

On behalf of the University ethics reviewers who reviewed your project, I am pleased to inform you that on 17/06/2025 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 067693 (form submission date: 10/06/2025); (expected project end date: 15/06/2026).
- Participant information sheet 1154986 version 1 (10/06/2025).
- Participant information sheet 1153010 version 2 (23/05/2025).
- Participant consent form 1154399 version 1 (02/06/2025).
- Participant consent form 1153011 version 1 (12/05/2025).

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

Lauren Powell
Ethics Admin
School of Education

Appendix K: Debrief Information

Debrief Information

Project title: An exploration of how teachers and teaching assistants make sense of and respond to children's demand-avoidant behaviours in educational settings.
Researcher: Emma Crowder (Trainee Educational Psychologist)
Project supervisor: Dr Francine Wint and Dr David Ben Shannon

Thank you for participating in this research study. I am very grateful for the time that you spared in order to participate. I hope that you found taking part an interesting experience. If you have been affected by any aspect of the research, further support may be found here:

- https://www.pdasociety.org.uk/support-and-training/support/#support-tabs|2
- https://www.mind.org.uk/

You may also find it helpful to speak with your Union Representative or School Wellbeing Lead if any aspect of the research has impacted on how you feel at your workplace.

If you are not satisfied with any aspect of the research and wish to make a complaint, please contact my supervisor at the university. If you feel your complaint has not been handled in a satisfactory way you can contact the Head of the School of Education. If the complaint relates to how your personal data has been handled, you can find information about how to raise a complaint in the University's Privacy Notice:
https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/govern/data-protection/privacy/general

If you wish to make a report of a concern or incident relating to potential exploitation, abuse or harm resulting from your involvement in this project, please contact the project's Designated Safeguarding Contact. If the concern or incident relates to the Designated Safeguarding Contact, or if you feel a report you have made to this Contact has not been handled in a satisfactory way, please contact the University's Research Ethics & Integrity Manager.

You will be informed of the findings in July 2026 at the end of my project.

Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any further questions. You can contact me on ecrowder1@sheffield.ac.uk

Thank you.

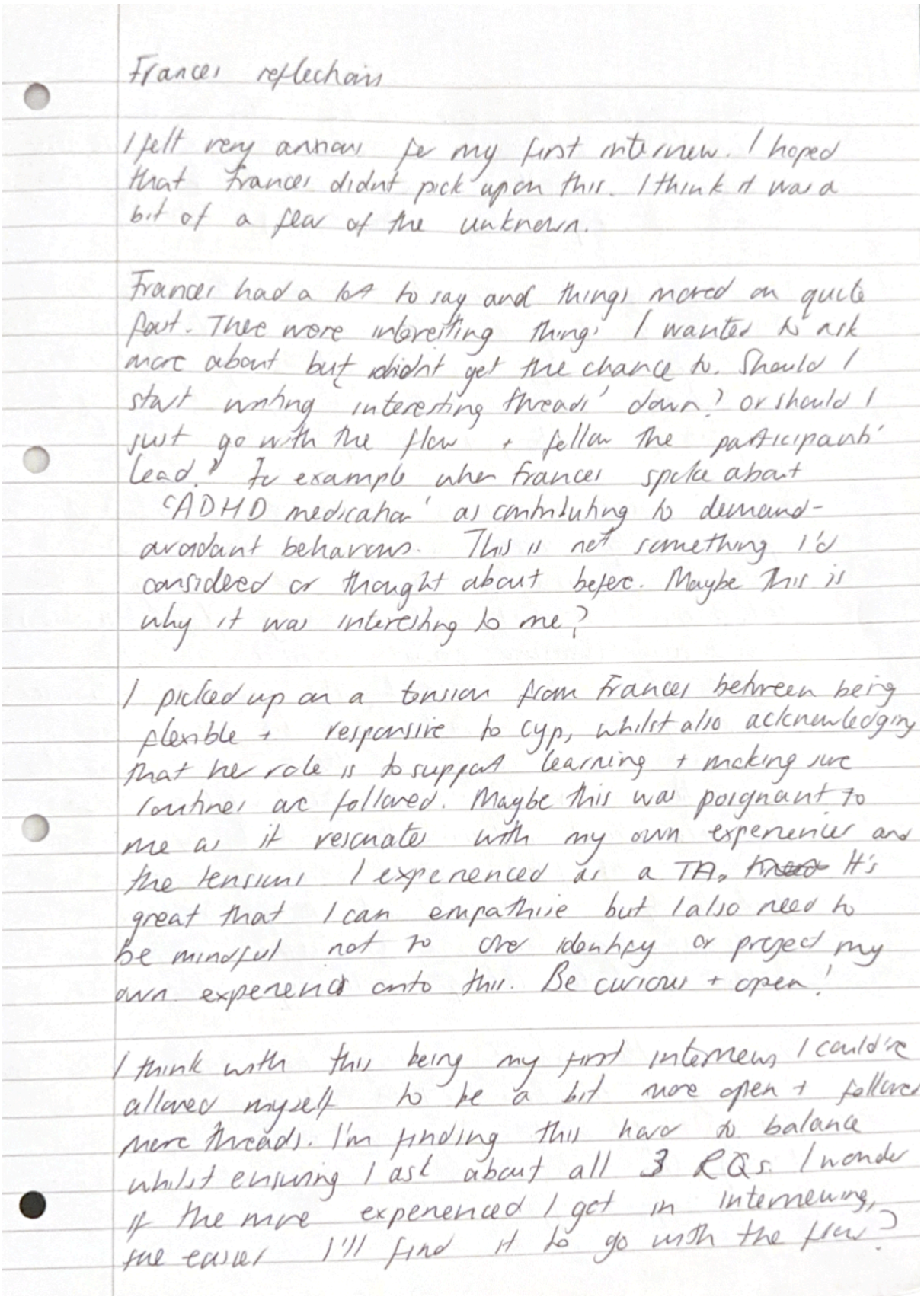
Appendix L: RTA Six Phase Analysis Approach

Phase of RTA	What was Involved
Phase One: Familiarising myself with the Dataset	Braun and Clarke (2022) describe the first stage of RTA as developing a comprehensive understanding of the dataset through immersion (achieving closeness and familiarity) and critical engagement (maintaining analytical distance to reflect on meaning). Immediately following each interview, I wrote initial reflections and impressions (Appendix M), then listened back to the recordings the same day, and added to my notes. I then transcribed the recordings. Google Meet's automated transcript feature was used and edited for accuracy. All interviews were transcribed verbatim, consistent with Braun and Clarke's (2006) guidance that thematic analysis does not require the fine-grained detail needed for discourse or narrative analysis. Full transcripts are provided in Appendix A. Once transcribed, I read each transcript multiple times, both with and without audio, to deepen familiarity. I then critically engaged with the data, asking questions such as: How is the participant constructing their understanding? What perspectives or assumptions are conveyed? How do I respond to the data, and what might my reactions reveal about how I'm interpreting it? This aimed to interrogate my own positioning to ensure reflexivity. Examples of this critical engagement are in Appendix M. **(See Reflexive Diary Entry 6 - *Appendix N*)**
Phase Two: Data Coding	Braun and Clarke (2006; 2022) emphasise that coding should be undertaken systematically to capture the breadth and diversity of meanings across the dataset. A descriptive approach to coding was adopted, allowing segments of varying length to be coded where relevant to the research questions. Coding remained flexible, with longer sections coded when they represented specific ideas or experiences, preserving the coherence and context of participant meaning and supporting an inductive approach. I worked through the dataset coding segments that appeared relevant to the research questions or potentially meaningful. Coding was conducted at both semantic and latent levels. Semantic coding focused on participants' explicit points, while latent coding attended to underlying meanings or assumptions. Coding was initially predominantly semantic, staying close to participants' language. However, I also captured latent insights as they arose, documenting early interpretive reflections. Coding was conducted across two full rounds, with NVivo software used to organise and manage the process. Examples of my codes in NVivo

	can be found in Appendix O. Braun and Clarke (2022) emphasise that codes remain provisional and researchers do not need fixed interpretations too early, which allowed me to revisit earlier codes with flexibility. During the second round, I noticed that some codes were overly broad or vague (for example, "listening"), while others were highly specific and contained only a single extract. Codes were collapsed where they captured similar ideas or separated to preserve subtle differences in meaning and codes that did not meaningfully capture the data were deleted. Code refinement continued iteratively throughout subsequent stages of analysis as I moved between phases, with examples of these refinements documented in Appendix P ***(*See Reflexive Diary Entry 7 - Appendix N*)***
Phase Three: Generating Initial Themes	This stage involved identifying patterns of meaning across the dataset by considering how codes might relate to create candidate themes. I exported coded data from NVivo into Microsoft Word and printed the codes onto paper, as I found NVivo did not support code grouping well. I cut these out and arranged them on coloured cards on the floor (Appendix R) Physically manipulating the codes helped me explore possible connections. I grouped codes where they captured related ideas, forming clusters around shared meanings also known as candidate themes. I recorded these in a colour-coded table (Appendix Q). I then revisited clusters several times, reviewing whether codes within each grouping fit together and considering how they addressed the research questions. Some groupings initially contained many different codes representing a broad range of ideas, which I felt would need breaking down further into sub-themes.
Phase Four: Developing and Reviewing Themes	This stage involved developing visual thematic maps using powerpoint to illustrate the themes and subthemes emerging within and across candidate themes, organised by research question. It then involved reviewing and refining initial themes to ensure they represented coherent patterns of meaning and addressed the research questions. After creating the initial thematic map, I returned to the dataset to evaluate whether the proposed themes aligned with the coded data and captured meaningful patterns relevant to research questions. During initial development of the thematic map for Research Question Three, I noticed that themes reflected the structure of my interview questions, particularly "helping" and "hindering" factors within schools. Following supervisor feedback, I recognised this could produce themes that described the interview schedule without capturing interpretive patterns of meaning. Braun and Clarke (2022) highlight that themes should not summarise topics discussed and should represent shared meaning underpinned by a central organising concept. I had developed a large number of initial themes and noticed

	considerable overlap, especially within Research Question 3. This made it difficult to distinguish how each theme was conceptually different, and some codes appeared to fit under multiple themes. Where themes reflected similar ideas, I explored whether they could be combined into a broader theme. In other cases, I refined the scope or reconsidered code placement. Some were discarded where they were 'thin' or did not capture meaningful patterns (Braun & Clarke, 2022). This involved repeatedly moving between themes, coded extracts, and the wider dataset to ensure each theme was distinct and capable of addressing the research questions to produce a rich analysis. (Appendix R demonstrates theme development through thematic maps). Braun and Clarke (2022) acknowledge that bringing theoretical perspectives to bear on data during later analytic phases is consistent with an inductive approach. It was during this phase that I began making a note of explicit links with the dataset to conceptual knowledge, theories and research which I made a note of on my thematic map (Appendix R). ***(*See Reflexive Diary Entry 8 - Appendix N*)***
Phase Five Refining, Defining and Naming Themes	At this stage of the analysis, Braun and Clarke (2022) recommend that researchers develop a clear definition for each theme. This involves outlining what the theme captures to clarify what makes it distinct from other themes and to identify its contribution to the overall analysis. To support this process, I wrote a one-sentence 'key takeaway' for each theme (appendix S). I also revisited the codes in relation to each theme to check that they remained grounded in the original data. The codes representing each theme can be found in Appendix T I revisited this stage during the process of writing the analysis, where I was bringing the data together under each theme. At this point, several themes still had multiple working titles. I found that redefining or renaming some of the themes helped improve clarity and better communicate the central meaning of each theme. Where possible, I incorporated participants' own words into theme names, privileging their language and keeping themes closely connected to the data. ***(*See Reflexive Diary Entry 9 - Appendix N*)***
Phase Six: Writing the Analysis	Braun and Clarke (2022) note that this stage is iterative, involving movement back to previous phases of analysis throughout the writing process. During this phase, I developed the written analysis for each theme. While doing so, I repeatedly revisited the codes and original data extracts to check they remained relevant to the developing interpretation. Participant quotations were incorporated to illustrate and support the points being made. **(See Reflexive Diary Entry 10 - Appendix N)**

Appendix M: An Example of Initial Interview Reflection and Critical Engagement with the data



Frances reflections

I felt very anxious for my first interview. I hoped that Frances didn't pick upon this. I think it was a bit of a fear of the unknown.

Frances had a lot to say and things moved on quite fast. There were interesting things I wanted to ask more about but didn't get the chance to. Should I start writing interesting threads' down? or should I just go with the flow + follow the participants' lead? For example when Frances spoke about 'ADHD medication' as contributing to demand-avoidant behaviours. This is not something I'd considered or thought about before. Maybe this is why it was interesting to me?

I picked up on a tension from Frances between being flexible + responsive to cyp, whilst also acknowledging that her role is to support learning + making sure routines are followed. Maybe this was poignant to me as it resonates with my own experiences and the tensions I experienced as a TA. ~~Need~~ It's great that I can empathise but I also need to be mindful not to ~~be~~ identify or project my own experiences onto this. Be curious + open!

I think with this being my first interview I could've allowed myself to be a bit more open + followed more threads. I'm finding this have to balance whilst ensuring I ask about all 3 RQs. I wonder if the more experienced I get in interviewing, the easier I'll find it to go with the flow?

Frances appeared quite sure in her construction of demand - avoidant behaviours as part of autism. It was also interesting how the role of training had helped to shape her understanding, this

It's interesting that she asked me if ODD is the same as PDA. I'm wondering if this suggests labels are important for Frances in supporting understanding of CYP. She did also mention about a cyp not having a diagnosis of anything, is this important to her?

Frances showed recognition of positive elements of cypi identity - entrepreneurial, assertive. I had a positive visceral reaction to this. I'm wondering if this is because I'm so used to hearing deficit narratives + was also worried about deficit narratives coming out in this research. It's great that Frances can recognise these but I get the sense that she ~~was~~ was alluding to these same qualities as problems within the school system. When she said about refusing to do work by certain deadlines - This feels aligned with the social model of disability + transactional perspectives of understanding demand - avoidant behaviours → Thisis quite telling about my interpretive lens.

Frances talked about having to 'coax both sides' referring to teachers. Again I am drawn to this as it fits with my own experiences of feeling like I had to justify choices about how to support cyp.

I'm wondering why I asked Frances about what she said as well as what she did? I think this is because of my engagement with PANDA approach + knowing ways of saying things matter.

Frances seems to be levelling out the power dynamic when she talks about getting on the same level, being calm. The relationship between Frances and the student feels quite reciprocal + it sounds like the cyp respect her. Frances seemed to be negotiating with the cyp like when she says 'which one should we try' and giving the cyp choice. She later on describes it as reciprocal.

Frances talked about trust quite a lot. This seems important to her in her approach

The way Frances talks about her example of negotiation feels like it constitutes quite a lot of thought and backwards + forwards

The question I asked about 'is there anything else that you've not already talked about that...' was helpful. Frances then said about relationships being important. I wonder how this compares to the advice + guidance already out there. How much do they foreground the relationship just as Frances does. I need to go back + have a look.

Listening back to the interview, I think I did well at being opening with my questioning in RQ3 towards the end of the interview. Although I wonder why I asked about whether staff see behaviours in the same way as he or different. Is this because I expect them to see it in a different way because this is what I've experienced?

Appendix N: Reflexive Diary Entries Related to Analysis Process

Reflexive Diary Entry 6

Phase One of RTA

My immersion in the dataset and critical engagement were not necessarily sequential, and as Braun and Clarke (2022) note, they do not need to be. For me, these processes occurred largely concurrently. While familiarising myself with each interview, I was simultaneously reflecting on emerging connections to existing research and patterns across the dataset. My initial notes following the interviews captured my early interpretations including reflections on why participants responded in particular ways and my rationale for pursuing specific lines of questioning in subsequent interviews. During this stage, I worried that I might be going “too deep too fast” and reminded myself to take a step back to allow space for basic familiarisation. Nevertheless, I felt it was important to document my immediate reflections, as they contributed to my developing understanding of the data.

Reflexive Diary Entry 7

Phase Two of RTA

During the first round of coding, I generated over 600 codes. Seeing such a high number felt overwhelming and led me to question whether my coding had become too fine-grained. I wondered whether I had become overly immersed in detail and whether this complexity would make later analysis more difficult. Conversations with other Trainee Educational Psychologists, whose coding resulted in far fewer codes, increased my uncertainty.

However, Braun and Clarke (2021) emphasise that there is no prescribed number of codes within RTA, and that coding processes vary depending on the dataset and research focus. My largely inductive approach, prioritising participants' own meaning-making, naturally generated more codes as I attempted to capture the breadth of their experiences. Also, the relatively long interviews produced rich data across three research questions, meaning multiple aspects of participants' experiences were relevant. My codes enabled nuances to be captured (Elliott et al., 2018).

Throughout the stages of RTA, I gradually reduced the number of codes to 500. I think that potentially I could have reduced this more, and noticed codes that could’ve been collapsed later on in the research process. However, once they’d been grouped under themes, seeing subtle distinctions helped me to create a narrative within the theme.

Reflexive Diary Entry 8

Phase 4 of RTA

At Phase 4, I met with a fellow Trainee Educational Psychologist to support reflexive engagement with the themes. The purpose of this meeting was to review the themes, ensure they were suitably interpretive and weren't topic summaries, gain perspective on theme naming, and assess whether they formed coherent patterns of meaning. During this discussion, we made links between my themes and coding, and Bronfenbrenner & Morris's bioecological model (2006). Whilst I had noted the systemic elements of how I'd organised the dataset, I had not yet made the explicit connection to Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model This conversation prompted me to begin thinking about links to theory and helped me recognise an ecological framework as useful for organising the discussion. We also discussed self-determination theory emerging through the dataset which I considered as another organising framework.

Reflexive Diary Entry 9

Engaging with the RTA process

Reflexive thematic analysis has been described as an "adventure rather than a recipe" (Willig, 2001), emphasising that there is no single correct pathway through the analytic process. At times, I found this openness challenging and noticed feelings of anxiety about whether I was "doing it right." The absence of a clear endpoint meant that I often had to sit with uncertainty while developing and refining my themes. I wondered whether I should have refined my themes further, for example by merging some. However, I chose to keep them distinct, as I felt this could make them more useful to practitioners looking for strategies to draw on. During periods where I felt stuck or unsure how to progress, I found it helpful to step away from the data and return to it later. Taking breaks and revisiting the analysis with a fresh perspective often helped me see connections more clearly and move forward in the process, reinforcing that understanding develops gradually through ongoing engagement with the dataset.

Reflexive Diary Entry 10

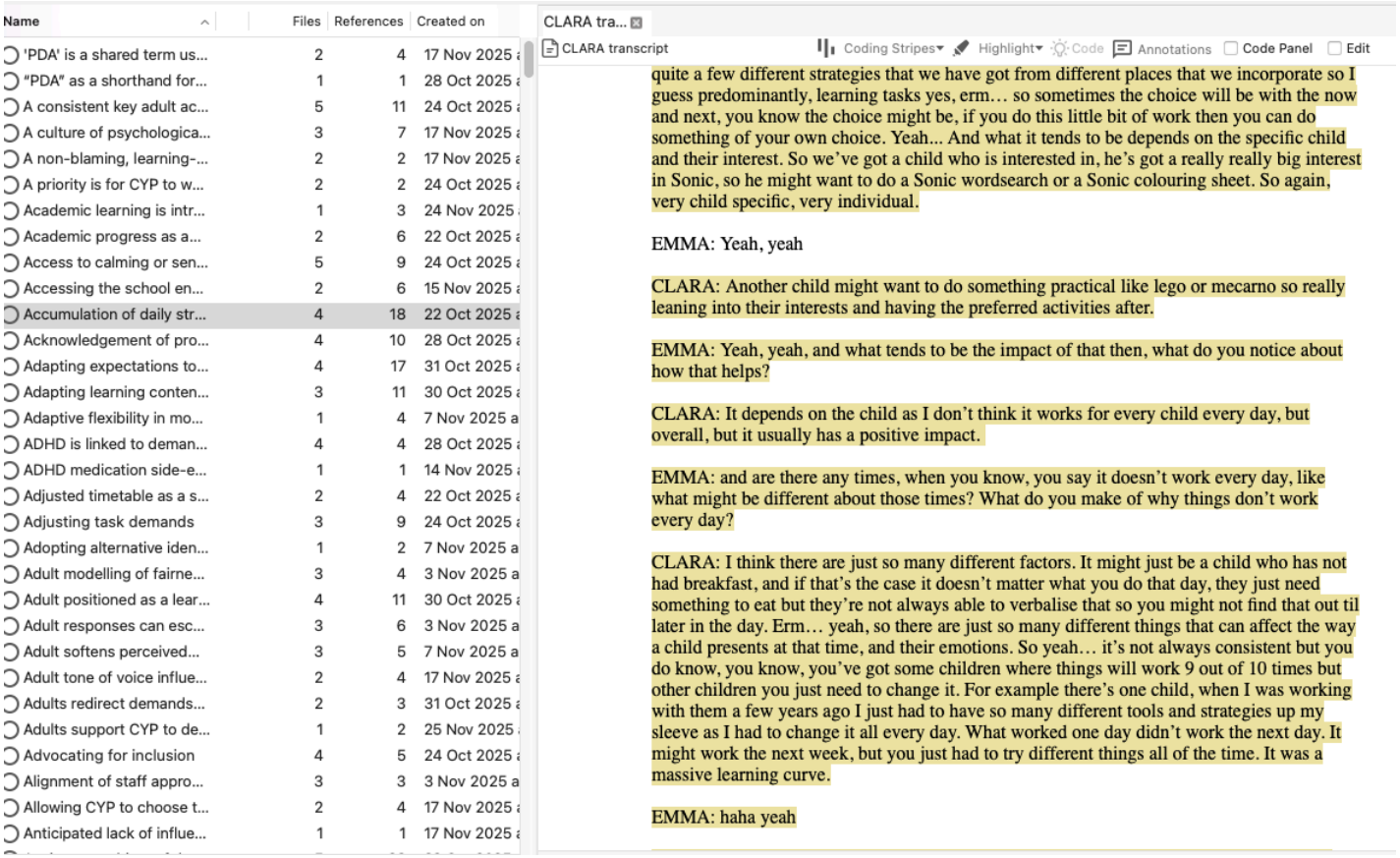
Phase 5: Writing the analysis

At the beginning of writing the analysis chapter, I set out with the intention of ensuring quotes were evenly distributed across all five participants. I wanted to honour each person's contribution equally and represent their experiences in the write up. However, as I immersed myself in the data and began constructing themes, I found myself repeatedly drawn to quotes from Lauren and Evelyn. This pattern troubled me initially, and I paused to reflect on why this might be happening.

I reflected that this might be because I resonated most strongly with their perspectives and experiences. Lauren's explicit focus on relational practice and her focus on whole-school approaches aligned closely with my own values about systemic change. Evelyn's reflections on contrasting school systems, going from punitive to relational environments, mirrored my own professional journey and the tensions I had witnessed in practice. Their voices felt familiar, maybe because they articulated experiences I had lived through or observed.

This realisation prompted an important ethical question: was I privileging certain voices because they confirmed my existing beliefs? Ethically, and methodologically, it was important that all participants' voices were represented authentically and meaningfully. I continued working with the dataset and writing my analysis with fresh attention, deliberately seeking out quotes from all participants that brought different perspectives or nuances to the narrative of each theme. I feel that I have achieved this as each participant contributes substantively across multiple themes, and no single voice dominates any theme entirely.

Appendix O: Code Examples from NVivo



Name	Files	References	Created on
'PDA' is a shared term us...	2	4	17 Nov 2025
"PDA" as a shorthand for...	1	1	28 Oct 2025
A consistent key adult ac...	5	11	24 Oct 2025
A culture of psychologica...	3	7	17 Nov 2025
A non-blaming, learning-...	2	2	17 Nov 2025
A priority is for CYP to w...	2	2	24 Oct 2025
Academic learning is intr...	1	3	24 Nov 2025
Academic progress as a...	2	6	22 Oct 2025
Access to calming or sen...	5	9	24 Oct 2025
Accessing the school en...	2	6	15 Nov 2025
Accumulation of daily str...	4	18	22 Oct 2025
Acknowledgement of pro...	4	10	28 Oct 2025
Adapting expectations to...	4	17	31 Oct 2025
Adapting learning conten...	3	11	30 Oct 2025
Adaptive flexibility in mo...	1	4	7 Nov 2025 a
ADHD is linked to deman...	4	4	28 Oct 2025
ADHD medication side-e...	1	1	14 Nov 2025
Adjusted timetable as a s...	2	4	22 Oct 2025
Adjusting task demands	3	9	24 Oct 2025
Adopting alternative iden...	1	2	7 Nov 2025 a
Adult modelling of fairne...	3	4	3 Nov 2025 a
Adult positioned as a lear...	4	11	30 Oct 2025
Adult responses can esc...	3	6	3 Nov 2025 a
Adult softens perceived...	3	5	7 Nov 2025 a
Adult tone of voice influe...	2	4	17 Nov 2025
Adults redirect demands...	2	3	31 Oct 2025
Adults support CYP to de...	1	2	25 Nov 2025
Advocating for inclusion	4	5	24 Oct 2025
Alignment of staff appro...	3	3	3 Nov 2025 a
Allowing CYP to choose t...	2	4	17 Nov 2025
Anticipated lack of influe...	1	1	17 Nov 2025

Appendix P: Examples of Coding Refinements

The codes in bold represent the final codes

Anxiety as an underlying driver of demand avoidance *(merged from: Anxiety as a driver of demand-avoidant behaviours; Persistent underlying anxiety; CYP experience a pervasive, global form of anxiety)*

Demand avoidance is an adaptive, self-protective response *(merged from: Demand avoidance is an adaptive behaviour; Demand avoidance as a rational self-protective strategy; Demand avoidant behaviours serve a reasonable function)*

Demand-avoidant behaviours are not a choice *(merged from: Demand avoidance is not a choice; Demand avoidant behaviours are non-deliberate responses; Demand avoidant behaviours are not intentional defiance; Internal compulsion vs voluntary choice)*

Demand avoidance manifests as a physiological stress response *(merged from: Fawn stress-threat response; Fight stress-threat response; Flight stress-threat response; Flop stress-threat response; Freeze 'stress' response; Emotional shutdown in response to demands, Withdrawal or disengagement; Incapacitation as a strategy for demand avoidance)*

Accumulation of demands shape demand-avoidant behaviours *(merged from: Accumulation of daily stressors shaping demand avoidant behaviours, Cumulative demand load can exceed coping capacity)*

Home context influences demand tolerance and presentation at school *(merged from: Home stressors can impact tolerance to demands; Changes to the home context can reduce tolerance for demands; Interplay between home context and presentation at school)*

Demand tolerance fluctuates *(merged from: Tolerance levels for demands changes every day; Tolerance levels for demands changes hour to hour)*

Attuning to CYP's emotional, physiological and behavioural cues to inform responses *(merged from: Attunement to emotional and physiological signals; Responsive attunement to CYP's emotional state; Embodied relational attunement; Observing behavioural and non-verbal cues to calibrate challenge and support)*

Feeling safe in relationships reduces anxiety and enables open communication and belonging *(merged from: Relational safety supports honest emotional communication from CYP; Trusting relationships enable emotional safety and reduce anxiety; Emotional safety created by feeling in control supports belonging)*

Safety, trust and engagement build gradually through consistent, predictable and low-demand interactions *(merged from: Trust builds slowly through ongoing attuned interaction; Building emotional safety occurs slowly through consistent low-demand experiences; Consistent, stable relationships create emotional safety; Engagement emerges from predictability and reliability)*

Providing choices reduces perceived demand *(merged from: Providing choice between alternative activities; Providing choice in learning task order of completion; Providing choice of content within learning tasks; Providing choice over timing of demands to support regulation; Providing choices reduces perceived demand)*

Adapting expectations to emotional state *(merged from: Adapting expectations to emotional state; Responsive adaption of demands to tolerance levels and capacity; Reducing expectations when a CYP is dysregulated)*

There are non-negotiable boundaries linked to safety *(merged from: Balancing preserving autonomy with ensuring physical safety; Balancing safety of individual vs group)*

Sanctions and consequences don't work *(merged from: Sanctions don't work; CYP do not respond to consequences; Punitive consequences meet adult needs rather than supporting the child)*

Staff worry about perceptions of professional credibility *(merged from: Staff worry about maintaining professional credibility; Fear of judgment or scrutiny from colleagues)*

Consistency across staff responses is essential for reducing anxiety and promoting emotional safety *(merged from: Consistency across staff responses is essential for reducing anxiety; Consistent adult responses promote emotional safety; Inconsistent adult approaches increase CYP's anxiety; Shared response plans promote consistent, aligned practice across staff; Inter-system consistency as emotional containment)*

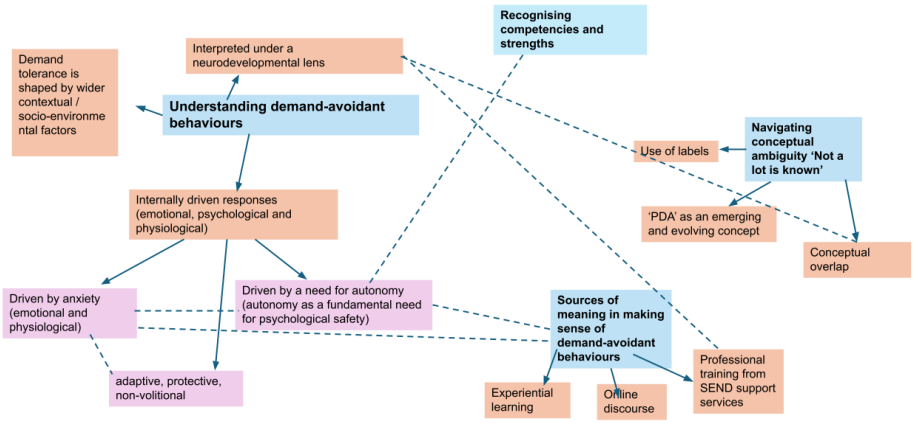
Appendix Q: Initial candidate themes during stage 3 of RTA



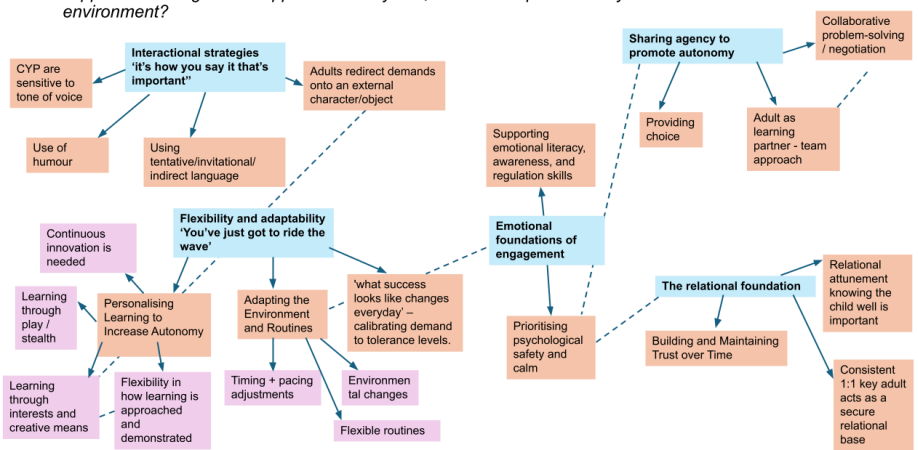
Strategies to support autonomy	Flexibility and adaptability	Whole-school context - what helps	Whole school context - hindering factors	Emotional experience of staff	Professional Identity
Adaptations to environment	Wider contextual factors contributing to demand avoidant behaviours	Relationships as the foundation of support	Interactions make a difference	Prioritising psychological safety and emotional regulation	Working in collaboration with parents
There is conceptual uncertainty	Demand-avoidant behaviours are driven by a need for control	What has informed understanding	Demand avoidant behaviours are not a choice	Emotional and physiological drivers of demand-avoidant behaviours (anxiety)	Reframing of demand-avoidance (strengths based / adaptive response)

Appendix R: Thematic Maps during Stage 4 and 5 of RTA

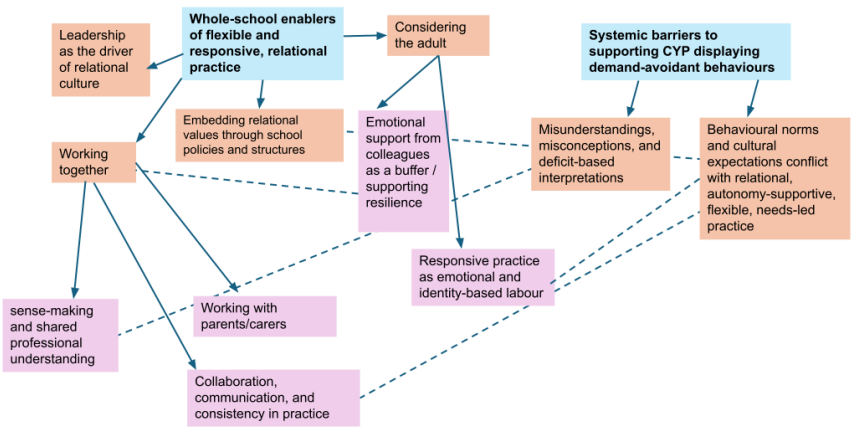
RQ1. *How do teachers and teaching assistants understand children's demand avoidant behaviours?*



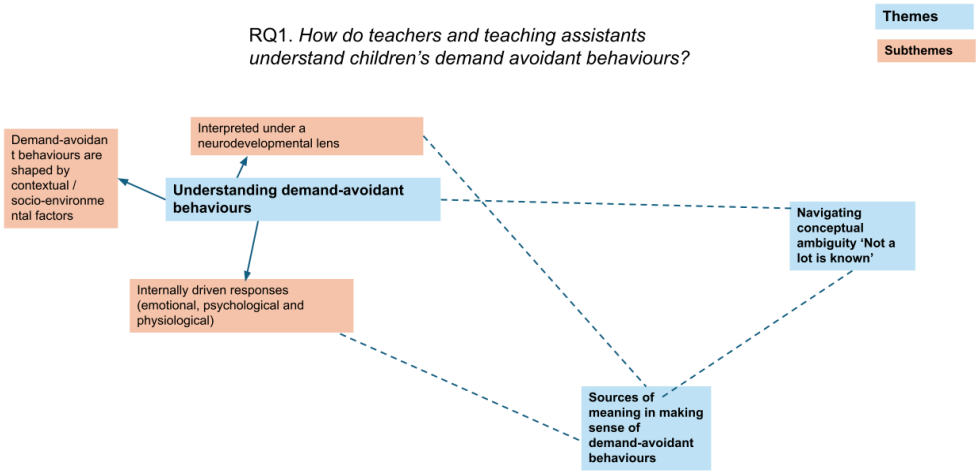
RQ2: How do teachers and teaching assistants respond to demand-avoidant behaviours, including the supportive strategies and approaches they use, and the adaptations they make to the educational environment?



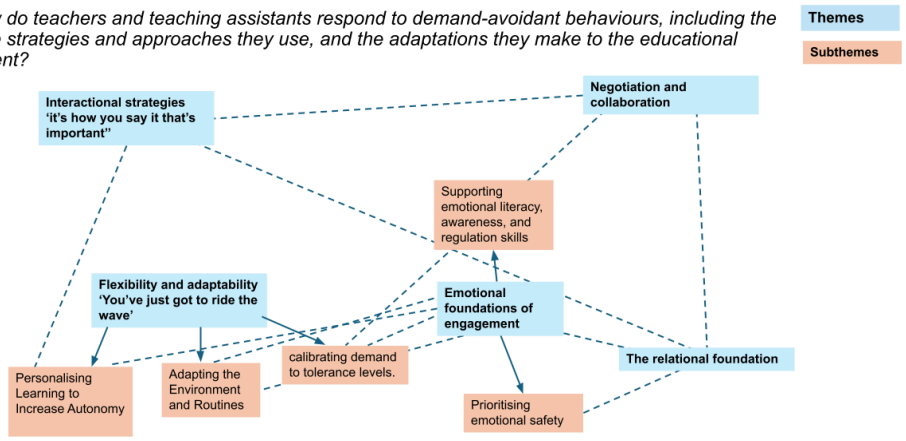
RQ3. *How do school policies and culture shape the ways in which teachers and teaching assistants respond to demand-avoidant behaviours?*



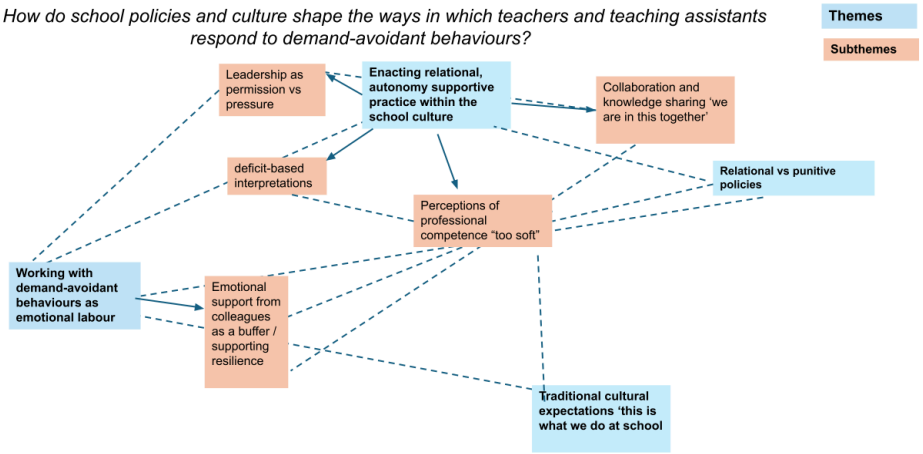
RQ1. *How do teachers and teaching assistants understand children's demand avoidant behaviours?*



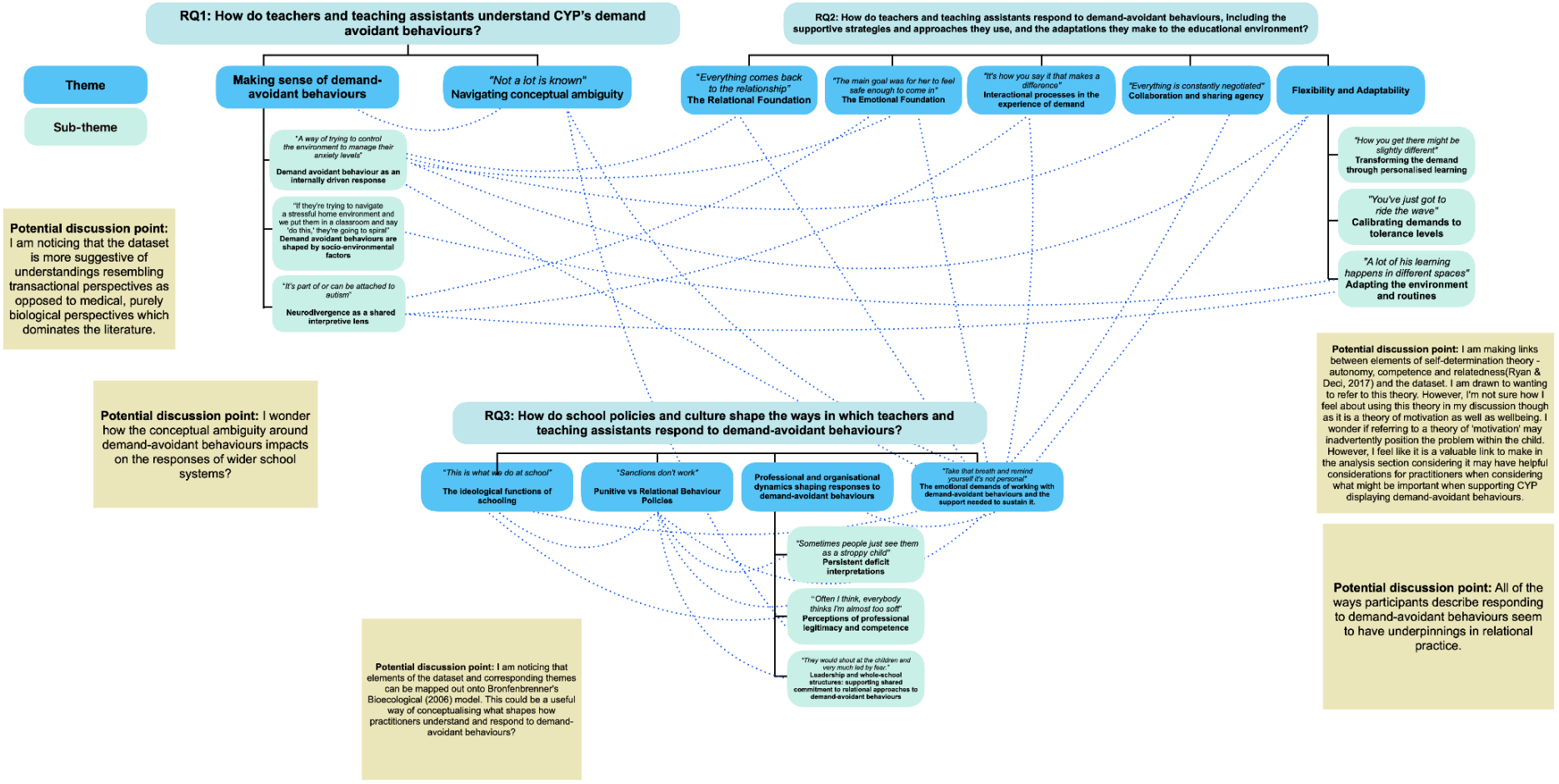
RQ2: How do teachers and teaching assistants respond to demand-avoidant behaviours, including the supportive strategies and approaches they use, and the adaptations they make to the educational environment?



RQ3. *How do school policies and culture shape the ways in which teachers and teaching assistants respond to demand-avoidant behaviours?*



Final thematic Map (Amended throughout Stage 4 and 5)



Appendix S: Theme Key Takeaways

Theme/Subtheme	Key takeaway
Research Question 1: *How do teachers and teaching assistants understand children's demand avoidant behaviours?*	
Theme 1: Making sense of demand-avoidant behaviours	Participants understood demand-avoidant behaviours as an anxiety-driven need for control and an involuntary response to perceived threat, shaped by neurodevelopmental influences (particularly autism) and socio-environmental factors.
Subtheme 1.1: "*A way of trying to control the environment… to manage their anxiety levels*" - Demand avoidant behaviour as an internally driven response	Participants understood demand-avoidant behaviours as involuntary, internally driven (emotional, psychological and physiological) regulatory responses to anxiety, in which CYP attempt to manage pressure and perceived loss of control.
Subtheme 1.2: "*If they're trying to navigate a stressful home environment and we put them in a classroom and say 'do this,' they're going to spiral*" - Demand avoidant behaviours are shaped by socio-environmental factors	Participants understood demand-avoidant behaviours as shaped through interactions with wider social, relational and environmental contexts that influences their capacity to tolerate everyday demands.
Subtheme 1.3: "*It's part of or can be attached to autism*" - Neurodivergence as a shared interpretive lens	Demand-avoidant behaviours were conceptualised through a neurodivergence-informed lens, most commonly autism, which functioned as a shared framework for understanding avoidance, anxiety, and control-seeking.
Theme 2: "*Not a lot is known*" - Navigating conceptual uncertainty	Participants described navigating conceptual uncertainty about demand-avoidant behaviours, recognising them before having formal terminology and developing understanding through training, professional discourse, and lived experience, with this uncertainty leading to them prioritising pragmatic, responsive, needs-led practice.
Research Question 2: *How do teachers and teaching assistants respond to demand-avoidant behaviours, including the supportive strategies and approaches they use, and the adaptations they make to the educational environment?*	

Theme 3: "*Everything comes back to the relationship*" - The Relational Foundation	Participants positioned strong relationships as the foundation of effective support for CYP displaying demand-avoidant behaviours with CYP's ability to participate depending on trust, feeling safe in relationships, and feeling understood.
Theme 4: "*The main goal was for her to feel safe enough to come in*" - The Emotional Foundation	Participants prioritised emotional safety, alongside the development of emotional awareness and regulation, recognising this as foundational in supporting children displaying demand-avoidant behaviours to be able to participate.
Theme 5: "*It's how you say it that makes a difference*" - Interactional processes in the experience of demand	Participants described that CYP's perception of a demand is shaped by how it is communicated by the adult.
Theme 6: "*Everything is constantly negotiated*" - Collaboration and sharing agency	Participants described collaborative approaches positioning CYP as active partners, reshaping adult-child hierarchy to reduce perceived threat.
Theme 7: Flexibility and Adaptability	Participants described flexible approaches that continuously adapted to fluctuating capacity for demands, through personalised learning, calibrated demands matched to tolerance levels, home-school communication and adaptations to the environment.
Subtheme 7.1: "*How they get there may be slightly different*" - Transforming the demand through personalised learning	Participants described transforming the experience of demand by embedding learning objectives within play, interests, and imaginative contexts, therefore altering how learning was accessed whilst keeping learning expectations intact.
Subtheme 7.2: "*You've just got to ride the wave*" - calibrating demands to tolerance levels	Participants described continually adjusting demands in response to pupils' fluctuating tolerance levels.
Subtheme 7.3 "*A lot of his learning happens in different spaces*" - Adapting the environment and routines	Participants described adapting physical environments and daily routines to sustain emotional safety and engagement
RQ3. *How do school policies and culture shape the ways in which teachers and teaching assistants respond to demand-avoidant behaviours?*	

Theme 8: "*This is what we do at school*" - The ideological functions of schooling	Participants' responses reflected awareness of the broader societal expectations of schooling, which shaped how demand-avoidant behaviours were responded to.
Theme 9: "*Sanctions don't work*" - Punitive vs relational behavioural policies	Participants described contrasting behaviour policy contexts, with punitive systems utilising sanctions viewed as ineffective and misaligned with CYP's needs, while relationship-based policies were described as producing positive outcomes.
Theme 10: Professional and organisational dynamics shaping responses to demand-avoidant behaviours	Participants described how responses to demand-avoidant behaviours are negotiated within professional and organisational dynamics that shape the legitimacy of relational approaches to demand-avoidant behaviours
Subtheme 10.1: "*Sometimes people just see them as a stroppy child*" - Persistent deficit interpretations	Participants described how entrenched negative interpretations of behaviour as purposeful continued to shape how demand-avoidant behaviours were understood and responded to within the staff community.
Subtheme 10.2: "*Often I think, everybody thinks I'm almost too soft*" - Perceptions of professional legitimacy and competence	Practitioners described experiencing professional anxieties about relational approaches to demand-avoidant behaviours and how they would be perceived by colleagues.
Subtheme 10.3: "*They would shout at the children and very much… led by fear.*" Leadership and whole-school structures: supporting shared commitment to relational approaches to demand-avoidant behaviours	Participants highlighted the role of leadership and whole-school structures in shaping whether relational approaches to demand-avoidant behaviours were legitimised and therefore could be sustained within school.
Theme 11: "*Take that breath and remind yourself it's not personal*" - The emotional demands of working with demand-avoidant behaviours and the support needed to sustain it.	Participants described supporting CYP with demand-avoidant behaviours as emotionally demanding work that was manageable with supervision, peer support, and shared responsibility, but overwhelming without collective support.

Appendix T: Final Codes Mapped to Themes

Theme 1: Making Sense of Demand-Avoidant Behaviours

Subtheme 1.1: "A way of trying to control the environment… to manage their anxiety levels" - Demand avoidant behaviour as an internally driven response

Anxiety as an underlying driver of demand avoidance
Anxiety disrupts ability to access cognitive skills
Anxiety impacts on ability to complete learning tasks
Anxiety impacts on ability to follow instructions
Anxiety impairs focus and engagement
Anxiety-driven need for control overrides rules and authority
Autonomy as a core driver of participation
Autonomy as a universal, fundamental human drive
Breakdown of self-regulation under perceived threat or pressure
Cognitive factors exacerbate demand-avoidant behaviours
CYP want to cooperate but are unable to
CYP cannot explain why they can't meet a demand
CYP experience feelings of shame following loss of control
Demand avoidance is an adaptive, self-protective response
Demand-avoidant behaviours are not a choice
Demand avoidance as an adaptive response to sensory overwhelm
Demand avoidance helps to regulate and reduce anxiety
Demand avoidant behaviours are linked to specific anxiety triggers
Demand avoidant behaviour as a response to perceived demand rather than capability or interest
Demand avoidant behaviours are driven by a psychological need for safety
Demand avoidant behaviours as a need for control and autonomy
Demand avoidant behaviours as a physiological response
Demand avoidant behaviours as actions to reduce stress
Demand avoidant behaviours as an internal compulsion to avoid or resist demands
Demand avoidant behaviours as expressions of agency
Demand avoidant behaviours as resistance to external expectations
Demand avoidant behaviours driven by absence of intrinsic motivation
Demand avoidant behaviours driven by internal pressure
Demand avoidant behaviours perceived as proportionate to CYP's internal experience of anxiety
Demand avoidant behaviours understood as 'Persistent Drive for Autonomy'
Demand avoidant behaviours as a physiological stress response
Current emotional state impacts demand-avoidant responses
Differences between what is externally visible and what is internally felt by CYP
Internal self-generated demands can trigger demand-avoidant responses
Demand avoidance is not linked to a single personality profile
Demand avoidance is pervasive across contexts

Subtheme 1.2: "If they're trying to navigate a stressful home environment and we put them in a classroom and say 'do this,' they're going to spiral" - Demand avoidant behaviours are shaped by socio-environmental factors

Accumulation of demands shape demand-avoidant behaviours
Accessing the school environment is difficult
Assessment contexts intensify perceived demand
Attributing demand-avoidant behaviours to parenting style
Home context influences demand tolerance and presentation at school

CYP are hypervigilant in classroom environments
CYP experience increased anxiety when working with unfamiliar adults
Cumulative fatigue transforms ordinary tasks into overwhelming demands
decision-making can function as a demand
Demand tolerance fluctuates
Demand avoidant behaviours in response to environmental or situational stressors
Demand avoidant behaviours in response to learning tasks
Demand avoidant behaviours in response to routine classroom activities
Demand avoidant behaviours in response to transitions
Demand tolerance is impacted by emotional state
Demands misaligned to emotional readiness causes dysregulation
Demands presented as non-negotiable escalates avoidance
Differentiating situational and pervasive demand avoidance
Direct adult demands trigger anxiety and avoidance
Control-Seeking as a compensatory response to life instability
Direct demands trigger demand avoidant responses irrespective of task preference
Everyday expectations can be too much to cope with
Demand avoidant behaviours framed as a way of reducing unpredictability in their environment
Everyday routines as cumulative demands
Fragmented systems amplify anxiety and avoidance
Lack of coherence between support system approaches causes stress for CYP
Lower tolerance for demands towards the end of term
School as a stressful environment
School attendance as an overwhelming demand
School breaks or changes can exacerbate demand avoidant behaviours
Sensory intensity of the school environment reduces CYP capacity to tolerate demands
The educational environment is full of demands
The social environment as a source of anxiety
There can be rapid escalation of emotional state
There is situational variability in demand-avoidant behaviours
Time can be a demand
Unmet basic needs (e.g. hunger, sleep) decrease tolerance to demands
Demand avoidant behaviours viewed through interactive factors framework

Subtheme 1.3: “It’s part of or can be attached to autism” - Neurodivergence as a shared interpretive lens

Neurodevelopmental framing of behaviours
Demand avoidant behaviours associated with other SEN needs
Demand avoidant behaviours present across various diagnoses
Linking demand-avoidant behaviours to autism
ADHD is linked to demand-avoidant behaviours
ADHD medication side-effects reducing demand tolerance
Lived experience of neurodivergence deepens professional empathy

Theme 2: “Not a lot is known” - Navigating Conceptual Uncertainty

'PDA' is a shared term used to describe demand-avoidant behaviours in school
"PDA" as a shorthand for describing observable behaviour
Changing interpretations of demand-avoidant behaviours over time
Conceptual overlap between 'PDA' and 'autism and anxiety' creates uncertainty about how to support CYP
Demand avoidant behaviours conceptualised as 'ODD'

Demand avoidant behaviours conceptualised as 'PDA'
Distinguishing demand-avoidant anxiety from normative teen boundary testing
External shaping of conceptual understanding
First exposure to PDA terminology came from parents
Increased professional use of PDA terminology over time
Influence of professional and public discourse on terminology
International variation in PDA recognition
Autism Training has shaped understanding of demand-avoidant behaviours
Learning about demand-avoidant behaviours through academic studies
Limited evidence base shapes reliance on practice-based knowledge
Lived experience of neurodivergence deepens professional empathy
Loose or informal use of PDA label
Not a lot is known about PDA
Parents using the term 'PDA'
PDA framed as part of the autism spectrum in training contexts
PDA is an emerging concept in educational discourse
PDA is increasingly included within autism training
Potential stigma from language
Practice is guided by observable behaviour rather than diagnostic labels
Questioning relationship between ODD and PDA
Questioning terminology and conceptualisation of demand avoidance
Questioning what labels mean in practice
Recognising need over diagnosis
Retrospective sense-making through professional discourse
Social media as a source of information
Staff perceive conceptual overlap between 'PDA' profile and 'autism and anxiety'
Staff use online resources to inform their approach to demand-avoidant behaviours
Support frameworks for PDA and autism are different
Terminology of ‘pathological demand avoidance’ can negatively impact on perceptions and treatment of children
The term 'PDA' is prevalent in online information
There are books that use the term 'PDA'
There is a lack of diagnostic clarity around PDA
Training enables re-interpretation of behaviour
Uncertainty about Pathological Demand Avoidance vs demand avoidance

Theme 3: “Everything comes back to the relationship” - The Relational Foundation

A consistent key adult acts as a secure relational base
Adult modelling of fairness and balanced social reciprocity
Acknowledgement of professional boundaries in staff-CYP relationship
Attuning to CYP's emotional, physiological and behavioural cues to inform responses
Belonging as a key element of support
Careful relational handover is required when changing key adults
Confidence and professional understanding are built through direct experience with CYP
CYP are sensitive to adult authenticity
CYP can be persistent
CYP can detect hidden compliance motives
CYP need to feel understood by adult
Daily meet and greet
CYP have 1-to-1 TA support

Difficult conversations become possible and productive once trust is established
Familiarity brings comfort
Following the child's lead
Having one or more trusted adults is important
High levels of dysregulation compromise the protective function of key relationships
History of relational instability undermines trust
Key worker system
Knowing the child well is important
CYP have a great sense of humour
Interactions with CYP can be engaging and stimulating
CYP have good expressive language skills when feeling safe
Personality and compatibility influence connection
Positioning adult and child as teammates rather than adversaries
Positive working relationships between school and parents are important ★ *(see also Subtheme 10.3)*
Recognition of reciprocity in the relationship
Recognising the CYP beyond their behaviour
Relational connection as a foundation for de-escalation
Relational connection precedes task engagement
Noticing the early signs of increasing anxiety
Relational safety reduces anxiety and enables open communication and belonging
Repairing relational ruptures
Safety, trust and engagement build gradually through consistent, predictable and low-demand interactions
Selective personal disclosure to build relational trust
Staff changes increase anxiety and demand avoidance
Strong relational rapport supports connection and belonging
Supportive relationships underpin all effective responses to demand-avoidant behaviours
Tacit knowledge of CYP developed through experience of working with them
The adult-child relationship shifts from hierarchy to partnership and mutuality
Transparency with CYP supports relational safety
Trust increases demand tolerance
Trust is actively maintained through relational attunement and repair

Theme 4: “The main goal was for her to feel safe enough to come in” - The Emotional Foundation

Academic learning is introduced only after social-emotional safety is established
Adults support CYP to develop emotional literacy by naming and labelling emotions
Carefully planned reintegration can successfully return CYP to full-time schooling
Co-regulation to support CYP during emotional overwhelm
Creating a calm environment reduces dysregulation
CYP require extended time to feel safe in the school environment
CYP's preferred coping activities often conflict with classroom expectations
Demand-free regulation time to restore capacity
Emotional education as an important component of support
Emotional consistency in staff as a cue of safety
Participation is aligned to CYP's readiness
Feeling in control of their environment helps CYP to feel safe
Having a clear sense of where trusted adults can be found reduces anxiety
Hierarchical progression through emotional and engagement goals
A priority is for CYP to want to come to school
It is important to support CYP to develop emotional literacy
CYP do not recognise or name their own anxiety

Not feeling understood negatively impacts CYPs' emotions
Planned regulation breaks increase demand tolerance
Prioritising regulation before learning
Prioritising the CYP feeling calm
CYP's emotional awareness may be limited
Providing opportunities for CYP to experience success
Providing opportunities for the CYP to feel good about themselves
Providing structured opportunities for time away from high-demand environments to support regulation
Psychological safety as prerequisite for learning
Redefining learning as an act of joy and connection rather than compliance
Social-emotional targets are prioritised before academic targets
Social-emotional progress valued as meaningful indicators of success
Structured pupil-voice tools help provide insight into CYP internal emotional state
Success is redefined around emotional safety rather than task completion
Time is required for emotional capacity to return before engagement is possible
Use of visual emotional check in tools to support interpretation of demand tolerance
Using ELSA support to build coping strategies
Validating and empathising with the CYP's emotional experience
Wellbeing is prioritised over academic progress
Staff question prioritising emotional targets when long-term outcomes feel unclear
Zones of Regulation to develop emotional awareness

Theme 5: “It’s how you say it that makes a difference” - Interactional processes in the experience of demand

Adult tone of voice influences CYP's perception of demand and safety
Adults redirect demands onto an external character or object to reduce perceived pressure
Adult softens perceived authority through self-disarming behaviour
Calm and gentle adult presence reduces anxiety
Choices can be experienced as demands
Directive language increases perceived pressure
CYP are hypervigilant to adult's non-verbal communication
De-personalising interaction through role-play to reduce perceived demand
Framing learning tasks as learning jobs
Framing participation as helpful to others
Framing tasks as meaningful or useful
Gentle encouragement to support participation
Language reframing promotes empathy and understanding
Level of demand can be perceived differently by adult and CYP
Minimal language use when the child is dysregulated
Minimising perceived pressure
Perceived pressure overrides intrinsic motivation
Power dynamics shape how CYP experience demands
Raising authority increases perceived threat
Reducing implicit demands to lower anxiety
Playfulness as a relational engagement strategy
Reducing perception of pressure as engagement strategy
Seemingly simple requests carry a hidden demand
Softening adult authority through physical positioning
Softening the demand presentation
Speaking to CYP through an alternative persona

Supportive intentions can still be experienced as pressure
Use of humour as relational strategy
Use of inclusive pronouns (we)
Using non-directive and invitational language to reduce perceived demand
Using tentative language to validate and explore emotions
WIN (Wondering-Imagining-Noticing) language used as a structured, low-demand communication approach

Theme 6: “Everything is constantly negotiated” - Collaboration and sharing agency

Child-led teaching or role reversal
Co-constructing support plans with CYP to promote control and reduce anxiety
Collaborative negotiation of expectations with CYP
Collaborative problem-solving with CYP
CYP are more able to engage when approaching learning task voluntarily
CYP chooses timing of participation to preserve sense of control
CYP feedback informs staff adjustments to support
CYP initiate engagement spontaneously when internally ready
CYP pursuing own activities
CYP require demands to hold personal purpose and meaning
CYP seeks autonomy over timing of activities
Dialogic negotiation between staff and student
Encouraging reflection on personal gain
Adult positioned as a learning partner
Fairness is important to CYP
Framing tasks as collaborative to reduce perceived demand
Negotiated choice ('my choice, your choice') to reduce demand intensity
Engagement occurs only on the child's own terms
enjoyment and interest does not guarantee participation
Involving CYP in decision making
Involving peers in learning to support engagement
Letting go of control to enable shared agency
Negotiated pacing and timing of learning
Persistence of intrinsic motivation despite external pressure
CYP see themselves as equals to adults
Providing choices reduces perceived demand
Reciprocal "give-and-take" motivates CYP participation
Restoring agency after perceived manipulation
Shared journey towards learning goals
Structured responsibility as a regulated form of control
Avoidance of learning tasks is driven by need for autonomy rather than ability

Theme 7: Flexibility and adaptability

Subtheme 7.1: “How they get there may be slightly different' - Transforming the experience of demand through personalised learning

Adapting learning content to CYP's interests
Continuous innovation is required to sustain engagement
Creating personalised resources linked to special interests

Creativity as a tool for engagement
CYP doing preferred tasks to delay engagement with learning
CYP engage in a fully personalised curriculum tailored to their needs
CYP need to understand the purpose of tasks to engage
Decoupling learning from task compliance
Deprioritising conventional pedagogy
Drawing on CYP's strengths to support participation
Embedding learning in fantasy and imagination
Flexibility in how learning is approached and demonstrated
Focus on the end goal rather than the means of getting there
Following learning tasks with a choice of preferred activity
Interest-based reframing of curriculum tasks
interest-led engagement enables greater demand tolerance
Intrinsic motivation linked to personal interests
Learning can occur outside formal parameters
Learning embedded in enjoyable activities
Learning tasks perceived as achievable increase CYP's sense of control
Learning through play
Learning through stealth
Making learning activities feel manageable and achievable
Gamification as a strategy to increase participation
Playful competition as engagement strategy
Preferred activities function as meaningful incentives for participation
Prioritising skill development over topic relevance
The same curricular aims achieved through different routes
Utilising interests to support emotional regulation

Subtheme 7.2: “You’ve just got to ride the wave” - calibrating demands to tolerance levels

Adapting expectations to emotional state
Adjusting task demands
Breaking tasks into predictable, time-limited steps to reduce demand
Choosing which rules or demands to enforce based on importance
Foreseeing potential triggers, challenges, or escalation in pupils
Low-demand approaches are not consistently effective
Navigating the sweet spot of demand
Observing underlying factors beyond surface behaviours
Offering lower-demand alternatives prevents emotional overload and later dysregulation
Picking battles - Differentiating between critical and negotiable expectations
Reading behavioural cues to avoid escalation
Regular impact review guides adjustments
Small steps of engagement are recognised as meaningful progress
Task finiteness makes the demand tolerable
There is a delicate balance between encouraging engagement and avoiding emotional escalation
Using small, gradual steps to encourage participation
What success looks like changes every day
What works one day, doesn't work the next
Adult positioned as a learning partner
Knowledge of home dynamics informs school responses

Subtheme 7.3: “A lot of his learning happens in different spaces” - Adapting the environment and routines

Allowing CYP to choose their physical environment supports emotional regulation
Adjusted timetable as a support strategy
Choice over learning location supports regulation
Providing calming spaces, sensory breaks and outdoor access to support regulation
CYP are educated in separate spaces away from peers
CYP don't always have to be in the classroom
CYP engage in learning across multiple environments, including outdoor spaces
Doing work in a different environment
Early arrival used as a strategy to reduce transition-related anxiety
Flexible attendance arrangements to reduce cumulative demand
Flexible approach to rules to avoid conflict
Flexible routines to reduce stress
Flexible timetable
CYP are given choice and control over seating
Being in the classroom is too anxiety-provoking
Flexible use of space to reduce environmental overwhelm
Flexibility in uniform rules
Providing flexible windows of engagement
Incorporating movement into learning activities
Movement can support regulation
Providing alternative environments during unstructured times reduces anxiety
Some CYP are on a reduced timetable
Staff create predictability to reduce anxiety
Small class sizes enable individualised relational support
Temporal adaptations that avoid peak sensory and social load
Transition support

Theme 8: “This is what we do at school” - The broader ideological functions of schooling

Academic progress as a goal
Advocating for inclusion
Appeals to institutional norms do not influence CYP engagement
Balancing autonomy with preparation for 'real-world' demands
There are non-negotiable boundaries linked to safety
Balancing preserving autonomy with meeting learning outcomes
Balancing wellbeing with academic achievement
Conventional pedagogy perceived as threatening to autonomy
Demand avoidant behaviours as advantageous life skills
Engagement in learning as a priority
Equipping CYP with transferrable life skills
Exclusion through a 'one size fits all' education
OFSTED validation strengthens staff confidence in their approach
Finding a balance between providing emotional safety and preparing CYP for future life demands
Formal learning activities perceived as overtly demanding
Impact on education of other pupils is a consideration in decision-making
Managing peer perceptions of unfairness regarding accommodations

Misalignment between school demands and student's internal drivers
Normative expectations of success
Reconceptualising 'challenging behaviour' as adaptive coping
Not all children fit the system
Rejection of school as unnecessary
Leadership qualities recognised as strengths
School doesn't suit everybody
Professional responsibility guiding interaction with demand-avoidant students
Some demands are unavoidable in real life
Tension between norms of authority and relational educational practice
Tensions between supporting autonomy and acknowledging societal expectations
There are broader systems of control and expectation that limit autonomy
Demand avoidant behaviours can function as self-advocacy
There are non-negotiable boundaries linked to safety
CYP evaluating rules, role expectations, and fairness in the environment
CYP demonstrate strong personal convictions that shape their response to demands
There are tensions between preserving autonomy and holding boundaries
CYP know their own minds

Theme 9: “Sanctions don’t work” - Punitive vs relational behavioural policies

Behaviour is treated as communication requiring investigation
Behaviour policy shift away from punitive, compliance-based approaches
Child-led restorative reflection replaces punitive behaviour responses
Downtime perceived as rewarding 'bad behaviour'
Generational or ideological differences in responding to behaviour
Preference for compliance-driven approaches among some staff
Recognition that pushing for compliance may do harm
Restorative conversations help CYP understand impact and emotions
Reward systems need to be subtle
Relational focused ethos guides school practice
Rewards systems can be too demanding for CYP
Rewards systems linked to interests
Sanctions and consequences don't work
shame as a harmful emotional impact of public behaviour systems
Staff insistence on rigid compliance is unhelpful
Validation of relational rather than control-based practice
Whole-school reorientation toward supportive, non-punitive approaches
Authoritative approaches increase perceived demand
Reconceptualising 'challenging behaviour' as adaptive coping
Restorative conversations help CYP understand impact and emotions
Shame as a harmful emotional impact of public behaviour systems
Feeling challenged can drive stricter or more directive responses

Theme 10: Professional and organisational dynamics shaping responses to demand-avoidant behaviours

Subtheme 10.1: “Sometimes people just see them as a stroppy child” - Persistent deficit interpretations

Avoidance of demands is perceived as 'refusal' by staff

Demand avoidant behaviours conceptualised as 'ODD'
Demand avoidant behaviours perceived as 'argumentative' by staff
Demand avoidant behaviours perceived as assertiveness
Demand avoidant behaviours referred to as challenging behaviour
Demand avoidant behaviours seen as 'being rude' by colleagues
Demand avoidant behaviours seen as deliberate defiance by colleagues
Demand avoidant behaviours seen as purposeful
Difficulties arise when adults assume intentional defiance
Gaps in staff understanding of needs increase risk of escalation
Parents experience invalidation and a lack of understanding
Parenting-style beliefs shape staff responses to CYP
Residual beliefs about behaviour as a choice persist among staff
Staff misconceptions require ongoing reframing
Adult responses can escalate emotional dysregulation

Subtheme 10.2: Being perceived as 'too soft" - Perceptions of professional legitimacy and competence

Being criticised for not asserting authority
CYP unlikely to change behaviour based on staff input
Disagreement over what counts as a necessary demand
Demand avoidant behaviours are perceived threat to professional competence
Low-demand approaches are perceived as 'too soft' by colleagues
Negotiating professional identity between authority and partnership
Staff worry about perceptions of professional credibility
Colleagues questioning the rationale for accommodations
There are limits to staff influence
Observed positive impact validating staff approaches
Professional identity affirmed through shared understanding
Anticipated lack of influence undermines staff confidence

Subtheme 10.3: "They would shout at the children and very much… led by fear." Leadership and whole-school structures: supporting shared commitment to relational approaches to demand-avoidant behaviours

A culture of psychological safety enables staff to learn, make mistakes, and refine practice
Building collective professional commitment to relational practice
Collaborative dialogue is needed to align staff approaches
Consistency across staff responses is essential for reducing anxiety and promoting emotional safety
Consistency of support should not be abandoned after setbacks
Developing whole-school alignment in understanding and responding to demand-avoidant behaviours is a gradual process
Developing shared understanding of behaviours between staff
Effective information sharing is crucial for consistency across staff
External professional services and networks provide guidance, resources and support to schools
Formalised core school values guiding how staff interpret and respond to demand-avoidant behaviours
Formal structures in school support staff development and reflection
Having a shared plan helps staff feel supported when responding to demand-avoidant behaviours
Inclusive and relational principles are intentionally filtered down from leadership to wider school
Institutional permission for pedagogical flexibility

Staff require support to implement relational strategies
Staff learn through observing the practice of colleagues
Leadership affirmation supports staff confidence
Linking training content to real-life observations
Leadership involvement in culture change
Leadership team culture supports staff to challenge or question decisions
Institutional permission for pedagogical flexibility
Inclusion is a core value guiding staff practice
Ongoing home-school communication and collaboration is essential for responsive practice
Regular sharing of accessible, practical strategies to support demand-avoidant behaviours
School-wide sharing of student support information to prevent unnecessary challenge
Senior leaders prioritise developing a consistent whole-school approach to demand-avoidant behaviours
Senior leadership involvement in meetings with parents
Shared values within leadership guide consistent school-wide practice
Staff need to feel supported and empowered by leadership
Training as a valued source of support
Training provides validation of experiential practice
Whole-school awareness of support systems in place to prevent unnecessary challenges

Theme 11: "*Take that breath and remind yourself it's not personal*" - The emotional demands of working with demand-avoidant behaviours and the support needed to sustain it.

Balancing positive regard with professional fatigue
Challenges are held collectively rather than by individual staff alone
Cognitive and emotional labour of 'in the moment' responsive practice
Collegial support provides emotional containment and empowers staff to persevere
Collective reflective practice supports shared learning and growth
Constructive, non-judgmental feedback helps staff refine their communication with CYP
Continuous adaptation and flexibility as emotional labour
Coordinated team response during crisis situations
Emotional labour of sustaining empathy after being hurt
Emotional resilience as a hidden demand of the role
Frustration at feeling unable to help the CYP
Frustration when efforts do not lead to engagement
It can be frustrating when support isn't 'accepted'
Working with demand-avoidant behaviours involves iterative problem solving
Leadership support provides emotional containment and enables honest reflection
Professional reflexivity and reflective rumination about strategies and approach
Professional sense of achievement is disrupted when learning does not occur
Professional sense of achievement through meaningful impact
Providing one-to-one support in separate spaces can be isolating for staff
Regular informal staff check-ins
Seeing positive impact supports staff resilience
Self-directed professional learning
Staff feel ill-equipped to support demand-avoidant behaviours
Staff demonstrate strong emotional commitment to CYP wellbeing
Staff describe 'treading on eggshells'
Staff emotional needs require intentional consideration
Staff engage in proactive problem-solving
Staff feel anxious in crisis situations

Staff feel safe to express vulnerability and seek support
Staff internalise CYP's difficulties as personal failure
Staff navigate several overlapping responsibilities within the school environment
Staff regulate visible emotions
Staff value having protected time and space to process emotional demands
Supporting demand-avoidant behaviours is emotionally demanding and can exceed staff capacity
A supportive professional community where staff share successes and struggles
Supportive culture mitigates emotional labour
Supportive school culture fosters staff retention
Tension between encouragement and over-demanding
Trust in process despite uncertainty
Unpredictability in behaviours as a source of anxiety for staff
Working with CYP displaying demand-avoidant behaviours can be rewarding
Working with demand-avoidant behaviours requires staff resilience
Working with demand-avoidant behaviours as 'fighting a losing battle'
You don't always get it right

Appendix U: Reflexive Diary Entry Related to Discussion

Reflexive Diary Entry 11

Reflexivity In The Discussion

As part of the commitment to transparency and rigour within reflexive thematic analysis (Yardley, 2000; Braun & Clarke, 2022), it is important to consider how my own experiences, values, and positioning may have shaped the focus of this discussion towards relational practice and the application of a bioecological framework.

As outlined in the axiology section, my role as a TEP and earlier experience as a TA supporting CYP displaying demand-avoidant behaviours within a school that frequently interpreted their behaviour as defiant shaped my attentiveness to relational and systemic factors throughout the research process. Building on this, my training within a relational paradigm at The University of Sheffield and my experience as a Trainee EP within a service whose values explicitly align with person-centred practice and relationality both oriented me towards relational and systemic framings of the data. Engagement with social model perspectives (Oliver, 2013) and social constructionist frameworks (Gergen, 2009) through reading for this thesis further shaped this orientation.

As described in my methodology reflexive diary, during Phase 4 of analysis, a conversation with a fellow TEP helped me recognise that the systemic elements I had identified through coding could be explicitly organised through Bronfenbrenner's bioecological framework (2006).

This conversation helped me articulate what had been developing in my analysis. helping me see that an ecological perspective would provide a helpful framework for discussing the analysis of the data. Also, during research supervision, we discussed that a relational approach appeared to be emerging as a consistent thread across the themes, which then informed my use of relational practice as an organising concept for the discussion. I recognise that the decision to organise the discussion around these frameworks reflects both what emerged from the data and the theoretical perspective I brought to it. I remain aware that both my fellow TEP and my supervisor share similar professional training contexts oriented towards relational and ecological paradigms (my supervisor is situated on the DEdCPsy course at The University of Sheffield), meaning they may have also been attuned to noticing things that resonated with these perspectives.

Appendix V: A Framework for Relational Practice with CYP Displaying Demand-Avoidant Behaviours

Area of Relational Practice with demand-avoidant behaviours	**What this looks like in practice**
Making sense of demand-avoidant behaviour: Anxiety, threat, and loss of control.	Adults understand that demand-avoidant behaviours may be an anxiety-driven need for control. They do not see it as deliberate defiance or a personal challenge towards the adult. In a field characterised by ongoing debate and contested understandings, adults respond to what they observe in the moment, remaining open, curious and empathetic about what the behaviour tells us about the CYP's experience of the world. *(Theme 1: Making sense of demand-avoidant behaviours; Theme 2: Navigating conceptual uncertainty; Subtheme 10.1: Persistent deficit interpretations)*
Building and sustaining the relationship	Adults prioritise building an authentic, attuned, and trusting relationship with the CYP, understanding this as foundational to all other approaches becoming impactful. Adults position themselves as on the same team as the CYP, working in genuine partnership. Adults recognise that trust is fragile and that ruptures may occur. Where misjudgements happen, adults repair these openly, understanding that how ruptures are responded to is important to preserving the relationship. *(Theme 3: The relational foundation; Theme 6: Collaboration and sharing agency)*
Prioritising emotional safety	Adults prioritise the CYP's emotional safety and wellbeing, including before academic demands, understanding that CYP can only engage when emotionally regulated. Adults work towards finding ways to reduce anxiety and support a sense of safety. Adults recognise how environmental factors, including sensory input, impact regulation and adapt these accordingly. This also includes accessing alternative learning spaces, and adapting transitions and routines to reduce environmental demands. Adults also support the CYP to develop awareness of their own emotional states. *(Theme 7.3: Adapting the environment and routines; Theme 4: The*

	emotional foundation)
Knowing the child well	Adults develop sustained, detailed knowledge of the CYP, including their triggers, tolerance levels, interests, and early signs of dysregulation, understanding that the knowledge needed to respond in attuned ways develops through spending time getting to know CYP and building a relationship. Adults use this knowledge to judge when the CYP has sufficient capacity to engage collaboratively with negotiated demands and when these should be increased, reduced or paused. Adults recognise that parents and carers hold important knowledge about the CYP's experience outside of school, and actively seek and draw on this information to inform their approach, understanding home and school as interconnected contexts shaping the CYP's capacity to engage with demands. *(Theme 3: The relational foundation; Subtheme 1.2: Demand-avoidant behaviours are shaped by socio-environmental factors; Subtheme 7.2: Calibrating demands to tolerance levels)*
Collaboration and sharing control	Adults avoid directive, adult-led approaches and use genuine negotiation, shared agency, and co-construction of expectations. Adults offer choice within interactions. Adults are transparent about their intentions, recognising that CYP displaying demand-avoidant behaviours may be highly attuned to when they are being steered towards compliance, and understand that genuine involvement in decision-making is essential to maintaining trust. *Theme 6: Collaboration and sharing agency; Subtheme 7.2: Calibrating demands to tolerance levels)*
Attuned 'demand-sensitive' communication	Adults remain continuously attuned and sensitive to how demands are perceived in the interaction, recognising that tone, timing, phrasing, implied expectation, and the specific words chosen can all heighten or reduce the experience of demand. Declarative, indirect, and invitational language is used to reduce the sense of adult authority and making demands feel less pressured and more collaborative. Adults allow sufficient time and space for CYP to process and respond to demands. Adults remain aware that their own emotional state, including anxiety, frustration, or urgency, is picked up by the CYP and directly affects how demands are experienced, and that their physical presence, manner, and level of warmth and empathy can communicate safety or threat.

	Theme 3: The relational foundation; Theme 5: Interactional processes in the experience of demand; Subtheme 7.2: Calibrating demands to tolerance levels; Theme 11: The emotional demands of working with demand-avoidant behaviours and the support needed to sustain it.)
Personalising learning	Adults adapt and personalise learning to meet the CYP's individual educational needs, embedding it within interest-led, play-based, and flexible approaches. Social and emotional skills are attended to alongside academic progress and adults vary when, how, and where learning takes place. Adults recognise that personalisation is an ongoing process of trial and error, requiring thinking 'on their feet' and recalibrating when approaches are not working. Adults remain open to the fact that what works one day may not work the next. *(Theme 7: Flexibility and adaptability; Subtheme 7.1: Personalising learning; Subtheme 7.2: Calibrating demands to tolerance levels; Subtheme 7.3: Adapting the environment and routines)*
Sustaining relational practice	Adults recognise that supporting CYP displaying demand-avoidant behaviours is emotionally demanding, and that looking after their own wellbeing is essential. Adults actively seek supervision, support from colleagues and reflective space, understanding this as a core part of professional practice. *(Theme 11: The emotional demands of working with demand-avoidant behaviours and the support needed to sustain it).*

Appendix W: Bioecological Model - Participant Quotation Mapping

The following appendix maps participant quotations onto each layer of the adapted bioecological model. Quotations were drawn from across the full transcripts, including material not included in the analysis chapter.

Child (Individual) - Biopsychological

Anxiety and need for control "an internal fear of losing control" (Clara); "a way of trying to control the environment… to manage their anxiety levels" (Evelyn); "that anxiety that they're feeling and the desire to control what's going on around them because of the anxiety completely, completely trumps any authority or rules or whatever" (Evelyn); "anxiety is kind of there bubbling away most of the time" (Frances); "demand avoidance is often due to anxiety and the child doesn't really want to feel anxious, because anxiety makes us feel unsafe" (Clara); "it comes from a place of real high anxiety and they just are unable to" (Lauren); "she was really anxious about coming back to school and where is she going to put her lunchbox, you know, all of these little things that can build up to make such a big thing" (Lauren); "I think it's a natural human drive to want to have control over our lives" (Evelyn); "that control over a world that can feel terrifying for them" (Evelyn); "they need to feel like they're in control of it… they feel like they're choosing it and so they're feeling like they're in control" (Lauren); "when they're feeling control and that anxiety is reduced, they feel obviously happier, they feel included, they feel heard, listened to, supported" (Lauren); "it's an urge they can't hold… they feel compelled" (Evelyn); "it was almost like her body was telling her she can't, even though she wanted to" (Lauren); "like a mental block… physically can't do it" (Lando); "it's not just external demands, it can be internal demands as well. So really wanting to do something but not being able to because of that profile" (Clara); "all children want to kind of do what they should be able to do or they want to do well, it's just that sometimes they can't and aren't able to do that" (Lauren) "in their head, to them, to their experience it's fully proportionate" (Evelyn) “demand avoidant behaviours I’d say are like behaviours that… that children do to avoid demands, so like requests, sometimes not even requests, just everyday things, which they feel are too much for them… that are like, more than they can cope with. So like… it’s their way of trying to control the environment and control what they engage with to manage their anxiety levels sort of thing.” (Evelyn)’ “and now almost their body is telling us, well, I can't do it.” (Lauren)

Neurodivergence "a PDA profile can present as part of autism" (Clara); "seen it most from our children with autism" (Evelyn); "trying to deal with social situations, trying to pick up on social cues in the playground and stuff, like not being able to figure people out" (Evelyn reflecting on social communication needs). “It’s that co-morbidity as well isn’t it, as you see it alongside a lot of other like… SEN needs.” (Lando) “I know we’ve got a particular child who has got a diagnosis of autism and PDA, and ADHD” (Clara) “part of or attached to autism (Frances) “We’ve got another student who’s just been diagnosed over the summer with ADHD, autism, PDA.”

Regulatory capacity "it can be so different day to day as to what demands they can

cope with" (Frances); "feeling able to" (Lauren); "it can change from one hour to the next, one day to the next… it depends what's happened too" (Evelyn); "what worked one day didn't work the next day. It might work the next week, but you just had to try different things all of the time" (Clara); "one day they might be able to sit and do the morning maths and that's absolutely fine. The next morning, even if we know absolutely they are able to do it, if they're not feeling able to, then that can be difficult for them" (Lauren); "it's just kind of changing the expectations day by day depending on where they're at" (Lauren); "trying to navigate a stressful home environment… and we put them in a classroom and say do this, they're going to spiral" (Lando); "sometimes they come in already on edge because of all the demands of the morning" (Evelyn); "their stress bucket is a lot smaller than maybe someone who isn't neurodiverse" (Evelyn); "would bring in any kind of past history altercations that they'd had with students that were in the room and those would sort of be still hanging over them" (Frances); “they physically could not bring themselves to do it. Once they’re in that state, that one small thing you're asking of them… You're not getting anything else out of them, whether that be for a good hour or whether that'll be for the rest of the day” (Lando)

Sensory preferences "sensory stuff… lights, noise, smells" (Evelyn); "going into the hall is very overwhelming" (Lauren); "the classroom environment like the noise and sensory overload can be a demand in itself and can be the difference between whether they can cope with a demand or not" (Evelyn); "really hypersensitive to any noises that were in the classroom or outside the classroom" (Frances); "PE kits are very synthetic" (Frances); "they used to get anxious about all of the children coming in at the same time" (Clara); "going into assembly can be difficult" (Lauren)

Physiological needs "making sure they're fed and watered… they're warm" (Lando); "a child who has not had breakfast, and if that's the case it doesn't matter what you do that day" (Clara)

Trauma and adversity "if a child has experienced things where they didn't feel safe… experienced ACEs, then being told what to do can feel threatening very quickly" (Evelyn); "student B from a home life perspective, I know there is separation between the parents… this student is struggling more with everything both at home and in school" (Frances); "a lot of these kids have childhood trauma… there's the whole control thing… there are so many ways that it could be understood" (Lando)

Emotional awareness "they don't talk about anxiety. They don't talk about it. But when you do something like a survey… that's when it really floods out… I don't know if they'd recognise it as anxiety" (Frances); "they can't always tell you why, because I think a lot of the time, they don't know themselves sometimes" (Lando); "a lot of the children either don't know why they're responding in a certain way or don't know why they find things so difficult or they can't do that" (Lauren); "children maybe can't always verbalise that. But when asked questions that they have to rate, it can be a bit easier for them to share" (Lauren)

Cognition and learning "educational support needs and learning needs" (Lando); demand-avoidant behaviours in response to "learning and teaching demands," "asking children to do a particular activity or join in with a class discussion" (Clara)

Microsystem - Relational

Adult interpretation of behaviour "sometimes people just see them as a stroppy child… as a kid that needs to learn the meaning of no" (Lando); "that doesn't mean that it's on purpose" (Frances); "it can present as that, that they're just not doing what they should be doing… but actually it comes from a place of real high anxiety and they just are unable to" (Lauren); "there's still, if I'm honest, like a bit of a preconception that these children are just being rude or being stubborn and they can do it, and they're just choosing not to" (Lauren); “staff were coming to me because I was in a student support role saying that he was refusing to do work by certain deadlines, that he wouldn't submit work in a certain format, that he was quite argumentative in class” (Frances); “I think people think, okay what this child needs is more discipline, there’s not enough boundaries at home, you know, they get away with murder” (Evelyn); “not following rules, being rude or whatever”; “it’s a reasonable, like, function isn’t it. We all want to feel safe.” (Evelyn); “he was quite assertive, that he had strong viewpoints” (Frances); “when she's not doing something… that doesn't mean that it’s on purpose,” (Frances).

Relational approach "if the relationship's not there, none of the strategies matter" (Lauren); "everything comes back to the relationship" (Evelyn); "to start, it was just making them feel that school was a safe place" (Clara); "what you really need is that unconditional care and positivity towards them" (Evelyn); "I'm on the same team as the child and I want them to feel that" (Evelyn); "when you've built up that trust with them, and you show that you keep to your side of the deal… then I think it helps them to keep their side of the bargain too" (Evelyn); "I worked so hard with this young person to make them feel safe as much as I can in any situation" (Frances); "them feeling safe knowing they've got a key person that's their person" (Clara); "if a child doesn't feel like they're understood by that staff member, it's a lot more difficult for them… we often see the behaviours potentially worsen or become harder to manage if they don't feel that" (Lauren); "they feel safe enough to share how they're feeling and they'll be honest with that as well and they know they can trust us with that" (Lauren); "[key adult] made a huge difference for him… a security blanket… life changing" (Clara); "not once did the child go and find her but it was enough to reduce anxiety, knowing where she was" (Clara); "when we asked the child who were their safe people in school, she suggested one of them was myself" (Lauren); "the TA who provides one-to-one support was moving away from the child this academic year and so we wanted to introduce a new member of staff, so they kind of shadowed them to see their relationship with them, how they interacted" (Lauren)

Communication approach "I'm wondering how long it'll take" (Clara); "frilly, indirect language" (Evelyn); "the minute you're too firm… you've lost" (Lando); "I'm not sure how to do this" (Evelyn); "they respond so well to when you're the one that needs help… letting them take that teacher role" (Evelyn); "I tend to get quite close, on the same level, one-to-one, quiet and calm" (Frances); "I wonder if Sonic can say these phonemes" rather than "can you say these phonemes" (Clara); "not just the language but how it's being said" (Lauren); "everything is constantly negotiated" (Frances); "let's do this together… we're partners" (Evelyn); "how would you suggest we go about it?" (Evelyn); "negotiating where we do the learning, when, how long for" (Evelyn); "sharing responsibility so 'us, we, let's, together'" (Clara); "which book would you like to read today" rather than "go and get your reading book" (Clara); "we

tried to involve the child in as much of that process as we can" (Lauren); "my choice, your choice" (Lauren)

Adult self-regulation "so hypervigilant… they pick up on slight changes… if you're feeling a bit off" (Evelyn); "you can feel it building in yourself… you've got to just take that breath" (Evelyn); "sometimes I just say to them oh I'm having a bad day because of x y z, so they don't think it's anything they've done" (Evelyn); "them not feeling like we're getting stressed by their behaviours… our tone of voice is calm" (Lauren); "keeping calm, even coming down to their level when they're talking" (Lauren); “I tend to, kind of, get quite, you know, close, on the same level, one-to-one, quiet and calm” (Frances); “ being too stern can add insult to injury. The minute you’re too firm.. It’s like… It's like to say the first time you raise your voice in an argument, you've lost.” (Lando)

Demand calibration "if there's five questions… let's just see if we can do these two" (Lauren); "you've just got to ride that wave with them" (Evelyn); "more often than not in the afternoon they need some time where demands are stripped back" (Evelyn); "getting them calm is success… some days, doing the date or title is a win" (Evelyn); "I look at their body language, yeah, their tone of voice, how they're moving" (Evelyn); "as soon as it's really blunt and their voice starts to increase in volume and get more aggressive… there is absolutely no point" (Frances); "we didn't put any demands on them at that time… that took quite a long time actually. But just enabling school to feel a safe environment for them. And then we slowly started introducing learning" (Clara); "in our head we're probably thinking we'll only expect them to do two anyway, but to them it feels like, oh brilliant, this feels more manageable" (Lauren); "they've put themselves down at the red face. So actually I can see they're probably not going to feel like doing much this morning. So I'll go easy" (Lauren); "it's just kind of changing the expectations day by day depending on where they're at" (Lauren)

Personalised learning "really, really big interest in Sonic" (Clara); "Minecraft language… missions" (Evelyn); "golden snitches" (Evelyn); "I'd rather them be practising their writing skills writing something about an interest… than them refusing to do any writing at all" (Evelyn); "a lot of the work for him is done around nursery rhymes which is his interest at the moment" (Clara); "whether it's like with Lego, whether it's drawing" (Lauren); "beanbags into hoops for times-tables" (Evelyn); "I still need to get the evidence… we do it in a different way" (Lando); "turning the task into a game rather than a demand" (Evelyn); "scaffolding it with support so they're able to do that or feel that they're able to do that" (Lauren)

Environmental adaptation "bean bags… very plain walls" (Frances); "a tent for a pupil who couldn't cope" (Lauren); "breakout rooms" (Lando); "a lot of his learning happens in different spaces… a lot of outdoors" (Clara); "we've just had a sensory report so we've tried to put in all OT recommendations in place for him" (Clara); "we set up like a room for him, he had a tent in there, you know, lots of things that would really help meet his needs" (Lauren); "a jungle area off the classroom that she could stay in there for a little bit" (Lauren); "if they're not ready… they can do it at a later time" (Clara); "taking away some of the pressure… this needs to be done right now" (Evelyn); "giving him some freedom as to what order, when he does them so he feels he's got that control" (Evelyn); "we met the cookery teacher beforehand, we explained what recipe we had" (Frances); "they would come to school early as well

because they used to get anxious about all of the children coming in at the same time" (Clara); "we put a timetable of where the ELSA would be throughout the week so that the child knew where to go to find her" (Clara); "for some children going into the hall is very overwhelming at lunchtime. So for some children we give them the choice of whether they go to the hall or not" (Lauren)

Emotional labour "your own anxiety goes up" (Frances); "aged 10 years in one week" (Evelyn); "I should've, or shouldn't've done that" (Lando); "takes its toll" (Clara); "you can spend ages preparing resources or planning an activity, and they're not interested" (Evelyn); "I felt really bad, like I've worked so hard with this young person to make them feel safe as much as I can in any situation and then I've just gone and…" (Frances); "one child who is demand-avoidant, their TA has left recently because she said she couldn't do it anymore" (Clara); "she feels quite isolated… a lot of the time because she's on her own with them" (Clara); "we do and can take it personally and feel that we've let them down" (Lauren); "it can feel like you are fighting a losing battle almost type thing" (Lauren); "I hadn't anticipated how that would be for the adult… she found that very difficult for herself" (Lauren)

Mesosystem - Connective

Staff consistency "shared language and shared understanding… inconsistency can just throw everything back and increase their anxiety" (Lauren); "a learning curve as a school" (Lauren); "we all sat down and said, right okay, what are the non-negotiables, and how do we agree we are going to respond" (Evelyn); "it doesn't matter what you've put in place, they don't know that young person" (Frances); "we've got scripts which had bits of card that we can wear around our lanyards so that we are all saying exactly the same things" (Clara); "it's been brought up in our senior leadership team meetings that we want to prioritise getting this consistency in how we work with demand avoidance" (Lauren)

Competing frameworks "I don't 100% know the difference between pathological demand avoidance and demand avoidance" (Clara); "old school staff… still want that compliance" (Evelyn); "we have had conversations recently with a member of staff… I kind of feel like it's all connected… do we support her as a child presenting with PDA or do we support her with being highly anxious and autistic? Whereas it can be all intertwined anyway" (Lauren); "sometimes people just see them as a stroppy child" (Lando); "we do our best until we know better, and then we do better" (Clara)

Home-school communication "what happened… even five minutes ago" (Lauren); "what kind of morning or weekend they've had" (Evelyn); "the parents are so knowledgeable about their children and just hearing from them sometimes oh like you may want to try this, or that" (Evelyn); "mum will bring in student A, we'll talk through how the evening's been, what's worked, what hasn't" (Frances); "day-to-day meet and greets with these key students as well" (Frances); "it makes such a huge difference when school and home are working in collaboration and you're consistent as well because I think that helps children feel safe and less anxious" (Clara); "their parents aren't on board yet… it is quite sad when we've not quite got those parents on board" (Clara); "a lot of parents have said she almost feels safe talking to me. There's never any judgment. We believe what they say" (Lauren); "we meet with parents every other week. Formally every other week with myself and a class teacher, sometimes a head teacher as well" (Lauren)

Cross-context stress "struggling more with everything… both at home and in school" (Frances); "it's the pressure building on the parents and that rubs off on them" (Lando); "sometimes they come in already on edge because of all the demands of the morning" (Evelyn); "they masked it completely and then they've gone home and just completely let it all out… the parent will ring and say when we have had no awareness of that at all" (Frances); "for some children it can be kind of maybe more like global anxiety where parents have kind of said to us that they see a lot of it at home as well" (Lauren)

Multi-agency support "we have asked the EP for their involvement to support us with that because it's tricky" (Clara); "The Educational Psychologist was involved and so were the SEND Inclusion Support Team" (Clara); "how different their child is now with the input of GP paediatric input and medication" (Frances); "we've just had a sensory report so we've tried to put in all OT recommendations in place for him" (Clara); "the communication and interaction team actually shared that with us… she actually analyses that herself and she has more experience doing that and then provides a bit of a profile for us from that, which has been really helpful" (Lauren)

Exosystem - Institutional

Policies and shared approaches "our behaviour policy became our behaviour and relationship policy" (Clara); "followed to the T" (Evelyn); "connect before correct" (Clara); "behaviour incidents reducing" (Lauren); "the behaviour policy which was based on consequences and rewards type of thing is literally followed to the T… and then you've lost them before you've even got to the actual learning" (Evelyn); "scrapping punitive consequences completely… the consequence is that the children will have a conversation together to help them understand the impact" (Clara); "we moved away a few years ago from the visual thing of moving children's names down, traffic lights, things like that… it's quite shameful" (Lauren); "on the regulation plan we put a lot of detail" (Lauren); "regulation plan… specific phrases" (Lauren); "we have shared notes on the system, so any sort of key strategies are logged and visible to everyone working with that child" (Evelyn); "we've got scripts which had bits of card that we can wear around our lanyards so that we are all saying exactly the same things… we've got the WIN language which is whole school" (Clara)

Leadership endorsement "a lot of conversations" helping challenge entrenched attitudes (Evelyn); approaches discussed within senior leadership meetings (Lauren); "it's taken time, and a lot of conversations to get everyone on board, and SLT getting involved in those conversations" (Evelyn); "if staff hear a raised voice, staff will come straight away… the head teacher comes straight away as well, just to check everybody's okay" (Frances); "when I first started, the headteacher had only been there a year before me and they work, our ethos and values very much align" (Clara); "the previous head would shout at the children and very much led by fear. Things are very different now" (Clara); "it has been brought up in our senior leadership team meetings that I attend as well, kind of as a whole school approach that we want to prioritise" (Lauren); "I know, you know, if I'd suggested something really needs to change for a child, I'd have the full support of staff" (Lauren)

Training and development "properly heard the term" during training "about 2 or 3 years ago" (Evelyn); "feeds through to what we do now" (Lauren); new staff shadowing experienced colleagues (Lauren); "it sort of gave me validation that this is

why I do things the way I do things" (Evelyn); "we had some whole school training based on Paul Dix… so fogging… connecting and diffusing, offering choice" (Clara); "we had some PDA training as a whole staff… through the communication and interaction team" (Clara); "I've been to speak to the midday supervisors… since they've adopted that language, they're getting the desired outcome instead of the demand avoidance" (Clara); "last year we had understanding autism training" (Lauren); "we are very safe like that, we're safe enough to have a go and people watch and learn from each other and make mistakes and that's really important" (Lauren)

Professional culture "too soft" (Lauren); "I know that's not how everybody does it and it might make me look really unprofessional" (Lando); "what people are going to think if it looks like I'm just letting them get away with doing nothing" (Evelyn); "feeling like you had to justify why you were doing what you were doing" (Evelyn); "even sometimes the odd member of staff will say, oh they really needed a grilling and it will make my skin crawl" (Clara); "it still really is a work in progress even after all of this time" (Clara); "you want to feel like you are in control of your classroom… you don't want to feel undermined" (Evelyn)

Support from colleagues "having time to discuss it when it gets too much" (Lando); "we're all in it together" (Lauren); "wins as well as struggles" (Lauren); "my SENCo is coming to me saying I understand what you're dealing with, how can we work together… offering me a biscuit" (Evelyn); "knowing you're not going to be criticised for letting them 'do what they want'" (Evelyn); "having the family SENCo network is really helpful to talk about things and get different people's perspectives" (Clara); "we do try and support each other as a team and remind each other that we are doing a great job" (Clara); "there's a sense that we're all in it together" (Lauren); "staff feel… I do believe staff generally feel supported in their role and that empowers them to keep going when things feel hard" (Lauren); "it's not something, completely wrongly, that I'd even considered, that actually, how's the adult feeling?" (Lauren)

<u>Macrosystem - Ideological</u>

Achievement and compliance pressures "in my role… my job here is to make sure that they achieve their potential" (Frances)' "And as an educator, you know, I'm a trained teacher, it is kind of in me to say, well, we are here to be educated and this might be your best time to be educated for free."' (Frances); "sit in class and do the work… they're here to learn" (Evelyn); "this is what we do at school" (Lauren); "mum was really anxious because he is getting left behind with his learning" (Clara); "will they ever be able to engage in learning in the same way as their peers" (Clara); "obviously we have all these things in place that we want every child to achieve… but how they get there may be slightly different" (Lauren). "refused to complete work by certain deadlines" (Frances)

Accountability frameworks "OFSTED… really saw and validated the methods we were using" (Clara)

Socialisation narratives "it's the nature of life that you can't just put your own needs first all the time" (Evelyn); "that's not life… we're being told this needs to be done" (Lando); "this might be your best time to be educated for free… you might gain something" (Frances); "they told me today that I will only see them for the next two

years because they're going to leave early and go to college because they know that they don't have to stay in school forever" (Frances)

Safeguarding "you want to keep everybody safe" (Frances); "we need to be safe here, it's got to be done in this way because of safety" (Frances)

Contested diagnosis "not a lot is known" (Lando); "I don't even know if it is diagnosed now?" (Lauren); "they had a hellish time last year because they had no diagnosis of anything" (Frances); "I don't 100% know the difference between pathological demand avoidance and demand avoidance" (Clara); "I believe it is starting to be recognised as its own entity" (Clara); "I think in terms of a country though we are quite far ahead than other countries in our recognition of it potentially" (Lauren)

Informal knowledge sources "you see PDA used online and in the books and stuff" (Evelyn); "we look at a lot of things online" (Lauren); "I saw on TikTok… I know probably not the best of places to get stuff and I know there's disinformation around SEN but actually there's quite a lot on there about PDA" (Evelyn); "after this parent kind of said that, I looked into it more generally" (Lauren)

Behaviourist paradigms "more discipline… let's put in this sanction" (Evelyn); "those traditional sanctions" (Frances); "shout outs don't always work for them" (Lando); "the child has to sit on their own and reflect on what they did" following consequences-based policy "followed to the T" (Evelyn); "very much led by fear. Things are very different now" (Clara); "we moved away a few years ago from the visual thing of moving children's names down, traffic lights, things like that… it's quite shameful" (Lauren)

Terminology "'pathological'… has the potential to make people scared or wary of the child, or see them as naughty, it's their fault, there's something intrinsically wrong with them, which I think impacts on the way that they might get treated in school" (Evelyn); "'persistent drive for autonomy'… just helps you to look at the kiddies with a bit more empathy and understanding" (Evelyn)

<u>Chronosystem - transformative</u>

Evolving practitioner understanding "ODD was how it was described at the time" (Evelyn); "you never heard anyone say… they've got PDA" (Lando); "when I first started, I probably just saw it as children being difficult or oppositional… but over time, with experience and learning more about PDA, you know, it's not about defiance or being a naughty child at all" (Evelyn); "it's deeper than what staff are seeing, it's deeper than just refusing, there's something else kind of going on" (Frances); "we've come on a big learning curve as a school to not kind of see that as just doing the wrong thing or being defiant type thing and then sanctioning them for that" (Lauren); "didn't really have a name for it… it was more just oh, that's tricky" (Evelyn); "it sort of gave me validation that this is why I do things the way I do things" (Evelyn); "it must be maybe six, seven years ago, we had a child come to this school and the parent had said they've got PDA and I was like what?... and then over the years it's become more of a term that we use" (Lauren); "not a lot is known" (Lando)

Policy shift "our behaviour policy became our behaviour and relationship policy"

(Clara); "behaviour incidents reducing" (Lauren); "the previous head would shout at the children and very much led by fear. Things are very different now" (Clara); "we moved away from the visual thing of moving children's names down, traffic lights… we've got quite a holistic approach in terms of we'll always remind the children about the expectations first" (Lauren)

Behavioural change over time "fully back in the classroom" (Clara); "student A has had such a different year eight to their year seven… really positive start" (Frances); "from where we have come from to where we are now, they've made massive progress" (Clara); "he is really settled now… I'd like to think that what I did a few years ago had a positive impact on him overall" (Clara); "we've had children who display those sorts of demand avoidant behaviours that have been on a reduced timetable… they've then come back into school full time and we've had two cases of that that have been really successful" (Lauren); "towards the end of the year, I didn't see them at lunch time at all in a really positive way" (Lauren)

Appendix X: Reflective tool for supporting demand-avoidant behaviours

Reflective Tool: Supporting CYP Displaying Demand-Avoidant Behaviours in Schools

The purpose of the tool is to support schools in reflecting on how they understand and respond to CYP who display demand-avoidant behaviours across individual, relational, environmental, and organisational levels.

Individual - Shared Understanding of Demand-Avoidant Behaviours

The research suggests that how practitioners understood demand-avoidant behaviours shapes their responses, with anxiety-based understandings orienting practitioners towards relational approaches. Participants associated these approaches with positive outcomes including reduced episodes of dysregulation and increased engagement. Where negative, deficit interpretations persisted, punitive approaches were more likely, and inconsistency across staff communities was described as destabilising for CYP.

(Links to: Theme 1: Making Sense of Demand-Avoidant Behaviours; Subtheme 10.1: Persistent Deficit Interpretations)

Reflection Prompts	✓	Notes/Evidence
Do staff across the school share an understanding of demand-avoidant behaviours as anxiety-driven responses to perceived threat and loss of control?		
Are demand-avoidant behaviours seen as involuntary responses, not deliberate defiance or manipulation, with staff remaining curious about what might be happening for the CYP in the moment?		
When staff discuss CYP displaying demand-avoidant behaviours, is language deficit-focused (e.g., "stroppy"; “choice”; "refusing"; "won't") or understanding-focused (e.g., "overwhelmed"; "can't"; "struggling with")?		
Do staff recognise that CYP may experience external demands (tasks, requests) *and* internal demands (even preferred activities once suggested by adults)?		
Is there recognition that capacity to engage fluctuates day-to-day and moment-to-moment based on emotional regulation?		

Strengths:

Areas for Development:

Net Steps (Who?, When?)

<u>Relational - Enabling Relational Practice</u>

Participants consistently described relationships as foundational to all other approaches, with one participant stating "if the relationship's not there, none of the strategies matter." Where relationships were prioritised and grounded in trust, collaboration, and power-sharing, participants described CYP as better able to engage with demands.

(Links to: Theme 3: The Relational Foundation; Theme 5: Interactional Processes; Theme 6: Collaboration and Sharing Agency; Subtheme 7.2: Calibrating Demands)

2a. Building and Sustaining Relationships

Reflection Prompts	✓	Notes/Evidence
Do staff have protected time to build authentic, trusting relationships with CYP before introducing academic demands?		
Is there consistency in which adults work with specific CYP, allowing knowledge of the CYP to develop?		
Do staff position themselves as being "on the same team" as the CYP, avoiding an oppositional stance?		
When relational ruptures occur, are staff supported to repair these openly with CYP?		

2b. Collaboration and Sharing Control

Reflection Prompts	✓	Notes/Evidence
Do staff work in genuine partnership with CYP, using negotiation and collaboration and avoiding directive, adult-led approaches?		
Do staff recognise that CYP displaying demand-avoidant behaviours need to experience legitimate agency and shared power in interactions?		
Are CYP given some choice over aspects of their learning (location, method, format) and is there flexibility to accommodate this whilst maintaining learning objectives?		

2c. Attuned, Demand-Sensitive Communication

Reflection Prompts	✓	Notes/Evidence
Do staff recognise that how demands are communicated (tone, timing, phrasing) affects whether CYP experience them as threatening?		
Is declarative, indirect language used (e.g., "I wonder," "I'm noticing") over direct commands?		
Do staff recognise that CYP are highly attuned to adult emotional states and that adult anxiety may increase CYP's anxiety?		
Are staff given support to manage their own emotional regulation?		

2d. Knowing the Child Well

Reflection Prompts	✓	Notes/Evidence
Do key staff have detailed knowledge of individual CYP? (triggers, tolerance levels, interests, early signs of dysregulation)?		
Do staff use this knowledge to judge when to introduce, increase, reduce, or pause demands?		
Do staff understand that demands accumulate across home and school, affecting CYP's overall capacity?		
Is information about the CYP's experiences at home actively sought and used to inform support?		

Strengths:

Areas for Development:

Net Steps (Who?, When?)

<u>Environmental - Adapting Spaces, Routines, and Learning</u>

The research suggests that everyday school environments (sensory input, classroom demands, routines, transitions) can overwhelm CYP displaying demand-avoidant behaviours.

(Links to: Subtheme 1.2: Socio-Environmental Factors; Theme 4: Emotional Foundation; Theme 7: Flexibility and Adaptability; Subtheme 7.1: Personalising Learning; Subtheme 7.3: Adapting Environment)

3a. Physical Environment and Sensory Demands

Reflection Prompts	✓	Notes/Evidence
Are sensory factors (lighting, noise, smells, textures) considered?		
Are alternative learning spaces available where sensory and social demands are reduced?		
Are spaces for regulation (sensory rooms, quiet areas) accessible?		

3b. Routines and Transitions

Reflection Prompts	✓	Notes/Evidence
Are routines and transitions flexible enough to be adapted when CYP are struggling?		
Can expectations around whole-school routines (assemblies, lunchtimes) be modified for individual CYP?		
Is partial participation recognised as valuable when full engagement is difficult?		

3c. Personalising Learning

Reflection Prompts	✓	Notes/Evidence
Is learning embedded within play-based, interest-led, and creative approaches that reduce the experience of demand?		
Can format, timing, and location of learning be flexibly adapted while maintaining learning objectives?		

Are emotional and social development prioritised alongside (or before) academic progress?		
Do staff recognise that what works one day may not work the next, requiring ongoing adaptation?		
Are alternative methods for evidencing learning accepted (photographs, verbal responses, practical demonstration)?		

Strengths:

Areas for Development:

Net Steps (Who?, When?)

<u>Organisational - Systems, Culture, and Leadership</u>

In the research, where leadership and whole-school approaches legitimised relational approaches to demand-avoidant behaviours and supported shared understanding across staff, participants described being better able to sustain them.

(Links to: Theme 8: Ideological Functions; Theme 9: Punitive vs Relational Policies; Theme 10: Professional and Organisational Dynamics; Subthemes 10.1, 10.2, 10.3; Theme 11: Emotional Demands)

4a. Behaviour Policy and Whole-School Approach

Reflection Prompts	✓	Notes/Evidence
Does the behaviour policy support relational, restorative approaches to demand-avoidant behaviours?		
Is it recognised that sanctions and rewards-based approaches may be ineffective for CYP displaying demand-avoidant behaviours?		

Do staff have permission to respond flexibly, even when this differs from standard approaches?		

4b. Leadership Support and Legitimisation

Reflection Prompts	✓	Notes/Evidence
Do senior leaders actively legitimise and model relational approaches to demand-avoidant behaviours?		
Are relational approaches recognised and communicated as skilled professional practice (i.e. they are not seen as "too soft")?		
Do leaders challenge deficit-based interpretations of behaviour in staff discussions?		
Are responses to demand-avoidant behaviours discussed in whole school meetings to promote consistency?		

4c. Shared Understanding and Consistency

Reflection Prompts	✓	Notes/Evidence
Is there shared language and understanding about demand-avoidant behaviours across all staff?		
Is there a consistent approach to demand-avoidant behaviours across all staff, including midday supervisors and supply staff?		
Are there opportunities for peer learning where staff are given opportunities for shadowing, observation, mentoring and sharing ‘what works’?		

Are plans to support CYP displaying demand-avoidant behaviours developed collaboratively with parents/carers, with consistency and open communication between home and school actively sought?		

4d. Supporting Staff Wellbeing and Emotional Sustainability

Reflection Prompts	✓	Notes/Evidence
Is it recognised that supporting CYP displaying demand-avoidant behaviours is emotionally demanding?		
Do staff have access to regular support for emotional processing and reflection?		
Is support for this CYP shared across a small team of consistent adults, not concentrated in one person?		
Do staff have peer support where they can celebrate successes as well as discuss challenges?		
Do staff feel able to seek support without fear of being perceived as unable to cope?		

4e. Professional Learning and Development

Reflection Prompts	✓	Notes/Evidence
Do staff have access to training on understanding and responding to demand-avoidant behaviours?		
Is reflective practice embedded in appraisals and professional development structures?		

Are there structured opportunities for collaborative problem-solving and developing solutions?		
Is external specialist support (EP, SEND teams) accessed where necessary?		

Strengths:

Areas for Development:

Next Steps (Who? When?)