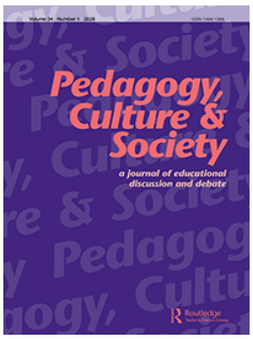

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Discursive spaces in education perpetuated by behaviour management systems

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ABSTRACT

This study explores discursive spaces in education shaped by behaviour management systems and the influence of trauma-informed practices. In schools, behaviour management operates not only as strategies for addressing pupil behaviour but as institutional mechanisms regulating conduct and compliance for both children and staff. Using a qualitative case study approach, the research examines school staff perspectives on trauma-informed practice, examining its benefits and implementation challenges. Grounded in the author's experience as a family support worker and educator, it investigates how trauma affects children's learning and advocates for relational behaviour frameworks over punitive measures. Informed by Foucauldian concepts of power and knowledge and employing Braun and Clarke's reflexive thematic analysis, the study situates behaviour management within broader systemic concepts, identifying themes of power dynamics, professional identity, and neoliberal pressures. Findings reveal the transformative potential of trauma-informed practices to foster empathy and inclusion while exposing tensions created by performative demands in education.

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Behaviour; schools; trauma-informed practice; school discourse; education; restorative practice

Introduction

In contemporary education, schools are often viewed as institutions that both impart knowledge and instil societal norms (de França Sá 2021). 'Acceptable' practices and behaviours are shaped by cultural norms and values, with significant implications for how behaviour management systems operate. 'Challenging' behaviour persists as a considerable issue for educators, with OECD TALIS 2018 data indicating that one in three teachers lose crucial time due to 'managing' behaviour (OECD 2019). This landscape illuminates the potential for trauma-informed practices to offer an alternative way of supporting behaviour in schools, where instead of punitive measures, a culture of understanding and collaboration between children and school staff is prioritised, promoting positive behaviour through trust and safety (Office for Health Disparities 2022). While advocates like Freire [1972] 2000 emphasise the importance of critical thinking and freedom of expression in education, in England rigid curriculum frameworks and stringent

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behaviour management systems stifle these ideals (Hempel-Jorgensen 2009; Humes 2022). Consequently, the accountability for behavioural nonconformity is often placed on children, diverting attention from institutional shortcomings (Foucault 1977). In a bid to examine another way of framing behaviour in schools, this paper draws on a qualitative case study of a trauma-informed primary school in Northwest England to explore perspectives from school staff, aiming to understand how differentiated practice influences behaviour management discourse, challenging traditional accepted notions of compliance and authority in schools.

Literature (Brown et al. 2021; Lanas and Brunila 2019; Weissman 2015) highlights the limitations of punitive systems and the marginalisation of vulnerable children in schools where, for example, a Foucauldian lens has been applied to examine behaviour and power in education (e.g., Brown, Englehardt, and Ku 2023). However, there remains limited research exploring how trauma-informed approaches intersect with these systemic power structures, performative pressures and institutionalised behaviour management frameworks. This research addresses that gap by drawing on Foucauldian concepts of power/knowledge, discourse and panopticism (Foucault 1977) to critically examine how behaviour is constructed and managed in schools, and how trauma-informed practices might offer a more relational alternative.

This paper seeks to answer the question – What are the perspectives of school staff in one primary school on trauma-informed practice and its influence on 'behaviour management' within that setting? The aim is to gain insight into these perspectives, identify benefits and barriers to implementation and explore how these views reflect wider discourses of power and relational practice in education. This paper begins by exploring the discursive framing of behaviour in education, followed by a methodology section outlining the interpretivist paradigm and case study design. The findings present three overarching themes developed through Braun et al'.s (2019) reflexive thematic analysis, and the discussion considers how trauma-informed practice might challenge accepted norms and promote inclusive, relational and restorative school practice.

Literature review

The literature review examines how behaviour is perceived and managed in schools; the constraints placed on teacher agency and the emergence of trauma-informed practices as a possible alternative to punitive behaviour management.

Discourse on challenging behaviour

Lopes et al. (2017) posit how the definition of acceptable and unacceptable behaviour is ambiguous, and subsequently so are behaviour management systems in schools. In 2015, Ofsted (Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills) reported that trying to define behaviour is an unsatisfactory enterprise. Lanas and Brunila (2019, 682) define it as 'a historically and socioculturally formed coming-together of various intersecting power-related discourses that make claims about individuals and contexts'. This ambiguity in defining 'good' behaviour not only complicates behaviour management in schools but also feeds into a broader discourse of blame, suggesting that challenging

behaviour stems solely from the child rather than a complex interplay of social and institutional factors.

Foucault (1977) describes the inextricable connection between knowledge and power and how this is what affirms dominance at both institutional and societal level. McInerney (2009) posits that when children display behaviour that is seen as disruptive in schools, the reason for the behaviour remains down to the child. The discourse of blame is contagious, further fuelling the notion that children 'choose' to rebel against the structures and routines of school. Furthermore, the broader context of governmentality created by educational bureaucracy (Adler and Borys 1996; Hoy and Miskel 2006; Kilinç et al. 2016) contributes to negative perceptions for both children and school staff. Teachers and schools must perform, because the repercussions of not doing so can have serious ramifications for jobs, reputation, the inspectorate.

Teacher agency and systemic constraints

Lanas and Brunila (2019) discuss the paradox of teacher agency and behaviour management in schools where there is an assumption that teachers have a fundamental understanding of how to promote positive behaviour. However, there is a lack of information on educating or empowering school staff on factors that might impact on a child's ability to abide by the routines and boundaries of a classroom, for example, experiences of adversity or trauma. It would be unfair to suggest that schools do not recognise or attempt to address marginalisation such as social class or vulnerability due to earlier adverse experiences, as such themes are considered in policy drivers, for example, in England, pupil premium funding and non-statutory initiatives such as the Opportunity for All white paper (Department for Education 2022). However, there lies a juxtaposition, where practice might stipulate empathy and understanding, but the wider framework still centres on control through meeting government regulatory measures.

Trauma-informed practice offers an alternative way to frame behaviour in schools. While accepting that there are rules and boundaries, how they are upheld are more in keeping with supporting the wellbeing of all. A key aspect of trauma-informed practice is restorative practice, where the focus is on using discussion to understand the impact of wrongdoing, for example behaviour that is seen as challenging, and to allow those responsible to acknowledge this impact and take steps to put it right (Office for Health Improvement and Disparities 2022).

Practice that is trauma-informed

Research continues to examine the effectiveness of trauma-informed practices in schools where studies indicate improvement in aspects such as student engagement, emotional regulation and overall, a more positive school culture, when implemented at whole school level and supported by leadership. For example, Kim et al. (2021) found that integrating trauma-informed training with mindfulness-based social emotional learning reduced teacher burnout and improved student–teacher relationships. Similarly, a study by Perry and Daniels (2016) demonstrated that staff training and support must be central to sustaining trauma-informed practices, which in turn positively influences student outcomes. Such findings indicate that trauma-informed

practices can yield benefits for both children and school staff when embedded within whole school frameworks

In promoting a change in schools, such as becoming trauma-informed, the dialogue must be in place in both policy and practice. Practice that is trauma-informed is not merely a set of strategies but a paradigm shift in how behaviour is framed, where recognising signs of trauma and the impact this might have on individuals is integral. This contrasts with traditional behaviour policies that often rely on sanctions and exclusion, which can exacerbate feelings of alienation and distress for children (Overstreet and Chafouleas 2016). Suppose a newly developed behaviour policy details that school staff must have restorative conversations with children following challenging behaviour in a bid to promote positive behaviour; the policy might depict 'best practice', but staff deserve a more fundamental understanding and supervision of the purpose and rationale to this change in practice if the intent is to change discourse on behaviour management long-term. This is where many schools fail with alternative behaviour support strategies that are less punitive (R. L. Jones 2022) where schools quickly adopt current, on trend initiatives, and for fear of appearing radical or to be caught in the process of transition, ready-made convenience strategies are quickly adopted and rolled out. Failing to collaborate with school staff on change and not inviting them to be an integral part of the process devalues their voice and subsequently the success of change.

Brown et al. (2021) discuss the 'double-voiced' (449) nature of becoming a teacher, where authoritative discourse, such as neoliberal agendas, can be at odds with teachers 'internally persuasive discourses' (458). School staff voice can be constricted by measures of performativity and policy (Keddie 2018), where docility of both the child and staff means conforming to disciplinary power. This indicates the perpetual influence of neoliberalism on school governance, where schools are subject to quasi-marketisation that dictates, directs and informs (Savage 2017). Perhaps, the pressure of performativity means that school staff voice or identity (S. J. Ball 2003) is less important, less measured and less valued (Skinner, Leavey, and Rothi 2021). Staff hold some ideological power at a micro-level such as the transmission of societal values and norms (Bodfield and Culshaw 2024), but on further interrogation, such 'powers' are bestowed onto staff through policy and regulations, which means 'power' becomes encapsulated by their own need to conform and comply, and as a result, limits empowerment and creativity (Kilinç et al. 2016).

Teacher retention continues to be a growing issue, with stress and burnout noted as key components (Bingham and Bubb 2021). Guha, Hyler, and Darling-Hammond (2016) note that recruitment and retention is even more challenging in schools serving vulnerable populations due to higher levels of need and the unpreparedness of staff. This results in the most vulnerable schools experiencing a 'revolving door of teachers' (1), where opportunities for relation and connection are limited. Darling-Hammond and Cook-Harvey (2018) suggest that effective, research-informed practices, promote an innovative pedagogy, where the healthy growth of the school community is considered, but this practice must be informed and accepted by all stakeholders, and within policy and practice.

Alienation, otherness and inclusive education

As posed by previous research (Leo 2020; Pratto and Stewart 2011) current educational practice aligns most closely to the habitus and cultural capital (Bourdieu 1984) of the

dominant middle-class in society. Weissman (2015) posits that children who are othered or alienated due to being outside of the social and behavioural norms of the school are more likely to be subjected to 'negative labelling' which 'cuts to the core of a person's identity' (189). McInerney (2009) states that although alienation is understood as a barrier to educational success, the reasons for alienation tend to focus on the ill-fitting of the child, rather than oppressive institutional structures, a typical example of Foucauldian power/knowledge constructs (Foucault 1977). McInerney (2009) believes that student alienation can be at least, in part, due to, 'notions of subjectivity, oppression and liberation … .in terms of the dehumanizing forces operating within schools and societies at large', (24). Weissman (2015) argues that punitive behaviour management procedures fail to address the underlying needs of children and instead reinforce feelings of ill-fitting and unbelonging, where the school environment can act as a precursor to the criminal justice system. Practice that is trauma-informed aims to mitigate alienation (Weissman 2015) by fostering respectful and inclusive learning environments. By prioritising restorative practice and relational safety, children who are vulnerable are more likely to be heard rather than their behaviour immediately being seen as requiring escalation to punitive behaviour management practices.

Theoretical framework – situating Foucault

The study draws on Foucauldian concepts of power/knowledge and discourse to interrogate how behaviour is constructed, managed and resisted within schools. Foucault's work permits questioning of accepted norms, how forms of knowledge become regimes of truth, and how power circulates through everyday practices (Ali 2016; Foucault 1977).

Behaviour management systems in education are deeply embedded within discursive regimes that define what is considered acceptable and unacceptable. These regimes are a product of historical, cultural and political forces and operate through the productive power of discourse (Foucault 1977) which is reproduced in societal institutions such as schools. Within this logic, discourses on behaviour in schools determine the treatment of the 'well-behaved' child and the 'challenging and disruptive child', often with little concern for the social or environmental conditions that shape children's realities and in turn behaviour (Lanas and Brunila 2019; Weissman 2015). Brown, Englehardt, and Ku (2023) similarly draw on Foucauldian concepts of power, discipline and governmentality, alongside S. J. Ball's (2003) notion of performativity, to theorise how behaviour systems embed surveillance and accountability within everyday school practice, where frameworks operate as mechanisms of neoliberal governance. The construction of the 'ideal' student is not incidental but deeply embedded in the everyday rituals of schooling. This echoes Foucault's notion of the 'conduct of conducts' (Foucault 1990, 172), where institutional practices shape subjectivity in ways that 'norms' often go unquestioned. These norms are reinforced through forms of surveillance, which Foucault (1977) defines as panopticism, where self-policing emerges from the gaze of monitoring through policies, routines and expectations that encourage children and staff in schools to become docile and obey, creating 'docile bodies' that prioritise conformity over creativity (Po Tao 2010).

Yet, Foucault posits that where there is power, there is also resistance (Foucault 1977) and this study examines if through trauma-informed practices, rooted in empathy,

relationality and care, there might be another way to frame behaviour in schools. Perhaps such practices create space for alternative ways of knowing and being in schools, particularly for children who have had experiences of trauma and adversity in their lives (Butin 2001; Ralph 2023). By foregrounding these Foucauldian concepts, this study seeks to consider how behaviour management might be reimagined through practices that challenge accepted norms and promote the agency of children and adults in schools.

Methodology

Research study

The study draws from qualitative interpretive research with staff examining their perspectives on trauma-informed practices and its influence on behaviour management within a school which focussed on answering the following research question and aims.

Question

What are the perspectives of school staff in one primary school on trauma-informed practice and its influence on 'behaviour management' within that setting?

Aims

(1) To gain insight into school staff perspectives on trauma-informed practice and how it influences how behaviour is supported within schools.
(2) To identify benefits and barriers that school staff experience in the implementation of trauma-informed practice in schools.

To help reveal the unique perspectives of staff on trauma-informed practice and its influence on behaviour management in schools, an interpretivist paradigm was used. Guba and Lincoln (1989) note that an understanding of the subjective world of human experience is the epitome of the interpretivist paradigm. The research intent was not to reach a final assumption of how best to apply trauma-informed practices but rather to examine how staff within one school perceive it. Consequently, a case study design was employed using qualitative data collection to gather the views of staff from one primary school, located in the northwest of England.

A case study design permitted a nuanced examination of trauma-informed practices within a school context (Yin 2018). Focusing on one setting enabled the examination of both the practice itself and the social and environmental factors that shape implementation, aligning with Gillespie's (2023) view that case studies offer context-rich insights that can add to existing knowledge in the field. While a case study was deemed the most appropriate design, potential challenges around reliability and validity were considered. To avoid 'narrative fraud', Bassey (1999) recommends a series of 'ethics of caution', including reflexivity, triangulation and thick description, aspects that were adhered to throughout the study. Furthermore, a peer feedback loop was utilised to support interpretive rigour, offering an external lens through which emerging insights were tested and refined. This collaborative process served as an additional layer of triangulation and ethical caution, reinforcing the reliability and credibility of the findings.

Holmes (2020) highlights the significance of researchers acknowledging how their ontological and epistemological beliefs shape their inquiry. In exploring trauma-informed practice, the researcher considered how personal experiences, values and beliefs influenced the research process. This interest emerged from previous roles in support roles involving close engagement with families facing deprivation and marginalisation. A recurring theme was the punitive disciplinary approaches encountered by children which often mirrored the experiences of their parents, suggesting a generational cycle of ineffective behaviour management.

Cooley's (1902) concept of the 'looking glass self' indicates the importance of examining personal attitudes towards trauma-informed practice and their potential influence on research outcomes. The researcher applied reflexivity throughout data collection and analysis, enhancing critical engagement and reducing bias. As Pillow (2003) argues, reflexivity is a methodological tool rather than a guarantee of objectivity; it surfaces the binaries, assumptions and perspectives of all involved, including the researcher, contributing to the development of nuanced and context-specific findings.

Research school

The research school was in an area in the Northwest of England often referred to as 'The borough of two halves', depicting the vast contrast of extreme wealth and extreme poverty in a relatively small demographic.

School statistics show an increasing percentage of vulnerable children, with an average of 84% in each class where the instability of the Covid pandemic had a lasting detrimental impact on the school community. These statistics indicated the acute level of need and suggest that most children and families within the school had experiences of trauma or adversity in their lives.

In response to the changing needs of the school community, leaders enrolled on the Department for Education funded Therapeutic School Status programme, with the intent to upskill staff to become trauma-informed and attachment-aware in a practical, tangible way. The school also registered with the Research School Network and the Education Endowment Foundation Effective Learning Behaviours Programme with a focus on social and emotional learning and Parental Engagement. These interventions may have been the initial shift in seeking to become trauma-informed, where staff gained a foundational understanding of trauma and its effects.

Judged as 'Good' by Ofsted in 2022, before this the school had a 'Requires Improvement' rating since 2018. The higher rating reflects progress where the development of trauma-informed practice might be seen as a contributing factor where the report comments on the school's nurturing ethos describing the school as a caring and harmonious environment where children have numerous opportunities to develop their character (Ofsted 2022).

The school operates within the broader bureaucratic landscape of UK educational practice, which is shaped by neoliberal policy agendas that emphasise accountability and performativity (S. J. Ball 2003; Humes 2022). Surveillance of compliance is ever-present in schools through systems such as the inspectorate Ofsted. Within this context, the schools attempt to adopt trauma-informed practices reflects a conscious effort to resist dominant performative discourses and prioritises relational and inclusive practices.

Participants

The study required eight participants that represented each key stage in the school: early years, key stage 1, and key stage 2 (Department for Education 2011). Stratified purposive was applied (Mukherji and Albon 2023) where interested staff were divided into subgroups of where they worked in the school, resulting in a teacher and teaching assistant from early years, a teacher and teaching assistant from key stage 1, and two teachers from key stage 2, as no support staff from that subgroup volunteered to take part (Figure 1). The school also employed Emotional Literacy Support Assistants (ELSA's) who worked across the school and two ELSA's volunteered to take part. As their role is fundamentally linked to social, emotional and mental health (ELSA Support 2023), aspects which resonate closely with trauma-informed practice (SAMHSA 2014), both were invited to take part in the interviews.

Data collection

Semi-structured interviews were employed with each participant to gain their perspectives on trauma-informed practice and its influence on behaviour management. Following completion of the consent form, the interviews were conducted in an assigned room in the host school where staff selected a time that worked best for them with guidance of allowing up to one hour per interview. To accommodate a natural environment, the interviews were discussion based, and rather than notetaking they were audio recorded, aiding more accurate transcription. This encouraged a conversational environment and supported participants to feel safe and comfortable to share information (Muswazi and Nhamo 2013; Opdenakker 2006).

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was granted from the researchers host institution (Ref: PR80090013), where the universities ethical guidelines were adhered to, alongside British Educational Research Association (BERA 2024) requirements and data gathered was stored in a secure manner in line with the Data Protection Act 2018. Furthermore, the name of the school is not used in the research and is simply referred to as 'the school'.

Staff Name	Role
Sadie	Emotional Literacy Support Officer [ELSA]
Maeve	Early Years Teaching Assistant
Hayley	Key Stage 2 Teacher
Aisha	Key Stage 2 Teacher
Cara	Emotional Literacy Support Officer [ELSA]
Sam	Key Stage 1 Teacher
Layla	Early Years Teacher
Roz	Key Stage 1 Teaching Assistant

Figure 1. Participant roles within the school.

Data analysis

Data analysis was guided by the research question and aims of the study. Braun et al'.s (2019) Reflexive Thematic Analysis emphasise the role of the researcher in discovering unexpected themes through the analysis process, aspects which were integral to understanding the richness of the data, alongside the researcher's knowledge, experiences and understanding in the theme of trauma-informed practice and behaviour management in education, hence the suitability of reflexive thematic analysis.

While the initial literature review helped to convey prompts to support the semi-structured interviews, the analysis aim was to seek new 'latent themes' (Braun and Clarke 2006, 84), rather than trying to fit the data into a preconceived thematic framework. Braun et al'.s (2019) six-phase framework for conducting reflexive thematic analysis was employed, this began with first familiarisation of the data to identify initial codes. Braun et al. (2019) describe the role of reflexivity in the coding process where 'shared meaning' is derived from both the data collected and the analytic and interpretive work of the researcher, where the need to reflect on assumptions help shape and delimit their coding.

Following this a series of themes were chosen, which the earlier codes fitted within. To ensure the themes were reflective of the whole data set, the codes were added to confirm that they all fitted within at least one of the themes. The researcher then returned to the data set again to review again to ensure that no further codes applied to the developed themes, and if any further themes were found. When reviewing the emerging themes against the whole data set, whilst no new themes emerged, it was found that they could be further categorised into three overarching themes (Figure 2).

Findings

The study revealed insights into institutional dynamics, professional identity and societal contexts when investigating staff perspectives on trauma-informed practices and their influence on behaviour management in schools where school staff navigate the complexities of power while striving to implement trauma-informed approaches. It also indicates that behaviour management operates on multiple levels within the school, such as in shaping staff practices and identities through leadership expectations and accepted norms. Furthermore, the findings illustrate the impact of neoliberal bureaucracy and performativity on teacher agency and professional identity, showing how external pressures can conflict with staff aspirations to meet the needs of vulnerable children.

Theme 1 – power and behaviour management

The interviews illuminated ways in which institutional power manifests in the deliberation and implementation of how behaviour is managed, ultimately effecting both children and staff within the school environment.

Staff described senior leaders as encouraging and in support of being the best versions of themselves, particularly when referring to the headteacher –

Figure 2. Mapping codes to overarching themes.

> The head teacher … wants everybody to be the best individual they can be regardless of what that is, regardless of who you are, regardless of your character … see the core of values in that person and just set that free. (Sadie)

This perspective aligns with the need to recognise staff needs when applying trauma-informed practices to ensure its effectiveness long-term, or as Perry and Daniels (2016) state, the need for 'staff-focused service at the core of school transformation … . the conduit for applying trauma-informed logic' (179). Brady and Wilson (2021) discuss how staff wellbeing is central to effective leadership, particularly as reports of poor mental health in teachers rise, alongside a recruitment and retention crisis. However, this is at odds with existing data on teacher dissatisfaction with increasing bureaucratic demands in education such as rigid performance targets, accountability and the inspectorate. Skinner, Leavey, and Rothi (2021) discuss how, with growing bureaucracy comes the need for conformity which again limits the identity of school staff. The constant monitoring and surveillance (Foucault 1977) of all within the school community, results in a corporate teaching and learning context which removes opportunity for autonomy and creativity.

Rigid measures in education are further highlighted when reflecting on past authoritarian practices in schools -

> I think, in the past, teachers ruled solely by fear . . . you just sat down, and you just shut up . . . children weren't given the chance to be themselves. (Maeve)

Maeves reflection demonstrates the impact that trauma-informed practice has had on the school, and how the ability for children 'to be themselves' has increased as a result. Whilst there may be more opportunity for personalisation in trauma-informed practices, it is also important to assess whether alternative practice genuinely empowers children or merely replaces one form of control with another. Vericat Rocha and Ruitenberg (2019) draw caution to the dangers of overemphasising the effects of trauma and adversity leading to pathologising children and as a result limiting their individuality.

Theme 2 – autonomy, professional identity and neoliberal pressures

Staff highlighted the school's commitment to research-driven practice –

> Like we're as a staff, constantly evolving . . . looking at different research and thinking about our actual cohort of children as a school . . . Yeah, we do a lot of research and . . . we're probably in [a] school that's more influenced by our own research. . . (Hayley)

This approach suggests a degree of agency in contrast to the broader educational landscape that often imposes constraints that limit such autonomous practices in schools. Brown et al. (2021) note that many educators report feeling unsure of how to support vulnerable children, indicating a gap between ideal practices and the realities of implementation.

This importance of knowing children is further emphasised by Aisha but in the guise of how this can help staff to understand the children they are working with:

> . . . . if somebody tells you to F off you automatically think, how dare you? . . .. after everything I've done for you! But they (children) don't see it like that . . . and if that's how they were brought up . . . and once they get worked up and they're overwhelmed, yeah, their automatic reaction is to swear cause that's what they are used to. (Aisha)

Whilst empathy is crucial, Aisha's comment highlights the challenges that teachers might face in balancing compassion with managing behaviour effectively. Although it can be argued that institutional boundaries are what gatekeeps safety, routine and conformity (James and Freeze 2006), Aisha's comment links to how boundaries are perceived by those who act within them either consciously or unconsciously. She infers that a natural reaction to challenge is to feel insult and injustice, but she stresses the need to contextualise the situation, such as the needs of the child and the fact that they are just that, children.

Cara further discusses the need to support staff in having a voice and value within aspects such as policy and decision making –

> with our relationships policy, it wasn't something that's come from top down. We had an entire staff meeting . . . every single adult needs to have buy-in. (Cara)

This collaborative approach resonates with Bandura's notion of collective efficacy (Bandura 1977), which describes how educators combined confidence and belief translates to positive pupil outcomes permeating a positive school culture. Cara refers to the need for staff buy-in for there to be an impact on children, which can be construed as

similar to collective efficacy, where there is a shared belief in the value and purpose of their work.

While the interviewed staff indicated an allegiance to the school this appeared to come with rejecting neoliberal agendas –

> I 100% follow my school and their guidance and they know what they are talking about. I'll end up getting really political here! (Sam)

Sam's reference to 'getting really political' suggests a conscious awareness of the broader neoliberal landscape of English schools, such as accountability measures and the inspectorate. This aligns with S. J. Ball's (2003) notion of the 'struggle over the teacher's soul' (216), where school staff navigate conflicting discourses of care and compliance. She infers a full commitment to the practices and processes of the school, which might indicate an awareness of the distinctiveness of the school in relation to others. Foucault's subjectification and power (1977) are considered here, where Sam's allegiance might indicate a willingness to refrain from or challenge the 'oppressive dimensions and effects' (Cooper, Ezzamel, and Willmott 2008, 675) of dominance.

Sam's comment and the perceived intent of the school striving towards exploring alternative ways to support children and their families, for example in promoting positive behaviour, might be a conscious or unconscious attempt to derail 'accepted practice' and to create and apply practice that is meaningful to the current needs of the school. It may be an attempt to reject docility and conformity and to instead fight to preserve free will and independent thinking (Foucault 1977), a heterotopia amongst suppression and dominance for both children and school staff.

Theme 3 – social inequality and educational transformation

Staff discuss the disparities on behaviour expectations across different schools, for example Hayley discusses whether context impacts on how children behave such as where children are from and the school's location. She uses Ofsted reports to identify what is classed as 'good' to 'outstanding' practice and observes that many of the schools are in areas of affluence, something she refers to as 'beautiful areas':

> I read a lot of Ofsted reports … look at the context of the areas … beautiful area with beautifully behaved children … Whereas here children don't always behave beautifully but go and look at their homelife … I do think the context is a big issue. (Hayley)

This calls for a more nuanced understanding of behaviour considering factors such as the impact of trauma and adversity on the developing child such as living in deprivation. Focusing solely on behaviour without addressing vulnerabilities such as social inequalities risks perpetuating systemic injustices.

This division of good and bad behaviour appears to again become problematic for children when they leave the trauma-informed philosophy of the school. Aisha shares an experience from a secondary school transition meeting –

> I see it from when we send them off to secondary school … there was a little boy, … his family life was absolutely awful … he was one of those children that he would have his outbursts and then he would cry his eyes out … And I said, 'oh he does have a tendency sometimes, like when he's angry to flip the table', and they immediately said, 'oh, he'll be gone within the first

> month then'. . . . totally just writing him off . . . kids from our areas and kind of who talk like they talk and who bounce about. But inside he was a little boy . . . he wanted to be looked after . . . they appear very street smart and quite cocky . . . I always think that sometimes our most needy ones are the cockiest ones. (Aisha)

The comment illuminates the inconsistencies in behaviour management across two settings, and crucially the impact that this can have on children. The response from the secondary school indicated that rules and boundaries of the setting superseded anything else (Foucault 1977) exemplifying a zero-tolerance approach that fails to consider the child's background and needs. Such practices can be detrimental, as they overlook the potential for growth and change in children with experiences of trauma and adversities in their lives.

This resonates with staff members discussing the purpose of schooling, whether it is to perform or to thrive, where Sam advocates for a shift in educational priorities –

> We want to set them (children) up for success, not failure . . . we need to care and listen and to be there. It's not a matter of churning out to get results, whereas if . . . everybody looked at it in that same kind of way, i.e., the big dogs and leadership and all that carry on, then you would start to see change. (Sam)

Sam discusses the role of bureaucracy in education, where she infers that the desire to get results can supersede basic needs such as care, listening and consistency. The purpose of education can be viewed in different ways, possibly based on the agenda of those viewing it, where Sam posits that with a more collective understanding of the requirement for basic needs (Maslow 1943) then change would happen.

The need for staff support and training was again amplified in statements such as Layla's -

> Like it's just understanding trauma-informed practice . . . And if you get that support from senior leaders around training and also support from your peers, you're much more likely to adopt it. (Layla)

Layla infers an awareness of the processes involved in becoming trauma-informed, where such a shift in practice involves buy-in from those who engage in it. She indicates the facets involved in changing practice to become trauma-informed, which indicate that it is much more than a policy change or government directive.

Discussion

Towards a relational and restorative school culture

While the interviews evidenced a collective resolve from the participating school staff on the positive influence that trauma-informed practice has had on the school, there was also consideration of how such a shift in practice challenged behaviour management in its traditionally behaviourist sense (R. Jones et al. 2024), where school staff might reject such an approach as it challenges the accepted practice of punitive procedures. Maeve, for instance, reflected on how some staff might resist trauma-informed approaches because they challenge established norms of authority, noting that 'some people really don't like that, especially if they see themselves as authority'. This was a prominent aspect to capture because it helps to 'humanise' practice within schools, where it does not make

the assumption that everyone will immediately buy-in and advocate for a certain practice, where individual needs require consideration. A further point is the pressures that school staff face, and it is unethical, and indeed unfair, to assume that every staff member should have the innate skill to refrain from feeling personally affected by challenging behaviour. The school community pulsates from relationships, both positive and negative, and a natural human response to insult or injury can be to feel victimised or attacked, which can lead the brain to prepare to respond to threat (Bates 2021). In Aisha's comment, there is a clear concern for understanding the motivations which may drive a child to behave in a particular way, but this requires support and ongoing guidance from the school community, rather than it be an individual endeavour (McCluskey 2018).

Staff reflections highlighted the pivotal role of leadership in embedding trauma-informed practices across the school. Sadie's observation that the headteacher 'wants everybody to be the best individual they can be regardless of what that is' infers a leadership style grounded in relational safety and personal growth. This ethos aligns with Perry and Daniels (2016) assertion that staff support is central to sustainable trauma-informed practices. It also reflects a shift away from hierarchical, compliance-driven models of leadership towards one that values staff autonomy and wellbeing.

However, this relational approach exists within a broader educational landscape shaped by surveillance and control. Foucault's (1977) theory of panopticism, as applied to schools by Sugden (2022), highlights how behaviour is often managed through systems of monitoring, rules and performativity. Within this context, the school's leadership appears to resist dominant discourses by fostering a collaborative culture in which staff are not only supported but actively involved in shaping practice. This was evident in staff accounts of school-wide change being co-constructed rather than imposed, reflecting the importance of collective efficacy (Berkovich and Eyal 2018; Leithwood, Aitken, and Jantzi 2006; Morris et al. 2020).

The collaborative and supportive culture that staff referred to indicates an emphasis on learner agency, where staff and leaders worked together to initiate and consolidate change, such as developing a more restorative approach to promoting positive behaviour within the school.

Asserting professional agency through challenging accepted norms

Staff did not directly reference specific guidance or policies but inferred an awareness of policies by indicating their lack of investment in such guidance, and instead their belief in their school's guidance. Sam, for example, expressed strong allegiance to the school's internal guidance, stating that she '100% follow[s] [her] school and their guidance', while acknowledging the political implications of such a stance. This suggests that school staff were instrumental in setting about change at the school, where their practice is shaped and informed by the needs of those who occupy it, rather than being moulded to fit societal expectations, and performative and bureaucratic measures.

A counterargument might be the potential of institutionalisation in the context of Sam's comment, whereby offering alternative approaches, such as how behaviour is supported or managed, might lead to staff identifying with the practices and procedures of the school, and as a result reject or fail to align to practices outside of it (Cooper, Ezzamel, and Willmott 2008). S. Ball and Collet-Sabe (2022) critique the notion of school as

an equitable space, positing that they often perpetuate subjugation despite attempts at reform. Sam's comment might offer a glimmer of resistance (Butin 2001; Deacon and Parker 1995; Foucault 1990; Ralph 2023) to such systemic agendas beyond her school where educational ideologies are questioned. This indication of resistance aligns with Brown, Englehardt, and Ku (2023), who similarly draw on Foucault (1977) and S. J. Ball (2003) to challenge accepted behaviour management systems in favour of more relational, inclusive approaches. However, this raises the question of whether creating an 'alternative sanctuary' within one school promotes equity on a micro level without harming those involved and their potential to exist on a macro level.

Layla emphasises the significance of senior leadership and peer support in establishing trauma-informed practice where through relevant training and research, these practices are normalised at the school. These feelings of security and support in practice are likely to enhance staff wellbeing. Venet (2019) examines staff burnout and saviour mentality in the teaching profession, where, possibly due to a lack of consistently applied trauma-informed practice within a setting, staff members may feel overwhelming accountability, which can be at detriment to their own emotional and professional needs. Foucault's concept of 'care of the self' resonates here, where it is imperative that, according to Foucault, one must care for oneself to be ably equipped to care for others (1977).

The intersection of equity, educational bureaucracy and systemic barriers

Much of the interview responses alluded to a culture of person or child-centred respect, aligning to the working definition of trauma-informed practice, which advocates for shared power and strong voices for both staff and service users (Office for Health Disparities 2022). Sadie exemplified this ethos in her reflection on leadership, describing how the headteacher supports staff regardless of personality or disposition, helping them to 'see the core of values in that person and just set that free'. This contrasts with the neoliberal focus of performativity in schools (Hempel-Jorgensen 2009; Lanas and Brunila 2019) where children are moulded to meet accountability measures rather than prioritising holistic wellbeing. Such tensions threaten teacher autonomy and agency, as described by Ball and Collet-Sabe (2002) who refers to 'the struggle over the teacher's soul', (216). Sadie's emphasis on individual growth may indicate that her professional identity intertwines with personal values and therefore potentially mitigating the struggle Ball refers to.

Reflexivity and research-informed practice

Research-informed practice may appear an obvious approach within education, however practical challenges hinder its implementation. Ostinelli (2016) identifies research as key to knowledge mobilisation, but barriers arise that infiltrate the dissemination of research into educational practice, such as government, funding councils and local authorities. A need for more informed educational research has been at the centre of political debate for many years (Flynn 2019), with current practices often picked to align with the vision of those in power. Ostinelli (2016) notes how policy changes often derive from research findings which are first applied to a small number of pilot schools, then, if successful, rolled out to the masses. Nelson and Campbell (2017) note that educators have

challenged the potential biased dissemination of research through such as through the teacher led Research Ed movement and the Chartered College of teaching.

Interviewed staff indicated that even within the confines of educational bureaucracy (Punch 1972), a culture of mutual empathy and respect has emerged within the school, demonstrating the collective efforts to yield success. Factors that may have contributed are the school's adoption of trauma-informed practices, diverging from traditional guidelines and regulations. Sam's comment that she '100% follow[s] [her] school and their guidance' reflects a strong sense of trust in the school's internal philosophy, suggesting that staff practice is shaped more by the lived realities of the school community than by external regulations or performative expectations. However, it is necessary to recognise the positionality of the school, being originally subjected to and 'stuck' (Munoz Chereau, Hutchinson, and Ehren 2022; Perryman et al. 2023), with Ofsted 'Requires Improvement' ratings, and with the recruitment of a new senior management team, likely complemented transformative practice. It is queried if, given the school's unique status, within an area of high deprivation, being originally subjected to a 'Requires Improvement' Ofsted rating, meant that it was in a suitable position to focus on aspects such as kindness, helpfulness and basic human kindness (Maslow 1943). This raises questions about the current educational landscape and whether empathy and understanding are constrained within bureaucratic frameworks.

Hayley's comment on 'beautiful behaviour' infers an awareness of the point in which 'alternative practice' stops and bureaucracy prevails, where 'behaving beautifully' means obedience and docility within the realms of behaviourist rules and boundaries. This indicates a juxtaposition in practice, where creativity in behaviour management can occur within the school, provided it sits within the parameters of what is deemed good practice or 'beautiful behaviour'. In Hayley's comment, the arbitrariness of accepted behaviour in schools is personified, and how this is often based on social norms reproduced by the dominant group (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977), where the cultural capital of dominant classes within society is favoured which marginalises minority and disadvantaged groups. This reinforces and perpetuates societal hierarchies and was evident in the interviews where staff members reflected this bias, with contrasting sentiments on behaviour rooted in social class. Hayley's reflection on children 'from beautiful areas behaving beautifully' illustrates how behaviour is often judged through a lens of social class, where affluence is equated with compliance and decorum. In contrast, Aisha's comment that 'sometimes our most needy ones are the cockiest ones' points to the misinterpretation of behaviour that may stem from unmet needs or trauma, rather than defiance. Children access a system embedded in the habitus and cultural capital of the bourgeoisie (Bourdieu 1984), where it appears that the intent is to 'integrate' the less dominant socioeconomic groups into the accepted habitus of the school, or become othered if they fail to comply, where their 'choice' to conform has been consciously denied.

The current education system advocates for compliance and obedience, which can be construed as the docile child (Foucault 1977), the attentive soldier who aims to please and be praised. This creates a discourse of the importance of control and subjugation, where failure to conform can result in being 'gone within the first month', (Aisha), and therefore opportunities for uniqueness are limited. Education policies, such as those outlined in the Behaviour in Schools document (Department for Education 2024), further entrench these

dynamics, where regulations and key performance indicators are prioritised beyond individual needs as these are the points in which the school will be examined and measured (Kilinç et al. 2016). When enthralled in a neoliberal, performance based, bureaucratic education system, the focus appears to lay more concern for academic grading rather than wellbeing (Hempel-Jorgensen 2009; Lanas and Brunila 2019).

Limitations and recommendations

While the research intent was met by examining the perspectives of school staff on trauma-informed practice and its influence on behaviour management in a trauma-informed school, the need to consider future research is acknowledged.

A notable limitation of the study is the sample size, and the research was conducted with a single primary school, which self-identified as trauma informed. These factors inherently restrict the generalisability of the findings (Gilbert 2016) due to the research being conducted in a primary school setting, in an area of high deprivation, and recipients of a less than good Ofsted rating may have influenced both the readiness for and receptivity to change. These recognised challenges, combined with an apparent willingness from staff and leaders, is likely to have positively cultivated the adoption of a trauma-informed philosophy. A key question that arises is whether schools from different demographics can draw meaningful insights from the findings and use them as a guide to inform change in their school.

A recommendation is to expand the research to include a cluster of schools that also identify as trauma informed. The aim would be to further interrogate and understand how different schools perceive and apply aspects of trauma-informed practice into the culture of their schools. This would present the opportunity to gain a wider understanding of the links between culture, demographics and practice, and how they are interconnected when engaging in trauma-informed practices.

It would also be beneficial to have the research sample include secondary schools, to examine further the challenges associated with transition within the existing research study. Unlike primary school settings, secondary schools often operate within rigid structures which lean towards behaviour management through punitive responses which presents significant challenge to embedding trauma-informed practices. To gain a deeper understanding of how trauma-informed practices can be effectively implemented, a comparative study of secondary schools that have been successful in this approach is required. Such a study would enable a wider identification of shared themes, strategies and adaptations that have worked well in this change in practice, whilst also highlighting the contextual nuances that shape the change in practice in secondary school provision.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this research highlights the pivotal influence of school staff in accepted discourses in education, particularly in relation to trauma-informed practices and behaviour management systems. As noted by Brown et al. (2021), the commitment to understanding trauma and its effects is vital for school staff to shift from traditional, often punitive, approaches to more compassionate and effective practices. This transition emphasises the importance of 'relationship over reproach' (Wall 2021) enabling educators

to respond to behaviour in ways that nurture relationships and promote understanding. The findings support the notion that training and effective leadership support equips staff with the required knowledge on how adversity or trauma can affect concentration, regulation and behaviour, thereby reshaping perceptions of behaviour (Kim et al. 2021). Despite the daunting nature of change (Kilinç et al. 2016), the research indicates that change need not be prescriptive; rather, it is an evolving journey shaped by supportive leadership and ongoing training and research, emphasising positive relational practices (Bowlby 1988; Reeve et al. 2012).

However, the study also reveals significant challenges, particularly regarding the sustainability of these practices during transitional phases, such as from primary to secondary education. The disconnect of approaches across different schools raises concerns about the continuity of support for vulnerable children (Vaandering 2010). To address this, schools must seek to resist dominant discourses that prioritise performativity over individual needs. While navigating the complexities of such change can be challenging, it is imperative that schools move towards models that prioritise the needs of all children, ensuring that no child, particularly those most vulnerable, is left behind. This commitment to trauma-informed practices will ultimately lead to healthier, more supportive learning environments and improved life outcomes for all students.

In concluding this study, I reflect on the interplay between my positionality as a researcher and the research process. Employing Braun and Clarke's reflexive thematic analysis (Braun et al. 2019) enabled interrogation of the interview data from school staff, fostering an evolving understanding of how effective change arises from collective engagement rather than top-down directives. This research offers insight into school staff perspectives on trauma-informed practices and their influence on behaviour management, contributing to the broader discourse on inclusive educational approaches that centre understanding, empathy, and restorative principles.

Disclosure statement

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