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‘A place you can call home’: A reflexive thematic analysis of student and staff experiences of relationships in a trauma-informed school.

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Abstract

Psychological trauma is defined as intense distress resulting from experiences that are perceived as harmful, that overwhelm coping abilities and negatively impact well-being with lasting effects. Research shows that more than one in three young people will experience a traumatic event before the age of 18. Such events can trigger toxic stress, disrupting the brain's development and impeding vital social, emotional, and cognitive skills needed for learning. As toxic stress accumulates, the risks of long-term health problems, socio-economic inequities and the likelihood of being diagnosed with a mental health condition in adulthood increase. Schools represent the first line of support to pupils, and trauma-informed practice (TIP) in schools represents a key method of supporting them.

The present study sought to understand the experiences of students and staff in a school that has embraced trauma-informed, attachment-aware practices. The study involved 10 focus groups with 39 students and 9 staff members from a school participating in a trauma-informed, attachment-aware project. Data were analysed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis, guided by a social constructionist epistemology.

The following themes were generated: ‘The power of relationships as a pre-requisite for learning’ and ‘Rules as relational ruptures’. Both staff and students within TIP found the relationships it fostered to be deeply valued. This research suggests that traditional sanction-based behaviour policies can create ruptures within relationships, and that TIP is a method of centring relationships in schools as reparative.

Introduction

An experience can be considered psychologically traumatic if it is perceived as harmful, creates intense distress, overwhelms a person’s ability to cope, and affects an individual’s well-being (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, SAMHSA, 2014). Such events may be experienced individually, generationally, or by a community (SAMHSA, 2023; UK Trauma Council, 2023). In the UK, up to half of all young people will have experienced a traumatic event before the age of 18 (Bellis et al., 2014; Lewis et al., 2019; Madigan et al., 2023). In England, it was predicted that 1.5 million CYP will need mental health support as a direct result of the Covid-19 Pandemic (O’Shea, 2020), an event that could itself be considered a traumatic stressor (Bridgland et al., 2021; Kaubisch et al., 2022).

Psychological trauma has long been associated with dysregulation of the autonomic nervous system, unregulated stress, and the individual appraisal of traumatic incidents (Evans & Fuller-Rowell, 2013; Gunnar & Quevedo, 2007; McEwen & Stellar, 1993). When prolonged exposure to unregulated stress occurs during infancy and childhood (such as can occur in experiences of loss, separation, neglect and abuse), there can be additional impacts on brain development, and subsequent sensory, emotional, cognitive, social, and physical development (Siegel, 2012; Shonkoff et al., 2012; Van der Kolk, 2005) and the manifestation of trauma can account for emotional, physical, cognitive, and behavioural symptoms, as well as diminished well-being (Wolpal et al., 2009). Traumatic experiences occurring in childhood can impact a young persons’ social, emotional, and cognitive development (Perfect et al., 2016; Siegel, 2012;

Van der Kolk et al., 2005) and has been linked with chronic health problems, mental illness, and substance misuse in adulthood (Felitti et al., 1998). Additionally, health related outcomes of prolonged stress exposure have been found to be mediated and moderated by socio-economic determinants arising from structural inequities (Kraft and Kraft, 2021), which illustrates an increased risk for individuals experiencing trauma and socioeconomic disadvantage.

Exposure to traumatic experiences in childhood and the consequences for school-related functioning has been widely researched. In a systematic review sampling 83 studies, Perfect et al (2016) found young people with cumulative and more severe exposure to traumatic events were at significant risk for difficulties in cognitive, academic, and social, emotional, and behavioural functioning. Furthermore, Perfect et al found that for those who develop traumatic stress symptoms, there was a marked decline in academic performance; they argue that despite gaps in the knowledge base, it is critical that schools recognise and respond to the needs of traumatised children.

In the UK, depending on the school context and ethos, traumatised CYP might be recognised as having 'social, emotional and mental health needs' (SEMH), be placed on the schools' special educational needs (SEN) register, and supportive adaptations put in place. However, school environments where trauma and its symptoms are overlooked, explained as within-child deficiencies and responded to with punitive and/or exclusionary measures, risk re-traumatising children and young people (Cafaro et al., 2023). In a study surveying 1,271 young people, aged 13–25, 78% reported school to be a contributor to poor mental health (Mind, 2021).

Trauma-informed Practice

Trauma-informed practice has been widely recognised within health care interventions as a systemic framework to reduce the negative impact of trauma and to support mental and physical health outcomes across whole systems (Office for Health Improvement and Disparities, 2022). The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA, 2023) provide an internationally recognised definition of Trauma-informed Practice as:

'A program, organisation, or system that is trauma-informed realises the widespread impact of trauma and understands potential paths for recovery; recognises the signs and symptoms of trauma in clients, families, staff, and others involved with the system; and responds by fully integrating knowledge about trauma into policies, procedures, and practices, and seeks to actively resist re-traumatisation.' (SAMHSA., 2023, pp1).

SAMHSA's 6 guiding principles for Trauma-informed Approaches are outlined below (Table 1):

Table 1

6 Principles of trauma-informed approaches

1. Safety	**Safety in physical settings and interpersonal interactions**
2. Trustworthiness and Transparency	Operations are conducted and decisions are made with transparency, consistency, respect, and fairness so as to build and maintain trust
3. Peer Support	Support from those with lived experiences of trauma or, in case of children with history of trauma, their family members
4. Collaboration and Mutuality	Partnering, levelling of power differences between and among staff and clients
5. Empowerment	Individuals' strengths and experiences are recognised and built upon
6. Cultural, Historical, and Gender Issues	Organisation moves beyond the cultural stereotypes and biases

Trauma-informed practice in schools

Attention to childhood trauma and the need for trauma-informed approaches in education have been widely acknowledged (Bombèr, 2007; Dingwall & Sebba., 2018a, 2018b; Geddes., 2003; Gus et al., 2015). Whether it be though attachment aware policies, relational approaches, or compassionate education frameworks, the underlying principles remain broadly the same: A whole-system understanding that our early experiences can impact our thoughts, feelings and behaviours, that all behaviour communicates an underlying need, that those needs can be met through an attuned relationship, (Bombèr, 2007; Geddes., 2003; Sabol & Pianta., 2012; Verschueren & Koomen., 2012), and that those relationships can enhance a young person's sense of competence, autonomy, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci., 2017).

Systematic reviews of school-wide trauma-informed practice have found that core elements, such as staff training, organisational changes and student screening are consistently present (Avery et al., 2021; Maynard et al., 2019) with some evidence of reduced trauma related symptoms and improved behaviour and academic outcomes. However, inclusion criteria for both systematic reviews include just two out of the three elements of trauma-sensitive interventions.

In an unpublished thesis, Blanton (2023) conducted a meta-analysis of the effectiveness of trauma-sensitive schools initiatives over 21 years. Aiming to address previous reviews that only included two out of three elements of trauma-informed practice (SAMHSA, 2023), Blanton included all three SAMHSA identified elements: professional development; organisational change, and practice change. Trauma-sensitive SBIs yielded positive effects for staff-, students-, and school climate-related outcomes. However, staff knowledge increased significantly more than staff attitudes and staff wellness, suggesting that learning about trauma does not necessarily lead to trauma-informed attitudes. Blanton argues that emotional overwhelm when learning about trauma might lead to decreased self-efficacy.

There is still a dearth of research into school-wide trauma-informed approaches. Thomas et al (2019) argues that the current evidence base is limited in size, rigor and is of a 'siloed nature' (pp. 423),

indicating that there is a lack of integration or collaboration among different research efforts. Avery et al (2021) highlight a lack of understanding regarding how trauma-informed practice interacts with organisational culture, suggesting future research should explore these dynamics, potentially by incorporating the perspectives of staff and students. Thomas et al (2019) emphasises the necessity for interdisciplinary inquiry. The current study aims to contribute to this body of literature to explore the perspectives of students and staff within a TI school.

Research Design

Participants and Recruitment

Invitations to participate were sent to nine secondary schools from three local authorities (LA) in the South of England. Schools were invited if they had been involved in LA educational psychology (EP) 'Trauma-Informed' or 'Relational Approach' training programmes, designed to comprehensively address systems change within schools.

The participating school had been part of a five-year local authority (LA) educational psychology service programme designed to support knowledge development, whole school implementation and sustainability of trauma informed practice over time. At the time of research, the school were in the second term of their second year of involvement in the programme. The programme requires representatives from across the organisation (senior leadership team, teaching team, and non-teaching staff). This team had access to 8 core modules throughout the year, module discussion groups and termly learning walks with the link educational psychologist (EP); the team are then required to disseminate the modules to the whole staff team. Evidence records are gathered and reviewed with the link EP, who then works with the team to consider continuous professional development, policy language and communication review and staff implantation review. At the end of the first year, the school had received their 'trauma-informed status', with the following four years of the programme designed to reinforce learning though an additional 5 modules, providing evidence to sustain status, with annual learning walks with the EP.

Opt-out consent forms were provided to all students' parents/carers. Information about the study was provided to all students and staff; students and staff could then express their interest to participate. 59 students and 12 staff members expressed their interest. 48 students and 12 staff members were invited to participate (based on schools' scheduling and capacity). Some participants withdrew from the study, and the final participant numbers were 39 students and 9 staff members (See Tables 2 and 3 for demographic data). Participants were provided with information sheets, and consent forms or assent forms, that were completed prior to data collection. Ethical approval was granted by the University's Ethics Committee (ERGO: 92997).

Table 2

Student demographic data

Ethnicity		**Year Group**		**Gender Identity**	
English, Welsh, Scottish, Northern Irish or British	19	Year 7	15	Female	24
White Gypsy or Irish Traveller	2	Year 8	5	Male	12
Any other White background	1	Year 9	10	Prefer not to say	3
Asian or Asian British	2	Year 10	5		
Indian	2	Year 11	4		
Black, African, Caribbean or Black British	4				
Mixed White and Black African	1				
Mixed White and Black Caribbean	1				
Arab	1				
Mixed White and Chinese	1				
Afghani	1				
Bulgarian	1				
Polish	2				
Prefer not to say	1				
				Total Students	39

Table 3

Staff demographic data

Ethnicity		**Age Group**		**Gender Identity**	
English, Welsh, Scottish, Northern Irish or British	8	25–34	3	Female	9
Pakistani	1	35–44	3		
		45–54	2		
		55–64	1		
				Total Staff	9

Focus groups were held in a quiet and confidential space in the school, with only myself and participants present. A semi-structured topic guide provided a flexible framework, allowing discussions to be led by participants while we used reflective, open-ended questions to explore meaning making. To ensure accuracy and depth, focus groups were audio-recorded using two recording devices and were later transcribed for analysis

Data Analysis

An inductive reflexive thematic analysis, following Braun and Clarke's (2022) six phase process was used. The process of analysis was iterative; I consciously shifted between semantic and latent understandings, allowing for continuous engagement with meaning-making and deepening my understanding of the data, which allowed codes and themes to evolve (Braun & Clarke., 2019; 2021).

In phase one of analysis, I immersed myself in the dataset, by transcribing, repeatedly listening to and re-reading the transcripts. This process supported an initial awareness of key patterns in the data. I systematically worked through the transcripts, identifying and labelling meaning-units. Reflexivity played a key role in this stage, as initial codes were developed through both individual reflection and supervision discussions that explored meaning making within the data. In phase three, codes were grouped according to shared meanings, leading to the initial development of themes. This stage involved examining both commonalities and distinctions across the data, to ensure a rich, nuanced interpretation. In phase four, I revisited the coded data, checking for coherence between the initial themes and the overall data set. This process ensured that the themes accurately represented my understanding of the participants' experiences and addressed the research questions.

In phase five, the narrative structures of the themes were considered and reviewed, leading to refinements in theme names. These themes were defined as The Power of Relationships as a Prerequisite for Learning and Rules as Relational Ruptures. The final stage involved synthesising the analysis into an analytical narrative that moved beyond a semantic description to offer a more interpretative exploration of participants' experiences.

Empirical Findings

Researcher

If we could design a school together, what would it look like?

James

A place you can call home.

(James, Y7)

The two themes, The Power of Relationships as a Prerequisite for Learning and Rules as Relational Ruptures, offer an understanding of how students and staff experience and make sense of relationships within a school that has based their approach on trauma-informed practice.

The Power of Relationships as a Prerequisite for Learning

Students and staff across each focus group raised the importance of relationships. They discussed how relationships were not only central to the learning process, but a prerequisite for learning. This theme is separated into three sub-themes: Connection in the Classroom: Make or Break for Learning, Being Seen to be Supported, and Feeling Heard to be Held.

Connection in the Classroom: Make or Break for Learning

The students spoke about the relationships they had with their teachers within the classroom, and how these relationships had the capacity to shape, make and break their learning experience: Learning was easier when they liked their teacher, and the relationship was seen as a prerequisite for learning. Students discussed that relationships with their teachers had the power to shape their enjoyment for the subject. '*If you like your teacher, then you'll be more likely to enjoy that lesson. If you don't like your teacher, you'll hate that lesson*' (Mae, Y9).

Even if the students enjoyed or had an aptitude for the subject, the relationship with the teacher was still seen as the most important factor in their ability to engage, as Bella (Y9) says: '*If you're good at a subject but you don't get along with the teacher, you're not going to be able to do that subject…*' The relationship with the teacher was seen as crucial for attendance; Simran (Y11) gave an example: '*…I've got a friend… She looks at her schedule every single day. And if she doesn't like the teachers in that lesson, then she doesn't come into school for that day. And it's greatly affecting her attendance and her school, education and grades*'.

The students expressed a desire for engaging learning experiences and playfulness, often discussed within a comparison between primary and secondary school, like Nyasha and Annie discuss:

Nyasha

OK, so about the teaching. I feel like in primary school, when there were slides on the board, the slides were like, very intriguing and I could see it, like I understood it more…

Annie

Yeh it just makes you wanna learn more!

Nyasha

but here it's just like blank with like words on it... (Nyasha & Annie, Y7)

Having these desires for learning met in the classroom enabled positive relationships to form. The students felt that the quality of the teaching experience and the subsequent relationships highly depended on the way the teacher was able to facilitate these desires.

Researcher

What makes a good lesson?...

Niko

…If the teacher is good, you don't really care.

Arjun

Like Mr Winslow, the best teacher.

Femi

Yeah, he carries…

Niko

He was like, he makes the lesson more fun I guess.

Max

He makes jokes. If you're supposed to be reading for like 20 minutes, he'll do like a vote, like "Do you want to continue reading for more or do you want to go back to lesson?" (Arjun, Max, Niko and Femi, Y8)

Teachers within the focus groups describe moments when they have opportunities for more engaging conversations and share their frustrations when these have to be cut short due to time constraints.

'But then you'll find that you just get a really good conversation going and then the bell goes!... And if it's that sort of thing that you just go 'noooo', just when you might have got them all really engaged in it. But that's just time isn't it!...' (Lisa, SFG1)

Amina, Tracey and Lisa speak to the restrictions that come from a focus on academic attainment, suggesting that the meaningful, engaging experiences that they recognise are valued by students are often deprioritised for content, which can feel perfunctory or tokenistic:

Amina

…You know, there's so many interesting conversations that we can have on the topics that we do, but it's just like 'let's get back in now we have to carry on with the content, your exams are in a few months.'… (Amina, SFG1)

Being seen to be supported

Across the focus groups, students and staff talked about the importance of 'being seen.' Being 'seen' for the students, encapsulated feeling liked by staff, feeling understood, of staff recognising and reducing the pressures of the education system and of teachers taking an interest in the students' life experiences

and recognising their potential impact. Importantly for students, feeling seen was born out of the staff's active empathy, noticing student needs, taking the initiative to inquire about and understand the individual lives of their students.

Like she always asks me, like if I look upset, she knows somethings wrong, because I struggle with my mental health, so she'll be like a person that whenever I walk past, she'll be like, are you OK? (Elisa, Y10)

Staff recognising students' needs and taking effective action to support them helped students to feel understood. It was not just teaching staff they recognised as important, they discussed valuing this approach from staff across the whole school, such as dinner ladies and cleaners. As a quote by Lydia exemplifies, it was important to the students that staff were able to first and foremost recognise that they were experiencing some uncomfortable emotions, then acknowledge they could understand how they might be feeling and then offering some suggestions that might help.

' *It's that she kind of gets that I get… "I understand how you're feeling. I understand that you're stressed. Do you want me to do this thing to help you? And do you want me to put this thing in place so that I can help you"… (Lydia, Y7)*

The staff's recognition of the emotional, social, and academic pressures that students were faced with, both at school and at home, enabled the students to feel seen. It was the teachers taking the relational initiative, showing positive regard and taking empathic action that led to the students feeling truly understood. For Paige, the teacher's flexibility and active empathy, during a time when she was suicidal, enabled her to feel seen and supported.

' *Umm basically it's OK now, because I'm all good now, but in year 8, I was like really, really bad mental health. I was like, nah I don't want to be here anymore. I think Miss Farrow was the one that started to catch on. And then we had to do this thing called DEAR like every lesson in English… but instead of reading, she would always just like, ask me how I am and then help me with stuff instead. Instead of like getting me to read to her.*

Researcher

What difference did that make for you?

Paige

A big difference. Like, she kind of made me feel like I wasn't really alone, which I felt I was at the time, but yeah, she helped a lot.' (Paige, Y10)

Across the focus groups, the students shared a range of experiences that they felt had an influence on their time in school. Students discussed their families' personal financial situations across several focus groups. Some students took on the worry about how their family could afford to provide school dinners or school uniform, and others spoke about the negative impact of being perceived as 'rich' by their peers.

Other students shared concerns about gang-related violence outside of school, which affected their sense of safety within school. While other focus groups shared peer-related worries about romantic relationships and friendships. Other challenging home experiences were shared, such as bereavement, loss, separation, and experiences of feeling unsafe at home. A number of the students recognised how the emotional impact of these experiences affected them in school, in both emotional and learning realms, for themselves and their peers. For other students it was academic and behavioural expectations within school that were causing pressure to build. Regardless of the cause of the students' worries, concerns, or challenges, they discussed the importance of staff recognising their personal experiences and challenges and the effect these situations had on their 'school selves':

' *They make like your mental health go like upside down because they couldn't be listening to what you were saying and that they couldn't been believing you when you said that you're really struggling, that you need help but and they could not understand that and just think, 'oh, she's just doing this to get out of lesson. That's someone that always gets a detention ... she doesn't really need it'. And then it can make your mental health really deteriorate. And it's like not good, I don't know.' (Ruby, Y9)*

The staff across both focus groups saw a holistic understanding of students as the very foundation of their relational work. As Georgia said:

Georgia

Like it's beyond even just like keeping them safe. It's just knowing who they are and like what they care about and what upsets them or what they enjoy doing in their spare time and just like having that extra layer of like interest in them and who they are as a person…

Jo

…It's actually acknowledging that they exist. (Georgia & Jo, SFG2)

The students experienced this attunement and positive regard as an active indication that the staff cared for and liked them. However, the absence of attunement and positive regard led to some students feeling that staff were disinterested and others feeling that they were disliked and that teachers were just putting up with them because they had to. As Mariam and Louise discuss:

Mariam

I think there's a difference between being accepted and being liked.

Louise

…even the teachers. It's like, you can see who they like and who they accept… She [the teacher] doesn't like me but she has to deal with me because I'm in her lesson. (Mariam & Louise, Y9)

The staff felt that care had to be shown to be known and recognised the impact an absence of these conditions had on the students. They spoke about the importance of pre-empting these feelings of being disliked and taking preventative relational action.

' …And then if you remember key things about them, they really appreciate it. And then you could start a conversation… they want to believe that you care about them and that you like them and if automatically they're thinking you hate them…' (Nikki, SFG2)

Staff also shared similar feelings to the students of wanting to feel seen and understood, especially when encountering an emotionally challenging topic, safeguarding concern, or a topic that was reminiscent of personal experiences.

' But even sometimes, if we do raise things in terms of like safeguarding issues on CPOMS, a child could have disclosed something awful. Yeah, and nobody, in my experience, turns around and says 'I've seen that, are you OK?' Yeah. Like there isn't a check in element… I don't think I've ever had one of them approach me and go, 'we've seen that. Are you OK? What can we for you to support you?' Because ultimately, once that child's told you, it's almost opened the floodgates, they know that you know. So they're going to come to you again. And quite often we don't get the 'Are you OK? Are you happy dealing with this? Are you comfortable having these conversations?' (Georgia, SFG2)

Across the staff focus groups, they attributed a dearth of attunement and support for both students and staff alike, not to a lack of wanting, but to a lack of time. Lisa states, '*ideally, we'd have a plan for everybody because everyone's going to need something to a certain extent, or a lot of them. But we're just sort of having to pick and choose because of the time pressure*'. Additionally, the staff discussed the possibility that this lack of time accounted for staff not feeling able to adopt a relational approach. Georgia goes on to say that this might be especially true for newly qualified teachers who are keen to adopt a relational approach, but become overwhelmed with workload, which becomes the priority over the relational approach.

'And I do think like the lack of time for some staff can be quite off putting, in terms of taking a more relational approach… they're so time poor, they've got so much other stuff to do, that it's almost like if I add this on top, what plates are gonna drop? (Georgia, SFG2)

The staff recognised the importance of developing strong relationships with students, to see them individually, holistically, and through a trauma-informed lens. These relationships came with a felt sense of care and were almost familial in nature. However, there was also a great sense of responsibility and intensity that often felt overwhelming, with some staff developing mantras designed to protect themselves from the emotional intensity of the role, as Lisa and Amina exemplify.

Lisa

You have to kind of build a shield a little bit don't you.

Amina

You do because you really care about those students… And when you see them going through this, in your head, you just literally say 'it's just a job, you know, it's just a job. You just have to move on. It's just a job.' (Lisa & Amina, SFG1)

Feeling heard to be held

In all of the focus groups, the students vehemently wanted to highlight their concerns about the hygiene, nutrition, and cost of the school canteen, and their desire for changes being made to the physical aspect of the school; they shared these concerns viscerally. However, the concerns appeared secondary to feeling heard; they hated the food, but more importantly, they wanted their concerns to be listened to.

There were complexities for the students around whom they were able to feel heard by. Some students shared that just the act of being offered the opportunity to share their views in the focus group was supportive of their mental health.

Researcher

What does help with mental health?

Niko

Getting someone to talk to.

Arjun

Like when you're here. (Niko & Arjun, Y8)

While for others, reminiscent of the staff's views on trust, the familiarity with the adults (or lack thereof) played a key part in whether they felt comfortable to speak to them.

Marek

They normally just tell you like…

Max

"Oh, there's people you can talk to."

Marek

Yeah, just here's a number.

Max

I'm not talking to some random teacher I've never spoken to before in my life.

Marek

Yeah, like here's a number or here's a teacher you could talk to.

Max

I'm not talking to some random stranger about my feelings.

Marek

It's never going to help, you need to talk to; actually, you need to talk to someone who helps. (Marek & Max, Y8)

Students across the focus groups discussed a desire to have adults to talk to. For the students though, this desire went beyond an adult just hearing their words. The students' desired a form of active listening, where they had their thoughts, feelings and perspectives acknowledged. Iris shared what it was like to experience this:

Yeah, and they don't come to us, and they don't shout at us or they don't disagree with what we're saying, or they don't try to change anything. They kind of just like want to listen and help us. They sometimes even like try to make it on a positive side, like they're not trying to completely change it, like it happened. They agree with us but they kind of put a positive spin on it. (Iris, Y7)

However, students across the focus groups shared that in some cases, in order to be referred to available support, they would have to share their stories, or reasons with an untrusted or unfamiliar teacher, which discouraged them from seeking help.

'Yeah, there are a few teachers in the school that you can go talk to you, but you have to like, ask pastoral and give them the reason for it… and that's someone you don't trust.' (Lucy, Y9)

A couple of students spoke about being able to receive this at home. Although, as Max said, '*sometimes you just can't talk to a family member*', suggesting a need for familiar, available adults outside of home who could listen. However, one staff member shared that they felt that sometimes, just listening, didn't feel adequate.

' *…But you can't, like, do anything in that situation apart from listen, but I guess that's all they need really. But then you feel like I should be doing more. Why am I not doing more? Because they're upset and they're clearly going through something. So, what can I do to help more?...' (Sophie, SFG2)*

This points to a broader concept discussed across the staff focus groups of feeling under-skilled when listening and supporting students. This feeling of what could be attributed as low self-efficacy, led to

protective strategies to prevent emotional overwhelm, however these strategies were recognised as not always helpful:

' …Although you can tell yourself it's just a job, there's a question mark over whether you're actually processing it and dealing with it, or whether actually you're just, right, I'm shutting off from that, I'm shutting off from that. I can't think about that too much.' (Lisa, SFG1)

Within this theme, students acknowledged that relationships with their teachers were central to the learning process, built through active empathy and engaging learning experiences that enabled them to feel seen, heard and understood, and this further developed trust. It was through this trust that students then felt able to share their challenges and concerns with those members of staff. However, analysis within this theme highlights that staff need further support to manage the emotional impact of a relational approach.

Rules as Relational Ruptures

The concept of 'unfair rules' was prominent within the student focus groups. The students shared common views on what rules were unfair and throughout the focus groups students were eager to share their '3R card:' a card detailing a list of rules and consequences of those rules being broken - uniform rules, equipment rules, lateness rules and conduct rules. These rules were felt to be illogical or unfair and mostly applied with little flexibility or uniformity. What appeared pertinent to the students was that when given these consequences, there was no room to reason or explain why they might be, for example, missing a pen or why they were late.

The manner in which the consequences were given was important to the students, and when given rules *with* reason, in an attuned way, with flexibility and respect, the students were able to understand the perspective of the staff, as Simran (Y11) said: *'…when they've… given a valid reason sometimes like you understand what they're doing, you understand that it's the rules.'* However, in the absence of these crucial relational factors, punishments appeared rigid and illogical and therefore acted as a rupture to the relationship.

But the way that they put it forward, really, really ruins the relationship because they are talking to you in a tone where it's obvious that they think they're better than you. For example… my tutor, and every time somebody talks to her, she's got this voice. She's like, it's a voice of superiority. And she thinks she's, the way that she talks. Maybe she doesn't think it, but the way that she talks, it's like everybody is beneath her. (Simran, Y11)

A number of metaphors were used to describe how it felt when rules were upheld without reason, with several students equating school to a prison, or a zoo. By using these metaphors, students positioned themselves as prisoners, as animals, evoking a sense of dehumanisation and an extreme restriction of autonomy and human rights. The counterpart of these metaphors is that staff are positioned as zookeepers, as prison officers, as key holders of power.

Luke

Power trip. Just speak to us like normal people. Speak to us like we're on the same level as you right. We're both people, just speak to me normally, and I'll comply.

Elisa

They treat us like animals. (Luke & Elisa, Y10)

The 3R cards were, for the students, causes of stress and fear, as denoted by Amirah (Y7): '*It stresses me out the 3R cards, it's just scary*'. It felt to them that the teachers' valued punishments over learning opportunities or wellbeing:

Mia

Sometimes they care more about like uniform than education, so like they shout at you for uniform and like, put you and IE and you miss out your education. That could be important.

Ruby

Or they care more about your uniform than your actual state, like your wellbeing… Than making sure that you're okay and if you need help with anything. And I'm sure a lot of people would agree with that. (Mia & Ruby, Y9)

Across all of the focus groups, students discussed receiving a 'consequence' point, and a number of students shared they had been given 'respite': they had been moved from their school to another school for a number of days: a punishment given after receiving a certain number of consequence points. The students who had experienced respite found it scary, likening it to a 'prison' (Ruby, Y9). Most prominently unsettling for them was the uncertainty of not knowing the teachers, highlighting the role of positive student-teacher relationships in fostering school belonging, the absence of which in the case of respite can leave students feeling scared.

Researcher

…what's that like being sent to another school?

Ruby

It's a bit scary.

Ellie

You don't know anyone there, like all the teachers, so you can't ask for help, because it's like you're scared to ask for help.

Ruby

…and it's just you don't know the teachers you don't know the way of learning around that school and stuff. (Ellie, Ruby, Lucy & Mia, Y9)

A few students gave examples of attempts to reconcile with the staff members giving the consequences, in an attempt to repair the relationship, redeem themselves or have the consequence point removed, but to no avail. Additionally, students who tried to reason or repair, felt that their reasons were not believed, and were from then on in, labelled by staff as 'naughty.'

' *And then I went to her the next day, I went to say sorry about walking out and I told her that I weed myself and that's the reason why I walked out, and she was like 'no you didn't' – Huh!? No I didn't!?' (Elisa, Y10)*

Experiences where students were given rules without room to reason or opportunities to repair, became sources of relational ruptures and had negative impacts on the students' behaviour, sense of self and feelings of safety.

' *It just makes me feel unsafe around her, because sometimes she'd be looking for someone, so she'd be on the playground and whenever she'd look past me I'd always think what have I done now? I haven't really done anything but like, I just feel like she. I just don't really feel safe kind of.' (Jaiden, Y7)*

Students felt that when they made polite attempts to question or challenge those in authority they were punished further, that caused them to feel 'helpless' and act in a self-protective manner. Lina and Simran equated this to an abusive relationship.

Lina

… We had an assembly about… like, abusive relationships. And how like they can harm, how a person can abuse another person. It was clearly on the board saying if you shout at someone that's abuse, but after the assembly, the teacher started shouting at everyone… You can speak loud so they can hear you, but you can't really shout and sometimes it just makes you feel like really…

Simran

Helpless, cos if you say anything…

Lina

Exactly. It makes you hate the teacher, it makes you like start hating the teacher and trying to, like, avoid the teacher or sometimes you just get mad, and you want to do it more because yeah…

Simran

Yeah you just want to act out more because they refuse to listen. (Lina & Simran, Y11)

This concept was echoed in the staff focus groups, where they acknowledged that it was not always easy holding 'high expectations' without 'breaking the trust' (*Nikki and Jo, SFG2*), and observing this happening between other members of staff and students was a cause of emotional turmoil:

But you know what, do you know what the bit that gets me?... it's the point when that same kid has come in, and maybe got plimsols on, because he didn't have time to find his shoes that morning and then another member of staff will absolutely roast him. And that's the kicker. Yeah, that's when it gets you, isn't it? Because you're like, well, just hold on a minute. Let's just explain… just take a minute… (Lisa, SFG1)

Discussion & Conclusion

The aim of the present study was to explore how students and staff within a trauma-informed school experienced and made sense of their relationships. Students and staff emphasised the importance of relationships as a crucial factor needed for learning. Importantly, the quality of these relationships had the ability to affect students' enjoyment, motivation, and attendance. Contributing to this, the extent to which teachers were able to provide playful, engaging learning experiences contributed to building the relationship. The strength of the relationships was determined by the staff's ability to notice student needs, understand students' individual context, and adapt their practice accordingly, which contributed to students feeling seen, heard, and understood. These were key factors that led to trust developing, alongside an active response from staff that validated students' perspectives and responded to their concerns with care. However, when rules were enforced with an absence of relational factors, these served as relational ruptures, eroding trust.

Relational Safety as a Foundation for Learning

The role of an 'other' in learning has long been recognised, with educators positioned as facilitators, mediators, scaffolders, and problem posers (Feuerstein et al., 1991; Freire., 1998; Ryan & Deci., 2017). Learning is a highly social process; it makes sense then that our analysis would support relationships being at the heart of learning.

Relationships with adults in schools are among the most important predictors of academic and non-academic outcomes (Hamre & Pianta., 2001). Thornberg et al (2022) found a predictive, positive association between teacher-student relationship quality and student engagement. Our analysis aligns with their findings, that teacher 'doing' (effective classroom management, learning experiences and enjoyment), and teacher 'being' (building relationships, creating a sense of safety, and being helpful), are connected to student engagement. Furthermore, Bakermans-Kronenburg et al (2003) found that teacher sensitivity and responsiveness were determinants of relationship quality. Yu et al (2018) also found that teachers noticing student needs and students' presence in and out of the classroom contributed to positive teacher-student relationships. Our analysis contributes to Yu et al's framework an additional element of 'teacher noticing', one that notices student context. These findings are reflective of Chhuon and Wallace's study (2014), who found that teachers moving beyond 'just teach' moments supported students' to feel 'known'.

Our analysis builds on Yu et al (2018) and Chhoun and Wallace's (2014) findings to extend 'teacher noticing' to include all members of staff. Students across our focus groups discussed the importance of relationships with other staff members, not just teachers. Yu et al also argue that 'relational practices that engender more positive interactions between students and teachers, impact students' perceptions of teachers' (pp.353); our analysis was reflective of such. However, our analysis extends beyond this to suggest that an absence of such relationships can lead students to feel unsupported, unvalued, and disliked, and can contribute to a feeling of distrust, suggesting that educational practices that do not include a relational aspect could contribute to a negative teacher perception.

Our analysis is reflective of concepts discussed within attachment literature, which provide frameworks for understanding the relational components needed to develop a secure attachment. Our themes are underpinned by Siegel and Bryson's (2012) concept of 'Safe, Seen and Soothed' (often expanded to include 'Secure') and in line with Golding and Huges (2012) PACE model (Playfulness, Acceptance, Curiosity, Empathy). Within the analysis, playfulness was conceptualised by the students as a salient factor in developing attachment relationships with teachers. The current study reflects previous findings within both teacher-student relationship research and attachment theory, underscoring the importance of relational safety as a foundation for learning.

When rules, sanctions or consequences were given rigidly, without room for reason or without opportunities to repair, students experienced staff as authoritarian, leading them to feel less trusting of staff and thus causing ruptures to the relationship. When experiencing this, students felt compelled to retaliate. This pattern is supported by Gregory and Ripski (2008), who found that the association between a relational approach to discipline, and cooperative or defiant behaviour was mediated by 'adolescents' perceptions of their teachers as trustworthy authority figures' (pp.337). Trust, importantly, is considered a key component of trauma-informed practice and is central to developing safe and supportive relationships that are foundational for learning. Relational ruptures are an intrinsic component of a relationship, and it is through rupture and repair that secure attachments are formed in childhood (Richards & Schreiber., 2024). Bombèr (2020) and Siegel (2003) argue that repair is necessary following a relational rupture, allowing trust and emotional connection to be restored.

Staff Well-being

Staff within our study highlighted some challenges they faced when implementing trauma-informed practice, frequently citing a lack of time. The descriptions that staff gave about feeling 'time poor' reflect a concept Creagh et al discuss (2023); they outline a need for teacher well-being research to differentiate between workload and work intensification. The staff in the present study did not talk about challenges related to an increase in the amount of hours in their working day (workload), but to 'heavier workloads' (Apple, 2004; higher accountability demands, less frontline support and a decline in resourcing) and 'heavier hours' (Beck, 2017; a feeling of being pulled in multiple directions, due to competing and contradictory demands). Higher workload and higher work intensification combine to create a subjective

experience that Wajcman (2015) highlights as ‘a more complex temporal patterning of experience’ (in Creagh et al., 2023, p664), leading to a feeling of time poverty, that affects stress and job satisfaction. For the staff, their heavier hours appeared to come from the competing and contradictory demands of employing a relational approach, whilst maintaining their own emotional boundaries, along with the complexity of balancing a behaviour policy with a relational policy, as well as heavier workloads, with higher accountability demands and a decline in resources.

Implementation of Trauma-Informed Practice

Relational approaches and trauma-informed practice are underpinned by a well-established evidence base, drawing on theories of attachment (Bowlby, 1969), and internal working models (Bowlby, 1973). Teacher-child relationships are also considered significant in child development (Pianta, 1992) and further research suggests that applying these principles of ‘high empathy and high guidance’ in teacher-student relationships has positive outcomes for both student and teacher (Gus et al., 2017). Theoretically, these principles were partially reflected in the findings of this study, particularly in staff experiences that emphasised the importance of relationship building and understanding behaviour as communication.

Both staff and students described practices that were contradictory to trauma-informed principles, suggesting that implementation has not been fully realised in practice. Students spoke about experiences of staff shouting, the use of punitive behaviour policies and the use of respite to another school, which are synonymous with disciplinary measures, and are contrary to relational approaches. The staff additionally cited the lack of consistency across different staff members as the most significant emotionally challenging experience in their practice. These accounts indicate that although relational language and intentions were present, students and staff’s experiences often reflected more traditional punitive responses. This suggests that the relational approach was adopted in principle by some staff, however, was undermined by the contradictory and inconsistent policies and practices, limiting its effectiveness at a whole school level.

Implications for Practice

The findings across this study suggest that students and staff are impacted by the tensions created through contrasting approaches. There is a strong case for the implementation of trauma-informed practices and relational policies to supersede traditional behaviour policies. However, it is recognised that adapting to these policies tends to be gradual. Therefore, careful thought and consideration need to be given to the concepts of relational rupture and repair in schools who are in the process of adapting policies or who choose to adopt trauma-informed practice alongside a traditional behaviour policy.

When considering support for staff working within a trauma-informed school, appropriate supervision needs to be offered, with educational psychologists who have the training to provide emotional

containment. Additionally, schools and practicing psychologists should consider providing peer supervision groups for staff, though their effectiveness may depend on staff having the autonomy to determine their group membership. However, our analysis suggests that the most valuable support to staff is the unstructured peer interactions with colleagues who can provide emotional support and relief. Therefore, policies and practices aimed at reducing staff workload and increasing staff wellbeing need to consider the impact that accountability demands and declines in resources have on the staff's work intensification, and therefore their ability to access invaluable ad-hoc relational support.

Limitations and Future Directions for Research

In this study, the staff participants self-identified as being 'pastorally driven'. Further exploration is needed with different groups of staff across all sectors of education. Additionally, self-selecting participants may be seen through a more realist lens as introducing bias. However, given the qualitative design with a focus on experiences, the focus on rich, in-depth insights means the analysis remains valuable to understanding the experiences of those in a trauma-informed school.

The school within this study was still in the process of adapting its policies to a whole-school approach, which may account for some of the experiences shared by both students and staff. Further research should consider exploring the experiences of those within schools at different stages of their journeys.

A large sample of student participants self-selected in this study, allowing for rich data. Many students emphasised an appreciation of being given the opportunity to share their voice. However, a limitation is that the researchers did not re-visit following analysis to member-check the themes. To emphasise empowerment, further research could consider using participatory methods.

Conclusion

Trauma informed practice is a valuable way for school staff to value relationships, to foster trust and commuincation, to remind ourselves of the humanity of the children and young people with whom we work. With behaviour systems that risk overlooking relationships, trauma informed practice offers a valuable exception, creating an educational environment where everyone can find a place to belong.

Declarations

The authors have no conflicts of interest to disclose of a personal or financial nature.

I confirm that the research presented in this article was carried out with due consideration to all relevant ethical issues and in line with BERA's Ethical Guidlines for Educational Research

Participants provided both consent to participate in this research and consent for it to be published.

Competing Interests

The research was not funded by any external grants.

Ethical approval

was granted by the [redacted] Ethics Committee (ERGO: 92997).

Author Contribution

Dr Becca Stadames conducted the research, designed the study, collected the data, analysed that data, and wrote the manuscript.Dr Cora Sargeant supervised the research and edited the manuscript for publication.

Data Availability

The data used in this study are available at: http://dx.doi.org/10.5258/SOTON/D3856

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