Alternative Provision Primary School Teachers' Perspectives of Trust Within Student-Teacher Relationships Following Exclusion and/or Suspension Transitions

RESEARCH

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ABSTRACT

The following study explores primary school alternative provision (AP) teachers' perspectives of trust within student-teacher relationships (STRs) following exclusion and/or suspension. The current study conceptualises trust in STRs as a protective factor in the development of resilience amongst young people, which impacts their learning and development. It also considers the potential underlying vulnerabilities of excluded children and why trust is particularly important for them when building relationships. This study seeks to firstly understand AP primary school teachers' perspectives of trust within STRs immediately following exclusion and/or suspension, and how trust is rebuilt.

The study adopts a qualitative approach to gain a rich understanding of the perceptions and experiences of the participants. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with four primary school AP teachers.

The findings of this study identify exclusionary practice as a potentially damaging transitional experience which can impact on young people's abilities to form trusting relationships. It emphasises the importance of trust within STRs when attempting to achieve positive outcomes for excluded young people and explores how students' feelings of rejection following exclusion can impact on their self-esteem, willingness to be vulnerable, and ultimately their ability to trust teachers. Furthermore, the study indicates how the participants rebuild trust within STRs following exclusion, through the use of more consistent, positive, and nurturing teaching strategies, such as unconditional positive regard and trauma aware practices.

The present study makes several original and significant contributions to AP research and practice, which are discussed.

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INTRODUCTION

The use of exclusionary practice within England is increasing with government statistics suggesting a 71% rise in permanent exclusions in the past 7 years (Department for Education, 2022). More specifically, it was shown within the DfE (2022) report that the rate of primary school exclusions is on the rise, with 432 primary school children permanently excluded in the first two terms of the 2021/2022 academic year, compared to just 186 in the previous year. Amongst these figures, children with social, emotional and mental health [SEMH] difficulties are disproportionately (approximately four times more than their peers) more likely to receive a permanent exclusion from school (Graham et al., 2019). In fact, vulnerable children who meet one or two of the following criteria: have special educational needs (SEND), especially SEMH children who do not have an education, health and care plan (EHCP); experienced Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs); and/or in receipt of Pupil Premium Funding (PPF), are six times more likely to be excluded (DfE, 2022). Within John et al.'s (2022) population level study, which linked Welsh attendance and exclusion data to national demographic, primary and secondary health-care datasets. The research found that of the children aged 7–11 in the study, those with a neurodevelopmental disorder, mental health disorder or self-harm were much more likely to be excluded than those without. The proportion of excluded pupils without a disorder was consistently low at 0.5%. However, of the children with an ASD diagnosis, 4.7% were excluded and, of those with a conduct disorder, 8% were excluded.

This is concerning, as being excluded and/or suspended can have significant negative implications for children's self-conception, emotional wellbeing, school belonging and academic attainment in the short term and has been shown to exacerbate existing social inequalities and lead to poor mental health, academic attainment and life chances in the long term (Tejerina-Arreal et al., 2020). Thus, the scale and importance of supporting children at risk of exclusion and/or suspension effectively cannot be over-stated, especially for our most vulnerable children, who experience an accumulation of risk factors at the individual, family, school and wider social and cultural level (Fielding, 2020).

Moreover, it is worth noting that exclusion and/or suspension can be conceptualised as key developmental and educational transitions for young people, which can pose heightened risk for the development of poor emotional wellbeing and mental health (Bagnall et al., 2024a). For example, when children are excluded they negotiate multiple, simultaneous changes, or as recognised in Jindal-Snape's (2016, 2023) *Multiple and Multi-dimensional Transitions Theory (MMT)*, "transitions", in their educational environment, social interactions, sense of self and identity, to name a few. Negotiating multiple transitions simultaneously can have a significant impact on children's ability to cope, especially if they lack sufficient support (Bagnall et al., 2024b), which unfortunately is common during exclusionary transitions where relationships with the school (including student-teacher relationships) are broken down (Macdonald & Marsh, 2004).

Positive student-teacher relationships are consistently shown to be a paramount protective factor for children who are at risk of exclusion and/or suspension (Fielding, 2020). Often underpinning positive student-teacher relationships (STRs) is trust. Although research has demonstrated the importance of trust within STRs (Cracknell, 2023; Fox et al., 2020; Zheng et al., 2024), the concept of trust has not received the theoretical attention which one might expect. This may be due to its complex multidimensional nature making it difficult to interpret and measure. The definition which will be used to conceptualise trust within this study comes from Rousseau et al. (1998) who defined trust as a 'psychological state comprising the intention to accept vulnerability based upon positive expectations of the intentions or behaviour of another' (P.395). There are however important debates within the field which must be discussed, for example, Jones and George (1998) believed an individual's ability to trust can be impacted by factors such as developmental experiences, social and cultural background, and personality type. On the contrary some theorists believe the trustee characteristics are a better indication of varying levels of interpersonal trust than the trustor's general tendency to trust (Jarvenpaa et al., 1998).

This study aims to investigate the potential impacts that exclusion transitions can have on trust within STRs. To do this, it is essential to firstly understand the importance of trust within STRs in the educational setting, and the role it can play in the positive development of children. Bryk

and Schneider (2002) suggested that trust acts as a bonding agent between students and staff. Ennis and McCauley's (2002) qualitative interviews and observations found that teacher's commitment, persistence and shared experiences provide the foundation for educational trust amongst disruptive and disengaged students. The findings of this study suggest that the development of a trusting relationship between students and teachers is essential when creating a positive learning environment for marginalised students (Ennis & McCauley, 2002).

The work of Ghosh et al. (2001) places Rousseau's definition of trust within the context of STRs whereby student's willingness to be vulnerable towards their teacher is discussed in relation to their perceived openness and reliability. The literature indicates that building trust is a relational practice which enables growth within the educational setting, and therefore greater focus should be placed on this when attempting to form productive STRs (Frelin, 2015). This is especially important for children who have been excluded and/or suspended, as they begin transitioning into alternate provision (AP) education, the foci of the current study.

In line with Risk and Resilience theory (Rutter, 2006), trust has been conceptualised within research as a protective factor for vulnerable children within the classroom environment. Protective factors can be defined as moderators which enhance positive developmental outcomes (Shonkoff & Meisels, 2011) and it is thought that the presence of protective factors promotes the development of resilience within an individual. For example, Schwarzer and Buchwald (2000) who have conceptualised and operationalised interpersonal trust as a protective factor within STRs, found trust to predict coping mechanisms, such as seeking social support (Schwarzer & Buchwald, 2000) and increased feelings of safety (Mitchel et al., 2016). Risk and Resilience theory underpins the rationale and focus for the current study which investigates trust within STRs as a protective factor which helps to promote resilience, as children transition to AP education. Conceptualising trust in this way highlights the importance of understanding what influences trust within educational settings, and how to promote trust within STRs, which will also be explored.

Trust within STRs is particularly important for children who are at risk of exclusion and/or suspension, such as children who have experienced ACEs (Anda et al., 2020; Lacey & Minnis, 2019). Research has suggested a clear link between the presence of ACEs and a young person's likelihood to be excluded and/or suspended (Giovanelli et al., 2020). For example, by examining the link between the presence of ACEs before the age of 5 and school suspension and exclusion, Pierce et al. (2022) found that children with a cumulative ACE score are almost four times more likely to be excluded or suspended from school several years later (Pierce et al, 2022).

Developing positive STRs have been shown to be particularly important for children with ACEs who may be at risk of exclusion or suspension. For example, Hunt et al.'s (2017) cross-sectional study, found the association between ACEs and 'unemotional' traits in children to be moderated by STR, in that the relationship between ACEs and unemotional traits was higher for children with high conflict/low closeness STRs. However, when the STR was deemed to have low conflict/high closeness levels, the association between ACEs and unemotional traits was significantly lower (Stoppelbein et al., 2020). These findings place emphasis on the notion that positive STRs may mitigate the development of these traits in children with a history of ACEs who are at risk of exclusion or suspension.

Similar findings have been shown within Michael and Frederickson's (2013) interview research with 16 secondary school students with SEMH difficulties, attending a pupil referral unit (PRU) in the UK, which found the most identified enabler of positive academic, social and emotional outcomes, was positive relationships with teachers. Extending on these findings, amongst primary-school aged children, Bagnall et al.'s (2021a) case study research found STRs to be crucial in promoting feelings of safety and belonging for children with SEMH difficulties attending an SEMH special school. This particularly helped children to feel settled within the primary school, following breakdown in previous school placements. These findings further emphasise the importance of STRs, for another at risk group of young people, whom are also disproportionately more likely to be excluded and/or suspended than peers without a SEMH diagnosis.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge that exclusion and/or suspension is most likely to result from an accumulation of risk factors (Tejerina-Arreal, et al. 2020) associated not only with the child but also with the family, school and wider social and cultural setting. In line with the

latter, children in receipt of PPF are also at greater risk of being excluded; with almost 50% of those excluded falling into this category (IntegratED, 2020). This can result in children in receipt of PPF making less progress, widening attainment gaps in the first three years of secondary education (Cook et al., 2020; Moore et al., 2020). These figures have increased further following the Covid-19 pandemic (Education Endowment Foundation, 2022; Thomas & Rogers, 2020), demonstrating the need to support our most at risk children (Garner & Bagnall, 2024).

THE CURRENT STUDY

The current study aims to investigate the changes within trust and the role it plays for children who have been excluded or suspended, during their transitions into AP education. As discussed above exclusionary educational transitions are an ongoing process of adaptations, which is in line with *Multiple and Multi-Dimension Transition (MMT)* theoretical framework the Jindal-Snape's (2016, 2023) and can be a stressful and uncertain time for children (Bagnall et al., 2021b). For children who face added risk factors at the group level, such as a lack of social support from significant others within their ecosystem, or risk factors at the individual level, such as limited coping skills or SEND are particularly vulnerable to a poor experience of transition. For these children, additional support during this time is crucial, and should consider their short-term emotional wellbeing whilst still in primary school, in addition to their long-term emotional wellbeing looking ahead to secondary school (Bagnall & Jindal-Snape, 2023; Bagnall, 2020).

When school transitions are not planned, such as in the case of exclusion and/or suspension, this time can be especially difficult and can have numerous negative implications for children's academic achievement, self-esteem, mental health and wellbeing (Bagnall et al., 2021a). Furthermore, children who are excluded from school are at risk of poor long-term outcomes, including social difficulties, poor mental health and wellbeing, reduced job prospects and greater involvement with the criminal justice system (Tejerina-Arreal et al., 2020; Rosenbaum, 2018).

These consequences of exclusion not only affect the individual, but also cost the state welfare, health, education and justice systems more than £2 billion for every cohort of excluded children. Thus, the importance of breaking this cycle cannot be underestimated, and there is broad agreement that the views of all stakeholders (namely pupils, schools, and parents and carers) are important in improving the transition process and reducing the associated risks (Bagnall et al., 2020).

The theory and literature discussed provides strong evidence for the notion that excluded and suspended children are a vulnerable group who are likely to benefit greatly from relational/trauma informed teaching and trusting STRs. However, to date there is little research available which explores the impact of suspension and/or exclusion on trust within STRs. In particular the voices of teachers are underrepresented, yet it is vital to understand their lived experiences of supporting children who have been excluded and/or suspended and to identify areas of challenge and examples of good practice. Learning gained from conversations with teachers could be shared more widely to enhance reintegration support across the United Kingdom for this vulnerable group of children. Thus, the present study will address this gap by answering the following research questions:

1. What are alternative provision school teachers' experiences of trust in student-teacher relationships immediately following suspension and/or exclusion?
2. What are alternative provision school teachers' perspectives in the rebuilding of trust in student-teacher relationships following suspension and/or exclusion

METHODS

DESIGN AND PARADIGM

This study used a qualitative design, characterised by critical realism. A constructivist framework was chosen as this epistemology was deemed necessary to acknowledge essentialist reports of individual experience, meanings and reality, but also recognise that broader environmental contexts, such as social influence and the school, can also impinge on such meanings. This approach was chosen, as the present study was not theory-driven, instead, the research purpose was to understand AP school teachers' experiences of trust within STRs following

exclusion and/or suspension from primary school. Thus, an inductive data-driven approach was taken, to directly explore participants lived experiences (Alhojailan & Ibrahim, 2012).

PARTICIPANTS

Convenience sampling was used to recruit 4 participants (3 males and 1 female) from one primary AP school in Greater Manchester. Participants had a collective experience of over 50 years working in education. Given the exploratory nature of the present research (Bhardwaj, 2019), the breadth of our participants' collective experience, the sample size is moderate relative to other interview studies within the field (Bagnall et al., 2021a; Demkowicz et al., 2023).

DATA COLLECTION

Materials

Semi-structured interview guides were developed to guide the discussions. Questions such as 'Can you tell me a bit about trust within STRs?', 'What kind of effects do you think the use of exclusionary practise is having on trust within STRs?' and 'What can individuals and schools do to help rebuild trust following exclusion and/or suspension transitions?' were asked in order to help the interviewer understand the participants experiences and perspectives. Prompts and follow-up questions were used where necessary (e.g. can you tell me more about that?).

Procedure

Following ethical approval and Head Teacher consent, recruitment letters were distributed to teachers. Self-selected participants who indicated interest were then emailed an information sheet and consent form, and a convenient date and time was arranged for the interview, which took place at the teachers' place of work. This was to ensure the participants had autonomy and were in a familiar environment during the interviews, which has been found to help ensure a certain level of comfort for the participants which can increase their engagement with the study (Turner, 2014).

At the beginning of each interview participants were asked to give written consent via a consent form which gave information on the recording and storage of their data and their rights to withdraw. Once consent was obtained, the audio recording commenced. Interviews ranged in length between approximately 20–25 minutes. Participants were issued with a debrief sheet after each interview and thanked for their involvement in the study.

Following data collection, each interview was transcribed using verbatim transcription. To ensure confidentiality and anonymity participants were provided with pseudonyms during transcription.

ANALYSIS

Transparency and congruence between philosophical perspectives, conceptualisations, theoretical frameworks, and methodology is paramount to determine the robustness of a study and interpretations drawn. This can help advance transitions theory, research, policy, and practice, as outlined by Hannah et al. (2023). Recognising this, data was analysed using reflexive thematic analysis, as this approach was compatible with the study's aims, inductive nature, and constructivist paradigm (Braun & Clarke, 2019, 2020). Reflexive Thematic analysis also fits well with the exploratory design of the study as it followed a data driven process which allowed the researcher to take a close line by line approach to the data, following Braun and Clarke's six step guide (Braun & Clarke, 2019; 2020). To ensure rigour and trustworthiness, Lincoln and Guba's (1985) framework of credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability, was followed. To ensure the present findings were credible, during data analysis, author 1 kept an audit trail, highlighting every step of data analysis. The audit trail was then checked by the project supervisor (author 3) establishing dependability. Identified themes were triangulated for congruence through discussion between authors, establishing confirmability and the analysis is grounded in examples illustrative by quotes from participants, enabling readers to evaluate the applicability of the data, establishing transferability.

FINDINGS

Two themes were identified across the 4 interviews which address RQ1: **'1. Students' feelings of rejection following exclusion'** and **'2. Trust in student-teacher relationships is essential for learning and development'**. Two themes were also identified across the four interviews which address RQ2: **'3. The importance of being trauma aware'** and **'4. The importance of honesty and consistency when building trust in student-teacher relationships'**. As demonstrated in Table 1 each of these themes encompasses 2–3 subthemes.

Table 1 A table illustrating the main themes and their subthemes, relating to each research question.

RESEARCH QUESTION	MAIN THEMES	SUB THEMES
Research Question 1: "What are alternative provision primary-school teachers experiences of trust within student-teacher relationships following suspension and/or exclusion?"	1. Student's feelings of rejection following exclusion	1a. Implications of rejection on self-esteem/self-worth
		1b. Rejection causing a mistrust towards authority
	2. Trust in STRs is essential for learning and development	2a. Importance of developing feelings of safety and trust early on
		2b. Student's willingness to be vulnerable/ pseudo-independence
		2c. Implications for later life
Research Question 2: "What are alternative provision primary-school teachers experiences of how trust is rebuilt in student-teacher relationships following suspension and/or exclusion?"	3. The importance of honesty and consistency when rebuilding trust in STRs	3a. Following through on actions
		3b. Being nurturing and transparent
	4. The importance of being trauma aware when rebuilding trust in STRs	4a. Understanding triggers/methods of interacting with students
		4b. Working and communicating with mainstream schools within reintegration
		4c. Acknowledging trust within the school

THEME 1: STUDENTS' FEELINGS OF REJECTION FOLLOWING EXCLUSION

When asked to discuss their experiences of students' trust within STRs following exclusion, all participants spoke about exclusion leaving children with feelings of rejection:

> *"They may well have experienced rejection; they were working with a group of adults who they trusted… and they've been told they can't go there anymore…it's a damaging experience…children in our setting sometimes just expect the exact same" (Peter.)*

There were negative implications associated with students' feelings of rejection following exclusion and/or suspension, *1a. implications of rejection on self-esteem/self-worth* and *1b. rejection causing a mistrust towards authority*, which are discussed in turn below.

1a. Implications of rejection on self-esteem/self-worth

Participants spoke about the compounding implications that feelings of rejection following exclusion can have on children's self-conception, specifically their self-esteem and self-efficacy: James indicated that:

> *"Exclusion is like doubling down on their self-esteem, their self-efficacy, all the things that you really want to promote and improve you're almost like compounding" (James).*

Similarly, Dave discussed how exclusion can cause children to question their self and others:

> *"They often think is it their fault? Is it something they've done? And I think a lot of them sort of lose that trust" (Dave).*

As discussed by James and Dave, exclusionary practice can work against the facilitation of trusting relationships, and promotion of a healthy and positive self-identity.

1b. Rejection causing a mistrust towards authority

All participants referred to the role that students' feelings of rejection play in the development of a mistrust towards authority. For example:

> *"We get children who are really distrustful of you… they're wary…just your presence can put them on edge" (Peter).*

Joanne similarly considered this:

> *"It's a lack of respect for any kind of authority… because they feel like they've just been failed so why should they bother? Why should they follow those rules?" (Joanne).*

As discussed by Peter and Joanne, children in AP settings may expect the same rejection that they had in mainstream education, causing a distrust in STRs going forward.

THEME 2: TRUST IN STRs IS ESSENTIAL FOR LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT

All teachers described trust as paramount for creating an environment which encourages learning and positive development for excluded and/or suspended children and reduces the likelihood of negative outcomes later in life. Crucial for this was the *2a. Importance of developing feelings of safety and trust early on* and *2b. Student's willingness to be vulnerable/ pseudo-independence,* which had *2c. Implications for later life,* discussed in turn below.

2a. Importance of developing feelings of safety and trust early on

The participants acknowledged that in order to learn, children must feel safe and have trust towards their teachers. For example:

> *"There's a trust in that you're a safe person and if you're not… children are vigilant… which makes learning difficult" (Peter).*

Peter went on to discuss how he feels children conceal who they are in order to protect themselves when they don't feel they are in a safe environment:

> *"They mask desperately in order to fit in because not fitting in makes you vulnerable" (Peter).*

Peter reflected on his experience of how trusting STRs and feeling safe as part of this can help counteract this:

> *"I really enjoy seeing them realise that it's okay to be themselves, and happy… and I think to do that you have to be able to trust people" (Peter).*

The participants all spoke about the importance of encouraging feelings of safety and developing trust early on during school reintegration:

> *"Children that arrive…quite often they're rabbits in the headlights… they've been to an environment that doesn't work for them, at that point for me… the first thing that I try to build is that trust" (James).*

Dave went on to discuss how not developing trust early on can impact on students' development:

> *"If a child hasn't developed that trust in adults by the time they leave us…you do hear about them steering off and going in the wrong direction" (Dave).*

As discussed by participants, building trust early in the STR is an important factor when encouraging feelings of safety, which impacts on the learning and development of students.

2b. Student's willingness to be vulnerable/pseudo-independence

When asked of any behavioural or attitudinal changes they had noticed in their experience, which might suggest a change in levels of trust following exclusion, the participants described how students are often unwilling to ask for help from their teachers. For example:

"We have children that won't open up…won't let you do things for them initially" (James).

Joanne went on to explain how children's past experiences may help explain this:

"They might have had an experience where they've asked for help and got shouted at, whereas here we reassure them, 'If you need help, I'm here'" (Joanne).

Peter agreed and described this unwillingness to be vulnerable as a pseudo independence:

"They're what you would call pseudo-independent… a really rubbish sort of independent…that's what they've learnt to be… it's very difficult for them to rely on others" (Peter).

As discussed by participants, a lack of trust within STRs can cause an unwillingness to ask for help or a 'pseudo-independence' and this impacts on children's abilities to learn and develop.

2c. Implications for later life

When asked to discuss whether a mistrust towards authority can have implications for children later in life, the participants explained:

"I think trust impacts on absolutely everything including relationships… jobs… careers." (Joanne).

Within the interviews participants spoke about the specific implications that untrusting STRs can have on children's abilities to form positive relationships later in life. For example:

"If you have failed relationships in your life, as an adult you are less likely to attempt those kinds of relationships again… you may think 'I'm rubbish at that'… and you may opt out… so the richness of your life is affected quite badly" (Peter).

Participants also went on to speak about how they thought the children's difficulties with trust could translate into different contexts and with different authority figures later in life:

"We often find police mistrust, they don't want anything to do with the police… if you think you've been rejected by authority in a school then on the street that's similar… they might think, 'What have the rules ever done for me? What has authority ever done for me?'" (James).

THEME 3: THE IMPORTANCE OF HONESTY AND CONSISTENCY WHEN REBUILDING TRUST IN STRs

All participants spoke about the importance of honesty and consistency within their experience of building trust in STRs. Imperative to this was teachers *3a. Following through on actions* and *3b. Being nurturing and transparent*, as discussed in the two sub-themes below.

3a. Following through on actions

All participants discussed the importance of keeping their word and following through on their actions when building trust in STRs. For example, Peter discussed the inconsistency that children who have been excluded may have experienced and how AP settings must work to counteract this:

"You have to do what you say you're gonna do… many children have just got used to in life adults saying they're gonna do something, and then not doing it…like 'I'm gonna do my absolute best for you at all times', and then you get excluded" (Peter).

James discussed similar experiences within his interview:

"When you do what you say you're gonna do…sometimes they're surprised" (James).

Dave suggested that if teachers do not keep their word, then that creates a negative memory for children:

> *"You've got to be on it, because if you don't, they see that as 'why should I trust you?' and it just manifests into every negative idea that they've got of people that let them down" (Dave).*

3b. Being nurturing and transparent

Participants described the importance of creating a nurturing environment when building trust with children in the AP setting. For example:

> *"The nurturing side is massive, being nurturing towards them, giving them that smile" (Joanne).*

Peter similarly discussed how demonstrations of honestly and warmth towards the children can help foster trusting relationships:

> *"If you're open…trust can be developed over time by being consistent and warm and caring and explaining" (Peter).*

Peter went on to describe how being transparent about the motives behind individuals' actions can help foster the development of trust in STRs in the AP setting:

> "*Sometimes children just jump to motives that are quite surprising… 'Did they really do that because they don't like you? So, it's exploring the motives, you're thinking out loud with children" (Peter).*

As discussed by participants within this theme, it is important to demonstrate consistency and create a caring and nurturing environment whereby staff are transparent about the motives behind their actions. This can help when developing trust within STRs following exclusion, as it counteracts the experiences they have already had.

THEME 4: THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING TRAUMA AWARE WHEN REBUILDING TRUST IN STRs

When expanding on what they thought teachers and schools can do to rebuild trust in STRs, the importance the participant's placed on being trauma aware was evident, especially *4a. Understanding triggers/ methods of interacting with students*. Crucial for this was *4b. Working and communicating with mainstream schools within reintegration* and *4c. Acknowledging trust within the school*, which are discussed within the sub-themes below:

4a. Understanding triggers/methods of interacting with students

All participants acknowledged that understanding the potentially adverse experiences of the children in their AP school can help influence the ways in which they chose to interact with them to develop trusting relationships. James explained how the experience that the staff in the AP settings have gained helps them with this:

> *"The staff here are experienced in knowing what to do to alleviate that stress and build that trust" (James).*

Peter specifically discussed the importance of being aware of body language and facial expressions:

> *"If you've got a blank facial expression, what you read into that depends on your life experience… for some children, their life experience has taught them that means aggression is coming… you have to be aware that children are reading you all the time" (Peter).*

Participants explained how developing trusting relationships with the students can help aid this process of understanding their behaviours. For example:

> *"They started to open up and you could understand then their behaviours…you knew what they needed at that point, so trust is key" (Joanne).*

As discussed by participants, understanding children's experiences and triggers can ultimately help inform how to best interact with them, and in doing so a trusting relationship can be developed.

4b. Working and communicating with mainstream schools within reintegration

The participants spoke about how they communicate with mainstream schools to enable them to become more trauma aware:

> *"What we're very good at is working with mainstream schools to try and create an operating system that allows children to feel completely safe and try to understand where children's triggers are" (Peter).*

Joanne similarly spoke about how communicating effectively with mainstream schools can help children feel supported rather than rejected:

> *"It's paramount that the communication between ourselves and the mainstream school is on point because we knew exactly what was going on there… the children could see we were working together, so it wasn't a rejection from school… it was getting them the help they need" (Joanne).*

4c. Acknowledging trust within the school

Participants described how the children's experiences of exclusion have left them with difficulties demonstrating trust, they emphasised how acknowledging trust as a key factor within the school's environment can help encourage the development of the skills needed to form trusting relationships, including modelling through everyday school experiences:

> *"We recognise trust… because we know how difficult it is, we look for opportunities to show that we are trustworthy" (Peter).*

And reflecting on these experiences, and especially the behaviours and emotions evoked:

> *"When we talk about behaviour and emotions, trust quite often crops up… there's a big focus on it" (Dave).*

Participants considered how they encourage help-seeking behaviours when building trust:

> *"Children are rewarded for asking for help, they're praised for it, I think that helps that trust as well" (Joanne).*

As discussed by the participants, it is important to understand how the experiences of excluded children may mean it is hard for them to demonstrate trust, and how acknowledging trust within the school ethos, and communicating with mainstream schools can help foster the development of trusting STRs.

DISCUSSION

There has been a significant increase in the number of children experiencing exclusion and/or suspension (DfE, 2022), which can have significant short- and long-term negative academic, social and emotional effects (Tejerina-Arreal et al., 2020). In addition, educational transitions (especially unplanned exclusionary transitions) are emotionally demanding experiences (Bagnall et al., 2021a), which can also have further negative long-term implications on children's emotional wellbeing and mental health (Symonds et al., 2023). Thus, the scale and importance of research within this area cannot be underestimated. However, to date there is little research available which explores the impact of suspension and/or exclusion on trust within student-teacher relationships (STRs).

Nonetheless, qualitative methods, such as the present study, have the potential to generate a richer understanding of teachers' experiences and elicit personal viewpoints and attitudes. This is critical in the context of Alterative Provision (AP), and perspectives of STRs within this context, given the diverse needs of students and organisational and environmental characteristics, which can heavily shape these experiences. However, AP teachers' perspectives have been

significantly underrepresented within the literature (Cahill et al., 2020). This is despite, teachers' experience of relationships with the children they support and the implications for changes in levels of trust within those relationships, being central to understanding how best to support children through transitions to AP and the practice required to enable children to re-build STRs. This necessitates further research of this population, which the present study overcame, by exploring AP primary school teachers' perspectives of trust within STRs immediately following exclusion and/or suspension, and how trust is rebuilt.

In line with the first research question, pertaining to teachers' experiences of trust in STRs immediately following exclusions and/or suspension, teachers described how exclusion can be a damaging experience for children. During this time, children are effectively removed from their school community and told they cannot be educated in this environment, and by their teachers, who they once trusted to look after them. In line with *MMT* theory, this leads to unplanned transitions in expectations and standards, interpersonal relationships, and/or identity, which can cause further stress, anxiety, and emotional instability. As shown within our findings, these transitions can lead to children experiencing significant feelings of rejection, which can have damaging implications on their self-esteem and ultimately their ability to form trusting STRs, impacting children's feelings of safety, ability to be vulnerable, seek and accept help. This highlights the need for strategies and approaches which seek to reduce suspensions and/or exclusions and aim to support children to remain within their primary settings. The SEND and AP improvement plan (Gov, 2023) recognises the role that AP could play in supporting children to remain in mainstream education by offering early targeted support within their settings and intervention in AP schools followed by reintegration back into their mainstream school or transitions to a different setting.

Extending on the above, participants discussed the importance of communicating with mainstream schools during reintegration. This is consistent with the literature which cites individualised reintegration and clear channels of communication between AP and mainstream schools as an enabler for the successful reintegration of excluded children (Atkinson & Rowley, 2019). This communication could also allow for an attitudinal shift within the discourse surrounding a child's exclusion as it may enable it to be viewed as providing access to support mainstream school struggled to provide, instead of viewing it as a rejection.

These findings also highlight the need for approaches which are underpinned by unconditional positive regard (UPR) within AP settings to counteract any negative effects exclusion may have had on the students' self-esteem, and to develop trusting STR. In line with Risk and Resilience theory (Rutter, 2006), UPR has been shown to act as a protective factor within the classroom, in encouraging the development of trusting interpersonal relationships and positive self-regard (Brunzell et al, 2015; Corey, 2020). Adopting this approach allows children to be valued as unique individuals who are not defined by their behaviour. This is likely to leave students feeling reassured within the school environment, that relationships will not come to an end if mistakes are made, making them more likely to demonstrate trust (Swarra et al, 2017).

In line with research question two, teachers discussed the importance of honesty and consistency as vital in rebuilding trust within STRs following exclusion. However, as shown within this theme, participants described children having difficulties 'opening up' and asking for help following exclusion, which was discussed as "pseudo-independence". This is where individuals are reluctant to ask for help due to a belief that others are not to be trusted to help, and that being dependant on another is negative, potentially putting the student at risk. These findings emphasise the priority AP staff need to place on building trust immediately following exclusion, to encourage feelings of safety and reduce negative learning and developmental outcomes for students. Although the literature explores the concept of help seeking and what influences it, it fails to link the impact of exclusionary practice to students' willingness to be vulnerable. This unique finding therefore emphasises the need to train teachers on the importance of supporting and positively reinforcing help seeking behaviours when developing trusting STRs to improve learning outcomes for excluded children in AP settings. This suggestion is further supported by the work of Jobe and Gorin (2012), who found it is through trusting relationships with professionals that children in care settings are more likely to seek and receive help.

Drawing on the second research question, the study highlights the importance of consistency when developing trusting STRs following exclusion. In working to rebuild trust with children

who have been excluded, participants discussed the importance of demonstrating consistency and honesty, for example by following through on actions as this counteracts the students' experiences of inconsistency created by exclusionary practice. This is consistent with recent studies which suggest students who experience high levels of consistency within their interactions with teachers report more positive feelings about school as well as higher levels of trust and less conflict. These findings suggest that AP settings may need additional supports to ensure consistency in their environment. This could be achieved for example, through providing children with key adults or small teams of adults who can provide reliable, predictable, and nurturing interactions (Price, 2010). This was shown effectively within the 'Check in/Check out' intervention, which was shown to promote resilience through the development of trusting STRs, through predictable, consistent, and nurturing check-ins (Crone et al., 2010).

However, it is important to note that there is a high prevalence of ACEs amongst children attending AP settings (Asmussen et al., 2020; Pickens & Tschopp, 2017), and children's ability to form trusting STRs may have also been affected by mistrust experiences within their home environment (Ennis & McCauley, 2002; Gold et al., 2023). This draws on Jindal-Snape's (2016) *MMT* theory, which outlines the need to consider significant others within a child's ecosystem, beyond the school, such as parents/carers and the community. Thus, as highlighted by the participants in the study, being trauma aware is critical when rebuilding trust within STRs following exclusion. Participants explained how an understanding of the students' experiences and potential triggers helps inform ways in which to interact with them, increasing levels of student confidence and leading to more trusting relationships. To do this, teachers emphasised the importance of using assessments to determine the presence of environmental factors and triggers that are thought to be problematic for the child and working closely with mainstream schools to further understand these. These findings have significant practical implications for educational settings and is consistent with the discourse surrounding successful trauma informed education, which suggests it must be holistic and consider the whole learning environment including policy, curriculum, and relationships with staff (Cavanaugh, 2016; Nava, 2018).

LIMITATIONS

This study is not without limitations. The main limitation of the current study is its small sample size, which may impact the generalisability of the findings. Future studies within this field may wish to recruit a larger sample size, which also includes secondary school AP staff; this may enable comparisons to be made between primary and secondary age children's experiences of trust within STRs following exclusion and/or suspension. However, due to the nature of qualitative research, it was important to gain an understanding of the perceptions of participants and therefore, the sample size enabled the researcher to gain rich, detailed data, which accurately represents the lived experiences of the participants. A further suggestion for future research would be to gather the perceptions of excluded young people themselves, the acquisition of such data could allow for a deeper understanding of the feelings and experiences of this group, which could further help inform practice.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

In sum, the present study makes several original and significant contributions to AP research and practice. This is the first interview study which has sought the first-hand experiences of AP primary school teachers' perspectives of trust within STRs immediately following exclusion and/or suspension, and how trust is rebuilt. This is a key strength of the present study and extends *MMT* theory (Jindal-Snape, 2016) in considering the experiences of unplanned transitions to AP. In doing so, the present study, suggests that exclusionary practice is a potentially damaging experience, which has negative implications for young people's abilities to develop trusting relationships. Whilst the literature emphasises the importance of trust in the development of positive STRs and cites the vulnerabilities of excluded children, this study has presented a unique contribution by discussing the particular importance of trust within STRs for the learning and development of excluded children.

As well as this, the study highlights the compounding negative effects that feelings of rejection following exclusion have on young people's self-worth, their emotional safety and

subsequent need to protect themselves from vulnerability, and how these impact on the development of trust within their STRs in the short term and may affect trust in other authority figures in the long term. The current study presents suggestions for educational practice to support transitions to AP settings, which include the use of UPR strategies, supporting help seeking behaviours and providing consistency and nurture when building trust within STRs. Another main implication comes from the need for APs to be trauma-informed when interacting with students, particularly in relation to understanding triggers when developing trusting STRs following exclusion. This is especially important due to the increased number of children with high ACE scores within the AP setting, as Pierce et al's (2022) study highlights that children with a cumulative ACE score are more likely to have different experiences and triggers to be aware of.

Overall, this study has found exclusionary practice to be transitions which can have negative implications on students' ability to form trusting relationships. The study highlights the impact that these unplanned transitions can have on student's self-esteem and willingness to be vulnerable. The researchers hope that providing an insight into these negative effects of exclusion and/or suspension helps to inform practice within the AP setting when building trusting relationships with young people, specifically through the use of nurturing and consistent teaching methods as well as being trauma aware.

DATA ACCESSIBILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

ETHICS AND CONSENT

The project was approved by The University of Manchester's Research Ethics Committee (ref: 2023-15942-26969). Information was communicated using information sheets, and consent was obtained.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Dr Charlotte Bagnall is a member of IJELT's *Primary-Secondary School Transitions* special issue editorial team and was removed from the review process to ensure independent review and editing.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

All authors were responsible for study conceptualisation, methodology, writing and editing. RD was responsible for data curation, and formal analysis. All authors read and approved the final version.

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