

Managing behaviour or understanding it?

Exploring what mainstream primary and secondary school teachers understand about children and young people's social, emotional, and mental health needs, and how they respond to these.

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List of Abbreviations

ACE/s – Adverse Childhood Experience/s (Felitti et al., 1998)

AEP – Assistant Educational Psychologist

BMHD – Bioecological Model of Human Development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006)

CPD – Continuous professional development

CYP – Child or young person/Children and young people

DfE – Department for Education

DoH – Department of Health

DoHSC – Department of Health and Social Care

EC – Emotion Coaching (Gottman et al., 1996; Gilbert et al., 2021)

EP – Educational Psychologist

EPS – Educational Psychology Service

ITT – Initial Teacher Training

ITT CCF – Initial Teacher Training Core Content Framework (DfE, 2019b)

IWM – Internal Working Model (Bowlby, 1969)

LA – Local Authority

MHST – Mental Health Support Teams (DoHSC & DfE, 2018)

PP – Pupil Passport

RTA – Reflexive Thematic Analysis

SEMH – Social, emotional and mental health

SEND – Special Educational Needs and Disabilities

SENDCo – Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Co-ordinator

SENDCoP – Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Code of Practice

SLCN – Speech, language and communication needs

SLT – Senior Leadership Team

TEP – Trainee Educational Psychologist

Abstract

The prevalence of social, emotional and mental health (SEMH) needs in children and young people (CYP) has continued to rise in the UK (Armitage et al., 2023; Gov.uk, 2024c). Research has identified educational settings as CYP's chosen primary source of support (NHS Digital, 2023). Simultaneously, the rates of permanent exclusion have increased annually, with 'persistent disruptive behaviour' cited as the most common reason (Gov.uk, 2024b). This illuminates a critical role for school staff in identifying, understanding and responding to CYP's SEMH needs effectively. Interpretation of existing literature through a bioecological lens suggests variation in school staff's understanding of and responses to CYP's SEMH needs. This is influenced by interacting factors across multiple systemic levels, including within-school factors such as school culture, access to continuing professional development, and school policy, and external influences, in particular Governmental guidance and legislation. A systematic literature review examining school staff's perspectives in this area illuminated a gap in research for the exploration and comparison of mainstream primary and secondary teachers' perspectives, which is poignant given that teachers are directly responsible for the progress and development of CYP in their class (DfE, 2015).

Positioned within an interpretivist epistemology and a relativist ontology, this study explores and compares mainstream primary and secondary teachers' understanding of and responses to CYP's SEMH needs. Online semi-structured interviews were conducted with mainstream primary (n=4) and secondary (n=4) teachers in England. Five themes were constructed through Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA): '*SEMH is associated with and impacted by various factors*', '*A whole-school approach to understanding and supporting CYP's SEMH*', '*A sense of powerlessness*', '*Are you ready to learn? Navigating the tensions between meeting SEMH needs and delivering the curriculum*', and '*Teachers' differing perspectives on their role in supporting emotional well-being and holistic development*'. Findings align with existing literature and research, while offering additional insights into teachers' perceptions of the interaction between SEMH and other areas of need, and a consensus that there has been a change in the socio-political landscape which is suggested to impact on CYP's SEMH. A stark contrast was interpreted between how primary and secondary teachers perceive their role in supporting CYP's SEMH needs, impacting their responses to CYP experiencing emotional dysregulation. Primary teachers were interpreted to prioritise supporting SEMH needs as foundational to development in other areas, while secondary teachers conveyed that curriculum pressures and other demands substantially limit their capacity to support SEMH needs. These findings have implications for Local Authorities (LAs) and wider Government, schools, and Educational Psychologists (EPs).

'So long as the children are happy and safe,

then I think the learning follows.'

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Chapter One: Introduction

1.1 Chapter Overview

This chapter offers a contextual background for the current study, beginning with an overview of the definitions and terms which will be used throughout. The national context will be presented in relation to children and young people's (CYP's) social, emotional and mental health (SEMH) in the UK. The chapter will conclude with a structural overview of the study.

1.2 Definitions and Terms

This study is grounded in a relativist ontology, positing that reality is not fixed or objective but instead exists in multiple forms and interpreted differently dependent on individuals' experiences (Gray, 2014). Consequently, the way in which SEMH is conceptualised, and the needs and behaviours believed to be associated with it, are likely to differ between individuals, shaped by their unique perspectives and contextual influences. Throughout this study, references to SEMH needs are therefore interpreted as tentative and subjective rather than definitive.

'SEMH' was introduced as a term in the Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) Code of Practice (SENDCoP; DfE, 2015), to replace 'Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties' (EBD) or 'Behavioural, Emotional and Social Difficulties' (BESD) as a category of special educational need. This shift aimed to promote acknowledgement of mental health (MH) needs, and reframe behaviour as a form of communication indicating an unmet need. MH is defined as a state of well-being in which an individual can cope with everyday stresses, work efficiently towards their goals, and be an active member of their community, and has been conceptualised as a continuum by the World Health Organisation (WHO, 2022). MH conditions are considered to encompass 'mental disorders' and 'psychosocial disabilities', and psychological states involving substantial emotional distress, difficulties in daily functioning, or an increased risk of self-injurious behaviours (WHO, 2022). Exposure to challenging social, economic, political or environmental circumstances is considered a risk factor for MH conditions, especially during developmentally sensitive periods such as early childhood (WHO, 2022). Emotional well-being in CYP is defined as encompassing an ability to recognise, understand, and regulate emotions, establish and maintain meaningful relationships, demonstrate resilience, engage with learning, experience a sense of belonging, and develop a strong sense of identity (Weare, 2015).

‘SEMH needs’ encompass the complex interaction between an individual’s social, emotional and mental health needs and the impact these may have on one another (DfE, 2015). These dimensions are intrinsically interdependent, whereby difficulties in one domain can cause or exacerbate needs in another. For example, limited emotional regulation skills may impact social interactions, and a sense of social isolation may compromise MH. Recognition of this interconnectedness could therefore be considered essential to inform a holistic understanding of and response to needs.

The SENDCoP (DfE, 2015) states that CYP’s SEMH needs can 'manifest themselves in many ways' including observable indicators such as social withdrawal or isolation, 'challenging, disruptive or disturbing behaviour', which may be due to 'underlying MH difficulties' (DfE, 2015, p.98). Language such as 'challenging’ and ‘disruptive’ behaviour could be argued to implicitly situate the problem within the CYP and may imply that it is intentional. The researcher made a decision to adopt the terminology ‘behaviour that challenges’ herein, as is used in the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) Guidelines (NICE Guideline 11; National Collaborating Centre for Mental Health UK, 2015). This terminology avoids labelling the behaviour as a defining feature of the CYP and instead puts the CYP first, describing the behaviour as an event that occurs which may be challenging for others to support. The focus of the current study is to explore primary and secondary teachers’ understanding of and responses to CYP’s SEMH needs, which may manifest in behaviour that challenges. The emphasis is therefore on interpreting such behaviour as possible communication of an unmet SEMH need, rather than positioning the behaviour itself as the primary concern.

Definitions of ‘SEMH needs’ within Educational Psychology literature suggest that SEMH needs may be observed as low emotional resilience, low self-esteem and poor self-perception, difficulties coping with everyday experiences due to limited emotional regulation skills, and difficulties forming and maintaining relationships (Martin-Denham, 2021). Carroll and Hurry (2018) define ‘SEMH needs’ as continuous and prolonged, as opposed to short-term or temporary, whereby support is required beyond Quality First Teaching provision (QFT; Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2008).

Terminology within literature varies, often reflecting the time period in which the research was conducted. Herein, the term ‘SEMH’ will be adopted to mirror contemporary understanding and terminology used in current statutory guidance.

1.3 National Context

In response to the rising prevalence of CYP's SEMH needs in the UK (Armitage et al., 2023; Gov.uk, 2024c), the focus on CYP's SEMH has increased in recent years at a Governmental level and within the education sector (e.g. Department of Health/DoH & Department for Education/DfE, 2017; DfE, 2018). One in five CYP have a 'probable MH disorder' (NHS Digital, 2023, Table 1.2) and almost one-third of CYP are believed to have experienced traumatic life events (Lewis et al., 2019). Furthermore, school exclusion rates have risen annually, with 87% of permanent exclusions occurring within secondary schools, citing 'persistent disruptive behaviour' as the most common reason (Gov.uk, 2024b).

The continual increase in SEMH needs has elicited a policy-level, Governmental response, proposing strategic interventions aimed at enhancing MH provision across education and healthcare settings (DoH & DfE, 2017), leading to the introduction of Mental Health Support Teams (MHSTs; Department of Health and Social Care/DoHSC & DfE, 2018). MHSTs were made available to 42% of schools and colleges by March 2025 (DfE, 2024c), and proposed to increase SEMH support within schools by bridging the gap between schools and CYP's MH services (DoHSC & DfE, 2018). Further guidance was published recommending the use of whole-school, trauma-informed and attachment-aware approaches which recognise behaviour as communication of an unmet need (DfE, 2018; Bombèr, 2020).

Simultaneously, Governmental guidance stipulates that maintained UK schools must establish a behaviour policy underpinned by rewards and sanctions (DfE, 2012), including suspensions and exclusions, which is consistently enforced to govern behaviour (DfE, 2024b). This behaviourist framework is instilled through teachers' Initial Teacher Training (ITT; DfE, 2019a). However, such approaches have been argued to overlook the exploration of potential underlying needs, acknowledge contextual environmental factors, or consider whether CYP possess the requisite emotional regulation skills for behavioural regulation. Guidance advising the use of sanctions in response to behaviour that challenges (e.g. DfE, 2019b; DfE, 2024b) could be argued to interpret behaviour as intentional and controlled and may therefore be misaligned with other Governmental guidance advocating for a holistic understanding of behaviour as communication of an unmet need (e.g. DfE, 2018).

Research has illuminated educational settings as CYP's primary source of support for SEMH needs (NHS Digital, 2023), increasing the importance of staff identifying, understanding and responding to these effectively. Furthermore, the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic placed additional

pressures on teachers to support CYP's emotional health and well-being, and provide a higher level of support to parents and carers (Woollard & Randall, 2024), suggesting a shift in teachers' roles and responsibilities, with an enhanced focus on supporting SEMH. Woollard and Randall's (2024) research identified a need for additional resources on a long-term basis to enable teachers to support CYP's SEMH needs effectively in a post-COVID-19 education system.

With conflicting guidance, and a perceived shift in teachers' roles with a heightened responsibility to understand and respond effectively to CYP's SEMH needs, the current study sought to explore and compare the perspectives of mainstream primary and secondary teachers.

1.4 Overview of Thesis

This thesis is presented across five chapters:

- *Chapter Two* offers a theoretical review and summary of existing research pertaining to CYP's SEMH and how SEMH may be conceptualised by school staff, followed by a systematic literature review (SLR) collating and interpreting mainstream school staff's understanding of and responses to CYP's SEMH needs. The SLR illuminates a knowledge gap within Educational Psychology literature for the current study, exploring and comparing mainstream primary and secondary teachers' understanding of and responses to CYP's SEMH needs.
- *Chapter Three* outlines an interpretivist epistemology and relativist ontology, which have informed Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA; Braun & Clarke, 2022) as a methodological approach. The methodology is detailed, encompassing the recruitment, data gathering and analysis processes.
- *Chapter Four* comprehensively explores the themes and sub-themes constructed from the RTA (Braun & Clarke, 2022).
- *Chapter Five* interprets the RTA findings in relation to existing literature, followed by a methodological review of strengths and limitations, and implications for professional practice at an LA and Governmental level, for schools, and EPs.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

2.1 Chapter Overview

This chapter explores existing literature around mainstream school staff's understanding of CYP's SEMH needs and their responses to these to inform the focus of the present study. An overview of theoretical perspectives and literature pertinent to SEMH will be presented. A narrative literature review is conducted, and findings are interpreted within a bioecological framework. A systematic literature review (SLR) is then presented. Staff's roles and responsibilities around supporting CYP's SEMH needs are reviewed, and the role of Educational Psychologists (EPs) in supporting staff's understanding of and responses to SEMH needs is considered. Collectively, this informs the rationale and research questions (RQs) for the present study.

Despite the overall study's focus on mainstream primary and secondary teachers' understanding of and responses to CYP's SEMH needs, this chapter explores the views of school staff as a whole due to the limited existing research where solely the views of teachers have been gained. 'Staff' will therefore encompass class teachers, headteachers, special educational needs and disabilities co-ordinators (SENDCos), one-to-one support assistants, teaching assistants, learning support assistants, and pastoral staff.

2.2 Theoretical Perspectives

There is a growing body of research exploring staff's understanding of and responses to CYP's SEMH needs in the UK. As CYP spend a significant amount of time in school, staff are considered to have a crucial role in the early identification and intervention of these needs through recognising changes in behaviour (Moor et al., 2007). In light of this, theoretical perspectives pertinent to this area of research have been considered in relation to the literature around staff's understanding of and responses to CYP's SEMH needs:

- Models of disability
- Hierarchy of Needs (Maslow, 1943)
- Attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969)
- Bioecological Model of Human Development (BMHD; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006).

The ways in which social and emotional development can be supported have been discussed. These theories will be considered in relation to how staff perceive CYP's SEMH needs and will be further explored within Section 2.2.4 in light of existing literature and research.

2.2.1 Models of Disability

Various paradigms within society seek to explain the causes of disability and, therefore, influence how a CYP's needs may be conceptualised and understood. What may be classified as 'SEMH needs' by EPs may be explained differently by other professions; professionals drawing on the medical model may classify a CYP's presenting behaviours with a diagnosis, such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), conduct disorder, or anxiety (National Institute for Health and Care Excellence, 2017). This paradigm frames the need as an impairment in functioning, suggesting it is inherently pathological and requires treatment or medical intervention. Research suggests that diagnostically labelling needs can be helpful, increase empathy, and decrease negativity towards CYP with SEMH needs (Hickinbotham & Soni, 2021; Martin-Denham, 2021). However, labels may feed pathologising narratives situating the problem within the child and neglect to acknowledge contributory environmental factors (Gillman et al., 2000; Lauchlan & Boyle, 2007).

Within the biopsychosocial paradigm, a holistic view is taken where needs are considered multi-faceted and attributed to an interaction between biological, psychological, and social factors. This theoretical model is well-supported within literature around SEMH (Cooper & Jacobs, 2011; Whitcomb & Merrell, 2013), and acknowledges that conditions such as ADHD or autism may be genetic but their associated difficulties can be exacerbated or supported by environmental and contextual factors, while others, such as conduct disorder, are more likely to occur as a result of these factors (Moffitt & Scott, 2008).

It is important to consider the paradigm underpinning staff's understanding of SEMH needs, as this could influence the level of competence they feel in providing support (Monkman, 2013). Staff perceiving SEMH needs as medical reportedly distance themselves from providing support due to feeling de-skilled and disempowered to respond effectively (Monkman, 2013). However, staff who view SEMH needs through a biopsychosocial lens, considering the role of the context and environment, are suggested to be better equipped to identify potential contributing factors and make appropriate adaptations with greater confidence (Norwich, 2016).

2.2.2 Theories of Social and Emotional Development

2.2.2.1 Hierarchy of Needs

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943) highlights the essential components CYP are believed to need to reach self-actualisation in order of priority: physiological, safety and security, love and belonging, and

self-esteem. This model supports the notion that all of these components must be present for CYP to have their SEMH needs met within school. It could be argued that this model neglects to acknowledge the need for social connection and collaboration with a trusted adult at its base to enable the fulfilment of all other needs, such as physiological and safety, as CYP are often unable to provide this for themselves (Rutledge, 2011). This illuminates a key role for staff in providing trusted staff-pupil relationships and a safe and secure environment within which CYP feel valued, as the gateway to identifying and meeting needs.

2.2.2.2 Attachment Theory

Bowlby (1969) proposed that the attachment between a CYP and their primary caregiver becomes a prototype for all future social relationships. This forms an internal working model (IWM) which enables the prediction and interpretation of future interactions (Bowlby, 1969). The theory suggests that the relationships a CYP experiences and how they are treated by others, both at home and at school, also influences their self-concept (Rosenberg, 1979). Therefore, experiences of nurturing, predictable, and secure adult relationships are essential to inform a CYP's IWM to develop a positive sense of self, feel safe, and trust that other adults will meet their needs (Bombèr, 2007).

For CYP whose primary caregiver relationship has been inconsistent or unstable, or whose basic needs have not been consistently met, their IWM can be conditioned to prioritise *connection-seeking* through maintaining constant interaction with adults due to a need to be noticed and remembered (Geddes, 2006). CYP who have experienced interpersonal trauma, such as neglect or abuse, from a primary caregiver may present as *connection-distorting*, resulting in difficulties trusting adults and forming positive peer relationships (Geddes, 2006). CYP who have felt unwanted by their primary caregiver may *connection-evade* through fear of further experiences of rejection, causing them to become self-reliant through feeling unable to ask for help (Geddes, 2006). However, CYP's connection-related behaviours may not always be indicative of their early attachment experiences, and it is the role of the key adult to explore and identify any unmet needs underpinning behaviour (Treisman, 2016). It is, therefore, essential for staff to understand the IWM as an evolving continuum which can change over time (Cortina & Marrone, 2003), illuminating a key role for staff to provide consistent exposure to experiences of secure, trusting relationships (Bombèr, 2007).

2.2.3 Theoretical Perspectives of Social and Emotional Development

Trusted key adult relationships play a key role in recognising emerging needs through attunement to behavioural changes (Bombèr, 2007), and can support the development of CYP's emotional regulation skills (Gilbert et al., 2021). 'Emotional regulation' can be defined as a combination of conscious and unconscious processes which enable CYP to monitor, evaluate and manage their emotional experiences, such as the intensity, duration and form of their emotional expression (Kok, 2020). When CYP are in a situation they perceive as physically or psychologically threatening, they can become emotionally dysregulated, significantly impacting their ability to rationalise and make decisions in the moment due to the brain's bottom-up response (Siegel, 2010).

As emotional regulation is not innate, opportunities are required to develop this through co-regulation with a trusted adult. Consequently, the acquisition of such skills can be significantly impacted by adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), and the absence of trusted adult relationships (Bombèr, 2007). The term 'ACEs' (Felitti et al., 1998) refers to a range of potentially traumatic, interpersonal events that may occur during childhood and adolescence, including abuse, neglect, and exposure to domestic violence. Experience of ACEs is considered a significant risk to healthy development and positive well-being across a CYP's lifespan (Felitti & Anda, 2010). Traumatic experiences can neurologically reorient CYP towards prioritising feelings of safety and security over the anticipation of reward or avoidance of sanction (Gilbert et al., 2021). Extensive research also illuminates links between speech, language and communication needs (SLCN) with SEMH and emotional regulation difficulties (Hancock et al., 2022). A systematic review highlighted that around eighty percent of CYP with SEMH needs also exhibited at least mild language difficulties (Hollo et al., 2014). Therefore, sanction systems relying on the acquisition of language skills and an ability to regulate emotions to foresee the potential consequences of behaviour, or delay gratification to receive a reward, are largely ineffective for many CYP, particularly those with trauma experience (Gilbert et al., 2021). Persistently sanctioning a CYPs' behaviour is argued to neither develop emotional regulation skills nor address its underlying cause, often leading to its continued reoccurrence (Parker et al., 2016).

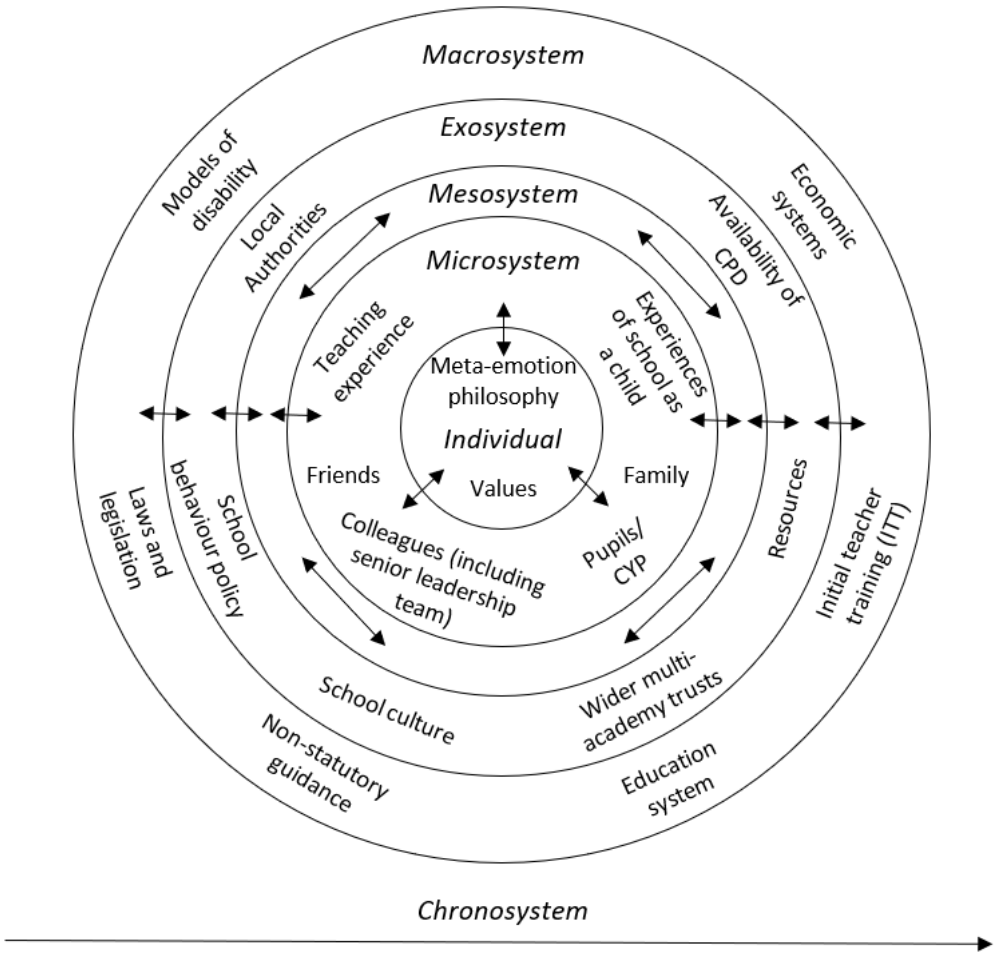
Emotion Coaching (EC; Gottman et al., 1996; Gilbert et al., 2021) is a relational approach deriving from attachment theory, which utilises moments of dysregulation as opportunities to develop emotional regulation skills through the identification and exploration of emotions underpinning behaviour. Over time, co-regulation with a trusted adult aims to develop CYP's self-regulation skills. Research indicates that the consistent use of EC can lead to positive outcomes for CYP, including improved social

relationships, increased resilience, better overall health, and higher academic attainment (Gottman et al., 1996), illuminating the value of this approach within educational settings (Gilbert et al., 2021).

2.2.4 Bioecological Model of Human Development

Research suggests that factors within staff's social context can influence their conceptualisations of and responses to CYP's SEMH needs (Coburn, 2001; Webster et al., 2012; Van Bodegraven, 2015; Skipp & Hopwood, 2017). The BMHD (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) offers a framework to present the factors within different ecological systems that may interact and impact staff's understanding and responses to SEMH needs. The model comprises of multiple layers to illustrate the proximity of influence the factors within each system may have over the individual (Bronfenbrenner, 1986). An adapted BMHD model is presented in Figure 2.1.

Figure 2.1. Bioecological Model of Human Development (adaptation of Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006).



- The microsystem consists of factors and bi-directional relationships within the individual's immediate environment that directly influence their development.
- The mesosystem considers how two or more factors within the microsystem interact and assert influence upon one another.
- The exosystem comprises of formal and informal social structures which indirectly influence the individual through their impact on factors within the microsystem.
- The macrosystem incorporates the broader context in which all other systems are situated, such as cultural beliefs and social norms.
- The chronosystem considers the internal and external changes an individual may experience over their lifetime.

(Bronfenbrenner, 1986)

2.3 Narrative Literature Review

This section explores literature and documentation around factors that may influence staff's understanding of and responses to CYP's SEMH needs. It has been posited that staff play a fundamental role in effectively identifying CYP's SEMH needs through providing supportive environments, specialised interventions and targeted support (Stoll & Macleod, 2020). However, their understanding and responses to SEMH needs vary, and there has been limited theorising regarding how staff develop their knowledge around SEMH and the approaches they draw upon to respond to SEMH needs. To inform a holistic understanding of factors which may contribute to this knowledge, a bioecological theoretical approach will be adopted to consider existing literature and documentation within an adapted version of Bronfenbrenner and Morris's BMHD (2006; Figure 2.1).

2.3.1 The Individual

The values held by staff are suggested to be highly influential in the approaches they use with CYP (Barni et al., 2018). In light of Schwartz's Universal Theory of Human Values (1992), teachers with higher levels of self-transcendence and openness to change are more likely to adopt an authoritative teaching style (Barni et al., 2018), associated with high guidance, affection, understanding, encouragement, and autonomy (Baumrind, 1966). Those who value conformity, security, and tradition have been found to place higher value on self-enhancement and are more likely to utilise an authoritarian style characterised by high expectations, obedience, and discipline (Barni et al., 2018). As self-transcendence is exemplified by concern for others and a desire to form connections, teachers aligned with an authoritative approach may be more likely to place importance on supporting CYP's

well-being and forming positive relationships. However, those who adopt an authoritarian approach may instead prioritise obtaining compliance and maintaining control, with an expectation for all CYP to adhere to behaviour management systems equally (Barni et al., 2018). It could therefore be theorised that teachers' values are instrumental in the culture they establish in the classroom and how they support CYP's SEMH needs.

Meta-emotion philosophy (Gottman et al., 1996) posits that individuals vary in the way they think and feel around their own and others' emotions based on their own emotional experiences, which can influence how they conceptualise and respond to others' emotional needs. Similarly, those with personal experience of MH difficulties have been shown to possess higher levels of MH literacy and heightened empathy toward others (Furnham & Sjokvist, 2017), indicating that staff with such experiences may be better equipped to understand and relate to CYP with SEMH needs.

Attribution Theory (Heider, 1958; Kelley, 1967) seeks to explain how individuals gather, combine and interpret information to 'arrive at causal explanations for events' (Fiske & Taylor, 1991, p.23). Heider (1958) originally theorised the existence of 'dispositional attribution', whereby a CYP's behaviour is attributed to their internal characteristics, and 'situational attribution', whereby environmental or situational factors outside of their control are considered as causal of their behaviour. Kelley's (1967) covariation model suggests that individuals adopt a more structured systematic process to determine whether a behaviour is attributed to internal or external causes by analysing the behaviour through multiple observations across different times and situations. This model proposes that observations consider the covariation of information across three dimensions: *Consistency, distinctiveness,* and *consensus* (Kelley, 1967). Staff may understand a CYP's behaviour through observing:

- *Consistency*: Whether the behaviour is occurring *regularly* in a specific context.
- *Distinctiveness*: Whether the behaviour is *unique* to that context.
- *Consensus*: Whether *other CYP behave similarly* within that context.

Staff's curiosity to consider the covariation of information across different contexts, as opposed to taking a within-child stance through solely attributing a CYP's behaviour to their individual characteristics, may facilitate their enhanced identification of and responses to CYP's SEMH needs. This may prompt greater consideration of environmental adaptations, such as to the classroom setting or teaching approach.

2.3.2 The Microsystem

Research has found that staff make sense of phenomena through formal and informal networks with peers and use this knowledge to shape their practice (Coburn, 2001). Therefore, staff's interactions with CYP with SEMH needs and discussions with colleagues, friends, family, or others in the community regarding observations or experiences of addressing these needs may shape their conceptualisations of SEMH. How behaviour is contextualised within these narratives can indicate the individual's attributions of a behaviour (Heider, 1958; Kelley, 1967), signifying whether they perceive it as an observable indicator of an unmet need, or as a distinct entity which may be more controlled and intentional as a result of dispositional factors (Jones & Davis, 1965). From a social constructionist perspective, language shapes reality (Tuffin, 2005). Therefore, the narratives conveyed within school around dispositional or situational attributions (Heider, 1958) and openness to explore the consistency, distinctiveness, and consensus (Kelley, 1967) of a behaviour may actively influence how SEMH needs and behaviour are understood and responded to by other members of staff.

2.3.3 The Mesosystem

Interactions between microsystemic factors can influence an individual's understanding of phenomena (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The power of language in shaping reality (Tuffin, 2005) signifies the potential influence of staff witnessing discussions between colleagues and the senior leadership team (SLT) around their conceptualisations of SEMH and attributions of behaviour (Heider, 1958; Kelley, 1967) and through narratives conveyed between friends and family in terms of how they or others respond to their CYP's needs.

2.3.4 The Exosystem

Observing others' practices within school may play a pivotal role in shaping staff's understanding of SEMH and the approaches they adopt within their interactions with CYP (Bandura, 1977). To promote professional development, staff may be observed by SLT and receive performance feedback guided by school policy. Staff are encouraged to observe and learn from others with more experience (DfE, 2019b) or those whose practice is considered to be of a high standard by SLT (Skipp & Hopwood, 2017). Although observations may promote consistency in the approaches used across a whole school (Skipp & Hopwood, 2017) and increase staff's self-awareness and reflectiveness (Zaare, 2013), it may also encourage a unified response to behaviour through pressure to adhere to 'highly consistent consequence systems' (DfE, 2018, p.5), and fail to address potential underlying SEMH needs. If staff do not abide by these systems, they may be at risk of being punished themselves (Bennett, 2017).

Vygotsky (1978) highlighted the central role of the community in making sense of concepts, and therefore, the culture and norms developed within schools are suggested to be highly influential in shaping teachers' practice in line with the expectations of the setting (Webster et al., 2012). However, staff may not always be aligned with school policies around responses to CYP's SEMH needs and associated behaviours, rejecting the idea of a universal 'behaviour management' response and instead expressing a preference to have autonomy to unpick the possible needs underpinning the behaviour (Anderton & Westwood, 2010).

Behaviour policies within schools often draw upon behaviourist systems to regulate CYP's behaviour, using extrinsic motivators of reward and sanction (DfE, 2024a). These systems operate under the assumption that behaviour is within CYPs' control, as opposed to an observable indicator of an unmet need, and can be altered through positive and negative reinforcement (Skinner, 1975; Ullman & Krasner, 1965; Payne, 2015). Staff may become reliant on these systems due to a limited understanding of, and confidence in, using alternative approaches (Van Bodegraven, 2015), pressure to conform with the wider school body, and feeling under surveillance by other members of staff (see Foucault's theory of Panopticism, 1977), despite potentially not aligning with this ethos.

The provision of continuous professional development (CPD) opportunities can vary between schools, multi-academy trusts (MATs), and Local Authorities (LAs). CPD can be governed by the availability of funding and may be targeted towards the school's development focus or selected to reflect the culture, ethos and policies within the school or MAT. In response to a Governmental green paper (DoH & DfE, 2017), multi-disciplinary MHSTs were introduced to position educational settings at the forefront of initiatives to foster a culture of openness regarding MH, proposing to reduce wait times and provide additional support within schools and bridge the gap between schools and CYP's MH services (DoHSC & DfE, 2018). Within some LAs, Educational Psychology Services (EPSs) have been commissioned to co-deliver the MHST offer within schools to enhance staff's capacity to identify and respond effectively to SEMH needs, such as through peer supervision, training around SEMH, and bespoke support at a systemic level, delivered by an EP. Consequently, staff in some LAs have received an extensive offer of CPD to develop their knowledge around SEMH, while others feel that more time should be dedicated to this (Ofsted, 2024). Although additional training can offer collaborative learning, enhance staff's practice, and increase professional reflectiveness (Teslo et al., 2023), attending training does not necessarily result in a change in practice. This could be attributed to limited capacity and resources within schools (Ofsted, 2024), discrepancies in alignment between

training content and staff's views (Garavan et al., 2020) or school culture (Georgiades & Phillimore, 1975), or openness to adapt practice due to limited confidence and low self-efficacy (Berman et al., 1977; Van Bodegraven, 2015). Follow-up support has been considered essential to enable the effective transfer of pedagogy to the classroom (O'Sullivan, 2002), however, workload pressures have often been found to prevent this (Ofsted, 2024).

2.3.5 The Macrosystem

To instil social harmony, rewards and sanctions are used within society to govern individuals' actions and behaviour (Zhang et al., 2022), such as laws established by the Government. Within schools, guidance states that maintained schools 'must' have a behaviour policy in place (DfE, 2012) which 'should' include the use of rewards and sanctions, including suspensions and exclusions, to govern behaviour and be upheld by staff 'at all times' (DfE, 2024b, p.5). Within ITT, teachers must establish a 'predictable system of reward and sanction' (DfE, 2019b); this expectation continues as they qualify (DfE, 2019a; DfE, 2021, Standard 7). Recently published Governmental guidance (DfE, 2024b) frequently uses zero-tolerance language, stating that at school, 'disruption is not tolerated' (DfE, 2024b, p.6) and when a CYP is 'persistently disruptive and support or sanctions are not deterring the misbehaviour, further action may be needed' (DfE, 2024b, p.5). Originating from the criminal justice system, 'zero-tolerance' is a concept characterised by the automatic, universal implementation of fixed, 'most often severe and punitive' sanctions without consideration of individual or mitigating circumstances (American Psychological Association/APA, 2008, p.852). A comprehensive review conducted by the APA (2008) found such approaches to be largely ineffective and often counterproductive, particularly for CYP with SEMH needs. Zero-tolerance approaches have been argued to overlook whether CYP possess the skills to regulate their emotions and, therefore, manage their behaviour (Gilbert et al., 2021), and may fail to recognise contributory environmental factors, assuming that sanctions alone will prevent its reoccurrence. It could be argued that this guidance (DfE, 2024b) contradicts previous guidance (DfE, 2018) recommending the use of whole-school, trauma-informed, attachment-aware approaches which recognise behaviour as communication of an unmet need (Bombèr, 2020).

2.3.6 The Chronosystem

Conceptualisations around SEMH have evolved due to increased knowledge, changes in law, legislation, policies, initiatives, and statutory and non-statutory guidance. These can be highly influential over the processes and procedures within LAs and educational settings that define how

staff should respond to behaviour that challenges. The SENDCoP (2015) details the legal duties which must be adhered to, as outlined in the Children and Families Act 2014. The SENDCoP (DfE, 2015) refers to conditions such as attachment disorder, ADHD, conduct disorder, and eating disorders, taking a diagnostic, within-child stance to explain the SEMH needs of some CYP, which may fail to acknowledge significant environmental precipitating or perpetuating factors.

Guidance in place when staff began working within education and teachers undertook their ITT may continue to influence their practice. Skinner introduced the concept of behaviourism (1938) and later proposed his theory of operant conditioning (1975). The theory is grounded in the principles of positive and negative reinforcement, shaping, and extinction, with a strong focus on using reward and sanction to manage behaviour (Skinner, 1975), which became standard practice in classrooms to increase CYP's performance, motivation and learning. Despite advancements in psychological understanding around the role of emotional regulation skills in behavioural regulation, the strategies employed by staff and those recommended within school policies frequently remain grounded in Skinner's behaviourist framework (1975). As aforementioned, such approaches may overlook underlying SEMH needs.

2.4 Summary

This literature review has summarised key theoretical perspectives around CYP's social and emotional development and used a bioecological framework (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) to consider existing literature and Governmental guidance, which could support an understanding of how staff conceptualise and respond to CYP's SEMH needs. Potential interactions between factors at different systems levels have been considered in light of how they may influence staff's understanding and responses to SEMH needs. Disparities between theoretical perspectives and Governmental guidance have been highlighted.

2.5 Systematic Literature Review

2.5.1 Rationale for SLR

There is a growing body of research around staff's understanding of and responses to, CYP's SEMH needs within educational settings in the UK. Concurrently, the prevalence of such needs has continued to rise, particularly in adolescents (Patalay & Fitzsimmons, 2018), and it has been suggested that pre-existing SEMH needs have been unmasked and exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic (Singh et al.,

2020). CYP with SEMH needs have identified educational settings as their primary source of support (NHS Digital, 2023), increasing the importance of staff understanding and responding to these needs effectively. Schools also have a legal duty to promote CYP's welfare (DfE, 2023) and support their SEMH needs through evidence-informed approaches (DfE & DoH, 2017; Frith, 2017). However, significant gaps have been identified in staff's knowledge and understanding of SEMH, impacting their practice (Martin-Denham, 2020).

Given EPs' responsibilities to adopt evidence-informed approaches when working with educational settings (Boyle & Kelly, 2017; Dunsmuir & Kratochwill, 2013), an understanding of staff's perceptions around SEMH is essential. Gaining a deeper insight into this area will shed light on the context in which teachers are working in the UK, thereby facilitating the researcher in refining the semi-structured interview protocol for the present study (Appendix 3.9).

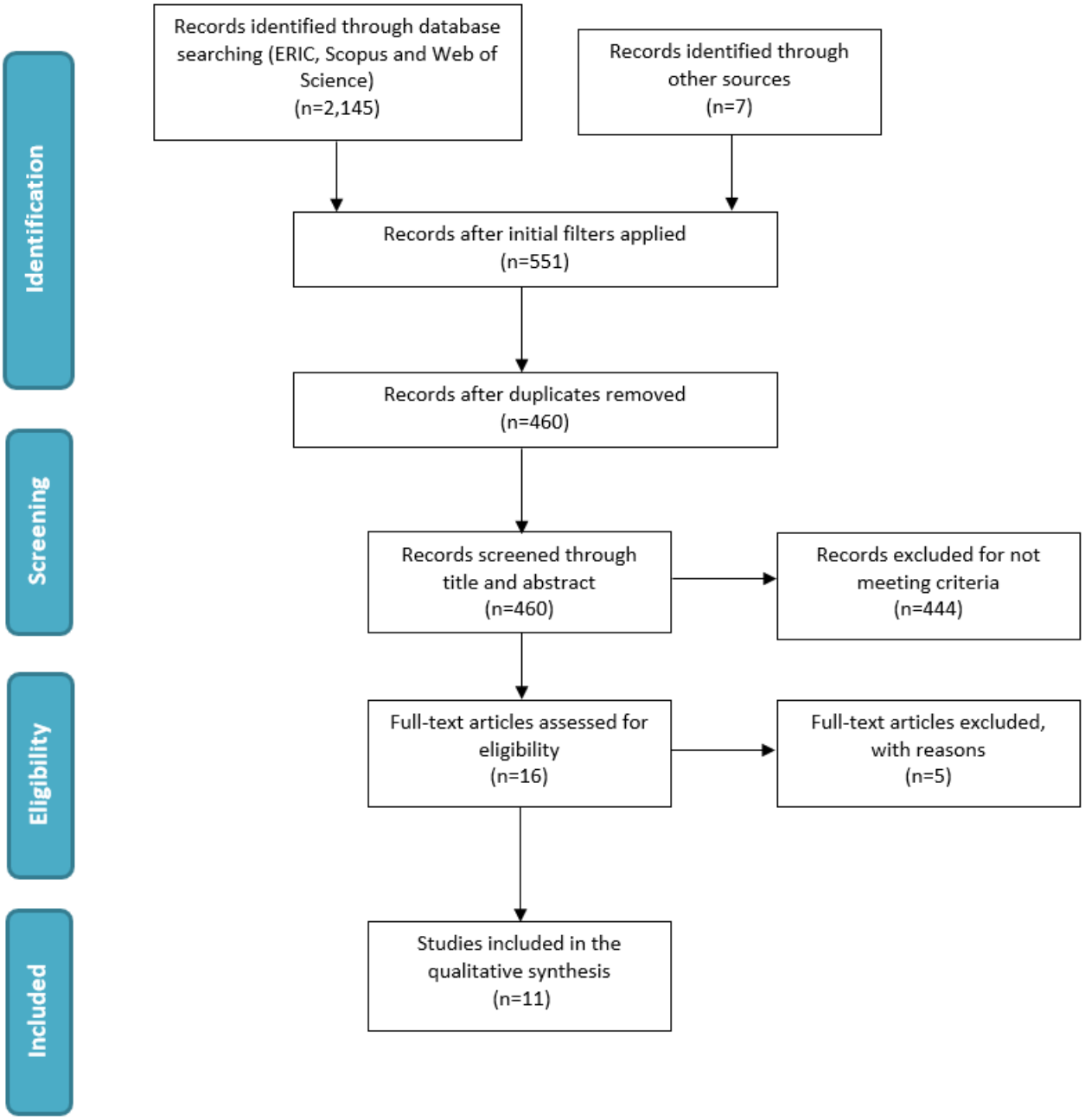
There are no existing qualitative syntheses of literature specifically around staff's understanding of and responses to CYP's SEMH needs dating from 2010 to the present day, which include research spanning across the changes in the SENDCoP (DfE, 2015). Therefore, literature from 2010 onwards will be synthesised within the qualitative paradigm. This paradigm facilitates in-depth explorations of how individuals make sense of their experiences, emphasising rich, contextual understanding over generalisability (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Gray, 2014). Through adopting a constructionist position, whereby the researcher actively engages in the co-creation of meaning, and knowledge is collaboratively generated between the researcher and participants (Guba & Lincoln, 1994), this SLR seeks to address the following research question (RQ):

What has the researcher constructed from the existing literature regarding mainstream school staff's understanding of and responses to CYP's SEMH needs in the UK?

2.5.2 SLR method

This SLR was carried out in accordance with the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines (Moher et al., 2009), a four-step model designed for refining research for systematic review (Figure 2.2).

Figure 2.2 PRISMA diagram.



2.5.2.1 Search Strategy

Studies exploring staff's perspectives around CYP's SEMH were located through an extensive and thorough systematic search. Three databases were searched between June 2024 and April 2025: ERIC, Scopus and Web of Science. Fifteen search terms were carefully considered and generated in relation to Population, Interest and Context (PICo) (Stern et al., 2014) and are presented in Appendix 2.1.

2.5.2.2 Eligibility Criteria

Appendix 2.2 presents the inclusionary parameters applied to all studies considered for this SLR during the screening process.

2.5.2.3 Screening and Selection

Studies were screened and selected from the initial 2,145 studies generated through a combination of databases (Figure 2.2) and other sources (n=7) based on the inclusion and exclusion criteria. 'Year of Publication', 'Language', and 'Country of Publication' filters were applied to refine the search (n=551) (Appendix 2.3). Due to the overly broad range of literature identified, further filters were necessary to increase the 'Subject' specificity (Appendix 2.3).

Duplicates were removed (n = 91), the remaining studies were screened for eligibility through their title and abstract, and a further 444 studies were eliminated. The remaining 16 full texts were examined and 5 were removed (Appendix 2.4). The remaining 11 studies were included in the quality appraisal (Frearson & Duncan, 2024; Wilson et al., 2023; Hattersley, 2022; Martin-Denham, 2021; Oakes, 2018; Devereux, 2017; Monkman, 2013; Harold, 2012; Burton & Goodman, 2011; Burton & Goodman, 2010; Kidger et al., 2010).

2.5.3 Quality Appraisal

A quality appraisal was carried out to evaluate the strengths and limitations of the eleven studies using Gough's (2007) Weight of Evidence (WoE) framework. The CASP Qualitative Checklist (2018) was utilised to assess the quality of each study (WoE A). The criteria for methodological appropriateness in terms of exploring the views of school staff (WoE B), and suitability of the focus of the studies (WoE C) were considered in relation to the review question. One point was awarded for each of the criteria, with a maximum total score of fourteen points. Each study's total Weight of Evidence (WoE D) was calculated. Studies scoring between 12-14 points were deemed to be of high quality, 7-11 points to be of medium quality, and 0-6 points to be of low quality. All studies included within this quality appraisal were scored as medium to high quality as they each scored 10 or higher (WoE D) and will therefore be included in the qualitative synthesis. The full criteria and scoring for this quality appraisal are available in Appendix 2.5.

All eleven papers were included in the qualitative synthesis to offer a broader range of literature, five of which were unpublished theses (Devereux, 2017; Harold, 2012; Monkman, 2013; Oakes, 2018;

Hattersley, 2022). Theses are typically not subject to the same rigorous peer-review processes as journal articles which may be viewed as a limitation in terms of their methodological and theoretical quality. However, they have an advantageous position in that their word count is not as limited as journal articles. Therefore, the methodology can be more comprehensive, offering greater replicability and transferability of findings.

2.5.4 Overview of Included Studies

A descriptive summary of the studies included in the qualitative synthesis is presented in Appendix 2.6, with an overview of their key themes/findings and limitations. A combined total of 145 participants' perspectives were included in the reflexive thematic analysis (RTA). Participants' roles within educational settings in the UK comprised of 43 headteachers (30%), 4 secondary SENDCos (3%), 6 primary teachers (4%), 45 secondary teachers (31%), 4 post-16 teachers (3%), 12 support staff including teaching assistants and one-to-one support assistants (8%), 3 secondary pastoral team members (2%), 1 manager of post-16 additional learning support (>1%), and 27 other members of school staff (19%). Therefore, this SLR will consider staff's perspectives across primary, secondary, and post-16 schools.

2.5.5 Synthesis of Data

RTA 'was selected as a flexible method rather than a methodology, not assigned to a particular theoretical perspective or epistemology' (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun & Clarke, 2013). Braun & Clarke (2022) suggest a six-step process for using RTA:

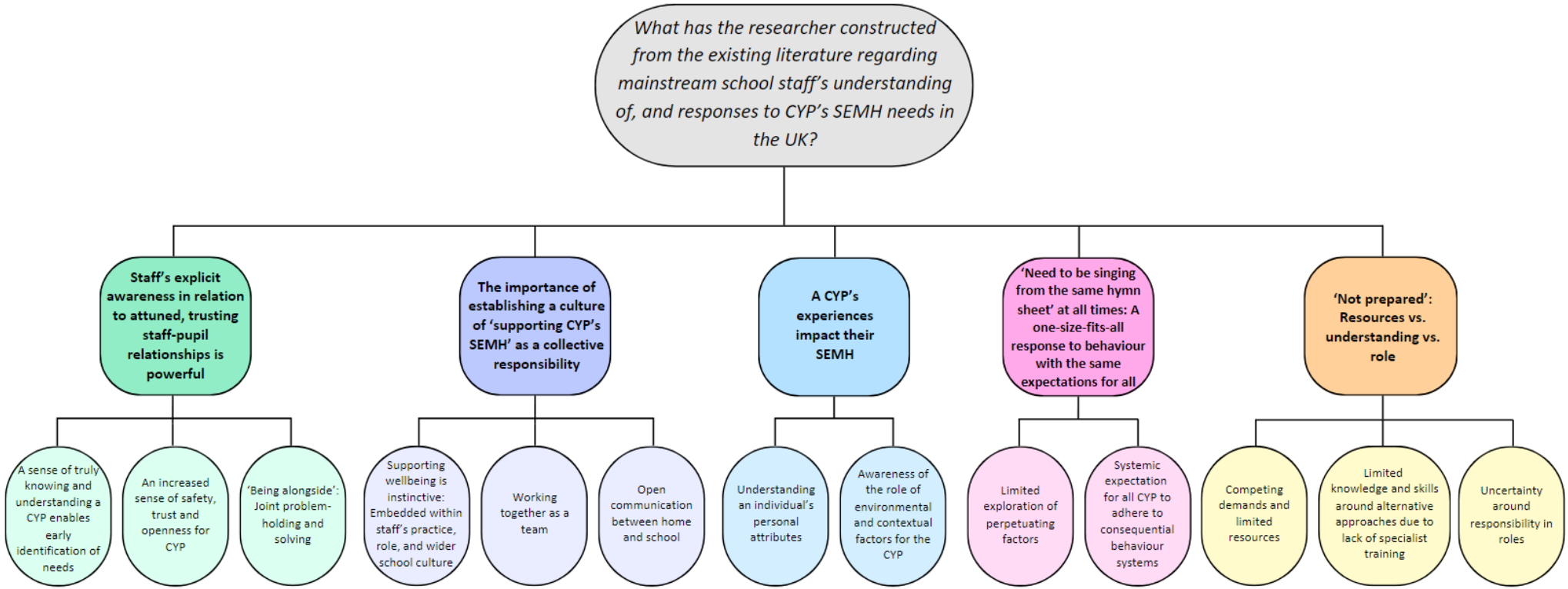
1. Becoming familiar with the data through repeated reading of the transcripts
2. Coding the data
3. Generating initial themes
4. Revision and development of themes
5. Defining and naming final set of themes
6. Organising and writing a report around those themes

All qualitative data, in the form of participant quotes, was extracted from the main body of the included papers, printed, and read several times to identify similarities between them (step 1). Due to the constructionist epistemological stance adopted, analysing participants' raw quotes enabled the researcher to construct themes using the participant's (staff's) understanding as detailed in their responses, as opposed to inclusion of the author's findings and interpretations of the data. Quotes

were coded with the researcher's initial thoughts and assigned colours corresponding to the eleven papers from which they derived. These were then manually organised, and similar quotes were clustered based on the researcher's interpretation of common threads and reviewed and merged several times to prevent overly fine-grained codes or the duplication of codes. This process resulted in the generation of fifty-two semantic codes, where a literal interpretation of the language used by participants was taken (step 2).

The fifty-two codes were further reviewed and explored, and five potential themes were constructed based on connections and similarities between them, around staff's understanding of and responses to CYP's SEMH needs (step 3). These were revised a number of times (step 4) and five themes were established, with a total of thirteen sub-themes (step 5). The researcher used sub-themes to emphasise particular aspects within each theme by grouping clusters of codes sharing a 'central organising concept' (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p.88) and pertinent to the RQ. A table of initial codes, sub-themes, and themes was created (Appendix 2.7), and a thematic map was generated (Figure 2.3). A table was produced to demonstrate the prevalence of studies contributing each of the sub-themes (Appendix 2.8).

Figure 2.3. Thematic map illustrating SLR RTA themes and sub-themes.



2.5.5.1 Theme One: Staff's explicit awareness in relation to attuned, trusting staff-pupil relationships is powerful

This theme, presented in Figure 2.4, comprises of the following sub-themes associated with the power of staff's awareness in relation to attuned, trusting staff-pupil relationships: '*A sense of truly knowing and understanding a CYP enables early identification of needs*', '*An increased sense of safety, trust and openness for CYP'*, and ''*Being alongside': Joint problem-holding and solving'*.

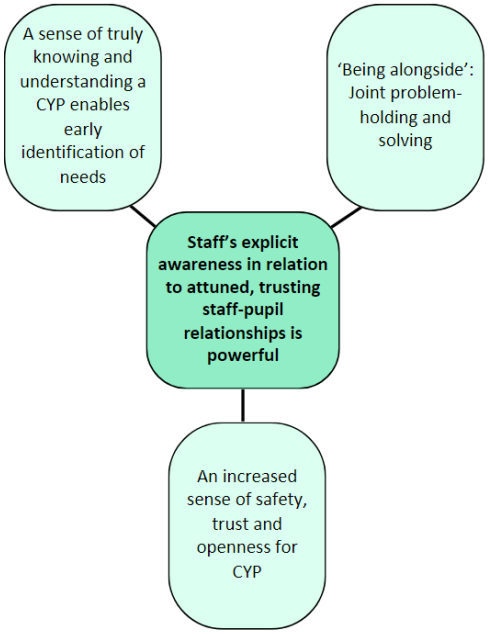


Figure 2.4. Thematic map illustrating 'Staff's explicit awareness in relation to attuned, trusting staff-pupil relationships is powerful', with associated sub-themes.

A sense of truly knowing and understanding a CYP enables early identification of needs

Some staff reported having '*a gut feeling*' when recognising a CYP was experiencing SEMH difficulties as they may notice the CYP '*behaving out of character*' and '*displaying different behaviours*' compared to '*what we would see on a day-to-day basis*' (Martin-Denham, 2021, p.198-199). This suggests that the staff member would be attuned to the CYP and know them to be able to identify changes in their presentation. The importance of early identification of need was highlighted to enable the implementation of support, to meet SEMH needs before they become more significant (Devereux, 2017; Hattersley, 2022). It was recognised that some CYP may be more able to disguise or mask SEMH needs, which raised concerns around how those CYP would be identified to receive adequate support and reinforced the importance of attunement to be able to recognise subtle changes (Martin-Denham, 2021). Staff expressed the value of knowing CYP to be then able to consider '*what might work with that student, particularly and personally*' (Oakes, 2018, p.107), which could support staff's decision-

making around how best to support them.

An increased sense of safety, trust and openness for CYP

Some staff described components of positive relationship-building, aligned with a relational approach, by '*always being available*' (Hattersley, 2022, p.53) to connect with the CYP (Devereux, 2017) as a '*trusted adult who they can talk to and who will support them*' (Hattersley, 2022, p.60). It was recognised that initially, '*trust is a massive barrier*' (Oakes, 2018, p.106) and '*it (can) take a long time to build a positive relationship in some situations*' (Oakes, 2018, p.106), but trust can be gained slowly through consistency and '*not giving up on them*' (Devereux, 2017, p.118).

Positive relationships were described as '*paramount*' (Burton & Goodman, 2010, p.143), '*a safe haven*' (Burton & Goodman, 2011, p. 141), '*a sanctuary*', and '*a safety net*' (Devereux, 2017, p.94). Trusting staff-pupil relationships were suggested to be foundational to restorative approaches, which were reported to be helpful in resolving issues and collaboratively identifying a way forward with CYP (Harold, 2012). The relationship may therefore enable CYP to feel comfortable being open and vulnerable about what did not work, trusting that the staff member's response will be supportive and not shaming.

'Being alongside': Joint problem-holding and solving

Nurturing interactions and active listening skills were described by some staff who suggested that '*you just have to be the one that sits there and listens…you may not say anything in particular but it's just the fact you're there*' (Oakes, 2018, p.139). Staff acknowledged the importance of being '*patient and giving them time*' (Hattersley, 2022, p.55), and listening to '*what someone is trying to tell you, because it will help you understand*' (Hattersley, 2022, p.56).

A sense of togetherness and joint problem-holding and solving was described by some staff, where they reflected on past experiences of supporting CYP with SEMH needs. Staff frequently utilised the pronoun, 'we', such as '*we need to find ways to make him realise he is ok and we are all in it together*' (Hattersley, 2022, p.53), '*we can fix this, it can get better*' (Hattersley, 2022, p.58), '*we can come up with ways to move forwards*' (Oakes, 2018, p.88), and '*we can almost take the world off their shoulders and put it on our own…sharing is key to help with that*' (Hattersley, 2022, p.71); this suggests that some staff members hold a strong sense of responsibility to alleviate the pressure from the CYP through identifying appropriate support strategies.

2.5.5.2 Theme Two: The importance of establishing a culture of 'supporting CYP's SEMH' as a collective responsibility

This theme, presented in Figure 2.5, comprises of the following sub-themes in relation to staff's understanding of the importance of establishing a culture of 'supporting CYP's SEMH' as a collective responsibility: '*Supporting well-being is instinctive: Embedded within staff's practice, role, and wider school culture', 'Working together as a team',* and '*Open communication between home and school'.*

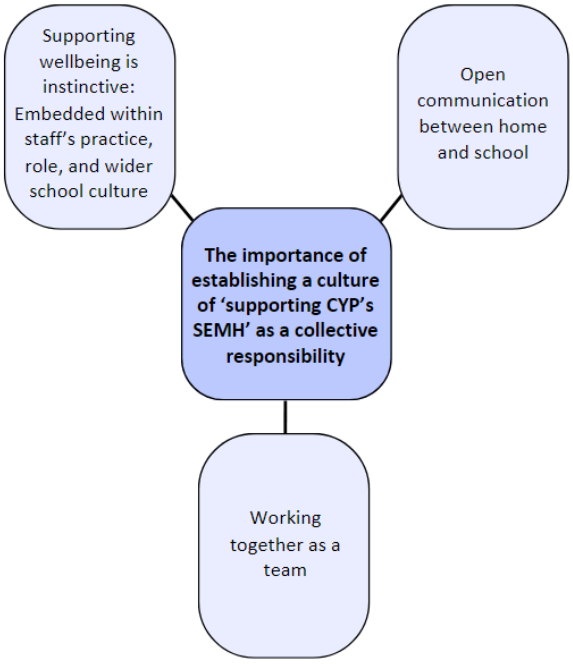


Figure 2.5. Thematic map illustrating 'The importance of establishing a culture of 'supporting CYP's SEMH' as a collective responsibility', with associated sub-themes.

Supporting well-being is instinctive: Embedded within staff's practice, role, and wider school culture

Some staff shared how their role has evolved from solely educating, as they '*become more and more like parents*' (Burton & Goodman, 2011, p.142), with another sharing that as a teacher, '*you are supposed to be there to support them and, sort of, be their second parent*' (Hattersley, 2022, p.68) and make sure they '*feel safe*' (Hattersley, 2022, p.43). In the absence of additional training and protocols, a teacher drew on '*innate compassion*' (Frearson & Duncan, 2024, p.563) to support CYP with experience of trauma, implying an instinctiveness to respond empathically to CYP's needs. Staff felt that '*in order to be a teacher, you have to care and have the children's best interests at heart. I don't see how you can do the job if you don't*' (Hattersley, 2022, p.65), acknowledging that '*these children need other things, other than me teaching them how to read and write*' (Hattersley, 2022, p.62), such as imparting '*strategies to manage their own MH*' (Hattersley, 2022, p.64). The teacher's role was described as '*so much more than just standing in a classroom and imparting knowledge…we give care*

all day' (Wilson et al., 2023, p.995), and nurture is '*what we as teachers do anyway*' (Monkman, 2013, p.110). This suggests some staff believe that supporting CYP's holistic development, including their SEMH needs, is an instinctive, automatic response and deeply embedded within their role and practice. Staff shared that CYP '*sometimes come to school to find emotional stability*' (Monkman, 2013, p.105), implying that staff provide this consistently. A '*safe place (had been created) in the school, which is not hidden away, it's right in the heart of the school*' (Oakes, 2018, p.94), suggesting that CYP's SEMH needs have been considered and prioritised in the wider school context, with SLT placing value on their school's '*ethos of care*' (Oakes, 2018, p.95).

Working together as a team

Staff regularly shared experiences where they had drawn on other staff's strengths and skills to jointly support a CYP's SEMH needs (Oakes, 2018; Hattersley, 2022). Working together and supporting one another was considered essential to '*keep us on top of things*' (Oakes, 2018, p.111), suggesting that if staff were not collaborative, it may be significantly more challenging to support the level of need. Staff valued opportunities to share good practice and take inspiration from colleagues, as '*they will have different ideas or things you hadn't thought of*' (Hattersley, 2022, p.56). A member of staff expressed their gratitude to be able to seek support if they felt unable to respond effectively to a CYP's needs, stating, '*I've only got to knock on the door or email…I don't feel isolated at all*' (Oakes, 2018, p.112). This may indicate that in some schools, staff can be honest around areas where they lack confidence or skills, which may reflect a wider school culture of care and support for staff.

In a secondary school where staff may have less contact time with CYP, they expressed the importance of subject teachers and support staff emailing the information they hold around a CYP to the pastoral team, who piece it together and share relevant information with the team (Oakes, 2018). Multi-agency working with professionals was suggested to be helpful in supporting CYP's needs '*that possibly we knew about but didn't quite know how to deal with*' (Oakes, 2018, p.110).

Open communication between home and school

Staff discussed the importance of trusting home-school relationships and '*working very closely with parents*' (Oakes, 2018, p.105) by involving them in any decisions about their CYP's care (Martin-Denham, 2021). Open communication and the sharing of positive news were suggested to bolster these relationships and increase parents'/carers' buy-in and support when sharing matters of concern (Burton & Goodman, 2011; Devereux, 2017), as well as serving as an intervention to better understand and respond to a CYP's SEMH needs (Martin-Denham, 2021). The power of open communication was

exemplified whereby staff member '*liaised with parents immediately and now thankfully the child is ok*' (Hattersley, 2022, p.53), indicating a sense of relief as a positive outcome was achieved through promptly sharing their concerns.

Staff acknowledged that issues from home may affect the CYP at school and vice versa; establishing a home-school diary was proposed as a method to regularly communicate with parents/carers around those issues (Burton & Goodman, 2011). Another member of staff described working within a '*family-feeling school*' (Martin-Denham, 2021, p.198) where the parents/carers and CYP would be consulted with to gather information to create a shared understanding of the presenting needs (Martin-Denham, 2021).

2.5.5.3 Theme Three: A CYP's experiences impact their SEMH

This theme, presented in Figure 2.6, comprises of the following sub-themes regarding staff's understanding that a CYP's experiences can impact their SEMH: *'Understanding an individual's personal attributes'* and *'Awareness of the role of environmental and contextual factors for the CYP'.*

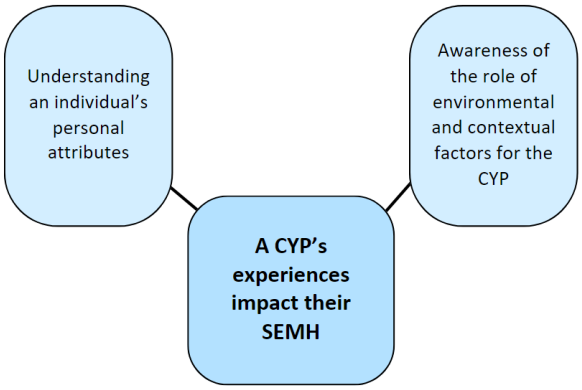


Figure 2.6. Thematic map illustrating 'A CYP's experiences impact their SEMH', with associated sub-themes.

Understanding an individual's personal attributes

There was a narrative across staff with an understanding that SEMH needs can present differently in different CYP due to individual factors and personal attributes (Martin-Denham, 2021), including associations with diagnoses such as autism (Hattersley, 2022). Behaviour was understood as a visible '*manifestation*' of these factors, of which the '*root cause*' should be identified, explored and understood (Martin-Denham, 2021, p.198). One member of staff shared their view that '*if the child is stood there screaming, there may actually be other issues going on*', maintaining curiosity and

demonstrating a deeper understanding around exploration of the personal attributes and factors which may be underpinning the behaviour. Behaviour was described as an indicator '*to essentially communicate "I need help" but without them realising that's what's going on*' (Hattersley, 2022, p.47) suggesting an understanding that the CYP may not be aware of their needs or how else to communicate these. Awareness of the potential impact of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) was discussed as an attribute, with one member of staff sharing their feelings around being '*suddenly exposed to almost the student's whole life and it all unravels, and then it becomes a whole picture*', explaining how this understanding helped to inform their interactions and intervention approach (Devereux, 2017, p.92). It was acknowledged that CYP may be proficient in masking their needs, causing teachers to feel '*taken aback*' (Wilson et al., 2023, p.995) upon receiving a disclosure.

Awareness of the role of environmental and contextual factors for the CYP

Some staff acknowledged the extensive environmental and contextual factors that could impact a CYP's SEMH, within and outside of school. Living within a '*disadvantaged area*' (Hattersley, 2022, p.45), being a care-experienced CYP who may have experienced highly stressful or traumatic events (Martin-Denham, 2021), or significant changes at home (Hattersley, 2022) or at school (Wilson et al., 2023) were discussed as potential contributory factors which could result in behavioural changes within school (Hattersley, 2022, p.44). Teachers perceived that CYP's experiences and manifestations of trauma are heterogeneous (Frearson & Duncan, 2024). Staff discussed the importance of fostering an environment within school which feels safe (Oakes, 2018), drawing on a past experience whereby they '*create(d) that positive environment'* for a CYP, who subsequently *'stopped presenting behaviour that challenges*' (Hattersley, 2022, p.43). Some staff also observed differences in CYP's presentation between lessons: '*you might see them in lessons where they don't like the lesson so it might be more prevalent there*'…'*you can see the changes of behaviour between them*' (Oakes, 2018, p.87), indicating that factors within the CYP's environment were either contributing to, or supporting these needs.

2.5.5.4 Theme Four: 'Need to be singing from the same hymn sheet' at all times: A one-size-fits-all response to behaviour with the same expectations for all

This theme, presented in Figure 2.7, comprises of the following sub-themes regarding staff utilising a 'one-size-fits-all' response to CYP's behaviour, with the same expectations for all: '*Limited exploration of perpetuating factors'* and '*Systemic expectation for all CYP to adhere to consequential behaviour systems'.*

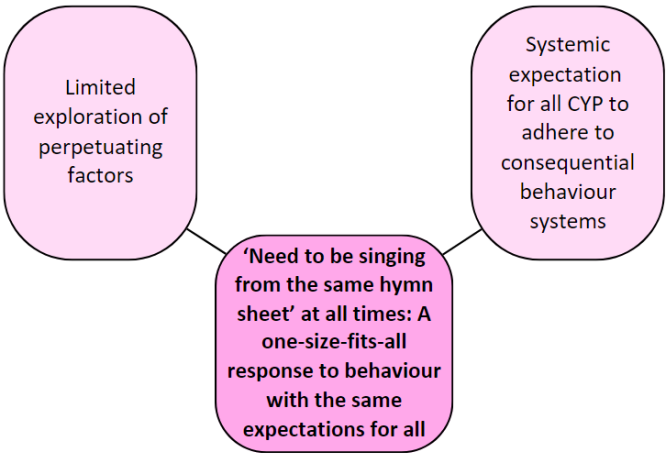


Figure 2.7. Thematic map illustrating 'Need to be singing from the same hymn sheet' at all times: A one-size-fits-all response to behaviour with the same expectations for all', with associated sub-themes.

Limited exploration of perpetuating factors

Some staff shared discourses suggesting that behaviour is a choice and is controlled and purposeful, resulting in a limited exploration of perpetuating factors (Harold, 2012). Within Harold's study (2012), staff used language such as '*immature*' and '*childishness*' to describe CYP's behaviour, explaining that they '*kick off and cause a huge fuss*', making a decision that they '*don't want to be here so (they) will go and swear at her and get excluded*' as they '*know who they can play off*', possibly lacking curiosity around the underlying causes of the behaviour or consideration that the CYP may not feel able to remain in school (p.148, p.159, p.160). Selecting language of choice may indicate an assumption that the behaviour is intentional, possibly resulting in limited awareness or exploration of underlying needs.

Staff suggested that '*persistent offenders*' are '*addressed by, you know, removing them*' (Harold, 2012, p.118), expressing frustration that '*you can't keep them out of circulation forever*' (Harold, 2012, p.119). Due to its association with the criminal justice system, the term '*offenders*' could be considered criminalising and othering. It may reflect a lack of confidence in staff to permeate, explore, and alter these patterns. Further suggestions were shared that CYP presenting with behaviour that challenges should be '*isolated*' or '*excluded*' (Harold, 2012, p.119), as opposed to exploring and responding to the needs underpinning the behaviour which may be perpetuating it. Staff within Devereux's research (2017) recognised '*patterns (which) have been hindering their behaviour for such a long time*' (p.128), perhaps acknowledging that opportunities to explore this had previously been missed.

Systemic expectation for all CYP to adhere to consequential behaviour systems

Some staff reported feeling a sense of powerlessness and bound by their school's behaviour policy which they did not feel aligned with, reflecting on their practice with concerns that they had been '*maybe too punitive*', '*but you're in a system which is that way*', suggesting an overarching narrative of zero-tolerance approaches had been established within the school (Devereux, 2017, p.115). A teacher shared concerns about the disproportionate use of sanctions to adhere to this approach, such as '*some teachers, or certainly some senior leaders, would already have given her a red card for not taking her coat off*' (Hattersley, 2022, p.55). Another shared that their setting had '*a very negative policy*' which created a '*negative atmosphere'* and *'didn't work*' (Burton & Goodman, 2010, p.228).

Others voiced how they felt conflicted as they were asked to keep the exclusion data low but to follow the behaviour policy '*straight down the line*' by following the '*C (sanctions) system*' so that '*everybody is singing from the same hymn sheet*', regardless of a CYP's SEMH needs or ability to adhere to the rules (Harold, 2012, p.113, p.188).

2.5.5.5 Theme Five: 'Not prepared': Resources vs. understanding vs. role

This theme, presented in Figure 2.8, comprises of the following sub-themes regarding staff not feeling prepared to support CYP's SEMH needs: '*Competing demands and limited resources', 'Limited knowledge and skills around alternative approaches due to lack of specialist training',* and '*Uncertainty around responsibility in roles.*

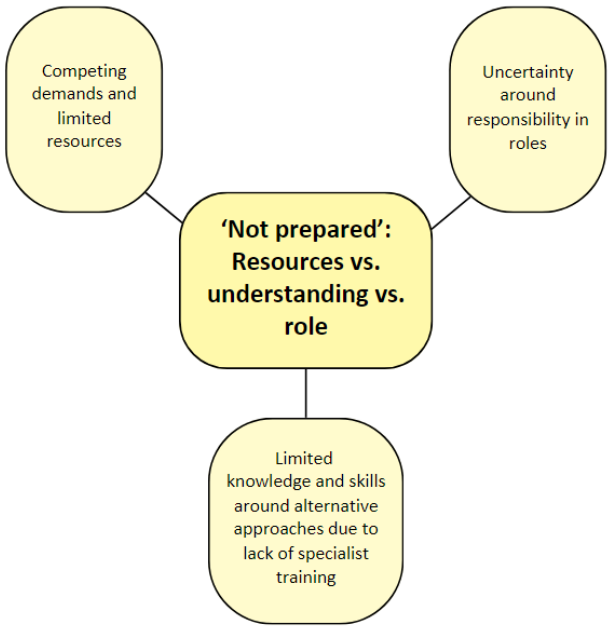


Figure 2.8. Thematic map illustrating ''Not prepared': Resources vs. understanding vs. role', with associated sub-themes.

Competing demands and limited resources

Staff reflected on the competing demands that could prevent them from effectively supporting CYP's SEMH. Staff expressed feeling that academic results were prioritised within school, meaning that their interactions with CYP were often centred around attainment and target grades; they were aware that this can add further pressure if a CYP is already under strain, rather than building rapport, which could act as a protective factor for a CYP with SEMH needs (Devereux, 2017). Due to the constraints of the school timetable, limited time was also shared as a competing demand affecting the development of trusting staff-pupil relationships, enabling CYP to seek the SEMH support they require (Kidger et al., 2010). Limited external capacity to support CYP with SEMH needs was also shared as a concern, with some settings reporting being '*inundated*' with '*huge waiting lists'* (for counselling) yet only receiving '*three hourly visits a year from the Ed Psych*' (Burton & Goodman, 2010, p.226). Financial cutbacks had also resulted in the withdrawal of the '*offer of continual (internal) support*' in some settings (Devereux, 2017, p.95), despite staff being aware that some CYP '*need (SEMH support) on an individual basis all of the time*' (Hattersley, 2022, p.68).

Monkman's (2013) study acknowledged a limited capacity for teachers to support SEMH needs due to a multitude of pressures, including curriculum delivery, marking, assessment and monitoring, and results-driven systemic pressures, meaning that CYP's emotional well-being often '*becomes one of the*

bottom priorities' (p.114). Support staff were perceived to have more time due to not having '*twenty-odd other students to deal with*' (Burton & Goodman, 2011, p.141) and more capacity to build relationships on a one-to-one basis, which '*can be hard to implement in a busy classroom, it's all time-consuming stuff*' (Burton & Goodman, 2010, p.228). Frearson and Duncan (2024) illuminated the importance of schools prioritising supporting CYP's holistic development, as opposed to taking a '*data-driven, top grades*' approach (p.561).

Limited knowledge and skills around alternative approaches due to lack of specialist training

Staff described feeling that their knowledge and skills to support CYP's SEMH needs were limited despite encountering increasing numbers of CYP with complex SEMH needs and a range of issues which they didn't feel they had received adequate training to support with (Devereux, 2017; Martin-Denham, 2021). Absence of training seemed to create a reliance on utilising schools' behaviour systems for some teachers due to a lack of alternative approaches to draw on; '*if they are refusing (your instruction), where else do you go?*' (Harold, 2012, p.168).

A need for specialist training around SEMH was shared by several staff (Hattersley, 2022) with practical examples of alternative approaches and an understanding of their theoretical underpinning (Frearson & Duncan, 2024). CPD was delivered in '*little pockets*', but whole-school training was requested to increase '*whole staff awareness of it*' (Kidger et al., 2010, p.927). This indicates possible inconsistencies across the staff team around responses to SEMH needs. Teachers felt strongly that ITT should develop the essential skills needed to identify and respond to SEMH needs effectively, as well as ongoing CPD (Kidger et al., 2010), and an understanding of the crucial role of positive teacher-CYP relationships and relational approaches (Wilson et al., 2023). Staff within Hattersley's study (2022) discussed the skills they felt training should address, such as '*how to manage MH in the moment, if a child is upset or distressed, what to say or do to help them and keep them regulated*' (p.72). Teachers' medicalisation of SEMH needs appeared to distance them from feeling able to respond effectively due to perceptions that they lacked the requisite training (Monkman, 2013).

Uncertainty around responsibility in roles

Some staff appeared uncertain around their role's responsibilities in supporting CYP's needs, possibly through limited awareness of the impact that day-to-day, nurturing interactions may have. A divide between the roles of teachers and pastoral staff was described (Frearson & Duncan, 2024; Harold, 2012), with a student support manager sharing that she does not feel valued within the school (Burton & Goodman, 2011). This may highlight that some staff in other roles lack understanding around the

extent of her role and may reflect limited knowledge in how SEMH needs can impact other areas of development, such as learning, and therefore the importance of supporting these.

Another shared that '*there is a large umbrella of support for students…there's a large number of staff that are monitoring that area*' (Oakes, 2018, p.87). The term '*that area*' could suggest a sense of detachment with an area of which they are not a part, which may reflect perceptions around their role in supporting SEMH. Others spoke of engaging other staff members if a CYP becomes dysregulated: '*the kid's refusing so I'll get on-call*' (Harold, 2012, p.168), suggesting that responding to these needs is not part of their roles and responsibilities. Within Kidger et al.'s study (2010), a teacher expressed concerns that he had '*trained to be a history teacher*' and didn't feel '*familiar enough*' to '*do it (SEMH support) justice*' (p.927), perhaps feeling that his role was solely to deliver the curriculum and subject knowledge, which was echoed within Wilson et al.'s study (2023). Monkman's (2013) findings mirror these, illuminating how differing perceptions in teachers' roles may inform the approaches they adopt: '*some don't like to have relationships and try to keep it very cold and controlling*' (p.104).

2.5.6 Conclusions of SLR

This qualitative synthesis combined existing literature around mainstream school staff's understanding of and responses to CYP's SEMH needs in the UK. The researcher has interpreted a variation in staff's understanding and responses, which are influenced by factors within different systems levels (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). At a microsystemic level, staff's discourse reflected an explicit understanding of the need for attuned, trusting staff-pupil relationships (Bombèr, 2007) to increase CYP's sense of safety, trust, and openness, to enable the early identification of needs through truly knowing and understanding CYP, and to be alongside CYP to joint problem-hold and solve. Staff also demonstrated an understanding that a CYP's experiences, such as their personal attributes and the environmental and contextual factors around them (Moffitt & Scott, 2008), impact their SEMH (Bombèr, 2020). Staff emphasised that fostering a school culture that supports CYP's SEMH needs is a collective responsibility; they shared the importance of working together as a team, maintaining open communication between home and school, and instinctively embedding well-being support into their roles and practices. Macro and exosystemic pressures (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) were reflected through discourse around one-size-fits-all, zero-tolerance responses to behaviour (DfE, 2024b), with strict adherence to the school's behaviour policy and limited exploration of perpetuating factors. Staff also expressed a lack of preparedness to support CYP's SEMH needs due to competing demands, insufficient resources, and a limited understanding of SEMH. Uncertainty amongst staff

regarding their roles and responsibilities in supporting SEMH needs arose through discussions around engaging other staff members to respond to a CYP when they are dysregulated and by 'removing them' from the classroom (Harold, 2012). A divide between pastoral and teaching staff has appeared to limit understanding of the remit of one another's roles (Ha rold, 2012). The increased presence of pastoral staff within schools (Gov.uk, 2023a) has seemingly blurred the boundaries of teachers' duties in addressing CYP's SEMH needs, creating ambiguity over where their responsibilities end and those of pastoral staff begin. This lack of clarity may lead to missed opportunities for teachers to foster an environment in which SEMH support is embedded.

Limitations

Gough's (2007) WoE framework was used to assess each study's quality, methodological relevance, and alignment with the SLR RQ. Therefore, the WoE framework (Gough, 2007) served primarily as a screening tool, rather than an approach to assign lesser or greater weight to each study based on quality. Although all eleven studies were scored as medium to high quality and consequently included in the qualitative synthesis (Appendix 2.5), the absence of differential weighting treated all studies as methodologically equal, which may obscure variations in the strength of the data. Without such weighting, it is not possible to determine whether studies deemed to be of higher quality had a greater influence on the overall conclusions of the SLR than those of medium quality, making the conclusions less robust. Themes and sub-themes constructed from this SLR should therefore be considered with awareness that all eleven studies were given equal weighting in the qualitative synthesis.

In conducting this qualitative synthesis, the researcher made a decision to extract and analyse all qualitative data, in the form of participants' verbatim quotes, from the main body of each included paper, rather than synthesising second-order constructs in the form of the original authors' thematic interpretations (Section 2.5.5). This approach resulted in inclusion bias, whereby only excerpts selected by the original authors were available to include in the current synthesis. Employing an alternative method, such as Thematic Synthesis (Thomas & Harden, 2008) may have facilitated a more comprehensive, transparent, and methodologically robust integration of the original authors' existing themes with those constructed through this qualitative synthesis. This would have enhanced the findings' credibility and transferability. To address this limitation, a table was created to illustrate the similarities between themes and sub-themes generated from the qualitative synthesis and themes from each of the existing papers (Appendix 2.9).

The inclusion of only qualitative studies to gather rich, narrative data, eliminated potentially valuable mixed methods and quantitative studies. Within the eleven studies, methodological limitations were highlighted and considered, which have been reported on within Appendix 2.6. In addition, five studies pre-date changes to the SENDCoP (DfE, 2015), within which language shifted around SEMH. This change may have influenced understanding and practice in the coming years, meaning that perspectives shared by staff in the literature were contextually situated and may no longer accurately reflect current beliefs and practice. Due to these limitations, there is considerable variation regarding the quality of studies included in the qualitative synthesis, which limits the potential for determining a firm conclusion and further supports the rationale for the present study.

2.6 Rationale for the Present Study

2.6.1 Teachers' Roles and Responsibilities in Supporting CYP's SEMH Needs

Teachers were identified as the most common source of support by CYP with MH needs (NHS Digital, 2017), however, there is limited guidance specifically outlining their roles and responsibilities in this area. The SLR highlighted staff's uncertainty around the remit of their roles in supporting CYP's SEMH needs, illuminating confusion around the responsibilities of teachers versus pastoral staff (Harold, 2012). Teachers have a legal responsibility to differentiate teaching for individual CYP with SEND (DfE, 2015, 6.37), which includes SEMH as a category of need, and to ensure that they are responding effectively to the strengths and needs of all CYP (DfE, 2021, Teachers' Standard 5). It is also the role of the teacher to maintain responsibility for all CYP from their class on a day-to-day basis, even when attending interventions outside of the classroom (DfE, 2015, 6.52). However, teachers have reported feeling ill-equipped to identify and respond to SEMH needs effectively due to a lack of training (Byrne et al., 2015; Lowry et al., 2022).

Previously, there has been an emphasis on teachers having a holistic role in supporting CYP academically and pastorally (Hamblin, 1978). In light of teachers reporting an increasingly high workload, changes were made to the Teachers' Standards (DfE, 2011) and 'care' was omitted from the requirements, possibly as a way of reducing professional responsibilities. This was reiterated in the education inspection framework (Ofsted, 2023), where 'pastoral' and 'pastoral care' were notably absent. A subsequent review of the National Curriculum in England across key stages one to four (DfE, 2014) resulted in higher standards and attainment expectations of CYP, delivered through more rigorous curriculum content with reformed assessment standards and an increased focus on literacy and numeracy. These increased expectations have been argued to place greater emphasis on

academic achievement than on CYP's SEMH and well-being (House of Commons Health and Education Committees, 2017), possibly resulting in a shift in the professional expectations of teachers, whereby measurable outcomes are prioritised over supporting the holistic development of CYP. Simultaneously, there has been an increase in CYP experiencing SEMH needs (Gov.uk, 2024c), with almost a third of CYP having experienced traumatic life events (Lewis et al., 2019) and one in five CYP experiencing a 'probable MH disorder' (NHS Digital, 2023). The COVID-19 pandemic reportedly placed additional pressures on teachers to support CYP's emotional health and well-being, indicating a shift in roles with an increased focus on SEMH (Woollard & Randall, 2024).

Simultaneously, school exclusion rates have continued to rise, with 87% of permanent exclusions occurring within secondary school settings, citing 'persistent disruptive behaviour' as the most common reason (Gov.uk, 2024b). Research into the use of internal exclusions also reported a significant erosion of trust between CYP and their schools (Trippler et al., 2025). This highlights a vital need for secondary teachers to feel equipped to explore needs underpinning behaviour to preclude the perception that exclusions are the sole viable response. An increasing need for improved access to SEMH support within schools has been recognised (Brown, 2018), leading to the employment of pastoral staff, the number of whom has increased year-on-year since 2011 (Gov.uk, 2023a). Secondary teachers have since expressed confusion around their role in supporting these needs due to the lack of clarity around their duties compared to those of pastoral staff, as well as reporting insufficient information-sharing to enable a cohesive approach (O'Toole & Soan, 2022).

There appear to be disparities between primary and secondary teachers' understanding of CYP's SEMH needs and their role in supporting these, which may impact how they respond. Although primary and secondary teachers are required to adhere to the same Teachers' Standards (DfE, 2021) and ITT courses must align with the same Core Content Framework (CCF) (DfE, 2019b), the pedagogy delivered can vary substantially due to differences in the curricula and developmental expectations of CYP based on their chronological age. Primary education courses cover broader curriculum content, with varying levels of psychology around child development. Emphasis is placed on the importance of building a supportive, nurturing classroom environment (Garner, 2019) where skills in self-regulation, empathy and social interaction are fostered which, in turn, support SEMH (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). Primary teachers often remain with the same class of CYP throughout each day, which can support the development of close, trusting relationships (Hargreaves, 2000) and enable the monitoring of CYP's well-being and prompt responses to any emerging concerns (Moor et al., 2007).

Primary teachers have expressed the essentiality of patient, nurturing, and understanding relationships with CYP to create an environment which promotes SEMH (Hattersley, 2022).

In contrast, secondary teachers often specialise in a subject area and have identified gaps in their knowledge around child development (Paulson et al., 1999). Feelings of limited confidence and competence in meeting all pupils' needs have been described (Ferriday & Cantali, 2020), which may be associated with uncertainties around recognising and interpreting indicators of CYP experiencing SEMH needs (Svensson & Warne, 2024). Secondary teaching has also been associated with increased professional and physical distance from CYP, with some secondary teachers reporting emotions to be disruptive to the classroom (Hargreaves, 2000) in favour of promoting academic development (Cefai & Cooper, 2010). Secondary teachers have reported internal conflict between giving care and delivering subject-specific knowledge (Wilson et al., 2023). Secondary teacher-pupil relationships are often built outside of the classroom (Hargreaves, 2000), possibly supporting the notion that secondary teachers may perceive two distinct components within their role: pastoral support and academic teaching. Findings from the SLR suggest that these relationships can be fundamental in increasing CYP's sense of safety, openness and trust, enabling the early identification of SEMH needs. However, without these relationships, there can be a dependence on the use of power and external motivators to encourage behavioural change (Alderman & Green, 2011), which can fail to address underlying needs and result in higher levels of permanent exclusion (Graham et al., 2019).

2.6.2 The Role of Educational Psychologists in Supporting SEMH Needs

Through the five core functions of the role (Scottish Executive, 2002), EPs are involved in a reasonably high volume of work in supporting the SEMH needs of CYP of varying age phases and at different system levels (Purewal, 2020). For example, EPs may facilitate consultations to create a shared understanding around a CYP's SEMH needs between consultees, such as parents, teachers and support staff (Wagner, 2008; Gutkin & Curtis, 2009), and carry out direct work with the CYP to gain their views as part of a person-centred approach (Smillie & Newton, 2020). The use of a solution-focused approach within consultation has been found to result in a shift in consultees' language around events involving CYP with SEMH needs (Underwood, 2022), support teachers' knowledge and skills through collaborative working (West & Idol, 1987), empower them through joint decision-making (Zafeiriou & Gulliford, 2020), and the co-production of support strategies (Underwood, 2022).

Although schools have been cited as a hub for supporting CYP's MH needs (DoH & DfE, 2017), school staff have reported feeling ill-equipped to recognise and respond to the increase in these needs

(Harland et al., 2015). Consequently, there may be a role for EPs in delivering training or facilitating peer supervision to enhance staff's knowledge and skills in this area to increase self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977), such as through an MHST offer (DoHSC & DfE, 2018). It has been suggested that training should be context-specific and address the school system's needs to be most effective (Patfield et al., 2021), which could increase the role of the EP in consulting with staff beforehand to identify areas for development. Follow-up support may be offered through school policy review and further training or coaching support (Johnson et al., 2017) to increase staff's confidence to implement alternative approaches (Gov.uk, 2024a).

It has been suggested that there is a limited understanding of the potential breadth of the EP role outside of the profession (Atfield et al., 2023), possibly limiting how schools utilise EP support to develop their knowledge and skills to support CYP with SEMH needs. The role of the EP is often not referred to within Governmental guidance around SEMH (Andrews, 2017; Greig et al., 2019), nor are EPs' professional opinions or contributions regularly sought in the drafting of Green Papers (Purewal, 2020). It has been proposed that EPs hold knowledge and skills valuable to this area, and formulation of policies and SEND strategies around SEMH should involve EPs as a professional body (Atfield et al., 2023).

2.6.3 Rationale for the Present Study

The expectations of CYP increase after transitioning from primary to secondary school in terms of their psychological and emotional maturity (Galton et al., 2003). This can pose significant challenges for CYP with limited emotional regulation skills who may experience difficulty adhering to consequential behaviour systems (Gilbert et al., 2021). In order to effectively meet the SEMH needs of CYP, it is essential for teachers to understand that social and emotional development is not linear and can be impacted by several factors, including interpersonal trauma (Bombèr, 2007) and the presence of other SEND (Doikou, 2024). Teachers have a legal duty to differentiate these expectations to support SEMH as a category of SEND (DfE, 2015, 6.37), which is especially important given that CYP with SEND are disproportionately around eight times more likely to be permanently excluded (Gov.uk, 2024b). However, effective differentiation necessitates teachers feeling competent in identifying, understanding, and responding to these needs effectively.

As permanent exclusion rates are significantly higher in secondary schools due to '*persistent disruptive behaviour*' (Gov.uk, 2024b), it is crucial to explore and highlight differences between primary and secondary teachers' understanding and responses to SEMH needs. This is particularly poignant given

that CYP exhibiting challenging behaviour have commonly experienced ACEs (Wilton, 2020) and consequently may not have developed the emotional regulation skills needed to adhere to consequential behaviour systems (Gilbert et al., 2021), which have been more commonly utilised in secondary settings compared with primary (Department for Children, Schools and Families/DCSF, 2009). The infliction of sanctions is suggested to elicit further experiences of trauma (McInterney & McKlindon, 2014), heighten a sense of exclusion or rejection (Howard, 2016), and negatively impact CYP's well-being and behaviour (Ijaz et al., 2024). Through illuminating 'what works well' in primary settings, consideration can be made around how EPs can support the transfer of this practice to secondary settings to bridge this gap and ensure CYP's SEMH needs are being met effectively within schools. This is particularly relevant in the current climate, given the increased prevalence of SEMH needs and statistics around teachers as CYP's most common source of support (NHS Digital, 2017).

As teachers hold responsibility for CYP from their class on a day-to-day basis, including when attending an intervention (DfE, 2015, 6.52), understanding their perspectives is crucial. The limited existing research has predominantly focused on gaining the views of secondary school staff around SEMH (Burton & Goodman, 2010; Burton & Goodman, 2011; Harold, 2012; Kidger et al., 2010; Monkman, 2013; Oakes, 2018; Wilson et al., 2023), and one paper has gained the views of primary teachers (Hattersley, 2022). Currently, no studies have sought to compare the views of primary and secondary teachers as two distinct categories.

Consequently, this study aims to contribute to the knowledge base by exploring what primary and secondary teachers understand about CYP's SEMH and how they respond to these needs, whether similarities and differences in perspectives or practice emerge, and the degree to which contextual factors influence their understanding of SEMH. This could aid EPs' development of targeted, evidence-informed training for mainstream primary and secondary settings, enhancing teachers' abilities to recognise and respond to SEMH needs and build capacity within schools.

Therefore, the present study aims to answer the following RQs:

1. *What do mainstream primary and secondary teachers understand about CYP's SEMH?*
2. *How do mainstream primary and secondary teachers respond to CYP's SEMH needs?*
3. *Are there similarities and differences between what mainstream primary and secondary teachers understand about CYP's SEMH?*
4. *Are there similarities and differences between how mainstream primary and secondary teachers respond to CYP's SEMH needs?*

Chapter Three: Methodology

3.1 Chapter Overview

This chapter explains the methodological approach selected to explore the RQs, beginning with an overview of the study's philosophical underpinnings which utilises a flexible design. There will then be an exploration of a range of qualitative research approaches, which will inform the rationale for selecting Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA; Braun & Clarke, 2022) as an appropriate methodological approach for the current study. The method will be outlined, including information about participant recruitment and sampling and data collection and analysis, with ethical considerations detailed. To conclude, the criteria used to evaluate quality in the present study will be presented.

3.2 Research Aims

The methodology for the current study aims to answer the following RQs:

1. *What do mainstream primary and secondary teachers understand about CYP's SEMH?*
2. *How do mainstream primary and secondary teachers respond to CYP's SEMH needs?*
3. *Are there similarities and differences between what mainstream primary and secondary teachers understand about CYP's SEMH?*
4. *Are there similarities and differences between how mainstream primary and secondary teachers respond to CYP's SEMH needs?*

3.3. Philosophical Underpinnings of Research

3.3.1 Research Paradigms

Various paradigms form the foundations of research, and a researcher's philosophical perspectives and positionality can be highly influential over their methodological decisions and approaches to research (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Guba & Lincoln, 1994). A paradigm is defined as a way of viewing the world, offering a framework which guides how research is conducted and interpreted (Mertens, 2024). Foundational elements of each research paradigm are its ontology, the nature of reality, and its epistemology, the concept of how reality can be examined and measured, informing the way in which research is conducted.

The approach adopted by the researcher within the social sciences has been a much-debated topic, as well as whether psychological research can be truly 'scientific'. At the centre of this debate is

whether the most appropriate line of enquiry for research within Educational Psychology espouses a positivist or an interpretivist approach (Cohen et al., 2017). A positivist view is grounded in the belief that the physical world exists independently from people's perceptions and constructions, and that there is a singular truth to be discovered through empirical testing of hypotheses (Beck, 1979), resulting in a quantitative approach to research enquiry. In contrast, an interpretivist perspective posits that reality is socially constructed, and people's unique perceptions shape their understanding and interpretations of the world; therefore, the external world does not exist beyond human minds (Crotty, 1998). Qualitative approaches lend themselves to this perspective. Assumptions and methodologies associated with each research paradigm and the philosophical orientation held by the researcher have implications for every research decision (Mertens, 2024), and therefore influence the research conducted (Shadish, 1998). To explore teachers' understanding of SEMH needs, methodology aligning with the positivist paradigm would not be appropriate due to its lack of acknowledgement of subjective experiences which inform that understanding, as well as overlooking the influence of the researcher and participants' values and biases in the generation of knowledge (Willig, 2013). An interpretivist worldview has therefore been adopted for the present study, and the ontological and epistemological positioning will now be outlined.

3.3.2 Ontology

Ontology explores the nature of reality, encompassing assumptions about what exists and what can be known, offering a lens through which the world is investigated and understood (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Willig, 2013). A continuum can be used to conceptualise the range of ontological positions, spanning from realism to relativism (Willig, 2013). A realist position espouses the belief that an objective reality exists independent of human perceptions, beliefs, or interpretations and is awaiting discovery (Gray, 2014). In contrast, relativism proposes that there are multiple realities due to the subjective and socially constructed nature of knowledge, varying across individuals, cultures, and contexts (Braun & Clarke, 2022). As relativism posits that truth is relative to the observer or context, how phenomena are interpreted can vary (Gray, 2014). This requires researchers to work reflexively, with an awareness of their underlying philosophical assumptions, experiences, biases, and their influence on the research process (Mertens, 2024).

For the present study, the researcher rejected a realist ontological stance as this research sought to explore teachers' subjective understandings of CYP's SEMH needs and how they respond to these. As highlighted within *Chapter Two*, teachers are likely to possess varied conceptualisations and interpretations of the term 'SEMH', influenced by their personal and professional experiences, values,

beliefs, cultural context, and school environment. These constructs likely influence their responses to SEMH needs (Tuffin, 2005). Therefore, a relativist stance was adopted, acknowledging the existence of multiple realities and subjective truths that are socially constructed and context-dependent, with no truth considered more valid or significant than another (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Levers, 2013). This position considers the possible influence of interacting factors within a teachers' ecological system (Figure 2.1) on their conceptualisations of, and responses to CYP's SEMH. **See Reflexive Diary Entry (Appendix 3.1**).

3.3.3 Epistemology

Epistemology refers to how knowledge is generated (Tuffin, 2005), providing a framework for evaluating the validity and reliability of knowledge claims (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Literature around research practice within the social sciences indicates a clear connection between the ontological and epistemological position and the paradigm, informing an appropriate methodological approach (Arthur, 2012; Cohen et al., 2018). A relativist ontological position was adopted for this study, necessitating an epistemological stance congruent to this.

A continuum can again be used to represent the range in epistemological positions, from objective to subjective (Willig, 2013). Objectivism posits that an objective, external truth exists, which can be found through empirical testing and observation (Beck, 1979). Subjectivism, however, argues that reality is constructed by individuals' interpretations of the world and is influenced by social and contextual factors and the values held by the participant and the researcher (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Interpretivism shares similarities with subjectivism in that both epistemologies challenge the notion of a single, objective reality and prioritise seeking the meanings individuals assign to their experiences; both also emphasise the role of social, cultural and historical contexts in shaping reality (Pervin & Mokhtar, 2022). However, interpretivism emphasises individuals' interpretations of phenomena and collective meaning-making, viewing knowledge as co-constructed through an interactive and integrated process between the researcher and participant/s (Willis, 2007a; Mertens, 2024) and acknowledges the role of the environment (Willis, 2007b). This research adopts an interpretivist epistemology as it seeks to explore teachers' understanding of CYP's SEMH needs at both a semantic and latent level, focusing on the meanings ascribed to SEMH, instead of seeking objective definitions. Therefore, the researcher will be actively engaged in the process, inferring meaning through the interpretation of participants' perceptions of their realities (Willis, 2007a). Interpretivism recognises that the researcher's worldview and values will inherently influence their interpretation of data, requiring reflexivity throughout to acknowledge potential biases to promote rigour and credibility of

the research. Excerpts from the researcher's reflexive diary are included within the appendices and are referenced throughout.

3.3.4 Qualitative Research Approaches

RQs are fundamental in informing an appropriate methodological approach and must be aligned with the philosophical assumptions of the research (Frost, 2021). As the current study explores subjective experiences and the meaning attributed to a concept, the chosen methodology adopts a relativist ontology and an interpretivist epistemology. A methodology of this type rejects using a fixed design with quantitative, empirical measures to obtain observable data that seek to establish universal, objective truths (Robson & McCartan, 2016; Mertens, 2024). Therefore, a flexible design utilising a qualitative approach was required in order to meet the research aims, as this offers the means to explore participants' interpretations of SEMH (Gray, 2014) and gather rich data concerning their nuanced and subjective experiences (Smith, 2015).

The subsequent section will explore qualitative data collection methods and a range of qualitative research approaches, concluding with the rationale for selecting Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA; Braun & Clarke, 2022) as the methodological approach for this study.

3.3.4.1 Discourse Analysis

Discourse Analysis (DA) examines how individuals use language as a tool to construct their versions of the world and make meaning within a social context (Willig, 2013), as opposed to language solely being a means to express internal thoughts (Burr, 2015). Consequently, language is considered an active mechanism in the development of knowledge through social interaction (Burr, 2015) and can indicate how individual realities are constructed (Padgett, 2016). This method aligns with the present study's philosophical assumptions due to the potential influences of social and political factors on teachers' conceptualisations of SEMH (Section 2.3.5). This understanding can be interpreted through the discourse used to convey their constructions of reality (Willig, 2013).

However, DA is misaligned with the research focus and is therefore not an appropriate method to explore the RQs. It is not designed to interpret individuals' experiences or perceptions directly, or to make comparisons across groups. Instead, the focus is on the functions and effects of language and how language is used to construct social realities, including broader societal, cultural or institutional discourses (Willig, 2013).

3.3.4.2 Narrative Analysis

Narrative Analysis (NA) explores how individuals make sense of their experiences through storytelling (Riessman, 2008). Although both NA and DA focus on the use of language as a tool to construct meaning within a social context, NA emphasises the content, sequence, and structure an individual uses to convey personal meaning and their sense of self (Clandinin & Connelly, 2004; Riessman, 2008). Although NA aligns with the epistemological and ontological assumptions of the present study, the RQs seek to explore and compare teachers' perspectives, and not how individuals construct and communicate stories. Therefore, this approach was not considered appropriate.

3.3.4.3 Grounded Theory

Grounded Theory (GT) aims to generate theory rooted in systematically collected and analysed data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), emphasising an iterative process through which data collection and analysis occur simultaneously to allow emerging insights to shape subsequent data collection (Charmaz, 2014). This method is congruent with the ontological and epistemological framework of this study due to its inherently subjective stance and accounts for the impact of context on the construction of knowledge (Charmaz, 2014). However, GT's inductive nature renders it more appropriate for use in under-researched areas to develop new theoretical insights where existing theories are minimal (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007). This study will contribute to an existing body of research around teachers' understanding of SEMH, and therefore GT was not deemed appropriate. Additionally, the RQs are not seeking to develop a new theory or model but rather understand existing practices and current knowledge relating to SEMH, thus not requiring the complex processes involved within GT.

3.3.4.4 Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is rooted in phenomenology, aiming to elicit how individuals have perceived and made meaning of phenomena, focusing on exploring complex, personal experiences (Smith et al., 2021). The approach emphasises the researcher's active role in interpreting individuals' accounts of lived experiences, whilst considering the context in which they occur (Smith, 2011). Although the flexibility of IPA accommodates the philosophical assumptions of this study, its objective is to facilitate an in-depth exploration of individuals' subjective experiences and interpretations (Smith et al., 2021) rather than making comparisons across homogenous groups. This approach was rejected because it does not align with the RQs where the focus is on exploring and comparing teachers' perspectives around SEMH rather than seeking teachers' lived experiences.

3.3.4.5 Reflexive Thematic Analysis

RTA (Braun & Clarke, 2022) is an inductive approach based on a systematic and flexible framework that facilitates identifying patterns across a dataset and subsequent construction of themes to explore an RQ. Themes are believed to be co-constructed through the interactions between the participant and researcher, and the researcher's interpretation of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Initially, the researcher reads the dataset multiple times until they have become immersed within it, before developing initial codes and subsequent themes (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Codes capture singular, distinct ideas, while themes comprise of groups of codes with shared meaning underpinned by a central concept (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

RTA is an evolution of Braun and Clarke's (2006) earlier work on thematic analysis, with a stronger emphasis on the active role of the researcher in interpreting the data and generating themes. This rejects the notion of themes 'emerging' (Braun & Clarke, 2006), instead framing them as constructs developed by the researcher (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Therefore, researchers must critically reflect on their own assumptions, values, and influence on the analytical process, illuminating reflexivity and subjectivity as central components of the approach (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Within RTA, it is suggested that an analysis is never truly 'finished', as the inherent complexity of the data allows for continuous re-interpretation (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Braun and Clarke (2022) posit that the researcher's evolving knowledge throughout the analysis process inevitably shapes their interpretation of the data. This illuminates that the lens through which data is viewed could be considered a snapshot in time, situated within a particular social, cultural, and historical context. Braun and Clarke (2022) emphasise the importance of the researcher being guided by the data, instead of adhering rigidly to pre-determined RQs, arguing that RQs should be considered evolving rather than fixed. If the RQs no longer align with what is constructed from the data, Braun and Clarke (2022) recommend refining them. To mitigate potential threats to trustworthiness, researcher reflexivity is considered crucial to support the rigour and transparency of the research (Section 3.4) (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Willig, 2013).

Due to its emphasis on rich, contextual and interpretive understandings of complex human experience, and the active and reflexive role of the researcher, RTA is considered a Big Q approach (Braun & Clarke, 2022). RTA is theoretically and philosophically flexible in that it was designed to be adapted to a wide range of ontological and epistemological positions (Braun & Clarke, 2019), from 'scientific' descriptive coding to 'artfully' interpretative methods (Finlay, 2021, p.107). Consequently, it has been argued that RTA could be considered atheoretical and, therefore, lacks rigour, which reinforces the importance of the researcher's explicit alignment with a philosophical stance to

increase the trustworthiness of findings (Finlay, 2021; Willig, 2013). The approach is often utilised within a relativist ontology and interpretivist epistemology, which supports its compatibility with the current study.

3.3.5 RTA Approach within the Current Study

This study aims to explore and compare mainstream primary and secondary teachers' understanding of and responses to CYP's SEMH needs. RTA was selected as a qualitative method as it offered a flexible, nuanced approach, which aligned with the complexity of the RQs seeking to capture teachers' rich, subjective experiences and is suited to the interpretative nature of the topic. RTA facilitated the exploration of teachers' understanding of and responses to SEMH needs within their school context, with acknowledgement of possible social, cultural and historical influences. The thematic nature of RTA enabled a comparison between primary and secondary teachers' perspectives.

Reflecting the ontological and epistemological position adopted for this study, meaning was interpreted at both a semantic and latent level, with researcher reflexivity demonstrated throughout the process (Section 3.4 and Reflexive Diary Entries in the Appendices). This enabled the exploration of explicit meanings in the data by initially analysing participants' direct quotes at a surface level (semantic), followed by the interpretation of implicit meanings, underlying ideologies and assumptions (latent). The theories of social and emotional development outlined within *Chapter Two* were used to guide the latent level interpretation (e.g. Maslow, 1943; Bowlby, 1969; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). This combined approach aligns with the RQs and RTA as a methodology, in that teachers' explicit knowledge and practices have been considered at face value, acknowledging their individual realities and experiences (semantic), as well as their deeper underpinnings, situated within the social, historical and political contexts of school environments and culture, Governmental guidance, policies and frameworks, and societal attitudes (latent). Including latent level analysis reiterates the significance of the researcher's acknowledgement of their positionality and reflexivity to increase transparency (Section 3.4 and Reflexive Diary Entries within the Appendices).

3.3.5.1 Limitations of RTA

Within qualitative research, it has been argued that researcher bias can inherently shape the findings (Robson & McCartan, 2016). As a qualitative approach, the reflexive nature of RTA requires the researcher to critically engage with their values, positionality and assumptions consistently throughout the research process (Finlay, 2021), with consideration and transparency around how

these factors could influence the findings (Braun & Clarke, 2022). The trustworthiness of such findings could be threatened if reflexivity and acknowledgement of the researcher's positionality are not evident (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Willig, 2013) (Section 3.4).

Although an inductive stance is taken by the researcher, it has been argued that it is not possible to be entirely inductive due to the researcher's pre-existing assumptions and knowledge, such as from existing literature or personal or professional experiences (Popper, 1972). These can inherently influence how data is gathered, analysed and interpreted, for example, what data is considered significant and what may be overlooked, reiterating the necessity for researcher reflexivity.

There is limited research around what is deemed an appropriate sample size for RTA specifically (Fugard & Potts, 2014; Wutich et al., 2024). Due to the small-scale nature of the research, the range of participant views was limited to four primary and four secondary teachers, which may have narrowed the diversity of perspectives (Marshall et al., 2013). A small sample size may also threaten the study's validity, as participants may not accurately reflect the variability within the population (Marshall et al., 2013). However, Braun and Clarke (2013) recommend recruiting six to ten participants for small-scale designs, which has been adhered to for this study. The small sample size could be considered advantageous in that there is opportunity to explore teachers' perspectives in greater depth through potential to reach saturation of the data, which can offer a more nuanced, rich analysis (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022).

As RTA can facilitate in-depth exploration of individuals' experiences within specific social, cultural and historical contexts, this limits the generalisability of findings to broader populations beyond the specific participants involved (Terry et al., 2017). However, generalisability is not an expected or required attribute of qualitative research (Leung, 2015; Westby, 2021). The aim is not to apply these findings to other educational settings but to inform EP practice. Additionally, when considering replicability, it would be epistemologically counter-intuitive to carry out the study again in the same way, as responses will always vary due to the subjective nature of interpretivist research (Burr, 1995).

RTA poses the risk of over-simplifying complex phenomena by reducing perspectives into themes, if the researcher attempts to collate and report on the entire dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Nuances may be lost if the depth of participants' contributions is not reported sufficiently (Terry et al., 2017). It was, therefore, essential that the researcher held the RQs in mind throughout the research process

to enable the generation of themes in response to these as opposed to reporting on all data (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

3.4 Reflexivity and Positionality

Due to the subjective nature of qualitative approaches, the researcher's values, assumptions, and biases can influence the knowledge generated (Silverman, 2021). It has been argued that there is an inextricable link between the researcher and the research, which cannot be separated, challenging the notion of researcher objectivity (Olmos-Vega et al., 2022). How the researcher positions themselves can influence the questions asked within participant interviews (Holmes, 2020) and participants' openness to share their knowledge and experiences, which can impact the data gathered (Seidman, 1998). This illuminates the importance of critical self-awareness through reflexivity as a crucial strategy to acknowledge how the researcher's personal and professional experiences and existing knowledge influences the research process to increase the trustworthiness of findings and the study's integrity (Finlay, 2016; Ortlipp, 2008; Willig, 2013).

Within this study, which adopts an RTA approach, reflexivity was essential to ensure full transparency of the researcher's thoughts, feelings and emotions throughout the research process (Ortlipp, 2008). This is demonstrated through maintaining a Reflexive Diary, excerpts of which are presented within the following chapters and the appendices, to demonstrate the researcher's thoughts and decision-making. These excerpts are therefore written in the first person, and aim to illustrate how the researcher's existing knowledge and experiences may have influenced the data gathering and analysis. The researcher will now consider her positioning within the current study.

The researcher is a 32-year-old White British female, Trainee Educational Psychologist (TEP) with previous experience as a Primary School Teacher and Assistant Educational Psychologist (AEP). Working within a wide variety of school contexts has provided rich insights and first-hand experience of the roles and responsibilities held by school staff to support CYP's SEMH needs, and the potential challenges of doing so. The researcher's experiences have increased her awareness of barriers which may arise within school contexts that can impact whether CYP's SEMH needs are identified or responded to effectively, such as competing pressures, limited resources, and socio-cultural factors. This includes teachers' knowledge and beliefs around SEMH, limited time, reductions in staffing, and availability of interventions to support CYP's SEMH.

Working in Educational Psychology has offered opportunities to put theory and knowledge around SEMH, acquired through experience and doctoral-level training, into practice in school settings. SEMH

is a prevalent area of need within the researcher's LA as an AEP and TEP, exceeding the national average (Gov.uk, 2024c), with varying levels of complexity becoming increasingly common within EPS casework. Consequently, the EPS has a strong focus on trauma-informed practice and is commissioned to deliver a school-based MHST offer (DoHSC & DfE, 2018) to enhance schools' capacity in effectively identifying and responding to SEMH needs, through the delivery of centralised and bespoke training and follow-up work. A vast range of opportunities have been available for the researcher to work with CYP, their families, and school staff through consultation and termly planning meetings. An increased awareness of the variation in teachers' knowledge and practice, coupled with the researcher's beliefs and values around the importance of supporting SEMH needs within schools, may have influenced how the data has been gathered and analysed. This reiterates the necessity of reflexivity (Section 3.4).

With this experience and knowledge, a subjective research approach was chosen, which could facilitate the elicitation and analysis of teachers' understanding of and responses to CYP's SEMH needs. This felt essential due to the researcher's awareness of the complex interplay of social, historical and contextual factors which may contribute to teachers' practice. A collaborative approach fostering the co-construction of knowledge was deemed appropriate, aligning with semi-structured interviews and RTA (Braun & Clarke, 2022) as a methodology. This approach valued teachers' explicit contributions as their reality at a semantic level but also enabled deeper interpretation at a latent level, drawing on psychological knowledge and experiences. Careful consideration was made when developing the semi-structured interview schedule (Section 3.5.5.2; Appendix 3.9) and conducting the interviews (Section 3.5.5.3) to minimise the risk of interview questions and the researcher's responses being biased or indicative of their views.

Therefore, it was imperative for the researcher to maintain critically self-aware of the influence of her personal values and professional motivations on the research and its impact on the knowledge generated (Finlay, 2016).

3.5 Research Design and Process

3.5.1 Research Design

In keeping with the researcher's epistemological and ontological stance, focus groups and semi-structured interviews are both commonly utilised as methods for collecting qualitative data and are compatible with RTA (Braun & Clarke, 2022) as an analysis approach (Willig, 2013). The researcher initially intended to adopt an in-person, focus group design with a homogenous approach to grouping

participants (primary and secondary teachers) due to the distinct structural, pedagogical and systemic differences between primary and secondary schools. Group interaction is considered fundamental to focus groups, as rich discussion can be elicited through participants building upon one another's contributions, exchanging anecdotes, and reflecting on their own and others' experiences (Kitzinger, 1995) to generate nuanced insights (Krueger & Casey, 2014).

However, recruitment challenges arose, whereby some participants could not commit to travelling to a central location within the LA in the North of England to meet in person due to limited time and availability of transport. It was not possible to identify a mutually suitable date or time for the group to meet within the limited timeframe available for the doctoral research. Online video conference software, such as Microsoft Teams, was considered as an alternative modality to conduct the focus groups and may have offered access to more geographically diverse populations (Rupert et al., 2017) and reduced the time and travel commitment (Turner et al., 2021). However, the researcher was concerned that utilising an online forum may have impacted group dynamics (Moore et al., 2015), rapport-building between the researcher and participant group (de Souza et al., 2024), participant engagement (Stewart & Shamdasani, 2015), and may have resulted in some participants dominating the discussion while others may have contributed very little (Poliandri et al., 2023).

Instead, the researcher decided to employ individual semi-structured interviews via Microsoft Teams as a data collection method, and utilised the program's audio recording and transcription functions. This approach overcame the challenge of coordinating mutually convenient dates and times and reduced the travel and time commitments. It also offered enhanced flexibility to accommodate participants' availability, and the potential to broaden participant recruitment beyond the LA in the North of England. As the research does not aim to generalise findings but rather to explore teachers' understanding of and responses to CYP's SEMH needs, it was not required for the data to be gathered within a specific locality. However, due to the cultural and political context, it was deemed crucial that participants both received their ITT and worked in schools in England.

The benefits and limitations of structured, semi-structured and unstructured interviews were considered (**See Reflexive Diary Entry, Appendix 3.2**). A semi-structured interview format was decided upon, as this offered a means of eliciting rich, in-depth data (Bearman, 2019) and the flexibility for the researcher to adapt to participants' responses (Braun & Clarke, 2022) whilst maintaining a level of comparability across interviews (Smith & Osborn, 2015) to stay 'on track' to answer the RQs (Ruslin et al., 2022). Once trust and rapport are established between the researcher and participant

(DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019), semi-structured interviews have been suggested to facilitate participants' openness to share their views around sensitive topics (Flick, 2002).

The following subsections will outline participants and recruitment, ethical considerations, data collection and analysis, and an evaluation of quality in the present study.

3.5.2 Participants

3.5.2.1 Sample Selection

Within RTA, a 'typical' participant sample size is not predefined, as it is deemed the researcher's role to determine this based on the breadth and length of the study. However, Braun and Clarke (2013) recommend interviewing six to ten participants for small-scale research projects utilising semi-structured interviews. For the current study, the researcher sought to recruit within this range, comprising of 50% primary and 50% secondary teachers to ensure an even balance of perspectives. Purposive sampling was used to recruit participants who fit the inclusion criteria in Table 3.1.

Table 3.1. Inclusion criteria and justifications.

Inclusion Criteria	*Justification*
❖ *Qualified as a mainstream primary OR secondary school teacher in England.*	*To reflect ITT CCF (DfE, 2019b) pedagogy, policy, practice and legislation in England.*
❖ *Mainstream primary OR secondary school teacher and has taught exclusively within either infant/junior/primary OR secondary school settings.*	*To capture distinct, nuanced perspectives within specific educational contexts, without potentially conflating experiences by involving participants who have worked across both educational stages.*
❖ *Has only worked within mainstream school settings.*	*To align with the RQs which focus on eliciting the understanding and responses of mainstream teachers, rather than those working within specialist settings.*
❖ *Currently working within a mainstream infant/junior/primary OR secondary school as a teacher*	*To reflect contemporary practice which aligns with current educational policies, practices and contextual factors that may influence SEMH understanding and responses.*

in England, teaching CYP aged between 4-16 years.	
❖ *Currently working at a different setting to other participants.*	*To increase contextual and systemic variation and reduce potential homogeneity bias.*
❖ *Understands and speaks a proficient level of English.*	*Unavailability of funding for interpreters to assist with the semi-structured interviews.*

3.5.2.2 Recruitment Process

Upon receiving ethical approval (Appendix 3.3) in May 2024, the researcher liaised with her Placement Supervisor and the Principal EP from the EPS in the North of England where she was on placement as a TEP, and shared the ethical approval letter (Appendix 3.3) and supporting documentation (Appendices 3.5 to 3.10). The researcher contacted the SENDCos from the schools where she was the link EP, via email, to share the information sheet (Appendix 3.5) and recruitment poster (Appendix 3.6), and invited them to distribute this to all teachers within their settings who fit the inclusion criteria. At an EPS team meeting, the researcher presented her research proposal to the EP team, who disseminated the recruitment information with their link schools. SENDCos were reminded about research participation by their EP at their summer termly planning meetings. Expressions of interest were received from prospective participants via email, and three primary teachers and one secondary teacher were recruited through purposive sampling.

To expand reach to a larger pool of potential participants, the researcher sought ethical approval to share the recruitment poster on social media (Facebook, LinkedIn, and X), however there were initially no expressions of interest through these channels. This was likely attributable to the requirement for participants to travel to a central location in the North of England to attend in-person focus groups for data collection. This would have inherently excluded individuals unable to travel, or residing outside a reasonable commuting radius.

Due to these recruitment challenges, the researcher adapted the data collection method to semi-structured interviews via Microsoft Teams (Section 3.5.1), and ethical approval was received in November 2024 (Appendix 3.4). The researcher shared an updated recruitment poster with her link SENDCos, the EP team for distribution, and on social media (Facebook, LinkedIn and Twitter/X), which led to the recruitment of a further three secondary teachers and one primary teacher, totalling eight participants.

3.5.2.3 Final Sample

Eight participants took part in the study from LAs across England, comprising of four primary and four secondary teachers. To contextualise their experience and possible variation in training content, a summary of their role, the number of years as a class teacher, and the ITT route taken was recorded. Participants were invited to select a pseudonym to protect their identities. Demographic information and participant characteristics are presented in Table 3.2.

Table 3.2. Participant characteristics.

Pseudonym	*Role*	*School Context*	*Years as a Class Teacher*	*ITT Route*
Georgia	*Year 2 Teacher*	*Primary*	*10*	*Undergraduate degree in Primary Education with QTS*
Francis	*Reception - Year 2 Teacher in a SEND Resourced Provision within a mainstream school, and SENDCo*	*Primary*	*29*	*Undergraduate degree in Creative and Expressive Arts with Early Years with QTS*
Kate	*Reception - Year 2 Teacher in a SEND Resourced Provision within a mainstream school, and SENDCo*	*Primary*	*24*	*Undergraduate degree in Primary Education with QTS*
Nicola	*Reception Teacher and SENDCo*	*Primary*	*23*	*Undergraduate degree in Biological Sciences with QTS*
Katherine	*Years 7-11 Performing Arts and PE Teacher*	*Secondary*	*7*	*Undergraduate degree in Performing Arts, and PGCE*
Laura	*Years 7-11 English Teacher*	*Secondary*	*3*	*Undergraduate degree in Drama and Theatre Arts, and Teach First graduate scheme*

Doug	*Years 7-11 Science Teacher and SENDCo*	*Secondary*	*25*	*Undergraduate degree in Physiology, MSc in Deaf Education (QToD), and PGCE*
Holly	*Years 7-11 English and Media Studies Teacher*	*Secondary*	*6*	*Undergraduate degree in Drama and Theatre Arts, and School Direct graduate scheme*

3.5.3 Ethical Considerations

This research adheres to the British Psychological Society (BPS) Code of Ethics and Conduct (BPS, 2021a), the BPS Code of Human Research Ethics (BPS, 2021b), and the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC) Standards of Conduct, Performance and Ethics (HCPC, 2016). Ethical risks were identified, and actions were taken to mitigate against these. Ethical approval from the University of Nottingham was received in May 2024 (Appendix 3.3). A request to recruit participants via social media (Facebook, LinkedIn, and X), and to amend the data collection method from in-person focus groups to semi-structured interviews via Microsoft Teams was approved in November 2024 (Appendix 3.4).

Ethical considerations regarding informed consent, confidentiality, reducing harm, and participants' right to withdraw will now be outlined.

3.5.3.1 Informed Consent

To obtain participants' full and informed consent, guidance outlined in the BPS Code of Ethics and Conduct (BPS, 2021a), BPS Code of Human Research Ethics (BPS, 2021b) and Best Practice for Educational Psychologists in Gaining Consent (Association of Educational Psychologists, 2022) was strictly adhered to.

Within the researcher's LA, SENDCos were contacted via email by their link EPs and encouraged to share the information sheet (Appendix 3.5) and recruitment poster (Appendix 3.6) with teachers in their setting who met the inclusion criteria to invite their voluntary participation. Expressions of

interest were received via email, and the information sheet (Appendix 3.5), privacy notice (Appendix 3.7), and consent form (Appendix 3.8) were shared. The researcher offered initial meetings with teachers who had expressed interest to discuss the purpose of the study, detail the requirements of involvement, outline confidentiality and anonymity processes, and explain how the findings would be analysed. This would have provided the opportunity to clarify any questions prior to gaining informed consent, however, no participants requested this initial meeting. Consent was obtained in written form prior to data collection (Appendix 3.8).

Four participants were initially recruited expecting to participate in an in-person focus group. However, recruitment challenges arose, and the data collection method was adapted to semi-structured interviews via Microsoft Teams (Section 3.5.1). Having consented to participating in a focus group, participants were contacted via email and informed of the change in method, and an updated information sheet was shared (Appendix 3.5), with the opportunity to withdraw given. All participants responded and provided written consent via email to participate in a semi-structured interview via Microsoft Teams, with an understanding that this would be audio-recorded and transcribed. To enhance transparency and support informed consent, the interview topics and schedule (Appendix 3.9) were emailed to participants one week before the interview, allowing participants to review the questions and consider their responses in advance.

At the start of each interview, a script was read to reiterate the purpose and procedure, with the opportunity to address any questions about the research (Appendix 3.9). Ethical considerations were shared regarding anonymity and confidentiality, as well as participants' right to take a break or terminate the interview and withdraw their data from the study at any time. Verbal consent was subsequently obtained.

3.5.3.2 Confidentiality

At the start of participant interviews, participants were invited to select a pseudonym to maintain confidentiality. A privacy notice (Appendix 3.7) was reshared, outlining how participants' data would be protected in line with the Data Protection Act (Legislation.gov.uk, 2018).

Audio recordings and initial transcriptions were saved within the Microsoft Teams program, protected using the researcher's password and additional Microsoft authentication software. Audio recordings were deleted immediately following the researcher's amendments to and anonymisation of the transcripts, whereby all identifying information was removed or changed. Transcripts were stored in

an encrypted folder on the researcher's University of Nottingham OneDrive in line with the University's data policy.

3.5.3.3 Reducing the Risk of Harm

The nature of the research required participants to draw on their knowledge and experiences of supporting CYP with SEMH needs, which may have elicited personal memories and emotional distress. To mitigate against this, complete transparency was ensured by providing the semi-structured interview schedule (Appendix 3.9) one week in advance to forewarn participants of the prompt questions. At the start of the interview, the researcher acknowledged and normalised the possibility of experiencing uncomfortable emotions, given the topic's sensitive nature. Participants were invited to take a break or withdraw from the study at any point. They were reassured that they did not have to answer questions they did not feel comfortable with, their responses would not be judged, and there were no 'wrong' answers. This supported researcher-participant rapport and fostered a sense of openness and mutual respect.

Following completion of the interviews, debriefs were carried out (Appendix 3.10) and the researcher's contact details were shared for participants to ask questions or discuss any concerns that may have arisen. As participation was online, follow-up support was offered in person, either at the participant's school, the researcher's EPS office, or in a neutral location such as a public library meeting room.

3.5.3.4 Right to Withdraw

Before commencing the interviews and following their completion, the researcher reiterated participants' right to terminate the interview at any point and withdraw their data from the study until 3rd January 2025 before the data analysis phase. This was outlined in the information sheet (Appendix 3.5) and aligns with the voluntary nature of participants' involvement. Had any participants chosen to withdraw, their data would have been removed and permanently deleted.

3.5.4 Data Collection

3.5.4.1 Developing the Semi-Structured Interview Schedule

The semi-structured interview schedule (Appendix 3.9) was composed following guidance by Bearman (2019), and DeJonckheere and Vaughn (2019). To facilitate participants' in-depth, nuanced responses,

open-ended questions were prepared in an order that would 'optimise an intuitive and conversational flow' (Bearman, 2019, p.1). Questions were clear and neutral, avoiding jargon and leading language which may have influenced the data gathered (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). A pilot interview was conducted after receiving ethical approval to conduct semi-structured interviews (Bearman, 2019). This enabled the researcher to be aware of any questions that may evoke emotional responses, ask how the participant felt about the questions, and consider whether any questions were inappropriate, may be missing, or should be rephrased. The interview schedule was subsequently modified and refined.

Opening questions gathered background and demographical information, followed by two sections of questions focusing on teachers' *understanding* of CYP's SEMH needs and teachers' *responses* to CYP's SEMH needs. This approach was employed to ensure that relevant information would be elicited in relation to the RQs. Prompts and follow-up questions were considered, although use of these would depend on participants' responses (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). The semi-structured interview approach permitted the flexibility to ask unplanned, probing questions to elicit a deeper, richer level of data (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019).

3.5.4.2 Facilitating the Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews took place between November and December 2024. The interviews ranged from 37 to 58 minutes, with an average of 52 minutes. Interviews were limited to 60 minutes to mitigate against screen fatigue and support participants' engagement online. While scheduling the interview, participants were informed of the requirement to access a quiet, distraction-free environment (Poliandri et al., 2023) to participate in the online interview for 60 minutes, where they could speak openly and honestly about their knowledge and experiences. The interview and topic schedule (Appendix 3.9) was shared with participants one week in advance, which provided the opportunity to review the prompt questions and consider responses (Section 3.5.4.1).

Before beginning the interview, the researcher ensured that participants' microphones were functioning effectively and that consent forms had been received. Before initiating the audio recording and transcription, participants were invited to turn on their cameras to facilitate visual interaction between the researcher and participant whilst the researcher shared the introduction script (Appendix 3.9). This approach aims to foster rapport and connection, which is particularly important in an online setting (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019; Gill & Baillie, 2018). Demographical information was gathered to support the transferability of findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Participants were informed that they

did not have to answer questions they did not feel comfortable with to reduce the risk of emotional harm, and could take a break or withdraw from the study at any time. Participants were asked to turn off their camera throughout the interview, before the audio recording and transcription began. The researcher adopted an empathic, non-judgemental approach throughout the interview, using active listening skills to build rapport and trust, and validate participants' emotions and experiences. Secondary questions were used to clarify responses and to elicit participants' deeper reflections. At the end of the interview, participants were invited to ask questions, revisit previous questions, or share any further contributions they may have felt were relevant.

After the interview, a debrief (Appendix 3.10) was shared and participants were reminded of their right to withdraw and the researcher's availability if follow-up support was required. The next steps of the research process regarding data analysis were shared, and an approximate timeframe was given to indicate when the research would be available for participants to read, should they wish.

3.5.5 Data Analysis

3.5.5.1 Transcription

Microsoft Teams' in-built transcription software was used to transcribe the interviews in real time, which were downloaded by the researcher following each interview. To ensure the accuracy of transcriptions, these were reviewed manually whilst listening to the audio recordings, enabling the identification and correction of errors to form verbatim transcripts. As the study aimed to construct themes around teachers' understanding of and responses to CYP's SEMH needs, data not relevant to the analysis was removed (O'Connell & Kowal, 1995), e.g., when a participant's doorbell rang during the interview. The researcher removed all identifying information and replaced participants' names and school names with chosen pseudonyms. Punctuation was added to improve readability.

It has been argued that in virtual research, the use of automatic transcription may reduce researchers' familiarity with the dataset, compared to manual transcription, as the process of manually deciphering interviews supports deeper engagement and absorption of their content (Poliandri et al., 2023). This was mitigated by the researcher listening to the audio recordings multiple times and re-reading the transcripts simultaneously.

3.5.5.2 The Process of RTA

As a methodology, RTA (Braun & Clarke, 2022) comprises of a six-step process: Becoming familiar with the dataset through the repeated reading of the transcripts, coding the data, generating initial themes, revising and developing themes, defining and naming a final set of themes, and organising and writing a report around those themes (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Although there could be an assumption that this framework is linear, researchers are encouraged to revisit steps as required, as part of an iterative, flexible process (Byrne, 2022). The steps taken by the researcher to conduct the data analysis using RTA (Braun & Clarke, 2022) will now be presented.

Phase One: Becoming familiar with the dataset through the repeated reading of the transcripts

The transcription process (Section 3.5.5.1), including listening to the audio recording and re-reading the transcript multiple times, enabled the researcher to become immersed within the dataset. This facilitated the researcher's engagement with the dataset at a critical level. Participant data was transferred to a table on Microsoft Word. Questions began to develop, with initial thoughts around recurring ideas and patterns within and across the dataset regarding the RQs. Such questions can arise during this phase, and when moving into the coding phase (Braun & Clarke, 2022), and initial thoughts were noted in a column beside the data (Appendix 3.12). The entire dataset was printed in the table format for manual analysis. With RQ2 in mind, where potential similarities and differences between primary and secondary teachers' understanding of and responses to CYP's SEMH needs would be explored, primary participants' data was printed on pink paper, and secondary participants' data was printed on green paper. This enabled a clear visual distinction during the analysis process.

Phase Two: Coding the data

Within the coding phase, the researcher engaged in a systematic process (Braun & Clarke, 2022), holding the RQs in mind whilst reviewing each data item to identify areas of meaning that may be relevant to the study's aims. Braun and Clarke (2022) suggest that reviewing the dataset in a different order each time can help the researcher to code in a way which is more balanced and consistent. The researcher read through the dataset four times, in a different order each time, and tentative codes were written on Post-it notes. Each code was constructed to represent a distinct meaning, rather than encompassing multiple meanings. Coding labels were revised and refined multiple times through an iterative process, at a semantic and latent level (Appendix 3.13)

Phase Three: Generating initial themes

Braun and Clarke (2022) suggest that this phase can incorporate a combined approach, utilising computer-based and manual processes. The researcher transferred the initial codes to the computer, printed them, and engaged with them manually, beginning to cluster them into groups of others with similar meanings (Appendix 3.14). Each code was coloured pink and green in proportion to the ratio of primary (pink) to secondary (green) teacher quotes to enable a clear visual distinction around how the code had been formed. These clusters became initial themes and sub-themes (Appendix 3.15).

Phase Four: Revision and development of themes

During this phase, the researcher re-engaged with the codes and the entire dataset. Initial themes were reviewed and reconstructed, and some codes were removed from the initial theme clusters. New themes were constructed that the researcher felt captured the meaning more accurately. A coding refinement table was created to illustrate the researcher's thoughts during this process (Appendix 3.16). The researcher also began to make links between the dataset and theoretical knowledge and existing literature.

Phase Five: Defining and naming a final set of themes

Themes were refined further, which provided a clear and organised structure to support the report-writing phase. The names of the themes were considered in greater depth, and some were renamed (Appendix 3.17). Thematic maps were generated for each RQ (Figures 4.2 and 4.3). This refinement continued into phase six as the researcher continued to interpret and reconstruct during the write-up process.

Phase Six: Organising and writing a report around those themes

Braun and Clarke (2022) deem phase six as a crucial element of the process, as it centres around bringing the data together to construct a story regarding the RQs. The themes continued to evolve throughout this stage. Links were explicitly made between the themes and existing literature, and implications for EPs and educational settings were illuminated. In subsequent chapters, the researcher refers to primary and secondary 'participants', rather than 'teachers'. This terminological decision was made to clarify that the findings represent the perspectives of this particular participant group and not necessarily the wider teaching population, thereby mitigating the risk of over-generalisation.

3.6 Evaluating Quality in the Present Study

Lincoln and Guba (1985) highlight the importance of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability in qualitative research to enhance the trustworthiness and rigour of findings. Audit trails, reflexivity and peer review are recommended to increase qualitative research's stability, consistency and overall dependability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

To increase credibility and confirmability, strategies such as member checking, triangulation, and peer debriefing to review findings from the research were adopted (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Aligning with an interpretivist epistemology, anonymised transcripts and the researcher's initial thoughts (Appendix 3.12) were shared with participants for member checking, requiring them to review for accuracy and error correction (López-Zerón et al., 2021) to prevent any potential misrepresentation prior to beginning the data analysis process (Candela, 2019). Following analysis of the data, initial codes and themes were peer reviewed with a TEP colleague also utilising an RTA methodology (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

Braun and Clarke's (2006) *15-point checklist of criteria for good thematic analysis* (Appendix 3.8) was utilised to increase the quality of the analysis. The researcher maintained a reflexive diary to support critical reflection (Marian, 2020) and promote complete transparency of their thoughts, feelings, and methodological decisions throughout the research process (Braun & Clarke, 2022) (e.g. Appendices 4.6 to 4.11). Although generalisability is not required in qualitative research (Leung, 2015; Westby, 2021), the researcher provided rich descriptions of the participants and research processes to enable the transferability of findings (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Bracketing was used to acknowledge the researcher's biases and preconceptions regarding their interpretation of the data. This audit trail is deemed essential within qualitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), particularly when utilising an RTA methodology (Braun & Clarke, 2022) where a latent level of interpretation is adopted (Levitt et al., 2016) to increase the credibility and trustworthiness of findings. Findings from the RTA process carried out in this research are presented in *Chapter Four*.

Chapter Four: Findings

4.1 Chapter Overview

This chapter presents the RTA findings concerning mainstream primary and secondary teachers' understanding of and responses to CYP's SEMH needs. The findings will also present similarities and differences between primary and secondary participants' understanding and responses. Findings are aligned with the relativist ontology of the study, which acknowledges the influence of participants' contexts, personal and professional experiences, values, and beliefs on their understanding of and responses to CYP's SEMH needs. Aligning with the study's interpretivist epistemology, findings have been co-constructed between the researcher and participants through collective meaning-making in an interactive process (Willis, 2007a; Mertens, 2024). The philosophical positioning of these findings is detailed within *Chapter Three*.

As outlined in *Chapter Two*, the researcher initially posed four RQs (Section 2.6.3). However, during the data gathering and analysis processes, a decision was made to merge RQ1 with RQ2, and RQ3 with RQ4. This was due to the researcher's interpretation that teachers' 'understanding' and 'responses' were intertwined as concepts and, therefore, not possible to separate. **See Reflexive Diary Entry (Appendix 4.1)**. Braun and Clarke (2022) emphasise the importance of refining RQs throughout the research process if their structure no longer aligns with the data (Section 3.3.4.5). The RQs were therefore adapted, and the following were answered:

1. *What do mainstream primary and secondary teachers understand about CYP's SEMH, and how do they respond to CYP's SEMH needs?*
2. *Are there similarities and differences between what mainstream primary and secondary teachers understand about CYP's SEMH, and how they respond to CYP's SEMH needs?*

The chapter will present findings corresponding to RQ1, with associated themes and sub-themes, which will be discussed alongside participants' verbatim quotations. Subsequently, the findings relating to RQ2 will be presented, following the same structure. The chapter will conclude with a summary of RTA findings.

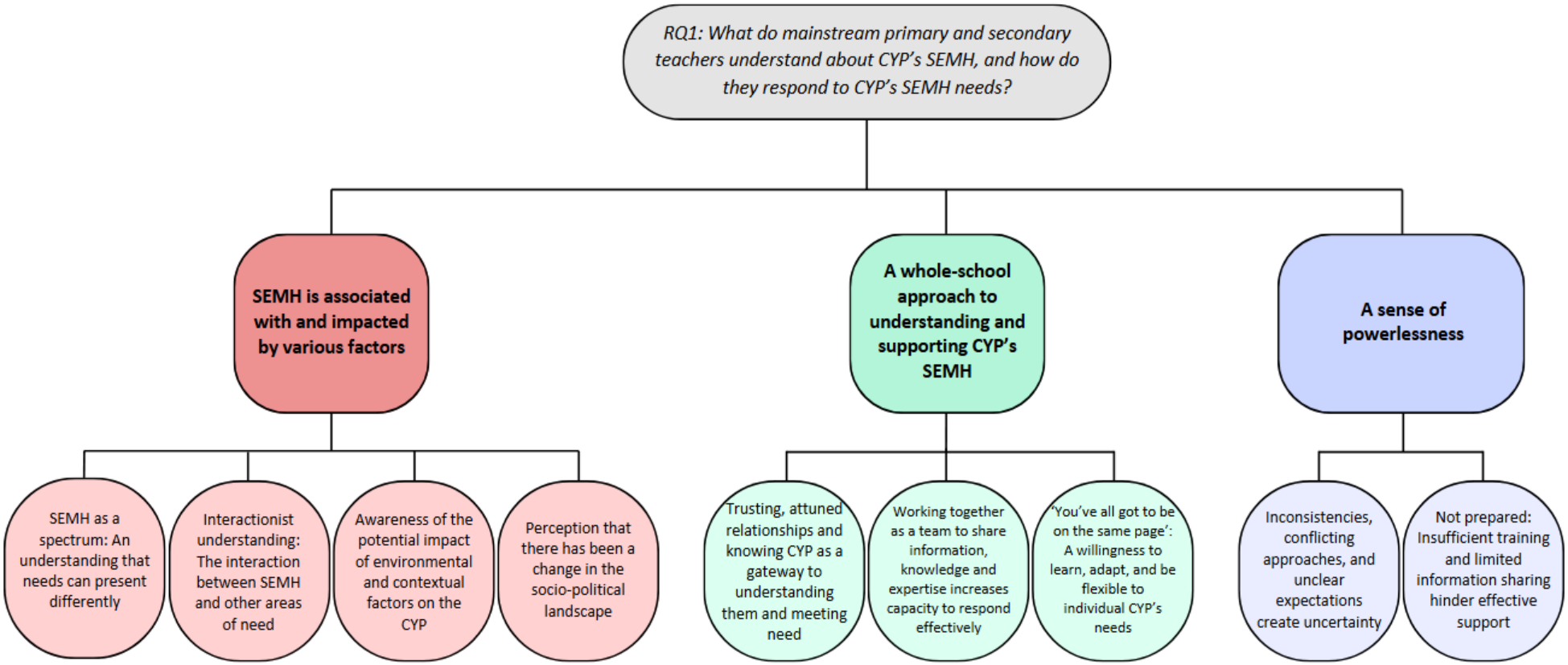
4.2 RQ1: What do mainstream primary and secondary school teachers understand about CYP's SEMH, and how do they respond to CYP's SEMH needs?

Three themes were constructed from participants' data, as presented in Figure 4.1:

- *SEMH is associated with and impacted by various factors*
- *A whole-school approach to understanding and supporting CYP's SEMH*
- *A sense of powerlessness*

A table was created to outline the initial codes, sub-themes and themes for RQ1 (Appendix 4.2). An additional table highlights the prevalence of participants' quotes contributing to each sub-theme and theme (Appendix 4.4).

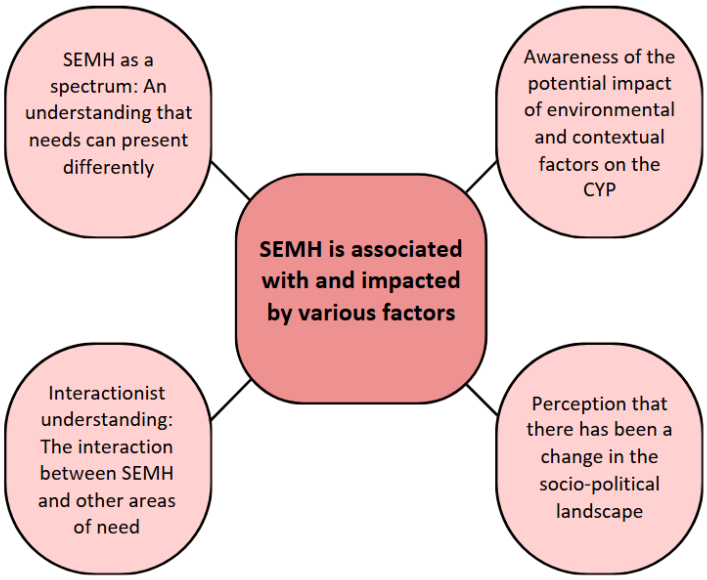
Figure 4.1. Thematic map illustrating the RTA themes and sub-themes in relation to RQ1.



4.2.1 Theme: SEMH is associated with and impacted by various factors

The researcher interpreted teachers' understanding of SEMH as associated with and impacted by various factors as a prominent theme across the dataset. This was demonstrated through participants' constructions around the meaning they made of the term 'SEMH', how SEMH needs may present, and factors perceived as contributory to or causal of SEMH needs. Sub-themes were constructed to capture this: '*SEMH as a spectrum: An understanding that needs can present differently*', '*Interactionist understanding: The interaction between SEMH and other areas of need*', '*Awareness of the potential impact of environmental and contextual factors on the CYP*', and '*Perception that there has been a change in the socio-political landscape*' (Figure 4.2.1).

Figure 4.2.1. Thematic map illustrating 'SEMH is associated with and impacted by various factors', with associated sub-themes.



4.2.1.1 Sub-theme: SEMH as a spectrum: An understanding that needs can present differently

Most participants shared conceptualisations of SEMH as being on a spectrum or continuum, which can fluctuate significantly within and between individuals. Francis shared her perception that SEMH is not a fixed state: *"people can experience both, which is good or poor mental health"*. The researcher interpreted Nicola's understanding of SEMH as a spectrum ranging from a subtle, withdrawn and quiet presentation to one characterised by more overt and observable physical behaviours:

"They could be withdrawn, or they could be heightened. Very, very upset, crying at tiny little things. Or they could be very, very extreme, giddy and bouncing off the walls." (Nicola)

Similarly, Doug spoke of SEMH as the area of need with the broadest range of needs and presentations:

"I think that is the biggest, kind of, bracket." "All your, sort of, mental health difficulties, all your emotional difficulties, all the adverse childhood experiences, trauma, all those social issues, all get lumped into there. And it can be absolutely immense." (Doug)

Doug suggested that "*you can't just go, 'they've got SEMH difficulties'"* due to the "*immense*" range of presentations and needs within "*that bracket*" as there is "*always something new*". This illuminates the complex, unique and evolving nature of SEMH, emphasising that assumptions about a CYP's needs cannot be made solely based on being labelled as having "*SEMH difficulties"*. Francis spoke of associating SEMH needs with emotional regulation difficulties, which can present in "*various ways"*:

"They could be showing distress, and that comes in various ways, that could be vocally, that could be withdrawn, they might be seeming very anxious, struggling with their ability to engage with the world and others. Not able to manage their emotions." (Francis)

Francis discussed observable behaviours indicating emotional dysregulation, from withdrawal and difficulty engaging with others, to vocal expression and "*emotional outbursts"*, aligning with Doug's perception that SEMH needs are not homogenous but exist on a broad spectrum. Holly shared an understanding that CYP's SEMH needs may not be immediately apparent in school due to their ability to conceal their needs:

"Students that seem fine when they're in your classroom, etcetera, could be showing very different sides of themselves at home. It's like they hold on all day, and kind of get through the school day, and then they get home, and it all just comes out." (Holly)

Holly's narrative indicates an understanding of the significant emotional release which can occur due to CYP trying to maintain a calm exterior presentation to conceal their needs. This may also reflect an understanding of the mental exhaustion that can be associated with masking, and conveys a sense of urgency to access a 'safe environment' due to the inability to suppress the emotion any longer.

Several secondary participants shared an awareness of medicalised diagnoses of conditions such as ADHD, anxiety and eating disorders falling within the category of 'SEMH', but also an understanding of 'SEMH needs' as a diagnosis itself:

"Perhaps parents not getting the diagnosis (of SEMH needs). Parents not taking them to the doctors." (Holly)

This understanding may reflect an essentialist perception of SEMH needs, whereby decisions around whether these needs 'are' or 'are not' present are reserved solely for medical professionals and are possibly considered as more of a fixed state due to the permanence of a diagnosis. This may distance teachers from feeling confident in identifying, understanding and responding effectively to these needs, or assume that this role is not within their domain.

4.2.1.2 Sub-theme: Interactionist understanding: The interaction between SEMH and other areas of need

There was a consensus across all participants that SEMH needs can impact on and be impacted by other needs. The researcher interpreted dominant discussion around a reciprocal relationship between SEMH needs and cognition and learning needs, which participants described as a potential barrier to CYP being in the classroom:

"They could be linked to cognitive difficulties. You know, if they've, they've struggled with school every day, they'll eventually get to the point where they think, 'What's the point? This is rubbish', and I think quite often cognitive difficulties lead to SEMH difficulties because if their cognitive needs aren't being met correctly, then everything becomes a battle. And that is shown in the classroom. That's where that battle's fought." (Doug)

Doug describes a '*battle*', whereby persistent struggles with learning can lead to frustration, lack of motivation and disengagement, and impact on a CYP's SEMH. This perspective moves beyond viewing SEMH needs in isolation but through a broader lens with consideration around precipitating and perpetuating factors. The phrasing '*everything becomes a battle*' may also convey the idea that these difficulties are not isolated, but impact upon the CYP's wider school experience. Holly reflected on her school's transition from ability sets to mixed ability classes and the positive impact this had on CYP's sense of competence and motivation, reinforcing the idea that SEMH and learning are strongly interlinked:

"They also had this mindset of, 'oh, I'm only in bottom set. So, what's the point?'. And it was so sad to see. And now, since we've got rid of that, and they are surrounded by a range of different students with a range of different abilities, but it just means everyone's just more settled, and I think, they don't, they don't feel different." "And it's just really, kind of, promoted like, enthusiasm with the children that you didn't really used to see enthusiasm from, and that's really nice." (Holly)

Primary participants discussed the interconnectedness between SLCN and SEMH:

"I think when you have those communication needs, it leads into your social, emotional, and mental health, because you can't be social because you don't have the communication skills. Therefore, it makes you very emotional when people can't understand you, or if you can't understand them." (Nicola)

In these examples, SEMH needs appear to be primarily driven by SLCN through emotional distress arising from CYP's inability to express their wants and needs and interact with others.

4.2.1.3 Sub-theme: Awareness of the potential impact of environmental and contextual factors on the CYP

All participants demonstrated an awareness that environmental factors, such as trauma, can impact a CYP's SEMH. Laura shared, '*probably like 8 times out of 10*', '*things going on at home*' underpin a CYP's SEMH needs, emphasising the need for a holistic lens to consider the ecological system within which needs may be situated. Doug and Francis listed a range of ACEs a CYP may be exposed to within the home and wider community, which teachers may not be aware of:

"There could be substance abuse in the home. There could be domestic violence in the home. There could be substance abuse from them." "Outside of school, some of these children are involved in gangs, involved in knife crime, involved in some really quite shocking things." (Doug)

"Bereavement. They could have been subjected to abuse, all kinds of abuse, verbal, violence, sexual." "And that could be affecting that they've not had any positive attachments." "Or they may attach themselves to people who are not appropriate for them." (Francis)

Holly conceptualised SEMH needs to stem from a "*mix of nature and or nurture"*, recognising that previous trauma and instability can have a long-term impact on SEMH, even in isolated occurrences or if their circumstances change:

"When they were younger, not having a stable home life, even if it's more stabilised now. I know things from infancy can really affect people as they grow up as well. It might be a single traumatic event that happened in their life, and they're still dealing with that." (Holly)

Georgia discussed the potential impact of parental conflict and parents' MH needs on CYP. The researcher interpreted Georgia's understanding that when CYP are exposed to challenging dynamics at home, and parents are unable to model regulated behaviour and navigate conflict healthily, CYP's acquisition of coping mechanisms, emotional resilience, and emotional and behavioural regulation skills can be impacted:

"They're maybe not getting a good model of what managing their emotions and mental health looks like. If it's not being modelled by their adults at home, for example, if things are challenging at home between parents and they're getting cross with one another, if the parents aren't very regulated themselves, that's like the model child has as well." (Georgia)

Participants shared how CYP's needs can present differently between contexts:

"Sometimes it doesn't come out at school, or it doesn't come out at home." (Francis)

"It's always interesting to see how some children are in your lesson compared to what they might be in a maths lesson, for example. You know, sometimes you can have real differences, just because it's a different teacher on a different day." (Doug)

The researcher interpreted these perceptions to indicate that CYP's behavioural presentations can fluctuate depending on their surroundings, the people they are interacting with, and the specific context they are in. This also suggests that CYP's needs may not always be present or may be concealed in particular contexts, indicating an understanding that information should be triangulated to gain a holistic understanding of these.

4.2.1.4 Sub-theme: Perception that there has been a change in the socio-political landscape

Across most participants, the researcher interpreted perceptions that socio-political changes within CYP's ecological system may impact their SEMH. Francis shared observations of increased "*pressure in households*" where families are experiencing "*financial difficulty*". She recognised changes in "*dynamics in families*" with "*divorce and separations and kids displaced*", resulting in CYP not having "*the same security as they did in the past*".

Laura recognised *"the pressures of having to meet targets and goals in school exams"* as contributory to SEMH needs, and Doug conveyed that this pressure has increased significantly over time:

"The pressures and demands of GCSEs are far higher than they've ever been. And I think that really does exacerbate any SEMH issues that were already there." (Doug)

This possibly reflects an increased emphasis on academic targets within the broader socio-political landscape, and suggests that CYP are navigating a school system within which achievement is prioritised, potentially at the expense of their SEMH. **See Reflexive Diary Entry (Appendix 4.6)**. Doug described a "*pandemic hangover*" due to COVID-19, which he perceives has compounded this pressure due to the stark contrast in expectations and experiences:

"They were on live lessons"…"we were expecting them to stay at home and do a bit on the computer if they could. And we've flipped that to, 'right, you're in school, you're doing as you're told, and you've got GCSEs soon'. So, it's had a massive impact on SEMH. And we're finding significant numbers of children that just can't cope." (Doug)

Kate perceived that increased use of electronic devices in the home, such as phones and tablets, has substantially impacted CYP's speech and language development and reciprocal interaction skills. She conveyed significant concerns regarding the profound impact of this deficit in skill acquisition on CYP's ability to "*interact or play*" with peers:

"Parents will admit to me here, that they give them the phone or the iPad so they'll sit down and eat if they're watching that. Massive impact. And then that follows on with the impact on their speech. So then, they're not speaking to each other, then, they're not able to talk to their peers in school. Then they're not interacting or playing." "They're not seeing people's mouths move or they're not hearing discussions or talking as much as they were." (Kate)

Laura highlighted the evolving pressures associated with the technological and societal shifts around CYP's increased use of social media and face-altering filters:

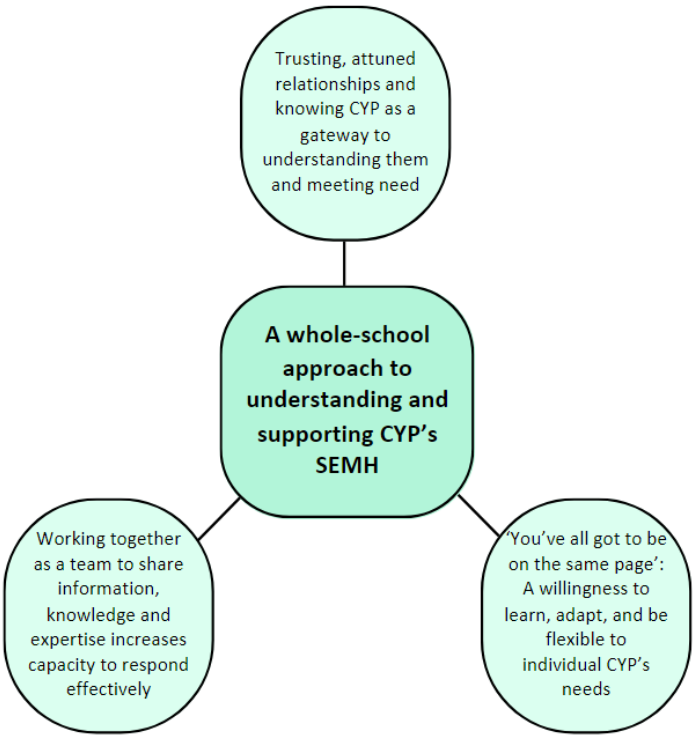
"Children that I've spoken to that are so concerned about how they look without using filters. It's probably every other student at least. Don't get me wrong, I know as a teenager and growing up, you are changing and a bit concerned with your looks. I think that's been an age-old thing, but I just feel like technology and just society in general has just exacerbated that. And having to live up to certain social expectations, and seeing it on social media and this feeling of comparison." (Laura)

Laura normalised concerns about appearance during adolescence, but emphasised how social media can intensify these feelings through heightened self-scrutiny and comparison. She suggested that this may be fuelled by "*comparison*", possibly through exposure to curated, idealised images online and a self-imposed pressure to conform to perceived societal expectations.

4.2.2 Theme: A whole-school approach to understanding and supporting CYP's SEMH

The researcher constructed a theme predominantly comprising of primary participants' data, demonstrating the utilisation of a whole-school approach to better understand CYP's SEMH needs and respond effectively. Sub-themes were formed illuminating various factors contributing to this approach: '*Trusting, attuned relationships and knowing CYP as a gateway to understanding them and meeting need*', '*Working together as a team to share information, knowledge, and expertise increases capacity to respond effectively*', and ''*You've all got to be on the same page': A willingness to learn, adapt, and be flexible to individual CYP's needs*' (Figure 4.2.2).

Figure 4.2.2. Thematic map illustrating 'A whole-school approach to understanding and supporting CYP's SEMH', with associated sub-themes.



4.2.2.1 Sub-theme: Trusting, attuned relationships and knowing CYP as a gateway to understanding them and meeting need

Most participants shared narratives indicating an understanding that attuned, trusting relationships and knowing CYP can be a gateway to identifying and meeting their needs. Nicola highlighted the importance of attunement, indicating that knowing CYP enables teachers to establish a baseline from which changes in behaviour can be recognised:

"If I had a child in my class whose, maybe, behaviour's changed"… "just something that stands out, that niggle, where you think 'something's just not quite right here and we need to explore this a little bit more', how can we support it?" (Nicola)

Francis discussed the pivotal role of teachers in providing strong, consistent attachments, particularly for CYP who may not have experienced a secure attachment with their primary caregiver:

"One attachment is enough to get somebody through difficult times and probably, a lot of people have said, celebrities particularly, that it's saved them, you know, having that one teacher, that one adult in school"… "who's in their corner, that can bring them through it." "The earlier on it happens

in a child's life, if they've got a secure attachment, the more resilience they're going to have then out there to cope with traumas and things that come along." (Francis)

Nicola highlighted the importance of CYP experiencing a sense of safety and belonging within school, reflecting on a comment made by an Ofsted inspector:

"We were praised on our well-being in school." "He said, 'the children, the staff, every classroom I went into', he said, 'I could feel it', and he said, 'I felt part of that family in the time I've been here'. Which, to us, was more important than anything else, because that's what we want for our children. We want everybody to, to feel like that in our school. Because if you've got that in place, everything else should slot in nicely, it should make everything else easier." (Nicola)

4.2.2.2 Sub-theme: Working together as a team to share information, knowledge, and expertise increases capacity to respond effectively

The researcher identified a consensus across all participants that working together to share information, knowledge, and expertise is a valuable mechanism to better support CYP's SEMH needs. Francis talked of the advantages of working within a small school setting, which enables teachers to "*know our children well*", facilitates a "*close-knit team*", and a high level of collaborative working. **See Reflexive Diary Entry (Appendix 4.7)**.

Georgia discussed the value of joint reflection through informal peer-supervision-style discussions, which she explained enables the sharing of approaches and strategies found by teachers to be supportive or unhelpful when working with individual CYP:

"Things might happen with certain children, and we'll say, 'oh, this went well' or 'actually this time when I handled this situation like this, it didn't go particularly well'. And we talk about 'okay so why was that?'. We're very, sort of, reflective." (Georgia)

The researcher interpreted an understanding that gaining multiple perspectives can facilitate collaborative problem-solving through pooling teachers' expertise and knowledge and indicates a school culture in which continuous learning amongst teachers is fostered and valued. Francis and Kate shared that staff meeting time is allocated to the sharing of up-to-date information:

"We spend time at staff meetings discussing our children, and flagging up when we're concerned, and all the information is put onto our CPOMS system, so everybody knows when somebody's having some issues at home or at school or, you know, there's things going on." (Francis)

The use of staff meeting time, where attendance from all teachers is expected, enables "*everybody*" to have an understanding of potential SEMH needs or safeguarding concerns. This suggests that collective awareness is a school priority to improve consistency and effective responses. Whole-school use of CPOMS indicates a structured, systematic approach to logging and monitoring concerns and facilitates the identification of patterns, enabling timely intervention where needed.

Secondary participants discussed the use of Pupil Passports (PPs) to outline CYP's needs and support strategies, which are shared with teaching staff. Holly discussed how these are regularly updated to reflect evolving needs and are completed with the CYP, reflecting a CYP-centred approach:

"Students themselves speak with our SEND team, and they fill in their Profiles, like 'things that help me', 'things that I struggle with', 'what I try to do in class', 'what I try to do at home'." "Those Profiles are updated every term. So, they're updated really, really regularly because obviously, what helps a student at one time in their life isn't going to help them at another time." (Holly)

Francis highlighted the importance of teachers having interoceptive awareness to critically reflect on their meta-emotion philosophy if a CYP becomes dysregulated. This enables teachers to determine whether they are "*in the right headspace*" to "*remain calm*" in their response to mitigate further escalation. Francis reiterated the importance of drawing on others' support, indicating that working together as a team increases capacity to respond effectively:

"If you feel like you're struggling, you can't manage it, then you get somebody else and you step away from those times… you've got to be in the right headspace to deal with that as well. I think, it's about always trying to remain calm, isn't it? Not escalating yourself because that just escalates the behaviour even further." "There's always people to do that. Step back and let somebody else deal with that escalation. Because we're, well, we're a very supportive team." (Francis)

Within-school CPD was discussed as a valuable mechanism to share knowledge through teachers delivering training and briefings in areas of expertise, and in light of lived experiences, to build capacity within the team. Holly valued a CPD opportunity whereby a colleague utilised staff meeting time to

share their lived experience as a parent of a CYP with ADHD, offering practical strategies that were well-received by the wider staff team:

"The diagnosis was helping her to understand what was going on with her daughter, and in her daughter's mind. And she thought that'd be really useful to share with the staff, because we obviously see a very different version of her daughter at school than she sees at home." (Holly)

4.2.2.3 Sub-theme: 'You've all got to be on the same page': A willingness to learn, adapt, and be flexible to individual CYP's needs

Narratives across all participants suggested an understanding that consistency, a willingness to learn, be flexible, and adapt to CYP's individual needs are important. Primary participants emphasised whole-school training as a mechanism for systemic change to increase consistency, shared understanding, and confidence:

"We've had a decent amount of training on how to handle these situations and what that looks like in our school, but it really just, sort of, happens by osmosis I think." (Georgia)

The phrase "*happens by osmosis*" suggests that, following training, much of the learning and change in practice occurs informally over time through observations, experience, and interactions with colleagues. Georgia explained, *"so, in terms of training, if you were to ask me how confident I feel to deal with certain children's behaviours, and how to help them with their SEMH needs, I would say I do actually feel fairly confident."* For Francis, Nicola and Kate, extensive training around SEMH was accessed through the MHST delivered by LA EPs. Francis suggests that this has increased capacity and confidence within school to identify emerging needs:

"Everybody's undergone a lot of the social and emotional training, you know, the Emotion Coaching, the ACEs, we've done it, all of us. And that's support staff, teaching staff and dinner staff as well. So, I think it's the fact that everybody's on the same page really, that everybody knows the things that they need to be looking for." (Francis)

The decision to access whole-school training may indicate recognition of a specific area of need within school, and may reflect an openness to adapt practice and enact systemic change, demonstrating a commitment to increasing staff's capacity and improving outcomes for CYP. Kate expressed that

"*refresher training is needed more frequently in this area*" to support embedding alternative approaches. **See Reflexive Diary Entry (Appendix 4.8)**.

Willingness and flexibility to support CYP's needs were demonstrated through an understanding that alternative approaches with different expectations may need to be implemented:

"We've tried to make the foundation curriculum as accessible as possible. So, it's sort of really evolved over the years." (Georgia)

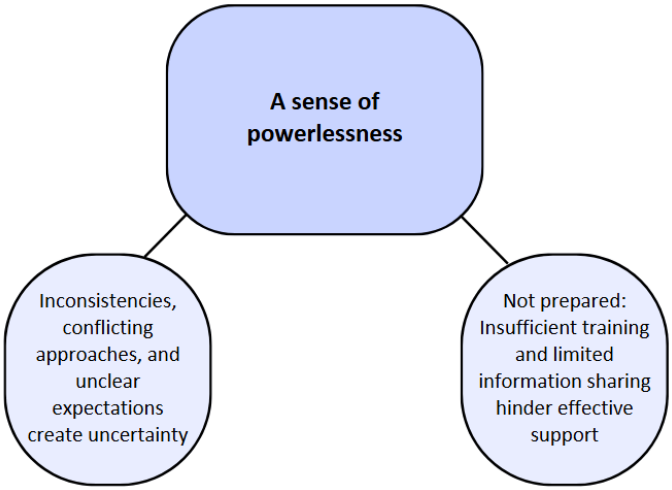
Holly explained how her school fosters a responsive and inclusive environment by allowing all CYP access to the SEMH provision within school, regardless of whether they are identified as having SEMH needs. Holly explained that this level of flexibility has helped to reduce absences as CYP feel supported in knowing they can access this space as a "*safety blanket*" if needed.

For additional specialised support to understand and respond to a CYP's needs, primary participants shared that they would request involvement from external professionals such as outreach or their LA EP.

4.2.3 Theme: A sense of powerlessness

The researcher interpreted a sense of powerlessness, predominantly across secondary participants, associated with unclear expectations of teachers in relation to supporting CYP's needs, inconsistencies in approaches, a perceived lack of knowledge regarding SEMH, insufficient information sharing, and limited training. Sub-themes were constructed to capture this: '*Inconsistencies, conflicting approaches, and unclear expectations create uncertainty*', and '*Not prepared: Insufficient training and limited information sharing hinder effective support*' (Figure 4.2.3).

Figure 4.2.3. Thematic map illustrating 'A sense of powerlessness', with associated sub-themes.



4.2.3.1 Sub-theme: Inconsistencies, conflicting approaches, and unclear expectations create uncertainty

Narratives around inconsistencies and unclear expectations were shared by secondary participants, while primary participants acknowledged the challenges which can arise when support staff may not have an understanding around the utilisation of de-escalation and co-regulation strategies in response to a CYP experiencing emotional dysregulation:

"There can be this narrative of, you're rewarding a child for 'bad behaviour', or 'naughty behaviour'. But actually, it's not. They're dysregulated. They're emotionally not at their best. So, let's take their mind off it and do something else for a little bit. Even if it's 5 minutes of Lego. I do sometimes feel like there can be a little bit of friction with support staff." (Georgia)

Doug described inconsistencies in staff's responses to SEMH needs, theorising that "*some teachers are naturally gifted in terms of being able to relate to children and work with children. Other teachers, their strength is more in the expert subject knowledge*". This implies that teachers holding "*expert subject knowledge*" may relate less to CYP and find it more challenging to understand their needs, which he described has resulted in "*pockets of excellent and pockets of rubbish*" practice. Doug explained that a restorative approach is written into the school's behaviour policy despite staff not receiving training in this approach, likely exacerbating inconsistencies in teachers' responses. Competing responsibilities and systemic pressures reportedly further hindered teachers' capacity to engage in restorative conversations consistently.

"Sometimes you just don't have chance to do it as a class teacher, you know, you're busy. You're on duty. You've got a meeting, you're here, there and everywhere. But then other teachers are absolutely nailed on with it." (Doug)

Laura spoke at length about the internal conflict and uncertainty she experiences due to unclear expectations of how to implement the behaviour policy for CYP with SEMH needs:

"The behaviour policy is pretty standard. There's not a subsection for SEND needs. It is just meant to fulfil all students." "Because you understand some sort of context and you're not meant to treat them differently. But at the same time, you <u>are</u> meant to treat them differently and adapt your teaching style." "They always talk about swiping the small stuff, but maybe you can't always swipe the small stuff because they'd be out of the classroom in two seconds?" (Laura)

Laura conveyed a sense of disempowerment through "*mixed messages*" from SLT, which the researcher interpreted as causal of uncertainty for both the teacher and the CYP:

"I followed behaviour system with one child that was in care. He'd had a really difficult time, but he was causing a lot of disruption in my lesson, so I had to, I had, I did what school asked me to. So, I sent him out and he was meant to get a detention. But then, I had his Head of Year going, 'oh no, we can't give him a detention because, you know, it might drive him to do this or that, and we're trying to keep him in school'. So, when he comes to my lesson next, nothing's happened, no reprimand." "And that's where you kind of go into your own intuition and your own knowledge and just try and do the best that you can, and you leave thinking, did I do the best I can? I don't know." (Laura)

Laura's hesitation indicates a sense of discomfort and uncertainty in following the behaviour policy for a CYP she understood to have had "*a really difficult time*". This may also reflect the absence of alternative strategies to draw upon in the moment. SLT overriding Laura's decision may have caused further uncertainty regarding the expected course of action. Her reflectiveness and concern around whether she had done "*the best (she) can*" indicates an emotional toll from navigating different priorities: responding to the CYP's needs, Laura's professional judgement, and following the behaviour policy.

4.2.3.2 Sub-theme: Not prepared: Insufficient training and limited information sharing hinder effective support

Most participants shared discourses around a sense of unpreparedness to identify and effectively respond to CYP's SEMH needs following ITT. Kate shared her experience of ITT, noting a strong focus on imparting "*behaviour management*" strategies, without acknowledging "*social and emotional needs*". Doug provided a direct and critical reflection of the perceived inadequacy of his ITT, suggesting that he felt ill-equipped to fulfil his teaching role: "*Teacher training was rubbish*." Katherine shared similar views, also reflecting a sense of unreadiness: "*I don't think we ever got taught enough*", while Holly expressed that SEMH was "*not hugely*" covered within her ITT. Kate, Nicola, and Francis discussed receiving valuable SEMH training through the SENDCo qualification, the Senior Mental Health Leader (SMHL) training, and Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) England course. This suggests that training in SEMH is not ordinarily available through ITT, but additional for those fulfilling a specific role.

Secondary participants expressed a need for bespoke training, with contextualised "*real-life case study examples*" (Laura) to target specific needs identified within school and support the application of alternative approaches:

"When we have training, we get given all these little tips here and there, but we never get it put into practice. So, you get a couple of examples, but nothing in detail or nothing that might be suitable for you in that classroom or in that school." (Katherine)

Katherine explained that training is often policy and process-driven rather than developing teachers' pedagogical knowledge and practice. Laura shared concerns about her perceived "*lack of knowledge*" around SEMH, stating a feeling that "*the tide is always a bit against you*". She explained that her understanding has developed from "*just seeing it in real life, and learning as I go*", with the increased challenge of feeling that, as a secondary teacher, knowing all CYP and understanding their individual needs is an "*impossible task*". This indicates a sense of unpreparedness to effectively supporting CYP's SEMH needs due to insufficient training, knowledge and resources. Secondary participants identified a need for further training to better understand SEMH needs and their "*root causes*" (Holly).

Laura conveyed a sense of powerlessness in relying on other staff members to de-escalate circumstances in which CYP have become dysregulated through feeling "*forced to respond in some way*". She raised concerns that staff are "*not always available*", indicating a sense of isolation arising from the absence of alternative approaches to draw upon:

"I'd have to try and call another member of staff to come and escort them out." "What else can you do in that situation? In the moment, because I'm forced to respond to it in some way, I will do what I can in the best of my ability. But am I doing it right? I don't know. There's not really a textbook to go to, or a rule book, and nobody's sat down with me to have a session on whether that's the right thing to do. So, it's just, kind of, on your own." (Laura)

Poor communication and limited information sharing were common discourse from Laura, Doug and Katherine, indicating an increased difficulty to meet individual CYP's needs. Katherine shared that she does not receive sufficient information "*probably 95% of the time*" due to factors such as PPs not being updated regularly and teachers' inconsistent use of monitoring systems:

"It's almost like you have to go and do your own investigation on it. Whereas it'd be so much easier if everybody just recorded what was going on. Again, another time thief." (Laura)

The term "*time thief*" conveys a sense of frustration around the impact of this "*investigation*" on Laura's workload, suggesting that this would be alleviated if teachers consistently adhered to the systems in place.

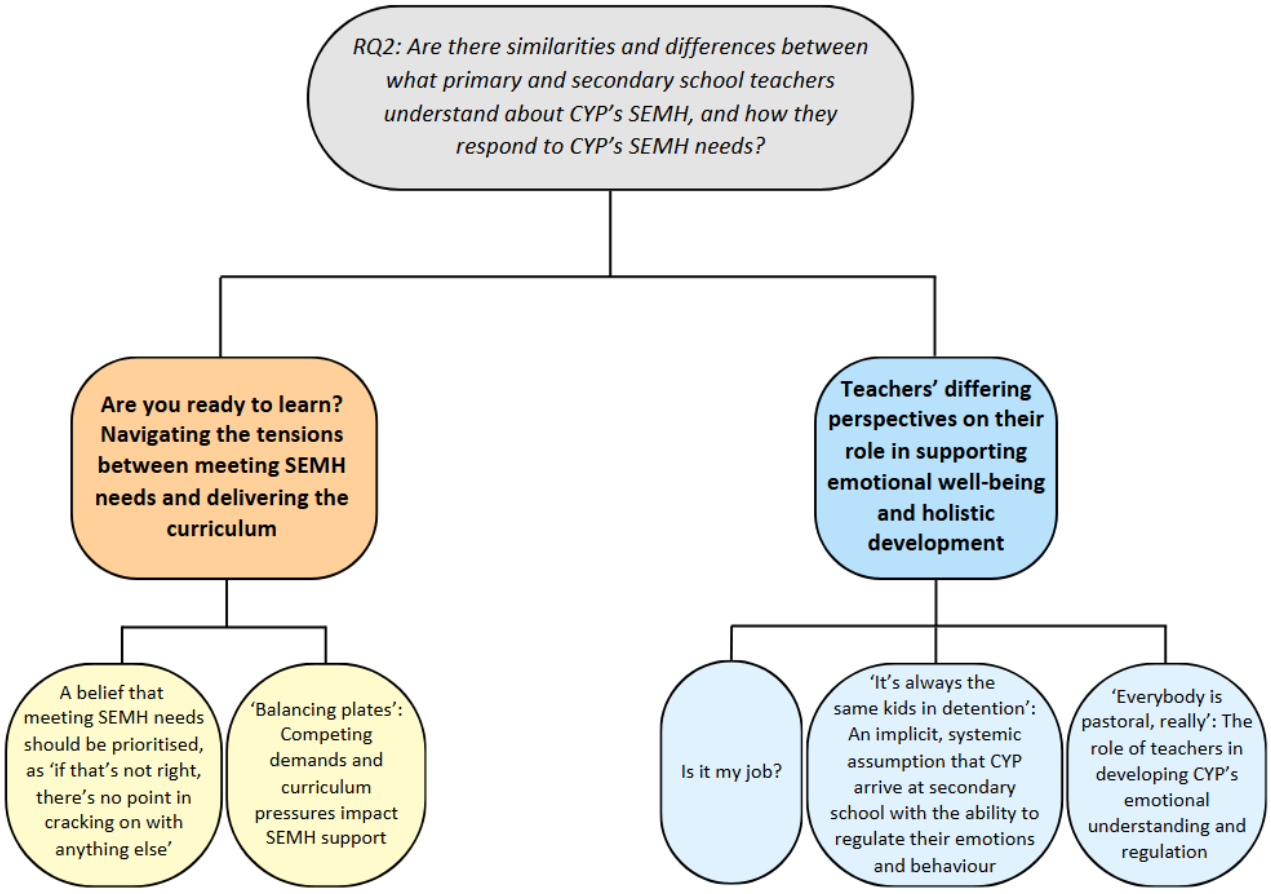
4.3 RQ2: Are there similarities and differences between what mainstream primary and secondary school teachers understand about CYP's SEMH, and how they respond to CYP's SEMH needs?

Two themes were constructed from participants' accounts in response to RQ2, as presented in Figure 4.2:

- *Are you ready to learn? Navigating the tensions between meeting SEMH needs and delivering the curriculum*'
- '*Teachers' differing perspectives on their role in supporting emotional well-being and holistic development*'

A table detailing the initial codes, sub-themes and themes for RQ2 is presented in Appendix 4.3, and an additional table highlights the prevalence of participants' quotes contributing to each sub-theme and theme (Appendix 4.5). To interpret whether similarities and differences were present between primary and secondary teachers' understanding and responses, the researcher considered the weighting of primary and secondary teachers' contributions within each code, theme and sub-theme (Section 3.5.5.2; Appendix 3.16).

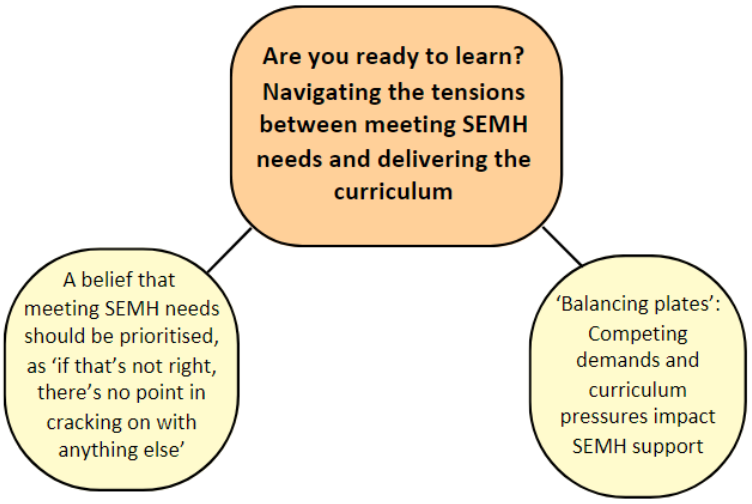
Figure 4.2. Thematic map illustrating RTA themes and sub-themes in relation to RQ2.



4.3.1 Theme: Are you ready to learn? Navigating the tensions between meeting SEMH needs and delivering the curriculum

A contrast was interpreted between primary and secondary participants' perceptions regarding the prioritisation of supporting SEMH needs versus a sense that curriculum pressures and other demands can take priority over SEMH support. This is reflected in the sub-themes: '*A belief that meeting SEMH needs should be prioritised, as 'if that's not right, there's no point in cracking on with anything else*'', and ''*Balancing plates': Competing demands and curriculum pressures impact SEMH support*' (Figure 4.3.1). **See Reflexive Diary Entry (Appendix 4.9)**.

Figure 4.3.1. Thematic map illustrating 'Are you ready to learn? Navigating the tensions between meeting SEMH needs and delivering the curriculum', with associated sub-themes.



4.3.1.1 Sub-theme: A belief that meeting SEMH needs should be prioritised, as 'if that's not right, there's no point in cracking on with anything else'

Narratives were shared, predominantly across primary participants, emphasising that meeting CYP's SEMH needs and fostering a sense of safety should be prioritised due to their fundamental role in facilitating learning and holistic development:

"If the SEMH needs aren't met, then we won't complete a lesson because somebody might not be engaged and not ready to learn. And then it can affect attendance. It can affect them eating at lunchtime. It just affects everything really. If that's not right, there's no point cracking on with anything else, if we're not even addressing what the root of the problem is." (Nicola)

"So long as the children are happy and are safe, then I think the learning follows. And so, the nurture side of things is, well, if the children are feeling safe in our care, then it's likely that they're going to be much more successful in a learning capacity as well. If their basic needs aren't met, and emotionally if their needs aren't met, then then chances are that will be a barrier to their learning." (Georgia)

Nicola explained that teachers within her school "*make sure*" that they "*always take time*" to listen to a CYP and respond to their needs, indicating that this is prioritised within the school's culture and ethos. Primary participants shared that within their schools, well-being and SEMH development is promoted through the schools' rules and behaviour policies:

"It's 'kind hands, kind words, kind hearts', and that's it. Just so simple, but it's really, really embedded in school." (Nicola)

"Our school rules are 'aim high and be kind' and that's it." "It's very much more about nurture and making sure they're happy." (Georgia)

Primary participants described how SEMH development has been embedded within school routines and integrated across the curriculum beyond PSHE, suggesting that supporting SEMH is a whole-school priority. This has been achieved through Circle Times, mindfulness and "*yoga as part of our PE sessions*" (Francis), introducing a "*Mental Health Champion of the Week*" and "*Well-being Warriors*" (Nicola), and the embedding of the myHappymind programme as a whole-school psychoeducational approach. Francis expressed the importance of "*helping (CYP) to understand their own emotions*" because often when a CYP becomes highly dysregulated, "*it's because they don't have the vocabulary to explain it*". Georgia shared her view that "*if they've got that ability to regulate themselves at a young age, you would hope that this skill would only get more secure as they get older*". Teachers using the myHappymind programme consistently every day described a significant positive impact for all CYP, observed through their increased ability to recognise emotions within themselves and draw on the emotional regulation strategies learnt during a "*period of unsettlement"* (Nicola).

Georgia explained that Boxall Profiles are used to assess "*every single child every term which is time consuming, but it means that no child slips through the net*". This strongly indicates that the early identification and monitoring of SEMH needs is a whole-school priority despite competing demands and curriculum pressures. Kate expressed an interest in developing an SEMH audit tool to support the identification and monitoring of CYP's SEMH needs. Primary participants shared how whole-class emotion check-ins are built into the daily routine as an informal strategy to identify and monitor SEMH needs and support emotional literacy development.

Across primary participants' data, the researcher interpreted a commonality that SEMH needs are prioritised through the provision of targeted interventions, including ELSA, Time to Talk, Circle Time, and social skills groups, which increase schools' capacity to meet need. Regulation spaces and sensory rooms to support emotional regulation were described as available for all CYP, indicating a school commitment to supporting SEMH. Georgia discussed the addition of the "*Learning Base*" to her setting for CYP who may "*not quite (be) ready to spend the whole day in the main classroom*". Within this small-group provision, CYP's learning can be highly personalised alongside prioritising SEMH development:

"It will be a bit of curriculum, but it'll also be a lot of Emotion Coaching and that kind of thing to support them. So that's really, really effective." (Georgia)

Primary participants shared that their schools had not permanently excluded any CYP throughout their time in employment:

"Even though some of the children's behaviours can present as being quite challenging, a child is never excluded because I think, we just feel that it's just not helpful for the child in the long run." (Georgia)

Georgia's use of the phrase "*we just feel*" indicates a collective belief that permanent exclusions are detrimental, and a school-wide commitment to working inclusively through exploring behaviours to identify unmet needs.

4.3.1.2 Sub-theme: 'Balancing plates': Competing demands and curriculum pressures impact SEMH support

The researcher perceived dominant discourse across secondary participants that curriculum pressures and other demands within school can significantly impact the SEMH support CYP receive. Doug described an "*unreal*" increase in curriculum content, placing pressure on teachers to ensure this is delivered, particularly as CYP approach GCSEs:

"The demands of the curriculum are such that, if they're in Year 11, say, they've got so much content to get through, they haven't got time for chats like that." "If it's at the start of a lesson, chances are that they're teaching. And they've got to get in and get on with it, for the other 29 kids they have got in that class." (Doug)

Doug explained, *"if I'm teaching a lesson, I'm kind of teaching a lesson, I've got to get through this stuff, I've got to get this taught"… "I can't just stop and spend 10 minutes talking to the person that needs 10 minutes talking to."* To enable teachers to continue teaching, CYP are often "*just passed on to Student Managers to deal with*", suggesting that academic priorities often take precedence over pastoral support, possibly due to systemic and broader socio-political factors. Laura also shared concerns around time constraints, expressing that "*you've got so much of a heavy curriculum to get through*", and "*when it's extreme difficulties, you know, it's a thief for time*". Due to these pressures,

Doug felt that secondary schools are reactive to CYP's needs as they "*don't have the capacity to be preventative*"; "*the nature of staffing*" was noted as a barrier to being able to "*screen*" all CYP to enable early identification and intervention for SEMH needs.

Secondary participants conveyed that rapport-building and pastoral support predominantly occurs outside of the classroom, implying that that once in the classroom setting, academic learning is the primary focus:

"If you can see there's a couple of children that are maybe really struggling, then I think you can take time to maybe, just have a word with them outside of lessons, potentially." (Laura)

Doug illustrated efforts to foster relationships and engage in informal interactions to support rapport-building outside the structured classroom environment, implying an understanding of the importance of establishing trust, connection and emotional safety as a foundation for learning:

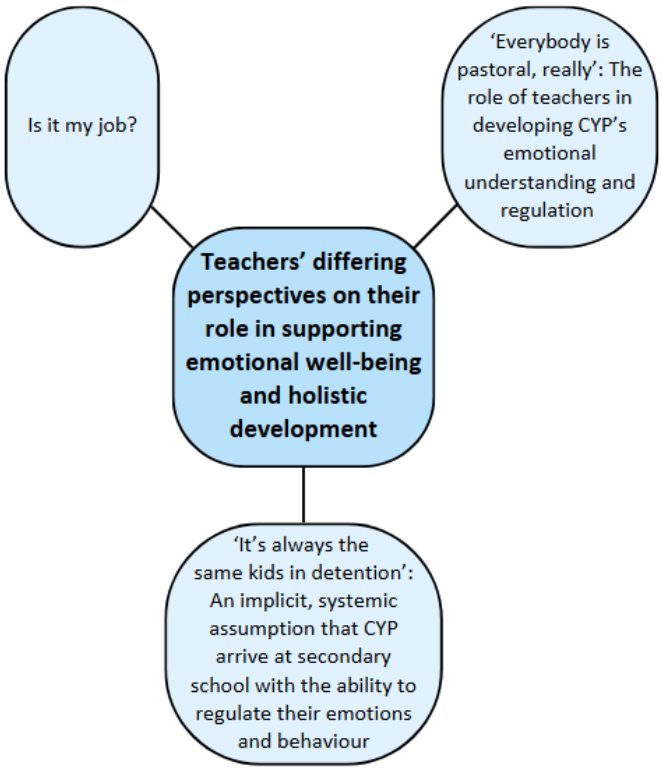
"I've always tried to talk to the children outside of the classroom as well. You know, see them at breaktime, see them at lunchtime. Just have a chat. Find out what football team they support, that sort of thing. Just try and find an 'in' with them, so you can build those relationships so that they see your lesson as being an all-right place to be." (Doug)

Doug's use of a relational approach to form meaningful connections with CYP outside of the classroom demonstrates additional efforts beyond his core responsibilities of delivering the curriculum. **See Reflexive Diary Entry (Appendix 4.10)**.

4.3.2 Theme: Teachers' differing perspectives on their role in supporting emotional well-being and holistic development

A significant contrast was interpreted between primary and secondary participants' perceptions of their role in supporting CYP's holistic development and emotional well-being. The following sub-themes were constructed to reflect teachers' differing perspectives: '*Is it my job?*', predominantly comprising of secondary participants' data, ''*It's always the same kids in detention': An implicit, systemic assumption that CYP arrive at secondary school with the ability to regulate their emotions and behaviour*', encompassing primarily secondary participants' data, and ''*Everybody is pastoral, really': The role of teachers in developing CYP's emotional understanding and regulation*', largely formed from primary participants' data (Figure 4.3.2).

Figure 4.3.2. Thematic map illustrating 'Teachers' differing perspectives on their role in supporting emotional well-being and holistic development', with associated sub-themes.



4.3.2.1 Sub-theme: Is it my job?

Discourse was shared, predominantly across secondary participants, conveying a sense of uncertainty around whether supporting CYP's SEMH needs is their role. The researcher interpreted a perception from secondary participants that "*transferring knowledge*" is integral to their role, as well as a broader responsibility to develop "*integrity*" and the skills to contribute to society:

"When you think of a teacher, you think of somebody, I guess, transferring knowledge. But it's so much more than that." "Developing integrity. Kind of, teaching them values and life lessons as well." (Laura)

Doug shared that his role as a subject teacher enables him to "*give kids the opportunity to further their own studies and progress to where they need to be, their next steps in life*". Katherine initially shared that her role is "*not necessarily just being a teacher, probably being like a bit of a mum sort of role as well*". However, when asked about responding to CYP experiencing emotional dysregulation, Katherine explained, "*my role is teaching, really*". This implies the presence of role boundaries wherein offering co-regulation may be viewed as beyond her professional remit.

Holly identified empathy as a characteristic needed to effectively support SEMH needs, although noted that some teachers "*don't have as much understanding or empathy as they could*". Doug conveyed that teachers with a "*fundamental lack of empathy*" find it difficult to "*understand what these children are going through*". He explained that, for some, *"it comes down to that subject knowledge and that love of the subject, but it doesn't always transfer across into a love of children"*, potentially illuminating pastoral support and curriculum delivery as two distinct components of a secondary teacher's role.

Secondary participants shared discourse around perceived differences in the roles and responsibilities of the form tutor versus a subject teacher, with differing approaches adopted within these roles. Laura explained that as a form tutor, she can be "*a bit more relaxed, in that, I know the students a bit more because I see them every day*". Holly implied that a relational approach is used in form time through the use of "*bonding exercises*" and a "*reflection of our week and talk about how that's gone*". She shared that, "*my form know where I am at break and lunch*", indicating that her relational role extends beyond form time through remaining accessible for additional support. However, Doug conveyed the negative impact of increased curriculum pressures on form tutors' roles:

"I think the role of the form tutor has been eroded because of the curriculum that we've got to implement during form time. You've gotta tick this box and do this, and do that, so there isn't, or there hasn't been, quite so much time to, to just have that form teacher, sort of rapport and that chat with them." (Doug)

The researcher interpreted that the increased pressures of curriculum delivery, combined with the employment of designated pastoral and 'behaviour' staff, may be causing uncertainty around teachers' responsibilities in providing SEMH support and exploring behaviour:

"Our Behaviour Leads are really, really good at just calming them down and talking with them and finding out what's going on. And getting to the, kind of, root issue of why they behaved that way." (Holly)

"They're being put on on-call and then it's up to a member of pastoral to pick that up to sort it out. And then that student's being put back in your classroom again." (Katherine)

Doug discussed how "*resets*" are utilised to respond to emotional dysregulation:

"We've got a couple of systems where we can have a reset. It could be in an SLT office. It could be with our Well-being Team. It could be in the SEND Base. It could be with the Head of Department even." (Doug)

These systems indicate that SLT and designated SEND and pastoral staff are responsible for responding to SEMH needs. This reflects a systemic expectation for teachers to prioritise curriculum delivery over pastoral support.

4.3.2.2 Sub-theme: 'It's always the same kids in detention': An implicit, systemic assumption that CYP arrive at secondary school with the ability to regulate their emotions and behaviour

The researcher interpreted dominant discussion across all secondary participants around utilising the school's behaviour system in response to behaviour that challenges, requiring CYP to have acquired emotional and behavioural regulation skills. Secondary participants discussed using detentions, internal exclusions, turnaround placements at alternative provisions, managed moves, and permanent exclusions as sanctions. **See Reflexive Diary Entry (Appendix 4.11)**. Laura explained that "*you have to follow the behaviour system*" for all CYP, despite the potential presence of additional needs. Katherine shared that, "*if you've got more than one student in your class that's badly behaved, then sometimes it's a lot easier to just try and get rid of the child*", whereby *"they get sent to isolation and it's disciplined*". Holly shared that, *"we've got a new Head and he's not afraid to exclude people"* if CYP are "*choosing to be disruptive, to be defiant*", indicating a top-down expectation for teachers to maintain high expectations of CYP. However, a sense of doubt was conveyed around the effectiveness of detentions to regulate behaviour:

"You're always going to have the same students that are in detention." (Holly)

"I know I've gotta put the detention on, but you also know that that detention isn't going to make any difference because it's their third detention today." (Doug)

Holly shared that "*some teachers go straight to consequences*", and implied that their expectations of CYP may be underpinned by a limited understanding of SEMH, with an assumption that "*they are 'just being difficult' or 'just being quiet' or 'just being naughty'*". Holly and Doug theorised that a higher use of sanctions appears to correlate with a limited understanding of SEMH:

"*If you look down the detention list each day, you very often see the same teachers' names that hand out the detentions." "I wonder if that's as a result of their, kind of, lack of understanding and empathy with the students in their class, and the needs that they've got?*" *(Holly)*

Turnaround placements were discussed as a mechanism to prevent permanent exclusion. Laura attributed this to her deputy principal's concern that "*it's really bad if we exclude students*", "*I know they look at that data when it comes to Ofsted, etcetera*". **See Reflexive Diary Entry (Appendix 4.12)**. Holly shared, *"I'm gonna be really honest, I haven't seen a successful reintegration*" following a turnaround placement, possibly indicating a limited systemic awareness of potential environmental factors within school which may contribute to a CYP's SEMH needs.

High expectations and limited flexibility were interpreted as dominant narratives across Katherine's responses, who indicated possible frustration that CYP with SEMH needs are "*allowed to get away with a lot more*". Katherine reflected on a circumstance in which a CYP had become dysregulated:

"His head of year said, 'well, his grandad has died', and I looked at him and I were thinking, well, yeah I understand your grandad might have died, but that's still not a reason and a point for him to speak to a member staff like that." (Katherine)

This response indicates an expectation that CYP should be able to regulate their emotions to interact with staff in a manner deemed appropriate, despite experiencing grief.

Primary participants shared concerns around CYP not receiving adequate SEMH support once they have transitioned to secondary school:

"Lots of children leave us for their next school, and then been excluded within weeks. It's so sad." "We hear these reports of children going there and unfortunately really struggled and not been supported. It's not got that same nurturing environment, and they've been excluded or put on reduced timetables." (Georgia)

Through attending LA cluster meetings and becoming aware of CYP's needs within her school's local area, Francis shared observations that "*so many*" SEMH needs are "*becoming apparent*" as CYP enter the next phase of education. Francis and Georgia highlighted that, in their experience, structures and

approaches to support SEMH needs effectively are often not be in place beyond primary school, resulting in CYP feeling unable to cope with the increased demands. This may be attributed to a potential systemic assumption that CYP's SEMH development and ability to understand and regulate their emotions increases in line with their chronological age, and therefore, all CYP should be able to adhere to behavioural expectations.

4.3.2.3 Sub-theme: 'Everybody is pastoral, really': The role of teachers in developing CYP's emotional understanding and regulation

The researcher interpreted narratives across all primary participants that they hold a fundamental role in supporting CYP's holistic development through providing pastoral support and developing emotional regulation skills. Francis illuminated the centrality of promoting CYP's well-being by supporting CYP to "*be happy, healthy, have good self-esteem and confidence, and succeed*". When discussing pastoral support, Georgia shared that as teachers, responding to CYP's emotional needs is "*just part and parcel of what we do*":

"It's everybody's role to be that role really. So, we don't have anyone specifically for it because I would never find myself saying, 'oh, you know, Bobby, go and speak to so and so', you know, it's not like that at all. It's all dealt with in class." (Georgia)

Kate demonstrated an understanding of the neurological mechanisms underpinning CYP's emotional dysregulation, informing her use of EC to support them through co-regulation:

"It depends how dysregulated they are, but just sit and wait. Take time, and then if you see them starting to regulate, maybe put in some minimal language." "Not overcrowding, not raising our voices, making sure we use calm voices, less language. Less language is a massive, massive one. Because if you overload them with language, that'll heighten them even more."

Georgia, Kate and Francis emphasised the importance of utilising an attuned, gentle response through body language and tone of voice. This demonstrates an awareness of the need to build connection and use cues which signal to the CYP that they are in the presence of a safe adult to support emotional regulation:

"It's approaching them slowly, crouching down to their level, speaking softly. You know, asking them, 'are you OK? What is it that's upsetting you?'." "It's just reassuring them all the time that you

understand how they feel. So often, if a child's dysregulated, the conversation will start with 'I understand how you feel', or, 'I understand you feel worried', 'I understand you feel cross', you know, and kind of validating that feeling firstly." (Georgia)

Through validating CYP's emotions and introducing precise emotional vocabulary, Georgia demonstrated how emotional dysregulation can be utilised as a teaching opportunity through linking emotional language to observed physiological responses. Kate and Nicola emphasised the importance of teachers understanding every CYP at an individual level to know how best to co-regulate them:

"*Finding a toy or a book or something that they like, to try and use with them to calm them and regulate them*." *(Kate)*

"It might just be guiding them out into the playground so they can do five laps of the playground, and sort of, get it out of their system like that." (Nicola)

Georgia discussed a key component of her role is to "*give children the strategies and tools*" to "*deal with certain situations a bit more independently*".

As one of the few secondary participants contributing to this sub-theme, Holly conveyed her understanding that CYP may not be able to draw on self-regulation strategies independently, highlighting a role for the teacher: "*Sometimes they just need that reminder from us to use the stuff that we put in place for them*".

4.4 Summary of RTA Findings

To summarise this RTA, three themes were constructed in relation to what primary and secondary participants understand about CYP's SEMH needs and how they respond to these (RQ1): '*SEMH is associated with and impacted by various factors*', '*A whole-school approach to understanding and supporting CYP's SEMH*', and '*A sense of powerlessness'*. Two themes were constructed illustrating differences between primary and secondary participants' understanding of CYP's SEMH needs and their responses to these (RQ2): '*Are you ready to learn? Navigating the tensions between meeting SEMH needs and delivering the curriculum*', and '*Teachers' differing perspectives on their role in supporting emotional well-being and holistic development*'. The *Discussion and Conclusion* will now consider these findings in relation to existing literature.

Chapter Five: Discussion and Conclusion

5.1 Chapter Overview

This chapter presents the researcher's interpretations of the current study's findings in relation to existing literature to explore two RQs:

1. *What do mainstream primary and secondary teachers understand about CYP's SEMH and how do they respond to CYP's SEMH needs?*
2. *Are there similarities and differences between what mainstream primary and secondary teachers understand about CYP's SEMH, and how they respond to CYP's SEMH needs?*

The chapter begins with a summary of the RTA findings. Discussion will focus on how these findings pertain to existing literature and psychological theory, and contribute to current knowledge. A methodological review will acknowledge the study's strengths and limitations. Implications for practice and recommendations for future research and psychological theory will be discussed. The chapter will end with a conclusion of the research.

5.2 Summary of Research

The current study utilised semi-structured interviews and an RTA methodology to explore mainstream primary and secondary teachers' understanding of and responses to CYP's SEMH needs (Section 5.3.1). The researcher interpreted differences between the perspectives of these homogenous groups (Section 5.3.2). The study offers an original contribution to the field of Educational Psychology, aiming to guide the practice of EPs and schools, with recommendations at an LA and wider Governmental level.

5.3 Discussion of Findings

A relativist ontology and interpretivist epistemology were adopted to explore mainstream primary and secondary teachers' understanding of and responses to CYP's SEMH needs. This philosophical position facilitates a collective meaning-making process (Willis, 2007a; Mertens, 2024) and acknowledges the potential influence of social, cultural and historical contexts (Pervin & Mokhtar, 2022) and personal and professional experiences, values, and beliefs on teachers' understanding and responses. The study's findings will be discussed in relation to RQ1 and RQ2 and are presented in two adapted BMHD models (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006): Figure 5.1 illustrates factors at different systems levels which may influence teachers' understanding of and responses to CYP's SEMH needs,

and Figure 5.2 presents risk and protective factors teachers understand to be associated with and influential over CYP's SEMH needs. Themes and sub-themes from the SLR are compared to those from the RTA, and are presented in a thematic map (Figure 5.3).

Figure 5.1. BMHD (adaptation of Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006) to reflect factors at different systems levels that may influence teachers' understanding of and responses to CYP's SEMH needs.

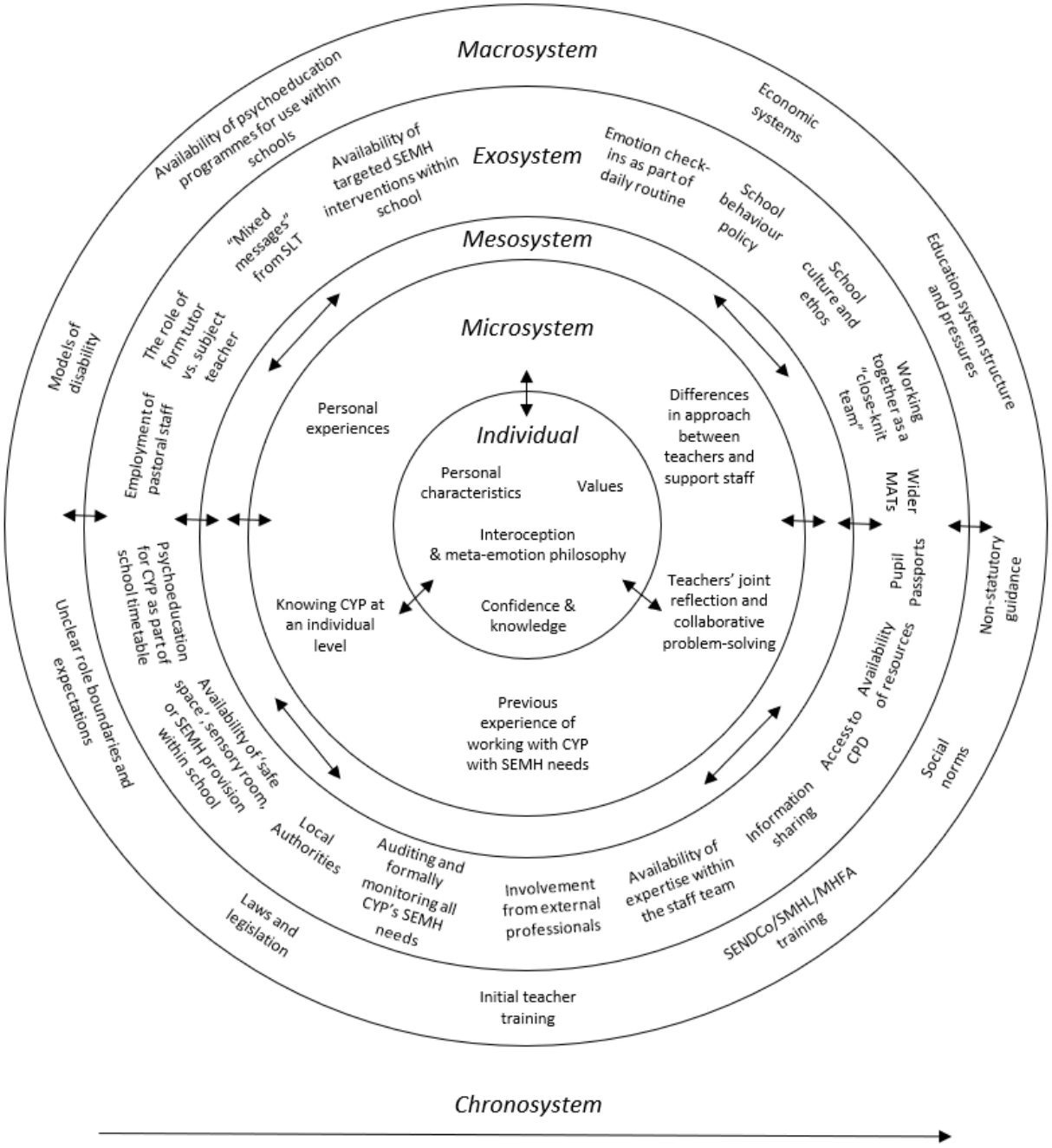


Figure 5.2. BMHD (adaptation of Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 2006) to reflect risk factors and protective factors at different systems levels teachers understand to be associated with and influential over CYP's SEMH needs.

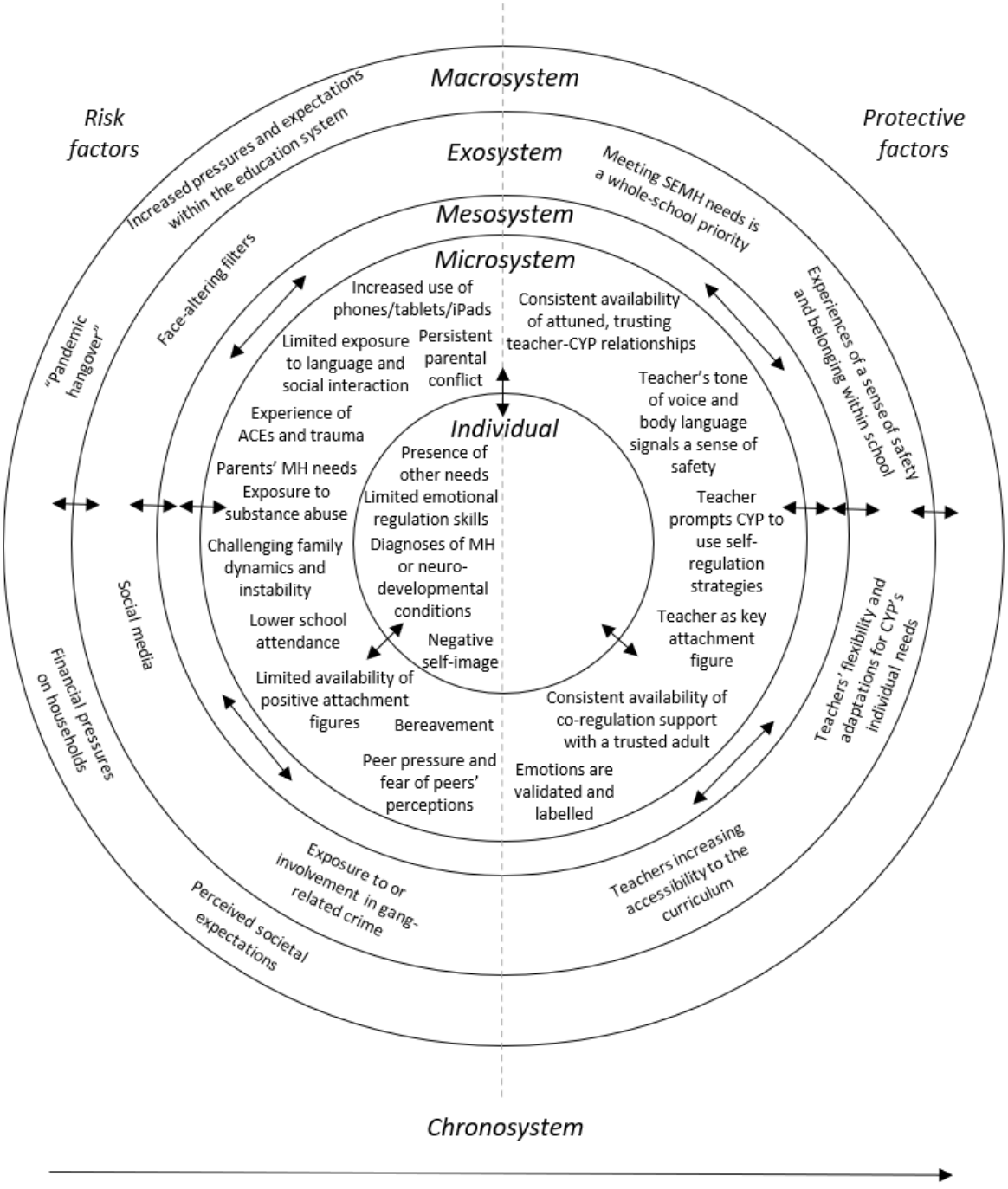
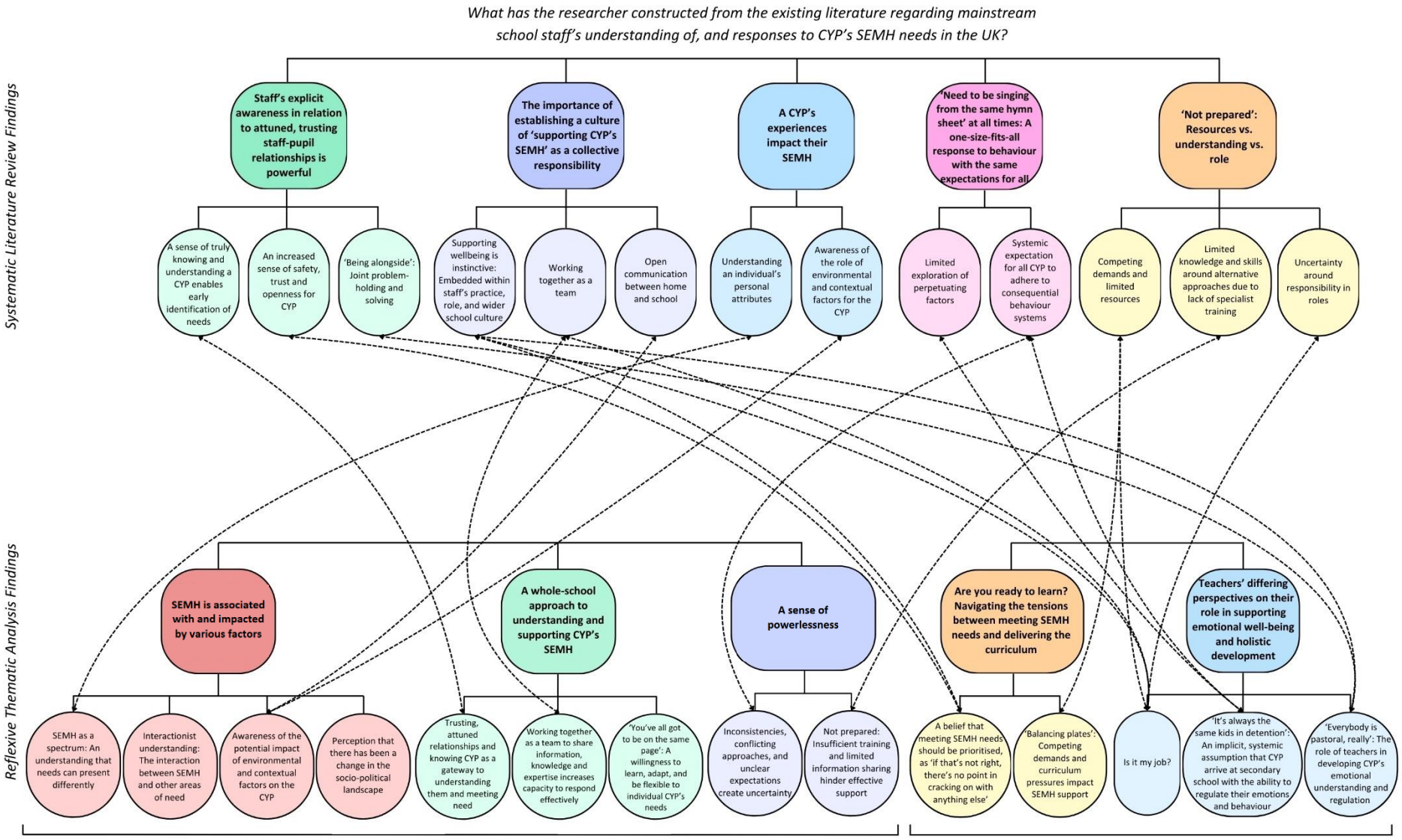


Figure 5.3. Comparison of SLR findings to RTA findings.



5.3.1 RQ1: What do mainstream primary and secondary school teachers understand about CYP's SEMH and how do they respond to CYP's SEMH needs?

The following themes will be discussed in relation to RQ1 and existing literature and psychological theory: '*SEMH is associated with and impacted by various factors*', '*A whole-school approach to understanding and supporting CYP's SEMH*', and '*A sense of powerlessness*'.

5.3.1.1 Theme: SEMH is associated with and impacted by various factors

SEMH as a spectrum: An understanding that needs can present differently

The researcher interpreted an understanding across all primary and most secondary participants that SEMH needs can manifest differently within and between CYP. Several participants conceptualised SEMH as a spectrum ranging from a subtle and withdrawn presentation to more overt physical behaviours, a description aligning with the definition within the SENDCoP (2015). Previous research by Hattersley (2022) found that staff may associate SEMH with diagnosed mental health and neurodevelopmental conditions, reflecting findings from the current study. The researcher interpreted an understanding that differences in individual factors and personal attributes can contribute to how SEMH needs may present and that these may vary between CYP, supporting existing literature (Frearson & Duncan, 2024; Martin-Denham, 2021) and the WHO's definition of MH (2022).

However, findings indicate that teachers' understanding of SEMH may extend beyond the SENDCoP's (DfE, 2015) definition regarding the level of complexity and variation understood to be associated with SEMH. This aligns with Hibbott's (2024) research where SEMH was conceptualised as 'heterogeneous'. Holly acknowledged that SEMH needs may not be immediately apparent due to some CYP's ability to 'mask', echoing Wilson et al.'s (2023) findings that staff can feel 'taken aback' following disclosures due to some CYPs' proficiency in concealing their needs. Martin-Denham (2021) illuminated teachers' concerns regarding the barrier that concealment of needs can present to their identification and subsequent provision of adequate support, highlighting the cruciality of teachers' attunement to recognise subtle changes.

Primary participants shared an understanding that CYP may present with limited emotional regulation skills and difficulties forming and maintaining relationships and "*engaging with the world and others*" (Francis). This corresponds with existing literature emphasising the impact of these needs on CYP's everyday experiences (Martin-Denham, 2021) and community involvement (WHO, 2022). Notably, many of these elements are not explicitly addressed within the SENDCoP's (2015) definition, which

could be argued medicalises and over-simplifies the complex and nuanced nature of SEMH. **See Reflexive Diary Entry (Appendix 5.1)**.

Interactionist understanding: The interaction between SEMH and other areas of need

All participants shared an understanding that SEMH needs can interact with other areas of need. There was dominant discourse across primary participants around the interconnectedness between SLCN and SEMH needs, whereby limited language and communication skills were interpreted to significantly impact CYP's ability to engage in social interaction and express and regulate their emotions. These findings align with Hancock et al. (2022) and Hollo et al.'s (2014) research, which suggests that SCLN and SEMH needs commonly co-occur and can present as difficulties with emotional regulation and building and maintaining peer relationships.

Holly discussed the increase in "*enthusiasm*" observed when CYP moved from the "*bottom set*" to mixed ability classes. This was interpreted to enhance CYP's competence by reducing possible psychological barriers which may decrease perceived potential and motivation. The impact of unmet cognition and learning needs on SEMH were discussed, whereby persistent difficulties were interpreted to impact on engagement and motivation significantly. These findings align with Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985), and demonstrate beliefs that SEMH and learning needs are strongly interlinked.

Aligning with the SENDCoP (2015) definition of SEMH, several participants associated SEMH needs with diagnosed MH and neurodevelopmental conditions at an individual level (Figure 5.2), indicating a dispositional attribution whereby needs are attributed to fixed, internal characteristics (Heider, 1958). Two secondary participants shared discourse around 'SEMH needs' as a formal diagnosis made by medical professionals, possibly indicating a sense of permanence. A medicalised view of needs has been suggested to distance teachers from feeling able to respond effectively (Monkman, 2013), and may overlook contributory environmental factors.

Awareness of the potential impact of environmental and contextual factors on the CYP

Across all participants, the researcher interpreted an awareness that environmental and contextual factors can impact a CYP's SEMH. Participants listed potential risk factors within a CYP's microsystem and exosystem (Figure 5.2) at a home and community level, including gang-related crime, unstable caregiver attachments (Bombèr, 2007), and interpersonal trauma, with several participants demonstrating an explicit awareness of 'ACEs' as a concept (Felitti & Anda, 2010), aligning with

Hattersley's (2022) findings. However, findings within the current study and existing research (e.g. Martin-Denham, 2021) suggest that while staff may be able to identify risk factors, a deeper understanding of their potential developmental impact may not be held, such as on CYP's development of emotional regulation skills (Gilbert et al., 2021), ability to engage in trusting relationships (Bombèr, 2020; Bowlby, 1969), and self-perception (Bombèr, 2007). Notably, interpersonal factors within school which may impact a CYP's SEMH, such as a limited sense of safety or belonging (Maslow, 1943) or the absence of trusting teacher-CYP relationships (Bombèr, 2007), were not explicitly discussed. **See Reflexive Diary Entry (Appendix 5.2)**.

Several participants conveyed that CYP's SEMH needs may vary or present differently across contexts, such as between home and school or dependent on the lesson, the teacher, or the day. This corresponds with Oakes' findings (2018) and may indicate an implicit awareness of the importance of triangulation and covariation of information through establishing the consistency, distinctiveness, and consensus of needs across contexts (Kelley, 1967). An understanding of the potential reciprocal influence between home and school environments was demonstrated, whereby challenges arising in one context may manifest across multiple domains, consistent with existing literature (Martin-Denham, 2021; Burton & Goodman, 2011). This illuminates a key role for teachers in working together, as well as with parents and carers, to gain a holistic, contextualised understanding of a CYP's needs. **See Reflexive Diary Entry (Appendix 4.9)**.

Perception that there has been a change in the socio-political landscape

Discourse was interpreted across most participants indicating beliefs that changes within the wider socio-political landscape impact CYP's SEMH. Financial pressures on families and households were discussed as contributory factors, suggesting that increased economic pressures at a macrosystemic level (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006), such as the current cost-of-living crisis (National Institute of Economic and Social Research, 2025), may influence factors within a CYP's microsystem, in turn impacting them at an individual level (Figure 5.2). This is reflected in recent statistics whereby thirty percent of CYP are living in poverty, with significantly higher levels of economic disadvantage in lone-parent families (Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2025). Significant and prolonged financial pressures on parents could impact the possibility of consistently meeting their CYP's physiological needs, such as through providing sufficient food and adequate housing. Changes to family dynamics due to a perceived increase in familial separation were also identified as risk factors; CYP consequently being "*displaced*" (Francis) was suggested to reduce their sense of stability and security. **See Reflexive Diary Entry (Appendix 5.3)**. Experiences of diminished physical or emotional safety and unmet physiological

needs are considered to hinder CYP's progression toward higher-order needs, such as belonging, self-esteem and self-actualisation (Maslow, 1943).

Perceptions were shared that CYP's use of electronic devices, such as phones and tablets, has increased, which is believed to have had a direct, negative impact on their speech and language development and reciprocal interaction skills. Kate attributed this impact to electronic devices diverting CYP's attention away from everyday opportunities to observe others modelling language, conversational skills, and mouth movements critical for letter sound formation. Electronic devices typically offer one-way interactions, lacking the crucial reciprocal exchanges offered through human engagement. This skill deficit was suggested to impact CYP's social development in their ability to interact and play with peers. These findings mirror those from the School Readiness Survey (Kindred Squared, 2025), where one-third of CYP were not considered to possess the foundational skills to be 'school ready' for Reception in September 2024. Excessive screen time was identified as a contributory factor, with further concerns reporting that parents' increased use of electronic devices potentially diminishes direct parent-CYP engagement (Kindred Squared, 2025). As a secondary teacher, Laura discussed the evolving pressures at an exosystemic level (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) associated with CYP's increased use of social media and face-altering filters, which she perceived can increase self-scrutiny and comparison, with pressure to conform to perceived societal expectations at a macrosystemic level (Figure 5.2). This aligns with Frith's (2017) findings, where excessive social media usage positively correlated with harmful effects on CYP's MH.

Secondary participants conveyed concerns that increased attainment expectations and GCSE exam pressures have negatively impacted CYP's SEMH and exacerbated existing SEMH needs, particularly since changes to the National Curriculum (DfE, 2014). This echoes findings within the House of Commons Health and Education Committees' (2017) report and may reflect socio-political pressures driven by Governmental agendas which may prioritise measurable success and academic outcomes over CYP's well-being. Schools are subjected to increased accountability measures to assess CYP's attainment against rigorous evaluative standards, possibly resulting in the transfer of Governmental pressures through teachers to CYP, which is suggested within existing literature (Wilson et al., 2023). These findings also support Simpson's (2018) paper positing that SEMH needs may solely emerge due to inherent issues within pedagogical practices and the education system's possible failure to facilitate a CYP-centred curriculum which values skills beyond academic achievement. While participants in the current study did not explicitly discuss pedagogical practices, discourse around curriculum pressures strongly indicates that socio-political pressures exert significant influence over these practices, which

is consequently perceived to impact CYP's SEMH. Existing research suggests that the increased prevalence of SEMH needs in the UK (Armitage et al., 2023; Gov.uk, 2024c) may be partially attributed to evolving academic pressures (Armitage et al., 2025).

At a macrosystemic level (Figure 5.2), a COVID-19 "*pandemic hangover*" (Doug) was theorised to have exerted a prolonged negative impact on CYP's SEMH, extending beyond the lifting of lockdown measures. This was attributed to the stark contrast between CYP accessing online lessons from home if they could and the return to formal education where pre-pandemic behavioural and academic expectations immediately resumed. A reduction in social contact, the absence of supported transitions, and temporary changes to schooling were identified as key risk factors impacting CYP's SEMH, indicating that the detrimental impact was not necessarily from COVID-19 itself but the Government's measures to prevent its contagion.

5.3.1.2 Theme: A whole-school approach to understanding and supporting CYP's SEMH

Trusting, attuned relationships and knowing CYP as a gateway to understanding them and meeting need

Most participants shared perceptions that attuned, trusting teacher-CYP relationships at a microsystemic level (Figure 5.1) can facilitate the identification and effective fulfilment of their SEMH needs. Participants discussed the importance of knowing individual CYP as a gateway to recognising behavioural changes and determining appropriate support. This illuminates the crucial role of attuned teacher-CYP relationships in the early identification of SEMH needs, echoing existing literature (Martin-Denham, 2021; Moor et al., 2007). Across secondary participants, knowing CYP was discussed as more feasible for core subject teachers who likely engage with CYP more frequently.

Primary participants shared narratives suggesting an understanding that secure, trusting, predictable teacher-CYP attachments can foster psychological safety, security and openness, as reflected in existing research (Burton & Goodman, 2010; Burton & Goodman, 2011; Devereux, 2017). Francis conveyed a belief that "*a teacher can be a key attachment for a child that's not got a key adult at home*", recognising that a consistent, nurturing relationship can bolster emotional resilience to navigate future challenges more independently. Francis's phrase "*it's saved them*" indicates a nuanced recognition of the profound, potentially life-changing role a teacher can have as a key attachment figure, and aligns with Bombèr's (2020) work on relational trauma and the critical function of secure relationships in supporting regulation and resilience. It also demonstrates an understanding of

attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969), implying that CYP can still form trusting attachments when experiences of uncertainty and instability are consistently challenged and disconfirmed. This indicates a conceptualisation of attachment as a dynamic and evolving continuum rather than a fixed state (Cortina & Marrone, 2003).

Positive teacher-CYP relationships were interpreted as crucial for fostering belonging. Nicola emphasised belonging as the fundamental precursor for holistic development, asserting it is "*more important than anything else*" and underpins all other needs. This perspective indicates that despite curriculum demands and accountability pressures, prioritising positive relationships and belonging is believed to be fundamental in maximising CYP's potential (Maslow, 1943).

Working together as a team to share information, knowledge, and expertise increases capacity to respond effectively

All participants perceived that staff should work together as a team by effectively sharing information, knowledge and expertise to build capacity and better understand CYP's SEMH needs.

A small primary school environment was identified as a key factor in fostering a "*close-knit team*" (Francis), promoting open communication and effective information sharing. This dynamic was perceived to increase teachers' awareness and understanding of all CYP's needs, as well as their confidence in seeking peer support both preventatively and responsively, embodying a collaborative, whole-school approach to supporting SEMH. Primary participants emphasised the value of collaborative problem-solving and joint reflection around CYP's needs by eliciting multiple perspectives and pooling expertise and knowledge, which may foster continuous learning and capacity-building. This aligns with research suggesting that sharing practice inspires alternative ideas (Hattersley, 2022) and mitigates feelings of isolation by promoting peer support (Oakes, 2018).

The use of annual transition meetings and staff meeting time to discuss CYP's SEMH needs at a school-wide level was interpreted as a valuable strategy across primary participants and may reflect a systemic commitment to ensuring consistent, effective responses to CYP's SEMH needs from all staff. This aligns with the SENDCoP's (DfE, 2015) expectation for all professionals working with CYP with SEND to understand their specific needs and the strategies and approaches required to facilitate their learning. Within secondary settings, this occurred instead through the provision of PPs, with secondary participants sharing limited dialogue around engaging in problem-solving discussions. PPs may, therefore, act as compensatory mechanisms in larger educational settings where it may be less

feasible for teachers to know every CYP and understand their needs on an individual basis. An understanding of CYP-centred working was demonstrated by involving the CYP in constructing and reviewing their PP, with the recognition that needs may evolve over time and require different support. This reflects requirements within the SENDCoP (DfE, 2015) to regularly review and evaluate the impact of interventions and ensure that CYP and their families are involved in any decisions made around outcomes and provision.

Several participants discussed access to within-school CPD, where the sharing of knowledge between teachers is encouraged. This indicates a systemic priority to build capacity within school, with value placed on teachers' expertise. Research indicates that schools are more able to facilitate training in-house due to increased control over teachers' directed hours (Ofsted, 2024).

'You've all got to be on the same page': A willingness to learn, adapt, and be flexible to individual CYP's needs

Primary participants identified whole-school training in SEMH as a key mechanism for change at an exosystemic level (Figure 5.1), to create a shared understanding and promote consistency across all staff. Primary participants discussed the extensive utilisation of their MHST offer (DoHSC & DfE, 2018) for whole-school training with their LA EPs, describing a subsequent, significant increase in staff's confidence, consistency, and capacity to support SEMH needs effectively. They shared perceptions that training in EC (Gottman et al., 1996; Gilbert et al., 2021) and trauma-informed practices had initiated changes to practice through "*osmosis*" (Georgia), indicating that post-training, practice changes occur through informal interactions, experiences and observations (Bandura, 1977). This supports existing literature indicating that CPD can offer collaborative learning, enhance practice, increase professional reflectiveness (Teslo et al., 2023), and emphasises whole-school training as a catalyst for fostering a culture shift across a school system. A need for follow-up training was identified to refresh knowledge and support the transfer of pedagogy to practice, echoing research by O'Sullivan (2002) and Ofsted (2024).

Discussion arose around identifying a common area of need within school, which had then been addressed through whole-school training. This reflects professional responsibilities outlined in the SENDCoP (DfE, 2015) requiring teachers to identify and access necessary training and support to understand and address CYP's specific needs, and may signal an acknowledgement of the need to develop knowledge, explore alternative approaches, and adapt teaching practices. Further discourse was shared about the need for adaptations to the curriculum, environment and expectations to

increase accessibility for individuals' needs as a preventative measure, reflecting requirements in the SENDCoP (DfE, 2015).

Although staff being "*on the same page*" was noted as important, this was interpreted not to imply uniformity but rather a shared commitment to adaptiveness and flexibility in response to individual CYP's needs. **See Reflexive Diary Entry (Appendix 5.4)**. Discussion around the involvement of external professionals indicated a willingness to learn, adapt, and enhance capacity within school, consistent with literature highlighting the value of multi-agency collaboration, particularly when there may be uncertainty around the specific support a CYP requires (DfE, 2015; Hellawell et al., 2022; Oakes, 2018).

5.3.1.3 Theme: A sense of powerlessness

Inconsistencies, conflicting approaches, and unclear expectations create uncertainty

Narratives were shared, primarily by secondary participants, around uncertainties caused by inconsistencies, unclear expectations and conflicting approaches between support staff and teachers in response to CYP experiencing emotional dysregulation, which Georgia explained can cause "*friction*". She discussed her use of de-escalation and personalised emotional regulation strategies with CYP, which can be perceived by support staff as "*rewarding a child for 'bad behaviour'*". This narrative aligns with Hattersley's (2022) findings, whereby sanctions were stipulated by SLT as the appropriate response to behaviour that challenges, resulting in inconsistent responses between staff who may not align with this perspective.

Laura conveyed a sense of uncertainty and internal conflict regarding implementing her school's consequential behaviour policy for CYP with SEMH needs, complicated by the absence of "*a subsection for SEND needs*". This echoes findings from Harold (2012) where teachers were expected to utilise a uniformed, sanctions-based response with all CYP, regardless of additional needs, reflecting a zero-tolerance approach (APA, 2008). Simultaneously, Laura described "*mixed messages*" from SLT, whereby teachers were instructed to apply the behaviour system for all CYP, but later directed to make exceptions for specific CYP. This inconsistency was interpreted to elicit feelings of powerlessness and uncertainty amongst teachers around policy application, with possible confusion for CYP around expectations and consequences. This sense of conflict reflects Harold's (2012) findings whereby secondary teachers were instructed to keep exclusion data low, whilst strictly adhering to the behaviour system.

Further inconsistencies were attributed to teachers' characteristics and values, which were perceived to inherently impact their interaction with CYP. Doug identified discrepancies between teachers who are "*naturally gifted*" in their ability to relate to CYP, and others' whose strengths are in "*expert subject knowledge*". This implies an understanding that, as human beings, teachers do not operate in a vacuum but bring their own biases, orientations and preferences into the classroom which in turn shapes their perceptions around SEMH. This reflects research by Barni et al. (2018), where teachers' values are considered influential over their teaching style and approach with CYP, likely impacting their responses to SEMH needs. **See Reflexive Diary Entry (Appendix 5.5)**.

Not prepared: Insufficient training and limited information sharing hinder effective support

Discourse across most participants indicated that their ITT had not adequately prepared them to understand or support SEMH needs effectively, echoing existing literature (Aydin, 2021; Kidger et al., 2010). Participants sharing these views had taken a variety of routes into the profession (Table 3.2), indicating a commonality that ITT pedagogy may be misaligned with the practical needs of the change in the landscape with increasing numbers of CYP with SEMH needs (Gov.uk, 2024c). This is echoed within previous research (Martin-Denham, 2021; Devereux 2017), where staff reported feeling ill-equipped to effectively respond to the ever-increasing numbers of CYP with complex SEMH needs, due to a lack of specialist training. This may also be attributed to schools' prioritisation of curriculum-focused CPD (Ofsted, 2024). Existing literature illuminates the need for ITT to develop teachers' skills to identify and respond to SEMH needs effectively, in addition to ongoing CPD (Kidger et al., 2010), as well as illuminating the crucial role of positive teacher-CYP relationships and relational approaches (Wilson et al., 2023).

Numerous secondary participants expressed that poor communication, insufficient information sharing, inconsistent use of monitoring systems, and irregular updates to PPs can exacerbate a sense of unpreparedness, echoing Frearson and Duncan's findings (2024). This was perceived as particularly challenging for teachers with infrequent contact with CYP, who may be less familiar with their individual needs.

Secondary participants reported a limited repertoire of strategies to draw upon in response to behaviour that challenges, relying primarily on the application of the behaviour policy (Van Bodegraven, 2015), instinct, conjecture, and seeking intervention from specialist staff within the school. This mirrors Harold's (2012) findings and supports existing literature where teachers described relying on 'innate compassion' and instinct to guide their responses (Frearson & Duncan, 2024).

A pedagogical gap was noted within secondary participants' ITT regarding their awareness of approaches which support the development of emotional regulation skills. Instead, pedagogy aligns with behaviourist frameworks, whereby teachers are required to establish behaviour management systems underpinned by reward and sanction (DfE, 2019a; DfE, 2019b; DfE, 2021). Where emotional regulation skills are underdeveloped, such approaches are argued to be inappropriate and ineffective (Gibert et al., 2021), illuminating a dissonance between the developmental needs of CYP and the frameworks in place, particularly within secondary schools (DCSF, 2009) as reflected within this study. **See Reflexive Diary Entry (Appendix 5.6)**. In the absence of SEMH training within current ITT pedagogy (DfE, 2019b), there is a reliance on schools to provide CPD in this area. However, secondary participants described CPD as largely process-driven and policy-focused, identifying a need for bespoke training in SEMH, relevant to the school context, with theoretical underpinnings and examples of practical application to increase their knowledge and confidence, aligning with existing research (Frearson & Duncan, 2024; Hattersley, 2022; Patfield et al., 2021).

Those with additional training through a specialist role (e.g. SENDCo/SMHL/MHFA) reported higher levels of confidence and knowledge around SEMH, however such training is not ordinarily available for all teachers, likely hindering the potential support everyday teacher-CYP interactions can offer (e.g. Bombèr, 2020; Gottman et al., 1996; Gilbert et al., 2021).

The researcher interpreted a more medicalised view of SEMH among secondary participants, which literature suggests aligns with a dispositional attribution (Heider, 1958) and can evoke a perception that meeting these needs is beyond teachers' remit, instead for those in specialist roles (Monkman, 2013).

5.3.2 RQ2: Are there similarities and differences between what mainstream primary and secondary school teachers understand about CYP's SEMH, and how they respond to CYP's SEMH needs?

In response to RQ2, the following themes will be discussed in light of existing literature and psychological theory, with their associated sub-themes: '*Are you ready to learn? Navigating the tensions between meeting SEMH needs and delivering the curriculum*', and '*Teachers' differing perspectives on their role in supporting emotional well-being and holistic development*'.

5.3.2.1 Theme: Are you ready to learn? Navigating the tensions between meeting SEMH needs and delivering the curriculum

A belief that meeting SEMH needs should be prioritised, as 'if that's not right, there's no point in cracking on with anything else'

A comprehensive understanding was conveyed, primarily across primary participants, emphasising the cruciality of meeting CYP's SEMH needs as a foundation for supporting holistic development (Maslow, 1943). This reflects existing literature illuminating the interrelatedness between SEMH and learning (Duckworth & Seligman, 2005; Gottman et al., 1996), whereby emotional needs can hinder CYP's engagement with learning (Wilson et al., 2023). The prioritisation of supporting SEMH needs was demonstrated through primary participants ensuring they "*always take time*" (Nicola) to support SEMH needs despite curriculum pressures, sharing a belief that "*as long as the children are happy and safe, then I think the learning follows*" (Georgia). These findings echo existing research, whereby staff discussed prioritising their availability as a trusted adult to connect with CYP in moments of emotional dysregulation (Devereux, 2017; Hattersley, 2022).

Primary participants' discourse indicated that CYP's SEMH development was prioritised within school culture, ethos and practices at an exosystemic level (Figure 5.2), underpinned by an understanding of behaviour as communication of unmet needs (Treisman, 2016). This was demonstrated through relational policies and approaches (e.g. EC; Gottman et al., 1996; Gilbert et al., 2021), daily routines with emotional check-ins, the availability of allocated regulation spaces and targeted SEMH interventions (e.g. Emotional Literacy Support Assistant/ELSA; Burton et al., 2010), the auditing and monitoring of every CYP's SEMH (e.g. Boxall Profiles; Bennathan et al., 2011), zero use of permanent exclusions, and the curriculum. **See Reflexive Diary Entry (Appendix 5.7)**. Psychoeducational approaches, such as Zones of Regulation (Kuypers, 2011) and myHappymind (Earnshaw, 2020), were described as having a significantly positive impact on CYP's emotional understanding and physiological responses, developing self-regulation skills and emotional literacy, and in teachers' early identification of emerging needs. The positive impact was attributed to the prioritisation and consistent implementation of the approach within daily routines as part of a whole-school strategy. This reflects Hattersley's (2022) research where teachers conveyed the importance of equipping CYP with strategies to understand and manage their own MH and well-being.

'Balancing plates': Competing demands and curriculum pressures impact SEMH support

The researcher interpreted narratives exclusively across secondary participants as reflecting a perception that curriculum pressures and other demands within school significantly impact the

provision of SEMH support, reflecting Hibbott's findings (2024) that SEMH support is often overlooked in favour of academic prioritisation. Across all secondary participants, the researcher interpreted substantial exosystemic pressures (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) on teachers to prioritise curriculum delivery (Figure 5.2), particularly regarding GCSE outcomes, reflected in the statement, "*we don't have the capacity to be preventative*" (Doug). Notably, this perspective was not shared by primary participants, who, despite recognising competing demands and curriculum pressures, prioritised meeting CYP's SEMH needs as the foundation for learning and holistic development.

A significant increase in curriculum content since changes to the National Curriculum (DfE, 2014) was discussed by multiple secondary participants as a barrier to relationship-building and responding to SEMH needs, leading to a reliance on pastoral staff to intervene when CYP become emotionally dysregulated and require additional support. This reflects Devereux's (2017) findings, where staff discussed the prioritisation of academic results, meaning that teacher-CYP interactions were often centred around attainment and target grades rather than rapport-building. Frearson and Duncan (2024) illuminated the need for a top-down, holistic approach to understanding CYP's needs, rather than focusing solely on CYP's measurable attainment, which Kidger et al.'s (2010) findings suggested can negatively impact the development of trusting teacher-CYP relationships. Findings by Burton and Goodman (2010) echo this, with staff reporting that relationship-building is 'time-consuming' in a busy classroom. As a result, it was interpreted that rapport-building and pastoral support typically occur outside of the classroom, either from designated pastoral teams, form tutors, or subject teachers. This indicates additional efforts beyond a subject teacher's core responsibilities, which may lead to variability in its provision across a staff team. The possible prioritisation of curriculum delivery over SEMH support in secondary settings may be attributable to pressures at an LA and Governmental level for producing satisfactory attainment data within the wider cohort of CYP. Through this lens, the needs of one CYP may, therefore, be neglected in favour of prioritising the academic needs of the broader cohort.

5.3.2.2 Theme: Teachers' differing perspectives on their role in supporting emotional well-being and holistic development

Is it my job?

Narratives were shared exclusively across secondary teachers conveying a sense of uncertainty about whether it is the role of the teacher or pastoral staff to respond to CYP's SEMH needs. At an exosystemic level (Figure 5.2), secondary participants discussed the increased presence of pastoral staff within schools (Gov.uk, 2023a), which appears to have caused ambiguity around teachers'

responsibilities in responding to SEMH needs, mirroring existing literature (O'Toole & Soan, 2022). Most secondary participants also expressed uncertainty around what happens when CYP leave the classroom to receive pastoral support, potentially overlooking their responsibilities to collaborate with pastoral staff in planning and monitoring interventions for CYP with SEND (DfE, 2015). Tension and a sense of blame were described between pastoral and teaching staff, mirroring Harold's (2012) findings where a divide in the staff team was considered to hinder their understanding of one another's roles. This may impact effective communication about CYP's needs and the support provided. Research has illuminated that more collaboration is needed between pastoral and teaching staff, particularly in relation to supporting trauma-experienced CYP (Frearson & Duncan, 2024).

Numerous secondary participants shared that if CYP become emotionally dysregulated, pastoral staff are called to escort them out of the classroom and return them once they are regulated. This aligns with existing literature (Harold, 2012; Kidger et al., 2010), possibly indicating perceptions that providing co-regulation is neither expected within the classroom setting nor considered part of a secondary teacher's role. This may imply a belief that the classroom is solely for academic learning rather than a holistic environment fostering all areas of development. Increased curriculum content (DfE, 2014) and the omission of 'care' and 'pastoral' from teachers' professional responsibilities (DfE, 2011; Ofsted, 2023) may have altered systemic expectations and shifted the focus exclusively to academic outcomes. The employment of pastoral staff has previously been framed as an attempt by SLT to separate pastoral from teaching and learning to reduce teacher workload (O'Toole & Soan, 2022). Secondary participants implied this through discussion around existing systems, where SLT, pastoral and SEND staff were positioned as primary responders when CYP require a 'reset'; this may further impact teachers' perceived capacity to offer SEMH support, or assume it is not within their role's remit. Oakes' (2018) findings reflect this, whereby secondary teachers shared information regarding CYP's SEMH needs with pastoral staff who were responsible for exploring these and disseminating information to relevant staff. This may imply that unpicking to understand a CYP's SEMH needs is not perceived to be within a secondary teacher's domain.

Secondary participants conveyed narratives indicating perceived differences in their roles and responsibilities as subject teachers, where the expectation was described as imparting subject knowledge and developing CYP's skills to contribute to society, versus form tutors, where a more nurturing, relaxed approach was described. This is reflected in Wilson et al.'s (2023) research where subject teachers described their role as primarily transmitting curriculum content. Several secondary participants expressed knowing teachers who exhibit a "*fundamental lack of empathy*" and

relatability, with a strong passion for their subject, which "*doesn't always transfer across to a love of children*" (Doug). This may denote a perception of teaching as content-driven, with limited emphasis on relational engagement and supporting holistic development. This supports existing literature whereby some teachers avoided building relationships with CYP in favour of an authoritarian-style approach (Barni et al., 2018; Monkman, 2013), possibly indicating a perceived need to maintain control to fulfil professional responsibilities.

'It's always the same kids in detention': An implicit, systemic assumption that CYP arrive at secondary school with the ability to regulate their emotions and behaviour

Discourse across secondary participants illuminated teachers' strict adherence to consequential behaviour systems in response to behaviour that challenges, including the use of detentions, internal exclusions, turnaround placements at alternative provisions, managed moves, and permanent exclusions. Primary participants perceived a stark contrast in how SEMH needs are understood and responded to between primary and secondary school, voicing concerns that the "*nurturing environment*" and adaptations offered within primary school are often not replicated in secondary settings, resulting in CYP with SEMH needs being "*excluded within weeks*" (Georgia). This reflects existing literature suggesting that expectations of CYP increase after transitioning from primary to secondary school regarding their psychological and emotional maturity (Galton et al., 2003). There may be an implicit assumption that emotional regulation skills are acquired prior to secondary school, potentially explaining the disproportionate exclusion rates in secondary settings (Gov.uk, 2024b).

Recommendations to use sanctions in response to behaviour that challenges within the Teachers' Standards (DfE, 2021), and Governmental guidance (DfE, 2024b) demonstrates a zero-tolerance approach (APA, 2008); guidance advises that, despite the possible presence of additional needs, all CYP should be expected to conform to 'highly consistent consequence systems' (DfE, 2018, p.5) and behavioural expectations. This reflects secondary participants' discourse around teachers' universal application of the behaviour system, which is likely amplifying the disproportionate exclusion rates for CYP with SEND (Gov.uk, 2024b) who may experience difficulties with emotional and behavioural regulation. At a macrosystemic level (Figure 5.1), this guidance, therefore, appears to have a significant influence over the processes outlined within schools' behaviour policies. Secondary participants articulated their obligation to enforce this through the administration of sanctions, such as detentions and turnaround placements, despite scepticism around their impact on reducing behaviour that challenges. This may indicate underlying awareness of the limitations of behaviourist approaches in developing the emotional regulation skills needed for CYP to regulate their behaviour

in order to adhere to expectations (Gilbert et al., 2021), often resulting in its continued reoccurrence (Parker et al., 2016). This perspective aligns with existing research indicating that secondary school systems may be "*too punitive*" (Devereux, 2017), an approach considered ineffective for many CYP (Burton & Goodman, 2010) through its neglect in addressing underlying needs (Graham et al., 2019). This may also be reflected in 'persistent disruptive behaviour' being the most frequently cited reason for permanent exclusion (Gov.uk, 2024b).

Participants hypothesised that an increased reliance on sanctions is negatively correlated with a more limited understanding of SEMH among teachers, reflecting Van Bodegraven's (2015) findings. Holly noted that some teachers view CYP as "*just being naughty*", possibly implying that behaviour is always a controlled choice. This interpretation indicates a behaviourist understanding (Skinner, 1975) where environmental and biopsychosocial factors may be overlooked. Teachers adopting a biopsychosocial perspective which acknowledges these factors are considered to be better equipped to make appropriate adaptations with greater confidence (Norwich, 2016), suggesting that those who do not may be less confident and effective in doing so.

'Everybody is pastoral, really': The role of teachers in developing CYP's emotional understanding and regulation

Narratives were conveyed, predominantly across primary participants, indicating an understanding that fostering CYP's emotional awareness and regulation as part of their holistic development is central to a teacher's role. At a microsystemic level (Figure 5.1), primary participants expressed that providing pastoral support and responding to CYP's emotional needs is "*part and parcel of what we do*" (Georgia), reflecting Kidger et al.'s (2010) findings. This suggests that SEMH needs are responded to by the class teacher, reflecting Monkman's (2013) findings that supporting these needs and providing 'emotional stability' are integral to a teacher's role. This also aligns with existing literature whereby teachers expressed a strong sense of responsibility to serve as trusted adults and consistently be available to give care (Wilson et al., 2023), and joint problem-hold and solve as a 'second parent' (Hattersley, 2022). Participants' use of the pronoun "*we*" when discussing the identification and implementation of support may also denote a sense of responsibility, aligning with expectations within the SENDCoP (DfE, 2015), reflecting existing literature (Hattersley, 2022; Underwood, 2022).

The use of relational approaches was described across primary participants, such as EC (Gottman et al., 1996; Gilbert et al., 2021), to respond to CYP experiencing emotional dysregulation. Utilising non-threatening body language, a gentle, calming tone of voice, minimal language, offering reassurance,

labelling, and validating emotions were discussed as key factors to foster safety and build connection. This demonstrates an awareness of trauma-informed, attachment-aware practice (Bombèr, 2007; Bombèr, 2020) and the use of co-regulation skills to develop CYP's emotional understanding and regulation skills (Gilbert et al., 2021). Primary participants conveyed discourse around the importance of allowing time and metaphorically sitting with a CYP in an uncomfortable feeling when they are dysregulated, emphasising that prioritising time for co-regulation remains fundamental despite the competing demands of a teacher's role, mirroring Hattersley's (2022) findings.

A secondary participant discussed prompting CYP to use their own self-regulation strategies when emotionally dysregulated, suggesting that their role may be perceived as *reminding* rather than explicitly *teaching* emotional regulation. This perspective may shift the responsibility onto the CYP, by assuming that they already possess the pre-requisite skills to self-regulate independently.

5.4 Summary of Findings

The current study aimed to answer two RQs:

1. *What do mainstream primary and secondary teachers understand about CYP's SEMH and how do they respond to CYP's SEMH needs?*
2. *Are there similarities and differences between what mainstream primary and secondary teachers understand about CYP's SEMH, and how they respond to CYP's SEMH needs?*

Five themes were constructed following the analysis of eight semi-structured interviews using RTA. Findings support existing literature and offer additional insights:

'*SEMH is associated with and impacted by various factors*' (RQ1) indicated an understanding across most participants that SEMH exists on a spectrum with needs manifesting differently within and between CYP, often interacting with other areas of need. While all participants demonstrated general awareness that environmental and contextual factors may influence SEMH, there appeared to be less clarity around the nature of the impact. Participants perceived that socio-political changes at exosystemic and macrosystemic levels (Figure 5.2) influence CYP's SEMH.

'*A whole-school approach to understanding and supporting CYP's SEMH*' (RQ1) indicated perceptions across most participants that trusting, attuned teacher-CYP relationships are fundamental to understanding and responding to SEMH needs. All participants suggested that teachers working together to share information, knowledge, and expertise enhances schools' capacity to provide effective SEMH support. To successfully embed a whole-school approach to support SEMH, predominantly primary participants conveyed the necessity of a unified mindset, where teachers are

consistently aligned in their openness and flexibility to continuously learn and adapt in response to individuals' needs.

'*A sense of powerlessness*' (RQ1) indicated perceptions across predominantly secondary participants that unclear expectations, inconsistencies and conflicting approaches foster uncertainty. Primarily secondary participants felt unprepared to support SEMH needs, citing insufficient training and limited information sharing as contributory factors. Most participants reported feeling that ITT pedagogy had not equipped them to provide effective SEMH support.

'*Are you ready to learn? Navigating the tensions between meeting SEMH needs and delivering the curriculum*' (RQ2) illuminated a stark contrast between primary and secondary participants' perceptions. A belief that meeting CYP's SEMH needs must be prioritised was interpreted across primary participants. In contrast, secondary participants conveyed a sense that curriculum pressures and other demands significantly impact their perceived capacity to meet SEMH needs.

'*Teachers' differing perspectives on their role in supporting emotional well-being and holistic development*' (RQ2) indicated a notable disparity between primary and secondary participants' views. Secondary participants conveyed uncertainty about their role in supporting SEMH, describing the utilisation of pastoral teams' support in response to CYP experiencing emotional dysregulation and increased curriculum pressures within their role. A potential systemic expectation that CYP enter secondary school with emotional and behavioural regulation skills was interpreted through the increased utilisation of consequential behaviour systems, possibly implying that secondary teachers have no role in developing these skills. In contrast, primary participants were interpreted to view fostering emotional awareness and regulation as central to their role in supporting CYP's holistic development.

5.5 Methodological Review

5.5.1 Methodological Strengths

RTA (Braun & Clarke, 2022) enabled the thorough exploration of the RQs, including drawing comparisons between primary and secondary participants' perspectives. This methodology was appropriate as it aligns with the study's relativist ontological position in its acknowledgement of multiple realities and socially constructed, subjective truths. The methodology facilitated the elicitation of teachers' rich, subjective experiences and perceptions around the complex and nuanced nature of SEMH, while acknowledging the influence of social, cultural and historical influences upon their understanding and responses. The flexibility inherent in RTA allowed for the refinement of the RQs in response to the data gathered.

Flexibility in the semi-structured interview method aligned with the study's interpretivist epistemological stance, as it facilitated the co-construction of data between the researcher and participants. Conducting the interviews virtually enabled the researcher and participant to deactivate the camera function, minimising the possible influence of visible cues, such as body language and facial expressions. This, in conjunction with the use of neutrally phrased interview questions, helped mitigate demand characteristics, thereby decreasing the likelihood of social desirability bias and response modification based on perceived researcher expectations.

Interpretation of data at a semantic and latent level acknowledged participants' explicit meanings as their realities and experiences, whilst also considering their deeper underpinnings within ecological contexts (Figure 5.2).

5.5.2 Methodological Limitations

RTA relies on researchers' interpretation of participants' discourse (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Inextricable biases shaped by researchers' values and personal and professional experiences inevitably inform how the data is interpreted and the knowledge generated (Robson & McCartan, 2016; Silverman, 2021; Willig, 2013), and researcher objectivity in qualitative research has been challenged (Olmos-Vega et al., 2022). To promote transparency and increase the integrity and trustworthiness of findings, the researcher demonstrated critical engagement with her values, positionality, assumptions and decision-making throughout the research process by maintaining a reflexive diary (Finlay, 2016; Ortlipp, 2008; Willig, 2013). Excerpts of this are presented in the appendices and referenced throughout. The researcher has experience as a primary teacher and as an AEP and TEP working within an LA where SEMH represents a prevalent area of need and the EPS has a strong emphasis on trauma-informed practice. Consequently, this area of research became a professional interest, which has inevitably influenced how the current study has been conducted and analysed. Researcher reflexivity and consideration of positionality have therefore been crucial to supporting the rigour of this study (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Willig, 2013), which has been acknowledged in greater depth (Section 3.4).

Four SENDCos participated in the study, which may reflect a heightened interest in SEMH and SEND. As SENDCos receive additional training in SEMH within their role (Gov.uk, 2023b), they may possess an enhanced understanding. Additionally, three participants had engaged extensively with their MHST offer (DoHSC & DfE, 2018), and a fourth was employed at a school where a comprehensive level of training in relational approaches and trauma-informed practice had been delivered. The recruitment

process may have, therefore, disproportionately attracted individuals who perceived themselves as well-informed or interested in this area. While qualitative research does not seek generalisability (Leung, 2015; Westby, 2021), the data may not reflect the broader teaching population, potentially limiting the applicability of findings beyond those with a strong professional investment in SEMH. Recognition of this supports transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), which is particularly important given the small sample size in the current study (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

Initially, the researcher had intended to incorporate a focus group design within the LA, which may have facilitated richer discussion and ensured that all participants had access to the same MHST offer (DoHSC & DfE, 2018). However, recruitment challenges necessitated a methodological shift to semi-structured interviews conducted via Microsoft Teams, enabling national recruitment due to the time constraints of this doctoral research. Therefore, not all secondary participants had access to an MHST offer (DoHSC & DfE, 2018), making it impossible to determine whether they would have engaged with this if it had been available.

From the outset, a decision was made not to adopt Grounded Theory (GT) as a methodology for the current study. Despite GT's epistemological and ontological congruence, the focus for this study was exploratory (RQ1) and comparative (RQ2) and it was not anticipated that new psychological theory would be generated (Section 3.3.4.3). The researcher consequently sequenced the research process beginning with a literature review, as opposed to inductive data collection, which immediately rendered it incompatible with the epistemological foundations of GT (Hallberg, 2010; McGhee et al., 2007). In retrospect, the findings illuminate conceptual insights that formulate new theoretical contributions (Section 5.9), suggesting that GT may have offered a more coherent structure for systematically generating and refining these concepts to produce a theoretical framework (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), whilst accounting for the impact of context in the construction of knowledge (Charmaz, 2014).

It could be suggested that the researcher had a presupposition that differences would emerge between primary and secondary teachers' understanding of and responses to CYP's SEMH needs, due to the decision made to compare their perspectives as two homogenous groups (RQ2). This is supported by the researcher's knowledge of the disproportionate rates of permanent exclusion within secondary settings whereby 'persistent disruptive behaviour' is cited as the most common reason (Gov.uk, 2024b). The researcher hypothesised that this statistic may reflect differences in teachers' understanding of and responses to SEMH needs between primary and secondary settings, resulting in

a comparative inquiry (RQ2). However, there was not a prior expectation that similarities and differences would definitely emerge between the two groups, hence the inclusion of RQ1 which was exploratory in nature, and sought to analyse participants' perspectives collectively as a single group.

The nature of qualitative research values participants' subjective experiences and perspectives (Smith, 2015). The researcher, therefore, felt uncomfortable moving away from these during the coding and theming process. To mitigate this, she decided to include verbatim quotes in the names of codes, sub-themes and themes, where appropriate, to ensure participants' voices remained at the centre of the research.

5.6 Original Contribution

School staff's understanding of and responses to CYP's SEMH needs have been explored within existing literature. However, no study had yet sought to gain and compare the perspectives of mainstream primary and secondary teachers. The current study's findings indicate that teachers across primary and secondary phases perceive broader socio-political changes as having a notable influence over CYP's SEMH, and a subsequent shift in teachers' roles was discussed. However, secondary participants highlighted a need for further training to enhance their confidence and knowledge to effectively identify and respond to CYP's SEMH needs. There was a consensus across most participants that ITT had not adequately prepared them to understand or respond to SEMH needs. This suggests a possible misalignment between ITT CCF (DfE, 2019b) pedagogy and the evolving socio-political landscape, including the rising prevalence and complexity of SEMH needs in CYP (Gov.uk, 2024c).

Findings suggest that while primary and secondary teachers may be aware of environmental and contextual factors outside of the school environment that may impact SEMH, they may not have a deeper understanding of their potential developmental influences. Furthermore, there appeared to be less awareness of within-school risk factors, indicating a possible gap in primary and secondary teachers' conceptualisations of the school's role in influencing SEMH needs.

The comparative element of the study illuminated a stark contrast between how primary and secondary teachers may conceptualise their role and their responses to SEMH needs. Primary participants were collectively interpreted to view their role as supporting CYP's holistic development, prioritising SEMH needs as the foundation to other areas of development. However, secondary participants were broadly interpreted to perceive their role as primarily curriculum delivery and

imparting subject-specific knowledge, indicating that pastoral support is available outside of the classroom. Possibly in the absence of knowing teacher-CYP relationships, which are likely more feasible through the primary school structure, secondary teachers described a reliance on up-to-date PPs and effective information-sharing to understand and consistently respond to CYP's SEMH needs. However, poor communication and inconsistent use of monitoring systems, along with infrequent updates to PPs, were perceived to negatively affect the support CYP receive. It was suggested that a limited understanding of SEMH and alternative approaches, paired with systemic expectations around adherence to behaviour management systems, may lead to an increased dependence on behaviourist frameworks in addressing behaviour that challenges in secondary settings, potentially without consideration of underlying needs. These stark systemic differences have implications for how EPs tailor their approaches across primary and secondary systems (Section 5.7.3).

5.7 Implications for Practice

5.7.1 Implications for Local Authorities and Wider Government

The current study illuminated participants' perceptions around significant changes in the socio-political landscape. Combined with the increasing numbers of CYP described as having SEMH needs (Gov.uk, 2024c), these changes indicate a shift in teachers' roles and responsibilities with an increased focus on supporting holistic development. Most participants felt ill-equipped to respond to these changes following ITT, and secondary participants conveyed uncertainty around whether supporting SEMH is within their role remit. A review of the ITT CCF (DfE, 2019b) is therefore considered crucial to realign its pedagogy to better reflect CYP's evolving SEMH needs, such as incorporating compassion-focused approaches which develop emotional regulation skills, and outlining teachers' roles and responsibilities in supporting SEMH. In conducting this review, considerations should be made around the introduction of pedagogical frameworks focusing on the identification, understanding, and monitoring of SEMH into the ITT CCF (DfE, 2019b), including behaviour as communication (Treisman, 2016), the interaction between SEMH and other areas of need, and risk and protective factors (Figure 5.2). As professionals considered to hold expertise in SEND (DfE, 2015), EPs are considered well-placed to collaborate with policymakers, stakeholders and educators in this area (Atfield et al., 2023), and may offer insight into trauma-informed, attachment-aware practices and relational approaches. Revision of the ITT CCF (DfE, 2019b) to incorporate these pedagogical approaches could enhance teachers' capacity to support SEMH effectively before qualification.

Furthermore, a review of Governmental guidance around SEMH and behaviour (e.g. DfE, 2024b) is recommended, given the increasing rates of permanent exclusion (Gov.uk, 2024b). This is particularly important in light of existing literature (e.g. Burton & Goodman, 2010; Gilbert et al., 2021; Parker et al., 2016) and findings from the current study, which indicate the ineffectiveness of sanctions, such as detentions and exclusions, in preventing the reoccurrence of behaviour that challenges. These strategies are argued not to adequately support the development of the emotional regulation skills considered crucial for behavioural regulation (Gilbert et al., 2021); however, they form the foundation of Governmental guidance (e.g. DfE, 2024b). This indicates a disparity between such guidance and key theoretical frameworks, illuminating a crucial, collaborative role for policymakers and EPs in re-centring guidance around relational approaches which develop emotional regulation skills, whilst setting limits on behaviour (e.g. EC; Gilbert et al., 2021), to promote CYP's SEMH development.

The definition of SEMH within the SENDCoP (DfE, 2015) could be suggested to reflect a predominantly medical model perspective; revision of this definition by acknowledging the multi-faceted and nuanced nature of SEMH and different behavioural presentations, including CYP's possible 'masking' of needs, may offer more conceptual clarity. A reframe, incorporating the possible influence of environmental and contextual factors, such as ACEs and trauma, and the interaction between SEMH and other areas of need could promote a holistic understanding and inform more effective responses.

Extensive engagement with whole-school training in SEMH was described as having a significantly positive impact on primary participants' knowledge and confidence in understanding and responding to SEMH needs, with increased consistency in practice across the school. Numerous participants had sought this through their school's MHST offer with an LA EP (DoHSC & DfE, 2018). This illuminates the critical role of EPs being commissioned by LAs to deliver components of the MHST offer to enhance capacity and bridge the gap between schools and CYP's MH services through training and follow-up support, as intended nationally by the initiative (DoHSC & DfE, 2018).

5.7.2 Implications for Schools

Findings illuminate teachers' critical, holistic role in providing consistent, trusting, attuned teacher-CYP relationships as a gateway to identifying and responding to SEMH needs as part of a consistent, whole-school approach. This is supported by statistics citing teachers as the most common source of support for CYP with SEMH needs (NHS Digital, 2017). Teachers were recognised as key attachment figures with a pivotal role in identifying factors which may hinder secure attachments within a CYP's home environment and providing emotional availability and relational stability within school.

However, findings mirror existing research highlighting significant gaps in secondary participants' knowledge and confidence in understanding SEMH needs (Devereux, 2017; Martin-Denham, 2020; Martin-Denham, 2021). Research indicates that schools prioritise curriculum-related CPD, particularly within secondary education (Ofsted, 2024), possibly indicating a limited understanding of the interaction between SEMH and other areas of development (Maslow, 1943), however equal importance should be placed on supporting CYP's well-being and academic learning (Culshaw & Bodfield, 2024). It is therefore essential for school leaders to seek whole-school training in trauma-informed, attachment-aware practices (Bombèr, 2020), and relational approaches (e.g. Gilbert et al., 2021) for all staff to increase consistency in practice across the school, and staff's confidence to support CYP's SEMH as the underpinning to other areas of development.

Consideration should be given to systemically reviewing school behaviour policies, with a shift away from '*managing behaviour*' solely through rewards and sanctions towards '*understanding it*' as communication of an unmet need (Treisman, 2016) to promote an inclusive learning environment. This may be achieved by implementing a relational policy acknowledging the foundational role of emotional regulation in influencing behaviour (Gilbert et al., 2021), while developing these skills through trusted teacher-CYP relationships. This is particularly relevant given the increased expectations on CYP following the transition from primary to secondary school in terms of their emotional and psychological maturity (Galton et al., 2003), and the disproportionate exclusion rates within secondary settings (Gov.uk, 2024b) which may be associated with this.

Maintaining consistency in flexibility was interpreted as crucial to meet individual CYP's needs, as opposed to adopting a one-size-fits-all approach, illuminating the importance of open communication and the sharing of up-to-date information about CYP's needs across all staff, to ensure that expectations are being adapted consistently. Effective information sharing between teachers and pastoral staff is especially critical when supporting trauma-experienced CYP (Frearson & Duncan, 2024), who constitute almost one-third of CYP in the UK (Lewis et al., 2019). Consistency could be promoted through staff meeting times dedicated to joint problem-solving and discussion around the needs of CYP, as well as allocating time during these meetings for teachers to review PPs on a half-termly basis, ensuring that knowledge is current and necessary adjustments are made. Whole-school monitoring of every CYP's SEMH should be considered to identify emerging needs and enable early intervention.

Consideration should be made around embedding psychoeducation approaches and emotional check-ins into daily routines to support CYP's emotional awareness and development, such as myHappymind (Earnshaw, 2020) and Zones of Regulation (Kuypers, 2011). It is essential to ensure that approaches are age-appropriate and developmentally suitable to foster engagement, which may necessitate adaptations.

5.7.3 Implications for Educational Psychologists

EPs are involved in a relatively high volume of work relating to supporting CYP's SEMH needs at different systems levels (Purewal, 2020). At a macrosystemic level (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006), EPs are in a unique position to provide expertise on the intersection of educational practice and SEMH (Atfield et al., 2023) by contributing to reviews of Governmental guidance (Section 5.7.1), including the definition of SEMH in the SENDCoP (DfE, 2015), the ITT CCF pedagogy (DfE, 2019b), and guidance for schools around responses to behaviour which develop emotional regulation skills (e.g. DfE, 2024b).

Significant differences were interpreted between the ways primary and secondary teachers may perceive their role, and their responses to SEMH needs. This emphasises the flexibility required from EPs to tailor their work differently between primary and secondary settings. A consensus among primary participants highlighted the significant positive impact of whole-school training in increasing the capacity to support SEMH needs consistently within school, predominantly delivered through MHST (DoHSC & DfE, 2018) by an LA EP. Secondary participants identified a need for bespoke training in SEMH, relevant to the school context, with examples of practical application and theoretical underpinning, aligning with existing research (Frearson & Duncan, 2024; Hattersley, 2022; Kidger et al., 2010; Patfield et al., 2021). This illuminates a key role for EPs in delivering training, which may be commissioned through MHST (DoHSC & DfE, 2018), to increase teachers' knowledge and confidence to utilise alternative strategies in response to CYP's needs where behaviourist systems are argued to fall short (Gilbert et al., 2021).

To enact systemic change, particularly in secondary settings, it could be considered necessary for EPs to work collaboratively with SLT, firstly establishing the school's position in the Cycle of Change (Prochaska et al., 2013). A tool such as Appreciative Inquiry (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005) or a PATH (Planning Alternative Tomorrows with Hope; Pearpoint et al., 1993) may be used to create buy-in and establish a training focus tailored to the school context. Findings indicate a need for ongoing, whole-school training in the following areas:

- Complex nature of SEMH: Understanding behaviour as communication of an unmet need (Treisman, 2016) and shifting the narratives around behaviour and SEMH,
- Interaction between SEMH and other areas of need,
- SEMH situated within an ecological system (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006; Figure 5.2): Socio-political, environmental and contextual influences,
- Developing emotional awareness (e.g. psychoeducational approaches),
- And trauma-informed, attachment-aware practices and relational approaches (e.g. EC, Gilbert et al., 2021).

A need was identified for follow-up support after training, which is suggested to increase staff's confidence to implement alternative approaches (Gov.uk, 2024a). This could further expand the EP role, e.g. through facilitating peer supervision, coaching, refresher training, or school policy review (Johnson et al., 2017). EPs may also support SENDCos to embed an SEMH audit or monitoring system (e.g. Boxall Profiles; Bennathan et al., 2011) for all CYP to support the early identification of SEMH needs.

Participants conveyed feeling unprepared to support SEMH effectively following ITT, illuminating a role for EPs in co-reviewing the ITT CCF (DfE, 2019b) to better equip teachers before qualification. Alternatively, a requirement could be introduced for Early Career Teachers (ECTs) to attend additional training facilitated by an EP, designed to establish a strong understanding of SEMH with effective support strategies and approaches from the outset of their careers. This is particularly relevant for secondary teachers given the prominent discourse around their unpreparedness to respond effectively to CYP's SEMH needs, possibly perpetuated by their settings' prioritisation of curriculum-focused CPD (Ofsted, 2024). Secondary teachers may otherwise not receive training in SEMH if it is not made compulsory through ITT or additional training as an ECT.

Findings from the current study also have implications for the way in which EPs engage with primary and secondary settings in the immediate future, in terms of what is practical and possible within existing systems. While findings suggest that teachers across both educational phases may hold a general awareness that environmental and contextual factors can impact CYP's SEMH, an understanding of the possible developmental impact may not be held. This offers a valuable insight for EPs to consider when facilitating consultations, illuminating an opportunity to scaffold teachers' understanding through drawing on relevant developmental psychological theory and co-constructing working hypotheses which link environmental and contextual factors with a CYP's SEMH needs and possible behavioural presentation. Participants' perceptions that there has been a change in the socio-

political landscape could also shape EPs' questioning and discussion around factors which may impact CYP's SEMH, such as changes to familial dynamics, poverty, and excessive use of electronic devices, social media and face-altering filters.

The findings have immediate implications for EPs working with primary schools, in that primary participants were found to prioritise SEMH needs and perceive their role as encompassing CYP's holistic development, cultivating emotional awareness, and supporting emotional regulation. Primary settings may therefore be especially receptive to implementing approaches which foster positive SEMH to build school capacity by enhancing knowledge and responses as a preventative measure. Findings indicate that psychoeducational approaches (e.g. Zones of Regulation, Kuypers, 2011; myHappymind, Earnshaw, 2020) can be highly beneficial in developing CYP's emotional understanding and regulation, which could support EPs' rationale for recommending such approaches at an individual, group, whole-class, or whole-school level where appropriate.

A number of immediate implications emerged for EPs working within secondary school contexts. Findings highlight that behaviourist principles often underpin secondary settings' systemic approaches and expectations with regard to teachers' responses to behaviour that challenges. Coupled with perceived limited knowledge, understanding and confidence in supporting CYP's SEMH needs, secondary teachers may be largely reliant on behaviour policies driven by reward and sanction frameworks when responding to behaviour that challenges. This could present barriers to the consideration of relational, trauma-informed, and attachment-aware approaches which seek to explore possible needs underpinning behaviour (Bombèr, 2007; Bombèr, 2020), prompting EPs to gently draw on psychological theory and evidence-informed approaches within consultations and discussions to shift narratives towards an ecological understanding and response (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Secondary teachers may also experience 'mixed messages' from SLT, further contributing to a sense of uncertainty around how to respond effectively, which could be supported by EPs' involvement of SLT in consultations to create a shared understanding of the need for flexibility and consistency in approach across the staff team. The findings also suggest that secondary teachers may view such support as the remit of pastoral staff rather than an integral component of a teacher's role. In light of this, EPs can play a key role in facilitating reflective dialogue with teachers about their perceptions of their role in supporting SEMH, exploring how classroom-based support could look in practice, and identifying and unpicking barriers to implementation. Without collaborative exploration, recommendations of such support may be dismissed, particularly if they are perceived as misaligned with a teacher's role expectations or institutional norms.

5.8 Implications for Future Research

Whilst semi-structured interviews were valuable in gaining participants' individual views, utilising a focus group approach to collect data may have elicited richer discussions between participants (Kitzinger, 1995; Krueger & Casey, 2014). Conducting focus groups in person within one LA may have enhanced the transferability of findings due to schools having access to the same Local Offer, such as where EPSs are commissioned to partially deliver the MHST offer (DoHSC & DfE, 2018). However, significant recruitment challenges prevented this due to the time constraints of doctoral research. Future research may consider adopting a focus group methodology, incorporating measures to mitigate possible recruitment challenges.

The current study focused on teachers' understanding of and responses to CYP's SEMH needs as a general population. However, the highest exclusion rates are reported among Gypsy/Roma (0.16), Travellers of Irish Heritage (0.13) and White and Black Caribbean CYP (0.13) (Gov.uk, 2024b), illuminating a clear rationale to explore teachers' understanding of SEMH within these specific populations to address gaps in the existing knowledge base.

5.9 Implications for Psychological Theory

Findings from the current study carry significant implications for existing psychological theory, particularly in relation to how teachers and school systems may perceive CYP's capacity for emotional regulation, as well as teachers' attributions of CYP's SEMH needs. This section will present key psychological frameworks that are pertinent to the findings: the Three Rs framework (Perry & Szalavitz, 2017), the Process Model of Emotion Regulation (Gross & Thompson, 2007), and Attribution Theory (Heider, 1958; Kelley, 1967). Each will be discussed in relation to the findings to explore how these models may support or challenge current educational practices.

5.9.1 The Three Rs Framework: Regulate, Relate, Reason

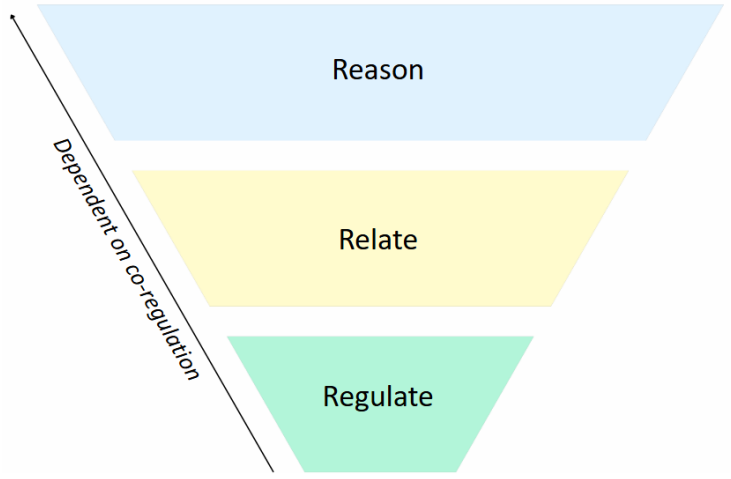
Perry and Szalavitz (2017) proposed a conceptual framework to illustrate a bottom-up, trauma-informed process for effectively supporting CYP to regulate their emotions. The Three Rs framework (Perry & Szalavitz, 2017; Figure 5.9.1) offers a neurobiologically and developmentally-informed approach, considered particularly appropriate for CYP who have experienced trauma or who have not yet developed the ability to independently self-regulate. Central to the framework is the vital role of a trusted adult in providing connection and co-regulation as a developmental necessity to supporting emotional and physiological regulation; regulation is deemed a prerequisite for the engagement in

higher-order cognitive processes involved in meaningful problem-solving and learning. This relational foundation is considered essential for nurturing CYP's emotional awareness and understanding, which in turn, can gradually increase their skills and capacity for self-regulation (Perry & Szalavitz, 2017). The framework is based on three components facilitated by a trusted adult:

- Regulate: If a CYP is in a state of heightened arousal or distress, associated with the brainstem or lower brain functions, they must first be supported to regulate by a trusted, calm and attuned adult through co-regulation using relational, sensory, and rhythmic strategies.
- Relate: Once the CYP is beginning to emotionally regulate, the trusted adult utilises an attuned, empathic approach, demonstrated through tone, body language, curiosity, and emotional validation to establish a relational connection and psychological safety, activating the limbic system.
- Reason: The trusted adult remains attuned to recognise when the CYP has reached a level of emotional regulation that enables engagement in non-judgemental, reflective and collaborative problem-solving discussions, and in learning tasks, that require the activation of the pre-frontal cortex. It is acknowledged that such tasks are only meaningful and effective when the CYP feels both emotionally regulated and relationally safe.

(Perry & Szalavitz, 2017)

Figure 5.9.1. The Three Rs framework (Perry & Szalavitz, 2017).



5.9.2 The Process Model of Emotion Regulation

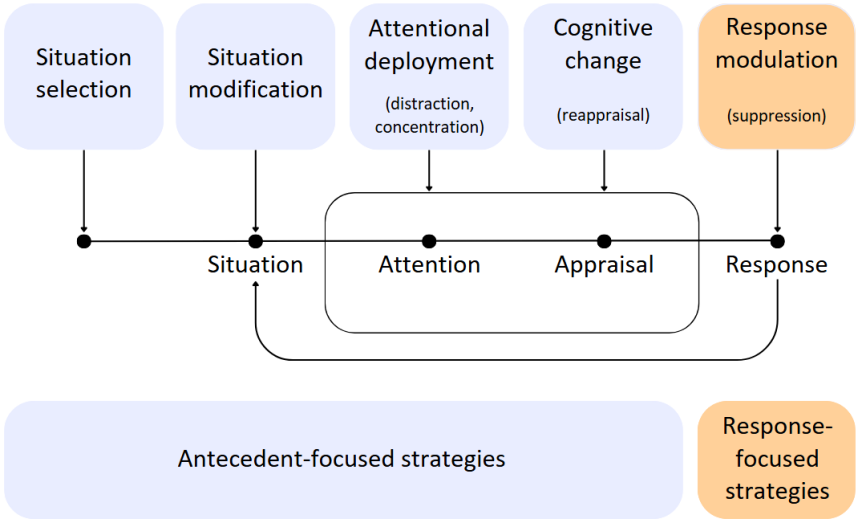
Gross and Thompson's (2007) Process Model of Emotion Regulation (PMER; Figure 5.9.2) proposes a conceptual framework to explain how individuals regulate their emotions through adopting various regulatory strategies at distinct points within a five-stage linear process. The PMER (Gross & Thompson, 2007) suggests that emotions evolve progressively as individuals encounter a situation,

acknowledge it, evaluate its challenges, and subsequently respond emotionally, physiologically, and behaviourally. Five categories of emotional regulation strategies are proposed within this theory, grouped by the stage at which they may be drawn upon within an emotional cycle (Gross, 2015), although it is acknowledged that multiple regulation processes can occur simultaneously (Gross, 2008):

1. Situation selection: Selecting situations which are likely to lead to desirable emotions, and avoidance of situations which may trigger unwanted emotional responses.
2. Situation modification: Adapting elements of a situation to change its emotional impact.
3. Attentional deployment: Directing one's attention away from or toward particular elements of a situation.
4. Cognitive change: Reframing the way in which a situation is conceptualised to alter its emotional meaning.
5. Response modulation: Altering and suppressing the intensity, duration, or outward expression of the emotion once it has been experienced.

(Gross, 1998)

Figure 5.9.2. Process Model of Emotion Regulation (Gross & Thompson, 2007).



Notably, emotional regulation is defined by Gross and Thompson (2007) as encompassing both deliberate strategies and automatic processes that shape how intensely emotions are experienced, their duration, and how they are outwardly expressed (Joormann & Stanton, 2016). This definition implies that emotional regulation is both a controlled, conscious process, requiring emotional awareness and the ability to draw upon self-regulation mechanisms, as well as unconscious, indicating

that the individual possesses internalised self-regulation skills enacted without intentional effort or awareness.

Each stage in the PMER (Gross & Thompson, 2007) is considered to be either antecedent-focused (stages 1-4), where the strategy is utilised before the emotion has fully emerged as a preventative mechanism, or response-focused (stage 5), where the strategy is employed after the emotion has been elicited, and is focused on modifying the emotional reaction. The Extended PMER (EPMER; Gross, 2015) later proposed three stages of the emotion regulation cycle: Identification (recognition of a need for emotion regulation), Selection (determining the most appropriate regulation strategy to draw upon), and Implementation (deploying the chosen strategy in a manner suited to the current context).

5.9.3 Implications for the Three Rs Framework and PMER

The PMER/EPMER (Gross, 1998; Gross & Thompson, 2007; Gross, 2015) framework could be argued to oversimplify complex human emotions to a linear sequence of stages. In the context of understanding and responding to CYP's emotional regulation needs, the model's predominant focus on CYP being able to utilise conscious, deliberate strategies to emotionally regulate implicitly assumes the presence of advanced psychological skills, such as meta-cognitive insight, emotional awareness, and the ability to foresee circumstances which may elicit an unwanted emotional response. In turn, it is assumed that CYP possess the ability to identify self-regulation strategies from memory and implement these in real-time to overcome emotional experiences independently, suggesting that emotional expression is within CYP's control. This assumption overlooks the role of unconscious, automatic processes that can either support or hinder emotional regulation. Automatic processes include implicit beliefs, habits, and physiological responses, and may have developed through repetition and reinforcement, exposure to emotional experiences such as trauma, or attributed to other environmental factors. Individual differences, such as personality, cognitive functioning, and neurodevelopmental differences, which may influence how regulatory processes are experienced and developed, are also not accounted for. As discussed (Section 2.2.3), emotional regulation is not an innate skill, and its development relies heavily on consistent experiences for co-regulation within safe, trusted adult relationships. As such, the acquisition of such skills can be significantly impacted by the absence of trusted adult relationships or experiences of interpersonal trauma (Bombèr, 2007).

A further limitation when applying the PMER/EPMER (Gross, 1998; Gross & Thompson, 2007; Gross, 2015) to CYP, particularly in the context of the school setting, is that early-stage regulatory strategies

of situation selection and situation modification require autonomy and control to avoid or alter emotion-eliciting situations. However, the structure and expectations within the school environment offer CYP limited agency to implement these strategies in ways that are considered appropriate or permissible. Consequently, CYP's avoidance or altering of a situation to remove themselves from the stimulus may present as skipping lessons that provoke anxiety, engaging in behaviours that lead to internal exclusions or suspensions, leaving the classroom to access a 'safe space', or presenting with emotionally-based school avoidance (EBSA).

Furthermore, the attentional deployment stage could be argued not to account for CYP with trauma experience who may present as hypervigilant and compelled to remain on high alert to identify potential threats, or manage overwhelming internal states through disengagement (Bombèr, 2020). As the PMER/EPMER (Gross, 1998; Gross & Thompson, 2007; Gross, 2015) assumes a level of cognitive control in CYP's ability to allocate attention, it may overlook the influence of neurobiological adaptations resulting from trauma on executive functioning skills and attentional flexibility. This significantly limits the model's applicability to CYP whose regulatory strategies are shaped more by a need to ensure safety and survival rather than the deliberate use of higher-order cognitive strategies.

Strategies drawn upon by school staff to elicit cognitive change in CYP, with an aim of fostering cognitive reappraisal, may involve restorative conversations, detentions, or turnaround placements. Such approaches may neglect to acknowledge or explore underlying emotional needs driving a behaviour, and may risk invalidating CYP's emotional experiences and inadvertently reinforce internalised narratives of shame or mistrust and promote a sense of disconnection, particularly for CYP with experience of trauma (Bombèr, 2020). In terms of response modulation, systemic expectations within schools often require CYP to suppress emotional expressions to adhere to behavioural requirements. These expectations may be enforced through sanctions such as internal exclusions, detentions and suspensions. To modulate emotional expression to comply, CYP may mask their needs, physically withdraw, or may later present with delayed emotional outbursts. Such systemic expectations and approaches could be suggested to polarise relational approaches, which seek to foster connection and acknowledge and validate emotional experiences to increase CYP's emotional literacy and awareness (Gilbert et al., 2021), skills which could be considered a critical foundation for emotional self-regulation (Perry & Szalavitz, 2017).

The PMER/EPMER (Gross, 1998; Gross & Thompson, 2007; Gross, 2015) framework could be considered applicable to CYP who (1) already possess advanced emotional literacy and awareness, (2)

are proficient in identifying and differentiating between different emotional states, (3) can identify, anticipate, and modify situational triggers whilst still adhering to systemic expectations, (4) can effectively apply self-regulation strategies appropriately, in real-time, based on the social context, and (5) can suppress emotional expressions to align with behavioural expectations. In doing so, this cognitive process assumes CYP's ability to access and implement each stage independently, including whilst in an emotionally dysregulated state, without co-regulation or adult scaffolding.

Findings from the current study indicate that the Three Rs framework (Perry & Szalavitz, 2017) is implicitly embedded within primary participants' practice. Discourse strongly indicates a perception that CYP need to be emotionally regulated to engage in cognitively-demanding tasks requiring higher-order processes, such as problem-solving and accessing learning and other areas of development, and supported through co-regulation. These narratives are particularly evident within sub-themes, *'A belief that meeting SEMH needs should be prioritised, as 'if that's not right, there's no point in cracking on with anything else''*, and ''*Everybody is pastoral, really': The role of teachers in developing CYP's emotional understanding and regulation'*. The Three Rs framework (Perry & Szalavitz, 2017) calls for a developmentally sequenced, relationally attuned, and neurobiologically informed response to emotional dysregulation and behaviour that challenges, that prioritises a bottom-up approach to support CYP's emotional regulation through co-regulation.

Within the current study, participants' narratives about secondary schools' systems and expectations indicate underlying assumptions of CYP that align with the PMER/EPMER (Gross, 1998; Gross & Thompson, 2007; Gross, 2015), potentially leading to an overestimation of CYP's ability to emotionally self-regulate following the transition to Year 7. This is indicated in discourse within sub-theme, ''*It's always the same kids in detention': An implicit, systemic assumption that CYP arrive at secondary school with the ability to regulate their emotions and behaviour*'. These expectations can be observed through the widely-discussed implementation of universal zero-tolerance behaviour policies within secondary settings, underpinned by the implicit assumption that all CYP can regulate their emotions to adhere to behavioural expectations. An emphasis on providing '*reminders*' for CYP to independently draw upon their own self-regulation strategies further supports this assumption, thereby diminishing opportunities for emotional scaffolding, co-regulation, and the explicit teaching and modelling of strategies for CYP who may not yet be able to self-regulate. These processes could be considered critical for CYP who may not yet have acquired emotional regulation skills to acquire these (Perry & Szalavitz, 2017), such as those with SEMH needs or with trauma experience, and their absence may subsequently contribute to a regression in skill development.

Discourse shared by primary participants illuminated significant concerns regarding a perceived lack of reasonable adjustments and the absence of a nurturing environment within secondary schools, both considered essential for fostering CYP's emotional regulation skills and SEMH development (Bombèr, 2007; Bombèr, 2020; Gilbert et al., 2021). This absence was believed to directly result in the permanent exclusion of CYP with SEMH needs reliant on these factors to remain emotionally regulated. This skill deficit may be reflected in the disproportionate exclusion rates within secondary settings where 87% of permanent exclusions occur, predominantly due to 'persistent disruptive behaviour' (Gov.uk, 2024b).

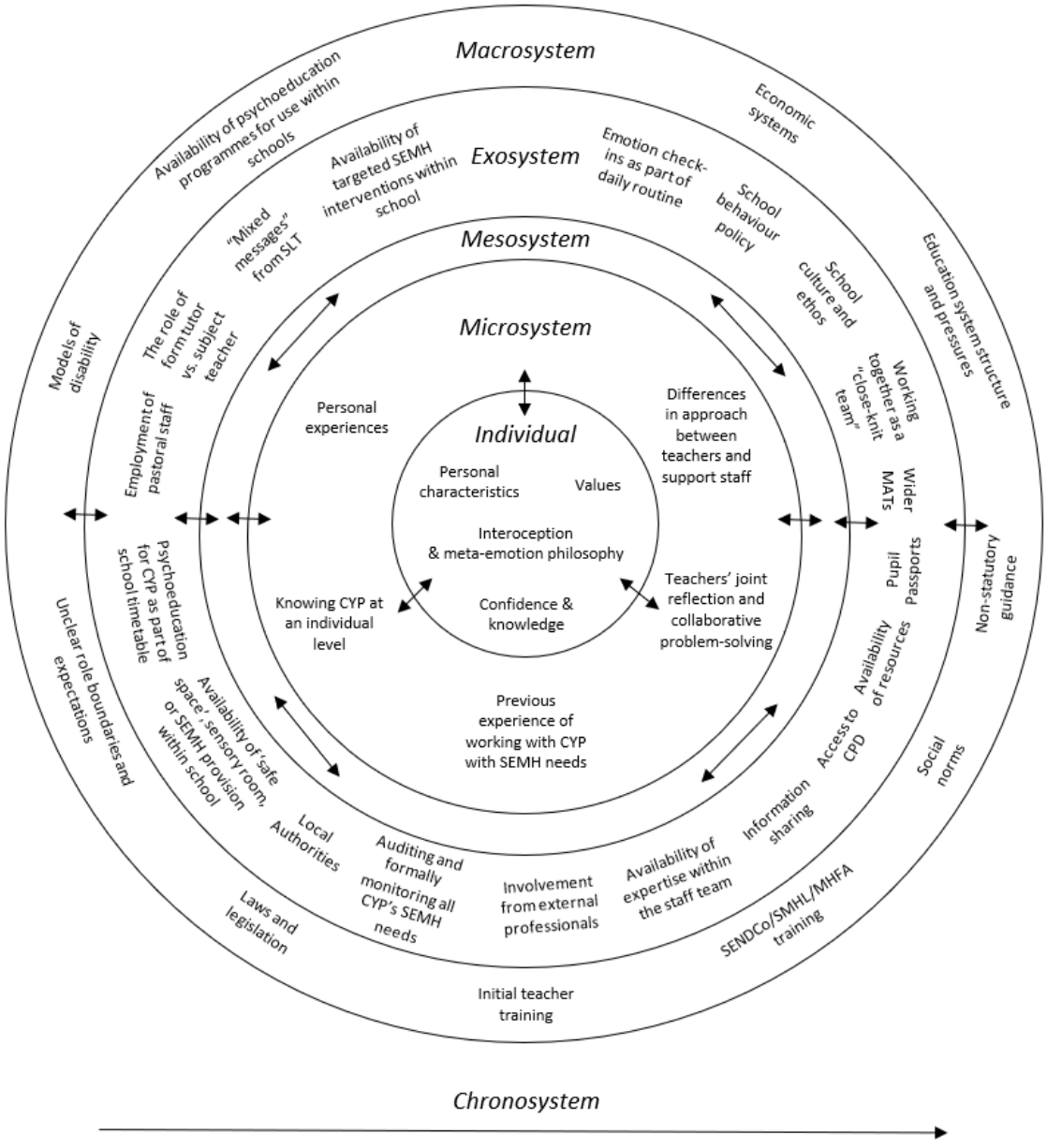
In contrast with the Three Rs framework (Perry & Szalavitz, 2017), which emphasises the importance of a bottom-up response to support emotional regulation through co-regulation, the PMER (Gross, 1998; Gross & Thompson, 2007) may be interpreted as a 'top-only' process in its requirement for CYP to be able to independently access higher-order cognitive skills to emotionally self-regulate. The Three Rs framework (Perry & Szalavitz, 2017) could therefore be considered a prerequisite process through which emotional regulation skills are developed before CYP are expected to self-regulate independently.

In terms of implications for practice, findings from the current study highlight the need for both primary and secondary settings and staff to adopt developmentally informed and neurobiologically grounded approaches that meet CYP at their current stage of emotional development, recognising that their chronological age may not accurately reflect their capacity for emotional regulation. The identified misalignment between primary and secondary participants' implicit expectations and subsequent responses to CYP's emotional needs suggests a significant gap during the transition from primary to secondary school. This illuminates the importance of enhancing secondary teachers' knowledge around SEMH, including the ways in which contextual, environmental, and individual factors can shape CYP's automatic and unconscious processes, and how these processes can influence their emotional regulation. Furthermore, secondary teachers would benefit from developing a deeper understanding of the critical role that trusted adults play in providing co-regulation as a developmental necessity for fostering CYP's self-regulatory capacity and emotional awareness, as emphasised within the Three Rs framework (Perry & Szalavitz, 2017). Such relational foundations should be considered as an essential prerequisite for CYP to independently access the higher-order processes outlined in the PMER/EPMER (Gross, 1998; Gross & Thompson, 2007; Gross, 2015).

5.9.4 Implications for Attribution Theory

As explained within section 2.3.1, Attribution Theory (Heider, 1958; Kelley, 1967) seeks to explain how individuals gather, combine and interpret information to make sense of events and behaviours (Fiske & Taylor, 1991). However, Attribution Theory could be argued to overlook the role of social, contextual, historical, cultural, and environmental factors in shaping how teachers' knowledge is produced and interpreted. Findings from the current study illuminate the potential influence of ecological factors at different systems levels on teachers' attribution tendencies, in terms of how SEMH is conceptualised, and therefore how CYP's SEMH needs are responded to. The researcher therefore proposes an Ecological Attribution Theory (Figure 5.9.4) situated within an adaptation of Bronfenbrenner and Morris's (2006) BMHD.

Figure 5.9.4. Ecological Attribution Theory.



While Attribution Theory (Heider, 1958; Kelley, 1967) could be considered to offer a more individualised and decontextualised account of how individuals attribute behaviour, the present model illustrates the influence of varying ecological factors at multiple systems levels, as discussed by participants, in shaping teachers' understanding of and responses to CYP's SEMH needs. Ecological Attribution Theory proposes that teachers' attributions are not solely derived based on preexisting knowledge, but shaped by contextual factors such as school policy, Governmental guidance (e.g. DfE, 2019b; DfE, 2024b), ITT (DfE, 2019a), CPD, and interactions with colleagues. Consequently, teachers' expectations of CYP's capacity to regulate their emotions are therefore likely shaped by their attributions of behaviour, influenced by their environmental context. This is likely reflected in the stark contrast between primary and secondary participants' discourse around systemic expectations of CYP's ability to regulate their emotions, and the influence this has over staff's practice.

5.10 Research Conclusions

This study sought to explore and compare mainstream primary and secondary teachers' understanding of and responses to CYP's SEMH needs. Within the findings, SEMH was conceptualised as associated with and impacted by various factors, with a perception that a whole-school approach to understanding and supporting SEMH can enhance schools' capacity to support these needs effectively. A sense of powerlessness was interpreted across predominantly secondary participants and attributed to limited knowledge and strategies to draw upon to support SEMH needs. Significant differences were interpreted between the ways in which primary and secondary teachers may perceive their role in supporting SEMH needs, thus influencing their responses to CYP experiencing emotional dysregulation. Primary participants were interpreted to prioritise meeting SEMH needs as the foundation for other areas of development, while secondary participants conveyed that curriculum pressures and other demands substantially constrained their perceived capacity to adequately support SEMH needs.

Implications for professional practice were highlighted across different systems. LAs and wider Government may consider adaptations to the ITT CCF (DfE, 2019b), revision of the SENDCoP's (DfE, 2015) definition of SEMH, and a review of guidance around behaviour in schools (e.g. DfE, 2024b) to incorporate a more holistic approach seeking to develop CYP's emotional regulation skills. At a school level, a crucial role for teachers as key, trusted adults was illuminated, and a need for comprehensive, whole-school training in SEMH was identified, particularly in secondary settings. Given teachers' perceptions that ITT (DfE, 2019b) did not adequately prepare them to understand and respond to

SEMH needs, such training is essential for enhancing teachers' knowledge and confidence in responding to CYP's SEMH needs consistently and effectively. As EPs are considered to hold expertise in SEND, including SEMH (Atfield et al., 2023; DfE, 2015), they may be uniquely placed to contribute knowledge that integrates educational practice and teaching pedagogy with an understanding of SEMH. Findings from the current study therefore illuminate a pivotal opportunity for EPs to support the alignment of school systems and teaching practices with the dynamic and evolving SEMH needs of CYP, thereby contributing to meaningful impact across multiple systemic levels (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006).

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Appendices

Appendix 2.1. Search strategy.

PICo	***Search terms using Boolean Operators***
Population	(teacher*, OR educator*, OR school staff, OR teaching assistant*, pastoral staff*, OR SENDCo*, OR headteacher*) AND ("SEMH", OR "social emotional mental health", OR "BESD", OR "social, emotional behaviour* difficult*", OR "SEBD", OR "social, emotional and behaviour* difficult*", OR "EBD", OR "emotional and behaviour difficult*", OR "behaviour*", OR "mental health")
Interest	AND ("perspective*", OR "view*", OR "perception*", OR "attitude*", OR "opinion*", OR "understand*", OR "experience*", OR "respon*", OR "react*", OR "support*")
Context	AND ("United Kingdom", OR "UK")

Appendix 2.2. Eligibility criteria for studies in the SLR.

Inclusion Criteria	***Exclusion Criteria***	***Rationale***
Publication Type		
Research which is derived from primary data sources, including peer-reviewed studies and unpublished theses.	Research from secondary data sources, such as SLRs.	To increase methodological quality and reliability (Kelly et al., 2014).
Research conducted between 2010-2025.	Research conducted outside of this timeframe.	To include paper spanning changes to the SENDCoP (2015). Only 4 papers met the inclusion criteria since 2015, and consequently the criteria were broadened to allow for the inclusion of a greater quantity of data.
Research Context		
Research conducted within the UK.	Research conducted outside of the UK.	To reflect the context and systems within which EPs work in the UK and offer a level of generalisability.
Study Design		
Research adopting a qualitative methodology,	Research adopting either a mixed methods	The RQ aims to explore staff's understanding of and responses to CYP's

e.g. focus groups or semi-structured interviews.	or quantitative methodology.	SEMH needs in their own words. The complexity of qualitative data enables exploration of this through analysis of individuals' perspectives and accounts (Flick, 2018).
Research Focus		
Studies gathering mainstream teachers', support staffs', SENDCos' and school senior leaderships' views around their understanding of and responses to the SEMH/EBD/BESD needs of CYP aged between 5-18 years, which are reflected in verbatim quotes.	Research which explores the views of CYP, parents/carers, or staff not working in mainstream schools (such as alternative provisions and non-maintained schools). Research containing views around any other SEND.	To ensure that the perspectives included in the qualitative synthesis were reflective of the level of training received by staff, and somewhat representational of the dialogue used within mainstream educational settings.
Explores the views of staff currently working within mainstream school settings.	Explores the views of individuals who do not currently work within a mainstream school setting.	To reflect the current context with findings which are relevant to current EP practice.

Appendix 2.3 Filters to narrow the screening and selection.

Year of Publication	2010-2025
Language	English
Country of Publication	United Kingdom; England
Subject	Semi-structured interviews; questionnaires; interviews; qualitative; research; teachers; teaching experience; primary education; secondary education; teacher attitudes; beliefs; teacher student relationship; children; young children; adolescents; secondary school students; child behaviour; social behaviour; emotional disturbances; behaviour problems; student behaviour; emotional problems; discipline; intervention; expulsion

Appendix 2.4. Studies excluded from qualitative synthesis.

First author, year, country	***Setting, participants (n =), and role***	***Study design and methodology***	***Reason for exclusion***
Nash et al. (2015),	Mainstream primary and secondary schools. Part one: 54 primary headteachers (HTs) and deputy headteachers (DHTs), and 50 secondary HTs and DHTs responded. Part two: 21 primary HTs and DHTs and 69 secondary HTs and DHTs responded.	Quantitative, two-part study, postal and SurveyMonkey questionnaires, analysed through SPSS.	- Study utilised a quantitative methodology.
Trotman et al. (2015), England	Mainstream secondary school, 8 behaviour co-ordinators and 49 CYP.	Qualitative, iterative and reflexive semi-structured interviews, progressive focussing to systematically reduce broad categories of data. Analysis approach not stated.	- Study involved CYP as participants.
Armstrong et al., (2012), UK	Mainstream school (age range unspecified), 150 teachers.	Qualitative, written accounts, analysed through phenomenographic analysis.	- Study involved staff working within an alternative provision as participants.
Hibbott (2024), England	1 deputy headteacher and teacher in a specialist setting, 1 head of year and PE teacher in a mainstream secondary school, 1 positive behavioural support assistant in a specialist setting	Qualitative, individual semi-structured interviews, analysed through Foucauldian Discourse Analysis.	- Study involved staff working within an alternative provision as participants.

Appendix 2.5. Quality appraisal of studies using Gough's Weight of Evidence (WoE) Framework (2007), including CASP Quality Appraisal (2018) criteria.

Gough's Weight of Evidence (WoE) Framework (2007)											
Weight of Evidence A: *Generic on quality of execution of study*											
CASP Quality Appraisal (2018)											
Research study / ***CASP section and question***	**Frearson et al. (2024)**	**Wilson et al. (2023)**	**Hattersley (2022)**	**Martin-Denham (2021)**	**Oakes (2018)**	**Devereux (2017)**	**Monkman (2013)**	**Harold (2012)**	**Burton et al. (2011)**	**Burton et al. (2010)**	**Kidger et al. (2010)**
1. Are the results valid?	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
2. Is a qualitative methodology appropriate?	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
3. Was the research design appropriate to address the aims of the research?	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
4. Was the recruitment strategy appropriate to the aims of the research?	0	1	1	0	1	1	1	0	0	0	1
5. *Was the data collected in a way that addressed the research issue?*	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
6. Has the relationship between researcher and participants been adequately considered?	1	0	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	0	0
7. Have ethical issues been taken into consideration?	0	0	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	0	0
8. *Was the data analysis*	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	1

sufficiently rigorous?											
9. *Is there a clear statement of findings?*	1	1	1	0	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
10. *How valuable is the research?*	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Total WoE A =	**8**	**8**	**10**	**8**	**10**	**10**	**10**	**9**	**7**	**6**	**8**
Weight of Evidence B: *Review specific on appropriateness of method*											
Was there a clear definition of the participant sample (e.g., gender, context, working in a mainstream primary/secondary/post-16 setting), to support with replication and applying research findings into practice?	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	0	1	1	1
Did the authors adopt a qualitative methodology (e.g. focus groups or semi-structured interviews) to explore the views of participants?	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
Total WoE B =	**2**	**2**	**2**	**2**	**2**	**2**	**2**	**1**	**2**	**2**	**2**
Weight of Evidence C: *Review specific on focus/approach of study to review question*											
1. A clear exploration of school staff's understanding of/responses to/experiences in relation to CYP's SEMH/BESD/EBD needs.	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
2. Explores the views of staff working within mainstream	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1

school settings.											
Total WoE C =	**2**	**2**	**2**	**2**	**2**	**2**	**2**	**2**	**2**	**2**	**2**
WoE D (overall rating) =	**12**	**12**	**14**	**12**	**14**	**14**	**14**	**12**	**11**	**10**	**12**

Appendix 2.6. Descriptive summary of studies included in the qualitative synthesis.

First author, year, country	*Setting, participants (n =), and role*	*Study design and data analysis*	*WoE A*	*WoE B*	*WoE C*	*WoE D*	*Summary of key findings/themes*	*Limitations of study*
Frearson et al. (2024), United Kingdom	Mainstream primary and secondary schools, 1 primary headteacher, 1 secondary headteacher, 3 secondary teachers, 1 primary teacher, identified through heterogeneous sampling.	Qualitative, semi-structured interviews, analysed through cross-case analysis and thematic analysis.	8	2	2	12	- 'Children's Experiences and Manifestations of Trauma are Diverse.' - 'Trauma management is instinctive and self-motivated with little or no training provided.' - 'An empathic personality and an environment that is supportive of mental health are important.' - 'Senior management have high expectations but support is inconsistent.'	- Ethical considerations or approval process were not explained, or whether participants were able to withdraw from the study. - Small sample size, resulting in limited confidence in the outcomes.
Wilson et al. (2023), England	Mainstream secondary schools, 20 teachers recruited through purposive sampling.	Qualitative, semi-structured interviews, analysed through Reflexive Thematic Analysis.	8	2	2	12	- 'Being well' in the classroom is seen as foundational and relational, rather than a process of qualification in knowledge and skills.' - ''Doing well' as exterior mastery and performance; 'being well' as interior emotional and psychological health, and experience of balance.' - 'Relational practice and care.' - 'Engaging with students' context (time, place, body).'	- Ethical considerations or approval process were not explained, or whether participants were able to withdraw from the study. - Participants were not asked to review the interview transcripts for accuracy. - Participants were teachers who had 'self-identified as

							- 'Self-knowledge and space for agency as an important condition for well-being.' - 'Culture for well-being—purpose and relationships before measures and content.'	having an interest in well-being', which likely skewed the sample.
Hattersley (2022), England	Mainstream primary schools, 4 teachers, identified through purposive sampling.	Qualitative, semi-structured interviews, analysed through interpretative phenomen-ological analysis.	10	2	2	14	- 'The impact of environment and context on children's mental health.' - 'Difficulties children experience.' - 'Language around mental health.' - 'Relationships as a protective factor.' - 'There should be a team approach to offering support.' - 'The power and importance of talking.' - 'Teacher ethos, attitude and role in mental health.' - 'The impact on teacher mental health.' - 'Support needed for teachers.' - 'Mental health as a personal and individual experience.'	- 'All teachers must believe they had experience of children's mental health' as a selection criterion which may have skewed the participant sample towards those with an interest in, or greater understanding of, mental health. - Participants were not asked to review the interview transcripts for accuracy. - Small sample size, resulting in limited confidence in the outcomes.
Martin-Denham (2021), England	Mainstream nursery, primary and secondary schools, 41 headteachers identified through purposive sampling.	Qualitative, structured and semi-structured phenomenologi cal interviews, analysed through thematic analysis.	8	2	2	12	- 'Unable to cope with day-to-day aspects of schooling.' - 'Isolated, unable to form and/or sustain friendships.' - 'Increase in anxiety and challenging, violent and aggressive behaviours.' - 'Children's SEMH difficulties identified too late.' - 'Exposure to adverse childhood experiences.' - 'Gathering information from caregivers.' - 'Gathering information from multi-agency professionals and feeder schools.' - 'Exploring how the behaviour manifests.'	- Utilised unreported, retrospective data from a year prior. - Original research aim was not around educators' perspectives of SEMH and behaviour, so participants were not recruited with this focus in mind. - Only headteachers as participants, so perspectives could have been limited.

Oakes (2018), England	Mainstream secondary school, 3 pastoral team members, 3 teachers (1 of whom is also a pastoral team member), identified through theoretical sampling.	Qualitative, semi-structured interviews, analysed by the use of a grounded theory methodology.	10	2	2	14	- 'Providing containment – school as a safe place.' - 'Having a culture of support and responsibility for pupil well-being.' - 'Building relationships with pupils and parents.' - 'Understanding changing societal contexts.' - 'Support for staff.'	- Small sample size, resulting in limited confidence in the outcomes. - Views gathered from one setting and therefore not justifiable to generalise the findings.
Devereux (2017), England	Mainstream post-16 college, 4 teachers, 1 teaching assistant, 1 manager of additional learning support, identified through purposive sampling.	Qualitative, focus group, analysed through discourse analysis.	10	2	2	14	- 'SEMH needs as a worthy issue for college to support.' - 'SEMH needs as a consequence of pressures to succeed.' - 'SEMH needs as a presentation of traits and symptoms.' - 'SEMH needs as constructed through historical and cultural contexts.' - 'SEMH needs that are affected by relationships.' - 'SEMH needs as a consequence of developmental causes.' - 'SEMH needs that also impact college staff.'	- Small sample size, resulting in limited confidence in the outcomes.
Monkman (2013), England	Mainstream secondary school, 6 teachers identified through	Qualitative, semi-structured interviews analysed through	10	2	2	14	- 'Mental health as illness.' - 'Passing the problem on to other professionals.' - 'Dilemma between illness and wellbeing – teachers' responsibility or the responsibility of others?' - 'Training.' - 'Mental health as well-being.'	- A senior member of staff invited the participation of members of staff she expected would be more likely to participate, which could have increased bias

	purposive sampling.	discourse analysis.					- 'Relationships.' - 'Supporting emotional wellbeing by drawing on own experience (empathy).' - 'Part of teaching anyway.' - 'The dilemma - to support wellbeing or to get results.' - 'Control and Responsibility.' - 'Mental health and behaviour.' - 'Noticing changes in behaviour.' - 'External environmental influences.'	and limited the variety of different discourses available. - Small sample size, resulting in limited confidence in the outcomes.
Harold (2012), England	Mainstream secondary school, 21 members of staff with varying roles identified through purposive sampling.	Qualitative, focus groups, analysed through critical discourse analysis.	9	1	2	12	- 'Behaviourism, zero tolerance and systems.' - 'Staff roles and conflict.' - 'Needs and differences.' - 'Teaching and learning.' - 'Defining and judging behaviour.' - 'Relationships and restorative justice.' - 'Within-child explanations.' - 'Agency.' - 'Nominalisation.' - 'Authority and power.' - Staff voices and power relations.' - 'Fluidity in assertions.' - 'Oscillations.' - 'Building constructions.' - 'Why is the problem needed?' - 'The possibilities for restorative justice – a dissatisfaction with behaviourism?'	- A senior member of staff invited the participation of members of staff she expected would be more likely to participate, which could have increased bias and limited the variety of different discourses available.
Burton et al. (2011), England	Mainstream secondary school, 4 SENDCos and 8 support staff	Qualitative, semi-structured interviews, analysed through	7	2	2	11	- 'SENCo and support staff perceptions of their roles.' - 'Facilitation of inclusive practices.' - 'Understanding of BESD.' - 'Staff background.' - 'Relationships with students. Availability.'	- Participants were only selected who had been employed to work directly with CYP with BESD needs, as opposed to school staff in

	identified through purposive sampling.	thematic analysis.					- 'Importance of a nurturing environment.' - 'Relationships with parents.' - 'Accessibility.' - 'Approachability.'	general, which was not representative of the whole body of staff and could have resulted in bias discourses. - Participant recruitment or selection process was not explained. - Ethical considerations or approval process were not explained, or whether participants were able to withdraw from the study. - Lack of detail around data analysis process.
Burton et al. (2010), England	Mainstream secondary school, 8 secondary teachers and 1 former primary teacher identified through purposive sampling.	Qualitative, semi-structured interviews, data analysis method not stated.	6	2	2	10	- 'The gap between theory and practice.' - 'Multi-agency working and on-site support.' - 'Communication with parents.' - 'Discipline and exclusion.' - 'Perceptions of policy.' - 'Different experiences of inclusion/integration.' - 'Strategies and intervention.' - 'Positive and negative reinforcement of behaviour.' - 'Respect and negotiation.' - 'Minimising disruption for the benefit of the learning environment.' - 'The use of primary school strategies.' - 'Training needs.' - 'Learning from peers.'	- Participant recruitment or selection process was not explained. - Ethical considerations or approval process were not explained, or whether participants were able to withdraw from the study. - Data analysis method not stated.
Kidger et al. (2010), England	Mainstream secondary schools, 5 teachers, 3	Qualitative, semi-structured interviews, analysed	8	2	2	12	- 'Teaching and emotional health and well-being are inevitably linked.' - 'Reluctance of some teachers to engage in emotional health and well-being work.'	- Original research aim was not around educators' perspectives of SEMH, so participants were not

	teaching assistants, 6 other staff working in emotional health and well-being roles, identified through purposive sampling.	through thematic analysis.					- 'Neglect of teachers' own emotional health and well-being needs.'	recruited with this focus in mind. - All participants were recruited due to their role in supporting emotional health and well-being within the school, and were therefore knowledgeable about this area which may not be reflected in others' understanding across the school. - Ethical considerations or approval process were not explained, or whether participants were able to withdraw from the study. - Considerations around the participant-researcher relationship not stated.

Appendix 2.7. Table of initial codes, sub-themes, and themes.

Initial codes	***Sub-themes***	***Themes***
Importance of knowing CYP as individuals	A sense of truly knowing and understanding a CYP enables early identification of needs	Staff's explicit awareness in relation to attuned, trusting
SEMH as an individual experience		
Not one-size-fits-all approach, and knowing 'what works' for different CYP		
Differentiation of expectations		

Recognising subtle changes in a CYP's presentation		staff-pupil relationships is powerful
Finding common interests	An increased sense of safety, trust and openness for CYP	
Consistent, stable, predictable interactions		
Unconditional positive regard		
Importance of authentic, caring interactions		
Openness due to no fear of judgement		
Being relatable and 'human', drawing upon own experiences		
Validating and normalising emotions	'Being alongside': Joint problem-holding and solving	
Supporting a CYP to navigate a problem		
Listening to understand		
Well-being is beyond the curriculum: it is embedded in daily interactions	Supporting well-being is instinctive: Embedded within staff's practice, role, and wider school culture	The importance of establishing a culture of 'supporting CYP's SEMH' as a collective responsibility
Staff believe supporting CYP's SEMH is part of the holistic nature of their role		
Environmental adaptations to support well-being		
Caring ethos within school		
Increasing staff's capacity to respond to CYP's SEMH needs is a school priority		
Importance of working together	Working together as a team	
Everybody holds a piece of the puzzle		
A whole-school approach		
Being able to ask for help internally and externally		
Good relationships with parents/carers	Open communication between home and school	
Parents/carers raising their concerns with school staff		

Informing parents/carers when concerns are raised by school staff		
Uniqueness of SEMH needs: Needs present differently for different CYP	Understanding an individual's personal attributes	A CYP's experiences impact their SEMH
Behaviour associated with diagnosis (e.g. autism)		
Understanding needs of CYP with diagnoses can help to support CYP without diagnoses, who present with similar needs		
Understanding behaviour as indicator of an unmet need		
Understanding that CYP need to have emotional vocabulary and/or emotional regulation skills to manage behaviour		
The dynamic nature of SEMH needs which exist on a continuum: Belief that SEMH is not fixed and can change over time		
'School as a safe haven'	Awareness of the role of environmental and contextual factors for the CYP	
Understanding of contributory environmental factors		
Knowing about the 'bigger picture'		
Parents/carers sharing information from home		
Narratives held around behaviour as a choice	Limited exploration of perpetuating factors	'Need to be singing from the same hymn sheet' at all times: A one-size-fits-all response to behaviour with the same expectations for all
Idea that behaviour and SEMH are separate entities		
'Persistent offenders' and ongoing patterns of behaviour		
Zero-tolerance responses to behaviour which challenges	Systemic expectation for all CYP to adhere to consequential behaviour systems	
Staff adhering rigidly to behaviour systems		
Staff feeling powerless and conflicted towards the system		
Exclusion and isolation as a response to behaviour		
'All are expected to tow the line': CYP must respond to behaviour systems in the same way		

Limited capacity, time and resources	Competing demands and limited resources	'Not prepared': Resources vs. understanding vs. role
Academic achievement is prioritised: competing demands		
'Preparing' CYP to return to class: Limited knowledge and awareness of environmental factors	Limited knowledge and skills around alternative approaches due to lack of specialist training	
Staff expressing need for whole-school training around SEMH		
Staff feeling ill-equipped to respond due to lack of specialist training		
Medicalisation of need can create distance – 'we're not clinicians here'		
Unclear on whose role it is to support SEMH: Teacher, support staff, or pastoral?	Uncertainty around responsibility in roles	
'Nurture happens in the student support centre': Sense-making around the remit of their role and their approach to SEMH support		

Appendix 2.8. Prevalence of studies contributing to sub-themes in Reflexive Thematic Analysis.

Themes	**Sub-themes**	*Frearson & Duncan, 2024*	*Wilson et al., 2023*	*Hattersley, 2022*	*Martin-Denham, 2021*	*Oakes, 2018*	*Devereux, 2017*	*Monkman, 2013*	*Harold, 2012*	*Burton & Goodman, 2011*	*Burton & Goodman, 2010*	*Kidger et al., 2010*
Staff' s explicit awareness in relation to attuned, trusting staff-	*A sense of truly knowing and understanding a CYP enables early identification of needs*	✓		✓	✓	✓		✓				

	An increased sense of safety, trust and openness for CYP	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
	'Being alongside': Joint problem-holding and solving'			✓		✓		✓		✓		
The importance of establishing a culture of ' supporting CYP' s SEMH' as a collective responsibility	*Supporting well-being is instinctive: Embedded within staff's practice, role, and wider school culture*	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓		✓		✓
	Working together as a team		✓	✓	✓	✓					✓	
	Open communication between home and school	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	
A CYP' s experiences impact their	*Understanding an individual's personal attributes*	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	

	Awareness of the role of environmental and contextual factors for the CYP	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓		
' Need to be singing from the same hymn sheet' at all times: A one-size-fits-all response to	*Limited exploration of perpetuating factors*						✓		✓			✓
	Systemic expectation for all CYP to adhere to consequential behaviour systems			✓			✓		✓		✓	
' Not prepared'	*Competing demands and limited resources*	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
	Limited knowledge and skills around alternative approaches due to lack of specialist training	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓			✓

	Uncertainty around responsibility in roles	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓

Appendix 2.9. Table to illustrate similarities between themes and sub-themes from each existing paper and those generated from the qualitative synthesis.

Theme/sub-theme generated from qualitative synthesis		***Findings from existing paper (author/s, year)***
Theme	*Sub-theme*	
Staff's explicit awareness in relation to attuned, trusting staff-pupil relationships is powerful	A sense of truly knowing and understanding a CYP enables early identification of needs	❖ 'Relationships as a protective factor.' (Hattersley, 2022) ❖ 'Noticing changes in behaviour.' (Monkman, 2013)
	An increased sense of safety, trust and openness for CYP	❖ 'Relationships as a protective factor.' (Hattersley, 2022) ❖ 'SEMH needs that are affected by relationships.' (Devereux, 2017) ❖ 'Relationships.' (Monkman, 2013)
	'Being alongside': Joint problem-holding and solving	❖ 'Relational practice and care.' (Wilson et al., 2023) ❖ 'Relationships as a protective factor.' (Hattersley, 2022) ❖ 'The power and importance of talking.' (Hattersley, 2022) ❖ 'SEMH needs that are affected by relationships.' (Devereux, 2017) ❖ 'Relationships with students. Availability.' (Burton & Goodman, 2011)
The importance of establishing a culture of	Supporting well-being is instinctive: Embedded within	❖ 'Trauma management is instinctive and self-motivated with little or no training provided.' (Frearson & Duncan, 2024)

‘supporting CYP’s SEMH’ as a collective responsibility	staff's practice, role, and wider school culture	❖ ‘An empathic personality and an environment that is supportive of mental health are important.’ (Frearson & Duncan, 2024) ❖ ‘Relational practice and care.’ (Wilson et al., 2023) ❖ ‘Culture for well-being—purpose and relationships before measures and content.’ (Wilson et al., 2023) ❖ ‘There should be a team approach to offering support.’ (Hattersley, 2022) ❖ ‘Teacher ethos, attitude and role in mental health.’ (Hattersley, 2022) ❖ ‘Providing containment – school as a safe place.’ (Oakes, 2018) ❖ ‘Having a culture of support and responsibility for pupil well-being.’ (Oakes, 2018) ❖ ‘Supporting emotional wellbeing by drawing on own experience (empathy).’ (Monkman, 2013) ❖ ‘Part of teaching anyway.’ (Monkman, 2013) ❖ ‘Importance of a nurturing environment.’ (Burton & Goodman, 2011) ❖ ‘Teaching and emotional health and well-being are inevitably linked.’ (Kidger et al., 2010) ❖
	Working together as a team	❖ ‘Culture for well-being—purpose and relationships before measures and content.’ (Wilson et al., 2023) ❖ ‘There should be a team approach to offering support.’ (Hattersley, 2022) ❖ ‘Multi-agency working and on-site support.’ (Burton & Goodman, 2010) ❖ ‘Learning from peers.’ (Burton & Goodman, 2010) ❖
	Open communication between home and school	❖ ‘Gathering information from caregivers.’ (Martin-Denham, 2021) ❖ ‘Building relationships with pupils and parents.’ (Oakes, 2018)

		❖ ‘Relationships with parents.’ (Burton & Goodman, 2011) ❖ ‘Accessibility.’ (Burton & Goodman, 2011) ❖ ‘Approachability.’ (Burton & Goodman, 2011) ❖ ‘Communication with parents.’ (Burton & Goodman, 2010) ❖
A CYP's experiences impact their SEMH	Understanding an individual's personal attributes	❖ ‘Children’s Experiences and Manifestations of Trauma are Diverse.’ (Frearson & Duncan, 2024) ❖ ‘Difficulties children experience.’ (Hattersley, 2022) ❖ ‘Mental health as a personal and individual experience.’ (Hattersley, 2022) ❖ ‘Unable to cope with day-to-day aspects of schooling.’ (Martin-Denham, 2021) ❖ ‘Isolated, unable to form and/or sustain friendships.’ (Martin-Denham, 2021) ❖ ‘Increase in anxiety and challenging, violent and aggressive behaviours.’ (Martin-Denham, 2021) ❖ ‘Exploring how the behaviour manifests.’ (Martin-Denham, 2021) ❖ ‘SEMH needs as a presentation of traits and symptoms.’ (Devereux, 2017) ❖ ‘SEMH needs as a consequence of developmental causes.’ (Devereux, 2017) ❖
	Awareness of the role of environmental and contextual factors for the CYP	❖ ‘Engaging with students' context (time, place, body).’ (Wilson et al., 2023) ❖ ‘The impact of environment and context on children’s mental health.’ (Hattersley, 2022) ❖ ‘Exposure to adverse childhood experiences.’ (Martin-Denham, 2021) ❖ ‘Understanding changing societal contexts.’ (Oakes, 2018) ❖ ‘SEMH needs as a consequence of pressures to succeed.’ (Devereux, 2017) ❖ ‘External environmental influences.’ (Monkman, 2013)

		❖ ‘Understanding of BESD.’ (Burton & Goodman, 2011) ❖
‘Need to be singing from the same hymn sheet’ at all times: A one-size-fits-all response to behaviour with the same expectations for all	Limited exploration of perpetuating factors	❖ ‘Mental health as illness.’ (Monkman, 2013) ❖ ‘Behaviourism, zero tolerance and systems.’ (Harold, 2012) ❖ ‘Defining and judging behaviour.’ (Harold, 2012) ❖ ‘Within-child explanations.’ (Harold, 2012) ❖
	Systemic expectation for all CYP to adhere to consequential behaviour systems	❖ ‘Behaviourism, zero tolerance and systems.’ (Harold, 2012) ❖ ‘Discipline and exclusion.’ (Burton & Goodman, 2010)
‘Not prepared’: Resources vs. understanding vs. role	Competing demands and limited resources	❖ ‘‘Being well’ in the classroom is seen as foundational and relational, rather than a process of qualification in knowledge and skills.’ (Wilson et al., 2023) ❖ ‘Mental health as illness.’ (Monkman, 2013) ❖ ‘The dilemma - to support wellbeing or to get results.’ (Monkman, 2013) ❖ ‘SENCo and support staff perceptions of their roles.’ (Burton & Goodman, 2011) ❖ ‘Neglect of teachers’ own emotional health and well-being needs.’ (Kidger et al., 2010)
	Limited knowledge and skills around alternative approaches due to lack of specialist training	❖ ‘Support needed for teachers.’ (Hattersley, 2022) ❖ ‘Mental health as illness.’ (Monkman, 2013) ❖ ‘Training.’ (Monkman, 2013) ❖ ‘Training needs.’ (Burton & Goodman, 2010)

		❖ ‘Reluctance of some teachers to engage in emotional health and well-being work.’ (Kidger et al., 2010)
	Uncertainty around responsibility in roles	❖ ‘Relational practice and care.’ (Wilson et al., 2023) ❖ ‘Mental health as illness.’ (Monkman, 2013) ❖ ‘Dilemma between illness and wellbeing – teachers’ responsibility or the responsibility of others?’ (Monkman, 2013) ❖ ‘Staff roles and conflict.’ (Harold, 2012) ❖ ‘Reluctance of some teachers to engage in emotional health and well-being work.’ (Kidger et al., 2010)

Appendix 3.1. Reflexive Diary Entry.

As a researcher, I am not seeking to explore teachers' perspectives around an objective, concrete concept, such as a school behaviour policy or Governmental guidance, which supports why I decided to take a relativist ontological stance over a critical realist stance. For example, what teachers consider SEMH to encompass, or what is deemed an effective response to SEMH needs, may differ across cultural, social, or institutional contexts.

Appendix 3.2 Reflexive Diary Entry.

I'm not seeking to generalise this data beyond this population, so there is not a need for structured interviews with closed questions. Semi-structured interviews offer the means of exploring participants' understanding and responses in greater depth, by enabling the flexibility to ask secondary questions. This would not be possible with a structured interview utilising more close-ended questioning which may lack the complexity and depth. I feel that an unstructured interview format would make it difficult to compare responses between participant groups (RQ2) as it is not possible to know what direction their responses could take, and may not elicit data which answers the research questions.

Appendix 3.3. Ethical approval letter.

The University of Nottingham

UNITED KINGDOM · CHINA · MALAYSIA

School of Psychology
The University of Nottingham
University Park
Nottingham
NG7 2RD

tel: +44 (0)115 846 7403 or (0)115 951 4344

SJ/tp

Ref: S1608

Tuesday 28th May 2024

Dear Melaina Gretton & Dr Mark Izzard-Snape

Ethics Committee Review

Thank you for submitting an account of your proposed research 'Exploring what mainstream primary and secondary school teachers understand about children and young people's social, emotional and mental health needs, and how they respond to these.'

That proposal has now been reviewed and we are pleased to tell you it has met with the Committee's approval.

However:
Please note the following comments from our reviewers.

Reviewer One:

- Please indicate in the participant information sheet and consent form, how long you will retain the data provided by participants (the standard is up to 7 years after the end of the study), and who will have access to the data. It is especially important to let participants know that their data may be shared with other researchers outside beyond the student and their supervisor. Many journals now require you to deposit your data.

Independently of the Ethics Committee procedures, supervisors also have responsibilities for the risk assessment of projects as detailed in the safety pages of the University web site. Ethics Committee approval does not alter, replace, or remove those responsibilities, nor does it certify that they have been met.
Yours sincerely



Professor Stephen Jackson
Chair, Ethics Committee

Appendix 3.4. Ethical approval for change of methodology.

The University of Nottingham
UNITED KINGDOM · CHINA · MALAYSIA

School of Psychology
The University of Nottingham
University Park
Nottingham
NG7 2RD

T: +44 (0)115 8467403 or (0)115 9514344

SJ/tp

Ref: **S1608R**

Wednesday 20th November 2024

Dear Dr Mark Izzard-Snape & Melaina Gretton

Ethics Committee Review

Thank you for submitting an account of your proposed research 'Exploring what mainstream primary and secondary school teachers understand about children and young people's social, emotional and mental health needs, and how they respond to these.'

That proposal has now been reviewed by the Ethics Committee and I am pleased to tell you that your submission has met with the committee's approval.

Final responsibility for ethical conduct of your research rests with you or your supervisor. The Codes of Practice setting out these responsibilities have been published by the British Psychological Society and the University Research Ethics Committee. If you have any concerns whatever during the conduct of your research, then you should consult those Codes of Practice. The Committee should be informed immediately should any participant complaints or adverse events arise during the study.

Independently of the Ethics Committee procedures, supervisors also have responsibilities for the risk assessment of projects as detailed in the safety pages of the University web site. Ethics Committee approval does not alter, replace, or remove those responsibilities, nor does it certify that they have been met.

Yours sincerely



Professor Stephen Jackson
Chair, Ethics Committee

Appendix 3.5. Information sheet.

School of Psychology

Information Sheet

The University of Nottingham
UNITED KINGDOM · CHINA · MALAYSIA

'Managing behaviour or understanding it? Exploring what mainstream primary and secondary school teachers understand about children and young people's social, emotional and mental health needs, and how they respond to these.'

Ethics Approval Number or Taught Project Archive Number: S1608R

Researcher: Melaina Gretton – melaina.gretton@nottingham.ac.uk

Supervisor: Marie House - lpamh4@exmail.nottingham.ac.uk

This is an invitation to take part in a research study exploring what mainstream primary and secondary school teachers understand about children and young people's (CYP's) social, emotional and mental health (SEMH) needs, and how they respond to these. Before you decide if you wish to take part, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully.

If you participate, you will partake in a semi-structured interview with the researcher for up to an hour, on an agreed date, via Microsoft Teams. You will be asked some questions and asked to share your views around understanding and responding to CYP's SEMH needs.

You are welcome to participate if you fit the criteria below:

- You are a qualified mainstream primary or secondary school teacher.
- You have taught exclusively within either infant/junior/primary or secondary school settings (not both).
- You have only worked within mainstream school settings.
- You are currently working within a mainstream infant/junior/primary or secondary school as a teacher in the UK and are teaching children aged between the ages of 4-16 years.
- You understand and speak a proficient level of English.

The semi-structured interview will be audio-recorded (without video), transcribed, and anonymised. All identifying information about you and your school will be removed, and pseudonyms will be used.

Participation in this study is totally voluntary and you are under no obligation to take part. You are free to withdraw at any point before or during the study. All data collected will be anonymised, kept confidential, and used for research purposes only. It will be stored in compliance with the Data Protection Act until 1st September 2025, and may be shared with other researchers, beyond the researcher and their supervisor.

If you have any questions or concerns, please don't hesitate to ask now. We can also be contacted after your participation at the above address.

If you have any complaints about the study, please contact:
Stephen Jackson (Chair of Ethics Committee)
stephen.jackson@nottingham.ac.uk

**If safeguarding concerns arise, the researcher will respond in line with XXXXXX Educational Psychology Service's Safeguarding Policy.*

Appendix 3.6. Recruitment poster.

'Exploring what mainstream primary and secondary school teachers understand about children and young people's social, emotional and mental health needs, and how they respond to these.'



Who am I?

My name is Melaina, and I am a Trainee Educational Psychologist at The University of Nottingham.

I am interested in learning more about teachers' knowledge around social, emotional and mental health (SEMH), and how they respond to children and young people's SEMH needs.

About the research...

I am looking for qualified, mainstream **primary** and **secondary** school teachers to participate in my doctoral research exploring their understanding around children and young people's SEMH needs.

Taking part would involve a semi-structured interview for no longer than an hour, with myself as the interviewer **via Teams** on a date and time convenient for us both.

All identifying information will be removed from the data and pseudonyms will be used to ensure anonymity and confidentiality.

If you are interested, **please contact me by Friday 1st December 2024** via email for more information: melaina.gretton@nottingham.ac.uk.

Ethical approval number: S1608R

The University of Nottingham

Appendix 3.7. Privacy notice.

Privacy Notice

How the University of Nottingham processes your personal data The University of Nottingham, University Park, Nottingham, NG7 2RD (0115 951 5151), is committed to protecting your personal data and informing you of your rights in relation to that data. The University of Nottingham is registered as a Data Controller under the Data Protection Act 2018 (registration No. Z5654762).

One of the University's responsibilities as a data controller is to be transparent in our processing of your personal data and to tell you about the different ways in which we collect and use your personal data. The University will process your personal data in accordance with the UK data protection legislation and this privacy notice is issued in accordance with the UK GDPR Articles 13 and 14.

We may update our Privacy Notices at any time. The current version of all of our Privacy Notices can be found below, and we encourage you to check back here regularly to review any changes.

The Data Protection Officer
The University has appointed a Data Protection Officer. Their postal address is: Data Protection Officer, B16 Lenton Hurst, University of Nottingham, University Park, Nottingham NG7 2RD They can be emailed at dpo@nottingham.ac.uk and telephoned on (0115) 748 7179.

What information do we hold?
We hold a range of personal data about you, some of which you may provide to us directly and some of which we may receive from third parties:

- Contact information (full name and email address).
- Demographical information (age, ethnicity, gender, number of years spent working as a teacher).
- Name of the school in which you currently work.

How do we use it and why?
We only process data for specified purposes and if it is justified in accordance with data protection law. The purpose of this processing is for doctoral research purposes. This processing is justified because it is required to enable a detailed analysis for research purposes. The legal basis for this processing is as a Public Task.

Where we use Statutory Obligation as the legal basis for processing, the consequences of not providing the University with your personal data are that the research cannot go ahead without the data. Therefore, an alternative participant would need to be identified to partake in the research if a participant chooses not to provide their personal data.

How long do we keep your data?
The University will only keep your personal data for as long as necessary to fulfil the purposes for which we collected it. To determine the appropriate retention period for personal data, we consider the amount, nature, and sensitivity of the personal data, the potential risk of harm from unauthorised use or disclosure of your personal data, the purposes for which we process your personal data and whether we can achieve those purposes through other means, and the applicable legal requirements. We retain your data until 1st September 2025.

Your rights as a data subject
You have a number of rights under UK GDPR. Further information about these rights and how to invoke them can be found on our website here:

https://www.nottingham.ac.uk/utilities/privacy/privacy.aspx

Where can I get more information?
If you have any questions about this privacy notice or how your data is processed, please contact the data protection team: dpo@nottingham.ac.uk

This privacy notice is reviewed regularly and we will alert you to any changes we might make.

Appendix 3.8. Participant consent form.

School of Psychology

Consent Form



'Managing behaviour or understanding it? Exploring what mainstream primary and secondary school teachers understand about children and young people's social, emotional and mental health needs, and how they respond to these.'

Ethics Approval Number or Taught Project Archive Number: S1608R
Researcher: Melaina Gretton – melaina.gretton@nottingham.ac.uk
Supervisor: Marie House - lpamh4@exmail.nottingham.ac.uk

The participant should answer these questions independently:

- Have you read and understood the Information Sheet? YES/NO
- Have you had the opportunity to ask questions about the study? YES/NO
- Have all your questions been answered satisfactorily (if applicable)? YES/NO
- Do you understand that you are free to withdraw from the study? (at any time and without giving a reason) YES/NO
- Do you consent for your data to be retained for up to 7 years after the end of the study? YES/NO
- I give permission for my data from this study to be shared with other researchers provided that my anonymity is completely protected. YES/NO
- Do you agree to take part in the study? YES/NO

Participant's name: _____

Signed by participant: _____

Date: ____ / ____ / _____

Appendix 3.9. Semi-structured interview schedule.

Semi-Structured Interview Schedule

Introduction:

- My name, my role as a researcher and my role as a TEP within the EP service, and how they are different. In this capacity, I am a researcher (and will be wearing my University of Nottingham ID badge to reflect this).
- Explain the purpose of the study and why participants are being asked to take part. Share the participant letter again.
- Reassure the participant that they will remain anonymous through removal of any identifying information and use of pseudonyms. Refer to GDPR sheet.
- There are no right or wrong answers to questions, all contributions are valued. Explain that I am interested in participants' authentic and unique contributions and experiences. There are no trick questions.
- Explain to the participant that they are free to ask questions, give comments and opinions at any point in the process.
- Explain that we will be discussing potentially sensitive topics. If the participant needs to take a break at any time, or wish to withdraw from the study completely, they will be asked to let me know.
- Explain that if anything we discuss upsets the participant, I am available to speak with afterwards.
- Ask for permission to record audio to transcribe.
- Give consent form to be completed, and allow time for questions about the consent forms, GDPR, or anything else to do with the study.
- Ask the participant to turn off their video and begin the recording.

Background questions:

1. Clarify participant's ethnicity, gender, age, chosen pseudonym.
2. Can you tell me about your role as a (role title)? How many days per week in class? Full-time or job-share?
3. How long have you been a class teacher for?
4. What does being a (role title) mean to you?
   a. What does being a (role title) in your school look like?
5. Approximately how many pupils are on roll in your current setting? How many classes per year group? How many of these CYP are on the SEND register for SEMH needs?

Teachers' understanding of children and young people's (CYP's) social, emotional and mental health (SEMH) needs:

1. What does 'social, emotional and mental health' mean to you?
2. What do you think of when you hear, 'SEMH needs'? What do you associate with 'SEMH'?
3. What may indicate to you that a CYP has SEMH needs? What might you see?
4. Why might a CYP person present with SEMH needs? What might underpin SEMH needs?
5. What would you say the gaps are in your SEMH knowledge?
6. What has informed your understanding of SEMH? *(E.g. teacher training course, staff INSET training, school policy, government guidance etc.)*
7. How confident do you feel to identify possible SEMH needs?
8. What are your beliefs about the increase in CYP with SEMH needs? Why do you think this is happening?

Teachers' responses to CYP's SEMH needs:

1. How do you respond to CYP's SEMH needs within your classroom? School?
    a. Strategies?
    b. Whole-school approach?
2. How competent and/or confident do you feel to respond to CYP's SEMH needs?
    a. What would make you feel more confident?
    b. What support do you need?
    c. Who can you go to, to support this?
3. What factors influence/govern how you respond to CYP's SEMH needs? *(e.g. school policy)*
    a. Does this affect how you would otherwise respond?
    b. How would you respond if these influences were not in place?
4. How consistent are other members of staff in responding to CYP's SEMH needs?
    a. What is it that makes you consistent/inconsistent?

Final questions:

1. Is there anything else you would like to tell me or anything important you feel that we have missed?
2. Is there anything you'd like to clarify or revisit?
3. Do you have any questions for me?

- Share the debrief form and how to contact myself as the researcher.
- Reiterate confidentiality and GDPR, storage of data, and participants' right to withdraw their data until 3rd January 2025.
- Share the next steps in the research process (transcribing and Reflexive Thematic Analysis).
- Give an approximate timeframe for the research to be shared with participants and their settings.

Appendix 3.10. Debrief form.

School of Psychology

Debrief Form



University of Nottingham
UK | CHINA | MALAYSIA

'Managing behaviour or understanding it? Exploring what mainstream primary and secondary school teachers understand about children and young people's social, emotional and mental health needs, and how they respond to these.'

Ethics Approval Number or Taught Project Archive Number: S1608R
Researcher: Melaina Gretton – melaina.gretton@nottingham.ac.uk
Supervisor: Marie House - lpamh4@exmail.nottingham.ac.uk

Thank you for your time and participation in this research study exploring what mainstream primary and secondary school teachers understand about children and young people's social, emotional and mental health (SEMH) needs, and how they respond these.

All data collected will be kept confidential and used for research purposes only and will be stored in compliance with the Data Protection Act. Data will be anonymously transcribed and analysed to identify common themes between primary school teachers, and secondary school teachers.

Right to withdraw
You have the right to withdraw your data from this study until 3rd January 2025. If you wish to do so, please contact the Researcher or her Supervisor via email as soon as possible.

Confidentiality
Please feel reassured that all identifying information will be removed, and pseudonyms will be used to ensure anonymity and confidentiality of yourself and the setting in which you work.

Support
If participation in this study has been emotionally triggering or raised concerns and you wish to seek support, please contact the Researcher or her Supervisor.

If you have any other questions, please don't hesitate to contact the Researcher or her Supervisor on the email addresses provided above.

If you have any complaints about the study, please contact:
Stephen Jackson (Chair of Ethics Committee)
stephen.jackson@nottingham.ac.uk

Appendix 3.11. 15-point checklist of criteria for good thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.96).

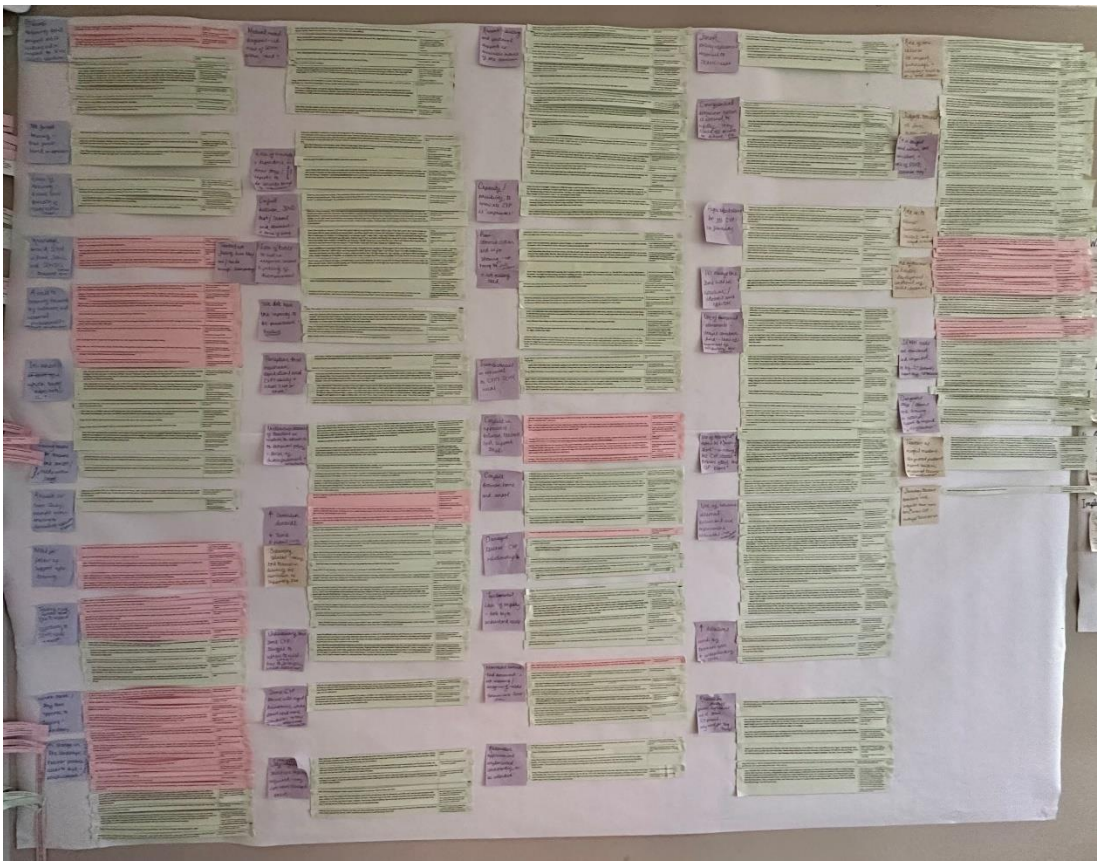
Process	***No.***	***Criteria***
Transcription	1	The data have been transcribed to an appropriate level of detail, and the transcripts have been checked against the tapes for 'accuracy'.
Coding	2	Each data item has been given equal attention in the coding process.
	3	Themes have not been generated from a few vivid examples (an anecdotal approach), but instead the coding process has been thorough, inclusive and comprehensive.
	4	All relevant extracts for all each theme have been collated.
	5	Themes have been checked against each other and back to the original data set.
	6	Themes are internally coherent, consistent, and distinctive.
Analysis	7	Data have been analysed/interpreted, made sense of/rather than just paraphrased or described.
	8	Analysis and data match each other/the extracts illustrate the analytic claims.
	9	Analysis tells a convincing and well-organised story about the data and topic.
	10	A good balance between analytic narrative and illustrative extracts is provided.
Overall	11	Enough time has been allocated to complete all phases of the analysis adequately, without rushing a phase or giving it a once-over-lightly.
Written report	12	The assumptions about, and specific approach to, thematic analysis are clearly explicated.
	13	There is a good fit between what you claim you do, and what you show you have done, i.e. described method and reported analysis are consistent.
	14	The language and concepts used in the report are consistent with the epistemological position of the analysis.
	15	The researcher is positioned as active in the research process; themes do not just 'emerge'.

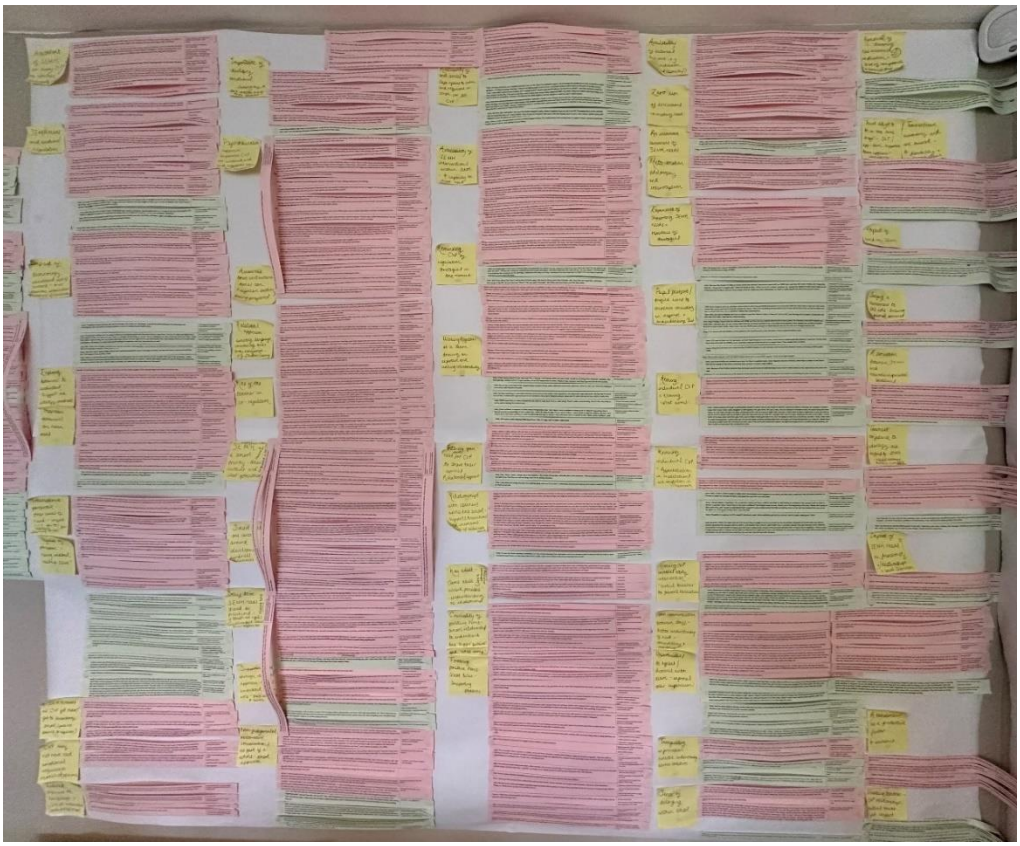
Appendix 3.12. Excerpts of tables of participants' quotes with the researcher's initial thoughts.

Francis: Children are generally pretty good at coming and talking with when they're feeling that way.	*Fostering relationships where CYP feel able to express their emotions*
Francis: I think we've got quite good at identifying those times now, and I feel pretty confident about doing that. And I would say that probably the rest of the staff do generally feel confident.	*Staff feel confident to identify SEMH needs*
Francis: (Children are able to be open about their emotions because…) I think having a shared understanding that everybody is, everybody's approaching things consistently in the same way really. And the fact that we've got a school policy, you know, a whole school approach to everything, and that everybody in each classroom is doing is doing the same really in that respect.	*CYP trust adults to be responsive to their SEMH needs due to consistency* *Whole-school approach embedded consistently by all*
Francis: Because we've all, everybody's undergone the training, you know, done the social, emotional training, the Emotion Coaching, the ACEs, we've done it, all of us. We've done a lot of the training. And that's support staff and teaching staff and dinner staff as well, who've done training. So, I think it's the fact that everybody's on the same page really, that everybody knows the things that they need to be looking for.	*SEMH training received by all staff enables consistent approach – whole-school approach*
Francis: We talk a lot about safeguarding the children as well. We do a lot of work around that. So I think people have got really good at spotting the signs. Yeah. Early intervention. I mean that's it.	*High priority on the school's agenda* *'Spotting the signs' enables early intervention*
Francis: We're doing the ELSA as well, is a big thing as well, all the interventions that we do, Circle Times, Time to Talk, ELSA. You know, all the therapy things that we do.	*Availability of SEMH interventions*
Kate: We've had lots of discussions about this, because we use Zones of Regulation, but it's also realising you don't have to be happy, you can't, you won't be happy all the time, you know. You can't. You know, you are going to feel sad.	*Normalising uncomfortable emotions*
Kate: We're discussing the 'why' you feel sad, and what we can do to support that.	*Working with CYP to identify unmet needs underpinning emotions – helping CYP to make links, and working together with CYP to identify strategies to support*
Kate: They have a little stick with a name on, and if that goes in the sad pot, it's then unpicking why they're feeling sad.	*Teachers are responsive to CYP using classroom-based emotion check-ins* *Emotion check-ins as part of daily routine* *Early identification*
Kate: It's all around, for us, it's all around that emotions and feelings side, and trying to unpick that, and make sure the children are happy when they can be happy. And if they're sad, they can be sad. But, you know, why are they sad? And what can we do to support that? And the same with being cross or frustrated or angry. And if they realise that emotion is that feeling, it's unpicking how they can express that to us at such a young age, I think.	*Linking emotion words to physiological responses to increase emotional understanding and vocabulary*

Appendix 3.13. Photographs of the manual initial coding process.



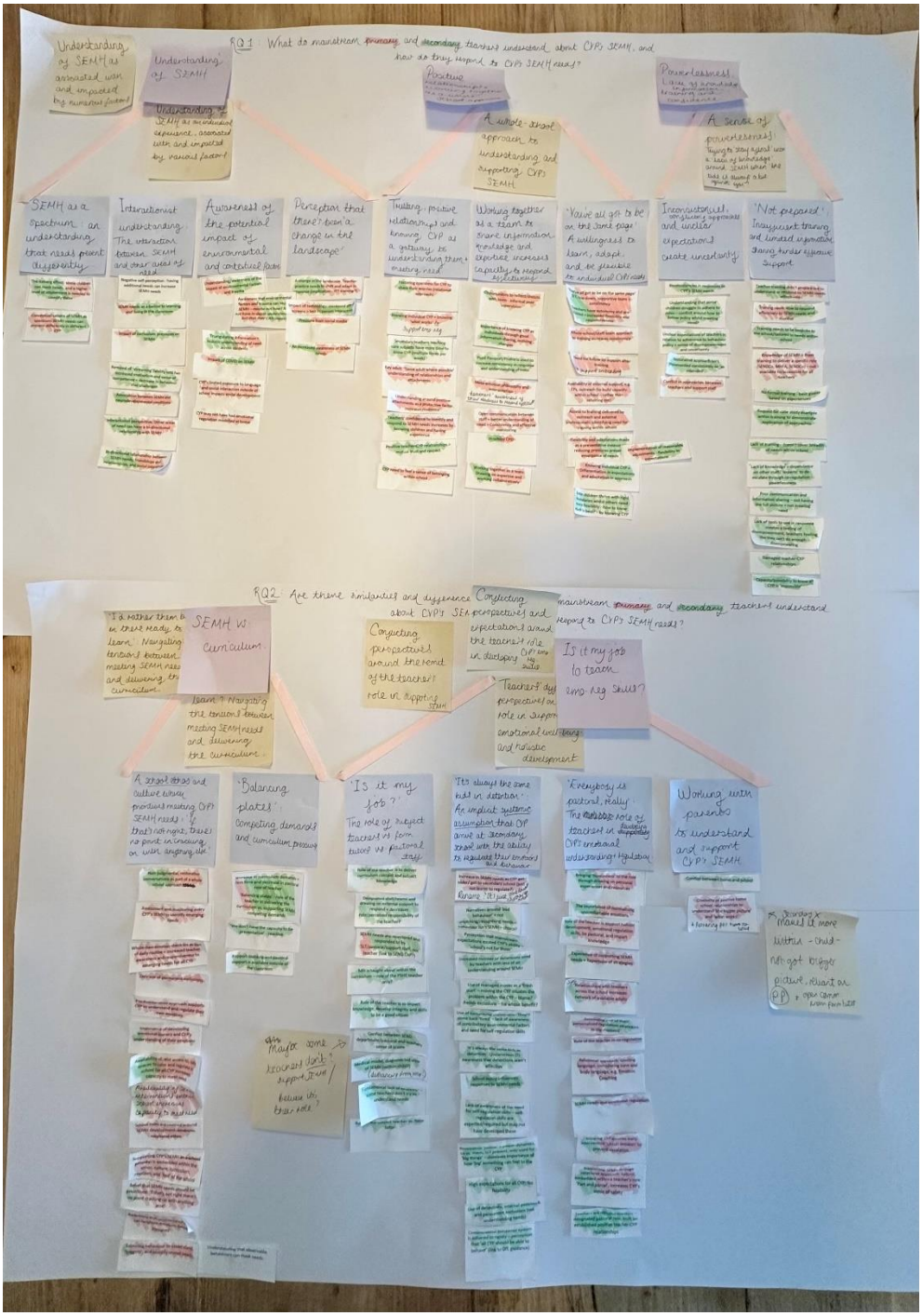




Appendix 3.14. Photograph of the manual process through which clusters of codes were formed.



Appendix 3.15. Photograph of the initial codes, sub-themes and themes.



Appendix 3.16. Coding refinement table.

Example data items	***Iteration one***	***Iteration two***	***Notes***
Georgia: I've worked in different schools, in different areas and things, and I think that there can be a lot of extrinsic factors that can affect SEMH. *Katherine: There might be some sort of background of like, trauma.* *Laura: I guess, things going on at home. Which I think, in my experience, probably like 8 times out of 10 that is usually the reason as to why somebody might have social or emotional or mental health needs. Other times it could be to do with, maybe, something going on at school.* *Doug: They could have had adverse childhood experiences.*	Understanding of the impact of environmental factors and trauma	Awareness that environmental factors, such as trauma, can impact SEMH	Initially I had labelled this code 'understanding of the impact of…' but when revising the data items, I felt that some contributions indicated more of an *awareness* that environmental and contextual factors may have an impact, rather than an understanding of *how,* or what the impact may be.
Georgia: So that's become a really, really huge part of our PSHE. But it definitely crops up in other areas of the day as well, so that's really, really lovely. So, yeah, it's part of our whole school ethos, is that the right word? It's definitely part of our whole-school approach. *Francis: We do lots of mental health things with, you know, yoga as part of our PE sessions as well. And the children do a lot of mindfulness things. And understanding about looking after their own mental health.* *Nicola: So that's the next step for us in school and then choosing, you know, a Mental Health Champion of the Week and things like that. It's a big part of the school ethos.* *Nicola: We're going to have 'Well-being Warriors', which is a bit like a council. You know, you'd have your school council, your eco council… it's those children in school who are going to spearhead everybody's well-being. You know, and go around and say, 'how are you today?', 'you're looking well', 'do you want a hug?', and yeah.* *Francis: And we do a lot of things we do, sort of, PSE, Circle Times as well, so the children learn, learn to understand about emotions, managing their own and other people's as well. So, we've done a lot of work around that.*	Supporting CYP's SEMH is embedded within the ethos, culture, curriculum, routines, and 'feel' of the school	Supporting CYP's SEMH is embedded within the ethos, culture, curriculum, routines, and 'feel' of the school	I merged these two codes together as they were conveying similar meaning. Having 'school rules (which) are centred around SEMH development' could be considered to reflect the wider ethos and culture of the school, and therefore it felt appropriate to combine it with this code.

Nicola: We've just relaunched our Golden Promises to really simplify them, because they were too wordy. It's very simple now, and it's, 'kind hands, kind words, kind hearts', and that's it. Just so simple, but it's really, really embedded in school. *Georgia: Our behaviour policy is, there isn't even really like an escalation. Our school rules are 'aim high and be kind' and that's it.* *Georgia: I think, the 'aiming high' is more of the academic side of things, but it's also like, 'how are you aiming high in terms of being a good person?'. And then the 'being kind' is, again, 'am I being kind to my friends, but also my adults and my class?' So, it kind of encompasses a lot.* *Georgia: Through like behaviour management and all those kinds of things - it's very much more about nurture and making sure they're happy.*	School rules are centred around SEMH development		
Holly: If a student gets to that point, the teacher can say, 'would you like to use your 'time out' card? Do you need to use your SSC card?'. And we can remind the students that they've got that option. And more often than not, they will say, 'ah, yes, please'. And then that's to avoid giving the consequences for, perhaps, a behaviour that they can't help. Sometimes they just need that reminder from us to kind of use the stuff that we put in place for them. *Holly: And if they refuse that, then it will be the ACE Room again. But they're always given that reminder. Like, 'here like you've got this', you know, 'you can go to the SSC, do you need your 'time in'? Do you need 5 minutes?'. All of that, and nine times out of ten, that works.*	Reminding CYP of their personalised regulation strategies in the moment	Attunement and knowing CYP enables early intervention 'circuit breaker' and reminders of self-regulation strategies to prevent escalation	I chose to merge these three codes because they all emphasise the importance of knowing CYP to be able to provide an individualised response to support emotional regulation. Iteration two also captures the need for the teacher to be attuned to CYP's needs, whereby they can identify early signs of emotional dysregulation, to enable early intervention.
Kate: And we're aware of children who may need some time out, and need some, you know, movement break or a walk because that's, if someone's feeling unhappy or frustrated, or they just need to have some time away.	Knowing CYP enables early intervention 'circuit breaker' to prevent escalation		
Kate: Finding a toy or a book or something that they like, to try and use with them to calm them and regulate them.	Knowing individual CYP = knowing 'what		

Nicola: Or actually, they might just need to get out into the playground. So, it might just be guiding them out into the playground so they can do five laps of the playground, and sort of, get it out of their system like that.	works' to support emotional regulation		
Francis: Make sure we've got a really good environment that children feel safe and looked after. *Georgia: I think just making them very aware, all the time really, that you are a safe adult that they can go to, to speak to if they have got any worries.* *Georgia: But it does just kind of happen by osmosis. I think it's just part and parcel of what we do. So yeah, I would say with the teaching staff, it feels very, very easy and it's very much about what we, what all of us, all of us do.* *Holly: It's just kind of, like. That's our team, we're a team. We check in with each other for 20 minutes every morning. They know where I am break and lunch if they need to find me.* *Doug: So, in my classroom, I like to have it as quite, that fun place. Quite a relaxed place, you know. With high expectations, but I like to think that the majority of SEMH children will come into my classroom and know that they're gonna have a decent time. Know that's not going to be a dreadful lesson usually. And hopefully enjoy it, or at least enjoy parts of it.*	Supporting SEMH through relational approach to increase a sense of safety is embedded within a teacher's role	Supporting SEMH through relational approach to increase a sense of safety is 'part and parcel' of a teacher's role	Iteration one of both codes were similar in their focus around teachers' use of relational approaches, although 'Relational approach: Limiting language, considering tone and body language, e.g. Emotion Coaching' was more specific around what that could encompass. I merged the codes together and included 'to increase a sense of safety' because the elements of a relational approach mentioned in iteration one, whether applied consciously or unconsciously, contribute to fostering a sense of safety.
Kate: So, it's been, like I said, not overcrowding, not raising our voices, making sure we use calm voice, less language. Less language is a massive, massive one. Because if you overload them with language, that'll heighten them even more. Especially for those children with communication and interaction needs. *Georgia: I would say it's approaching them slowly, crouching down to their level, speaking softly. You know, asking them, 'are you OK? What is it that's upsetting you?'. And just kind of, working through it and intervening before things do escalate.* *Kate: The Headteacher were a lot on, you know, using calm voices, not heightened voices. Time for them to stop and calm and regulate and take them away from their space. Those sorts of things. Not crowd them, because it doesn't help, does it?*	Relational approach: Limiting language, considering tone and body language, e.g. Emotion Coaching		

Kate: It depends how dysregulated they are, but just sit and wait. Take time, and then if you see them starting to regulate, maybe put in some minimal language.			
Doug: It gives me an opportunity to impart my knowledge. I've got, I like to think, a lot of scientific knowledge and I like getting my passion for science across to a class of kids. I started off teaching wanting to make a difference. I guess that that sort of cliche. And you know, give, give kids the opportunity to learn more about the world around them and give kids the opportunity to further their own studies and progress to where they need to be, their next steps in life. *Laura: I think obviously, when you think of a teacher, you think of somebody, I guess, transferring knowledge. But it's so much more than that. It's about their development as a person. Even just teaching simple things like saying, 'hello, how are you?', being polite, developing integrity. Kind of, teaching them values and life lessons as well. As, well, as obviously the curriculum, they need to know, in order to succeed in their exams.*	Role of the teacher is to impart knowledge, develop integrity, and skills to function in society	Role of the teacher is to impart subject-specific knowledge, develop integrity and skills to function in society	These two codes were merged due to their similarity, as I felt that both possibly demonstrate a traditional view around the role of the teacher: to impart subject-specific knowledge and equip CYP with the skills needed to contribute positively to wider society. This felt conflicting, as I perceive these skills as advantageous at a group and community level, as they can benefit others within school and wider society. However, this focus does not necessarily consider or prioritise imparting the skills needed for the individual's own development or intrinsic well-being. This prompted me to critically consider who should be the primary beneficiary of education, and in turn, how this should be reflected in its structure and implementation.
Laura: It's a hard one to answer, that. There's quite a lot of teachers in my school. I guess, some teachers are able to, I guess, switch off from it. And that they're not really going to go out of their way to record anything, or follow things up if they're worried, because they're going by 4pm. Maybe because they've done their hours? And maybe they don't want to over-do it, and I do kind of understand that, too. Whereas others, maybe, think and do more about it. *Doug: I think it comes down to that subject knowledge and that love of the subject, but it doesn't always transfer across into a love of children.* *Doug: So, you can quite often get like super intelligent people being teachers and they've got this tremendous subject knowledge. But then when it comes to relating that to a bottom-set Year 8, they find it difficult to understand why they don't just get it. Because to them, it's easy. They're quite often a doctor or a or a Teach First type. It's 50/50.* *Katherine: My role is teaching really.*	Role of the teacher is to deliver curriculum content and subject knowledge		
Francis: We're constantly reminding everyone, 'you need to find out why that happened'. It's no good just telling somebody off because you've got to find out why they did that. There's always a	Exploring behaviour to understand 'triggers', and	Assessment and monitoring of every CYP's SEMH increases	I merged these four codes which each emphasise different components of/approaches to identifying and responding to CYP's emerging SEMH

reason, there's always a behaviour that's going to cause that, and it's about unpicking, isn't it? And going to the bottom of why that would be happening. *Francis: But it's because they're not able to, and that's knowing your children, isn't it? And knowing what your children are like and what's going on behind these behaviours.* *Kate: When it comes to my class, because they're non-verbal/non-speaking, it's understanding that this is their communication. They might be crying because they're trying to tell us something. They're laughing because that's how they feel. But you know, it's getting that across that they are communicating with us, and there's a need that we need to unpick there.* *Georgia: Now, I think people are much more knowledgeable about what to look out for, and actually that there can be a whole host of reasons as to why a child is behaving in that way.*	identify unmet needs	teachers' awareness and responsiveness to emerging needs for all CYP	needs. Having a core understanding that 'observable behaviours can mask needs' places a 'behaviour as a form of communication' lens over the way in which teachers can interpret a CYP's observable presentation, and facilitates the early recognition of emerging needs through 'exploring behaviour to identify unmet needs'. There was a narrative across these codes that this is a universal approach and that the SEMH of *all* CYP is monitored, as opposed to solely those identified as having SEMH needs; this is reflected within iteration two.
Georgia: It's just that we're recognising it more, rather than, 'oh, that child's naughty', which people might have been saying years ago. *Francis: You would just take that child away from, you would try and make them safe and get them away from that situation that's causing that, that feeling because you know that, that it's not, it's, it's a reflex action, isn't it? Rather than a, a malicious behaviour. And it's understanding that isn't it?*	Understanding that observable behaviours can mask needs		
Kate: We have the Zones of Regulation across school, so that's as soon as they come in. As soon as they come in, they have their name on a stick and they've got the pots with the pictures on and the colours, and they put their stick into the pot of how they're feeling when they come in. And then it's used across the day, they can go back and forth to their pot and then teachers and support staff keep an eye on the pots and see if anyone's moved their stick. And if they have, if they've moved it, if they were sad when they came in, they would try and unpick why, and have a chat with them. *Kate: They're constantly trying to watch how they feel through the movement of their little stick, because the children know they can go back and forth. And their key adult will respond to that.* *Nicola: We do like a daily check in, you know, 'thumbs who's feeling good today? Who's not feeling good today? Tell us a little bit why you're not feeling good today'. 'Oh, I'm not feeling good because I*	Whole-class emotion check-ins as part of daily routine = increased teacher awareness and responsiveness to emerging needs for all CYP		

haven't had breakfast', 'oh well, we can deal with that straight away', 'I'm not feeling good because I'm cold'.			
Georgia: We do the online Boxall Profiles for the children, and once upon a time earlier on in my career you would just do a Boxall Profile for the children who you suspected maybe had some need, and you'd go 'OK I'm going to do these 4 or 5 children and see what the areas of need are', but I mean, I don't know how it works in other schools, but in our school we actually do it for every single child every term which is time consuming, but it means that no child slips through the net. And you can sort of look at the data and go 'oh actually, that child might not be presenting with particularly challenging behaviours or anything, or you know, anything like that, but actually there's this one little area where they do need a bit of support'. *Kate: Meetings with myself, being Senior Mental Health Lead, so I minute discussions that we have in the termly meetings and ensure that they are aware of who's in the ELSA, who's in the social skills group. And I've got a monitoring sheet as well as children on the Register, I've got a monitoring sheet so we know who we're monitoring. They're valuable because staff can update me on children's needs. And where, you know, what needs focusing upon.* *Kate: And in year group teams. They discuss this when they have their planning meetings and things. If there's anything needs to be discussed, the group leads will discuss that with their year.*	Assessment and monitoring every CYP's SEMH to identify emerging needs		
Kate: It's all around, for us, it's all around that emotions and feelings side, and trying to unpick that, and make sure the children are happy when they can be happy. And if they're sad, they can be sad. But, you know, why are they sad? And what can we do to support that? And the same with being cross or frustrated or angry. And if they realise that emotion is that feeling, it's unpicking how they can express that to us at such a young age, I think. *Kate: We're discussing the 'why' you feel sad, and what we can do to support that.* *Francis: That might be supported by helping them understand their own emotions. Because that's generally when a lot of the children, it's about that they don't understand how to express that emotion appropriately, because they don't have the means. The vocabulary. A lot of the time it's because they don't have the vocabulary to explain it. 'Well, actually, he did this to me, and I didn't*	Importance of developing emotional literacy and CYP's understanding of their emotions	Developing CYP's emotional literacy and understanding of their emotions supports emotional regulation	Iteration one of both codes emphasise the importance of developing CYP's emotional literacy as a foundation for emotional regulation, but framed this concept in slightly different ways. The merged code consolidates their shared meaning into a clearer and more cohesive statement.

like that', or, 'oh I did that because he took my trains away and he didn't ask me could have them', kind of thing. It's, it's that kind of initial lash out really, isn't it?			
Nicola: I think the, the myHappymind at the moment, we're just building on that and hoping that that gets stronger and stronger. So obviously the children that start in Reception, by the time they get to Year 2, the hope is that they will be, you know, really, understanding, you know, impressively understanding of their, you know, their own SEMH needs. *Nicola: The Happy Breathing has been a huge hit in our school, so that's really good for regulating our children. We tend to use it when we've had, sort of, if we're coming in from outside, lunch times, or play times.* *Nicola: And the children talk about Happy Breathing, you know, with their friends. If anybody's upset, they'll say, 'think about your Happy Breathing'. Everybody talks about it so excitedly.* *Georgia: Teaching them what each of those parts of the brain is for, and actually if certain parts of our brain are not as engaged. It's the amygdala isn't it? If that's, you know, heightened, what can you do to help regulate yourself and calm yourself?*	Psychoeducation approach supports CYP to understand and regulate their own emotions		
Francis: I think probably pressure, pressure to succeed and being able to do their work. Yeah. I think that's, some of our, some of our, thinking about our little ones, it's like, 'have you done your reading?' 'Have you done your reading book?', 'Why has nobody written in your book?'. Because for our kids, really, that's kind of beyond their control, isn't it? That's parents, really. *Doug: That could potentially be down to the pressures of school, the pressures and demands of GCSEs are far higher than they've ever been. And I think that really does exacerbate any SEMH issues that that were already there.* *Laura: I think there's a whole multitude of things. The pressures of everyday life. The pressures of having to meet targets and goals in school exams.*	Curriculum pressures can impact on CYP's SEMH	Wider pressures on schools around academic attainment can transfer to CYP	The change to this code encompasses a wider range of pressures relating to academic attainment, such as targets, exam pressures, completing homework, and school performance measures. Iteration two highlights that wider socio-political factors can place pressure on schools and teachers which can transmit to CYP. For example, the increase in the attainment expectations of CYP since the change in the National Curriculum (2014), the requirement of schools to submit attainment data to the Standards Testing Agency and Local Authority, and through Ofsted

			inspections where attainment data is reviewed. Reflecting on my own experience as a Year One/Two teacher, the increase in expectations within the National Curriculum (2014) required CYP to be able to apply numerous pre-requisite skills they had not yet necessarily learnt to complete a task with a different learning focus. It was assumed and expected that these skills had already been acquired. I witnessed firsthand the significant pressure it placed on CYP, and sometimes presented as a barrier preventing them from accessing the intended learning task. In this example, the pressures on teachers to deliver the intended curriculum and achieve the expected attainment data can unintentionally transfer to CYP, and place undue pressure on them, impacting their SEMH.
Francis: And yeah, because I think it was that it felt like it was like a change in routine for them that it was somebody else, particularly if it was myself, because I'm, I'm sort of, in and out a lot. And that can be a bit disruptive for them, if you are their adult that's working with them sometimes, and then you're not there the next day. We just found that the children needed that consistency, and it just worked better for them. *Francis: I think that it becomes predictable for the child, and the style that that adult's using. I've found that sometimes when, when it changes, it's kind of, it's a bit disruptive for some of those children, if they've got a different adult to work with. They work with everybody in the provision, so they build those relationships.*	'Same adult where possible': understanding of key adult relationships and attachments	An understanding of the power of positive key adult relationships and attachments	Iteration one of both codes highlight teachers' understanding of the significance of secure key adult relationships. Therefore, it felt appropriate to merge these into iteration two.

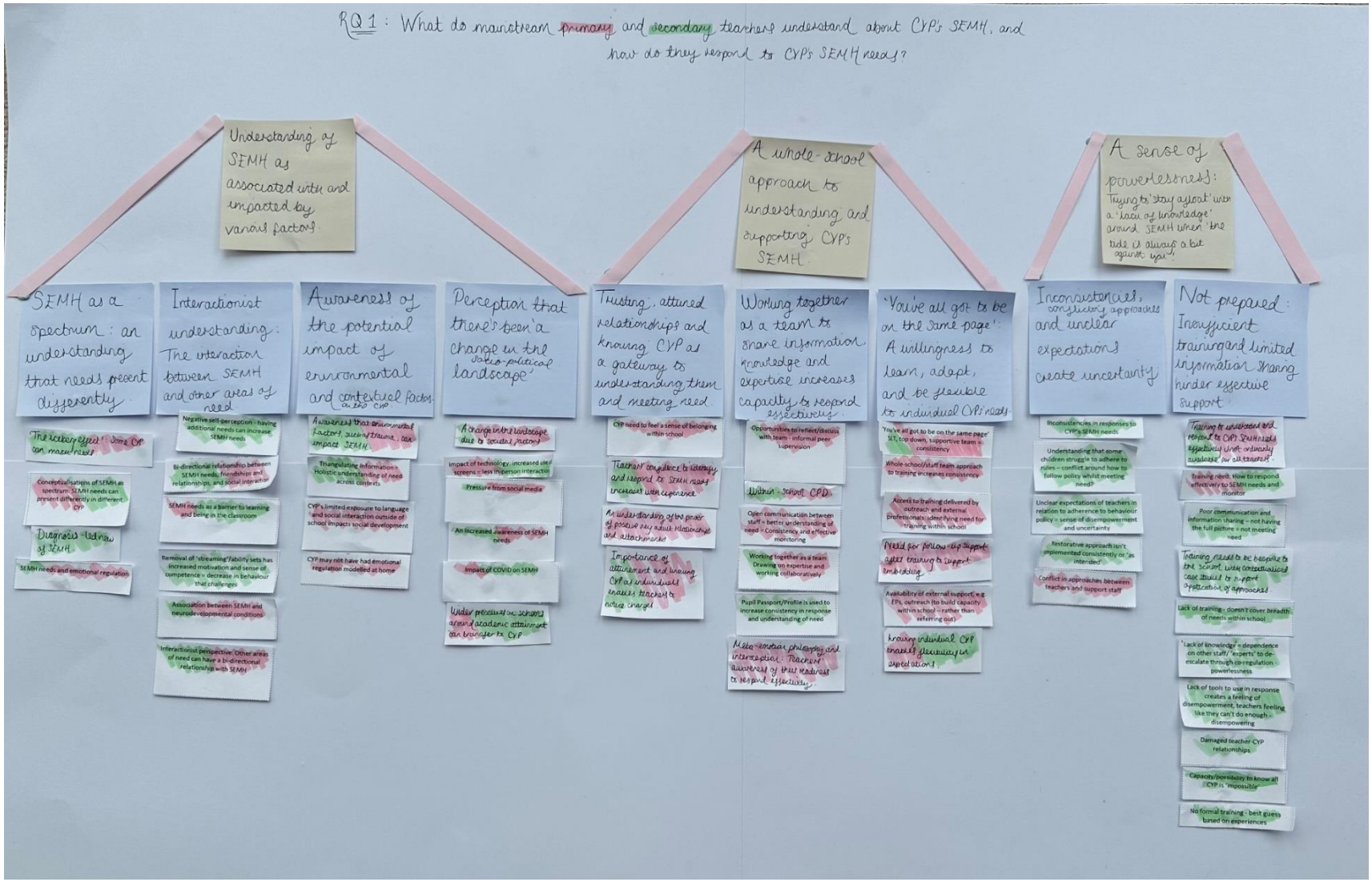
Francis: I think, obviously the sooner that happens, the better that happens, and the earlier on it happens in a child's life, if they've got a secure attachment, the more resilience they're going to have then out there to cope with traumas and things that come along. *Francis: I've always read that one attachment is enough to get somebody through difficult times and probably, a lot of people have said, celebrities particularly, have said that it's saved them, you know, having that one teacher, that one adult in a school. It could be anybody, it doesn't have to be a parent that's that good attachment. And you know, who's in their corner, if you like, that can bring them through it.*	Understanding around positive attachments as a protective factor which increases resilience		
Georgia: Just having that as part of your classroom setting, and you're just creating an environment through the way that you talk to the children and just the things that you say to them and, yeah, just to reassure them, 'you can talk to me if you need to', but just being consistent. *Francis: They're always reminded, 'who can you go and talk to if you're worried or upset or you're scared about anything?', and they're constantly reminded about that.* *Holly: Also, I have, I mean, I always say to my students, I like to kind of have like, a friendly vibe in the classroom. I like my students to know that they can talk to me. That they can tell me things that they're feeling, etcetera.*	Fostering openness for CYP to share their worries	Consistent and predictable relationships foster mutual trust and respect	Iteration one of both codes emphasise the importance of stable, supportive teacher-CYP relationships in creating a trusting environment. A core idea I felt was present within both iteration one codes was the need for consistency, which in turn can increase predictability, and support the development of trusting teacher-CYP relationships. This was mentioned explicitly through language such as 'always', 'constantly', and 'consistent', and implicitly through actions teachers talked about carrying out.
Doug: We work hard on building relationships with the kids that we're teaching so that we've got that sort of mutual respect going on. *Holly: And whilst they might get very frustrated and annoyed with us at times, if you give them a minute, they do get it. Like, I do think as a whole, at our school, the communication between the students and the teachers is really strong. And most of the students know that. Yeah, OK. They might be in trouble for the way they've just behaved, but they're also going to have a chance to sit down and talk to someone about it.*	Positive teacher-CYP relationships = Mutual trust and respect		
Kate: Having strategies in place to support the children if they need.	Implementation of reasonable adjustments and	Knowing individual CYP	The merging of these four codes was decided upon due to their common focus around flexibility and making

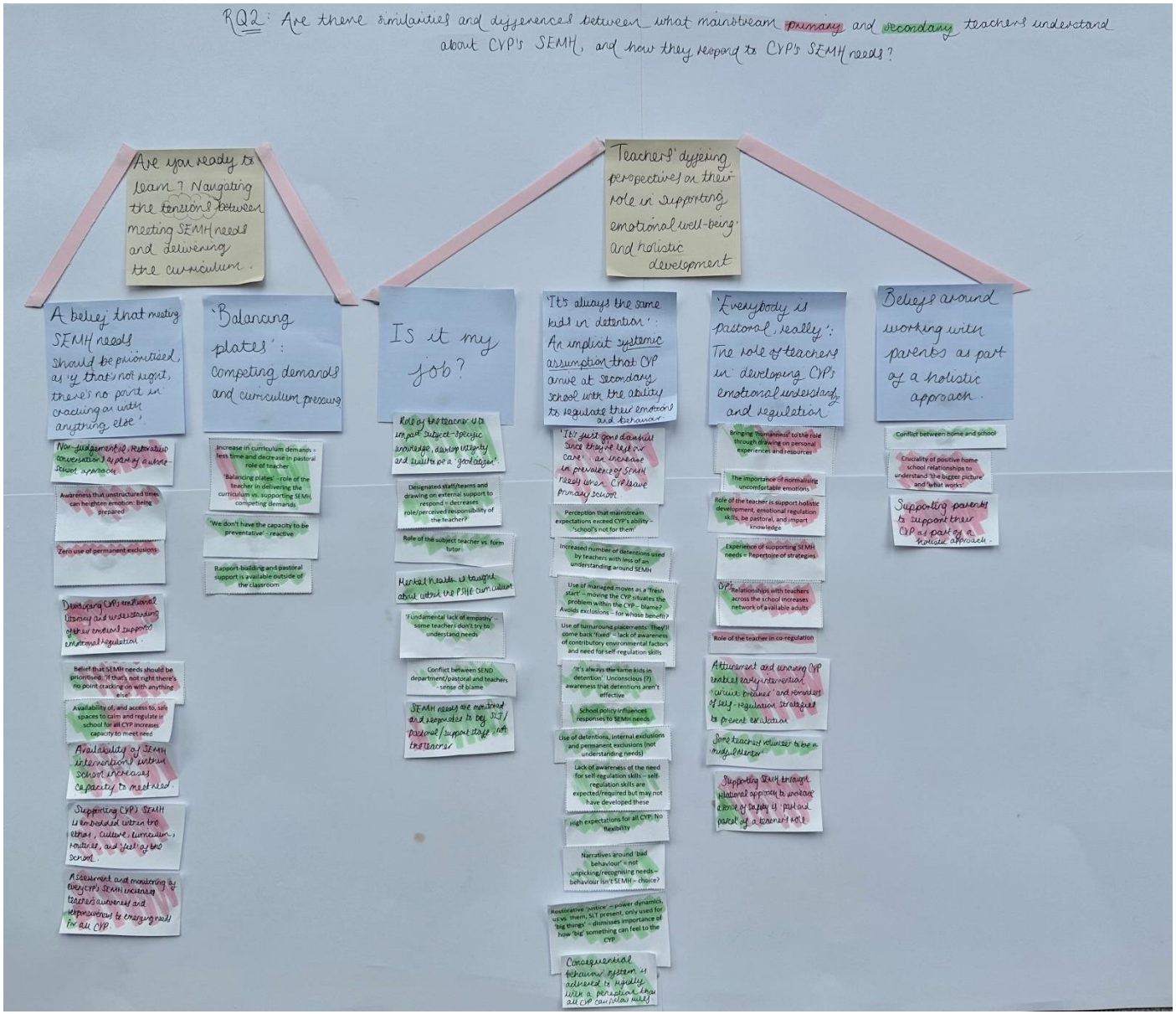
Katherine: So, it's trying to go through like a behaviour issue on ways on how we can support them. So, we might give 'em more of a chance, so we'll have like, trying like different strategies that we can use for that student.	flexibility in expectations	enables flexibility in expectations	adaptations to accommodate CYP's individual needs.
Georgia: I'd say it's about delivering a creative and accessible curriculum firstly. *Holly: Just in my lessons, just kind of again having an awareness of the students' needs, and having empathy for that and putting slightly different strategies in place. Like if a student struggles to copy a lot down off the board, I will put a bullet point next to the, kind of, three things I'd like them to copy down rather than asking them to copy everything else. So, kind of, making those reasonable adjustments for certain students as well, in terms of workload. Just to make it a bit more accessible for them, I think.*	Flexibility and adaptations made as a preventative measure: Reducing pressure helps to prevent emergence of needs		
Laura: To conform, to follow rules when they're not, you know, ready. In some cases, I think the school environment can enhance whatever they're going through or make them more anxious. But then for some students, I think actually maybe it is good for them as well. Like, it gives them structure. Depending on the needs. You know, they might enjoy coming to school because it's a place where they feel safe. And I think that's absolutely, like, there is space for that.	An understanding that some CYP thrive with rigid boundaries while others need more flexibility		
Georgia: We've kind of created them and refined them sort of over the years, and I think part of that is the fact that we've got quite a high level of children who, well, relative to our numbers, are on the SEND register or are sort of on Learning or SEND Support Plans and things. We've tried to make the foundation curriculum as accessible as possible. So, it's sort of really evolved over the years, which is quite nice. *Nicola: It is very bespoke to each child, and it's about us knowing each child well. And staff knowing their children well.* *Laura: Well, I'd link it to SEND, that's immediately what happens to my mind, that they have a need, and it has to be met somehow, so I'll need to adapt my teaching for them. And adapt the way that I am with them.*	Knowing individual CYP = Differentiation in expectations and adaptation in approach		

Katherine: My teacher training was quite a few years ago. Ten years ago. I don't think we ever got taught enough. *Doug: Teacher training was rubbish.* *Laura: I'd say I don't feel very confident with it. I mean, I know I'm in my first five years of teaching. I know, certainly like, the way I was, sort of, trained is you learn on the job and that's exactly it. I'm not sure how I can compare that to a like a traditional PGCE course in university because I've not done that. I can only assume that maybe you do a unit on SEN. So, it feels like, really, it feels like a black hole. It's the only way I can describe it, a real grey area. And I think, it's such a vast amount of different needs. Obviously if there's a kid with ADHD, or a kid with autism, you're not going to know exactly where they're at necessarily, on the spectrum because it's so wide. So, it's going to be difficult to cater exactly for them, but just to have some basic knowledge of what ADHD is like, how that can be handled in the classroom.*	Teacher training didn't prepare me to understand or respond to SEMH needs effectively	Training to understand and respond to SEMH needs effectively is not ordinarily available for all teachers	The first iterations of these codes shared the commonality that training around SEMH isn't ordinarily available for all teachers. A number of participants shared their views that teacher training alone had not prepared them to understand or respond to SEMH needs effectively, while those who felt more confident had accessed SENDCo/MHFA/SMHL training which is typically restricted to those in designated roles to support SEMH.
Kate: My SENDCo qualification covered it a bit. Yeah, I think we did a section around it. We had standards as well to meet, so I had to show how we were managing that and everything. So yeah, that's probably more of the up-to-date stuff I'd have had was around that, with my SENDCo award which I got in 2021. *Francis: I also did, a few years ago, I did the Mental Health First Aid course, which I found really, really interesting. Very useful. Which, I've done that, and the Headteacher's done that one as well. I found that really useful, it gave me a better understanding about mental health generally, and social and emotional.*	Knowledge of SEMH is from training to deliver a specific role (SENDCo/Mental Health First Aider/Senior Mental Health Lead) and is not ordinarily available for all teachers		
Katherine: When we have training, we get given all these little tips here and there, but we never get it put into practice. So you get a couple of examples, but nothing in detail or nothing that might be suitable for you in that classroom or in that school. It's quite open. *Katherine: Maybe a member staff comes around and get, like, maybe an outside person would come and have a look, kind of, observe for a few weeks and then come and do some training on it.*	Training needs to be bespoke to the school/tailored to needs within the school	Training needs to be bespoke to the school with contextualised case studies to support	These codes were merged due to their shared focus on identifying key elements that teachers perceive as beneficial for training in SEMH. Iteration two captures the request for training to encompass case study

Katherine: Or a member of like, your SENDCo team come in and go 'right, such and such, yeah, he struggles with this, OK, erm, after speaking to loads of teachers, this is maybe the best way on how you deal with that person'. And give a bit more of a real-life scenario situations on how to deal with it. *Laura: Definitely more training. And like, case studies, like a real-life case study example.*	Request for case study example within training to demonstrate application of approaches	application of approaches	examples which are relevant to the school, to support teachers in adopting alternative approaches.

Appendix 3.16. Photographs of the final sets of themes, sub-themes and codes for RQ1 and RQ2.




RQ2: Are there similarities and differences between what mainstream primary and secondary teachers understand about CYP's SEMH, and how they respond to CYP's SEMH needs?
Are you ready to learn? Navigating the tensions between meeting SEMH needs and delivering the curriculum.
Teachers' differing perspectives on their role in supporting emotional well-being and holistic development
A belief that meeting SEMH needs should be prioritised, as 'if that's not right, there's no point in cracking on with anything else'
'Balancing plates': competing demands and curriculum pressure
Is it my job?
'It's always the same kids in detention': An implicit systemic assumption that CYP arrive at secondary school with the ability to regulate their emotions and behaviour
'Everybody is pastoral, really': The role of teachers in developing CYP's emotional understanding and regulation
Beliefs around working with parents as part of a holistic approach.
Non-judgemental, restorative conversations as part of a whole-school approach
Awareness that unstructured times can heighten emotion: Being prepared
Zero use of permanent exclusions
Developing CYP's emotional literacy and understanding of their emotions supports emotional regulation.
Belief that SEMH needs should be prioritised: 'If that's not right there's no point cracking on with anything else'
Availability of, and access to, safe spaces to calm and regulate in school for all CYP increases capacity to meet need
Availability of SEMH interventions within school increases capacity to meet need.
Supporting CYP's SEMH is embedded within the ethos, culture, curriculum, routines, and 'feel' of the school.
Assessment and monitoring of every CYP's SEMH increases teachers awareness and responsiveness to emerging needs for all CYP.
Increase in curriculum demands = less time and decrease in pastoral role of teacher
'Balancing plates' – role of the teacher in delivering the curriculum vs. supporting SEMH, competing demands
'We don't have the capacity to be preventative' - reactive
Rapport-building and pastoral support is available outside of the classroom
Role of the teacher is to impart subject-specific knowledge, develop integrity and swiss to be a 'good citizen'.
Designated staff/teams and drawing on external support to respond = decreases role/perceived responsibility of the teacher?
Role of the subject teacher vs. form tutor
Mental health is taught about within the PSHE curriculum
'Fundamental lack of empathy' – some teachers don't try to understand needs
Conflict between SEND department/pastoral and teachers - sense of blame
SEMH needs are monitored and responded to by SLT/pastoral/support staff, not the teacher
'It's just gone downhill since they're left in care' - an increase in prevalence of SEMH needs when CYP leave primary school
Perception that mainstream expectations exceed CYP's ability – 'school's not for them'
Increased number of detentions used by teachers with less of an understanding around SEMH
Use of managed moves as a 'fresh start' – moving the CYP situates the problem within the CYP – blame? Avoids exclusions – for whose benefit?
Use of turnaround placements: They'll come back 'fixed' – lack of awareness of contributory environmental factors and need for self-regulation skills
'It's always the same kids in detention'. Unconscious (?) awareness that detentions aren't effective
School policy influences responses to SEMH needs
Use of detentions, internal exclusions and permanent exclusions (not understanding needs)
Lack of awareness of the need for self-regulation skills – self-regulation skills are expected/required but may not have developed these
High expectations for all CYP: No flexibility
Narratives around 'bad behaviour' = not unpicking/recognising needs – behaviour isn't SEMH – choice?
Restorative 'justice' = power dynamics, us vs. them, SLT present, only used for 'big things' – dismisses importance of how 'big' something can feel to the CYP
Consequential behaviour system is adhered to rigidly with a perception that all CYP can follow rules
Bringing 'humanness' to the role through drawing on personal experiences and resources
The importance of normalising uncomfortable emotions
Role of the teacher is support holistic development, emotional regulation skills, be pastoral, and impart knowledge
Experience of supporting SEMH needs = Repertoire of strategies
CYP's Relationships with teachers across the school increases network of available adults
Role of the teacher in co-regulation
Attunement and unveiling CYP enables early intervention 'circuit breaker' and reminders of self-regulation strategies to prevent exclusion
Some teachers volunteer to be a 'mindfulness mentor'
Supporting SEMH through relational approach to increase a sense of safety is 'part and parcel' of a teacher's role
Conflict between home and school
Cruciality of positive home school relationships to understand 'the bigger picture' and 'what works'
Supporting parents to support their CYP as part of a holistic approach.

Appendix 4.1. Reflexive Diary Entry.

When carrying out the participant interviews and designing the semi structured interview schedule, I had initially anticipated to have four RQs:

1. What do mainstream primary and secondary teachers understand about CYP's SEMH?

2. How do mainstream primary and secondary teachers respond to CYP's SEMH needs?

3. Are there similarities and differences between what mainstream primary and secondary teachers understand about CYP's SEMH?

4. Are there similarities and differences between how mainstream primary and secondary teachers respond to CYP's SEMH needs?

These RQs intentionally separated teachers' *understanding* from their *responses*, as I felt that these were separate entities, and asking different things, so had anticipated distinguishable responses. This was reflected in the semi-structured interview schedule which had questions split into two sections around *understanding*, and questions around *responses*. However, as I was gathering the data, there were significant crossovers and repetition in terms of participants' responses between the two sections of questions. Following the initial coding of the data, I began attempting to cluster the codes together under the original four RQs. However, again, there were significant crossovers, with codes having the potential to answer both RQ1 and RQ2, '*understanding*' and '*responses*'. For example, I initially constructed a **sub-theme** around '*teachers working together as a team: drawing on expertise and working collaboratively'.* This contained codes around working collaboratively to respond to children's SEMH needs, and through drawing on expertise within the team to build capacity by increasing teachers' understanding around SEMH. Another example was that another theme was constructed around *'reliance on external motivators to manage behaviour'*, which in itself is a *response*, but may also indicate an underlying *understanding* around behaviour as a controlled choice. I felt that teachers' *understanding* and *responses* were too intertwined to separate them under different RQs.

Braun and Clarke (2022) emphasise the importance of the researcher being guided by the data, as opposed to adhering rigidly to pre-determined RQs, arguing that RQs should be considered as evolving rather than fixed. If the RQs no longer align with what is constructed from the data, Braun and Clarke (2022) recommend refining them. I therefore made the decision to merge RQ1 with RQ2, and RQ3 with RQ4:

1. *What do mainstream primary and secondary teachers understand about CYP's SEMH, and how do they respond to CYP's SEMH needs?*
2. *Are there similarities and differences between what mainstream primary and secondary teachers understand about CYP's SEMH, and how they respond to CYP's SEMH needs?*

Appendix 4.2. RQ1: Table of codes, sub-themes and themes.

'What do primary and secondary teachers understand about CYP's SEMH, and how do they respond to CYP's SEMH needs?'

Initial code	***Sub-theme***	***Theme***
'The iceberg effect': Some CYP can mask needs	SEMH as a spectrum: An understanding that needs can present differently	SEMH is associated with and impacted by various factors
Conceptualisations of SEMH as a spectrum: SEMH needs can present differently in different CYP		
Diagnosis-led view of SEMH		
SEMH needs and emotional regulation		
Negative self-perception: Having additional needs can increase SEMH needs	Interactionist understanding: The interaction between SEMH and other areas of need	
Bi-directional relationships between SEMH needs, friendships and relationships, and social interaction		
SEMH needs as a barrier to learning and being in the classroom		
Removal of 'streaming'/ability sets has increased motivation and sense of competence, resulting in a decrease in behaviour that challenges		
Association between SEMH and neurodevelopmental conditions		
Interactionist perspective: Other areas of need can have a bi-directional relationship with SEMH		
Awareness that environmental factors, such as trauma, can impact SEMH	Awareness of the potential impact of environmental and contextual factors on the CYP	
Triangulating information = Holistic understanding of need across contexts		
CYP's limited exposure to language and social interaction outside of school can impact social development		
CYP may not have had emotional regulation modelled at home		
A change in the landscape due to societal factors		
Impact of technology: Increased use of screens results in less in-person interaction		

Pressure from social media on CYP	Perception that there's been a change in the socio-political landscape	
An increased awareness of SEMH needs		
Impact of COVID-19 on SEMH		
Wider pressures on schools around academic attainment can transfer to CYP		
CYP need to feel a sense of belonging within school	Trusting, attuned relationships and knowing CYP as a gateway to understanding them and meeting need	A whole-school approach to understanding and supporting CYP's SEMH
Teachers' confidence to identify and respond to SEMH needs increases with experience		
An understanding of the power of positive key adult relationships and attachments		
Importance of attunement and knowing CYP as individuals: Enables teachers to notice changes		
Opportunities to reflect/discuss with team (informal peer supervision)	Working together as a team to share information, knowledge, and expertise increases capacity to respond effectively	
Within-school CPD		
Open communication between staff = better understanding of need, enabling consistency and effective monitoring		
Working together as a team: Drawing on expertise and working collaboratively		
Pupil Passport/Profile is used to increase understanding of need and consistency in response		
Meta-emotion philosophy and interoception: Teachers' awareness of their readiness to respond effectively		
'You've all got to be on the same page': SLT, top-down approach with a supportive team increases consistency	'You've all got to be on the same page': A willingness to learn, adapt, and be flexible to individual CYP's needs	
Whole-school/staff team approach to training increases consistency		
Access to training delivered by outreach and external professionals: Identifying need for training within school		
Need for follow-up support after training to support embedding		

Availability of external support, e.g. EPs, outreach, to build capacity within school		
Knowing individual CYP enables flexibility in expectations		
Inconsistencies in response to CYP's SEMH needs	Inconsistencies, conflicting approaches, and unclear expectations create uncertainty	A sense of powerlessness
Understanding that some CYP struggle to adhere to rules: Conflicting feelings around how to follow policy whilst meeting need		
Unclear expectations of teachers in relation to adherence to behaviour policy creates a sense of disempowerment and uncertainty		
Restorative approach is not implemented consistently or as intended		
Conflict in approaches between teachers and support staff		
Training to understand and respond to CYP's SEMH needs effectively is not ordinarily available to all teachers	Not prepared: Insufficient training and limited information sharing hinder effective support	
Training need: How to respond effectively to SEMH needs and monitor		
Poor communication and information sharing = not having the 'bigger picture' and difficulty meeting need		
Training needs to be bespoke to the school with contextualised case studies to support application of approaches		
Lack of training – doesn't cover breadth of needs within school		
'Lack of knowledge' = dependence on other staff/'experts' to de-escalate through co-regulation		
Lack of tools to use in response creates a sense of disempowerment and teachers wondering whether they have 'done enough'		
Damaged teacher-CYP relationships		
Capacity/possibility to know all CYP is 'impossible'		
No formal training = best guess based on experience		

Appendix 4.3. RQ2: Table of codes, sub-themes and themes.

'Are there similarities and differences between what primary and secondary teachers understand about CYP's SEMH, and how they respond to CYP's SEMH needs?'

Initial code	***Sub-theme***	***Theme***
Non-judgemental, restorative conversations as part of a whole-school approach	A belief that meeting SEMH needs should be prioritised, as 'if that's not right, there's no point in cracking on with anything else'	Are you ready to learn? Navigating the tensions between meeting SEMH needs and delivering the curriculum
Awareness that unstructured times can heighten emotion: Being prepared		
Zero use of permanent exclusions		
Developing CYP's emotional literacy and understanding of their emotions supports emotional regulation		
Belief that SEMH needs should be prioritised: 'If that's not right, there's no point in cracking on with anything else'		
Availability of, and access to, regulation spaces to calm and regulate within school for all CYP increases capacity to meet need		
Assessment and monitoring of every CYP's SEMH increases teachers' awareness and responsiveness to emerging needs for all CYP		
Supporting CYP's SEMH is embedded within the ethos, culture, curriculum, routines, and 'feel' of the school		
Availability of SEMH interventions within school increases capacity to meet need		
Increase in curriculum demands = less time and decrease in pastoral role of teacher	'Balancing plates': Competing demands and curriculum pressures impact SEMH support	
'We don't have the capacity to be preventative' – reactive		
Rapport-building and pastoral support is available outside of the classroom		
Role of the teacher is to impart subject-specific knowledge, develop integrity, and skills to function in society		

Designated pastoral staff/teams and drawing on external support to respond may impact perceptions around teachers' responsibilities to support CYP's SEMH needs	Is it my job?	Teachers' differing perspectives on their role in supporting emotional well-being and holistic development
Role of the subject teacher vs. the form tutor		
Mental health is taught about within the PSHE curriculum		
'Fundamental lack of empathy' – some teachers don't try to understand needs		
Conflict between SEND department/pastoral team and teachers – sense of blame		
SEMH needs are responded to and monitored by SLT/pastoral/support staff, not the teacher		
'It's just gone downhill since they've left our care': An increase in the prevalence of SEMH needs when CYP leave primary school	'It's always the same kids in detention': An implicit, systemic assumption that CYP arrive at secondary school with the ability to regulate their emotions and behaviour	
Perception that mainstream expectations exceed some CYP's ability: 'School's not for them'		
Increased number of detentions used by teachers with less of an understanding around SEMH		
Use of managed moves as a 'fresh start' and to avoid exclusion – situates the problem within the CYP		
Use of turnaround placements: A belief that CYP will return 'fixed', without awareness of potential contributory environmental factors		
'It's always the same kids in detention': Unconscious (?) awareness that detentions aren't effective for many CYP		
School policy influences responses to SEMH needs		
Use of detentions, internal exclusions and permanent exclusions		
Lack of awareness of the need for self-regulation skills to regulate behaviour – unconscious (?) expectation that they have acquired these		
High expectations for all CYP – no flexibility		
Narratives around 'bad behaviour' = not unpicking/recognising needs		
Restorative 'justice' power dynamics with SLT present: Us vs. them		

Consequential behaviour system is adhered to rigidly with a perception that all CYP can follow rules		
Bringing 'humanness' to the role through drawing on personal experiences and resources	'Everybody is pastoral, really': The role of teachers in developing CYP's emotional understanding and regulation	
The importance of normalising uncomfortable emotions		
The role of the teacher is holistic: Developing CYP's emotional regulation skills, giving pastoral support, and imparting knowledge		
Experience of supporting SEMH needs enables teachers to develop a repertoire of strategies		
CYP's relationships with teachers across the school increases the network of available adults		
Role of the teacher in co-regulation		
Attunement and knowing CYP enables early intervention 'circuit breaker' and reminders of self-regulation strategies to prevent escalation		
Some teachers volunteer to be 'Mindful Mentors'		
Supporting SEMH through a relational approach to increase a CYP's sense of safety is 'part and parcel' of a teacher's role		

Appendix 4.4. Prevalence of participant quotes contributing to RQ1 sub-themes in Reflexive Thematic Analysis.

		Primary teacher participants				**Secondary teacher participants**			
Themes	**Sub-themes**	***Francis***	***Georgia***	***Kate***	***Nicola***	***Doug***	***Holly***	***Katherine***	***Laura***
SEMH is associated with and impacted by various factors	*SEMH as a spectrum: An understanding that needs can present differently*	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
	Interactionist understanding: The interaction between SEMH and other areas of need	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Awareness of the potential impact of environmental and contextual factors on the CYP	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Perception that there has been a change in the socio-political landscape	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
A whole-school approach to understanding and supporting CYP's SEMH	*Trusting, attuned relationships and knowing CYP as a gateway to understanding them and meeting need*	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓
	Working together as a team to share information, knowledge, and expertise increases capacity to respond effectively	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

		Francis	Georgia	Kate	Nicola	Doug	Holly	Katherine	Laura
	'You've all got to be on the same page': A willingness to learn, adapt, and be flexible to individual CYP's needs	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
A sense of powerlessness	*Inconsistencies, conflicting approaches, and unclear expectations create uncertainty*		✓	✓		✓		✓	✓
	Not prepared: Insufficient training and limited information sharing hinder effective support		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Participants' names have been replaced with pseudonyms to protect their anonymity.

Appendix 4.5. Prevalence of participant quotes contributing to RQ2 sub-themes in Reflexive Thematic Analysis.

		Primary teacher participants				Secondary teacher participants			
Themes	**Sub-themes**	***Francis***	***Georgia***	***Kate***	***Nicola***	***Doug***	***Holly***	***Katherine***	***Laura***
Are you ready to learn? Navigating the tensions between meeting SEMH	*A belief that meeting SEMH needs should be prioritised, as 'if that's not right, there's no point in cracking on with anything else'*	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓		✓

needs and delivering the curriculum	*'Balancing plates': Competing demands and curriculum pressures impact SEMH support*					✓	✓	✓	✓
		Francis	***Georgia***	***Kate***	***Nicola***	***Doug***	***Holly***	***Katherine***	***Laura***
Teachers' differing perspectives on their role in supporting emotional well-being and holistic development	*Is it my job?*					✓	✓	✓	✓
	'It's always the same kids in detention': An implicit, systemic assumption that CYP arrive at secondary school with the ability to regulate their emotions and behaviour		✓			✓	✓	✓	✓
	'Everybody is pastoral, really': The role of teachers in developing CYP's emotional understanding and regulation	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	

Participants' names have been replaced with pseudonyms to protect their anonymity.

Appendix 4.6. Reflexive Diary Entry.

When constructing this sub-theme and re-reading the participant quotes associated with it, I reflected on my own experience as a teacher and how uncomfortably it sat with me to conduct the Year 1 phonics screening and Year 2 SATs, as well as the extensive preparation which went into increasing 'readiness' for the Year 6 SATs. I vividly recall discussions in the staff room around how the outcomes would not be a 'true' reflection of ability due to the pressure it put on various CYP, preventing them from performing at their best, and parents reporting absences due to high levels of anxiety. In my experience, SATs were prioritised over most other learning in Year 6, often at the expense of creative and topic-based subjects. The intense focus on the core subjects seemed to exacerbate the anxiety of those CYP who were already feeling nervous about them, often the same CYP who thrive in creative and practical-based tasks. It caused me to consider why teacher assessment is not considered 'robust enough', *is it rooted in a fundamental lack of trust in teachers to fulfil their professional role?* If teacher assessment was considered as an alternative means of measuring CYP's attainment, the pressures of exams could be alleviated.

I am mindful about how my experiences as a teacher are impacting my analysis, but that I am a researcher in this capacity and not a teacher – it can be difficult to separate these roles, but returning to the dataset frequently has enabled me to keep my 'researcher hat' on and ensure I'm not reading my own experiences into the analysis.

Appendix 4.7. Reflexive Diary Entry.

Working together as a team predominantly comprised of primary teacher participants. Primary teachers working in smaller schools noted the school size as a factor contributing to successful collaborative working and knowing CYP better, which I am interpreting as possibly being due to more frequent interactions. It caused me to consider how collaborative working and knowing CYP/understanding their needs could be improved in larger settings, such as secondary schools where there are often 900+ students and less frequent teacher-CYP interactions, due to having a range of different subject teachers they may only see for one hour on a fortnightly basis. This increases the importance of effective, consistent use of alternative monitoring approaches, such as Pupil Passports, Arbor or SIMS to record and share up-to-date information about CYP to enable a better understanding of need, and consistent approach to be used across all teachers. This caused me to consider: *Are all teachers aware of how to access information about the CYP they are responsible for making adjustments for? How often are Pupil Passports updated? Who is involved in updating this information to ensure it is accurate and still relevant? Are Pupil Passports/Profiles CYP-centred, and is the CYP involved in the process with their views at the heart? Are teachers regularly provided with additional designated time to review the information for the CYP they teach?*

Appendix 4.8. Reflexive Diary Entry.

I found it interesting how primary teachers had all accessed extensive training around SEMH, and none of the secondary teachers had. This caused me to consider why this may be, *was it reflecting rigidity within secondary school systems, and potentially a reluctance to disturb the culture/equilibrium of the school as it currently stands – a fear of change? Or a limited awareness that change may be needed? Are EPs as agents of change therefore perceived as a threat to the school system?*

The reflectiveness of the primary teacher participants (shared through narratives around using staff meeting time to discuss SEMH, and through peer-supervision-style discussions) may indicate more of an awareness of the potential power in their role to elicit change for CYP, and therefore increase their motivation to access training - *it might feel more meaningful?*

Appendix 4.9. Reflexive Diary Entry.

Initially I had included an additional sub-theme: '*Beliefs around working with parents and carers as part of a holistic approach*' associated with the theme, '*Teachers' differing perspectives on their role in supporting emotional well-being and holistic development*'. Within this sub-theme, I had interpreted differences in primary and secondary teachers' perceptions around their role in working with parents and carers. Primary teachers conveyed a strong discourse indicating that they held a fundamental role in supporting CYP by supporting their parents and carers as part of a holistic approach, such as with processes and referrals, the sharing of emotional regulation strategies used within school (to encourage use at home as part of a consistent, joined-up approach), as well as through an awareness of parents' experiences outside of school and being available for supportive conversations to share concerns. Kate also shared narratives of the importance of working with parents to gain a holistic understanding of the CYP, and to gain parents' perspectives around 'what works' to support their CYP, indicating a perspective that parents/carers are experts of their CYP. Secondary teachers conveyed different perspectives, conveying a sense of frustration around parents' expectations of school to adapt and be flexible to their CYP's needs, indicating that working with parents and carers can be challenging.

Due to the word limit of this thesis, I was unable to include this sub-theme in my final draft. I decided to remove this particular sub-theme as, although it was a dominant narrative across primary teachers, it was the sub-theme with the least data associated with it across the dataset.

Appendix 4.10. Reflexive Diary Entry.

I interpreted Doug's description of his approach to relationship-building as being additional to the core responsibilities of his teaching role, as he is doing this in his own time (break and lunch). This caused me to consider whether, in secondary schools, forming meaningful relationships and building connection with CYP is valued or prioritised, and whether this is considered/recommended/discussed during staff meetings or through CPD/training. If this is not expected or possibly even acknowledged, practice may look very different even across one school, especially if curriculum pressures continue to increase, which may be impacting on teachers' own well-being and capacity to support CYP. It may then depend on teachers possessing the characteristics of being relatable, empathic and relational to naturally form these connections as a foundation on which CYP feel comfortable and safe to engage in their learning.

Appendix 4.11. Reflexive Diary Entry.

I felt that there was a stark contrast between primary and secondary teachers' perceptions around the use of sanctions to respond to behaviour that challenges. Primary teachers described using a relational approach in response, with co-regulation strategies embedded within their role. This was reflected in Georgia and Nicola's school rules which were centred around SEMH, well-being, and 'being kind', and in primary teachers' shared discourse around 'zero use of exclusions'. As a secondary teacher, Holly also described using a relational approach, not only within her form tutor role but also as a subject teacher. I wonder whether this was associated with her role as an English teacher, as she explained that she knew the CYP better as she taught them more frequently, possibly providing the opportunity to build stronger relationships and connections and mutual trust – *I wonder whether a teacher who sees CYP less often, who may feel that they know the CYP less, would feel more confident relying on consequential behaviour systems in the absence of attuned, trusting relationships?*

Appendix 4.12. Reflexive Diary Entry.

Laura's reflection around her deputy principal's concern that "*it's really bad if we exclude students*", and acknowledgement that exclusion data is monitored by "*Ofsted etcetera*" caused me to think – *who is it bad for? Bad for the student, or bad for the school's exclusion data?* The use of a turnaround placement still removes the CYP from the school, but doesn't impact this exclusion data at this point. Holly also mentioned that CYP may be kept on roll at her school, but informally 'moved' permanently to the turnaround placement, as well as the use of managed moves to prevent a permanent exclusion (although this was not included due to the word limit of this thesis): "*a managed move to another school rather than having a permanent exclusion*". This suggests that other mechanisms are used to remove the CYP from the school, without impacting the exclusion data. I felt frustrated about how schools had found creative ways to avoid their data from being negatively impacted, but had not necessarily sought to explore and support needs of the CYP in their care, or identify potential contributory environmental factors, situating the problem within the CYP. The focus appeared instead to be ensuring the school 'comes out unscathed', rather than thinking of the bigger picture for the CYP and how a permanent exclusion could impact their self-perception, their experience of education, their future.

These systemic responses support Georgia and Francis's concerns around CYP moving to secondary school and potentially not receiving the level of SEMH support required, resulting in difficulty coping with the demands. Overall, this felt a significant contrast to primary teachers' narratives within a previous sub-theme (A belief that meeting SEMH needs should be prioritised, as 'if that's not right, there's no point in cracking on with anything else') around 'zero use of exclusions', where Georgia shared her view that exclusions are "*not helpful for the child in the long run*", and the focus is instead on exploring the needs underpinning behaviour that challenges.

Appendix 5.1. Reflexive Diary Entry.

The SENDCoP (DfE, 2015) definition of SEMH appears to focus primarily on within-child factors, and I feel it overlook factors around the CYP, which may result in teachers not taking these into consideration. For me, this raises important questions around whether, in practice, this may result in the reduction of multifaceted emotional and relational challenges to diagnostic labels or behaviours that fit pre-defined categories. The definition also outlines visible behaviours, but does not seem to acknowledge more subtle indicators of distress or difficulties that CYP may mask/conceal. The definition also doesn't acknowledge the need to truly know each CYP as an individual and have a relational, intuitive understanding of their needs. While the SENDCoP (DfE, 2015) may offer one perspective, the nuanced nature of SEMH could be argued to demand a more holistic, person-centred approach, with acknowledgement of contextual and environmental factors, and the interaction between SEMH and other areas of need.

Appendix 5.2. Reflexive Diary Entry.

Teachers' discourse around factors perceived to negatively impact CYP's SEMH appeared to be primarily focused on risk factors within the home and community, with little acknowledgement of factors within school. Discussion from numerous participants around CYP's use of alternative spaces within the school when emotionally dysregulated, such as a sensory room, indicates an implicit understanding that factors within the classroom environment may not be conducive to supporting their emotional regulation. However, this was not explicitly discussed by any participants. This may indicate a gap in reflective practice or professional development where teachers may not be explicitly aware of how environmental and interpersonal dynamics within school can be risk factors for a CYP with SEMH needs.

Appendix 5.3. Reflexive Diary Entry.

Although within a participant interview it was conveyed that familial separation and divorce can reduce CYP's sense of stability and security, I recognise that this is not a universal outcome. There is a high level of complexity associated with familial separation, and in many cases, separation may enhance a CYP's well-being, particularly if it removes them from an environment where there may have been ongoing parental conflict. This interpretation is therefore focused less on the separation itself but more around whether a CYP experiences a consistent sense of safety and stability, during and following this transition - it would be the absence of this which may impact their SEMH.

Appendix 5.4. Reflexive Diary Entry.

There may be an assumption that consistency and 'all on the same page' indicates the same response for all CYP. However, wider discourse indicated that it's more about consistency in flexibility, ensuring that CYP can expect all adults within school to be flexible in their adapted provision and responses to their needs. This discourse caused me to reflect on discussions which have arisen whilst delivering training in Emotion Coaching (Gottman at al., 1996; Gilbert et al., 2021) as a TEP, whereby school staff have raised questions around whether it is fair to have respond differently to different CYP, and make adaptations for individual CYP's needs in relation to their behaviour. These scenarios have led to further discussion with delegates around equity, and whether it would be fair not to make those adaptations given that every CYP is arriving at school with different experiences and skills, including in relation to their ability to regulate their emotions. This led to conversations around whether teachers would expect the same from all CYP in relation to their academic ability, with discussion around the adaptations and scaffolds educators put in place to support the development of these skills. It therefore felt important to illuminate this within the data, following these reflections around my own professional experiences having these discussions as a TEP.

Appendix 5.5. Reflexive Diary Entry.

My own observations and professional experiences within educational settings have demonstrated that behaviour policies can be utilised very differently, even when teachers are adhering to the same framework. The natural variation in teachers' personal characteristics highlights the human elements of teaching that behaviour policies could be argued to overlook, likely resulting in differences in the way in which behaviour systems are interpreted and applied (e.g. some teachers may do so reluctantly, while others may move through the behaviour system quickly, possibly reflecting a more 'zero-tolerance' approach). This illuminates the criticality of schools providing training and opportunities for critical discussion to support teachers' understanding around how to support CYP's SEMH needs and implement the behaviour policy in a way which is appropriate for individual CYP's needs.

Appendix 5.6. Reflexive Diary Entry.

Reflecting on my own experiences during ITT and post-qualification as a primary teacher, I felt relatively ill-equipped with strategies beyond reward and sanction to respond to behaviour that challenged me. During observations as a trainee teacher, and later by SLT following qualification, I was praised for using the behaviour system consistently. This causes me to feel very uncomfortable on reflection, knowing what I now understand about emotional and behavioural regulation. Receiving praise reinforced my perception that this was the 'right' response. However, alongside this approach, I also naturally drew on my personal attributes of empathy and a relational nature, which enabled me to sit alongside and engage with CYP, build connections, and get to know them all as individuals. I feel that this resulted in a significant decrease in behaviours that challenged, as knowing individual CYP and being attuned to their needs enabled me to have provision in place to meet their needs, intervene early, and co-regulate with them (without necessarily having a conscious awareness at the time that this was what I was doing). While relational approaches and co-regulation may come more naturally to some teachers, others may rely more heavily on behaviour systems, which, from my experience, seem to be reinforced as a systemic level within many educational settings.

Appendix 5.7. Reflexive Diary Entry.

Primary participants provided examples of how SEMH support was embedded within the school's daily routines and provision, such as emotional check-ins, the consistent use of psychoeducational approaches, the availability of regulation spaces, the monitoring of every CYP's SEMH, and access to targeted interventions for CYP. This appears to reflect a systemic prioritisation of supporting CYP's SEMH needs. In the context of the increasing curriculum demands described by secondary participants, it was suggested through primary participants' discourse that supporting SEMH was still prioritised, with an understanding shared that CYP need to be emotionally regulated to learn. This has caused me to reflect on the way in which I will work with secondary settings in the future, ensuring I am making explicit links around the possible interactions between SEMH needs and learning. I need to make further considerations around how I can contribute to shifting the discourse so that SEMH is understood as a necessary foundation for learning, as opposed to a competing priority or separate entity which is supported solely outside of the classroom.