

**TRAUMA-INFORMED TEACHING: COMPARING TEACHERS' PERSPECTIVES  
AND APPROACHES TO SUPPORTING BEHAVIOURAL DIFFERENCES IN  
MAINSTREAM AND SPECIAL SCHOOLS**

by

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## Table of Contents

Abstract.....	5
1. Introduction.....	6
2. Literature Review.....	7
3. Methods.....	14
3.1 Design.....	14
3.2 Participants.....	14
3.3 Measures.....	15
3.4 Procedure.....	16
3.5 Data Analysis.....	17
3.6 Ethics.....	18
4. Results.....	18
4.1 Qualitative Results.....	18
4.2 Quantitative Results.....	24
5. Discussion.....	28
References.....	34

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# **Trauma-Informed Practices: Comparing Teachers' Perspectives and Approaches to Supporting Behavioural Differences in Mainstream and Special Schools**

## **Abstract**

Recent findings highlighted a concerning trend of increasing teacher attrition, largely driven by burnout and lack of support. This study aimed to understand how trauma-informed training and support structures in differing educational settings can enhance teachers' well-being and their ability to support students' behavioural differences. A mixed methods design was used, incorporating qualitative semi-structured interviews with teachers from mainstream and special schools, and quantitative data from the Teachers' Self-efficacy Scale. Qualitative themes included pedagogical approaches and strategies adopted to support pupils' socioemotional needs, as well as teachers' challenges and coping mechanisms. Comparison between mainstream and special educational needs (SEN) teachers' accounts revealed similarities in the challenges they face when teaching trauma-affected pupils but differences in the support and training they received. Quantitative data further highlighted gaps in mainstream teachers' training to support students' behavioural differences. For SEN teachers, data showed how they benefited from ongoing training, which helped them manage students' behaviours more effectively and enhanced their self-efficacy. The findings underscored the need for systematic support structures, including trauma-informed training and reflective practices, to improve teacher well-being and student outcomes. Future research should examine the long-term impact of trauma-informed approaches on teaching and learning.

## 1. Introduction

A recent report by the Department for Education (2024) revealed that approximately 40,000 teachers left the profession in 2022-2023 for reasons other than retirement. This number, accounting for about 9% of teachers employed within UK state-funded schools, is one of the highest recorded since tracking began in 2010. A concerning trend is the increasing number of new teachers leaving the profession each year; last year, 31.30% left after only five years of service (Henshaw, 2023). A significant factor for the high rates of teacher attrition has been the lack of resources to support their well-being, along with burnout due to emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation and reduced sense of professional accomplishment (Kinman et al., 2011). Emotional exhaustion, the feeling of being emotionally drained from professional circumstances, was identified as a pivotal aspect of burnout in teachers (Kim et al., 2021).

Related to this, studies in the UK and other countries identified various common stressors for teachers (Kinman et al., 2011; Kim et al., 2021). These included job-specific challenges such as limited time for lesson preparation, large class sizes, low pupil motivation and disruptive behaviour. Furthermore, research has indicated that managing challenging behaviour significantly contributed to teacher stress, emotional exhaustion, and low job satisfaction compared to other factors like lesson planning and administrative responsibilities (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2011; Collie et al., 2012; Aldrup et al., 2018). It was also shown to negatively influence teachers' self-efficacy, or belief in their ability to successfully execute work-related tasks and achieve specific goals (Allies, 2021). There is evidence that chronic emotional exhaustion in teachers can threaten the quality of instruction and socioemotional support provided to pupils (Kim et al., 2021).

In a sample of 406 primary school teachers, Oberle and Schonert-Reichl (2016) found that higher cortisol levels in students, indicating physiological stress, were associated with

increased teachers' burnout levels. Trauma-affected pupils often experience increased stress levels which can lead to challenging behaviour in class (Kim et al., 2021). Managing the behaviour of trauma-affected students can enhance teachers' compassion fatigue, which is the emotional exhaustion resulting from repeated exposure to the trauma of those they care for and want to help (Cordova et al., 2023). This creates a cyclical problem within educational settings, where pupils' stress can lead to behavioural differences which can increase teachers' stress levels. This heightened stress among teachers can compromise the quality of teaching and the emotional support they provide, further exacerbating pupils' stress and disruptive behaviour. This cycle ultimately leads to even greater stress for teachers (Kim et al., 2021).

The current study aimed to understand how the quality of instruction and socioemotional support can be bolstered by nurturing teachers' well-being via trauma-informed practices and adequate support structures, improving the experiences of both teachers and pupils within educational settings.

## **2. Literature Review**

Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) refer to traumatic events or conditions occurring before the age of 18. ACE categories include child abuse, neglect, aspects of family dysfunction (Asmussen et al., 2020), intergenerational poverty, pandemics, systemic disadvantage and discrimination (Brummer & Thorsborne, 2024). Such experiences can negatively impact cognitive functioning and socioemotional well-being (Shonkoff et al., 2015). ACEs can affect brain function (Anda et al., 2006), such as lasting dysfunction in the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis, crucial for stress responses, and the hippocampus, essential for learning and memory (Gould et al., 1999). Toxic stress from ACEs can hinder

neuron development, impair brain plasticity and affect long-term learning and behaviour (Liu et al., 1997; Beers & DeBellis, 2002; Amemiya et al., 2019).

Madigan et al. (2023) reported that 60.20% of children globally have at least one ACE, with 16.10% having four or more ACEs. In the UK, at least 2.50% of children experience trauma at any given time, although this figure likely underestimates its true extent due to the high number of unreported cases (Asmussen et al., 2020). These statistics highlight the pervasive influence of trauma and underscore the urgency for interventions mitigating its influence on children's physiological and psychological health.

Several empirical studies have described how ACEs affect children's ability to form healthy attachments (Cronholm et al., 2015; Finkelhor et al., 2015; Vega-Arce & Núñez-Ulloa, 2018). Bowlby's (1969) attachment theory proposed that the bond between child and caregiver can provide a secure base essential for children's sense of safety and emotional development. Attachment styles include secure, insecure-ambivalent, insecure-avoidant, (Ainsworth et al., 1979), and insecure-disorganised (Main & Solomon, 1990). Secure attachments can foster positive involvement in learning (Colley & Cooper, 2017). Insecure attachments can manifest in children's behaviour in the form of fight (e.g. physical and verbal aggression), flight (e.g. avoidance, truanting, procrastination) and freeze (e.g. withdrawal, unresponsiveness) trauma responses (Brummer & Thorsborne, 2024).

Schools can mitigate stress effects by offering a protective environment for students with ACEs and promoting emotional security through appropriate trauma-informed pedagogical models (Monsen et al., 2021; Garay et al., 2022). Establishing a safe, emotionally containing environment for pupils with ACEs can present difficulties as they are more likely to exhibit challenging behaviours (Howard, 2019). This might be especially arduous for teachers who can absorb the pupils' trauma-emotions (Ludick & Figley, 2017). This process, known as

transference, has been described as a type of projection where relationship patterns and expectations from an earlier, typically parental, relationship are transferred into new significant relationships (Greenwood, 2020). Teachers often face high negative emotions themselves (Southall, 2019) but must show strong self-regulation to maintain secure student-teacher relationships. Without effective ways to process their emotions, teachers may mask their feelings (Chang, 2009; Chang, 2013), leading to emotional exhaustion and burnout (Keller et al., 2014).

Studies have found that educators can amend insecure attachment behaviours by acknowledging their role as secondary attachment figures and building positive relationships with trauma-affected pupils (Rose & Gilbert, 2017; Fancourt, 2019). This has been considered as a restorative opportunity that can enhance learning and resilience. By identifying individual attachment style, seeing behind the behaviour and establishing attuned relationships, pupils' innate need for belonging can be fulfilled (Garay et al., 2022). Hughes' (2017) PACE model offers a way to achieve this by incorporating four elements - Playfulness, Acceptance, Curiosity, and Empathy - into practice. These elements can help adults form secure relationships with trauma-affected pupils, helping them feel more connected and understood.

Nonetheless, teachers might not recognise the root-causes of disruptive behaviour without relevant training, resorting to control-focused disciplinary measures and potentially exacerbating students' chronic stress symptoms (Chafouleas et al., 2016). This can result in difficulties when de-escalating situations, which can reinforce student misbehaviour and increase teacher stress. One effective way to disrupt this stress cycle is by equipping teachers with skills to handle behavioural differences via trauma-informed and attachment-aware training (Kim et al., 2021).



Brunzell et al. (2016) studied trauma-informed educational models and identified two intervention domains (repairing dysregulated stress responses and disrupted attachment styles) for teachers to implement within mainstream and SEN classrooms to address trauma-affected students' complex needs. The authors highlighted that promoting self-regulation (modulating emotions and regulating impulses) was crucial for pupils' development. They concluded that teaching pupils' emotional literacy (the ability to identify, label, and understand emotions) and offering coregulatory experiences (responsive interactions with a trusted adult that can help soothe distressing emotions) (Brummer & Thorsborne, 2024) could improve classroom's behaviour management.

Brunzell et al. (2019) investigated how primary and secondary teachers adapted their teaching methods post trauma-informed training. The key strategies introduced to practitioners included fostering emotional literacy and self-regulation and enhancing students' engagement through empathy and adaptability. They illustrated how trauma-informed training boosted teachers' self-efficacy and improved how they dealt with emerging challenges within the classroom. Results showed that educators felt more confident meeting the needs of trauma-impacted pupils when offered space to reflect and co-construct their pedagogies within trauma-informed principles. This finding is consistent with Kim et al.'s (2021) study investigating changes in teachers' attitudes and burnout levels before and after undergoing trauma-informed training. They concluded that equipping teachers with essential tools to create trauma-informed classrooms encouraged them to adopt more empathetic attitudes, helped alleviate stress associated with supporting trauma-impacted children, and reduced burnout.

There is evidence that trauma-informed training can refine educators' inclusive practices and consequently, improve teacher well-being (Asmussen et al., 2020). Teacher well-being has

been defined as an overall satisfaction with living and professional circumstances, resulting in a sense of autonomy, competence and connectedness (Allies, 2021). Building on this, the self-determination theory (SDT) highlighted that meeting the three basic psychological needs of autonomy, competence and relatedness are crucial for individual motivation and well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Applying the SDT to educators' experiences, training on managing behaviour in a trauma-sensitive way could increase feelings of autonomy and competence, thereby enhancing their self-efficacy (Allies, 2021). Niemiec and Ryan (2009) noted that a major threat to educators' autonomy and competence were the external pressures imposed on them to comply with a 'one-size-fits-all' curriculum and meet rigid performance standards. These pressures can lead educators to employ controlling rather than supportive classroom strategies, undermining their sense of autonomy and competence.

Relatedness can play an essential role in teacher well-being. Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2011) explored the relationship between school context variables and teachers' sense of belonging, emotional exhaustion and job satisfaction. They found that supervisory support and positive relationships with colleagues were predictive of educators' sense of belonging, supporting the notion of relatedness. Relatedness can be achieved through close collaboration with other educators and multiagency professionals (Rose et al. 2019), as well as designated time for team reflection on the approaches adopted to support pupils' behavioural differences (Southall et al., 2023).

Rose et al. (2019) demonstrated that multiagency cooperation between therapists and school-based practitioners led to significant improvements in students' academic achievement and behaviour, and positively impacted staff well-being and resilience. They explained how attachment-aware trauma-informed schools operating on principles of joined-up thinking and interagency collaboration endorsed holistic support for students. Wright (2023) agreed that a

unified approach, enabling teachers and therapists to collaborate more closely, can promote greater integration for children and foster a sense of connectedness among professionals, making them feel more supported in their roles.

Southall et al. (2023) tested the efficiency of the Reflective Circle Educational Model (RCEM) which prompted educators to critically reflect on underlying attitudes that underpinned their practice. The study elucidated how the RCEM's recommendation of critical reflection and group supervision can improve the way teachers offload and process professional difficulties. Additionally, sharing goals and values during group reflection may increase teachers' sense of relatedness and make them feel part of a team. Contrarily, lack of reflection and offloading can result in increased compassion fatigue (Cordova et al., 2023), burnout and a reduced feeling of belonging (Skaalvik and Skaalvik, 2011).

Trauma-informed schools are crucial for developing staff attitudes which positively affect trauma-affected children. Child-centred attitudes, like empathy and adaptability, can reduce instances of heightened behavioural manifestations (Kim et al., 2021). Within UK mainstream schools, trauma-affected pupils' behavioural patterns often result in school exclusions, alienation from mainstream education and re-traumatisation (reliving stress reactions experienced from a traumatic event when faced with a new, similar incident) (Aspland et al., 2020; Bellamy et al., 2022). Social, Emotional and Mental Health (SEMH) schools aim to meet pupils' diverse needs, improve their well-being and reduce exclusions via trauma-informed practices (TIPs), smaller class sizes, and larger adult-to-pupil ratios (Rose et al., 2019). However, even within SEMH schools, exclusionary disciplinary practices continue to be used when addressing challenging behaviours. This can counteract TIPs by failing to recognise trauma's impact and provide safety and healing opportunities. Exclusions have also

been linked to higher rates of juvenile crime and are often referred to as the ‘school-to-prison pipelines’ (Bellamy et al., 2022).

TIPs have been shown to address the negative impacts of ACEs in schools (Brunzell et al., 2019) by deepening teachers’ knowledge of trauma’s influence on brain function and behaviour, thereby, refining how they respond to students’ needs (Kelly et al., 2023). Wright (2023) explained that TIPs can humanise the school environment, guiding teachers to understand children’s perspectives and co-construct their pedagogies so students feel seen and valued. To achieve this, TIPs can encompass self-regulation and emotional literacy interventions (Brunzell et al., 2016, 2019), trauma-aware training (Kim et al., 2021), supervisory support and reflective practices (Southall et al. 2023).

In this study, we aimed to uncover pedagogical challenges, as well as strategies and coping mechanisms that support teachers’ well-being. We compared behaviour management perspectives of Year 5, 6 and 7 teachers from mainstream and special schools in London. With this approach, we aimed to understand their experiences when supporting pupils’ behaviour based on differing school structure and training. Specifically, the paper explored how mainstream and SEN teachers felt when working with high behavioural needs, what approaches they regularly utilised to promote learning, and their self-efficacy levels when managing challenging behaviour. Finally, we investigated how TIPs can enhance teacher well-being and job satisfaction.

### **3. Methods**

#### **3.1 Design**

The current study used a mixed methods design, amalgamating qualitative and quantitative approaches to data collection (Robson & McCartan, 2016). This design was chosen to triangulate findings, as the corroboration between qualitative and quantitative data can enhance the investigation's validity. Combining research approaches was preferred over a purely qualitative design as it can provide a more comprehensive view of the phenomenon, leading to stronger inferences. Additionally, this design was favoured over experimental approaches, as we were not aiming to analyse correlations between variables and test hypotheses (Dancey and Reidy, 2017). Specifically, the project employed a sequential exploratory design with an initial phase of qualitative data collection and analysis, followed by a phase of quantitative data collection and analysis. The primary focus was the exploration and interpretation of a phenomenon with priority given to the study's qualitative aspects. Findings were integrated during the interpretation phase using both inductive and pragmatic approaches to thoroughly answer research questions (Robson & McCartan, 2016). Pragmatism prioritises the use of any method that can effectively address the research aims and rejects traditional dualisms in research, endorsing practical theory that informs practice.

#### **3.2 Participants**

Educators from mainstream and special schools in London were recruited for this study. The sampling was purposive, considering participants' occupation, year group taught and type of setting (i.e. mainstream or special school). The teachers taught either Year 5, 6 or 7 classes, working with children aged 9 to 12. This age group was chosen due to significant behavioural

changes during these years regarding hormonal changes and the transition to secondary school (e.g., Rae, 2014; Pellegrini et al., 2016; Ng-Knight et al., 2016; Cross et al., 2018).

For qualitative data collection, four primary school teachers were recruited: two from an SEMH school (both female with 19 and 17 years of experience) and two from a mainstream school (one male with seven years and one female with four years of experience).

For quantitative data collection, 40 Year 5 and 6 teachers completed a questionnaire (Female = 32, Male = 6, Prefer not to say = 2); 36 were from mainstream and four from special schools. Regarding years of experience, five had 1-3 years, nine had 3-6 years, and 26 had more than 6 years of experience.

### **3.3 Measures**

Semi-structured interviews were used for the qualitative data collection and analysed using a reflexive thematic analysis (TA) framework (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Semi-structured interviews consisted of a set of predefined open-ended questions with flexibility to explore topics in more depth as they arose during conversation. This highlighted the project's constructivist epistemological positioning, asserting that knowledge is constructed through social interactions and experiences (Camic, 2021).

TA allowed for identifying reoccurring themes related to teachers' experiences working with behavioural differences. It is a more flexible model without built-in theoretical and epistemological assumptions, making it easier to integrate with other methods, compared to approaches like grounded theory which often has specific theoretical and methodological orientations (Braun & Clarke, 2022). TA aligns with an interpretivist paradigm, focusing on understanding subjective experiences and meanings constructed by individuals (Robson &

McCartan, 2016), which is consistent with the study's focus of understanding teachers' perspectives when managing behavioural differences.

Quantitative data was collected using the Teachers' Self-efficacy Scale to assess teachers' beliefs about their ability to positively influence student learning and manage classroom challenges. The questionnaire was presented online using Qualtrics. Responses were scored on a 1 to 5 Likert scale where 1 indicated low self-efficacy and 5 indicated high self-efficacy.

### **3.4 Procedure**

Initially, feeler emails were sent to SEMH schools and non-religious, mixed mainstream primary schools in London. When recruited, informed consent was obtained from Headteachers and the four teacher-participants. Prior to the interviews, a pilot interview was conducted with a primary school teacher to test the questions, ensuring the clarity, relevance, and effectiveness (Breakwell et al., 2012) of the final interview schedule. Four 30-minute semi-structured interviews were conducted, one with each participant, via Zoom. At the beginning of each online interview, ethical considerations, right to withdraw and the study's aim were reiterated, and consent was reaffirmed. After the interviews, debrief forms were emailed to participants, followed by member check-ins after transcripts were completed to verify accuracy.

Post qualitative data collection, the questionnaire was disseminated to Year 5 and 6 teachers via Qualtrics and social platforms. The questionnaires were anonymous, asking only Year group and what type of setting participants worked in (i.e. mainstream or special school). Prior to completing the questionnaire, participants were provided with relevant information about the study and informed consent was obtained. The questionnaire remained open for three months, after which analysis commenced.

### **3.5 Data Analysis**

A reflexive journal was kept by the researcher throughout the analysis process which contained subsequent reflections, inquiries and meaning-making. The reflexive journal augmented the study's trustworthiness by providing a transparent record of the researcher's reflections and decision-making process, promoting self-awareness and facilitating critical engagement with the data (Braun & Clarke, 2022). The qualitative data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2022) six-phase model of reflexive TA, allowing for flexibility in understanding complex ideas deriving from teacher-participants' perspectives. The inductive process commenced with data familiarisation and initial reflections. After coding, colour-coded annotated transcripts were constructed including semantic and latent coding. Codes were then organised and clustered according to meaning and conceptual coherence. Considerable time was dedicated to examining and re-organising codes until a thematic map was created including initial themes. Redevelopment and refinement of those initial themes led to the construction of three final themes that reflected the coded data extracts and teacher-participants' accounts.

The quantitative data was analysed using frequencies to further present the comparison of teachers' approaches and self-efficacy levels when supporting behavioural differences. The 13 questions were grouped into three meaningful themes (classroom management and strategies, student motivation and socioemotional support, teacher support and training), interconnected with but distinct from qualitative themes.

### **3.6 Ethics**



Ethical approval was obtained from the Institute of Education. This project adhered to the British Psychological Society's (BPS) (2021) Code of Ethics and Conduct, following four core principles of respect, competence, responsibility and integrity. Data confidentiality and participant anonymity were ensured through secure storage and use of pseudonyms. Informed consent was obtained, and participants were reminded of their right to withdraw and skip questions. Competence was emphasised in the study's protocol.

## **4. Results**

### **4.1 Qualitative results**

The reflexive TA of the four semi-structured interviews led to the identification of three main themes and corresponding subthemes. The themes were: 1) Approaches and strategies when teaching pupils with SEMH needs; 2) Teacher challenges; 3) Teachers' coping mechanisms.

#### ***4.1.1 Theme 1: Approaches and Strategies When Teaching Pupils with SEMH Needs***

##### **Subtheme 1: Promoting Self-Regulation and Emotional Literacy.**

Teachers' responses suggested that self-regulation was integral to the SEMH school's curriculum. Teachers employed approaches such as occupational therapy toolboxes and self-science lessons, which taught pupils about brain functions, helping them understand their neurodiverse brains and use that awareness as a calming strategy. One teacher noted,

*“[...] the children need to understand the brain and how it works because they are neurodiverse, how their brain acts differently to other people's and the reasons why and how we can use strategies to help us calm down and deescalate situations.”*

Emotional literacy was a key focus for SEMH teachers as it helped students understand and articulate their feelings, promoting independence and self-regulation.

*“[...] it's really important to have lots of different words to explain your emotions. We'll teach them all that stuff quite overtly at the beginning of the year [...].”*

### **Subtheme 2: Building Trusting Relationships.**

Trusting relationships was an essential part of SEMH teacher-participants' pedagogy.

*“We do get students that don't want to do work, and it takes a long time to actually build up that trust to get them to do the work [...] So, it's building up the relationship with the students.”*

Here, the teacher explained how getting to know students and building trusting relationships served as a prerequisite to learning.

### **Subtheme 3: Teacher Regulation.**

SEMH teachers practiced self-regulation to manage their responses towards student behaviour, viewing behaviour as communication and remaining curious and objective about underlying causes.

*“All the behaviour that's happening is trying to communicate something and our job is to be curious.”*

Mainstream teacher-participants' regulation strategies came from personal relationships rather than school-provided support. One mainstream teacher explained,

*“Speaking to my partner, who's currently studying clinical psychology, has given me a little more insight and stopped me from thinking so subjectively and that it's quite a personal thing when it actually isn't. [...] My approach basically changed from being, ‘I need to nullify this behaviour’ to being ‘these kinds of behaviours can improve but will inevitably stick around of some sort’ [...]”*

#### **Subtheme 4: Training.**

Ongoing professional development was crucial for SEMH teachers, with various training programmes offered, including trauma-informed training (TouchBase).

*“We do ‘team teach’, these are de-escalation techniques [...] In our school we have ten in-service training days a year, not five. [...] The school looks at the whole school’s teacher training needs. We have occupational therapy training, we looked at sensory circuits and how that can support students.”*

Mainstream teachers reported minimal training.

### **4.1.2 Theme 2: Teacher Challenges**

#### **Subtheme 1: Supporting Pupils with SEMH Needs.**

SEMH teachers faced challenges in managing trauma-related behaviours.

*“[...] they might need to really try to control situations. They can be really hypervigilant. They can be very competitive. [...] Really difficult for them to manage change or a bump in the road. [...] low self-esteem, low resilience. They can be very, very challenging to teach.”*

Mainstream teacher-participants shared some of their responses when teaching a class with high behavioural needs and the impact on their well-being.

*“I’m a bit of a worrier. I used to bring it home with me, and it would have a knock-on effect on my well-being. I just couldn’t switch off. [...] I just couldn’t cope some days. I would nip at people. I often felt like I was helping a few children at once and then other children would be neglected. I felt really torn, like I wasn’t the best I could have been. So that then made me question myself as a teacher. I suppose it has an effect on my friendships and my personal relationships. [...] Because you are not fully there because you’re thinking about other things.”*

### **Subtheme 2: Lack of Training and Resources.**

A significant challenge was the lack of training and resources, mainly for mainstream teachers. A teacher noted,

*“At the beginning it would have been really helpful [training], I think, for my own sanity as well. It would have reassured me a little bit more in terms of, I’m not alone in feeling this way or having some things to put in place a bit earlier. When asking for support, it was very much like, ‘You can figure it out’, is basically what I got.”*

Here, the teacher indicated a lack of support from the school when requested.

### **Subtheme 3: Clash Between Classroom Needs and School Expectations.**

Teachers reported struggling with school behaviour management policies that didn't align with their classroom needs. Mainstream teachers felt pressure to achieve performance standards, especially prevalent during the end of primary school.

*“This particular child or group of children are now impacting all of the other children which in turn could affect Senior Leadership Team’s view of me in terms of results. We obviously look at the whole child, I'm fully aware of that, but you can't deny Year 6 is a key part of the Year group. [...]”*

An SEMH teacher-participant highlighted how their values on behaviour management clashed with the school's escalation policy.

*“[...] I think, naively, I thought when I came to the school, I would not be faced with cases of kids being excluded again [...] And it's something I am at odds with the school about.”*

### **4.1.3 Theme 3: Teachers' Coping Mechanisms**

#### **Subtheme 1: Building Resilience, Knowledge and Empathy.**

SEMH teacher-participants stated how training can augment knowledge and resilience.

*“I have had Mental Health First Aid training, which is important to be able to support both adults and students and myself.”*

Knowledge of trauma's impact on the brain helped SEMH teachers develop empathy and accept pupils' behavioural differences.

*“It is interesting to know that the reason that you're thinking or acting in a particular way, it is actually your brain and the different lobes which are helping you or making you act in a particular way.”*

Moreover, thinking objectively and understanding that pupils' behaviour was part of transference processes rather than personal attacks to teachers strengthened their empathy.

*“I think it's just being a bit more accepting that this is some of the behaviour that they will present and there's a reason for that. It's not a personal thing. It's a result of the child having early traumas.”*

### **Subtheme 2: Teamwork and Professional Collaboration.**

Teamwork and communication among colleagues were marked as effective ways to process and offload professional difficulties.

*“Just checking in with each other. Which is why it takes a team. Because, you know no one is a saint and people are human. They get tired. They kind of had their fill.”*

This showcased how group debriefs were characterised as a coping mechanism by an SEMH teacher-participant. Additionally, multiagency collaboration with therapists was described to support teachers' practice and well-being.

*“[...] a more formal debrief, headed up by our Head of Therapies, it starts next week. But I'm really welcoming of it because I think sometimes you do need somebody with that kind of outside perspective to help you break it down and think of new ways to support.”*

Even though the supervision headed by the school's lead therapist had not yet commenced, it was evident that the teacher valued supervision. The mainstream teacher participants

expressed that they had minimal multiagency collaboration, even though a play therapist worked with some pupils.

*“I was supposed to meet up with the play therapist in the last week of term. Then she had a meeting [...] still have not had a catch-up yet, to be honest.”*

## **4.2 Quantitative results**

The quantitative data collected from the Teachers’ Self-efficacy Scale was analysed and presented using pie charts to illustrate the responses’ distribution across three key themes: classroom management and strategies, student motivation and socioemotional support, and teacher support and training.

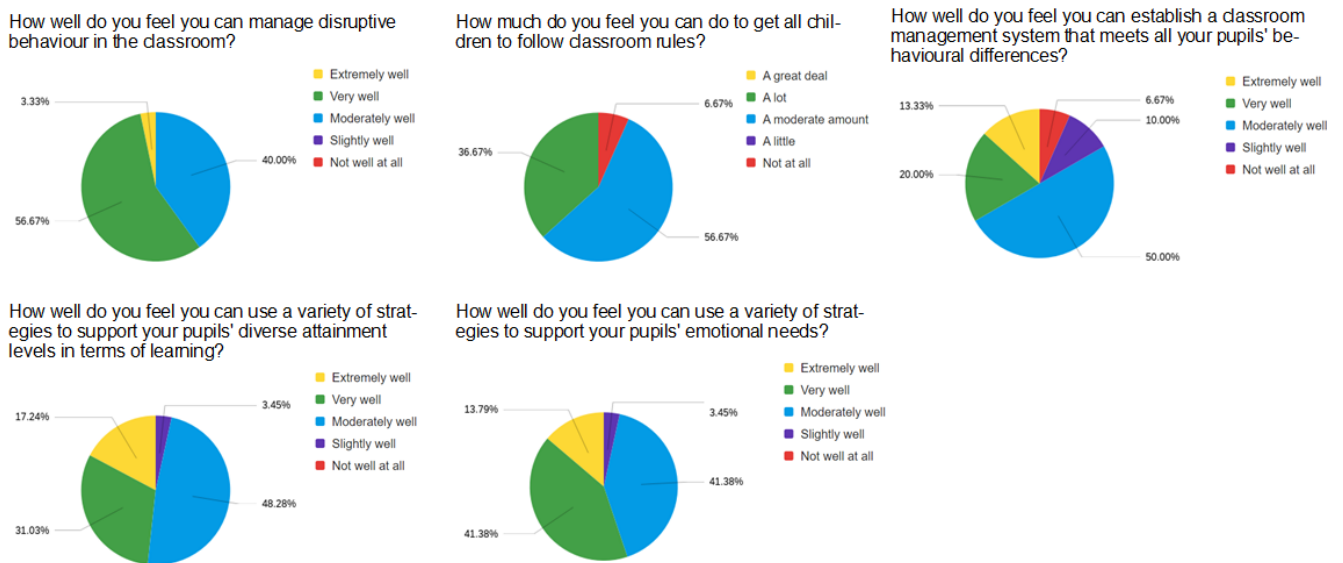
### ***4.2.1 Classroom Management and Strategies***

Figure 1 shows frequencies of responses for mainstream and SEN teachers' self-efficacy when managing behaviour and using strategies to meet pupils' behavioural needs. The majority of respondents felt moderately to very confident in their ability to manage disruptive behaviour and use varied strategies to support pupils' learning and emotional needs.

Specifically, 96.67% of teachers felt they could manage disruptive behaviour moderately to very well. Figure 2 shows how 18.52% of mainstream teachers felt they could not confidently establish a classroom management system that accommodates all behavioural differences, while 66.66% of SEN teachers believed they could do so very efficiently.

**Figure 1**

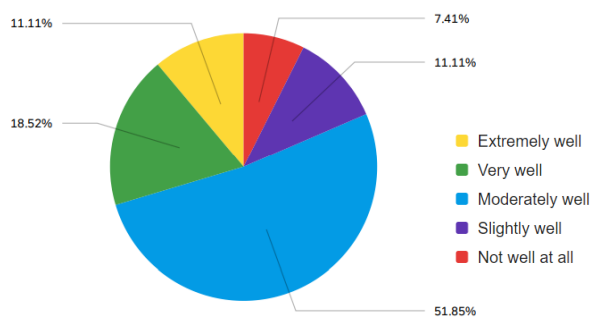
*Classroom management and strategies*



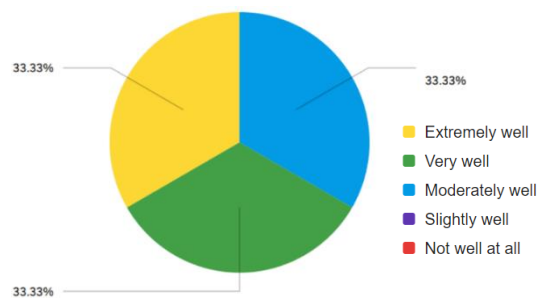
**Figure 2**

How well do you feel you can establish a classroom management system that meets all your pupils' behavioural differences?

**Mainstream teachers' responses**



**SEN teachers' responses**



**4.2.2 Student Motivation and Socioemotional Support**

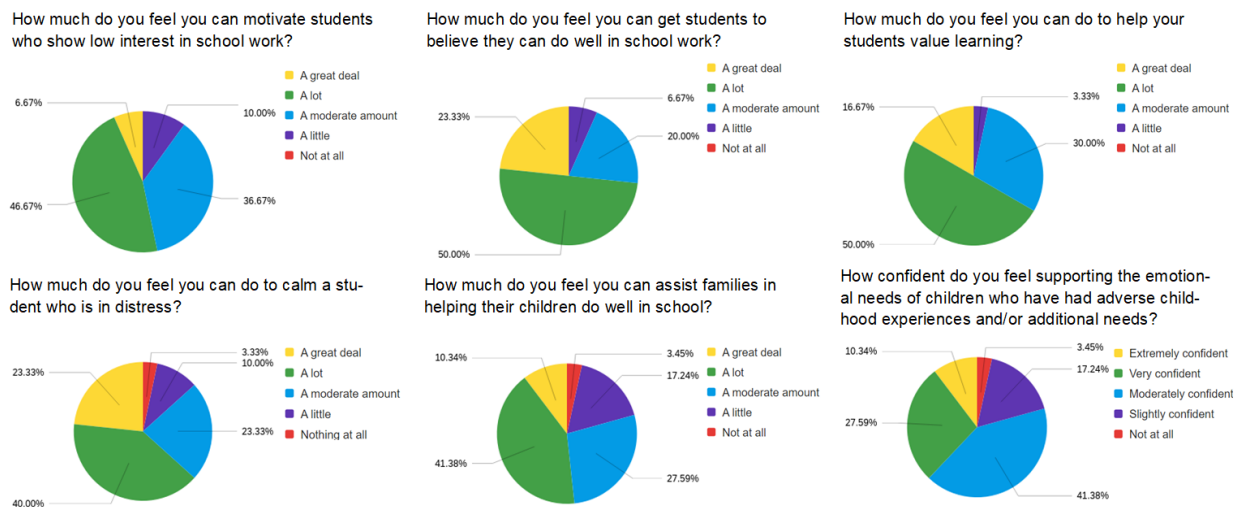
Figure 3 shows teachers' confidence levels when motivating students to learn and providing socioemotional support. A significant portion of teacher-participants (90%) felt they could



motivate students with low interest in schoolwork. Additionally, Figure 4 shows that 100% of SEN teachers felt very confident when supporting the emotional needs of children with ACEs, while 69.23% of mainstream teachers felt no to slight confidence.

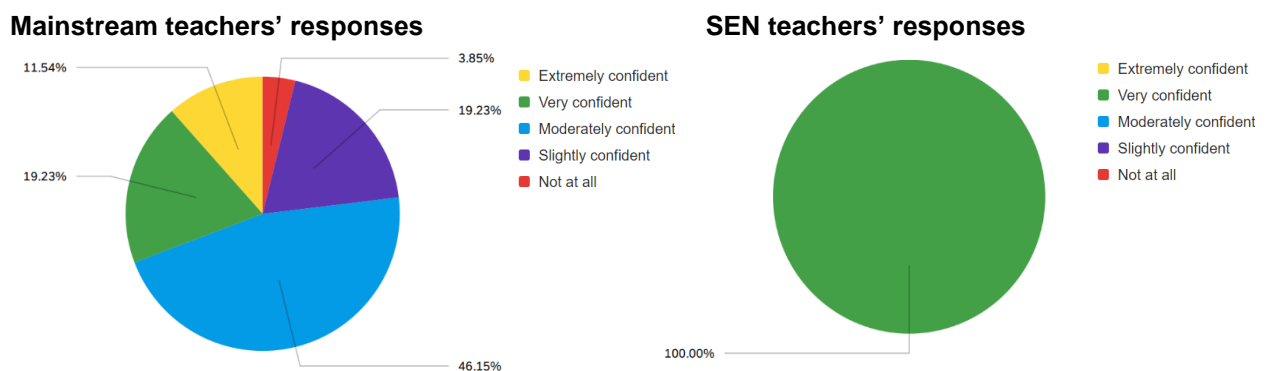
**Figure 3**

*Student motivation and SEMH support*



**Figure 4**

How confident do you feel supporting the emotional needs of children who have had ACEs and/or additional needs?



### 4.2.3 Teacher Support and Training

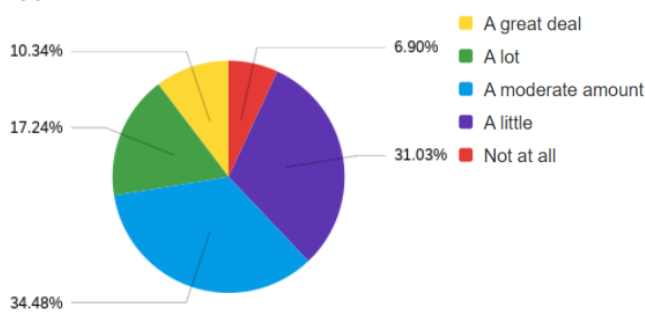
Figure 5 focuses on teachers' perceptions of the quality of support and training they received.

While 62.02% of respondents felt supported by their schools when teaching pupils with challenging behaviour, 37.93% expressed they did not feel adequately supported. Moreover, Figure 6 depicts how 56% of mainstream teachers expressed dissatisfaction with training they received to support pupils' behavioural differences, while SEN teachers expressed that they felt moderately to very satisfied with training. This indicated a need for enhanced training programmes for mainstream teachers to better equip them in managing diverse behaviours.

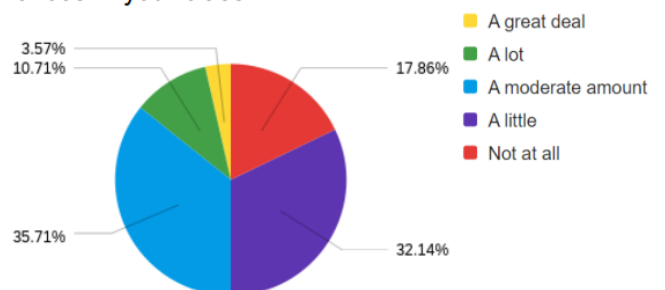
**Figure 5**

#### *Teacher support and training*

How supported do you feel by the school you work in when teaching pupils with challenging behaviour?

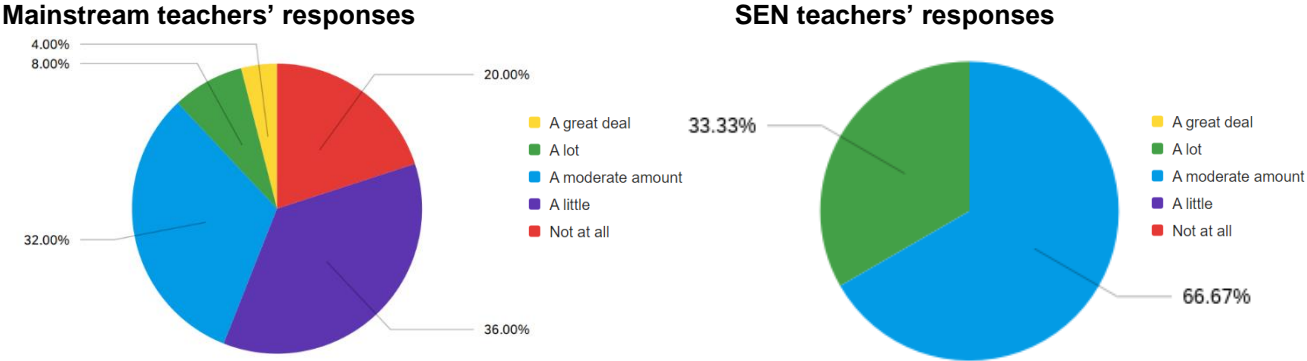


How satisfied do you feel with the training you have received to support pupils' behavioural differences in your class?



**Figure 6**

*How satisfied do you feel with the training you have received to support pupils' behavioural differences in your class?*



**5. Discussion**

The current study aimed to understand teachers' experiences when supporting behavioural differences, based on the differing training they received and varying pedagogical expectations deriving from their school's structure. By examining these two aspects, we gained awareness into how supported and confident teachers felt within various educational settings managing their students' behavioural differences. The emotional states and self-efficacy levels of SEMH and mainstream teachers were examined in relation to teaching classrooms with high behavioural-related needs. The mixed methods approach provided a comprehensive view of teachers' experiences, revealing significant insights into their pedagogical strategies, challenges, and coping mechanisms. TIPs were investigated regarding how they might enhance teacher well-being and job satisfaction.

The qualitative analysis showed that SEMH teachers used emotional literacy and self-regulation strategies to promote independence in how pupils managed their behaviour. These

strategies were found to be effective by the teacher-participants as pupils independently used tools, such as occupational therapy toolboxes, when needed. Self-science lessons focusing on brain functions provided a calming strategy for pupils who started understanding and accepting themselves and their neurodiversity. These approaches minimised instances where children became unregulated which was conducive to a calmer classroom environment. This illustrated how the explicit teaching of emotional literacy and self-regulation techniques can support teachers' management of emerging classroom challenges (Brunzell et al., 2016). This is in line with previous studies which have demonstrated how trauma-informed educational provision, including emotional literacy and self-regulation, can improve pupils' behaviour and in turn, support teachers' well-being (Brunzell et al., 2016; Brunzell et al., 2019).

Regarding the SDT, qualitative analysis suggested that teachers' competence can be augmented when pupils' positively respond to such practices, increasing their self-efficacy and improving their well-being (Niemic & Ryan, 2009). Within mainstream schools, emotional literacy and self-regulation strategies were not overtly taught to pupils and only utilised in times of need. The integration of these strategies to daily provision of mainstream schools can improve pupils' behaviour and alleviate teachers' stress (Kim et al., 2021).

Building trusting relationships was seen as prerequisite to teaching practices, as SEMH teachers explained that trust comes before learning. This aligned with the idea that trauma-affected children, who might have insecure attachment styles, can display challenging behaviour that includes fight-flight-freeze responses (Brummer & Thorsborne, 2024), as well as difficulty to trust others and build secure attachments (Cronholm et al., 2015). It was evident from both mainstream and SEMH teachers' accounts that teaching trauma-affected pupils presented difficulties and had a direct effect on their well-being and job satisfaction. SEMH teachers discussed feeling curious towards heightened behavioural patterns and viewing behaviour as a communication device. Hughes (2017) PACE model emphasised

acceptance, curiosity and empathy as a way to enable pupils to manage their emotions and teachers to deal with challenges more objectively. This can have a positive effect on teachers' self-efficacy and reduce compassion fatigue (Cordova et al., 2023) and burnout (Kinman et al., 2011).

Mainstream teachers deemed challenging behaviour as a reflection of their practice and worried about the impact behavioural differences could have on all pupils' performance results. This can undermine their sense of autonomy and competence and therefore, impact their job satisfaction and motivation (Niemic and Ryan, 2009). However, the mainstream teacher-participant's stance towards challenging behaviour changed when they received trauma-informed knowledge from an external professional. For the teacher, this ignited a more accepting and objective attitude and a better understanding of pupils' transference processes. This highlighted the importance of knowledge and training on attachment styles and trauma-informed principles so teachers can identify the root-cause of pupils' behaviour and support them more efficiently (Chafouleas et al., 2016).

Training has been found to increase teachers' empathy and decrease performance-related anxieties, thus reducing the cycle of stress experienced by teachers and students. Studies have indicated that educators felt more confident to meet pupils' needs when given the tools and knowledge to understand and support pupil behaviour (Brunzell et al., 2019; Kim et al., 2021). In this study, SEMH teacher-participants who received trauma-informed training showed a deeper understanding of trauma's impact on the brain and how trauma can manifest through actions (Garay et al., 2022). Training can enforce the alleviation of stress associated with supporting trauma-impacted children by increasing empathetic attitudes and reducing emotional exhaustion (Oberle & Schonert-Reichl, 2016).

Mainstream educators disclosed a lack of training in supporting trauma-affected students, highlighting a desire for further professional development. They emphasised that trauma-informed training would provide essential resources to rely upon during challenging situations. Quantitative data delineated that a significant portion of teachers, particularly in mainstream schools, felt dissatisfied with the training they received. Furthermore, while many felt capable of encouraging student engagement, a notable percentage felt only slightly confident in addressing the emotional needs of children with ACEs, underscoring the need for targeted training in this area.

Teaching can be an emotionally charged profession due to the global prevalence of ACEs and their impact on pupils' behaviour and learning (Garay et al., 2022). Teachers would benefit from space and time to reflect and offload. However, supervision and designated reflection time are not widely used within schools to support teachers' well-being (Allies, 2021). This study's qualitative data showed that the SEMH teacher-participant valued supervision and intimate group debriefs headed by a therapist. Nevertheless, these occurred organically through informal discussions rather than being formally implemented. A mainstream teacher expressed the lack of support when they requested it from the school.

Although trauma-related literature emphasises the importance of embedding systematic support structures for educators' personal and professional well-being, it has been noted that teachers seldom receive the necessary support as these systems are often neglected (Southall et al., 2023). This was evident within this study's data. Quantitative data illustrated how a significant portion of teachers felt inadequately supported by their schools. Southall et al.'s (2023) RCEM can provide this support structure for teachers while promoting positive change in their sense of competence and their connection to colleagues. Guided reflection has been found to empower teachers to make more conscious decisions, informed by the group

and rooted in a deeper understanding of their students. These findings interrelate with the SDT's fundamental needs of competence and relatedness which can aid resilience and well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2017).

Approaches such as the RCEM have aimed to replace reactive responses with trauma-informed ones, leading to increased feelings of self-efficacy in teachers (Southall et al., 2023). In this investigation, reactive responses to behaviour were prevalent in both mainstream and SEMH schools. Qualitative data pointed out a misalignment between classroom needs, teacher beliefs and school behaviour management policies. Performance pressures, especially in critical academic years such as Year 5, 6 and 7, often clashed with the need to address individual students' behavioural and emotional needs.

Exclusionary practices were found to conflict with TIPs and teachers' perspectives on behavioural policies. Exclusions can impact educators' job satisfaction and retraumatise pupils, leading to negative attitudes towards school and more intensified behavioural differences (Bellamy et al., 2022). Quantitative results showed that a significant portion of teachers believed they could not establish a classroom management system accommodating all pupils' behavioural differences. This further exemplified the presence of inflexible behavioural expectations that lacked holistic inclusivity, potentially hindering students' integration into institutionalised education (Aspland et al., 2020) and, consequently, creating more challenges for teachers. However, more research is needed on the impact of exclusion on pupils' and teachers' well-being.

This study's findings have several practical implications for educational institutions, including the need for enhanced training programmes that equip all teachers, particularly in mainstream schools, with trauma-informed behaviour management skills. Training should include components of emotional literacy, self-regulation, and understanding the impact of

trauma on brain development, as highlighted by Brunzell et al. (2016, 2019). Another implication is the need of supervision and intimate group debriefs headed by therapists that can help teachers process professional challenges and refine their practice (Southall et al., 2023). This approach is supported by Rose et al. (2019) who found that multiagency cooperation led to significant improvements in pupils' academic achievement and behaviour, as well as staff well-being and resilience.

This study's limitations include the small sample size and the focus on teachers from a specific geographical area, which may limit the findings' generalisability. Future research could explore these themes with a larger, more diverse sample and examine the long-term impact of trauma-informed training on teacher well-being and student outcomes. Another limitation was the absence of inter-rater reliability. Having more than one coder interpreting the findings could have enhanced confidence in the findings' credibility (Camic, 2021).

To conclude, this study underscored the importance of trauma-informed training and support structures, such as designated reflection time, for enhancing teachers' well-being and their ability to support students with SEMH needs. Educational institutions can create a more effective learning environment for both teachers and students by addressing teachers' challenges, such as supporting behavioural differences, through the implementation of supportive strategies such as trauma-informed principles. The findings contributed to the growing body of literature advocating for TIPs in education, highlighting their potential to improve teacher well-being, student behaviour, and the overall school climate.



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