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Exploring teachers' experiences of working with students presenting with conduct

problems and Callous-Unemotional traits: A qualitative interview study-in-progress

Laura Oxley

Abstract

Systems of rewards and punishments are common classroom management strategies used in schools in England. For some students, teachers need to adopt alternative strategies. These often place an emphasis on relationship building, creating an additional burden of emotional labour for the teacher. However, students who present with conduct problems and Callous-Unemotional (CU) traits, including low empathy, interpersonal callousness, and restricted affect, are typically resistant to discipline strategies and less responsive to relationship building. There is little research into the potential cost to teacher wellbeing of the additional emotional labour created when working with these students, especially when the likelihood of positive change is low. This work-in-progress study explores how teachers may experience working with students with CU traits, and what strategies they use, both to manage student behaviour and to support their own well-being. Qualitative interviews will be conducted with between 15 to 20 teachers working in schools in England. Participants, who report teaching a student with conduct problems, will complete a screening tool to identify whether the student presents with high or low CU traits. The interviews will focus on participant wellbeing and their experiences managing student behaviour. Thematic analysis will be conducted with the interview data.

Keywords: *teachers; wellbeing; conduct problems; CU traits; qualitative*

Introduction

The teaching profession in England is experiencing a recruitment and retention crisis, with 43,522 teachers leaving the profession in 2023 and teaching vacancies increasing by 20% on the previous year (Department for Education, 2024a). Student misbehaviour and disciplinary problems have been identified as a key factor in teacher burnout and attrition (McCormick & Barnett, 2011; Ingersoll, 2003). In 2023/24, £13.6 million was spent on behaviour support services in schools (Department for Education, 2024b). The current crisis in teacher recruitment and retention highlights this as a key area within the field of educational psychology, with student misbehaviour identified as one of the main drivers behind teachers leaving the profession. Improving our understanding of teachers' experiences, and how student misbehaviour can impact their wellbeing, could contribute to addressing this crisis. It is important to develop our understanding of the different approaches that schools take towards classroom management, as well as the current interventions that aim to improve teacher wellbeing.

Teaching implicitly involves emotional labour, as there is a need for teachers to invest themselves in their work (Johnson et al., 2005). When this work elicits unpleasant emotions, this can lead to difficulties in forming and maintaining student-teacher relationships (Split et al, 2011). It is important that teachers are supported to maintain these relationships as this aspect has been identified as a core reason for teachers remaining in the profession (Split et al., 2011). Whilst common classroom management strategies in schools tend to rely on systems of rewards and punishments, there is a minority of students for whom teachers need to adopt alternative strategies. These approaches often place an emphasis on relationship building (Greene, 2016; Thorsborne & Blood, 2013), creating an additional burden of emotional labour for the teacher. This can have an impact on the teacher's wellbeing (Split et al., 2011), particularly when the relationship building is unsuccessful.

Student-teacher relationship building can be difficult with students presenting with significant conduct problems. This may be especially the case when the students also present with Callous-Unemotional (CU) traits, including low empathy, interpersonal callousness, restricted affect, and a lack of concern for performance. Willoughby et al. (2022) suggest that teachers can distinguish CU behaviours from traditional disruptive behaviour. Students with conduct problems and CU traits typically have poorer quality student-teacher relationships (Horan et al., 2016). Although a small number of students, the impact of their behaviour can create a disproportionate cost to the school community. These students are resistant to discipline strategies and less responsive to social rewards such as praise, demonstrating a poor ability to learn from reinforcement information (Allen et al., 2018; Viding & McCrory, 2018). School-based interventions to improve the quality of student-teacher relationships are encouraged to support these students (Horan et al, 2016). It is recognised within the current study that a trauma-informed approach is often the most appropriate practice when working with students who present with conduct problems in school (Watson & Astor, 2025). The author's previous work explores the potential for compassionate and collaborative approaches to responding to student behaviour in schools (Oxley, 2023). However, there is at present little research into the potential cost to teacher wellbeing of the additional emotional labour required to implement these practices. Understanding the emotional cost to teachers of implementing relationship-based and trauma-informed school interventions, especially those which may go unrewarded if the intervention is unsuccessful, is important in supporting teacher wellbeing and reducing attrition within the teaching profession.

It can also be argued that systemic change is needed in order to support both the students presenting more effectively with conduct problems, as well as their teachers. The current educational system in England is not designed or resourced to be able to sufficiently meet the needs of all students (Mansell, 2023). Teachers are put in a position where they have

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no choice but to bear the emotional labour cost of supporting students with conduct problems, which could potentially be mitigated by systemic changes to make the educational environment more accessible for all.

Study Aims

The current study aims to understand how teachers in England experience working with students with conduct problems, in particular those who also exhibit CU traits; to what extent this experience may impact teachers' wellbeing and their perceptions of these students; and what strategies teachers report using when working with students with CU traits and conduct problems, both to manage the student's behaviour, and to support their own wellbeing. This will identify whether teachers may need additional support when working with students with these characteristics, and what strategies are already working well for teachers in this situation. The study will consist of reflective cross-sectional qualitative interviews with teachers, aiming to contribute to answering the following research questions:

RQ1: In what ways does working with students with Callous-Unemotional (CU) traits and conduct problems (CPs) impact on the wellbeing of teachers, if at all?

RQ2: What strategies do teachers report using when working with students with CU traits and CP, both to manage the student's behaviour, and to support their own wellbeing?

Methods

Participants

The study aims to recruit around 15 to 20 participants. Braun and Clarke (2013) suggest that a sample size of between 15 to 30 is common in qualitative research aiming to identify patterns across data. Vasileiou et al. (2018) suggest that saturation, the point at which new information is no longer being generated by adding further data, has emerged as the 'gold standard' of determining sample size in qualitative research. They suggest one way to reach this to specify an initial analysis sample (e.g., 15 interviews) and a stopping criterion,

which is the number of interviews (e.g., 5) that need to be further conducted, with the analysis of these not yielding any new themes. Taking this as a guide, the study will aim to recruit 15 participants for the initial sample and potentially recruit at least a further 3 to 5 participants to test this principle of saturation, giving a total of between 15 to 20 participants overall.

Recruitment to the study is open to teachers in mainstream schools in England, both qualified and pre-service. By including pre-service teachers in the study, it is hoped that this will help to address the recruitment element of the teaching recruitment and retention crisis.

Participants will need to meet the following eligibility criteria:

Inclusion Criteria

1. Be currently working as a class teacher or pre-service teacher in a school in England.
2. Be able to think of one student they currently teach who the teacher identifies as presenting with conduct problems.

Exclusion Criterion

1. The student, who the teacher identifies as presenting with conduct problems, cannot have a diagnosis of Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD)

This exclusion criterion is included because students with ASD and students with CU traits may present with similar behaviours, for example, showing reduced empathy, increased aggression, and anti-social behaviour. However, these are distinct conditions. Children with ASD have a normal ability to respond affectively to others' emotions, whereas children with CU traits do not (Allen & Jones, 2018). Whilst CU traits and ASD can co-occur, this is not common, and the resemblance of behaviours between children with the two conditions typically tends to be superficial (Allen & Jones, 2018). This study specifically wants to explore the experiences of teachers working with students with CU traits, thus students with a diagnosis of ASD cannot be selected for the study. Whilst acknowledging that there are

students who have autistic traits, may self-identify as having ASD, or are currently being assessed for ASD, the exclusion criterion specifies a diagnosis of ASD to ensure that this is a clear criterion easily understood by all.

Data Collection

Participants will be asked to complete a screening tool; the Inventory of Callous-Unemotional Traits (ICU) (Frick, 2004). The ICU assesses CU traits using 24 statements, with each item scored on a 4-point Likert scale. The teacher will be asked to complete the ICU with the student they have identified in mind. The screening questionnaire will also gather demographic data (e.g. gender, age range, number of years as a teacher).

This initial questionnaire will give an indication as to whether the teacher is working with a student with high or low CU traits. Kemp et al (2021) considered suitable cut-off scores for the ICU when used with different populations. Within a school-based sample with teacher reported scores on the ICU, the study suggests a cut off score of 35. Based on this, the current study will use the same cut-off point. If participants score 35 or above when completing the ICU with their student in mind, they will be categorised as teaching a student with high CU traits. If they score below 35, they will be categorised as teaching a student with low CU traits. When analysing the interview data, the range of CU scores across the sample will be considered, to explore any commonalities and differences across this continuum.

Participants will be invited to take part in one semi-structured interview between January to July 2025. Each interview will take around 30 minutes and will take place online. This will save time, money, and environmental costs by reducing travelling. It will also mean that geographical location will not present a potential barrier to teachers taking part in the study. Participants will be offered a £10 Amazon voucher as a thank you for taking part in the interview.

In order to safeguard against the study being completed by bots or fake participants, there are some provisions in place. Firstly, there are three verification questions included in the screening survey which a bot is likely to answer incorrectly. Secondly, during the interview itself, I will ask the participant to switch their camera on if possible.

The interview will focus on the participant's experience of teaching the class including the student they have thought of. No identifying data will be gathered about the student in question. During the interviews, the teachers will be asked about examples of situations where they have dealt with student misbehaviour, and to reflect on how they handled the situation, whether they feel there has been any impact on their wellbeing and if so, in what way. They will also be asked about what teacher wellbeing means to them, and what strategies they use to support their own wellbeing. Pre-service teacher participants will be asked whether student misbehaviour has had any impact on their motivation to enter and remain in the teaching profession. See Appendix A for the interview questions, which are shared with participants via email before the interview.

The interviews will be analysed after each is conducted. This will enable the researcher to monitor the saturation principle and whether the sample size will be enough to reach this, thus indicating when recruitment can cease. This study will enable an in-depth examination, using inductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2013), of how the experience of working with a student with CU traits and conduct problems may impact teacher wellbeing and what strategies they report using to manage this.

Work-in-Progress

A co-production group has been established, consisting of teacher practitioners and education professionals. This group has been involved in the development of the initial survey and interview questions for the study, offering feedback and suggestions to the researcher.

The study is currently recruiting teachers to participate in the interviews. Data collection will continue until around July 2025, although it may be completed sooner. Analysis is planned to take place from July to October 2025, with the intention that the findings from the study will be ready to submit for publication at the beginning of 2026.

Intended Study Impact

The findings of the study will add to the understanding of teachers' experiences and perceptions of students with conduct problems, particularly those with CU traits, as well as the impact this may have on teacher wellbeing. As there is currently little research on teacher wellbeing in relation to working with students with CU traits, a greater understanding could identify successful strategies for working with students with these characteristics and ways in which teachers could be better supported.

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Appendix A: Interview Questions

1. Can you tell me what teacher wellbeing means to you? How would you define this?
2. What strategies do you use to support your own wellbeing? Do you receive any support, for example, from colleagues, friends, or family? Is there any additional support that you would like to receive?
3. Keeping in mind the student you thought of when answering the pre-interview questionnaire, could you talk me through your reasoning process for choosing this particular student?
4. Please can you give me an example of a situation where you have dealt with an instance of this student misbehaving? Please tell me what happened, with a focus on how you handled the situation and whether you thought this was effective or not.
5. What strategies do you feel work well to manage this student's behaviour? What strategies do you feel do not work well?
6. Do you feel there has been any impact on your wellbeing as a result of this student's behaviour? If so, in what ways?
7. Pre-service teachers only: Do you feel that there has been any impact on your motivation to enter and remain in the teaching profession, as a result of this incident?
8. Do you have any examples of student behaviour having a positive impact on your wellbeing?
9. Is there anything else you would like to share about your experience of student behaviour or about teacher wellbeing in general?