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“They almost seem to revel in their behaviour”: an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of the experience of Alternative Provision teachers when teaching students with conduct problems and Callous-Unemotional traits

Laura Oxley, Department of Education, University of York, UK.

laura.oxley@york.ac.uk

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Abstract

Teachers working in Alternative Provision (AP) settings, for students with additional behaviour needs, are likely to experience working with students with conduct problems. Some students with conduct problems may also present with Callous-Unemotional (CU) traits, such as low empathy and interpersonal callousness. This study explores AP teachers' experiences of teaching students with these characteristics, as well as aiming to identify the strategies that teachers use to manage student behaviour in these circumstances. Using an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) framework, in-depth interviews have been conducted with two teachers working at AP schools in England. Key themes identified within the data suggest that AP teachers may use strategies such as playful learning, reflective avoidance, and colleague relationships, to support their well-being and manage student behaviour. There needs to be recognition of the types and levels of support that AP teachers may require to ensure that remaining in the teaching profession is sustainable.

Keywords: Conduct problems; Alternative Provision; Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis; well-being; behaviour management

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Introduction

Student conduct problems in school have been identified as one of the key drivers for teachers choosing to leave the teaching profession (McCormick & Barnett, 2011; Ingersoll, 2003). When students present with conduct problems and Callous-Unemotional (CU) traits, including low empathy, interpersonal callousness, and disregard for academic performance (Willoughby et al., 2022), this can create additional difficulties in the classroom. These students are typically resistant to the usual discipline and reward systems employed by teachers (Allen et al., 2018; Viding & McCrory, 2018). They also tend to be less responsive to strategies based on relationship building (Horan et al., 2016). Little research has been conducted into how the experience of teaching students with these characteristics impacts the teachers’ experience in their role.

Student-teacher relationships (STRs) are known to be a protective factor for teachers choosing to remain in the profession (Split et al., 2011). STRs may be especially important for teachers working with students with conduct problems. Tavlin et al. (2025) examined teachers’ perspectives on working with students with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) symptomology. ADHD has been found to often co-occur with conduct problems and CU traits (Haas & Waschbusch, 2012). Tavlin et al. (2025) found that teachers perceived strong STRs to help them better meet their students’ needs, to contribute to improved student behaviour, and to make their teaching job more enjoyable. With students who present with CU traits, as well as conduct problems, these benefits may be more difficult to attain as teachers may struggle to build meaningful and positive STRs. As a result, teachers may find that their enjoyment of their own role decreases, and in turn, they may experience an impact on their well-being.

This issue is particularly pertinent for teachers working in Alternative Provision (AP) settings for students with additional behaviour needs. Generally, students are referred to AP settings when they have been, or are at risk of being, permanently excluded from their mainstream school. AP students often present with externalizing conduct problems and disengagement from education (Mullen, 2022). AP settings are able to provide a more tailored approach than mainstream schools. This enables them to cater to students who typically have higher needs that cannot be met in mainstream settings, but who do not necessarily have a diagnosis (such as ADHD) or an Education Health and Care Plan (EHCP) in place. AP schools may be able to offer smaller class sizes, a higher teacher-to-student ratio, and a more bespoke curriculum built around the students' interests and abilities. Due to these differences, STRs are arguably of higher importance in an AP setting than in a mainstream school, with the school community being smaller overall and the students themselves having higher needs. Fitzsimmons et al. (2021) suggest that teachers in a mainstream secondary school may only have the opportunity to become ad hoc attachment figures, whereas AP teachers have the time to build a stronger attachment within the STR. However, because of the nature of AP schools specifically for students with additional behaviour needs, teachers in AP settings are more likely, than mainstream teachers, to experience working with students with both conduct problems and CU traits. This may make building STRs more difficult.

This study takes a qualitative approach to exploring AP teachers' experiences teaching students with conduct problems and CU traits, examining whether there is any impact on teachers' well-being, as well as aiming to identify the strategies that teachers use to manage student behaviour in this situation. The research question that this qualitative case study will aim to answer is: how do teachers in AP settings in England experience teaching students with conduct problems and CU traits? By expanding our understanding of AP teachers' experiences, more effective support can be provided, therefore leading to improved well-being and increased retention of teachers in the AP sector.

Method

Using an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) framework (Smith et al., 2021), in-depth interviews were conducted with two teachers working at Alternative Provision (AP) schools, for students with additional behaviour needs, in England.

Research design

The study used an IPA framework. This approach was chosen as the study aimed to illuminate the experiences of teachers when working with students with the particular characteristics of conduct problems and CU traits. The idiographic emphasis, suitable for working with small sample sizes, meant that IPA was well suited to exploring the subjective lived experience of the two case study teachers included in this paper (Smith et al., 2021). The participants were both working at AP schools and had identified a student who presented with significant conduct problems in their classes. These criteria provide the commonalities to create an expert group within the IPA framework (Smith et al., 2021). As the participants had differing levels of experience working in AP schools, this may have impacted on the homogeneity of the sample. However, it was felt that the commonalities of working in AP at the time of the study, regardless of the length of previous experience in the sector, were sufficient to create the expert group for this analysis.

Participants and recruitment

The participants focussed on in this paper were recruited as part of a larger study. The overall study involved interviews with 22 teachers in England, exploring teacher well-being in relation to student conduct problems and Callous-Unemotional traits. The two participants included in this paper were selected to focus on as a case study because they were the only teachers within the larger sample who worked in AP schools.

The researchers sent emails to schools to invite teachers to participate in the study. When teachers got in contact to express interest, they were sent study information sheets and a link to the online consent form, administered via Qualtrics. After participants read the information sheet and completed the consent form, the researchers contacted the teachers by email to arrange a convenient time to conduct the interview. The interviews were conducted online via Zoom video conferencing.

At the time of the interviews, Participant 1 was 25 years old, female, and taught English to 11–16-year-old students; Participant 2 was 45 years old, male, and taught Science to 14-16-year-old students. Participant 1 had been working as an AP teacher for 2 years 7 months and had previously worked in two mainstream schools. Participant 2 had been working as an AP teacher for 14 years and had not worked as a qualified teacher in a mainstream school, although he had worked in a mainstream school on a placement as a pre-service teacher.

Data collection and interviews

The participants in these two case studies identified that there was at least one student in their class who presented with significant conduct problems. Prior to the interview, participants were invited to complete the Inventory for Callous-Unemotional Traits (ICU; Frick, 2004), to investigate the extent to which their selected students presented with CU traits. The interviews then gathered in-depth qualitative data about the participants' experiences managing behaviour with the class, including their selected students, and also focused on any impact on their own well-being. The interviews lasted between 30 to 45 minutes each. An interview guide was used to provide prompts and suggested questions, but these prompts were kept broad to allow the interviewer to follow the teachers' direction of thoughts.

Interviewers had the freedom to ask follow-up questions, depending on the teachers' answers. This openness enabled the interview to flow and offered space for the teachers to reflect on their experiences during the discussion. Interviews were recorded with the consent of the participants and were stored securely.

Ethical considerations

The study has been approved by the Education Ethics Committee at the University of York. Participants were provided with study information sheets and were asked to read and sign consent forms before taking part in the study. Participants had the opportunity to ask questions before giving consent, as well as being invited to ask questions during and after their participation in the interview. All data has been anonymised. As the interview topic was potentially emotive, covering aspects of personal well-being and professional efficacy, the questions were worded sensitively, and participants were reminded that they could pause or stop the interview at any time without needing to give a reason. They were also reminded that if they would prefer not to answer a particular question but would like to continue with the interview as a whole, they could simply ask the interviewer to move on to the next question. The final question of the interviews was on a positive topic, asking about examples of student behaviour positively impacting the teacher's well-being, and debriefing was conducted after the interview to ensure that participants felt comfortable about the interview process.

Analysis

The interviews were transcribed by the Zoom software in real time. These transcriptions were then manually checked by the researchers after the interviews. The transcripts were quality assured by listening to the audio recording, to ensure that the transcription was accurate. As the IPA framework emphasises immersion in the data, the recordings were listened to multiple times and the transcripts read and re-read. The author initially coded the interview data by hand on paper. Personal Experiential Themes (PETs) were identified by the author in each interview through exploratory comments. The two interviews were then considered together, and Group Experiential Themes (GETs) were identified by grouping common PETs and pattern recognition (Smith et al., 2021). These GETs were recorded, with illustrative quotes, in a codebook on an Excel spreadsheet.

The results of the interview analysis were organised into key themes. These GETs were developed from the commonalities between the PETs identified in each individual interview. For example, the key PETs identified for Participant 1 included: *Active management of relationships with colleagues; Compartmentalisation as a protective strategy; Formal well-being support is not helpful; Sense of a lack of understanding by those outside of AP;* and *Playful learning as a strategy for engagement.* The PETs identified for Participant 2 included: *Colleague support; Avoidance as a protective strategy; Formal well-being support is not helpful; Unique shared experiences within AP;* and *Playful learning as a strategy for engagement.*

There were clear commonalties between the PETs in each interview, with some themes being the same across each, for example, *Playful learning as a strategy for engagement.* Other PETs covered similar topics to each other and could be grouped together. For example, the PETs titled *Sense of a lack of understanding by those outside of AP* (Participant 1) and *Unique shared experiences within AP* (Participant 2) were grouped together as a GET titled *Professional loneliness and shared experiences as an AP teacher.*

Reflexivity

Positionality and reflexivity are important considerations in an IPA study. It is acknowledged that the researcher will bring their own interpretation of the data to produce a coherent narrative within the wider context (Embeita, 2019). Acknowledging and bracketing my own preconceptions was a necessary part of the analysis process (Smith et al., 2021). Prior to working as a researcher, I taught in AP settings myself and have several years of experience working with children with conduct problems, and their families, in relation to their educational provision. I was aware that my own previous experience may cause me to hold preconceptions about how AP teachers experience working with students with conduct problems and CU traits. For example, if I had found a certain strategy to be helpful in supporting my well-being as an AP educator, I may make the implicit assumption that all AP educators would find this helpful. I ensured that I considered and acknowledged potentials for bias such as these, thus minimising any impact on the analysis. Making these potentials for bias explicit and holding them in mind during the analysis process allows for more effective mitigation against them. Smith et el. (2021) refer to the hermeneutic circle. This describes how the researcher engages in a cyclical hermeneutic process, uncovering and acknowledging their preconceptions, whilst gaining a deeper understanding of the phenomena being studied. This cyclical relationship enables the researcher to engage with challenges to their preconceptions as they analyse the data.

Results and interpretation

The participants each completed the ICU (Frick, 2004) prior to their interview, to investigate the extent to which their selected student presented with CU traits. The maximum ICU score is 72, and a score of 35 or higher indicates high CU traits (Kemp et al, 2021). Both participants indicated that they perceived their students to score highly on the ICU, with Participant 1 indicating a score of 53 and Participant 2 indicating a score of 60.

The high ICU scores were supported by the qualitative interview data. The participants described student behaviour characteristics consistent with CU traits, such as difficulty building relationships, low concern for academic work, and lack of impact from rewards and sanctions. One participant stated: “It was really disheartening because you were trying everything with this particular pupil, and there was just nothing. Every interaction would be negative” (Participant 2). Participants also reported bullying behaviour, such as “… making really inappropriate comments towards another student, a female student, of like quite a sexual nature” (Participant 1), as well as aggressive and threatening behaviour towards both students and staff. This impacted participant well-being, with one participant saying “that [threat’s] probably the biggest thing that stuck in my head, just in a conversation, and he laughed, he got everybody else to laugh” (Participant 2), and the other participant stating “I know the student has the potential to be aggressive and I don’t know if [they] would think twice about hurting a member of staff” (Participant 1). Participants also reported theft and damage to property, for example “he stole his mum’s phone” (Participant 1), and substance abuse with the student “probably more often than not, com[ing] in under the influence of cannabis” (Participant 1). One participant highlighted that for their selected student it appeared that “they almost seem to revel in their behaviour, outright bullying, rudeness, just an awful behaviour of someone who has no respect for anybody” (Participant 2).

Experiential themes

The key GETs in the interviews were identified as the following: *Avoidance as a protective strategy for well-being; Colleague relationships as both a resource and a demand; Playful learning as a strategy for engagement; Unhelpful well-being support; and Professional loneliness and shared experiences as an AP teacher.* Each key theme is presented below with illustrative quotes.

Theme 1: Avoidance as a protective strategy for well-being

The participants talked about trying many different strategies to support their selected students. However, they found that many of their approaches were ineffective in engaging these students or managing their behaviour. One participant stated that “it impacts on our well-being, like I’m on the front line of this bad behaviour” (Participant 1). The other stated that “this pupil didn’t really respond, so I mean, I tried a lot. You’ve got to use all the weapons in your arsenal” (Participant 2). Interestingly, in describing their efforts to work successfully with their students, both participants used phrases which have associations with the military (‘front line’; ‘weapons in your arsenal’).

The lack of change in student behaviour impacted negatively on the well-being and professional self-efficacy of the participants, and as a result, the participants felt that they had no other choice than to avoid contact with these students as much as possible. One participant talked about an incident where the student had been involved in an aggressive altercation over the lunch break and this behaviour had continued into the lesson time: “I tend to just avoid, and like [the student] was not supposed to be in my lesson next so I just kind of ignored it, carried on teaching” (Participant 1). In this situation, the participant reported that the student was removed from the lesson, with the incident being followed up later at an appropriate time with a reflective conversation between the student and teacher.

The other participant described a situation as “just so freeing” when they realised:

> I could just stop trying and I would just avoid that pupil. I would not seek them out to help them. I would not seek them out to support them. I would not seek them out to chastise them. I just let it go. (Participant 2)

The participant went on to clarify that “there were other people who had a better relationship [with the student] who could make that work”. This meant that they knew that the student was still being supported, whilst enabling them to adopt this avoidance strategy for their own well-being.

Theme 2: Colleague relationships, both as a resource and a demand

Both participants talked about their relationships with colleagues as being significant and impacting on their well-being. However, colleague relationships were described as being both a source of social support with an associated positive impact on well-being and, conversely, also a drain on mental resources with an associated negative impact on well-being. It was clear that both participants valued their colleague relationships in a positive light. For example, one participant stated:

> I think as a teacher well-being for me is being supported by my employer and feeling like I have got a team around me or somebody I know I can speak to about any concerns and just knowing that somebody's got my back in the classroom and out of it. (Participant 1)

Communication between colleagues was also highlighted as being important to both behaviour management and well-being, with a participant stating that “communication is key. You have to be able to speak to your colleagues” (Participant 2).

However, there was also discussion about how colleague relationships need to be carefully managed to avoid difficulties. As one participant stated:

> Personally, I like to keep colleagues at arm's length emotionally. I like to joke with my colleagues and chat with my colleagues, but I do feel that you shouldn't get too close. I've seen that work against people in AP. (Participant 2)

Theme 3: Playful learning as a strategy for engagement

Playful learning was mentioned by both participants as a way of engaging the students. This was described as being used to allow the students space and time away from more formal learning activities. For example, one participant talked about how they use a game of pool for the student to “let off steam”, stating “we have in our school like a pool table that some of the students choose to play on. It gets very heated, but you know it's good for a let off of steam and stuff” (Participant 1).

The other participant talked about their use of table tennis to engage the student. For example:

> We have a table tennis table in our breakout room, and it's become officially my role: I will play table tennis. For years - I'm very good now, and the pupils will want to beat me. But as a result, too, a lot of people want to just play table tennis throughout the break. (Participant 2)

This participant suggested a sense of ownership over this strategy (“…it’s become officially my role…”) which is one of the few that they have found to be effective in engaging their selected student. The importance of having “a lot of people” wanting to play table tennis during the break is expanded upon as the teacher being able to engage a number of students in a positive activity:

> I’ll have six pupils, which in a small cohort is a sizable number of kids, who know where they are, who will take turns, and the banter, and the jokes, and the back and forth, is really edifying. [These] are kids that I find difficult to engage in class. (Participant 2)

Theme 4: Unhelpful well-being support

Well-being support offered by their schools was discussed by both participants. They described this as being support such as short-term counselling and Well-being Days. Both participants reported that these offers of support were not particularly helpful. In the case of Well-being Days, these appeared to be actively unhelpful as they obliged teachers to give their time to participate in an activity which did not support either their well-being or their teaching role. Participants felt that these were tokenistic, for example, “we recently started holding Well-being Days, which happen like once a half term. I think they're a bit of like a tick box token kind of like “oh, we're doing this” (Participant 1).

One participant even described the Well-being Days as ‘offensive’:

> We used to have one well-being day a year, … they would send you off to do an activity and have a lunch somewhere. And to be honest, that approach is so piecemeal, and almost to the point where it almost becomes offensive in that your well-being is one day, riding round on a quadbike. (Participant 2)

In place of the Well-being Days, the participants explained that they would have preferred more time to either reduce their workload or to spend at home. Talking about the Well-being Days, one participant said: “It’s not really well-being… Well-being to us is actually getting an early finish” (Participant 1).

The offers of counselling were not used by either participant. They explained that they have not felt it has been needed for their well-being, stating: “I know that [counselling] is available. I haven’t personally needed it but I know it’s there if I did” (Participant 1), and “there is a counselling service available through [my school]. I’m aware that it is there. It’s never something that I’ve felt compelled to pursue in terms of my well-being.” (Participant 2)

Theme 5: Professional loneliness and shared experiences as an AP teacher

Both participants shared that they felt their experiences as an AP teacher were not well understood by those who work outside of AP, even if still in the teaching profession. The participants described some of the key differences in the experiences of behaviour in AP, compared to what may be expected in a mainstream school. For example, the difference in expectations of behaviour and flexibility in response means that AP settings are more able to deal with low-level disruptive behaviours, whereas “I feel like a lot of the students that we get coming to us when they're excluded from a mainstream school, the reason for their exclusion is just persistent disruptive behaviour" (Participant 1). It is perhaps an expectation for AP teachers to be able to manage a higher level and frequency of challenging behaviours, with one participant stating:

> I think that that's more just the consequence of having an alternate provision setting you'll come across more examples of traumatic behaviour, rude behaviour, aggressive behaviour, violent behaviour. So, I do think there is a difference between AP and mainstream in terms of teacher experience. (Participant 2)

Whilst acknowledging that there are also challenges faced by mainstream teachers, saying "I don't think there are any easy jobs in education, and I think working in a mainstream school, you will be exposed to challenges and emotional trauma" (Participant 2), this participant also used the analogy of working in the police force, where you may have a mixture of positive and negative interactions each day out in the community, compared to "if you're then working in a prison with criminals, you should expect and be guarded against an extreme level of behaviour. I think that that analogy works for AP" (Participant 2).

Given the difficult situations that the participants described managing on a daily basis, it was important to them that they had shared experiences with colleagues in AP. This helped the participants to feel understood, for example, "I think when one of us has a bad day, it generally means that somebody else has shared that same concern or that same kind of struggle" (Participant 1) and "we tend to all face the same struggles so it's kind of nice to share that and know that you're not alone." (Participant 1)

Discussion

This study aimed to examine how teachers in AP settings in England experience teaching students with conduct problems and CU traits. This paper used an IPA framework to present case studies of two participants working in AP schools in England. Five themes were identified: *Avoidance as a protective strategy for well-being; Colleague relationships as both a resource and a demand; Playful learning as a strategy for engagement; Unhelpful well-being support;* and *Professional loneliness and shared experiences as an AP teacher.*

Each teacher was asked to select a student they were currently teaching, who they perceived to present with significant conduct problems. Both participants indicated that they perceived their identified students to exhibit high levels of CU traits, as indicated by the ICU (Frick, 2004). This was supported by qualitative interview data, with the teachers describing student behaviour characteristics including difficulty building relationships, bullying, aggression, stealing and damaging property, attempts to humiliate and threaten staff and other students, low concern for academic work, and lack of impact from rewards and sanctions. These characteristics are consistent with previous studies examining CU traits in adolescents (Horan et al., 2016). This consistency suggests that the students selected by the teachers did demonstrate CU traits, in addition to significant conduct problems. It is possible that the ICU scores may reflect poor STRs, rather than specifically CU traits. However, poor quality STRs are also a characteristic of high CU traits, so it is likely that the two phenomena would often co-occur.

The analysis suggests that AP teachers may use strategies to support their well-being that are specific to the smaller, more flexible settings typical within the AP context. For example, teachers being able to avoid contact with a student to protect one's own well-being may not be possible in a larger mainstream school with less flexibility. Classroom management is often viewed as being relational at the core (Tavlin et al., 2025), but when students present with CU traits, this makes fostering a positive STR difficult. As a result, teachers may feel unable to, or not want to, connect with these students, leading to the avoidance response experienced by the participants in this study. Fitzsimmons et al. (2021) suggest that these situations produce difficult emotional responses for the teachers, which they may not fully understand themselves and calls for teachers to be supported with knowledge of psychodynamic theory, alongside strategies such as reflective supervision, to support their own well-being. Such strategies would also help teachers to reflect on and process the strong emotions created by their interactions with particular students. There may also need to be recognition from Senior Leadership colleagues of when an 'avoidance' strategy, such as that described by the study participants, becomes necessary, with support offered to implement this in a way that has minimal negative impact on the student, teacher, and school community.

Playful learning was mentioned by both participants as a strategy to keep students engaged and to help attempt to build relationships. Similarly to the avoidant behaviours mentioned above, playful learning may also be a strategy that is specific to the flexible environment and small class sizes typical of AP settings. For AP teachers and students, there could be a number of benefits to increasing the extent to which play and learning are intertwined in the school setting (Johnston et al., 2022). For example, potential benefits of playful learning for adolescents have been found to include reduction of stress and improved well-being (Staempfli, 2007), as well as increased motivation and engagement in learning (Johnston et al., 2022). Strategies which improve the well-being, motivation and engagement of the students will support behaviour management in the classroom and will then in turn be beneficial for teacher well-being.

The findings suggest that there needs to be recognition that AP teachers may require different types and levels of support, compared to mainstream teachers. The participants talked about how their experience as AP teachers was different to that of teachers working in mainstream schools, suggesting a sense of professional loneliness. Tensions between AP settings and mainstream schools may exacerbate the feeling that there is a gulf between teaching professionals in the two sectors. Often the climate in mainstream schools is focussed on core performance levels, with pressure to remove disruptive students (Pennacchia & Thomson, 2016); a practice which is at odds with the inclusive, bespoke environment that AP seeks to provide. Pennacchia and Thomson (2016) explore how mainstream schools and complementary AP settings can work together in a positive model to more effectively support the students involved. This type of collaborative work may also have benefits for the teachers by improving their understanding of the challenges faced by each of their respective sectors.

The participants reported that their sense of professional loneliness was mitigated by the shared experiences with colleagues in AP. However, colleague relationships were highlighted as being significant both as a source of support and also as a demand requiring active management. The quality of social support from teacher colleagues has been found to be associated with lower levels of stress and burnout, as well as helping to shape occupational well-being overall (Kollerová et al., 2023). However, Matsushita and Yamamura's (2025) study, exploring stress factors among teachers in special needs schools, suggested that colleague relationships among teacher can also be a source of stress. It is possible that colleague relationships may need to be managed more carefully in settings such as special needs schools (Matsushita & Yamamura, 2025) and AP schools, due to the smaller nature of the communities resulting in closer working conditions, as well as the more intense interactions that may arise because of the higher needs of the students. Support to manage colleague relationships effectively, so as to foster these as a source of support rather than a drain on resources, would be helpful to AP teachers.

Finally, the formal well-being support offered by the schools, such as Well-being Days and short-term counselling, was not found to be useful. The participants either found these offers of support to be actively unhelpful, or they simply did not engage with them. A previous study reported that teachers view Well-being Days as being 'prescriptive and tokenistic', even leading to feelings of mistrust in the motives of senior managers (Goddard, 2025, p.120).

Goddard (2025) found that teachers in their study felt obliged to attend the Well-being Days, even though there was little relevance to improving their actual well-being. This suggests that money spent on these initiatives could be better spent elsewhere to support well-being in a more sustainable way. Based on the findings from this study, supporting teachers to foster supportive colleague relationships, recognise when they need some reflective space away from a situation or student, or to implement more playful approaches to learning could all be avenues to be explored as well-being support that teachers would find more useful than the current typical offer.

Limitations and Future Directions

The two participants had differing levels of experience in AP, and only one of them had experience teaching in mainstream settings as a qualified teacher. This may have impacted the homogeneity of the sample. As the sample size is small, comprising of only two case study participants, the findings from the study need to be considered within this context and cannot be generalised in any way. They are intended to offer an insight into AP teachers' experiences and act as a starting point for a discussion about how AP teachers can be better supported, in order to work towards improving teacher retention in this sector.

It would be of interest to examine further AP teachers' experiences in this area, to see whether the length of time working as an AP teacher has any impact on their well-being and behaviour management strategies. For example, early career teachers have been found to respond to student conduct problems with harsher interventions than teachers later in their career (Glock & Kleen, 2019), so there may be differences in the strategies for behaviour and well-being used by AP teachers depending on the length of time they have been working in the teaching profession. It would also be helpful to explore whether there are differences in the perceptions of teachers who have only worked in AP environments and the perceptions of teachers who have also worked in mainstream schools. Previous studies (Farouk, 2014; Oxley, 2021) have found that teachers moving from working in mainstream schools to working in AP settings experience substantial differences. This meant that the teachers needed to develop a new style and strategy for engaging with students. This necessary change towards using a different framework for managing behaviour may impact on teacher well-being, due to the cognitive resources needed to manage this shift in their professional identity.

Further research could complement this IPA study by conducting a study with a larger sample of AP teachers and exploring whether similar findings as from these case studies are also found in a larger sample. Future studies could also look in more detail at what AP teachers would find useful to support their well-being, as it appears that the current formal support is not seen as helpful. For example, Well-being Days were not perceived to be useful by the case study participants, so it would be beneficial to explore further what would be useful instead. This would enable the funding that is currently spent on Well-being Days to be spent on more sustainable and welcome well-being support for AP teachers.

Conclusion

This IPA study offers an insight into the experiences of two AP teachers in England. Whilst a small sample, it provides a starting point for the discussion about how AP teachers may be able to be more effectively supported to remain in the profession. For example, through supporting colleague relationships to become a resource rather than a demand; encouraging the implementation of playful learning approaches to increase student engagement; and recognising when space and time away from a situation is most helpful to support well-being. AP teachers should be considered as a distinct professional group when reflecting on their experiences working with students with conduct problems and CU traits. Consideration needs to be given as to the level and type of support that they would find most useful for well-being and behaviour management.

Author

Laura Oxley

Department of Education, University of York, UK

Correspondence

laura.oxley@york.ac.uk

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