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Research Note: A Work-in-progress Report on a Longitudinal Survey Study Examining the Impact of Teaching Students with Callous-Unemotional Traits and Conduct Problems, on Teacher Wellbeing over One Academic Year

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ABSTRACT

Student conduct problems have been identified as one of the key factors contributing to attrition in the teaching profession (McCormick & Barnett, 2011). With teacher wellbeing being shown to decline in recent years, particularly since the Covid-19 pandemic (Kim et al., 2021), it is important to increase understanding of how student conduct problems may impact teacher wellbeing. This study followed a group of teachers (n=30) in England over a period of one academic year (2024-2025), with the aim of exploring their experiences of working with students presenting with persistently challenging behaviour. The study particularly focused on students who present with Callous-Unemotional (CU) traits. These traits include low empathy, restricted affect, and a lack of concern for academic performance. Students with CU traits are typically less responsive to the usual classroom management strategies employed in schools in England, which may further impact teacher wellbeing. Participants were asked to complete online surveys at three time points across the year (approximately 3 to 4 months apart). The surveys included open-ended qualitative questions and quantitative measures such as the Inventory of Callous-Unemotional Traits (ICU; Frick, 2004); Oldenburg Burnout Inventory (OLBI; Halbesleben & Demerouti, 2005); Student-Teacher Relationship Scale (STRS; Pianta, 2001); and Pro-Social subscale of the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ; Goodman, 1997). Currently, the study has completed data collection (September 2025) and is in the process of analysis. Findings from the study will indicate whether teachers with high CU trait students are more likely to burn out and/or have poorer student-teacher relationships than teachers with low CU trait students. The longitudinal aspect of the study will enable changes over time to be considered, and the study will particularly highlight strategies that teachers report using to support their own wellbeing in these situations.

KEYWORDS

Wellbeing; behaviour; CU traits; teachers; longitudinal

Introduction

Teacher wellbeing is an important topic which has become particularly prominent since the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic. Research suggests that, during this time, teacher wellbeing has declined (Kim et al., 2021). In 2024, the Department for Education (2025) reported that over 40,000 teachers left the profession. A range of factors have been suggested to contribute towards teachers making the decision to leave the profession. However, student conduct problems have been identified as one of the key factors causing a negative impact on teacher wellbeing (Ingersoll, 2003), with disciplinary issues being shown to lead to teacher stress and burnout (McCormick & Barnett, 2011). It is essential that the impact of student conduct problems

on teacher wellbeing is better understood, in order for teachers to be effectively supported with classroom management and their own professional wellbeing.

Callous-Unemotional Traits

A minority of students, who present with conduct problems, also present with Callous-Unemotional (CU) traits. These traits include low empathy, interpersonal callousness, restricted affect, and a lack of concern for their academic performance. Studies suggest that teachers are able to identify students who present with both CU traits and conduct problems, in comparison to those who demonstrate conduct problems but not CU traits (Willoughby et al., 2022). Whilst this group, presenting with both conduct problems and CU traits, consists of a small number of students overall, the consequences of their behaviour can have a significant impact on the school community and particularly on the teachers working with them.

Classroom Management Approaches

Classroom management strategies often include systems of rewards and sanctions which aim to encourage compliance with school rules and deter undesirable behaviour within the school environment. However, students with CU traits tend to be resistant to the usual classroom management strategies used in schools in England. In addition, it has been found that these students show a lack of response to social rewards, such as praise, suggesting that they are not able to learn effectively from reinforcement information (Allen et al., 2018; Viding & McCrory, 2018). Often, when students do not respond well to the default system of classroom management, interventions are encouraged within the school to support these students. It is common for these interventions, such as Restorative Approaches (Thorsborne & Blood, 2013) or Collaborative and Proactive Solutions (Greene, 2016), to focus on improving the quality of student-teacher relationships (Horan et al., 2016). However, there are few studies that have explored the impact of being asked to implement these approaches on teacher wellbeing.

Student-Teacher Relationships

Typically, students with CU traits have poor quality student-teacher relationships (Horan et al., 2016). This is problematic for teacher retention as strong student-teacher relationships have been identified as one of the core motivations for teachers deciding to continue in the profession (Split et al., 2011). In addition, when teachers are asked to implement alternative approaches to classroom management with persistently challenging students, these approaches are often based on the principles of building relationships with the student (Greene, 2016; Thorsborne & Blood, 2013), thus requiring additional emotional labour from the teacher. However, with students presenting with CU traits, relationship-building efforts are unlikely to be successful, which can then lead to a negative impact on the teacher's wellbeing (Split et al., 2011).

Purpose of the Present Study

This 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.

A longitudinal survey study is in the process of being conducted with a group of teachers in England, thereby contributing to answering the following research questions (RQs):

RQ1: Do teachers' perceptions of their students' level of CU traits show any correlation with:

- a) their self-reported symptoms of burnout (ie, exhaustion and disengagement); and/or
- b) the perceived quality of their relationships with students?

RQ2: Is there any change over the course of an academic year in:

- a) teachers' perceptions of their students' level of CU traits;
- b) their self-reported symptoms of burnout (ie, exhaustion and disengagement); and/or
- c) the perceived quality of their relationships with students?

RQ3: What strategies do teachers report using to support their own wellbeing when working with a student with conduct problems?

Method

Participants

The sample of teacher participants (n=30; 66.67% primary school teachers) were recruited through professional networks, emails, social media, and word of mouth. All participants met the following eligibility criteria:

Inclusion criteria

1. Be currently working as a qualified class teacher in a school in England
2. Be able to think of one student in their current class whose behaviour the teacher identifies as being persistently challenging and disruptive

Exclusion criteria

1. Participants will no longer be able to take part in the longitudinal study if they are no longer teaching the student whose behaviour they identified as being persistently challenging and disruptive (for example, if the student moves to another school during the study)
2. The student, who the teacher identifies as presenting with behaviour that is persistently challenging and disruptive, cannot have a diagnosis of Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD).

Children with ASD and children with CU traits may superficially be seen to present with similar observable behaviours, such as showing a reduction in empathy, an increase in aggression, and antisocial behaviour. However, children with ASD must be seen as distinct from children presenting with CU traits, as those with ASD are able to respond affectively to others' emotions, whereas children with CU traits do not have the ability to do this (Allen & Jones, 2018). Therefore, this second exclusion criterion has been included, as this study specifically intends to focus on the experiences of teachers working with students with CU traits. Whilst acknowledging that not all students with ASD will have a diagnosis of ASD (for example, if they are still in the process of assessment, or if they have chosen not to seek a diagnosis), it was decided that specifying a diagnosis of ASD was a clear criterion for exclusion from the study.

Research Design

Participants were asked to complete an online survey at three time points across the academic year 2024-2025. An initial invite was sent to participants to ask them to complete the survey, and then two periodic email reminders were sent if the survey was not completed, to try and improve retention and response rates. The participants were offered an incentive to complete the surveys (£5 voucher per survey completed). The survey included the following measures as well as demographic and educational experience questions:

- Inventory of Callous-Unemotional Traits (ICU) (Frick, 2004);
- Oldenburg Burnout Inventory (OLBI) (Halbesleben & Demerouti, 2005);
- Student-Teacher Relationship Scale (STRS) (Pianta, 2001);
- Pro-social scale questions from the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) (Goodman, 1997);
- Typology of challenging behaviour in school (TCB) (Oxley, 2021);
- Teachers' perceptions of disruptive behaviour in schools (TPDB) (Nash, Schlösser & Scarr, 2016).

Participants were asked to complete the ICU, STRS, SDQ, and TCB with the student in mind who they have identified as behaving in a way that is persistently challenging and disruptive. However, no identifying or direct data was gathered about the child, only the teachers' perceptions. The initial survey also confirmed eligibility criteria and gathered demographic information. In order to link the surveys across time points, each participant was allocated a participant number, which enables their surveys to be linked anonymously.

The participants were allocated to one of two groups: either the high CU traits group (n=21) or the low CU traits group (n=9), depending on their score on the ICU. The cut-off point, to be allocated to the high CU traits group, was a score of 35 or over. 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 cutoff score of 35. Based on this study, this was the cutoff point used for the present study

(i.e. a score of 35 or above places the participant in the high CU traits group, whereas a score below 35 places them in the low CU traits group).

It was initially intended to recruit at least 100 participants and conduct a quantitative analysis of the survey responses. This initial plan was pre-registered on OSF (Oxley et al., 2024). However, issues with attaining sufficient rates of recruitment during the first time point led to a change in the plan for analysis. It was decided that the second and third surveys would also include open-ended qualitative questions, as well as the quantitative measures. This allowed more in-depth information to be gathered about the reasons behind, and potentially the directionality, of any correlation between the students' level of CU traits, and the teachers' reports of burnout symptoms and the quality of their student-teacher relationships.

In order to safeguard against the online surveys being completed by bots or fake participants, there were some provisions put in place. For example, three additional questions were included in the survey, which asked participants to verify that they are not a robot by completing a simple task. These questions should be simple for a genuine human participant to complete correctly, but a bot is likely to answer incorrectly.

The study has been reviewed and approved by the Department of Education Ethics Committee at the University of York.

Rationale for Choice of Measures

The ICU is designed to provide an assessment of CU traits, which can identify a particular subgroup of children who display antisocial and aggressive behaviours. The version used in this study is the ICU-Teacher, which is designed to be completed by the child's teacher. This measure will enable participants to be allocated to one of the two study groups: those teaching a student with high CU traits and those teaching a student with low CU traits. As CU traits are associated with lower pro-social behaviours, the Pro-Social subscale of the SDQ was also included in the survey, as a further measure of the behaviours, perceived by teachers, of their identified student.

The OLBI is a self-report measure used in the assessment of the severity of work-related burnout. It assesses two core dimensions: namely, exhaustion and disengagement from work. The inclusion of the OLBI in this study will allow exploration of the participants' levels of burnout, which can then be compared across the two groups, as well as looking for any changes that may occur over time. Similarly, the STRS was included in this study to record participants' perceptions of their relationship with the identified student, so that these can be compared between groups and over time. The STRS is a teacher-report measure, which assesses the teacher's perception of conflict, closeness and dependency with a specific child.

The reason for including the TCB, as a measure of challenging behaviour, is to explore whether any changes in symptoms of burnout or the quality of student-teacher relationships are in fact potentially due to a difference in levels of CU traits or may actually be due to the severity of challenging behaviour presented by the student. For example, a teacher may experience higher levels of symptoms of burnout and/or poorer quality student-teacher relationships if they are managing more severe levels of challenging behaviours, regardless of whether CU traits are present or not. The inclusion of this scale will enable these two factors to be distinguished from each other.

The TCB gives an indication of the severity of the behaviours being displayed by the participants' selected student. This measure was developed by the author and used during their PhD study (Oxley, 2021). It is applicable to the types of challenging behaviour that teachers may typically observe in a school in England. The Disruptive Behaviour Disorder Rating Scale (DBDRS; Pelham, 1992, cited in Kemp et al, 2021) was also considered as an alternative option to the TCB. However, this is a longer scale (45 items, compared to the TCB's 13 items), which would therefore increase the length of time taken to complete the overall survey. To keep the measure brief, it was considered whether to include just the items for ODD and CD from the DBDRS, as per Kemp et al (2021). However, the DBDRS tends to focus on more extreme behaviours which teachers may not necessarily see or know about in a typical school environment in England (for example, one item asks whether the student has 'forced someone into sexual activity' and another asks if they have 'been physically cruel to animals'). Therefore, it was decided that the TCB scale was the more appropriate option to include in the survey.

It was anticipated that there would be an even spread of TCB scores across the high and low CU groups

(e.g., there would be students in both groups who show more severe behaviour and those who show less severe behaviour). This data has not yet been analysed to ascertain whether this is correct. However, if the finding is that all the students in the high CU traits group show more severe behaviour than those in the low CU traits group, then we cannot suggest that any changes in symptoms of burnout or quality of student-teacher relationships are contributed to explicitly by the higher CU traits, but instead by a combination of higher CU traits and more severe behaviour. Further research would be necessary to distinguish between the two and explore whether the changes in symptoms of burnout or quality of student-teacher relationships are similarly seen when there is the same severity of behaviour without CU traits.

The TPDB (Nash, Schlösser & Scarr, 2016) was included as it offers a measure of teachers' perceptions of disruptive behaviour. This was included as an exploratory outcome due to the possibility that teachers who perceive that students are always or mostly in control of their behaviour will potentially experience higher levels of symptoms of burnout and poorer quality student-teacher relationships. As with the TCB, it was anticipated that there would be an even spread of TPDB scores across the high and low CU groups (e.g., there would be teachers in both groups who perceive students to be always or mostly in control of their behaviour). This data has also not yet been analysed to test this assumption. However, if it is found that teachers who perceive this are more likely to experience higher levels of symptoms of burnout and poorer quality student-teacher relationships, then, as above, we cannot suggest that higher CU traits are an explicit contributing factor to these, and further research would be needed to distinguish between these factors.

Work in Progress

Recruitment began in October 2024. The first time point for completing the initial survey was between October 2024 and February 2025. Additional capacity for emailing schools with recruitment information was gained through the appointment of a Research Assistant over a six-week period in January and February 2025, with the intention of maximising the number of participants recruited to the study during the first time point. As the study was at risk of potential under-recruitment, the additional capacity provided by a Research Assistant enabled the study team to contact a greater number of schools and reach more potential teacher participants. Data collection for the second time point ran from February to May 2025, and the third time point then took place between May and August 2025.

Plan for Analysis

For analysis, participant data has been divided into two groups based on participants' answers to the ICU in the initial survey. Participants are either in a group for those teaching a student with conduct problems and high CU traits ($n=21$; ICU score 35 or over; Kemp et al, 2021) or one for those teaching a student with conduct problems and low CU traits ($n=9$; ICU score under 35; Kemp et al, 2021). The qualitative data will be thematically analysed in a longitudinal trajectory analysis to look for commonalities among the groups and changes over time. The quantitative longitudinal data will be presented as descriptive statistics to complement the qualitative analysis.

Intended Study Impact

The findings of this study will indicate whether teachers with high CU trait students are more likely to burn out and/or have poorer student-teacher relationships than teachers with low CU trait students, in situations where they are working with students with conduct problems. It will also examine the strategies that teachers report using to support their own wellbeing in these types of situations. This will enable proposals to be developed with the aim of offering effective guidance about how teachers can best be supported to work with students with CU traits and conduct problems, whilst maintaining their own positive wellbeing.

The longitudinal aspect of the study will offer a unique insight into how teachers' wellbeing may fluctuate over time whilst working with students with the characteristics of conduct problems and CU traits. This could provide guidance about how support for teachers could be targeted more effectively, both in terms of tailoring the content of the support and the timing of when this could be offered, ultimately supporting teacher retention and wellbeing.

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