“You just hold on to your life…it’s that kind of feeling”: A psychosocial exploration of educational staff’s emotional experiences of using reasonable force and restraint with children and young people

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Confidentiality and Declarations

Declarations have been made on the RD1 form submitted with this thesis. Regarding confidentiality, all participants' names in this thesis are pseudonyms. I retain my name, 'Libby', in the thesis when referring to extracts or interview quotes where I am included.

Abstract

This research reflects my curiosity about the emotional experiences of educational staff using reasonable force and restraint. It is situated within an evolving legislative context, during the Department of Education's consultation on new guidance for restrictive practices, and within a wider social climate of increased accountability, public scrutiny, and advocacy. Rather than evaluating the practice itself, I explore how staff navigate their emotional experiences and the unconscious, institutional and societal influences that shape them.

The research is grounded in a psychodynamic framework that recognises how anxiety and unconscious processes influence what can be spoken about and what may remain unarticulated. Ten staff members from UK educational settings, including a mainstream infant school, a secondary school, and two alternative provisions, participated in reflective interviews supported by talking stones, a projective tool that facilitated the exploration and interpretation of latent emotional material. This approach enabled access to defended and often unspoken aspects of staff experience.

The analysis highlighted how staff oscillate between what feels safe to acknowledge and what is intolerable to hold in mind, illustrating the emotional and relational complexity of their experiences and the defences mobilised to manage them. It foregrounds the emotional intensity of using reasonable force and restraint and suggests how institutional and societal pressures shape these experiences. Educational staff, therefore, are not simply applying reasonable force and restraint but navigating a complex interpersonal and relational experience.

I conclude that Educational Psychologists (EPs) are uniquely positioned to support staff through reflective practice that attends to these oscillating emotional and unconscious dynamics. To facilitate this, I have developed a reflective tool designed to help EPs to create spaces where staff can explore the complexity of their experiences. Consequently, this research contributes a rare psychodynamically informed understanding of reasonable force and restraint, alongside a practical application for the field of Educational Psychology, supporting reflection on the unspoken and emotional aspects of experience.

Contents

Confidentiality and Declarations ii

Abstract iii

List of Figures xiv

Abbreviations xv

Glossary xvi

Introduction 1

1.1. Overview 1

1.2. The Research Topic 1

1.3. Researching In an Evolving Policy Context 2

1.4 What Is Reasonable Force? 4

1.4.1 Control 4

1.4.2 Restrictive Interventions 4

1.4.3 Restraint 5

1.4.4 Critical Reflections on Terminology 7

1.4.5 Terminology Used in This Research 7

1.5 Who can Use Reasonable Force? 10

1.6 When can Reasonable Force be Used? 10

1.6.1 Accountability 11

1.7 Preventive Practice 12

1.8 Variations in Training 14

1.9 Recording Reasonable Force 15

1.9.1 Who Gets Recorded and Why? 16

1.10 Reasonable Force in the Media 17

1.11 Reasonable Force as a Societal and Moral Concern 21

1.12 The Role of Educational Psychology 24

1.13 Why Me, Why Now? 25

1.13.1 Research Orientation 26

1.13.2 Aims and Objectives 29

1.13.3 Thesis Roadmap 29

Literature Review 31

2.1 Overview 31

2.2 Rationale for a 'psychosocial creative review' 32

2.3 Developing a process for 'psychosocial creative review' 33

2.3.1 Challenges of a 'psychosocial creative review' 33

2.3.2 A Framework for 'psychosocial creative review' 34

2.4 The Review Question 39

2.5 Searching for Literature 40

2.5.1 Inclusion and exclusion criteria 40

2.5.2 Criteria Limitations 42

2.5.3 Search Strategy 43

2.5.4 Charting 44

2.6 Critical Engagement 55

2.7 Synthesis 56

2.7.1 Who is talking and what are they talking about? 57

2.8 Response 60

2.8.1 Families Experiences 60

2.8.2 Children and Young People's Experience 64

2.8.3 Staff Experiences 70

2.8.4 Reviewing and Improving 73

2.9 Review conclusion 77

2.9.1 What Still Needs to Be Asked? 78

Methodology 80

3.1 Overview 80

3.2 Purpose 80
3.3 Research Questions 81
3.4 Ontology 82
3.5 Epistemology 83
3.5.1 Defended subjects 84
3.6 Theoretical Framework 86
3.6.1 Object Relations 86
3.6.2 Defences Against Anxiety 87
3.6.3 Projective hypothesis 88
3.6.4 Interpretation and Subjectivity 90
3.6.5 Reflexivity 92
3.7 Research Design 94
3.7.1 Recruitment 94
3.7.2 Participants and Sampling 96
3.7.3 Data Collection 97
3.8 Ethical Considerations 99
3.8.1 Minimising harm 99
3.8.2 Informed consent and the right to withdraw 100
3.8.3 Transparency 101
3.8.4 Confidentiality and Data Protection 102
3.9 Data Analysis 102
3.9.1 Rationale for Reflexive Thematic Analysis 105
3.9.2 Analytic Positioning 105
3.9.3 Reflexive Thematic Analysis Process 107
3.10 Quality Assurances 111
3.10.1 Credibility 112
3.10.2 Transferability 113

3.10.3 Dependability 113

3.10.4 Confirmability 114

3.11 Summary of Methodology 115

Generated Themes 116

4.1 Overview 116

4.2 *Central-Theme*: 'Holding on in Role' 118

4.3 *Theme*: On the Edge of Danger 121

4.3.1 When nothing can be predicted 121

4.3.2 Vulnerability at the edge of safety 122

4.3.3 Impossible choices in an imperfect system 125

4.4 *Theme*: When Care Hurts 127

4.4.1 Containing the adult-child encounter 127

4.4.2 Repairing rupture and guarded closeness 130

4.5 *Theme*: Out of Sight but Still Held in Mind 132

4.5.1 Distancing emotional pain 133

4.5.2 Managing the threat of being the one who may harm 136

4.6 *Theme*: Under the Moral Gaze 140

4.6.1 No room for error 140

4.6.2 The pressure to be a 'good person' 143

4.7 *Theme*: All for One and One for All 146

4.7.1 Only we understand each other's experiences 146

4.7.2 Self-sacrifice within professional identity 148

4.7.3 Protective responsibility for the team 152

4.8 Summary of themes 155

Discussion 157

5.1 Overview 157

5.2 Responding psychosocially to the research questions 157

5.2.1 What can be understood about educational staff's emotional experiences of using reasonable force with C/YP? 160

5.2.2 How might unconscious processes interact with educational staff's emotional experience of reasonable force? 163

5.2.3 How might institutional and societal structures intersect with unconscious processes to shape staff experiences of reasonable force? 170

5.3 Visualising staff's emotional experience of using reasonable force. 174

5.3.1 Conceptual contributions from this research 175

Implications 178

6.1 Overview 178

6.2 Supporting staff's emotional well-being 178

6.3 Methodological implications of using talking stones 180

6.4 Dissemination 181

6.5 Limitations and areas of future research 182

Personal Reflection 186

7.1 Researching my lived experience 186

7.2 Being a practitioner-researcher 189

Conclusion 191

References 193

Appendices 212

Appendix A: Reasonable force definitions 212

Appendix B: Prisma-style diagram for Literature Search 216

Appendix C: Critical Engagement Examples 222

Appendix D: Synthesis Matrices 233

Synthesis Matrix 1: 233

Synthesis Matrix 2: 235

Appendix E: Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form 237

Appendix F: Ethical Approval Letter ..... 240_Toc243070322

Appendix G: Participant Wellbeing Form 241

Appendix H: Safeguarding and Malpractice Procedure 242

Appendix I: Diary Extract IPA Reflection 243

Appendix J: RTA Familiarisation Mind Map 245

Appendix K: RTA Coding Screenshots 246

Appendix L: RTA Theme generation tables 247

Coding to the initial theme generation table: 247

Table for generating initial themes, subthemes, and main themes. .. 250

Appendix M: Helping Staff ‘hold on in role’: A resource for EP practice 253

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List of Tables

Table 1	Thesis Chapter Map
Table 2	A psychosocial creative review process
Table 3	Literature inclusion/exclusion criteria
Table 4	A psychosocial creative review search strategy
Table 5	Charting summary of selected literature
Table 6	Overall research design
Table 7	Participant inclusion/exclusion criteria
Table 8	Phases of RTA

List of Figures

Figure 1	Thematic map
Figure 2	Photograph of Veronica's Stones
Figure 3	Photograph of Sophie's Stone Landscape
Figure 4	Photograph of Edward's Stone Landscape
Figure 5	Photograph of Anna's Stones
Figure 6	Photograph of Julie's Stone Landscape
Figure 7	Photograph of Nick's Stone Landscape
Figure 8	Photograph of Veronica's Stone Landscape
Figure 9	Graphical representation of reformulated Object Relations Theory (Sharhar, 2024)
Figure 10	A visualisation of staff's emotional experience of using reasonable force

Abbreviations

AEP	Association of Educational Psychologists
C/YP	Children and/or young person
DfE	Department of Education
EHRC	Equality and Human Rights Commission
EPs	Educational Psychologists
HCPC	Health Care Professional Council
LA	Local Authority
NLFT	North London Foundation Trust
ORT	Object Relations Theory
RTA	Reflexive Thematic Analysis
SEMH	Social, Emotional, and Mental Health
SEND	Special Educational Needs and Disabilities
SENCO	Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator
TREC	North London Foundation Trust Research Ethics Committee
UK	The United Kingdom

Glossary

Term	Definition	References
Anxiety	Anxiety refers to an internal response from the psyche to anticipated harm. Within Kleinian terms, anxiety also relates to persecution, loss, damage and psychic survival. As such, anxiety is a response to external and internal threats.	Freud (1926) Klein (1935, 1946)
Defended Subject	The concept of the ‘defended subject’ refers to when a person's unconscious shields itself from anxiety, making self-knowledge partial and causing related aspects of reality to be ignored or misrecognised.	Hollway & Jefferson (2000)
Depressive Position	This position is characterised by an increased capacity to integrate experiences in which the good and the bad can coexist. Consequently, the person begins to develop concern about possible damage to a loved object, resulting in feelings such as, but not limited to, guilt and loss.	Klein (1935) Steiner (1987)
Integration and Fragmentation	In this research, integration refers to accepting both the positive and negative aspects of experience together and holding space for nuance and complexity. Fragmentation, on the other hand, involves separating different parts of experience or struggling to tolerate complexity, leading to binary thinking.	
Oscillation	In this research, oscillation is used to describe a continuous movement between integration and fragmentation, or between depressive and paranoid-schizoid positions.	Bion (1963) Steiner (1987)
Paranoid-Schizoid Position	This position is characterised by the threat of persecutory anxiety through the mobilisation of primitive defences, such as but not limited to, splitting, idealisation, and projection. Consequently, idealised good objects are kept at a distance from persecutory bad ones. This position is preoccupied with self-survival, leaving little room for nuance.	Klein (1946) Steiner (1987)

Psyche	This is referred to as the inner world of the self. In Kleinian terms, the self is used to encompass the whole personality, including the ego, superego, and id, as described by Freud.	Bott Spillius et al. (2011)
Social Defences	Social defences describe ways institutions and their members unconsciously cope with anxieties, embedding structures within their organisations to support their psychic survival.	Armstrong & Rustin (2017)

Introduction

1.1. Overview

This chapter provides a contextual overview for this research and aims to:

- Explain how reasonable force is defined and legislated in educational settings in England.
- Explore how sociopolitical and media narratives shape public unease and accountability regarding reasonable force.
- Foreground staff experiences as central to the concerns of this study.
- Offer a reflexive account of my positioning as a researcher, including my motivation for exploring this topic.

1.2. The Research Topic

In educational settings across England, staff may use reasonable force to prevent harm, manage disruption or maintain safety. The practice is permitted under government guidance (Department for Education [DfE], 2026) and encompasses a range of actions. Consequently, reasonable force is a complex concept that involves care and control.

Reasonable force narratives understandably focus on the experiences of children and young people (C/YP). For example, the media highlight the physical and mental health risks related to reasonable force, particularly for those with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) (Adams, 2024). Such accounts have helped shape important debates about C/YP rights and what practice is acceptable. These concerns have been echoed by the Equality and Human Rights Commission (2021) and the Association of Educational Psychologists (AEP) (2018, as cited in Stothard, 2022), who have questioned the appropriateness of restraint and recommended positive behaviour approaches.

However, the experiences of the educational staff involved are often overlooked. This research turns toward that space and asks how the use of reasonable force is experienced emotionally by the adults involved. It seeks to explore, from a psychosocial perspective, the relational and unconscious dynamics that shape how adults experience these events within their wider institutional and social context.

1.3. Researching In an Evolving Policy Context

When my research journey began, the Department for Education's (DfE) (2013) '*Use of Reasonable Force: Advice for Headteachers, Staff and Governing Bodies'* was the main guidance for educational settings on the use of reasonable force. This guidance was non-statutory and allowed for varied interpretation, especially regarding application and recording. However, between February and April 2025, a national consultation took place on new guidance, '*Use of reasonable force and other restrictive interventions in schools, Guidance for schools in England*' (DfE, 2025a, 2025b). This proposed a statutory change requiring schools to record every significant use of force, initially scheduled for implementation in September 2025 (DfE, 2025a). However, this was postponed, and the DfE (2026) released the final revised guidance, '*Restrictive interventions, including use of reasonable force, in schools: Guidance for schools in England*', which came into effect in April 2026. The guidance sought to clarify terminology and expand statutory duties for schools regarding the recording of both seclusion and reasonable force.

Consequently, key stages of my research took place within an evolving policy context. For example, the planning and ethical approval for the research began before the consultation started, and recruitment was carried out during the consultation period itself. Data collection occurred during the summer and autumn

terms of 2025, when educational settings were still becoming familiar with the proposed DfE guidance (2025a). The final submission of the doctoral research was made just one month after the revised DfE guidance (2026) came into effect.

This timing is important because my research is situated in a period of transition, including developments in terminology and professional responsibilities. I interpret this transition as uncertain in how schools, and I as a practitioner-researcher, understood and responded to new legislation. This process also demonstrates how legislation influences and regulates a complex issue, requiring many revisions, perhaps mirroring some of the uncertainty about the topic itself.

The following sections explore key elements of the DfE's *Use of Reasonable Force* guidance (DfE, 2013) and the proposed DfE's *Use of Reasonable Force and Other Restrictive Interventions in Schools* guidance (DfE, 2025a), as these were available documents at the time of writing. The DfE guidance (2026) was unable to be fully included in the introduction due to its release near submission; however, key aspects of the final guidance will be discussed in Section 6.5.

The DfE (2013) and DfE (2025a) are considered alongside the Equality and Human Rights Commission rights-based publication, *Human Rights Framework for Restraint* (Equality and Human Rights Commission [EHRC], 2019). These documents were selected because they are relevant to educators, establish expectations for educational practice, and engage with wider concerns about C/YP rights. Consequently, they become 'meeting points' for institutional and societal expectations.

1.4 What Is Reasonable Force?

Terminology describing reasonable force is complicated. The DfE guidance (2013) originally defined reasonable force as a range of physical actions used to control or restrain C/YP. Over time, labels such as *control*, *restrictive intervention*, and *restraint* have been frequently grouped under the umbrella of reasonable force, but definitions vary. The following sections explore these variations before clarifying the terminology used in this research.

1.4.1 Control

The DfE guidance (2013) described control as including passive and active actions used to restrict C/YP, such as standing between pupils. In my interpretation, control could be regarded as part of 'typical' classroom management, such as blocking a doorway to prevent access to an out-of-bounds room. These actions may not be consciously regarded as using force, but nonetheless involve the body being used as a boundary to restrict another. The DfE guidance (2025a) defines reasonable force as "physical contact" used to control or restrain a C/YP's actions or movements (DfE, 2025a, p. 4). This definition does not explicitly acknowledge passive forms of control as described above. Consequently, differences between reasonable force, control, and classroom management are not always clear, highlighting ambiguity in how these practices are categorised.

1.4.2 Restrictive Interventions

The DfE guidance (2025a) introduced a new term, restrictive interventions, defined as "planned or reactive action" that limits a C/YP's movement or freedom (p.4). This also includes the use of equipment, medication, or seclusion, which may or *may not* involve reasonable force (DfE, 2025a). Seclusion is described as the supervised isolation of a C/YP in an area they cannot leave independently (DfE,

2025a). In my interpretation, restrictive intervention has a broad definition and implicitly encompasses passive control actions described in the DfE guidance (2013). This ambiguity could be regarded as a way to establish a category for multiple possibilities in practice. However, in doing so, the use of passive control is less visible, obscuring acknowledgement of behaviour management through these means. It also blurs important distinctions of actions by grouping them into a single category. In this sense, broad terminology may mirror the uncertainty of practice where staff may struggle to categorise their actions. At the same time, it may also shape the meaning attached to what they do. Therefore, legislation may reflect and produce the dilemmas staff face.

Additionally, the broadness of the term restrictive intervention, as well as its omission of the word control from the DfE guidance (2026), raises questions about whether there is an uncomfortableness in acknowledging the possibility of controlling another. This may function as a way to avoid potentially unsettling aspects of the controlling nature of reasonable force. Similarly, the word intervention is typically associated with supportive activities rather than control. Associating it with reasonable force may serve to position reasonable force as beneficial, shaping how its intention is understood. Consequently, I interpret these shifts as possible ways legislation is defending against the discomfort of ‘controlling children’.

1.4.3 Restraint

Restraint is the most direct and restrictive form of reasonable force. For example, in the DfE guidance (2013), it was defined as physically holding a C/YP to restrict movement, usually if there is an immediate risk of harm. Similarly, the DfE guidance (2025a) describes restraint as direct physical contact to prevent, restrict, or subdue movement. However, it continues to explain that restraint may, or may not,

involve the use of force and could include mechanical and chemical means (such as medication). Consequently, rather than clarifying the term, this addition creates further ambiguity regarding what restraint means in practice.

National frameworks, such as the EHRC, have also influenced definitions of restraint. For example, the *Human Rights framework* (EHRC, 2019) and the *Restraint in Schools Inquiry* (EHRC, 2021) conceptualise restraint as any act that restricts freedom of movement and independence and have further defined categories, including active and passive restraint, seclusion, mechanical restraint, chemical restraint, and coercion (Appendix A). The DfE guidance (2025a) utilises EHRC terminology, including definitions of seclusion, mechanical restraint, and chemical restraint, but omits coercion. At the same time, it applies these categories across the definitions of restraint, reasonable force, and restrictive interventions, creating uncertainty about what distinguishes them. As such, the EHRC definitions illustrate the potential scale of restraint practices, but their application in wider documents appears inconsistent. Therefore, definitions do not straightforwardly align across national guidance and rights-based frameworks.

Further ambiguity emerges when considering what recent guidance has omitted. For example, the DfE guidance (2013), influenced by the Physical Control in Care Medical Panel (2008), explicitly listed actions of unacceptable risk to C/YP, including the seated double embrace, the double basket-hold, and the nose distraction technique. The inclusion of unacceptable practices was, perhaps, an attempt to prioritise safety by making dangerous practices visible. However, although the DfE guidance (2025a) centralises C/YP welfare, it does not forbid specific restraints; it only prohibits the deliberate restriction of the airways and the application of pressure to the neck or abdomen. While this may appear straightforward it

arguably provides less guidance. This exclusion raises questions about how legislation may avoid potential unease by refraining from naming such practices as unacceptable and keeping definitions broad.

1.4.4 Critical Reflections on Terminology

Although the terms control, restrictive intervention and restraint appear distinct within the umbrella of reasonable force, they are arguably ambiguous. This varied terminology may create a sense of hierarchy, where some actions are seen as less severe or as part of a linear progression, which may not reflect practice. For example, passive forms of control risk being regarded as ‘low level’ despite their potential emotional or relational impact on staff or C/YP. Consequently, attempts to create neat definitions are problematic as they obscure the complexity of day-to-day implementation and practice.

1.4.5 Terminology Used in This Research

Variations in terminology suggest that reasonable force is not a fixed concept but a shifting set of practices, with difficult-to-define boundaries. As a result, multiple experiences of reasonable force may occur, with variation in how incidents are understood. Therefore, it is important to be clear about my research's intent, while also recognising that terminology can become an affective site where anxiety and defensiveness are enacted.

I have decided to use the term *reasonable force* to refer to the range of passive and active physical actions described in the DfE (2013) and DfE (2025a) guidance. This includes control, such as using one’s own body to block another’s movement, direct physical contact, such as guiding by the arm, and the use of force to restrain and subdue another’s movement, such as restraint. Mechanical restraint,

chemical restraint, and seclusion are outside the scope of my research, but their inclusion in guidance highlights the wider scope of reasonable force and avenues for future research.

What is helpful about this definition is that it allows for the variety of narrated experiences participants may offer during data collection. The research diary extract below illustrates my reflections which informed this decision.

> At the start of this research, I adopted the term reasonable force and restraint (RFR), based on the DfE (2013) guidance. This term was a practical way to refer to an array of practices used by school staff, from blocking or guiding a pupil to more restrictive forms of restraint. RFR seemed to help me find a descriptive shorthand to acknowledge the range of actions staff might engage in without separating them.
>
> However, I am becoming aware that the term might also serve as some form of containment or defence. Maybe a way of managing the ethical complexity surrounding the topic? I wonder if the mixing of the terms has allowed me to hold multiple meanings at the same time, but also somewhat hide elements of it, literally reducing it to an acronym. Does reasonable force sound more acceptable than restraint? By bringing them together under RFR, am I softening what I might feel too difficult to name?
>
> Now that the DfE (2025a) guidance has been introduced and new distinctions between reasonable force, restrictive interventions, and restraint have been explored I am starting to find term restrictive interventions too sanitised, a phrase that feels like it is distancing itself from the sometimes-distressing nature of what's being described. I am aware that I perhaps feel

> strongly about this, having done restraint before in my career. At the same time, using the new terms individually feels disjointed, as though each term misses something the other might offer, which makes it difficult to name the experience as a whole. But I still feel RFR doesn't quite work.
>
> In draft write-ups I've started using phrases such as 'restrictive physical practices' or 'controlling and restrictive practices', which I've tried to use to include the full array of physical actions without implying they are neutral or neatly defined, but in the end, I find myself returning to 'reasonable force'. Reasonable force allows me to hold the complexity of practice, and I find it aligns well with the overall legislation. I still remain open to what might change as I continue this research.
>
> (Research Diary, 24 July 2025)

Although the body of the thesis adopts the term 'reasonable force', I have intentionally retained the term 'restraint' in the title and abstract. This decision reflects my aim to signal to readers that both restraint and reasonable force are explored in the research, while supporting discoverability for those searching restraint-related literature using these keywords.

Furthermore, rather than oversimplifying a shifting terminology landscape, I have openly discussed the evolution of these terms in the introduction and been transparent about my decision to use reasonable force as a term that encompasses both passive and active actions, as described on page 7. This invites readers to accompany me through the complex terminological journey that shapes my research.

1.5 Who can Use Reasonable Force?

The DfE guidance (2013) states that all members of staff have the authority to use reasonable force. This applies to teaching and non-teaching staff, as well as volunteers (DfE, 2013). Similarly, the DfE guidance (2025a) states that “all school staff have the power to use reasonable force” (p. 6). However, it does not clarify whom the school staff includes, creating uncertainty about whether volunteers are considered staff.

The absence of clear authorisation to use reasonable force may create confusion. For example, adults may be left feeling uncertain about their colleagues’, or their own authority to act when urgent action is required to ensure safety. These ambiguous boundaries raise questions about how power is broadly allocated. As a result, allowing all adults to use reasonable force might reassure institutions by distributing responsibility but leave individuals uncertain about who can assist them when necessary.

1.6 When can Reasonable Force be Used?

The DfE guidance (2025a) states that reasonable force can be used to prevent or stop a C/YP injuring themselves or another, committing a criminal offence, damaging property, or undermining the discipline or teaching of the school. Similarly, the DfE guidance (2013) explained that reasonable force could be used to remove disruptive C/YP from the classroom. These circumstances have been clearly reiterated in DfE guidance (2026). However, the continued inclusion of what could be interpreted as ‘behaviour management’ highlights that staff must rely on their professional judgement to decide whether reasonable force is necessary.

Notably, the DfE guidance (2013) states that schools were not required to obtain parental consent before using reasonable force, and the DfE guidance (2025a) does not change this position. However, the DfE guidance (2025a) places a stronger emphasis on communicating with parents, particularly regarding behaviour policies and SEND support plans. The DfE guidance (2026) now includes a statutory requirement to inform parents of incidents involving the significant use of force, creating a cultural shift towards greater collaboration with families. However, it raises questions about how staff navigate such practice alongside the legal authority afforded to them by legislation.

The DfE guidance (2013, 2025a) states that reasonable force must never be used as punishment, as this would constitute degrading treatment of C/YP. This position is echoed by the EHRC (2019), which defines unlawful restraint as actions intended to harm, humiliate, or punish. However, the DfE (2013, 2025a) and the EHRC (2019) do not provide explicit definitions of punishment or humiliation, leaving this open to interpretation. This position highlights two concerns. Firstly, what constitutes unlawful or humiliating behaviour remains difficult to define in practice, especially in situations that require quick decision-making. Secondly, it is unclear whose voices are prioritised when deciding if reasonable force has been experienced as punitive, for example, the C/YP, staff, witnesses or families. This demonstrates the limits of legislation and foregrounds the associated professional risk for staff.

1.6.1 Accountability

Using reasonable force requires professional judgement and therefore carries increased accountability. The DfE guidance (2013) stated that in cases of alleged misuse of force, the burden of proof was placed on the complainant rather than the

staff involved. However, the DfE guidance (2025a) extends this by situating ethical practice within broader safeguarding guidance. It advises that concerns about misconduct should be managed within schools' existing processes, and allegations against staff should be addressed in accordance with the Keeping Children Safe in Education guidance (DfE, 2025c). This suggests integrated safeguarding oversight for C/YP, but risks accountability being shaped by how safeguarding concerns are upheld within a setting. Consequently, inevitable variations between settings highlight that reasonable force is enacted in systems with different expectations for behaviour management and preventive approaches, which will influence how accountability is managed.

1.7 Preventive Practice

Prevention is central to recent discussions about reasonable force. The DfE guidance (2025a) positions educational settings as responsible for anticipating and reducing the need for reasonable force through de-escalation and early support. There is also an acknowledgement that C/YP with SEND may "react to distressing or confusing situations by displaying behaviours which may be harmful to themselves and others" (DfE, 2025a, p.12), and these C/YP are at risk of being disproportionately subjected to reasonable force. In this sense, recognising disproportionate impact foregrounds the necessity of preventative approaches to support C/YP with SEND.

Professional bodies have also advocated for preventative approaches. For example, the AEP (2018, as cited in Stothard, 2022) questioned the necessity of restraint in educational settings and recommended relational approaches to support behaviour. Similarly, DfE guidance (2025a) requires schools to implement a reasonable force policy, ensuring it aligns with legal requirements and promotes

prevention and de-escalation as core principles . This supports the case for preventative practice but also introduces ethical positionality.

For instance, the AEP (2018, as cited in Stothard, 2022) and DfE guidance (2025a) positions are not simply procedural but arguably moral. Their positions on restraint reduction and the promotion of preventative practice carry an implicit judgement that restraint is undesirable and should be minimised. This raises questions about the ‘message’ this sends to staff, who may feel they must use reasonable force because it is perceived as necessary, but are then perhaps left to reconcile that such actions are increasingly objectionable. This may create a sense that reasonable force is not only a professional risk, but a moral one.

Additionally, educational research has begun to explore preventative approaches. For example, Hodgkiss and Harding (2023) reviewed North American literature on the use of reasonable force, aiming to evaluate strategies and approaches to reduce or replace physical restraint in educational settings. Their systematic review of 15 papers found that individualising support for C/YP was crucial to the success of preventative approaches. Additionally, where school-wide approaches were successful in reducing the frequency and length of restrictive interventions, there was a clear theme of individualisation, as well as the upskilling of both staff and C/YP to understand the management of emotional distress, ultimately providing C/YP with greater autonomy and reducing the likelihood of escalation (Hodgkiss & Harding, 2023).

Importantly, Hodgkiss and Harding (2023) suggest that these principles are relevant to UK educational settings and recommend implementing school-wide and individual strategies suited to the UK SEND context. While these recommendations

are not based on UK-based research, they illustrate how international research is beginning to inform UK discussions about preventative practice, and highlight an area for future research to examine whether individualised approaches are effective in UK educational settings, and how they can be implemented.

Taken together, these professional, policy and emerging research-based perspectives indicate a growing emphasis on prevention within educational practice, signalling a wider cultural expectation to support C/YP earlier and rely less on physically restrictive measures. This changing sociopolitical landscape places new demands on schools and highlights the importance of considering how staff are trained to support C/YP.

1.8 Variations in Training

The DfE guidance (2025a) encourages that staff “should be adequately trained in its safe and lawful use and in preventative strategies” (p. 7). However, this remains guidance, and there is currently no statutory requirement for training. As such, schools are expected to decide the most appropriate training provider “based on their school’s individual contexts and needs” (p. 7). Consequently, with no central training standards for the use of reasonable force, the quality of training is arguably variable, and its application is dependent on school leadership priorities.

This lack of regulation may lead to unequal implementation across educational settings, particularly where opportunities for professional development are limited. It also raises questions about which staff may be selected for training, whether all staff feel confident enough to accept such responsibilities, and how these decisions could reflect or reinforce team dynamics within schools. Accordingly, these issues invite reflection on the role that training might serve, whether to reassure

institutions or demonstrate compliance with guidance, especially when it is not mandatory. In this sense, reasonable force is shaped by school culture and extends beyond a simple staff skill.

Unlike training, recording of significant incidents is now a statutory requirement under DfE guidance (2026). It is notable that schools are afforded considerable flexibility in deciding whether to prepare staff for using reasonable force, but they are legally obliged to record incidents in which they are involved. This creates an emphasis on accountability rather than effective practice.

1.9 Recording Reasonable Force

The DfE guidance (2013) placed no legal requirement for schools to record reasonable force, only advising that it was “good practice” to consider how to record serious incidents (p. 6). However, it offered little detail on how record-keeping should be conducted. The EHRC (2021) highlighted this gap, noting that schools were often “dealing with issues surrounding restraint on a daily basis, often with little to no guidance” (p. 2). Arguably, this lack of regulation reflected a wider reluctance to acknowledge the use of reasonable force at the government level.

However, the DfE guidance (2025a) proposed a statutory duty to record all significant uses of force, which was enacted in the DfE guidance (2026), representing a shift towards greater accountability. The DfE guidance (2025a) provides schools with more detail on what records must include, such as the C/YP and adults directly involved, SEND or health needs of the C/YP, the time, date, and location of the incident, an account of what happened (including preventive strategies used), a rationale for why force was deemed necessary, and any post-incident support. However, what remains ambiguous is what significant means. The

DfE guidance (2025) does not clearly define this term, leaving it open to interpretation and potentially leading to variation in its application. Recent DfE guidance (2026) now addresses this and is noted in Section 6.5.

Recording only significant incidents creates a visibility threshold for reasonable force. For example, passive acts of control (e.g., blocking doorways) may not be considered significant but may still pose physical vulnerabilities (e.g., putting one's body in harm's way) and ethical dilemmas for staff, which may remain unrecorded. This prompts reflection on whose experiences are deemed more important and risks reinforcing a narrow view of what constitutes impact. As such, recording practices may reveal and conceal the nuances of reasonable force by establishing a threshold of what is permitted to be seen.

1.9.1 Who Gets Recorded and Why?

For over a decade, schools have been expected to monitor equality practices and to have due regard for eliminating discrimination. For example, the Public Sector Equality Duty (PSED), introduced under section 149 of the Equality Act (2010), requires schools to improve equal opportunities by building positive interactions between people with and without protected characteristics. Despite this, there has been no previous requirement to monitor how reasonable force was being applied to those with protected characteristics such as race, gender or disability. However, DfE guidance (2025a) advises governing bodies to review reasonable force data regularly to identify and implement improvements that support staff in their ongoing learning and development. Consequently, schools are encouraged to determine patterns that may indicate unmet needs, and to monitor disproportionate use of reasonable force in relation to protected characteristics. In this way, record-keeping has been positioned as a safeguarding procedure.

This also reflects the wider safeguarding context in education. For example, the DfE guidance (2025a) refers to *Keeping Children Safe in Education* (DfE, 2025c), which identifies poor record-keeping as a repeated factor of safeguarding failures and highlights the importance of accurate records in enabling schools to defend themselves against complaints. The inclusion in the DfE guidance (2025a) may suggest an attempt to align with broader safeguarding contexts, but it may also serve to protect institutions from potential scrutiny. It remains unclear whether this dual role serves to protect C/YP, schools or both.

It is not yet known whether enhanced monitoring may affect the emotional experience in schools. As incidents involving reasonable force are monitored more closely, staff may experience heightened scrutiny. Consequently, although policy developments may strengthen C/YP rights, they may inadvertently exacerbate unease about using reasonable force. Having explored the institutional context, the following section considers sociopolitical and media discourses.

1.10 Reasonable Force in the Media

In the following section, reported cases from Scotland and England are explored as illustrative examples of wider societal concern. Although Scottish accounts do not directly align with English policy, they highlight national concern regarding reasonable force and demonstrate how media attention can act as a catalyst for change.

The case of Calum Morrison illustrates this context. Calum, an autistic boy with learning disabilities and epilepsy, was aged 11 when he was restrained on the floor by four adults until he lost consciousness (Adams, 2024). National coverage of his injuries and subsequent campaigning from his mother prompted widespread

outcry and political action (Adams, 2022; Adams & Jarvis, 2023). Consequently, ‘Callum’s Law’ proposed in Scotland advocated for compulsory reporting, enhanced staff training, and positive behaviour support approaches (Adams, 2024).

This is not an isolated example; other C/YP have shared similar experiences. Leah, a young woman with autism, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and learning disabilities, described being repeatedly restrained in a Scottish specialist school, resulting in burst blood vessels in her face and self-harming behaviours (Clegg & Adnitt, 2024). Her account emphasised emotional distress and long-term psychological harm (BBC News UK, 2024). Leah eventually took her school to court and won a disability discrimination case, and the school accepted the ruling, stating it will comply with the requirements and recommendations (BBC News UK, 2024). The process of legal action has arguably contributed to an expectation of accountability, highlighting that harmful practices can be successfully challenged.

In contrast, not all accountability is maintained. For instance, testimonies from Charlene and her two autistic daughters, who both attended an independent special school in the south of England, reported that her younger daughter was being restrained daily (Clegg & Adnitt, 2024). Charlene explained that, alongside her, 16 other families submitted a formal complaint about the school's use of restraint, which the local authority (LA) investigated; however, no complaints were upheld (Clegg & Adnitt, 2024). This highlights that, even when families come forward collectively, their concerns may not be validated, leaving them feeling as if their experiences were not believed or significant enough.

More recently, the media reported that a 12-year-old boy with autism was restrained at a school in Leeds (Titheradge, 2025). The report was accompanied by

CCTV footage showing the child being held face down by five members of staff (Titheradge, 2025). It also quoted Eric Baskind, a consultant in the prevention and management of violence (National Federation of Personal Safety, 2026), who judged the staff's actions as unlawful (Titheradge, 2025). Alongside these accounts, the article included a statement from the school that “the incident was typical of those that happen in schools from time to time” and that the footage was “selective and lacking context” (Titheradge, 2025, p. 3). Taken together, these contrasting opinions illustrate the variability in how incidents may be interpreted, how professionals are trusted, and how the media attempts to hold people to account.

These cases demonstrate that questions of reasonable force can become framed in terms of ‘whose side to believe,’ risking polarisation between staff and families. As a result, rather than attending to the complexity of experiences, the media discourse can slip into narratives of right and wrong. However, such accounts may be understood as situated in relational and social contexts shaped by defended processes that protect against blame. In this sense, my concern is not to establish a definitive version of events, but to acknowledge the complexity of experience.

Overall, these accounts suggest a climate of unease and mistrust, in which staff are both scrutinised by the media yet shielded by their institutions. This narrative leaves little space for open reflection on the ethical complexities of reasonable force, and notably lacks staff accounts. This may contribute to concern about reasonable force, alongside limited acknowledgement of the emotional weight staff may experience. Therefore, this reinforces my research’s focus towards staff perspectives as central to understanding how reasonable force is understood in educational settings. I do not seek to undermine the seriousness of the harm C/YP

have experienced, but to explore what it means to be the responsible adult in those moments, when action is taken in a climate of public concern and accountability.

The diary extract below illustrates my experience of engaging with media accounts.

> While reading the stories, I have felt shame, embarrassment, anger, and disbelief. At times, this discomfort has become so strong that I have had to stop writing and step away so that I can compose myself.....I think this has been necessary to manage the emotional weight of the work.
>
> Part of my shock and uneasiness has come from recognising that these stories are about real children and families. Reading accounts of such harm has made me question if I am looking in the 'wrong' direction by focusing on staff experiences, and I worry about the assumptions others might make about what I believe or condone. Will people think that I am 'okay' with reasonable force because I am not actively 'taking a side'? But I also wonder if the stories seem to 'split' people into simple categories, staff as bad, children as good and vulnerable, and I wonder if this is a defence against the complicated anxiety of such a topic.
>
> However, I find the media accounts important to acknowledge. They make children's vulnerability visible and challenge my engagement in the ethical and emotional complexity of this research. I feel that the power dynamics and abuses of power must certainly be acknowledged, but I also think the emotional experiences of staff need to be recognised. Holding both these has been uncomfortable, and I don't know if I can resolve this tension.

> Writing in my research journal helps, though. It has reminded me that reflexivity is about recognising the emotional labour of research. My feelings of shame, doubt, and discomfort form part of the lens through which I interpret this material, and being transparent about this feels important.
> (Research Diary, 6th September 2025)

1.11 Reasonable Force as a Societal and Moral Concern

For much of England's educational history, schools were regarded as institutions of discipline and correction, under the unquestioned adult authority of the school master (Heywood, 2017). Educational guidance and approaches to teaching were often imposed as a form of "educational dictatorship", with little regard for input from the communities or C/YP they affected (p.191). Heywood (2017) suggests that English culture has long held the image, passed down the centuries, of the schoolteacher as a "fearsome creature wielding his authority literally with a birch or rod" (p.192). Arguably, this reflects a historical moral framework, in which physical punishment, or force, was considered reasonable and necessary in schools.

Current societal expectations regarding what constitutes moral or reasonable behaviour towards C/YP, although developed from this history, have shifted significantly away from historical associations of discipline towards greater regard for C/YP welfare and rights. For example, corporal punishment was abolished in English schools under Section 47 of the Education Act (1986), marking a cultural shift towards safeguarding. This aligns with broader human rights priorities, such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989), which signalled an international commitment to recognising C/YP as individuals entitled to protection and the consideration of their best interests. More recently, there have been proposals for schools to involve parents, students, teachers and local

stakeholders in shaping educational aims and practices (Ball, 2016). These developments are arguably reflected in the DfE's guidance (2026) emphasis on de-escalation strategies to support C/YP, and the requirements for communication with parents and carers regarding the use of reasonable force. Together, these shifts illustrate a broader movement away from disciplinary models of schooling and towards inclusive practice, in which reasonable force is distinguished from punishment and treated as an exceptional measure embedded within wider safeguarding expectations and communication with families.

However, Young-Bruehl's (2009) concept of *childism* offers a critical lens for understanding why practices such as reasonable force persist despite these societal shifts. Childism refers to prejudice against children and the cultural assumptions that legitimise adult authority over them (Young-Bruehl, 2009). Young-Bruehl (2009) argues that such prejudice serves three social functions: the ghettoisation or exclusion of a particular group, the marking of a group as eligible for exploitation, and the maintenance of the superiority of one group over another through attack or privilege. These social functions may operate not only at an individual level but as social patterns embedded within cultural norms (Young-Bruehl, 2009). Arguably, the continued use of reasonable force in English schools, despite strong commitments to safeguard C/YP, may indicate that a deeper, perhaps unspoken assumption about the superiority and privilege of adults still operates beneath contemporary safeguarding narratives. Consequently, through the lens of childism, the continued permission to use reasonable force raises questions about whether society continues to hold latent anxieties concerning C/YP's potential capacity to challenge adult authority.

Such anxieties may contribute to a paradox in which C/YP are both protected and controlled. For example, while reasonable force is officially considered an exceptional measure and not a form of punishment (DfE, 2026), its inclusion in educational practice perhaps suggests that traces of historical hierarchies remain embedded within approaches to safety and control. These may continue to privilege adult authority within decisions relating to these matters. This context forms part of the emotional and moral landscape in which educational staff must make sense of and act on decisions about safety and behaviour. Arguably, these decisions are inevitably shaped not only by current legislation but also by longstanding narratives about the changing notions of childhood, the relationships between adults and C/YP and whose protection or privilege is prioritised.

The changing notions of childhood and what is considered reasonable form part of a wider societal shift in which the use of force against vulnerable adults has also become subject to increased ethical scrutiny and regulation. For example, the Mental Health Units (Use of Force) Act (2018), commonly known as *Seni's Law*, was introduced following campaigning after the death of Olaseni Lewis, who died, aged 23, while being restrained by police in a psychiatric unit. Seni's Law (2018) aims to increase transparency and improve practice in mental health and police services by placing legal duties to monitor and report the use of reasonable force. These duties are further supported by expectations of suitable training and protecting patient rights (Department of Health and Social Care, 2021). Consequently, there has been an ongoing effort to address concerns regarding reasonable force prior to the DfE guidance (2025a).

Likewise, the Restraint Reduction Network (RRN), commissioned by NHS England, has developed training standards (Ridley & Leitch, 2019). These training

standards address concerns about restraint practices in NHS services for individuals with learning disabilities, autism, and mental health needs. While these developments are outside the educational context, they highlight a societal and ethical standpoint that reasonable force requires clear regulation and training. They also demonstrate that issues and perhaps anxieties surrounding reasonable force are not isolated to education but are part of a wider context. Consequently, educational settings are part of society, where the use of reasonable force is increasingly regulated, contextualising my research within societal concern. It is important to recognise the momentum of statutory obligations across disciplines as indicators of the social concerns surrounding the topic.

Taken together, these historical, social and legislative developments across sectors perhaps suggest deeper questions about how society and its members understand and protect its C/YP, or vulnerable adults. For example, despite the significant shifts towards C/YP's rights and the wider efforts across disciplines to regulate reasonable force, its persistence in education suggests a paradox between C/YP's care and control. These tensions are part of the sociopolitical and sociohistorical landscape in which reasonable force is understood and actioned in schools. EPs need to understand this context and, alongside advocating for C/YP rights, make space for staff experiences, who must navigate these practices amid ongoing reform.

1.12 The Role of Educational Psychology

Educational Psychology has an important role in supporting educational settings to address the complexity of emotional and systemic challenges related to reasonable force. The importance of centralising C/YP and family voices in collaborative practice is well embedded in statutory frameworks, such as the

Children and Families Act (2014) and the SEND Code of Practice (Department for Education & Department of Health, 2015). However, while staying committed to these principles, there is value in exploring how staff make sense of their experiences. If staff are to uphold working relationally with families, they arguably need support to process the potential emotional impact of their work.

EPs are well placed to offer this support through reflective practice with educational staff. This aligns with the Health Care Professional Council (2023) standards, which emphasise attention to the emotional factors affecting teaching and learning (Standards 12.29, 13.57) and the provision of preventive, system-level support to promote wellbeing (Standards 13.57, 13.59). It also aligns with the DfE's (2021) '*Education Staff Wellbeing Charter'*, which prioritises the emotional needs of staff. By turning towards staff experiences, we can widen Educational Psychology's understanding of the possible emotional and relational aspects of reasonable force, thereby supporting schools in managing the complexity of practice.

1.13 Why Me, Why Now?

My interest in reasonable force has stemmed from my professional experience. Some 20 years ago, I worked in a specialist school for boys with social, emotional and mental health needs (SEMH), where I was trained to use reasonable force. I remember these events as emotionally charged, shaped as much by the pressures of the setting as by the boys' behaviour. During my doctoral training, I found myself again in an SEMH setting where reasonable force was used with C/YP with complex mental health needs. Even though the situation had changed, moments of high intensity and anticipation felt remarkably familiar, and I found myself reflecting on how, in nearly 20 years, my feelings of practice had not changed.

Additionally, as a trainee EP, I have consulted with mainstream schools, which, despite not being specialist settings, are using reasonable force in situations involving complex behaviour and are struggling to make sense of their practice. Consequently, this has reinforced my view that staff involved in such incidents experience complex emotions and that reflection is important for helping them process them. My research stems from that noticing and is further shaped by my commitment to supporting staff as they navigate their work.

As a practitioner-researcher, I hold a dual role. As a trainee EP, my position requires me to promote interventions that support behavioural development and adopt preventative approaches to promote the well-being of service-users while understanding the emotional factors that facilitate or impede learning, and possible psychological processes associated with significant levels of challenging behaviour. I interpret this as working collaboratively with schools to understand behaviour as communication, while also finding space to listen to and research staff experiences, with the aim of fostering a better understanding of reasonable force. As such, I do not seek to condemn or justify reasonable force, but to engage with its complexities.

1.13.1 Research Orientation

This research is informed by a psychosocial orientation, influenced by my training at the North London Foundation Trust (NLFT). The NLFT was created through a merger by acquisition between the North London NHS Foundation Trust and the Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust, which grew out of the Tavistock Institute of Medical Psychology, founded in 1920 (Obholzer, 2020). The Tavistock Institute has a rich history in psychodynamics, particularly in utilising approaches that foreground unconscious processes and considering organisational dynamics (Mosse, 2019). Consequently, this research's orientation emphasises how

unconscious processes shape meaning within human experience as well as considering the researcher and participants as defended subjects whose unconscious guards against anxiety (Clarke, 2006; Hollway & Jefferson, 2000).

Anxiety refers to the internal response to anticipated harm, often rooted in unconscious processes (Freud, 1926). In the current climate of heightened scrutiny and media attention surrounding reasonable force, concern that C/YP may have been harmed may contribute to unease about the topic. Moreover, threats to the self, like the possibility of causing harm or permitting harm to continue, are recognised as sources of anxiety that create psychic survival mechanisms within the defended individual (Hollway & Jefferson, 2013; Klein, 1946). These concepts will be explored in the methodological-theoretical framework and in the later discussion.

There is no single approach to psychosocial research. Instead, it belongs to a group of methodologies that share an ‘attitude’ characterised by a focus on relationality and self-reflection (Clarke, 2006). Equally, psychosocial research encompasses a range of different “dialects”, offering a diversity to the field that can be both a strength and a source of confusion, reflecting the absence of a single unified consensus of what ‘psychosocial’ can be (Redman, 2016, p.73). I do not seek to resolve these tensions; rather, it is important to clarify the particular dialect from which I am speaking within my research.

My research is situated within a psychosocial orientation concerned with “what escapes being known” and seeks to explore aspects of experience that may remain difficult to articulate or acknowledge, whilst recognising the limits of what can ultimately be claimed (Redman, 2016, p.76). Within this orientation, Kleinian object relations theory (Klein 1935, 1946) provides the principal theoretical premise that

“anxiety is inherent in the human condition” (Hollway & Jefferson, 2013, p. 127). This offers a way to understand the emotional and relational experiences of reasonable force, providing a rich interpretative language through which unconscious, affective, and relational aspects of experience can be considered (Redman, 2016).

Additionally, this psychosocial orientation recognises how my own subjectivity will ultimately influence what I notice or defend against, and how meaning is generated during the research (Finlay & Gough, 2003). Therefore, I am not approaching the research neutrally; the context outlined in the introduction is filtered and disrupted by anxiety, and it has foregrounded staff experiences and interpreted societal unease. Consequently, I offer a curated context rather than claiming to outline an objective truth.

Furthermore, I recognise that the orientation of my research, and my subsequent choice of methodology, are not value-free. They have been shaped by development as a novice practitioner-researcher within the specific institution of my doctoral training. For instance, my training and supervision at the NLFT have inevitably foregrounded the role of unconscious thinking in how I view the world around me. This institutional context has emphasised certain questions, interpretations, and aspects of experience to which I have been most attentive, while rendering other questions, explanations or ways of understanding reasonable force less visible. Although the psychosocial approach has been carefully considered as the most appropriate for my research, I do not assume it is the only way to understand or explore experiences of reasonable force. Rather, it represents one theoretically informed perspective, through which the research questions can be explored. A researcher located within a different institution, with a differing field of vision, may have prioritised different approaches. Ultimately, I recognise that my

understanding and application of this research orientation will no doubt continue to develop through the research process.

1.13.2 Aims and Objectives

This research's goal is not to create certainty, but to remain with complexity. As such, the research's objective is to explore experiences of reasonable force and to understand them within a psychosocial lens. This involves listening carefully to what is said, what is not said, and considering ways unconscious processes might interact during the research process.

It is important to note that these unconscious processes have already begun. Any attempt to study human experience inevitably arouses anxiety, which in turn affects the research process (Devereux, 1967). The more anxiety a topic produces, the less able we are to observe it, and such distortions are likely to affect the research design (Devereux, 1967). I do not aim to suppress the anxiety surrounding reasonable force but rather to carry it with me, assuming that what feels difficult may be central to what requires attention. By observing my own defensiveness and interpretations, I gain a way into an authentic understanding of human experience (Devereux, 1967).

1.13.3 Thesis Roadmap

As this research progresses, reflexivity will be emphasised throughout, outlined in Section 3.6.5, and also expressed through research diary extracts and first-person writing to highlight positioning and interpretations. Table 1 signposts what the following chapters offer.

Table 1

Thesis Chapter Map

Literature Review	Drawing on interpretation (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Goñi, 2025) and creative inquiry (Montuori, 2005) within a psychological orientation, this review does not aim to find a research gap but engages in an internal dialogue with existing literature as an active participant.
Methodology	Situating the research within a critical realist ontology and epistemology, this chapter introduces Object Relations Theory (ORT) (Klein, 1935, 1946) as a theoretical framework and the projective hypothesis as central to data collection, enacted through talking stones.
Generated Themes	Generated themes are presented as tentative interpretations, assuming unconscious processes shape and disrupt what can be known.
Discussion	The research offers interpretations for discussion within the existing literature and sociopolitical context, further conceptualised through ORT.
Implications	The research moves to the practical application of its contributions and introduces a reflective tool for EP practice. Limitations of the research are discussed alongside areas for future research.

Literature Review

2.1 Overview

Drawing on principles of creative inquiry (Montuori, 2005) and a psychosocial orientation (Frosh, 2010; Hollway & Jefferson, 2013), this chapter offers what I have termed a ‘psychosocial creative review’. It regards the literature review as a conversation and subsequent internal dialogue, which I enter as a defended subject.

In this approach, uncertainty and multiple perspectives are favoured over positivist assumptions for truth, and there is no search for a literature ‘gap’. Instead, knowledge is curated through interpretation, in which I embrace my role in its construction through my subjective engagement with the data (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Goñi, 2025). This process is further assumed to be disrupted by unconscious processes that protect against anxiety. In this way, I am not a neutral reviewer but an active part of knowledge construction.

The chapter outlines a transparent and rigorous way of stepping into that conversation and will:

- Present a rationale and process for a ‘psychosocial creative review’.
- Explain the development of the review question.
- Introduce the search strategy and inclusion and exclusion criteria.
- Use TAPUPASM (Ryan & Rutty, 2019) to critically engage with the reviewed literature.
- Synthesise and respond to the reviewed literature.
- Discuss the limitations of knowledge.
- Conclude with a direction for my proposed research.

2.2 Rationale for a ‘psychosocial creative review’

The topic of reasonable force is already situated in legislative change and societal concern. Recent DfE guidance (2025a, 2026) and rights-based frameworks (EHRC, 2019), alongside various media accounts (Adams, 2024; Clegg & Adnitt, 2024; Titheradge, 2025), have brought this topic to attention, adding multiple voices to a ‘live’ conversation. This creates the backdrop to my own research, in which experience is already being spoken about and, therefore, activating meaning. Consequently, I did not believe I could enter this review neutrally. Instead, the review focused on engaging in an internal dialogue with these voices and acknowledging my own positioning.

To accomplish this, I drew on principles of creative inquiry (Montuori, 2005). Creative inquiry recognises the review as a means of constructing knowledge through the reviewer's subjectivity, interpretation, and decision-making, which, in turn, the audience reads through its own lens (Montuori, 2005). Interpretation reflects that what can be known about a social phenomenon is shaped by subjectivity, and that the researcher interprets and participates in this process (Goñi, 2025). In this sense, reviewing literature is never neutral.

Additionally, creative inquiry views research as part of a dialogue (Montuori, 2005). This was important because it allowed me to listen to existing voices, ask who had been speaking so far, who was silent, and consider what needed to be asked. This developed a space for critical reflection, including my interpretations and emotional responses as integral parts of the review. As a result, the review became generative rather than descriptive, allowing me to enter the conversation and respond with an internal dialogue rather than standing outside searching for a neat ‘gap’.

To extend this, I incorporated the psychosocial concept of the defended subject (Hollway & Jefferson, 2013). This recognised that unconscious processes shaped how reality was encountered and could not be separated from wider contexts (Frosh, 2010). As such, these principles provide a foundation for a '*psychosocial creative review'*, in which the literature review becomes a production of knowledge, shaped by joining a conversation and further disrupted by unconscious processes.

2.3 Developing a process for 'psychosocial creative review'

The following section outlines the process developed for a psychosocial creative review. It draws on scoping strategies (Pollock et al., 2024) and the principles of creative inquiry (Montuori, 2005; Montuori & Donnelly, 2013), creating a transparent, rigorous approach while resisting the reduction of complexity. This process underpins the review that follows.

2.3.1 Challenges of a 'psychosocial creative review'

Creative inquiry has no set method; instead, it offers an orientation that shapes the research journey (Montuori & Donnelly, 2013). This was particularly challenging given academic expectations for systematic processes. Therefore, the principles of creative inquiry offer a way forward through this challenge.

Foundational to creative inquiry is integrating the enquirer's subjectivity. It requires problem-finding rather than problem-solving, encouraging the generative potential of review as an open dialogue (Montuori, 2011). It also recognises that knowledge is produced in the interaction between the self and the world, emphasising the importance of context in shaping interpretation and positioning me as an active participant in constructing knowledge (Montuori & Donnelly, 2013). Consequently, I aimed to conclude the review with more questions than I began with.

Holding these principles alongside a psychosocial orientation requires care. Reviewing literature about reasonable force may be uncomfortable. Indeed, I noticed the risk of using creative inquiry as a form of defensive intellectualisation to protect myself from the material's emotional weight. However, I have sought to use this as an insight, attending to that anxiety rather than avoiding it. In this sense, my responses became inseparable from the creative process and were regarded as subjective data.

2.3.2 A Framework for 'psychosocial creative review'

To approach the review systematically, I drew on scoping review methodology. The collective work of Arksey and O'Malley (2005), Levac et al. (2010), Daudt et al. (2013), and Pollock et al. (2024) informed the development of a framework for a 'psychosocial creative review' (Table 2). I included Montuori's (2005) reflexive question, "*Who is the I that is inquiring?*", acknowledging that the review begins from my own affective engagement and professional noticing of the topic. This provided a flexible scaffold that incorporated iterative stages and allowed transparency into decision-making. Additionally, I used a PRIMSA flowchart to document the search process (Appendix B).

Table 2

A psychosocial creative review process

Stage	Psychosocial creative review	Rationale
Who is the I that is inquiring?	• I am a defended subject, with unconscious processes. • I acknowledge prior knowledge and emotions as part of the enquiry.	Enquiry does not start in a vacuum. This supports the researcher's integration into the review (Montuori, 2005).
Purpose	• Listen carefully to the 'conversation' to understand and synthesise insights. • Generate complexity and questions rather than answers.	Moves beyond identifying 'gaps', which risks assuming that knowledge must be tied to a single truth (Braun & Clarke, 2022). It embraces multiplicity, accepting that contradiction can enhance understanding (Montuori, 2005).
Protocol	• Reflexivity is documented. • Decision-making is transparent.	Knowledge is not neutral; it is important to demonstrate how decisions shaped the review, so the enquiry remains accountable.
Review Question	• Guided by the research aim and kept open to hold multiple perspectives… e.g.: "What is known about…"	Such openness resists reductionism, inviting complexity and contradiction.

Searching for literature	• Engagement with the topic is recognised as having begun before the search process and noted reflexively in a PRISMA. • Engage widely with the field, acknowledging multiple ways of collecting literature. • A four-layered search process, represented as a ‘conversation’, drawing on principles of creative inquiry and scoping reviews (Table 4).	Avoids ‘cherry-picking’ literature while acknowledging that the process is not neutral.
Charting	• Overview of selected papers (Table 5).	Aligns with Arksey & O'Malley's (2005) charting approach, supporting the cross-comparison in the following synthesis.
Critical engagement	• Involves engagement with diverse sources, acknowledging differences in quality and knowledge in context. • Emotional responses are considered in line with Montuori’s (2005) psychodynamics of inquiry (Appendix C).	The TAPUPASM framework (Ryan & Rutty, 2019) served as a prompt for critical reflection, viewing the process as a context-dependent and reflective judgment rather than a fixed metric, with an emphasis on reflecting on knowledge production within its specific context.

Synthesis	• Interpret the ‘conversation’ by asking two questions: *who is speaking and what are they talking about?* • Synthesise sources into ‘voices’ and ‘key discussion areas' through an iterative review of the literature and a matrix that maps these two questions, supported by the charting process.	This supports a dialogical approach to enquiry, holding space for many perspectives, which may lead to a complex view different from the researcher's own (Montuori, 2005). Aligns with Braun and Clarke’s (2022) ‘*Big Q’* argument, viewing synthesis as an interpretation of curated and contextualised material that responds to the review question.
Response	• The enquirer becomes an active part of the conversation through an internal dialogue. • Synthesised voices and key discussion areas are critically engaged with and responded to with interpretation and reflexive engagement. • Leads to the question: *what still needs to be asked?*	Participating actively in an internal dialogue allows new ideas to surface, framing the reviewer as an active, yet defended subject. This constructs a subjective account of what can be known.
Certainty of evidence	• Certainty is not the goal of the review. • Uncertainty or contradiction is valued as generative.	Uncertainty and multiplicity are valued as sources of insight (Montuori, 2005), highlighting how unconscious defences may shape what is offered or avoided within the reviewed literature.

Impact	• Generates new questions, considers possible defended dynamics, and opens up fresh ways of thinking.	This aligns with creative inquiry's emphasis on generating new avenues of thinking and research (Montuori, 2005) and a psychosocial orientation that values the consideration of unconscious processes.

Note: adapted from (Pollock et al., 2024)

2.4 The Review Question

The introduction highlighted the complexity of reasonable force. I regarded this as an opportunity for enquiry; therefore, the review question became a ‘site’ of knowledge production shaped by disciplinary and cultural orientations, not a problem to solve. This emphasises that we produce knowledge about reasonable force through what we ask about it.

My initial review question was: “*How are staff and C/YP impacted by reasonable force and restraint in UK educational settings?*” Although this appeared clear and considered population, outcome, and context, the term impact felt value-laden. I became aware that this phrasing implied an assumption about expected harm, suggesting that only C/YP and staff are affected. Rather than distancing myself from this reaction, I viewed it as an example of how the unconscious begins to shape even the framing of enquiry. This reflexivity informed the deliberate broadening of the review question…

> *“What is known from the literature about the use and experiences of reasonable force and restraint in UK educational settings?”*

This question allowed a broader exploration of experience, including the individual and society. For example, by focusing on *use* and *experience*, this question can hold multiple perspectives (e.g. staff, C/YP, families, government), conscious or unconscious, while recognising that different forms of knowledge may coexist even in tension (Montuori, 2005). The UK educational context remains a key factor in situating the review and the subsequent research in the current sociopolitical landscape.

2.5 Searching for Literature

The following section outlines the review's inclusion and exclusion criteria, as well as its limitations. Following this, I describe the search strategy, supported by a PRISMA-style diagram documenting the process. It concludes with the charting of the selected literature.

2.5.1 Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Criteria were established to guide the selection of literature (Table 3). These criteria are not neutral; they reflect what has been contextualised in the introduction and are influenced by the current legislation.

Table 3

Literature search inclusion/exclusion criteria

Area	Inclusion criteria	Exclusion criteria	Rationale
Participants	Staff, students, families or professionals contributing to research on reasonable force	Law enforcement, security, healthcare, social care or psychiatric care, or adults receiving reasonable force themselves	This reflects a range of perspectives on the reasonable force of C/YP relevant to education.
Setting	Main focus on the UK educational context (e.g. schools, special schools, pupil referral units, alternative provisions)	Non-educational settings (e.g. medical units, custodial settings, inpatient units)	UK-based sources ensure relevance to the current legislation (DfE, 2013; DfE, 2025a) that provide advice on the use of reasonable force in schools.

Study design	Empirical studies (e.g. qualitative, mixed-methods, surveys, quantitative), including published and grey literature	News/media articles; these have already been contextualised in the introduction	A diversity of research from different sources can provide a rich overview of the conversation, helping contextualise '*who is speaking and what they are talking about'*.
Date range	2013–2025	Pre-2013 publications	The cut-off from 2013 follows the release of the DfE (2013) guidance to the DfE (2025a) guidance. Including studies between these dates ensures the literature reflects the impact of legislation and aligns with current practices.
Language	English-language studies	Non-English studies.	English reflects the practical limits of my own language, and the UK focus of the current research.

2.5.2 Criteria Limitations

While the review aimed for a wide range of sources, it has limitations. First, the focus on the UK context excludes international perspectives that could have offered insights into how reasonable force is understood and experienced internationally. However, this decision aligned with the UK's evolving policy context and aimed to contribute to the 'UK's conversation'. Nevertheless, it has limited opportunities for cross-cultural analysis.

Secondly, the review focuses on educational provisions where teaching is the central purpose. This excludes a variety of settings. On reflection, this assumes that education occurs within specific contexts and overlooks establishments such as youth justice facilities and hospitals, which may have dual purposes. The extract below illustrates my reflection regarding this decision.

> …This prompted me to interrogate my own assumptions about what constitutes an educational setting… It leaves me with questions about why I have overlooked this and, perhaps, whether it is simply too 'concerning' to look at what is happening in places other than schools, as it is conceivable that elsewhere it is used more. Maybe it was too uncomfortable to consider this. Acknowledging this is important, as it shapes my research and is a potential limitation in the review. These emotional and defensive responses remind me that research choices are never neutral but emerge from my inevitably defended position. Additionally, this reflection aligns with my professional experience, in which I have encountered tensions regarding the role of educational staff in the use of reasonable force. In anecdotal accounts from staff during consultations, they are often required to engage in practices

> they seem to consider beyond their educational remit and more associated with specialised intervention. This raises questions about whether my exclusion of non-educational settings reinforces an artificial boundary between education and other disciplines, when in practice staff may find themselves operating across them.
>
> (Research Diary, 13th March 2025)

These limitations are not easily resolved, but they remain important to acknowledge. A psychosocial creative review does not seek to be exhaustive but encourages the enquiry to remain reflective and transparent in its decision-making.

2.5.3 Search Strategy

Literature was identified through a four-layered iterative process represented as entering a ‘conversation’ (Table 4). This provided a systematic process, allowing me to remain open to challenging what I had previously considered important while preparing me to be an active participant through voicing my internal dialogue. This process is mapped onto a PRISMA-style diagram (Appendix B).

Table 4

A psychosocial creative review search strategy

Stepping into the conversation	• The review does not start in a vacuum. • I reflected on what was taken into the search, including positionality and literature already encountered, even if this fell outside the inclusion criteria. These are recognised as *reflective inclusions*. • Reflective inclusions cannot be disowned and inevitably influence interpretation. It is honest to acknowledge them.

Listening to who is speaking	• I conducted *database searches* across education and psychology sources and *hand-searched key organisational websites*. • Databases provided a systematic way to locate a variety of academic research, and targeted web-based searches of charities and advocacy groups helped locate publications. • This widened the conversation beyond academic discourse.
Following the conversation	• I investigated who the selected literature has been 'listening' to. • This extends the conversation by noting prior contributions that have shaped the current voices. This was conducted using *backwards-chaining reference harvesting*.
Collating what you have heard	• I *made decisions* about which reflective inclusions were still relevant. • I r*eflected on* the collated 'voices', considering how selected literature relates to the review question and whether any stages need to be revisited.

2.5.4 Charting

Table 5 gives an overview of 10 studies included in the review. Influenced by Arksey & O'Malley's (2005) method of charting key information, the process involved repeatedly reviewing each study and charting six areas of information: author, literature type, aims, study populations, methodology, analysis, and findings. This provided a foundational understanding before moving to critical engagement and then cross-comparison during synthesis.

Table 5

Charting summary of selected literature

Paper	Literature Type	Aims	Methods / Analysis	Sample / Participant	Findings	Notes
Challenging Behaviour Foundation & Positive and Active Behaviour Support (CBF & PABSS) (2019, 2020)	Advocacy-based report	Document the frequency, nature, impact, and recording methods of restrictive practices to inform policy change.	Mixed methods: Survey and case studies No analytic framework was reported Results reported descriptively and statistically	Parents and carers survey (CBF) (n = 204) Case studies (PABSS) (n = 566)	Reports widespread, repeated restraint and seclusion. C/YP injuries; poor recording and notification to families. The report calls for compulsory reporting and urgent reform.	These two studies were combined in the search as they are presented in the same report. The source also includes experience with reasonable force in settings, such as school clubs and community groups, but primarily focuses on the educational context and is retained for this reason.

Danby (2020)	Research *Doctoral*	Explore the experience of TAs supporting excluded children in Alternative provisions	Qualitative Semi-structured interviews Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis	Teaching Assistants (n = 6) Alternative provisions (n = 2)	Five overarching themes describe professional commitment with a significant emotional impact. Relationships with C/YP are described as nurturing and challenging. TAs experienced their work as a "juggling act".	Restraint is noted in a subtheme but not fully explored. It is retained due to my curiosity and reflective engagement noted in the PRISMA (Appendix B)

Willis et al., (2021)	Research *Published*	Explore how C/YP with SEMH needs perceive the impact of restraint on relationships with staff, and how this differs between witnesses and direct involvement.	Qualitative Stimuli-informed focus groups Two focus groups, one for C/YP with direct impact, one for witnesses of restraint Thematic analysis	Boys aged 9–11 (n = 10) SEMH special schools (n = 2)	Anger was noted, but relationships were not lastingly damaged. Witnesses of restraint reported more negative emotions. Post-incident dialogue with staff helped repair relationships.

Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) (2021)	Review	Examine how schools record/use restraint data, and use it to improve outcomes.	No analytic framework was reported Results reported descriptively and statistically. Implied synthesis and triangulation across data sets.	Online survey for schools (n = 641) Question response Welsh LAs (n = 15) School case studies (n = 9)	Inconsistent policies and recording practices. Limited equality monitoring. Recommends compulsory recording and better guidance and training.

Reducing Restrictive Intervention Safeguarding Children and Young People Group (RRISC) (2021)	Advocacy-based Report	Ascertain the impact and use of restraint and seclusion on disabled children at school during the first COVID lockdown.	Survey (with open and closed questions) No analytic framework was reported Results reported descriptively and statistically.	Parents and carers survey responses (n = 48) Special School Staff survey responses (n = 12)	Overall, findings suggest heightened use of restraint and ongoing systemic pressures on staff.

Stothard (2022)	Research *Doctoral*	Accessing the views of a C/YP who has been physically restrained and determining appropriate ways to access them.	Thematic analysis 5 creative, child-led sessions	Qualitative Child age 12 (n = 1)	Overall, the findings highlight the emotional and relational impact of restraint and the importance of communication in reducing its use.

International Coalition Against Restraint and Seclusion (ICARS) (2023)	Advocacy-based research report	Examine the frequency, nature, and impact of restraint and seclusion in English schools. Draw attention to children's and families' experiences.	Survey (with open and closed questions) No analytic framework was reported Results reported descriptively and statistically	Parent/carer survey responses (n = 560)	Restrictive practices against disabled children have become dangerous and insufficiently regulated. Existing policy offers little protection or accountability, and autistic children are most likely to be restrained.

Mullowney (2023)	Research *Doctoral*	Examine the legal and ethical guidance on positive handling and explore staffs view and experience implementing advice and guidance in UK schools.	Qualitative Scoping Review and focus groups Directive content analysis (review) Conventional/evaluative content analysis (focus groups); NVivo supported.	**Paper 1:** (Mullowney & Kelly, 2023) Scoping review (n = 60) **Paper 2**: Focus groups + interviews with school staff School Staff (n = 31)	Inconsistent guidance led to the synthesis of 10 practice areas into a model for positive handling. Focus groups suggested emotional impacts on staff, including distress, self-doubt, and suppression due to a perceived taboo of the topic.	An Additional author, Kelly (2023), contributed to parts of Paper 1.

Hodgkiss & Harding (2024)	Research *Published*	Understand C/YP direct experience of physical restraint and to explore perspectives on alternative strategies.	Qualitative Semi-structured interview Thematic analysis; incorporation of drawings and writing. Inductive approach	Primary-aged children (n = 4) Male (n = 2) Female (n = 2) Specialist SEMH School in England (n = 1)	Restraints were experienced as distressing but understood as necessary. Mixed impact on relationships with staff. Recommend personalised de-escalation strategies.

Department for Education (2024)	Research Report	Understand when reasonable force is being used, and the recording practices in alternative provision & special schools, and to understand what schools think will help minimise it.	Qualitative Interviews Site visits Impromptu, on-site interviews Thematic/ grid analysis across transcripts and fieldnotes.	Special schools (n = 30) Alternative provisions (n = 15) Participants (n = unspecified)	Overall, schools had reasonable force policies embedded within behaviour frameworks, supported by individual behaviour plans. Reasonable force was reported as being recorded as a last resort. However, terminology varied.

2.6 Critical Engagement

The literature search produced a variety of sources, which made critical appraisal challenging. For example, sources included academic and unpublished research and advocacy reports. I wanted to resist academic selectiveness and recognise that many have the right to speak in conversations about reasonable force.

Ryan & Rutty's (2019) TAPUPASM framework enabled me to engage with this complexity. TAPUPASM (Pawson et al., 2003) is an acronym that includes *transparency, accessibility, purposivity, utility, propriety, accuracy, specificity,* and *modified objectivity*. Transparency refers to the clarity and coherence of knowledge generation. Accessibility considers how the research is disseminated. Purposivity considers whether the research methods have achieved their aims. Utility explores the usefulness of the knowledge produced to the field. Propriety asks if the research is ethical and legal. Accuracy refers to how claims are based on the most appropriate information. Specificity considers if the research meets the standards of its professional context, and Modified Objectivity concerns reflexivity and researcher positioning (Ryan & Rutty, 2019). Ryan and Rutty (2019) added Modified Objectivity to make it compatible with critical realism. It assumes that reality can only be partially known (Ryan & Rutty, 2019). Therefore, knowledge is contextual and shaped by the limits of human understanding.

I acknowledge that objectivity in experiences of reasonable force is not definitive but multi-layered and disrupted by the unconscious. As a result, I also consider how my emotions and perception of the literature interact with critical engagement, recognising that defended subjectivity and emotional responses influence my critical appraisal. Therefore, I noted my affective responses to each

study to understand how conscious appraisal and unconscious defences may intersect (Montuori, 2005).

Consequently, the areas of the TAPUPASM framework (Ryan & Rutty, 2019, p. 19) guided critical engagement rather than serving as a quality checklist (Appendix C), and no sources were omitted. This recognised that my critical engagement was not neutral and allowed reflection on who was speaking, why and in what context.

2.7 Synthesis

I viewed synthesis as a creative and interpretive process. After gathering the studies and critically engaging with the conversation, the next step was to ask *who was speaking and what they were talking about*. This aligned with Braun and Clarke's (2022) ‘Big Q’ approach by examining the curated material and constructing meaning through interpretation of the ‘conversation’, offering a contextualised understanding of what is currently understood in relation to the review question . Inevitably, this was partial and shaped by my own defended subjectivity.

I started by synthesising sources into ‘voices’ and ‘key areas of discussion’. This was supported by an iterative reading of the literature and synthesis matrices that mapped the two leading questions (Appendix D). This was preceded by the charting process, which, in line with scoping review methodology, facilitated cross-comparison between studies (Arksey & O’Malley, 2005).

Voices. Four distinct yet connected ‘voices’ were generated from the literature type and aims identified during the charting process. These were characterised as:

- The advocates (CBF & PABSS, 2019, 2020; ICARS, 2023; RRISC , 2021)
- The reviewers (DfE, 2024; EHRC, 2021)

- The researchers (Danby, 2020; Hodgkiss & Harding, 2024; Mullowney, 2023; Stothard, 2022; Willis et al., 2021)
- The improvers (Hodgkiss & Harding, 2024; Mullowney, 2023)

Studies, such as Mullowney (2023) and Hodgkiss and Harding (2024), were grouped into two voices because their aims and literature types spanned research and improvement efforts.

Key areas of discussion. I interpreted four key areas of discussion. These were generated from the participant samples and methods identified during the charting process.

These included:

- Families' experiences
- Children and Young people's experiences
- Staff experiences
- Reviewing and improving

Additionally, repeatedly reading the studies and noting the findings shaped my understanding of the experiences, which I will explore across the four main areas of discussion noted above. First, I offer a reflection on the conversation so far, combining my interpretations from critical appraisal and synthesis.

2.7.1 Who is talking and what are they talking about?

The conversation about reasonable force features four distinct voices, each representing different perspectives: the Advocates, Reviewers, Researchers and Improvers.

The *Advocates* (CBF & PABSS, 2019, 2020; ICARS, 2023; RRISC, 2021) speak on behalf of families and C/YP; notably, they are the only voice representing family perspectives. They do so with a strong sense of moral urgency and call for reform. The advocates demonstrate *accessibility* and *utility* in their work. For example, their reports are clear and accessible, and they speak boldly about the harm and distress families and C/YP are facing. However, *transparency* and *accuracy* appeared less evident as they spoke. They provided limited information about methodological choices or analysis within their work. This may itself reflect the urgent nature of advocacy, where something needs to be said quickly and takes priority over rigour.

I regarded the advocates as important because they speak directly into spaces where few have spoken. Their voice also paved the way for later research, as several academic studies (e.g. Hodgkiss & Harding, 2024; Mullowney, 2023) explicitly reference the advocates to justify the need for research. I wondered whether, without their voice, the conversation about reasonable force would have been seen as needing attention.

The *Reviewers* (DfE, 2024; EHRC, 2021) represent oversight and compliance. Their voices coincide with or follow the advocates' calls to reform and precede legislative changes (DfE, 2025a, 2026). These reviewers demonstrate strong *specificity* and *utility* by providing structured accounts aligned with policy standards or human rights frameworks. Yet they said little about who they were, the emotional climate they were researching, or the impact this may have had on their findings. Consequently, the reviewers' voices reinforce why the conversation is happening: there is concern about the use of reasonable force and the need to monitor it.

The *Researchers* (Danby, 2020; Hodgkiss & Harding, 2024; Mullowney, 2023; Stothard, 2022; Willis et al., 2021) are among the few who have engaged directly with C/YP or staff, focusing on their perspectives. The researchers' voices demonstrate strong *transparency* and *purposivity*. Their work shows methodological coherence and clearly articulated aims. However, the researchers acknowledge little about their own emotions, and the findings are situated within the research subjects rather than reflecting their positions. I wondered whether this creates a distance that protects them from the possible discomfort of researching reasonable force.

The *Improvers* (Mullowney, 2023) offer recommendations for reasonable-force alternatives or improved practice. Others, such as advocates and reviewers, also seek to generate solutions and call for improved training or practice. However, the improvers' voice shifts the conversation more directly to a model of ‘positive handling’ (Mullowney, 2023). I felt there was a preoccupation with improvement throughout the conversation, perhaps because of my own desire to stay with the topic’s complexity. I was curious if this suggests an underlying unease in the conversation; a need for resolution in a matter that feels ethically troubling.

The following section presents my response as an internal dialogue. The synthesised voices and key areas of discussion are critically considered and responded to in turn. My task was to hold multiple perspectives together in dialogue and respond in my own voice as the ‘*psychosocial creative reviewer’*. In this sense, I became a container for the conversation, reflecting on what is being said, what is left unsaid, and what still needs to be asked.

2.8 Response

The four key areas of discussion are addressed in turn: Families' Experiences, Children's Experiences, Staff Experiences, and Reviewing and Improving. This addresses the review question of "*What is known from the literature about the use and experiences of reasonable force and restraint in UK educational settings?"* However, as discussed earlier, what can be known from the literature is translated through defences and discourses that seek to protect against anxiety (Hollway & Jefferson, 2013). This anxiety permeates the individual and social systems; therefore, what can be known is always filtered through defended lenses. My task was not to remove these defences but interpret them and consider what they may suggest about the uses and experiences of reasonable force in education.

2.8.1 Families Experiences

The advocates' voices (CBF & PABSS, 2019, 2020; ICARS, 2023) are the primary channel for representing family experiences. They describe poor communication, exclusion from decision-making, and feelings of mistrust and powerlessness that affect family well-being and relationships with schools. Together, they give family stories visibility that might otherwise have remained unspoken.

The advocates' voices spanned a period of social concern. This includes during and after the COVID-19 pandemic (CBF & PABSS, 2019, 2020; ICARS, 2023), and amid growing public unease about restraint. For example, the CBF & PABSS (2019, 2020) reports follow the introduction of the Mental Health Units (Use of Force) Act (2018), known as *Seni's Law*. I interpreted the tone and timing of this literature as voicing a collective public concern about reasonable force and a desire for transparency and accountability.

Poor Communication. Poor communication and exclusion from decision-making were consistently highlighted across advocacy reports. For example, ICARS (2023) reported that out of 560 responses, 76% of parents were unaware that restrictive interventions could be used on their child, 52% were unaware that restraints had been used, and 43% were told of incidents directly by their child. Similarly, CBF & PABSS (2019, 2020) found that families were rarely informed about restraints. Consequently, parents described feeling excluded and misinformed (CBF & PABSS, 2019, 2020; ICARS, 2023).

Poor communication also appeared to impact recording practices. CBF & PABSS (2019, 2020) reported that in the PABSS case studies, 81% of injuries were not recorded, although it is unclear what this means in practice (CBF & PABSS, 2019, 2020). I considered that parents may have noticed unexplained injuries or might have been told about injuries without documentation. This raises questions about how harm is communicated in education and suggests a lack of focus on C/YP dignity and rights (CBF & PABSS, 2019, 2020).

Powerlessness. Powerlessness is a recurring experience for families and undermines their well-being. For example, ICARS (2023) found that 57% of families had complained about restraint, yet 84% reported no noted accountability. Additionally, some families described being pressured to sign consent for restraint as a condition of their child's placement at school (ICARS, 2023, p. 26). Other families reported intimidation when they tried to complain, such as being told by a headteacher, "Who will believe you over me?" (ICARS, 2023, p. 87). Similarly, CBF & PABSS (2019, 2020) reported families feeling dismissed when raising concerns; as one parent reflected, they had "fought [unsuccessfully] for 8 years for some kind of accountability" (p. 20). Furthermore, families reported that this had widespread

effects on the family, leading to mental health impacts and family breakdown (CBF & PABSS, 2019, 2020). One parent noted that the family was “unable to cope with knowing how disabled children are treated” (CBF & PABSS, 2019, p. 20). This illustrates the struggle families face in seeking accountability and the distress powerlessness can cause.

Mistrust. Family accounts reflect a possible breakdown of honesty between school and home. For example, parents believed schools concealed the use of restraint, reporting, “the SENCO let it slip,” “they tried to deny it,” “[it was] divulged by accident,” and “I found out through a freedom of information request” (ICARS, 2023, p. 30). CBF & PABSS (2019, 2020) identified similar patterns, in which parents discovered restraint records after freedom of information requests. Several families reported shock at the frequency with which their children had experienced restraint and seclusion, of which they were not previously aware (CBF & PABSS, 2019, 2020).

Families also did not appear to trust staff. CBF & PABSS (2019, 2020) reported that 42% of families felt restraint was used as punishment, and over 60% believed incidents could have been avoided if staff were better trained. Families also reported reasons given for restraint, including justifications such as “discipline,” “naughty,” or “cheeky” (ICARS, 2023, p. 66). This suggests that perceived concealment could erode trust between home and schools.

Critical Considerations. Although essential in capturing family experience, these advocacy reports have methodological weaknesses. For example, the ICARS (2023) report relied on social media recruitment and self-reported data from a self-selected sample. This may have meant that families with particularly strong or

negative experiences were more likely to respond. Likewise, CBF & PABSS (2019, 2020) used social media recruitment to collect survey data, alongside case studies between 2017 and 2019. This meant there was an extended data collection period for the CBF & PABSS (2019, 2020) reports. There was also a lack of clarity regarding duplication between survey and case-study responses, weakening the clarity of the findings. Additionally, it is conceivable that families contributed to both the ICARS (2023) and CBF & PABSS (2019, 2020) reports, as these reports were shared via social media, further complicating understanding of the impact on families.

Furthermore, CBF & PABSS (2019, 2020) consider reasonable force across various settings, including school transport, community groups, and holiday clubs. Although the main focus of the report is on the implied educational context, it is unclear which statistics refer to each specific setting. These methodological concerns make it difficult to interpret family experience with confidence. However, without the advocates voicing families' stories, these experiences may have remained unknown.

Response. I interpreted families' experiences as characterised by mistrust and moral urgency, with advocates supporting them in sharing their experiences. Their accounts reflect exclusion from decisions, being uninformed and the impact on family life. The advocates translate these experiences into a call for reform.

For me, this was reminiscent of *splitting* (Klein, 1946), a defensive position in which others could be understood as *good* or *bad* with little nuance. This may occur as a defence against overwhelming emotion. I wonder within family experience if schools may have become positioned as 'bad' objects, while families and advocates

position themselves as protectors of the ‘good’ child. This may offer temporary relief from the uncertainty surrounding children’s care at school but may reduce the capacity to hold the complexity of practice.

This dynamic perhaps mirrors the media accounts outlined in Section 1.10. These suggested a climate of mistrust in which staff practice is scrutinised. It may be that schools struggle to acknowledge distressing experiences, perhaps as a way to manage their own discomfort; however, this may also heighten parents’ suspicion, reinforcing a power imbalance between home and school. Therefore, I interpreted the advocate voices as giving voice to this distress. Their testimonies speak back to the systems which the families are trying to hold to account, demanding to be heard. Consequently, listening to this conversation invites recognition that family accounts are essential to understanding what can be known about the experiences of reasonable force.

The next section turns to the C/YP's perspective, exploring how researchers and advocates represent their experiences.

2.8.2 Children and Young People's Experience

Three researchers engage directly with C/YP’s experiences (Hodgkiss & Harding, 2024; Stothard, 2022; Willis et al., 2021). I interpreted these experiences as emotionally complex. For example, research highlights distress caused by restraint (Stothard, 2022), while other research suggests that relationships with staff, although disrupted by reasonable force, can be repaired and understood through safety rationales (Hodgkiss & Harding, 2024; Willis et al., 2021). The advocates, however, report a severe picture of harm and injustice for C/YP (CBF & PABSS, 2019, 2020; ICARS, 2023; RRISC, 2021). Consequently, there may be many different

experiences of reasonable force, and the combined research only represents a snapshot.

Danger, Harm and Injustice. The advocates voice the severity and frequency of reasonable force that causes physical and psychological harm. For example, 47% of families in ICARS (2023) shared that their child was psychologically harmed. Although this term is not defined, open-ended responses included “night terrors,” “flashbacks,” “toileting difficulties,” “fear of touch,” and “panic attacks” (ICARS, 2023, p. 48). Physical injuries included “bruises,” “nosebleed,” “marks on body,” “facial scarring,” “carpet burns,” and “hospital admission,” with some families reporting life-threatening harm, for example, “he collapsed after because he could not breathe” (ICARS, 2023, pp. 49, 52). Similarly, CBF & PABSS (2019, 2020) document the frequency and severity of incidents, including daily use of restraint in 35% of cases, severe harm, such as a “broken thumb”, and unlawful practice such as a teacher “slapping the child’s face” (CBF & PABSS, 2019, 2020, p. 19). Cases without harm were rare, with just 3% of families reporting no harm in ICARS (2023).

RRISC (2021) adds further context by reporting the use of reasonable force during the COVID-19 pandemic. Based on 48 parental responses, RRISC (2021) found that self-injury among SEND C/YPs increased during the first lockdown, and that restrictive practices rose in autumn 2020 compared with the same period in 2019. These experiences may be particularly relevant for autistic C/YP, who were the largest group of C/YP represented across advocacy reports (CBF & PABSS, 2019, 2020; ICARS, 2023; RRISC, 2021). Consequently, advocates emphasise the high risk and the repeated exposure to reasonable force experienced by C/YP.

Mixed Emotions. C/YPs' emotions regarding reasonable force are complicated; no single emotional response appeared to define their experience.

Stothard’s (2022) critical realist research offers a rare perspective on the memory of restraint. Stothard's (2022) research included a single case study: a 12-year-old Black African boy in an SEMH provision. The research used semi-structured interviews across five sessions and employed creative tools, such as painting, to explore past experiences of restraint from a previous school. Stothard (2022) identified themes of restraint being emotionally and physically hurtful, loss of control, worry about future restraint, and anger towards previous staff, alongside memories of kindness from a teacher. One painting from the session was described as representing his use of humour to mask painful emotions. This suggests the possibility of enduring emotional responses to reasonable force.

However, children also appeared to feel both distress and understanding regarding restraint (Hodgkiss & Harding, 2024; Willis et al., 2021). For example, Hodgkiss and Harding (2024) used semi-structured interviews with four Key Stage 2 pupils from an SEMH school to explore their experience of direct physical restraint. Through inductive thematic analysis, they noted emotional experiences of stress and anger, as well as reflections of understanding restraint as a way to keep themselves and others safe (Hodgkiss & Harding, 2024).

Similarly, Willis et al. (2021) used focus groups with ten boys aged 9 to 11 years with SEMH needs in two specialist schools to explore the impact of restraint and how this differs between witnesses and those with direct involvement. Findings suggest a range of emotional responses, including a subtheme of anger and feeling fearful of adults. For example, all participants reported believing pupils would feel

angry towards adults who restrained them and, without prompting, said they would feel the same way (Willis et al., 2021). Nonetheless, participants also acknowledged that restraint could prevent harm to themselves or others. However, Willis et al. (2021) note that some participants from both groups “offered opinions that they themselves contradicted moments later” (p.5). This suggests that distress and reassurance can co-exist, but achieving this balance is complex and reflects the mixed emotions experienced by C/YPs.

Relationships With Adults. The impact of reasonable force on C/YPs’ relationships with adults appears to vary. For example, children who witnessed restraints expressed more negative views about teacher-child relationships, believing it would take longer to restore positive adult connections compared to those who had been directly restrained (Willis et al., 2021). It may be that observing restraint, without understanding the experience first-hand, could erode trust. However, it was also noted that positive relationships with adults could reduce the likelihood of restraint and support recovery (Stothard, 2022; Willis et al., 2021). This suggests that relationships are a significant protective factor in experiences of reasonable force, yet witnesses’ experiences show how relational safety is impacted when witnessing others' distress. Overall, Willis et al. (2021) suggest that relationships between the child and adult may not be lastingly damaged.

Other researchers have voiced the importance of relationships for children in reasonable force experiences. For example, Stothard's (2022) case study noted a teacher's kindness as an important protective factor in feeling safe, as well as the need for teachers to build deeper connections with students so that it could be a protective factor during restraint. Similarly, Hodgkiss and Harding (2024) suggest that children's experience with adults can vary. For example, some children in their

research expressed positive feelings about staff alongside negative feelings about being restrained, while others felt negative toward the staff member involved (Hodgkiss & Harding, 2024). Consequently, reasonable force may be experienced differently across contexts or the existing dynamics between the adult and child.

Critical Considerations. The researchers (Hodgkiss & Harding, 2024; Stothard, 2022; Willis et al., 2021) offer valuable academic rigour to the conversation, with clear methodological frameworks and transparent analytic processes. However, they are limited as the samples were small and primarily included boys and specialist schools. In contrast, the advocates (CBF & PABSS, 2019, 2020; ICARS, 2023; RRISC, 2021) present evidence from larger samples, but rely on second-hand accounts and are methodologically fragile. Between the advocates, it is unclear whether sample populations reflect distinct cohorts with different experiences or overlap. Consequently, what can be known about C/YP's experience of reasonable force is only a partial snapshot.

Nevertheless, a notable strength of the researchers is their creative approaches. For example, Stothard (2022) and Hodgkiss and Harding (2024) used drawing and painting to support participants in expressing complex feelings about restraint. The participant in Stothard's (2022) case study described the research process as enjoyable and therapeutic, leading to the recommendation that C/YP who have experienced restraint should receive emotional support. Additionally, he described his painting as using humour to conceal painful emotions. This suggests that creative methods could enable symbolic expression and help make sense of latent emotions.

Similarly, Willis et al. (2021) used mock images of restraint in the focus groups to help build a sense of safety and accessibility. However, I wonder whether they could have narrowed the scope of interpretation of latent emotions. Indeed, in Willis et al.'s (2021) research, C/YP were “steered away from referencing their own experiences” (p. 5), thereby creating distance from the immediacy of experience. I also wondered whether these methodological decisions suggest how the research process itself managed possible unease. Such decisions may offer a means of containing the discomfort of researching potential harm, but perhaps at the expense of deeper emotional understanding.

Response. Listening to the conversation about C/YP experiences was emotional. I was shocked at the advocates' descriptions of harm and injustice. Additionally, I also felt confusion, as the researchers offer a more nuanced view of C/YP experiences, including moments of understanding, which initially seemed contradictory. Consequently, I interpreted that C/YP may experience and acknowledge care alongside hurt, and I wonder if this, perhaps, reflects attempts to find meaning in a context that involves both dependency and control.

The acknowledgement of distress and understanding in C/YP accounts was reminiscent of the depressive position (Klein, 1935). In this position, positive and negative experiences coexist rather than being separated, arguably embodying a duality that mirrors the nature of reasonable force, in which safety is maintained through control. I was curious whether, in these moments when C/YP acknowledged this, it may indicate they are experiencing their relationships with adults through this unconscious process. However, much ambiguity remains, as there is limited research on C/YP experiences. This uncertainty itself can create further concern,

which catalyses cycles of advocacy, research and reform. As a result, the conversation is ongoing but incomplete.

The following section explores staff perspectives, as shared by researchers, and how the other side of the encounter is experienced.

2.8.3 Staff Experiences

The literature search provided limited results regarding staff experiences. For example, Mullowney (2023) is the only significant piece of academic work that directly addresses this topic. Mullowney's (2023) study was divided into two parts: a scoping review to examine guidance on 'positive handling', discussed in Section 2.8.4, and focus groups with staff from both mainstream and specialist settings to explore their experiences and perspectives on implementation, discussed in this section. Alongside this, Danby's (2020) study of teaching assistants from alternative provision supporting C/YP who had received a fixed-term or permanent exclusion from either primary or secondary school offers indirect insight into how restraint features within their experience of working with behaviour that challenges. Additionally, the RRISC (2021) report includes a small staff survey conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic. Overall, this creates a limited but valuable part of the conversation, speaking into what feels like a significant silence.

Emotional Labour. The literature reflects the ongoing effort for staff to manage emotions alongside professionalism, suggesting intense emotional labour. For example, Mullowney's (2023) critical realist research suggested that staff felt worry, guilt, sadness, and frustration regarding their experiences. Additionally, they described suppressing their feelings due to the perceived taboo around restraint, often experiencing distress, self-doubt, and fear of judgment (Mullowney, 2023).

Institutional inconsistencies and unclear guidance appeared to add to this. However, trusting relationships with pupils were seen as protective, helping to repair relationships, with staff expressing the need for supervision and post-incident reflection (Mullowney, 2023).

Similarly, Danby (2020) highlights the emotional negotiation of staff in alternative provision, supporting excluded primary and secondary C/YP. Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), Danby (2020) interpreted the emotional commitment staff had towards C/YP, alongside the strain of managing behaviour. In particular, Danby (2020) notes the emotional labour expressed by staff and, as in Mullowney (2023), includes instances of suppressed emotion. Furthermore, experiences of restraint were indirectly reported by two participants, captured under the subtheme “complexities of managing behaviour and need” (Danby, 2020, p. 97). This suggests how physical management of behaviour may become woven into emotional experiences. Additionally, Danby (2020) noted the importance of the staff team in this emotional landscape that provided “personal strength and emotional holding during difficult times” (p. 136). This finding suggests the relevance of group dynamics as a form of support when working with behaviour that challenges or harms.

RRISC (2021) extends our understanding of staff experiences by contextualising their experiences of reasonable force during the COVID-19 lockdown. RRISC (2021) conducted a small staff survey (n = 12) from special schools in England and Wales to explore staff experiences. They reported that 92% of staff experienced heightened “anxiety” compared to the previous year, despite protective factors such as experienced teams, larger spaces, and well-being-focused curricula being in place (RRISC, 2021, p.13). This was reported alongside a parent

survey, which indicated increased restraint for C/YP at the same time, suggesting a pressurised system even with more available resources.

Overall, the conversation about staff experiences suggests a continual negotiation between care and control. Additionally, restraint and behaviour management are seen as potentially arousing unease and guilt, linked to staff's commitment to keeping C/YP safe.

Critical Considerations. Mullowney's (2023) research demonstrates high *transparency* and *purposivity* (Ryan & Rutty, 2019). Their research has clear aims, a coherent ontological and epistemological positioning, and they are transparent about their sample and research procedures, effectively exploring their aims. However, the focus on descriptive themes in the focus group analysis may have limited exploration of reported suppressed emotions. Similarly, Danby's (2020) use of IPA was methodologically well-suited to exploring staff's lived experience. It offered a rich account of the emotional labour experienced by staff. However, reasonable force appeared only tangentially, perhaps reflecting possible researcher or participant defensiveness when engaging with a topic that may cause unease. However, the RRISC (2021) report demonstrated weaker rigour. It provided little detail on sampling, consent, or analytic approach, which reduces confidence in its findings. Therefore, RRISC (2021) offers partial insights that are hard to generalise.

Response. The understanding of educational staff experiences relating to reasonable force remains tentative. Nevertheless, the conversation highlights emotion as a central experience, including but not limited to the juggling act of behaviour management (Danby, 2020), and instances of suppressed emotion

(Mullowney, 2023). This builds a picture of staff's experience as emotionally complex, similar to that experienced by C/YP.

I found myself drawn to these voices in the conversation. They discussed familiar experiences from my own practice, which resonated with me. During the conversation, these experiences were scarcely discussed, inviting reflection on why staff's experience of reasonable force remains under-examined, and how this silence may influence how it is experienced.

Additionally, it struck me that Danby (2020) and Mullowney (2023) are doctoral theses rather than published papers. This may be meaningful, suggesting a wider discomfort within the research community about which experiences should be prioritised. I interpreted this possible avoidance as a way for academia to manage the ethical dilemma that may arise when making judgements of priority between staff and C/YP experience. However, I believe that understanding staff experiences can help support C/YP. By understanding the other side of the encounter, we can begin to learn more about how reasonable force is experienced holistically.

2.8.4 Reviewing and Improving

This section explores the reviewers' and improvers' contributions to the conversation, supported by the advocates (CBF & PABSS, 2019, 2020; ICARS, 2023). The reviewer's concern is the oversight of reasonable force in educational settings (DfE, 2024; EHRC, 2021), while the improvers apply academic rigour to the search for solutions (Mullowney, 2023). Overall, their voices highlight variability in recording and implementation and advocate for a clearer understanding of reasonable force, including the facilitators and barriers to best practice (Mullowney,

2023). Consequently, their voices position reasonable force as a practice that can be done ‘correctly’, made safer through better alternatives.

Inconsistency. The reviewed literature suggests inconsistency in the recording and monitoring of reasonable force. The EHRC (2021) examined how English schools record and use restraint data; through surveys and school case studies, they identified significant gaps in recording and equality monitoring of reasonable force. For example, a quarter of the schools included did not record all incidents of reasonable force, and they had limited capacity to analyse any disproportionality in the data (EHRC, 2021). Furthermore, the protected characteristics of the C/YP being restrained were not documented in over half of the surveyed schools, with race the most frequently unrecorded characteristic (EHRC, 2021). This suggests a worrying trend, not only in inconsistent recording, but also in who isn’t represented in the data.

The DfE (2024) *Reasonable force, restraint & restrictive practices in alternative provision and special schools Research report* presents a more mixed picture. The report found variability in terminology and training across schools, but more consistency in the policy and reporting practices. For example, all staff in the DfE (2024) report had a comprehensive reasonable-force policy that positioned it as a last resort, and all schools reported recording all incidents of reasonable force. It suggested many schools used recorded data to identify patterns and understand triggers to support C/YP (DfE, 2024).

However, ICARS (2023) reported parents were unaware of how incidents were recorded, and many believed that data collection did not inform support strategies. One response noted, “I was aware it was recorded. I don’t believe this

was used to monitor the situation*”* (ICARS, 2023, p. 82). Overall, these findings indicate differing perspectives on what might be espoused versus what is experienced in practice.

Solutions. Mullowney's (2023) research highlights a drive for improvement. As part of their research, they conducted a scoping review of 60 papers. Informed by Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994), and supported by an additional author, Kelly (2023), the examined guidance on positive handling was synthesised into ten areas of practice that included planned intervention, balance of power and control, post-incident support and relationships (Mullowney, 2023). This model highlighted the interdependence of relationships, emotion, communication, and context in shaping practice. Its dissemination to the AEP signals a desire to create a shared practice framework.

Likewise, the advocates support whole-school approaches to support C/YP. For example, Positive Behavioural Interventions and Supports (PBIS) were noted to improve pupil behaviour, particularly when supported by training and collaboration with families (CBF & PABSS, 2019, 2020; ICARS 2023). This suggests that improvement in practice is being sought by applying a personalised approach to support C/YP.

Hodgkiss and Harding (2024) also explored perspectives on alternative strategies through direct research with C/YP. They found that C/YP identified personalised strategies, such as running or deep breathing, to reduce restraint. This echoed earlier evidence by Ryan et al. (2007), as noted by Hodgkiss and Harding (2024), that graded, less restrictive responses can reduce restraint. Overall, the

improvers and advocates position reasonable force as a practice that can be improved and prevented through proactive personalisation.

Critical Considerations. In the DfE (2024) report, there was limited detail on recruitment, participant numbers and analysis, which weakens confidence in the interpretive depth of the findings and raises concerns about consistency. Furthermore, the DfE's position of institutional authority alongside its data collection methods, such as video-recorded interviews and impromptu visits, may have introduced response biases, as participants might have felt pressured to say the right thing or face professional risks when engaging with this review. These factors may have shaped the findings, such as reports that reasonable force was adequately recorded and used as a last resort (DfE, 2024), a conclusion that directly contrasts with family reports voiced by advocates (CBF & PABSS, 2019, 2020; ICARS, 2023). The DfE (2024) did not consider these possibilities, and it reports their limitations without adequate reflection. This suggests that what can be known about the use of reasonable force may be shaped by possible power dynamics and should be considered tentatively.

Response. Overall, I interpreted the discussion of reviewing and improving as suggesting a collective desire for certainty in a topic characterised by inconsistency. I wondered if translating inconsistency into recommendations helps these voices transform the unease of complex experiences into a sense of proactiveness. Accordingly, in this conversation, reasonable force becomes polarised as something that can be carried out correctly, positioning research and review as mechanisms to manage unease.

For me, the reviewers (DfE, 2024; EHRC, 2021) characterise this dynamic. They seem to review as a way to reassure; however, this desire for clarity may suggest discomfort as they attempt to oversee rather than understand the complexities of practice. Similarly, the improvers (Hodgkiss & Harding, 2024; Mullowney, 2023) seem to transform the possible moral unease of reasonable force into evidence-based improvement. However, I wondered whether these possible defences risk oversimplifying the experience of reasonable force in practice.

In the following section, I continue my role as the psychosocial creative reviewer, engaging with the review question by attending to what feels difficult or defended, understanding these as potential pathways to unasked questions.

2.9 Review conclusion

The conversation about what can be known regarding the use and experiences of reasonable force in UK educational settings reflects the diversity of experiences and their contradictions. For example, families' experiences, mainly voiced by advocates (CBF & PABSS, 2019, 2020; ICARS, 2023; RRISC, 2021), report poor communication, exclusion from decision-making, and a sense of mistrust and powerlessness, with effects on family life. C/YP's experiences, captured directly by researchers (Hodgkiss & Harding, 2024; Stothard, 2022; Willis et al., 2021), are characterised by mixed and complex emotions, such as anger, alongside a partial understanding of restraint as a safety measure and of disrupted, if not irreparably damaged, relationships with staff (Willis et al., 2021). However, advocates demonstrate the potential for significant physical and psychological harm to C/YP (CBF & PABSS, 2019, 2020; ICARS, 2023; RRISC, 2021).

Staff experiences remain underrepresented but suggest feelings of guilt and emotional labour that often go unacknowledged in research (Danby, 2020; Mullowney, 2023). This absence itself may suggest a possible unease about looking too closely at the emotional experiences of reasonable force on those who carry it out. Lastly, reviewers and improvers (DfE, 2024; EHRC, 2021) highlight inconsistencies in recording reasonable force and demonstrate a strong desire for solutions that prioritise the search for alternatives.

Limits of knowledge production. I have not intended to claim a definitive account of reasonable force in this review. Instead, I have offered a construction of knowledge shaped by interpretive engagement with a sensitive topic. Furthermore, knowledge produced during this process is done so with the disruption of unconscious defences that influence what was voiced as well as heard. Tensions arising from this review need not be resolved but are integral to how meaning is created. Consequently, the review represents an internal dialogue rather than a neutral summary.

2.9.1 What Still Needs to Be Asked?

Anxiety feels central to the topic of reasonable force. For example, the advocates, reviewers, and improvers rarely acknowledge the complexity of experience, instead focusing on improvement and reform. While researchers sometimes recognise the complexity of experience (Danby, 2020; Stothard, 2022; Willis et al., 2021), they tend to note latent emotions rather than fully explore them. Ultimately, there remains a focus on finding alternatives (Hodgkiss & Harding, 2024; Mullowney, 2023).

Ignoring the possibility of complexity in experience may risk reinforcing defensive practices and overlook important factors, such as unconscious processes. Future research that acknowledges the uncertainty surrounding reasonable force could broaden the ongoing conversation about supporting staff and C/YP. Therefore, there is a need for research methods to go beyond surface accounts and investigate the latent emotional experiences of those involved.

Despite their central role in using reasonable force, staff experiences have rarely been explored. This possible avoidance may protect against the discomfort of looking too closely at the perspectives of those who use reasonable force, as if doing so could risk appearing to align with their use of it. However, it is here, where we experience discomfort, that the most meaningful insights might be generated. Future research should not avoid this and should include staff experiences as valuable sources of insight, even if this evokes anxiety. Furthermore, accepting the inherently defended nature of myself as a researcher and of subsequent research participants (Hollway & Jefferson, 2013), I consider that a psychosocial orientation will help anxiety become a route to understanding. This provides a foundation for the following research question, which the next chapter outlines.

Methodology

3.1 Overview

This chapter provides a methodological framework for exploring the research aims and will:

- Explain the purpose of the research and guiding questions
- Explain the ontological and epistemological foundations of the research
- Describe the theoretical framework that underpins this research
- Outline the research design and methods of data collection
- Describe the process of data analysis
- Offer ethical considerations and quality assurances

Table 6

Overall research design

Purpose	Exploratory	**Methodology**	Qualitative Psychosocially Orientated
Ontology	Critical Realism	**Methods**	Talking stones in-person interviews
Epistemology	Critical Realist	**Data Analysis**	Reflexive Thematic Analysis

3.2 Purpose

This research aims to contribute to the conversation on reasonable force by exploring the emotional experiences of educational staff who use it. I believe an exploratory approach is most suitable given the limited attention to staff experiences,

as it allows for an open-ended discussion without being constrained by a predetermined hypothesis. Additionally, to the best of my knowledge, this topic has not yet been considered with a psychosocial orientation. Therefore, I aim to explore how staff perceive these moments, paying attention to unconscious dynamics that may interact with institutional and social contexts. This will support an exploration of the complexities of practice, including emotional, relational, and institutional factors that may influence staff experiences.

3.3 Research Questions

In line with the approach above, the research questions are intentionally open-ended and ask…

> *What can be understood about educational staff's emotional experiences of using reasonable force with children and young people?*

To explore this question further, this research also considers…

1. *How might unconscious processes interact with educational staff's emotional experiences of using reasonable force?*

2. *How might institutional and societal structures intersect with unconscious processes to shape staff experiences of reasonable force?*

These sub-questions help explore causal mechanisms that may interact with emotional experience. They provide insight into the 'intersection' between internal and external worlds that influence the psychosocial subject (Frosh, 2003), enabling a deeper understanding of the topic. Consequently, the research questions are intentionally broad to support the study's exploratory nature. Although the questions

may be interpreted in different ways, their openness is intended to encourage exploration of this complex topic.

3.4 Ontology

Ontology refers to the nature of what is considered real (Fletcher, 2017; Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Ma & Ma, 2022). Reasonable force arguably exists independently of people's perceptions of it, manifested and enacted through legislation and observable physical actions. However, these events are understood through human experience, which is filtered through interpretations (Fletcher, 2017). For this reason, I believe a critical realist ontology is best suited for this research.

Critical realism acknowledges a multidimensional reality, recognising that human perception can only grasp part of the vastness of a phenomenon (Bhaskar, 2012; Fletcher, 2017; Lawani, 2021). This reality is divided into three levels: *the empirical*, where events are understood through imperfect human interpretation; *the actual*, in which events happen; and *the real*, which refers to latent causal mechanisms or structures that influence events at the *empirical level* (Fletcher, 2017). As such, understanding of reality is always partial, while deeper structures and causal mechanisms influence how aspects of reality operate and are understood (Bhaskar, 2012; Fletcher, 2017).

The research questions align with a critical realist ontology. They aim to understand reasonable force through the empirical level of human understanding, while also considering possible causal mechanisms that may intersect with these experiences, such as unconscious processes and institutional and social factors. Next, I consider how knowledge of this reality is formed within this research.

3.5 Epistemology

Epistemology describes the nature of knowledge and how reality comes to be known (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Ma & Ma, 2022). Within this research, I adopt a critical realist epistemology, underpinned by a critical realist ontology. This recognises that knowledge is generated through observation and interpretation to explain aspects of reality (Lawani, 2021). Lawani (2021) describes the epistemological objective of critical realism as being to “describe and clarify the relationship between observed experiences, events and [their] mechanisms” (p.5). Accordingly, participants' accounts and experiences are viewed as a source through which possible underlying psychological, relational, and social mechanisms may be tentatively interpreted.

Critical realism also recognises that knowledge is never absolutely certain and that it cannot ever be complete (Hanly & Fitzpatrick Hanly, 2001). The knowledge generated through this research is therefore understood as fallible and provisional, whilst still providing an avenue through which understanding and meaning can be developed regarding reasonable force.

Furthermore, human experiences, emotions, and the unconscious cannot be separated from social and contextual influences (Frosh, 2010). For example, reasonable force is an inherently social act, experienced with another and situated within a social context; therefore, the social and the individual are understood as intersecting rather than operating as separate entities (Frosh, 2010). From this perspective, unconscious processes operate within and outside the individual, neither fully owned by them nor separate from them, significantly shaping how reality is interpreted.

Hollway (2008) proposes that a crucial method of knowledge production involves the researcher's use of subjectivity as an "instrument of knowing" (p.9). This includes attending to emotional data, which can represent a key element in shaping what can be known (Hollway & Jefferson, 2013). In keeping with a critical realist epistemology, this requires a willingness to refine interpretations in response to emerging evidence (Hanly & Fitzpatrick Hanly, 2001). Accordingly, in this research I use myself as an instrument of knowing, recognising that the interpretations I offer represent a necessarily partial understanding of reality.

Drawing on Hollway's (2006) critical realist epistemological position, this research uses object relations theory as the theoretical framework through which both the participants and I, as the researcher, are understood as potentially 'defended subjects'; this is explored in the following sections. From this perspective, unconscious and defensive processes are recognised as shaping the interpretations and understanding regarding reasonable force. Consequently, the knowledge generated in this research presents a theoretically framed but necessarily fallible interpretation of experiences of reasonable force rather than a claim to an objective or complete truth.

3.5.1 Defended subjects

The defended subject refers to a person's unconscious being aroused by anxiety, thereby protecting itself and causing aspects of reality to be misrecognised or ignored (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000). As explored in the introduction, increased media focus on reasonable force may contribute to a sense of anxiety about the potential harm of C/YP. This anxiety may become embedded in the current sociopolitical context, which in turn influences and is part of the research context. This anxiety may create, at an unconscious level, psychological defences that affect

the individual and the systems around them. Therefore, the interpretations and subjectivities of myself, as a researcher, and the participant are defended, as the unconscious disrupts the reality which is perceived and narrated (Frosh, 2010; Hollway & Jefferson, 2000). As such, this research acknowledges that participants and I are defended subjects (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000).

Consequently, my interpretations and participants' accounts are necessarily partial, shaped by unconscious defences that influence what can be expressed or accurately perceived (Hollway & Jefferson, 2013). This shapes how knowledge comes to be known as provisional and inherently subjective. As such, psychosocial knowledge is never entirely known; its strength is not in certainty but in its capacity to hold complexity (Frosh, 2010). I decided to acknowledge this epistemological complexity in my choice to write psychosocial without a hyphen, as this extract from my research diary explores.

> As I have started this research, I have been asking myself, is this research 'psychosocial' or 'psycho-social'? This feels more than a stylistic writing decision, as this 'hyphen' seems to try to neaten a complex epistemological issue.
>
> I have been reading Hoggett's (2008, p. 379) argument that the hyphen in "psycho-social" demonstrates that the psychological and the social cannot be reduced to one another and are instead held in a dynamic relation. Similarly, Cummins and Williams (2018) seem to view the hyphen as a space that represents the 'both/and' tension of the interdependence and duality of the psychosocial experience.

> However, I have found myself questioning whether even holding the psychological and social as separate yet related entities still represents some kind of binary. I feel that the hyphen becomes misleading. For me, it implies two distinct entities in a relationship, even if they are interdependent. Instead, I feel the psychological and the social are fundamentally entangled.
>
> For me, the social is already present in the psyche, just as psychic processes are already shaped by the social. Therefore, writing ‘psychosocial‘ without the hyphen is not just stylistic but a way of committing to this epistemological acknowledgement. I think it reflects how I understand experiences of reasonable force not as the psychological or social interacting, but as inherently generated from a relational dynamic in which the social and defended subjectivities are already ‘messily’ intertwined.
>
> (Research Diary, 17th April 2025)

3.6 Theoretical Framework

This section presents a theoretical framework that provides a vocabulary for interpretation, encouraging reflection on the self and others within context (Frosh, 2010).

3.6.1 Object Relations

Object Relations Theory (ORT) (Klein, 1935, 1946) provides a perspective for understanding relational interactions. For example, the theory considers the unconscious connections between an individual’s internal and external worlds and the objects that occupy them, suggesting that early bonds, such as the infant-mother relationship, form foundational models for future relational dynamics (Bott Spilius et

al., 2011). In this way, a person develops an inner world that corresponds to experiences of the external environment, yet these are altered by unconscious, primal responses to anxiety, which then shape how others are perceived (Ruszczynski & Johnson, 1999). Consequently, individuals' psyches are situated within a context of relational embeddedness, in which the self and others are experienced as mental representations that influence thought, emotion, behaviour, and defensive responses (Shahar, 2024).

3.6.2 Defences Against Anxiety

Anxiety refers to an inherent human condition characterised by the psyche's internal response to anticipated harm (Freud, 1926). Anxiety also relates to psychic survival when something dangerous is considered to be inside oneself (Curtis, 2015; Klein, 1935, 1946). This includes persecutory anxiety, which suggests a sense of being under attack from either internal or external forces, and depressive anxiety, which suggests a fear of not being good enough for a desired object, resulting in feelings of love and hate, loss and guilt (Curtis, 2015; Klein, 1935, 1946). Therefore, anxiety is a response to internal and external threats.

A key contribution of ORT is the role of defence mechanisms in protecting the psyche against anxiety. Klein (1935, 1946) described two specific responses to anxiety: the paranoid-schizoid and depressive positions.

- The *paranoid-schizoid position* relates to persecutory anxiety, and in this position, splitting may occur (Spillius, 2007). Splitting involves viewing experiences or others as entirely *good* or *bad*, with little room for nuance. As a result, this fragments a person's experience, causing their emotions to fluctuate between idealisation and devaluation (Spillius, 2007). However, this

serves as a defence mechanism that protects the *good* objects from the *bad*, keeping aspects of the psyche safe.

- The *depressive position* involves integrating both the good and the bad of an object as a whole within the internal world, marking a shift from self-preservation to concern for the object and fear of its harm. This realisation often leads to guilt about having damaged the object and a desire to repair it (Roys, 1999).

Klein (1935, 1946) theorised that these positions function through projection and introjection. For example, individuals may *project* parts of the psyche, such as uncomfortable feelings, away from themselves or onto others. Conversely, *introjection* refers to the taking in of experience into the inner world through the attribution of negative and positive qualities (Kennedy & Eastwood, 2021). When one person experiences projected emotions from another, thereby effectively externalising the original person's discomfort, this can be understood as *projective identification* (Klein, 1946).

I consider these concepts to support a critical realist epistemology. This holds that individuals may interpret experiences through internal and external worlds, with defence mechanisms disrupting interactions (Hollway & Jefferson, 2013). The next section explores how the projection of unconscious material may occur within the framework of projective hypotheses.

3.6.3 Projective hypothesis

The projective hypothesis suggests individuals project unconscious thoughts and emotions when presented with ambiguous stimuli, thereby revealing internal processes that may not be consciously accessible (Rapaport, 1942). Rapaport

(1942) suggested two ways through which this projection occurs: *organisation*, in which a person structures ambiguous material in ways that mirror their internal world, and *choice*, in which a person makes preferences among choices to reveal deeper internal dynamics. These processes help latent emotions surface, offering a 'window' into meaning that lies beyond conscious meaning-making (Tuber, 2018). In this research, the projective hypothesis is applied through talking stones.

Talking Stones. The projective tool, talking stones, was initially created for therapeutic work with adults (Crosby, 1993, as cited in Wearmouth, 2004), and is a "projective technique derived from methods related to personal construct psychology" (Wearmouth, 2004, p.6). Participants are invited to *choose* stones of various shapes, colours, and textures to represent themselves, others, and their emotional experiences. These are *organised* on a blank sheet of A4 paper by the participant, where their positions denote a relationship to one another.

Talking stones have been used in research before. For example, Wearmouth (2004) used talking stones to support students in articulating their experiences of marginalisation in school, and Henderson (2009) used talking stones with teachers to explore their implicit theories of teaching and professional identity. In both cases, talking stones enabled emotional expression, allowing participants to convey difficult-to-articulate meaning.

Although talking stones originate within Personal Construct Psychology (Kelly, 1955), this research applies them, recognising that the interpretation of symbolic expression may be defended. Therefore, the focus of talking stones shifts from self-constructed meaning to meaning shaped by unconscious dynamics and social context. As such, talking stones utilise the projective hypothesis through the choice

and organisation of stones, as ambiguous stimuli, that have no inherent symbolism beyond their “stone-ness” (Wearmouth, 2004, p. 8). Consequently, selections represent a projection of internal experience, created as a visual and relational landscape out of which experience may be explored (Henderson, 2009; Wearmouth, 2004). In this way, talking stones are purposefully non-linear and metaphor-rich, enabling participants to narrate their experience in ways that may disrupt consciously rehearsed stories about reasonable force.

I therefore conceptualise talking stones as ambiguous stimuli that can create symbolic meaning, disrupt conscious narratives, and offer a way through which internal states and latent emotions can be projected and explored to facilitate and interpret metaphorical meaning. I do not consider this a route to inner truths, as the unconscious disrupts any claim to certainty, and knowledge in psychosocial research remains necessarily tentative (Frosh, 2010). The value of utilising the projective hypothesis is in providing a way to engage with emotional complexity. This informs the methodological design of this study, which foregrounds the interpretive and subjective nature of the research encounter.

3.6.4 Interpretation and Subjectivity

Interpretation refers to how meaning is created through my, the researcher's, subjective interaction with data (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Goñi, 2025). However, interpreting the world and its phenomena is not an isolated activity; it involves the self in relation to others (Tchelebi, 2018). This consists of engaging with the theoretical framework and using myself as an instrument of knowing, requiring me to become an active participant in knowledge generation (Goñi, 2025; Hollway, 2008). Therefore, any journey to understand human behaviour requires using oneself to interpret and shape that understanding (Tchelebi, 2018). Below are the principles of

subjectivity, intersubjectivity, and intrasubjectivity, offered as ways to explain this process.

Subjectivity can be understood as the researcher's interpretations, reflecting their values and experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2022). In this research, this involves reflecting on my own experience and how it is used to make sense of reasonable force, engaging with psychodynamic concepts, attending to the emotional texture of participants' accounts, and remaining curious about my own unconscious defences (Frosh, 2010). Therefore, it is the process in which a social phenomenon is made sense of empathetically (Tchelebi, 2018).

Intersubjectivity recognises the interconnectedness of the self and the other (Tchelebi, 2018). This can be understood as a recognition between individuals, where each person sees the other as an emotional being while still maintaining their own distinct centre of perception (Tchelebi, 2018). As such, the transfer of emotions between individuals can be experienced, for example, through projective identification.

Intrasubjectivity is offered to explain how another is interpreted. This process focuses on the 'other-in-the-mind' as a lens for making sense of the world, understood through its representation in the mind of the thinker, attempting to understand it (Tchelebi, 2018). It assumes that the other exists independently of me as a researcher but recognises that they are knowable through the mental representations that I form of them. Consequently, it is my focus on 'the-other-in-the-mind', that is, staff experiences of reasonable force, that has generated the research itself.

These concepts align with a critical realist ontology. They do not claim objectivity but embrace a multidimensional view of reality, acknowledging that human perception can only understand parts of a phenomenon (Fletcher, 2017; Lawani, 2021). They also accept the presence of unconscious processes that interact between people and cause disruption to conscious meaning-making. Consequently, interpretation and subjectivity are considered vital resources to the research process (Frosh, 2010). Reflexivity supports these processes and is explored in the next section.

3.6.5 Reflexivity

I viewed reflexivity as an active, iterative process of examining my interpretations and subjectivities. It required me to reflect on myself and take ownership of my interpretations, to understand how knowledge had been produced (Braun & Clarke, 2022). It was not simply reflecting on bias, but about considering the positions I held throughout the research journey and my relationship with the data. Reflexivity also encouraged reflection on how the methods influenced the research design and why, and how my academic and disciplinary context, including educational psychology, shaped which knowledge was foregrounded. However, full insight into these positions is rarely possible (Braun & Clarke, 2022); it required openness and attentiveness to processes shaping interpretation. Therefore, I used several methods to support reflexivity throughout the research process, as described below.

Research Diary. I kept a diary throughout the research journey. This started at the beginning of conceptualising the study through to data analysis, thesis writing and the viva. This diary provided a reflective space to think through key decisions and process emotional experiences. It provided a container for moments of

uncertainty and helped me to remain curious about my positioning. Extracts from the diary are shared throughout the thesis to offer transparency and, in doing so, strengthen the research's trustworthiness.

Field Notes. I am not a neutral observer to the research encounter. My emotions and positionality are integral to the meaning-making process (Thompson, 2014). As a result, I recorded field notes after interviews to capture my emotional responses, initial interpretations, and notable relational dynamics. Recording soon after the encounter supported the closeness of emotional material to context (Emerson et al., 2011 as cited in Thompson, 2014). These notes supported reflection on the possible intersubjective dynamics of the research relationship.

Supervision. I engaged in monthly research supervision at the NLFT. This supported critical reflexivity throughout the research journey. My supervisor had a strong grounding in psychodynamic and psychosocial frameworks, and these sessions offered a reflective space to explore the dynamics of the research process. Supervision helped me remain emotionally present by exploring my own defended positions or relationship to the topic. I felt it offered a space to help make sense of confusing or distressing aspects of the data.

Alongside this, I participated in peer 'reverie groups' at the NLFT . These groups were free-associative spaces rooted in Bion's concept of reverie and the container-contained relationship (Bion, 1962); the process aimed to restore the capacity for thought through emotional attunement and open inquiry (Bartle, 2021). Rather than offering solutions, group members shared spontaneous thoughts, images, and feelings that surfaced in response to my reflections. This process

helped surface my own unconscious associations and blind spots, introducing new perspectives and deepening my interpretive insight.

Lastly, I participated in a multidisciplinary psychosocial research group at the NLFT, which provided a space to connect with other researchers using psychosocial methods and to engage in discussions about the research process and their respective research areas. This experience deepened my understanding of how theoretical concepts can be creatively applied in research and provided an opportunity to reflect on the complex theoretical questions that often arose.

3.7 Research Design

Psychosocial research is inherently a relational endeavour which engages with unconscious dimensions of experience (Cummins & Williams, 2018). This invites the use of innovative, participatory methods that facilitate access to emotionally complex material while also challenging conventional understandings of what constitutes ‘data’ (Cummins & Williams, 2018). As a result, data was gathered through in-person interviews supported by talking stones and analysed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) (Braun & Clarke, 2022). The next section outlines the research process and ethical considerations before proceeding to data analysis.

3.7.1 Recruitment

I approached key contacts within a LA and educational settings in the Southeast of England to publicise the research. This strategy reduced reliance on a single gatekeeper and supported engagement across different educational settings. Key contacts passed the research information onto their senior leaders. Senior leaders at participating settings were provided with detailed information, including the research purpose, safeguarding protocols, participant inclusion criteria and ethical

approval details. Those who expressed interest received a participant sheet (Appendix E), including access to a video I created introducing talking stones. Before gaining consent, I offered participants opportunities to meet and clarify what participation would involve. Further ethical considerations are discussed in Section 3.8.

During recruitment, I noted my own feelings of stepping into a sensitive topic, which were explored in the research diary extract below.

> As I have started recruitment, I've started to notice a quiet but persistent sense of responsibility. As I have reached out to key contacts, I have noticed an emotional weight of introducing a topic like reasonable force, particularly within settings that already feel under strain. I've had a sense that these conversations could easily stir up discomfort, maybe because these environments face increasing external scrutiny and limited resources. I've found myself trying to reassure people about this research, that it isn't about blame or finding fault with their practice. Still, I am aware of how carefully I am managing how the research was presented. I am conscious of trying to protect the research and its intentions, but also of navigating the discomfort in these early exchanges. I wonder, though, if this is a discomfort that I feel more than they do?
>
> (Research Diary, 23rd May 2025)

This reflection captures my desire to reassure others during recruitment and offers insight into possible unconscious processes at work throughout the research journey, made visible through reflexive engagement. Acknowledging this in my diary helped me stay present with discomfort rather than seeking to ease it.

3.7.2 Participants and Sampling

I recruited 10 participants from 4 educational settings in the same LA in the Southeast of England: a mainstream infant school, a mainstream secondary school, and two alternative provisions. The sample comprised 3 males and 7 females. Educational roles varied, but included pastoral support, teachers, senior leaders, educational practitioners, and SEND coordinators. A sample of 10 participants was considered sufficient, as the focus was on generating rich accounts to support interpretive analysis rather than on collecting a large sample (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

At the time of recruitment, new government guidance on reasonable force was under consultation (DfE, 2025a), but the DfE guidance (2013) remained in effect. Therefore, participants were required to have experience using reasonable force in their educational roles. This included passive actions such as blocking and guiding, as well as more active measures such as restraint. The inclusion and exclusion criteria are outlined below.

Table 7

Participant inclusion/exclusion criteria

Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria	Rationale
Educational staff	Children and young people Other professionals (e.g., social workers)	The research question focuses on educational staff's experiences with reasonable force. While C/YP are central to the context of reasonable force, including them as participants or other professionals would shift the research question's focus.

18 years or older, possessing the mental capacity to provide informed consent	Adults who lack the mental capacity to provide informed consent	It is essential for participants to be able to provide informed consent to ensure ethical practice.
Reasonable force practices used within their educational role in the past 18 months	Individuals without direct experience of reasonable force in the past 18 months	Firsthand experience within 18 months supports the relevance of accounts aligned with professional contexts.
Primary, secondary, special-needs, or alternative-provision educational settings.	Medicalised care settings, such as inpatient units or other healthcare facilities, home education, or judicial facilities.	The research focuses on educators' experiences within educational environments where reasonable force is applied in the context of DfE guidance (2013, 2025a).

3.7.3 Data Collection

Talking Stone Interviews. The interview is a relational and socially situated encounter. Its purpose is to develop a deeper understanding of meaning and create a rich space for interpretative engagement (Willig, 2013). Additionally, Grossen (2010) emphasises that interviews are “populated by many other social actors” (p.11), meaning participants’ narratives may include embedded voices or audiences, such as institutional discourse or the imagined perspectives of others. Consequently, I regard the interview encounter as an affective exchange between the participant and me, within a space that invites the broader social or institutional context.

Talking stones were used during in-person interviews as a visual and tactile projective method. After initial rapport-building dialogue about educational roles and supporting challenging behaviour, all participants were asked to select a stone that represented themselves and place it on a blank sheet of A4 paper. Next, prompts were used as starting points for engagement with the stones rather than interview questions. Prompts included being asked to choose a stone to represent the educational setting, reasonable force, a time when they have used or witnessed reasonable force, their feelings or emotions about it, the moments before or after, and any support they received afterwards. After each prompt, participants selected a stone and placed it on the paper. After each choice, I asked follow-up questions such as, "*Can you tell me more about your stone choice?*" or "*What does this represent for you?*", as well as "*What made you place it there?*" I aimed to let participants talk as much as possible before asking further questions or prompting them to select another stone to represent another aspect of their experience. This process built a 'landscape' of stones (or experiences) which were positioned in relation to each other and the first stone, which represented themselves.

The process was evolving rather than prescriptive. For example, although all participants were asked to choose a stone to represent themselves, different prompts or questions were asked depending on the conversation. However, most interviews ended with me asking whether there was another stone they had been drawn to and, if so, why, or if there was anything else they would like to add. This approach provided flexibility in the research encounter, allowing conversations to follow where they naturally developed while offering a structure in which unconscious material could emerge, disrupting any 'rehearsed' narratives of reasonable force.

My role as a researcher was not to passively gather participants' experiences but to generate meaning through interpretation (Braun & Clarke, 2021). This meant I stayed attuned to what was said, or unsaid, as well as to the symbolism used to explain experiences. During the interview, I did not offer ‘in the moment’ interpretations to the participant but rather moved ‘aside’, allowing the interview space to ‘belong’ to them. This was in recognition that participants may have difficulty understanding aspects of the self that are obscured by the unconscious (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000). There are also limits to what can be known, and as the unconscious disrupts everything, including my interpretations and subjectivities, all knowledge is partial (Frosh, 2010).

3.8 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was granted by the NLFT Research Ethics Committee (TREC) in April 2025 (Appendix F). This section discusses my engagement with the British Psychological Society’s (BPS) (2021) four key principles, respect, scientific integrity, social responsibility, and maximising benefit while minimising harm, in relation to minimising harm, informed consent, the right to withdraw, transparency, confidentiality, and data protection.

3.8.1 Minimising harm

Protecting participants’ well-being was a key ethical concern, especially given the potentially distressing nature of reasonable force. Additionally, this is perhaps especially relevant when applying the projective hypothesis, which may surface latent emotions. However, Hollway & Jefferson (2013) argue that emotional discomfort is not necessarily harmful; it can be a productive part of reflection and aid emotional processing. Therefore, I did not aim to eliminate discomfort during the research encounters but saw areas of discomfort as a pathway to potential

understanding, recognising that what may feel uncomfortable might be what requires analytical attention.

Nonetheless, safeguards for minimising harm were embedded. This was managed through relational approaches, recognising that psychosocial research is a relational endeavour (Thomas, 2018). For example, before interviews, participants were invited to complete a wellbeing form to share their preferences for managing distress (Appendix G). Participants were also reminded of their right to take breaks or stop the interview. I also recognised that participants might leave the research encounter in a different emotional state from when they entered. Therefore, debriefing was offered, and interviews concluded with time for questions.

Additionally, participants were signposted to local and national support services, selected for their relevance to education staff. In line with BPS (2021) guidance, the debrief was seen as a continuation of care within the research relationship, rather than closure. These measures helped to minimise harm by providing participants with a sense of personal recognition of individual needs.

3.8.2 Informed consent and the right to withdraw

Signed informed consent was gained before data collection (Appendix E); however, informed consent was viewed as an ongoing ethical commitment rather than a single event. For instance, participants were informed of the limits of confidentiality before consenting, particularly regarding safeguarding or malpractice disclosures. This included a clear protocol, discussed with participants and their senior management, for responding to disclosures that could arise during the interview (Appendix H). No disclosures of safeguarding or malpractice arose.

Participants were informed of their right to withdraw within two weeks; this was the time before I processed the interview transcripts. They did not need to provide a reason for withdrawing, and I emphasised that participation was voluntary. Additionally, I offered opportunities to meet beforehand to help support informed decision-making, and participants were encouraged to take time before consenting. I also recognised that possible pressures of role expectations might influence how freely participants felt able to decline. For example, key contacts during recruitment were asked not to encourage others to participate on my behalf. One interested staff member consented but then withdrew before the interview due to time commitments; no other participants withdrew. These measures helped respect the participants' agency.

3.8.3 Transparency

This research involved no deception; however, I was transparent about the research's interest in exploring and interpreting the unconscious. For instance, the emphasis on the unconscious was explained on the participant sheets, and participants were given access to a video I created about talking stones, explaining its use in research beforehand. This approach helped build trust, especially since participants might not have been familiar with research into unconscious processes.

Furthermore, psychosocial research should be grounded in honesty, empathy, and respect, alongside a tolerance for ambiguity (Hollway & Jefferson, 2013). For example, participants may share partial or defended meanings, and interpretations of these should be tentative. Instead of claiming certainty, this research allows room for ambiguity, including respecting that participants might express aspects of their experience that were previously unspoken. Consequently, transparency means

acknowledging that both the researcher and the participant create meaning in ways that are often emergent and unpredictable, and that no objective truths are claimed.

3.8.4 Confidentiality and Data Protection

Decisions regarding confidentiality were based on the commitment to respect participants' privacy (BPS, 2021). I believed this was especially important given the potentially upsetting nature of reasonable force with C/YP, as discussed in Section 1.10. Confidentiality was maintained through pseudonymisation of participants' names and the removal of identifying details from transcripts and quotes. Furthermore, I remained aware that symbolic traces of institutional roles or personal histories might still be present, even in anonymised narratives. Consequently, careful judgment was used in selecting quotes to include to prevent indirect identification, and only the participants' genders and job roles were reported in the participant sample to ensure participants could not be linked to their pseudonyms.

Data handling complied with NLFT guidance. Audio recordings and transcripts were stored on password-protected systems, and all files were pseudonymised. Hard-copy documents were kept in a locked document safe in a secure location. In line with TREC approval, data will be retained for between 6 and 10 years before being securely destroyed. Participants were informed of their data rights, including the right to withdraw unprocessed data.

3.9 Data Analysis

This research explores the emotional experiences of staff, as well as the unconscious processes and institutional or social factors that may intersect with them. I considered a range of analytic methods, including Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), which I initially explored for its commitment to

understanding how individuals make sense of lived experiences (Larkin et al., 2006; Willig, 2013). This is discussed further in a diary extract (Appendix I).

However, an established tradition of, and interest in, psychosocial and psychoanalytically informed qualitative research which seeks to explore beneath the surface exists (Young & Frosh, 2018). This has informed approaches that attend to dynamics within the interview encounter itself, the researcher's relationship with the data and the coproduction of knowledge with the participant (Clarke & Hogget, 2009; Hogget et al., 2010; Hollway & Jefferson, 2013; Young & Frosh, 2018). Consequently, research and psychoanalytic approaches have developed a dynamic, overlapping relationship, particularly in ways the emotional dynamics of the interview encounter are attended to (Holmes, 2013).

As such, psychoanalytic concepts have helped shape the view that data generation is relational, emphasising the emotional and co-created nature of the qualitative interview. For example, rather than a neutral data-gathering exercise, interviews may be understood as unique, emotionally charged encounters (Holmes, 2013) that psychoanalytically informed concepts can enrich, helping to "thicken" the analysis of interview material (Young & Frosh, 2018, p.208). This involves resisting the imposition of coherence or the reduction of participant accounts to predetermined categories (Kvale, 2003). Accordingly, a commitment to researcher reflexivity, sustained time for analysis, resistance to premature interpretations, and tolerance for uncertainty becomes an essential approach to the researcher's relationship with the material (Ramvi, 2012).

This is particularly relevant when participants are understood to be defended subjects (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000). From this perspective, interpreting

‘psychoanalytically’ may involve attending to what is not said, what is avoided, contradicted, or inconsistent, allowing space for ambiguity (Boydell, 2009; Kvale, 1999, 2003). Such instances may reflect unconscious defences through which possible anxieties are managed (Boydell, 2009; Hollway & Jefferson, 2013).

As such, psychoanalytic thinking can support a deeper understanding of fieldwork material and the phenomenon under study. Yet, there is no single approach to analysing psychosocial research. Instead, psychosocial inquiry offers a range of analytic approaches suited to exploring inner experiences and possible meanings. For example, Critical Narrative Analysis (Emerson & Frosh, 2004) examines how individual narratives are shaped by and interact with broader discourses and power structures and is often suited to “the detailed investigation of very small numbers of research subjects” (p.11). Another approach, the Listening Guide method (Gilligan et al., 2006) uses “a series of sequential listenings…to bring the researcher into relationship with a person’s distinct and multilayered voice” (p. 5), where the voice, resonance, and relational dynamics within a person’s narrative can be explored as avenues into aspects of their inner-world and particular relational context.

While both approaches can identify patterns across participants, Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) was ultimately selected because it offered a flexible, iterative process in which I could use my subjectivity as an “instrument of knowing” (Hollway, 2008, p.9) to generate patterns of meaning across participant accounts. It also allowed for the use of abductive reasoning, discussed in Section 3.9.2, drawing on both participants’ accounts and the theoretical framework. My rationale is discussed further below.

3.9.1 Rationale for Reflexive Thematic Analysis

RTA advocates an ongoing, reflexive process in which meaning is created through the researcher's interpretive interaction with the data (Braun & Clarke, 2022). This is particularly important given that this research assumes narratives are defended and meanings are not always consciously available. Furthermore, RTA works well for "producing latent or deeply theoretical analyses", in which the researcher "must select the theoretical and conceptual assumptions" that inform their analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022, p.225). Therefore, RTA goes beyond a description of experience and utilises interpretation and the inevitable subjectivity of the researcher. I believe this makes RTA particularly well-suited to exploring experiences in which affect and narratives are defended, aligning with the philosophical position and theoretical framework of my research.

Additionally, I did not believe that my personal experience of using reasonable force could be separated from my analytical attunement. For example, I remember my protective intentions behind using reasonable force and the complex emotions involved, which were difficult to make sense of. This influenced my decision to use an analysis that could accommodate my experience as reflexivity and attunement. RTA supports this by emphasising researcher subjectivity and interpretation, offering a method of iterative engagement with the data, alongside sensitivity to affect (Braun & Clarke, 2021). This makes it a suitable choice given my lived experience. The next section discusses the research's analytical positioning.

3.9.2 Analytic Positioning

RTA offers flexibility between inductive-deductive and semantic-latent analytic processes, allowing a spectrum that is not mutually exclusive (Braun & Clarke, 2022). This is helpful in addressing research questions that aims to explore staff's

emotional experiences, as well as the underlying unconscious processes that interact with them. Therefore, RTA complements reasoning methods that employ immersive, iterative sense-making, such as abductive reasoning.

Abductive reasoning involves creatively ‘puzzling out’ meaning from the data by relating interpretations to possible explanations (Boyd, 2024; Timmermans & Tavory, 2012). It involves using a speculative interpretation that is “creative, imaginative or insightful” to make sense of a noticing and to explore how it might relate to other contexts or theories (Boyd, 2024, p. 2). It also encourages taking time for deliberation, tracing meaning back and forth through the dataset to question interpretations, and to ask where else confirms and challenges what has been puzzled out (Rinehart, 2021). Consequently, abductive reasoning is neither inductive nor deductive, but ‘sense making’ of phenomena in context, whether that involves a cause and effect hidden from view, relating it to similar experiences, or a way of developing new understanding about something (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012). As such, researchers are recognised as not being devoid of theoretical ideas but are encouraged to remain open to developing their theoretical engagement during analysis (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012).

I used abductive reasoning in this research. Coding was derived from the data, but my interpretations were influenced by a psychodynamically informed framework. Additionally, attention was given to the semantic focus of meaning as well as latent expressions, as I considered both could generate insights into the experience and mechanisms affecting staff’s emotions. This approach was informed by my recognition that participants' experiences may be obscured and by my commitment to exploring the unconscious. This meant the reasoning could not be neatly categorised as a simple combination of bottom-up and top-down processes,

as this risked reproducing rigid binaries, which RTA gives flexibility to avoid. Instead, the analytic movement felt immersive and fluid, disrupted by the defended and emotional meaning-making about a sensitive topic, explored further in Section 4.2.

3.9.3 Reflexive Thematic Analysis Process

Qualitative data analysis primarily involves reducing data into manageable representations that tell a coherent story (Longhofer et al., 2012). Braun and Clarke (2022) present a six-phase process within RTA for achieving this (see Table 8). The analytic process was also informed by the research's critical realist epistemology. For example, participant narratives were understood as empirical accounts that offered partial access to their experiences of actual reasonable force events rather than as complete representations of reality. I also considered that underlying psychological, relational, institutional, or social causal mechanisms may have shaped and influenced the experiences participants described, and the meaning attributed to them.

Accordingly, during the analysis I used myself as an "instrument of knowing" (Hollway, 2008, p.9), moving iteratively between participants' accounts, emotional responses and theory, developing interpretations to understand staff's emotional experiences of reasonable force. This involved using the analytic approach as described in Section 3.9.2. Table 8 outlines the six phases that scaffolded this process, and the following section describes how I engaged with each phase. Although these phases are presented linearly, in practice, the analytic process was iterative, with many revisions.

Table 8

Six Phases of RTA

Phase	**Aim**
1. Familiarisation	Immersion into the data, reflective engagement, and noting of initial ideas.
2. Generating initial codes	Working systematically through the dataset and capturing analytic ideas. Compile codes into relevant segments or clusters.
3. Generating initial themes	Themes are generated by the researcher through the interpretation of patterns of meaning from code clusters that share a core idea or organising concept.
4. Developing and reviewing themes	Initial themes are appraised to make sense of them in relation to the codes and extracts, as well as the full data set, ensuring they have a central organising concept. The relationship between themes is considered, and how they are positioned in relation to one another.
5. Defining and naming themes	Theme names reflect the analytic story of the data, ensuring the name reflects interpretive insight.
6. Producing the write-up	Narrative coherence is developed. Use of compelling extracts to tell the story of the dataset.

Note: (adapted from Braun and Clarke, 2022).

Familiarisation. I familiarised myself with the transcripts by reading and re-reading. I created mind maps for each participant by listening to the audio and allowing a free flow of initial ideas, notes, and sketches as I engaged with the material (Appendix J). This process was active, and it helped me conceptualise the material, stimulating initial insights (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

Generating Initial Codes. The coding process was manual; annotating each transcript by hand, I attended to both semantic and latent orientations and was guided by abductive reasoning, in which I endeavoured to 'puzzle out' meaning and explore its relationships within the dataset, constantly revisiting my interpretations (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012). This also involved a process of defamiliarising myself with the material, which in practice meant revisiting areas already coded to consider alternative meanings, as well as looking for gaps in transcripts where there were fewer codes and considering why this might be (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012). Consequently, I resisted premature closure, trying hard to find as many ways to understand extracts as possible (Rinehart, 2021; Timmermans & Tavory, 2012).

Additionally, the theoretical framework informed my attunement. For example, separating emotions and experiences, or expressing concern for C/YP, were considered possible indicators of unconscious processes, such as possible splitting or concern within a depressive position. As a result, particular attention was given to moments in narratives where I noticed strong affect.

The 10 participants were coded as a single data set, which allowed me to attend to each participant before reviewing patterns across the entire dataset (Hollway & Jefferson, 2013). Coding was carried out one participant at a time, applying existing codes where appropriate and creating new codes as necessary, with three rounds of coding completed. Codes were refined to 114 initial codes, which summarised my interpretations and were mapped onto an Excel spreadsheet (Appendix K); four of these were later omitted because, upon reflection, they represented individuals rather than patterns across the data, leaving 110.

Generating Initial Themes. Constructing initial themes involved interpreting and articulating patterned meaning across the coded data. The 110 initial codes were grouped into 30 initial themes (Appendix L). This phase was treated as a generative act of interpretation by exploring possible links and reflecting on shared underlying meanings.

Developing And Reviewing Themes. During this phase, I carefully examined the relationship between the initial themes and ensured their coherence with the codes. Twenty-nine of the initial themes were grouped into 12 sub-themes, which were then refined into five main themes. One initial theme, due to its relevance and sense of being a central dynamic, contributed to the development of the central theme (Appendix L). The themes' organising concepts were reviewed to ensure that the boundaries between them were clear (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

Defining And Naming Themes. Theme names were written and rewritten. I paid attention to how each theme fitted into the broader story being told, and I aimed to give each theme's name resonance rather than flatten it into a descriptive ‘tag-line’. During this phase, I also made many revisions to a visualisation of a thematic map; the final is shown in Figure 1.

Producing The Write-Up. The final phase of writing the analysis was treated as an integral part of the process (Braun & Clarke, 2022). I brought together analytical insights and interpretations to tell a thematic narrative about the dataset. As a result, writing became a key part of the analytical process as an act of integration where meaning continued to be actively constructed (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Additionally, field notes and diary entries were included to offer transparency to my interpretations. During this phase, I also returned to the theme names, bringing

them to supervision for discussion, which helped me refine them and articulate their significance.

The Role Of The Reader (The 7th Stage). I recognise that interpretation does not end with me. The themes I have constructed offer one possible interpretation, influenced by my own subjectivity, theoretical perspective, and emotional responses, but it is not definitive. I believe meaning will naturally continue to develop in your mind as the reader, and you will bring your personal experiences and potentially defended positions to what has been generated as part of the research. Therefore, interpretation is not final in the following chapters, but remains open to being defended against through your own engagement. As a result, the contributions of this research may be transformed by what you, as the reader, bring to it (Hollway & Jefferson, 2013). The next section now considers how quality is assured.

3.10 Quality Assurances

This qualitative research is grounded in a critical realist ontology and epistemology, informed by a psychodynamic theoretical framework. It departs from objectivity and foregrounds the relational subjectivity between participant and researcher, as well as the role of interpretation. Therefore, using objectivity or the lack of bias as a criterion for quality is not useful in this context (Willig, 2013).

Instead, I applied Lincoln and Guba's (1988) trustworthiness framework. Trustworthiness refers to how well the research findings coherently reflect the research's aims and intentions (Alexander, 2019). The trustworthiness framework offers four interrelated areas.

- Credibility,
- Transferability

- Dependability
- Confirmability

These areas reflect that the generated knowledge is situated and shaped by the interpretative relationship between the participant/researcher within context. This is particularly relevant in psychosocial research, in which particular attention was given to unconscious processes which cannot be objectively determined.

3.10.1 Credibility

Credibility relates to the confidence in interpretations and knowledge generation. It is based on sustained and meaningful engagement with the data to recognise patterns (Lincoln & Guba, 1988). During this research, credibility was maintained through extended, interactive engagement with the data, as well as acknowledging my prior professional experience in reasonable force and being explicit about how this has shaped interpretation, for example, as explored in Section 4.7.2. Additionally, my prior experience fostered familiarity with institutional language used by participants, enabling nuanced interpretation. Abductive reasoning further contributed to credibility by supporting an iterative movement between data, theory, and researcher insight. The aim was to develop interpretations able to hold the emotional and symbolic complexity of participants' accounts without claiming objectivity.

Reflexivity is another way I have engaged with credibility. For example, I used a research diary to document emotional responses and process my thinking, recognising that, in psychosocial research, latent material is treated as meaningful data. Additionally, I used field notes to support the transparency of these processes.

3.10.2 Transferability

Transferability refers to the extent to which findings may be relevant to other contexts. This is not achieved through generalisation but by offering a “thick description” of contextual detail for readers to make informed judgments (Alexander, 2019, p.3). While specific settings and sample details have been limited to protect confidentiality, I have made efforts to outline the educational settings and roles in ways that are ethically responsible and meaningful.

This research also contributes to methodological transferability by demonstrating how talking stones can be used in psychosocial research. Although already conceptually aligned with Rapaport’s (1942) projective hypothesis, previous research applications (e.g. Wearmouth, 2004; Henderson, 2009) were grounded in the original Personal Construct Psychology frameworks. In contrast, this research positions talking stones as a method for exploring defended subjectivity, and a detailed explanation of its application is outlined in Section 3.7.3, providing a rich description of how it can be used in a research encounter.

3.10.3 Dependability

Dependability refers to the stability of data over time and across conditions (Lincoln & Guba, 1988). For example, it calls for applied consistency and documented transparency throughout the research journey (Lincoln & Guba, 1988). I used a research diary and kept supervision notes to record reflections and evolving theoretical questions. This created an audit trail that noted decisions and coherence between philosophical positioning and design. Additionally, methods such as literature searches were approached systematically and documented to provide dependability.

Engagement with supervision also supported dependability by providing a space to interrogate my assumptions and consider how unconscious dynamics may shape my thinking. This helped critical reflection on interpretation and areas of possible defensiveness. Additionally, the Viva is another way this research will develop dependability, allowing professionals in the field to explore and reflect on the research. Consequently, while this research does not aim for reproducibility, it offers a coherent and transparent account of my engagement, enabling others to understand how knowledge is generated and the limits to its claims.

3.10.4 Confirmability

Confirmability refers to establishing that the knowledge produced aligns with participants' accounts rather than the researcher's own views and biases (Lincoln & Guba, 1988). It also relates to the likelihood of agreement between independent individuals' understanding of the data's accuracy or meaning (Alexander, 2019). Within the context of this psychosocially informed research, which foregrounds subjectivity, interpretation, and accepts the disruption of the unconscious, this requires careful consideration.

My approach has not been a pursuit of neutrality, nor do I expect my inter/intra/subjective experiences and interpretations to be replicated or ‘known’ to others. What is being offered is a tentative working hypothesis to human behaviour that relates to a given context (Lincoln & Guba, 1986). However, I am committed to being transparent about these interpretations through my reflective engagement, inviting and developing self-awareness in enquiry (Schwandt, 2007). Consequently, my positioning, as a practitioner-researcher, someone who has used reasonable force, as well as my acknowledgement that I am a defended subject, is made visible.

3.11 Summary of Methodology

In this research, I use a psychosocially oriented methodology to explore educational staff's emotional experiences of reasonable force. It is informed by critical realist ontology and epistemology and utilises the projective hypothesis to collect data through the use of talking stone interviews. I analysed the data using RTA (Braun & Clarke, 2022), supported by semantic and latent coding within abductive reasoning situated in a psychodynamic framework. Reflexivity and prolonged engagement supported the interpretation of data. Ethical considerations were relationally embedded throughout, guided by the BPS (2021) '*Code of Human Research Ethics*', in an acknowledgement that psychosocial research is inevitably a relational encounter (Thomas, 2018). Quality was addressed through Lincoln and Guba's (1988) trustworthiness framework, demonstrating credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability in line with the research's exploratory aims.

Generated Themes

4.1 Overview

The knowledge generated in this research is presented as interpretations, rather than findings. Themes did not emerge but were generated from the data gathered in the talking stone interviews and subsequent RTA (Braun & Clarke, 2021, 2022). This process is assumed to be disrupted by unconscious processes that influence what can be known and how reality is perceived and narrated (Frosh, 2010). As Braun and Clarke (2021) point out, this analysis is a “reflexive organic process” which can never be complete (p. 210). Consequently, themes are understood as inherently provisional, while my interpretations and participant accounts are understood to be shaped by unconscious processes that influence what can be accurately perceived or expressed (Hollway & Jefferson, 2013).

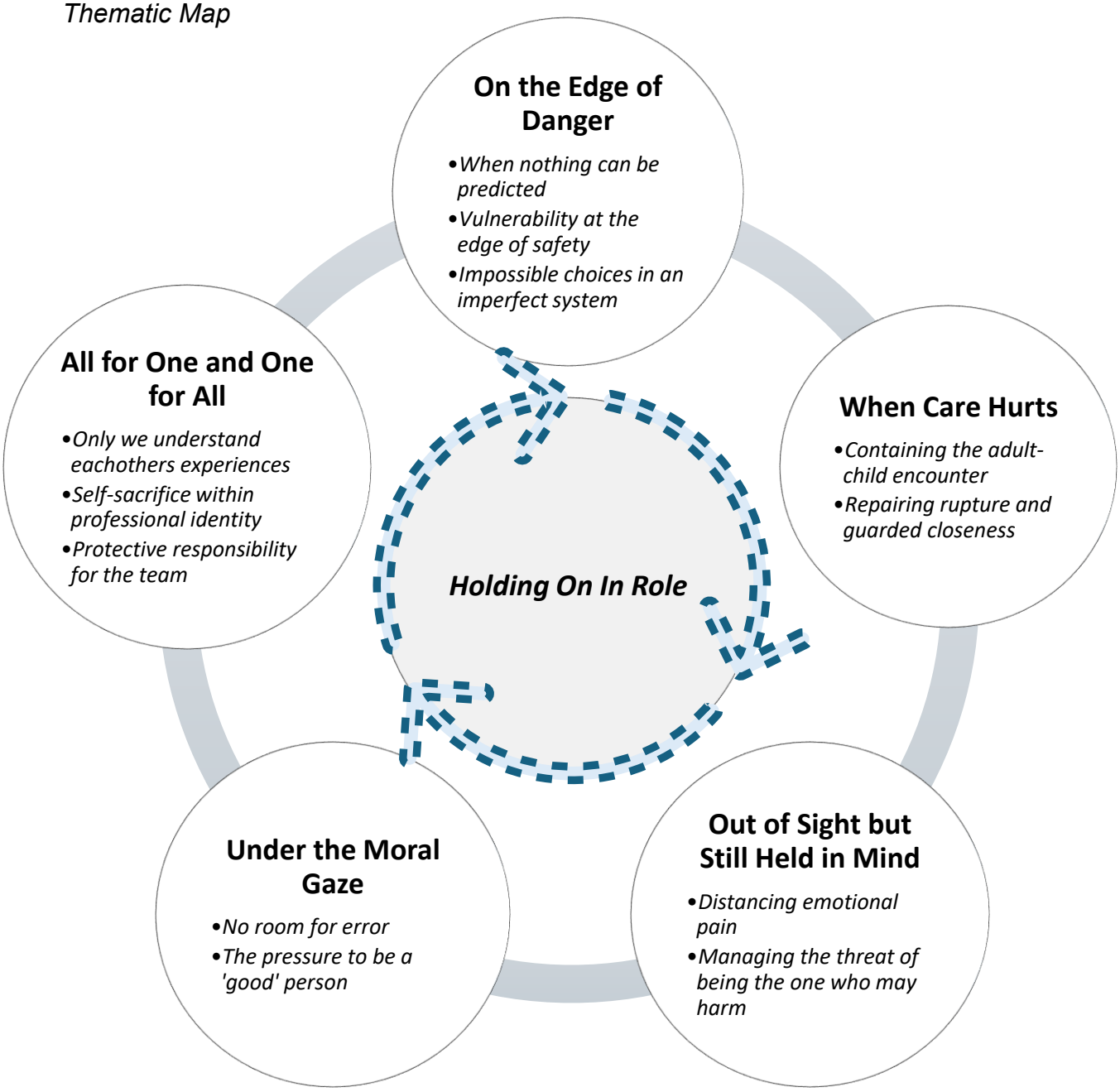
Accordingly, this chapter will:

- Explore the central theme, followed by 5 main themes, and contributing 12 sub-themes, while avoiding claims that they are definitive.
- Offer illustrative extracts from the research encounters alongside interpretations, including attention to my positioning as a researcher.
- Acknowledge the limits of what can be known, including that unconscious dynamics may shape what was said, understood, and left outside awareness.

It may be that not all individuals will have experienced these themes as I have narrated. Some aspects of experience may remain outside the participant’s conscious awareness or, indeed, my own. Furthermore, I acknowledge that the write-up itself, as well as the act of reading it, will inevitably influence interpretation and emphasis. Consequently, this chapter may be further transformed by what you, as the reader, bring to it (Hollway & Jefferson, 2013).

Figure 1

Thematic Map



Note: This map depicts the central theme encircled by 5 further main themes and bullet-pointed sub-themes. It demonstrates their interconnected relationship. The arrows represent the sense of shifting/spinning dynamics.

4.2 *Central-Theme*: 'Holding on in Role'

Across the dataset, I noticed an 'oscillation' in how participants made sense of the emotional experience of reasonable force, moving between moments of greater integration and moments of fragmentation. In this context, integration refers to being able to accept the positive and negative aspects of an experience, and to hold space for nuance and complexity. Fragmentation, on the other hand, involves separating different parts of experience or struggling to tolerate complexity, which can lead to binary thinking.

For instance, at times, participants' experiences appeared to be held with complexity. This is illustrated in Anna's reflection, expressed through her choice of a multicoloured stone to represent a C/YP,

> …So that's kind of like what the negative behaviour would be. It'd be the dark patch in that person. But then all the pretty, it's got pretty lines and sparkly bits and everything in it, which is all the good stuff…
>
> (Anna)

This perhaps symbolises the ability to psychologically integrate the 'good' and 'bad' within the whole person. On the other hand, integration could not always be sustained, and at other times, participants' experiences seemed fragmented. For example, Edward placed his chosen stone representing an ideal school far away from stones representing difficult emotions, explaining, "…aspiration, it's a positive thing, whereas some of the other emotions have not been so positive. So, I think that kind of shows where I've placed it on the opposite end of the paper". For me, this perhaps offered a glimpse of how feelings may become split around idealised and feared oppositions, leaving little room for nuance.

This movement between greater integration and fragmentation was also interpreted through Julie's comment about what it feels like doing a restraint, "You just hold on to your life, really, to be honest with you. It's that kind of feeling". For me, this offered an illustrative example not only of what it may feel like to physically take part in a restraint, but also of what it may feel like to psychologically hold on within these shifting moments. In this sense, 'holding on to your life', and the theme name '*Holding On In Role'*, capture the effort of holding complexity in mind, and the ease with which one may oscillate into more split positions when anxiety arises.

I also believe I experienced some of this 'holding on'. For example, while analysing the data, I felt pulled in different directions and felt a sense of needing to 'gasp for air', as this diary extract explores.

> I am writing this after completing a full round of coding, and I am feeling a real sense of turbulence. It has felt so disorienting working through the data set, as if one minute I am surfacing for air and can make sense of things and then I am suddenly pulled down again under the currents of conscious emotion. I am noticing a pull in me to seek reassurance that this 'wobbliness' is perhaps expected.
>
> The intention behind using 'Talking Stones' was to deliberately invite non-linear narratives and unconscious projection. I guess it's important to acknowledge that this has meant that participants begin and end in unusual places, or take unexpected turns, and therefore, meaning does not arrive fully formed, but I feel I get snippets of it at different times.
>
> A metaphor that has helped me understand this experience is that of a double helix or a swirling sea current. At times, I feel spiralled downwards into

> material that feels more implicit or symbolic, and it feels as if I have to hold my breath as I try to work through its possible meaning. These moments offer glimpses of something that feels significant but is hard to grasp, so I must remain tentative and reflective rather than conclusive, keep an open mind. At other times, I find myself higher up the helix, bobbing on the surface, gasping for air, grateful for material that's easier to code. This movement is continuous, and I feel repeatedly pulled back into uncertainty.
>
> (Research Diary, 13th December 2025)

In this sense, there is something of a mirror between my experience and that of the participants. Notably, a sense of instability about how much discomfort can be tolerated.

Additionally, I recognise that I entered data collection and analysis having interpreted anxiety surrounding the topic of reasonable force. I also regarded meaning-making as ‘defended’, reflecting the ways participants and I unconsciously seek to protect ourselves from such anxiety. In this way, the theme ‘Holding On In Role’ also captures the attunement to this turbulence, which became embedded in my subjective experience. Subsequently, the movement between integration and fragmentation was interpreted across accounts and is carried forward through aspects of the following themes and sub-themes. Therefore, what can be understood about staff’s emotional experiences is not singular but interpreted as shifting, depending on how feelings can be tolerated in a given moment.

4.3 *Theme*: On the Edge of Danger

'On the Edge of Danger' explores how participants experience working with challenging behaviour. Staff are required to step into situations they cannot predict, and their physical safety, emotional impact and the effectiveness of their practice are not guaranteed. Sometimes, danger is expressed through adrenaline. However, since incidents and emotional reactions are unpredictable, participants express attempts to create predictability and find it difficult to articulate the impact of using reasonable force. Consequently, I interpreted a sense of resignation as participants came to terms with working in imperfect systems.

4.3.1 When nothing can be predicted

Participants described working environments as unpredictable. Incidents themselves, their escalation, and outcomes could not be reliably anticipated, which seemed to disrupt a sense of stability, as Sophie says, "…there's always going to be those curveballs, isn't there, that come along and you think, oh, they haven't done that before…". Consequently, at times, unpredictability was felt as if something 'difficult' was coming. To me, there was a sense of 'bracing', contributing to a sense of fragile control, as Anna describes, "It's not nice because you know it's coming, you can feel it ……then it gets to that stage, and it's just horrible."

Participants also described the unpredictable nature of C/YP themselves and the constant variation in behaviour, as Nick says, "every child is different on every day, sometimes hour by hour, minute by minute", and Zara explained, "again, it's the changing nature of the child, their mood, how they're feeling that day, how they're going to react…". In response to this uncertainty, participants appeared to attempt to create predictability by recognising patterns of behaviour and using them to inform planning, as Veronica says "…different children do different things. But they tend to

have a pattern", and Sophie reflected, "…if you've got a plan in place and you all know student X needs this, and this, actually it makes this bit and these bits easier because you've planned ahead...".

However, participants also expressed that planning did not offer guarantees. For example, Zara reflects "…but even with the best will of the world, sometimes the next day they come in and none of it works". I remember feeling curious about the sense of unpredictability because it seemed so familiar. In my own experience working in SEMH settings, I anticipated behaviour escalation, which may have shaped my interpretation of these experiences as a sense of bracing.

Nonetheless, participants appeared pulled between recognising unpredictability as an inherent feature of their environment and the hope that planning might offer some form of predictability. However, predictability, whether consciously sought or more implicitly desired, could not be fully achieved.

4.3.2 Vulnerability at the edge of safety

Participants described physical responses to incidents, with vulnerability described as something actively felt in the body.

> Shaking. Makes me shake. And scared because I don't know what's going to happen next. And it's just not nice. It's not a nice feeling, but you know it's going to impact some of the other students as well. But you can't stop it. (Anna)

Here, vulnerability is expressed through shaking, alongside fear for others. I recall wondering if Anna's concern for others may also function, at least in part, as an unconscious expression of fear for her own safety.

I also interpreted vulnerability through symbolic stone choices and placement. For example, as seen in Figure 2, Veronica selected a sharp stone to represent what she described as the precariousness of reasonable force, explaining "…it represents a bit of a... for me, like a little bit of a knife edge." Veronica positioned it so that it pointed towards a heart-shaped stone she had previously chosen to represent "care and love". During analysis, I wondered whether this arrangement might symbolise intense exposure, or perhaps a feeling that she, or even her values, were being threatened. In this sense, the placement of a 'knife' pointing towards her symbolic 'heart', to me, suggested how closeness to danger can feel profoundly vulnerable.

Figure 2

Photograph of Veronica's stones



Note: Veronica's stone choice. On the left, a 'knife-edge' experience; on the right, a heart-shaped stone representing elements of love. Photograph taken by the researcher in July 2025.

Similarly, I interpreted Sophie's choice of stone as expressing a latent sense of vulnerability. For example, as seen in Figure 3, when asked to describe the lead-up to using reasonable force, Sophie placed a stone on the other side of the paper, away from a stone representing a recent incident. In the interview, I found myself drawn to this, and when asked about this separation, Sophie described a 'safety threshold' that might or might not be crossed, "…because actually you don't know what you're walking into and whether you're going to need this or not, or whether actually some of that de-escalation will work first. So, is that, that's safe at that point, isn't it?" What stayed with me was an interpretation of working at a 'precipice', where safety is temporarily held through de-escalation, but there is no guarantee these strategies will work. I wondered if the stone may be understood as representing a last point of safety, a sense of working at the edge of danger; on the other hand, I wondered if the concept of safety felt unobtainable and was therefore placed on the edges of the paper.

Overall, participants described feelings of heightened arousal, yet there was also a sense of emotions that were not easy to put into words. For example, experiences were sometimes described as draining but ultimately hard to predict, as Edward explains, "every time you have to hold a child, there's a different emotion, I mean, sometimes you may have a feeling of relief, other times you just want to curl up into a ball and cry", suggesting an uncertainty about how to name the emotional experience.

For me, what feels foregrounded is how these experiences are perceived through the body, for example, as draining or shaking, leading me to wonder if they are easier to articulate this way. Additionally, symbolic representations seemed to

convey more latent feelings of vulnerability. This was influenced by uncertainty about what might occur once they crossed the safety threshold.

Figure 3

Photograph of Sophie's stone landscape



Note: At the bottom left is stone (Y) representing a recent incident. On the far right, stone (X) represents possibly the last point of safety. Photograph taken by the researcher in September 2025.

4.3.3 Impossible choices in an imperfect system

Under these conditions, there was a sense that participants felt uneasy about using reasonable force. For example, participants expressed discomfort, as Kevin says,"…I don't think we should have to physically restrain a student at all…", and Edward explains, "Nobody wants to hold a child. It's against everything we all believe in…", positioning it as a practice that conflicted with their values.

Alongside this discomfort, participants also expressed a desire for a harmonious ideal in which reasonable force would never happen, as Julie expresses, "…my ideal world would be that I do this training for you, and you never use it…", and Joy reflects on what school should be, "…it's where we create the love for learning. So, everything is magical…". However, I wondered if these ideals existed.

I also interpreted a possible tension in decision-making. For instance, decisions were often required despite uncertainty, and this seemed to leave room for regret, as Anna expresses "…I didn't listen to my instinct, and I didn't send them home, which I regret because if I had trusted my instinct and knew and sent him home, it wouldn't have happened." As such, it felt at times as if participants were choosing between a rock and a hard place.

Participants also acknowledged gaps in provision, and I interpreted this as a movement toward resignation and weary acceptance of imperfection. This was illustrated when Sophie reflects on reasonable force usefulness, "…I don't know if it works as solving the problem. I think it fixes the issue at the time…." and further reflected by Julie "…it was successful for that moment to keep them safe. It wouldn't change anything in the long run…". This seemed to lead to an ultimate expression of doubt about the effectiveness of reasonable force, in which the complexity of the practice could be briefly tolerated.

During these moments in the interviews, I became aware of shifts in participants' bodies. For example, shoulders sagging, or sighs that seemed to carry something of the weight of what had been expressed. I wondered if this offered a glimpse into the effort involved in moving between emotional states. For example, from moments of idealised fantasy towards the acknowledgement of potential

ineffectiveness, and the reality of imperfection. In this sense, participants appeared to navigate ‘impossible choices’, briefly tolerating an awareness of their imperfect systems.

4.4 *Theme*: When Care Hurts

‘When Care Hurts’ explores how reasonable force is understood as an emotionally charged and highly relational encounter. Participants find themselves stepping into caregiving roles, voicing empathy, and, at times, drawing on their own experiences of parenthood as reference points for making sense of relationships, or for locating the ethical boundaries of practice.

However, I interpreted fears about relational rupture. These anxieties appear more tolerable when reasonable force is framed as benevolent and when reassurance is sought through a renewed closeness. Yet, there was a sense that closeness carries risk, and consequently, care may become guarded to protect against further harm. As such, ‘When Care Hurts’ illustrates a movement between care as relational and containing, and care as risky, as closeness is both desired and feared.

4.4.1 Containing the adult-child encounter

Across accounts, participants voiced a commitment to C/YP’s emotional well-being and expressed a desire to provide care where they perceived it absent, as Kevin says, “…But some of these people have never had any kindness in their life. So, I feel like if they don't get it here, where are they going to get it?...”, and Julie explains, “a lot of the time, they've never seen a healthy relationship. They've never seen a healthy adult who is measured and kind and reasonable and doesn't

overreact…". Consequently, participants positioned themselves as calm figures in contrast to the child's distress, as Julie continues,

> …You can't join them in their chaos. What's the point of that? You know, you can't then be, you know, it's just not going to help the situation. You are calm at all times. No matter what, because they're little children. They're babies… (Julie)

I was left thinking about Julie's choice of language, which suggested, to me, a particularly vulnerable state attributed to the C/YP. On the other hand, I wondered if this maybe was a way to show a form of affection to the C/YP. I also interpreted an attempt for participants to position themselves as containing the C/YP's distress rather than reacting to it, maintaining an empathic stance that allowed them to see beyond behaviour. In this sense, they appeared to consciously reject an adversarial framing of reasonable force, as Julie further explained,"…We're not in a battle with them…It's not us and them...." and also illustrated when Kevin says,

> …I'd rather usher them into a room where they can have an absolute blow up and throw things around. I don't care. Because afterwards, 9 times out of 10, what you'll find is that they're very remorseful and they're very tired… (Kevin)

Furthermore, participants drew on experiences of parenthood to inform their understanding of their practice. At times, this seemed to subtly blur the boundary between their professional and caregiving roles as Veronica notes "…But underneath that, there is a child that could be *your* child ….". In this sense, the professional and personal became porous as participants stepped into caregiving roles. During the analysis, I began to wonder if reasonable force was being located within the few

relational contexts where holding a C/YP is considered permissible. Here, Nick's sense-making of reasonable force is held alongside his own experience of parenthood.

> … if my little girl falls over and bangs her knee, I fully expect someone to go over and give her a hug and hold her hand. And that is all physical intervention. And, you know, putting your hands on somebody else's child is a physical intervention. However, people perceive it as just holding, whereas actually I want someone to give my daughter a cuddle, or I want someone to hold her hand. You know, and I try and replicate that here…
>
> (Nick)

Similarly, I began to interpret participants' framing of reasonable force as benevolent. It appeared that understanding it in terms of the C/YPs' best interests supported their capacity to tolerate its emotional intensity, as Helen suggests its positive effects "…You know, so and then it almost turns into a positive because you've given them that avenue where they have been able to communicate their needs…", and Zara explains "…they find it quite…comforting. And I know that might sound odd, like they actually benefit from the pressure…". I found myself imagining these incidents much like holding a distressed infant. In this sense, reasonable force was understood as protective, with C/YP positioned as needing containment. This may reflect an attempt to tolerate the intensity of the adult-child encounter by maintaining an 'it is not a battle' stance. Consequently, containment becomes the adult's physical and emotional task.

4.4.2 Repairing rupture and guarded closeness

Following these incidents, participants expressed what I have interpreted as a desire for repair. This was conveyed through implied fears of relational rupture, alongside expressions of a desire for renewed connection, as Nick suggests, “But afterwards, what I need to do is ensure that child has time to give me a cuddle…”. Moments such as these illustrate that physical closeness may repair relational ruptures created by reasonable force, seemingly reaffirming care and restoring the adult–child bond. The emphasis on a caring intent, to me, suggests reasonable force might otherwise be experienced as rejection, as much for the adult as for the C/YP. At times, this desire for connection was expressed through reflections on how intimacy becomes more complex as C/YP get older.

> …I had a year one…that I used to have to manage pretty much every day, but I used to be able to scoop him up. If he was in the wrong place, I'd scoop him up. I'd do a little cuddle. He used to like that, and he would automatically start stroking my hair and I'd get him back to a safe space. You can't do that with 14, 15-year-olds…
>
> (Sophie)

In this context, participants of both genders expressed a shared desire to repair physically with C/YP. I wondered, however, whether, as C/YP grew older, offering physical closeness became more complicated, perhaps reflecting uncertainty about how to offer closeness without breaking boundaries. It may also link to the previous sub-theme, where C/YP were sometimes positioned as infant-like, which could shape how repair is imagined.

In addition, participants expressed a desire to reset the relationship after incidents, alongside an implicit fear of the C/YP holding a grudge, as Edward notes, “We want to kind of leave that behind and start fresh. No grudges held on either side. And almost a second chance.” Similarly, Veronica’s account of challenging interactions with a C/YP offers a glimpse of how rupturing experiences can leave emotional traces of dislike, as she explains, “…she absolutely just could not tolerate me near her, but I was often called because I was there. And we'd get to that point, and she was very difficult to like.” I noted in my field notes that this account appeared meaningful.

> …I also wondered if there was some projection, a sense that Veronica unconsciously felt that she herself, might have been unlikable or intolerable, and this was being located in the girl, a sense that she perhaps displaced her own fear of relational breakdown onto the girl...
> (Field notes, 02.07.2025)

Likewise, Zara’s reflection on the changing dynamic of relationships with C/YP shows how dislike can be acutely felt when she said, “..they like you and they get on with you, and then the next day, the absolutely detest you…….and there’s nothing that can explain why”. These reflections stayed with me throughout the analysis and informed an interpretation that the fear, or experience of being disliked, may lie beneath the desire for relational repair.

Alongside this desire for connection, participants expressed how attempts at care could be dismissed. Zara’s reflection speaks directly to rejection and the subsequent need to offer future care with caution.

> …don't offer them a bottle of water because she's lobbed it at your head and that wasn't a good idea. And you're just thinking, well, you must be thirsty after all that screaming, have a sip. Next time we'll give them that much and a cup...
>
> (Zara)

Here, for me, the water was seen as a symbol of Zara's care, which she has given to the girl only to have it 'thrown back in her face'. The water is then reduced, going forward, perhaps representing future guarded closeness.

Additionally, institutional structures, such as a job role, were also noted as a way to create distance.

> …you've got to have that separation that even though I am on your side and I do want the best of you, I am not your friend. I am in a position of authority so that what I say goes…. (Kevin)

In this sense, when the boundary between the professional and the personal becomes porous, the separation offered by role may help create distance and emotional safety.

Overall, there is a sense that repair and guardedness coexist. Participants appeared to work to restore connection after incidents, often sought through renewed closeness, yet this seemed carefully managed. In this sense, participants appeared to move between desiring and fearing closeness, mindful perhaps that care can hurt.

4.5 *Theme*: Out of Sight but Still Held in Mind

'Out of Sight but Still Held in Mind' explores a sense that the unpleasant aspects of reasonable force can be difficult to hold in direct awareness. In particular,

some participants' stone choices and placements were interpreted as suggesting defended processes that keep potentially painful experiences at a safer psychological distance. This included moving on quickly, minimisation, externalising distress, and shifting attention or responsibility elsewhere. Alongside this, more subtle forms of disowning reasonable force seemed to support participants' sense of psychological safety.

At times, participants partially named the emotional significance or impact of incidents. At other times, participants hold difficult feelings at a distance, and fuller exploration became harder to initiate during interviews. As such, participants appeared to keep some aspects of reasonable force held out of full awareness. Consequently, I interpreted a difference between felt experience and defended articulation.

4.5.1 Distancing emotional pain

Participants expressed a desire to leave incidents behind, creating separation between themselves and what had just occurred, as Joy says,"…we've done this, but let's move on, and this is what we're going to do and then it's kind of forgotten about now…" However, while participants conveyed an effort to move on, emotions did not disappear, but were treated as something to keep contained, away from C/YP or loved ones, as Nick alludes, "…you know, I'm a big believer that, you know, I can cry in the shower later...", and Edward shares, "… before I've gotten home, [I've] had a cry in the car on the way home…".

This distancing was also present during reasonable force encounters themselves. For example, Edward suggests events were blocked out, "…there's something in me that's blocked it out and I can't even recall what's happened. Almost

like it never did happen...” Additionally, painful experiences were also seemingly repressed until, as in Nick’s account, the memory resurfaced during the interview itself.

> …No one's hurt. No one's got stabbed in the leg. You're both back in class, working hard, you know. How was your day? Yeah, pretty good. I did get stabbed in the leg, you know. True story. But that, you know, it's, that's fine.
> (Nick)

Within this dynamic, participants also reframed potentially harmful incidents as inconsequential through minimisation and humour.

> …If anything, we'll laugh, I'll check my bruise and they'll [staff] be comparing bruises and say, yeah, I've seen signs of that one, I've got one bigger than you. It's almost becoming a bit of a fun and games thing…
> (Zara)
> …I remember one kid once was stamping on my foot. I said, I've got horses, mate. You can stamp away because it doesn't bother me at all. (laughter) And it was really funny. And he'd never done that before. And then I think he started spitting the next time…
> (Sophie)

I found myself wondering if this may help reduce the emotional impact of events, allowing participants to continue functioning in the setting.

I did not consider the absence of overt emotion to indicate a lack of impact or care, rather, some experiences may feel too painful to remain in conscious awareness. For example, during the interviews, I began to notice that participants externalised difficult feelings through their stone choices and placements, suggesting

a symbolic way of organising emotions that were hard to articulate. Edward's stone landscape, as seen in Figure 4, offers an illustrative example to explore this. Edward chose a dark stone to represent using reasonable force, describing it not as a stone but as a 'dark place', "… it's quite a dark place to be in as well…It's nobody's comfortable doing it. Nobody ever wants to do it…" As his narrative progressed, this dark place became something that must remain closed off, a 'dark room', "…physical restraint is something I would just never speak about. Because it is kind of like…a dark room you go in and what happens in there stays in there."

In my field notes, I recorded noticing a shift in affect during his interview.

> I also noticed his stone arrangement; he placed his stone in the middle and encircled it with others. I wondered whether this symbolised emotions he had put away, which nonetheless surrounded him.
> (Field notes, 15.09.2025)

At the end of the interview, Edward reflected that the research process had resurfaced emotions he had previously left behind, perhaps indicating they had been carried out of direct awareness. I interpreted this as illustrative of how emotions appeared strongly defended against across the data set, with unconscious processes seemingly managing exposure to emotional discomfort. In this way, distancing may help contain participants in systems where emotional pain is present but cannot be fully acknowledged. However, what is kept out of sight may not be out of mind. It may remain, carried in the background, and managed through the ongoing effort of keeping experience at a tolerable distance.

Figure 4

Photograph of Edward's stone landscape



Note: The stone representing Edward in the middle is surrounded by other stones representing the possible presence of suppressed emotions. Photograph taken by the researcher in September 2025.

4.5.2 Managing the threat of being the one who may harm

Participants also appeared to manage the moral threat of using reasonable force and possibly causing harm, by keeping a safer psychological distance from its implications for the self-in-role. For example, when asked about reasonable force, participants frequently emphasised that it was not solely about 'hands-on restraint', but part of wider behaviour support, as Helen says, "…it's not just about the use of reasonable force and restraint, it's the repair, reflect, restore afterwards. So, it's a cycle, isn't it?...", and Joy explains "… the de-escalation, distraction, just listening, just being there, that we would avoid getting to this point and that actually by being a long process...." I recall noticing these moments in the interviews and feeling curious about the possible avoidance. It may be that such avoidance helps reduce exposure

to the more troubling aspects of reasonable force by stepping away from its potentially harmful elements.

Alongside this, responsibility for using reasonable force was subtly shifted onto the C/YP. For example, I noticed participants describing reasonable force as arising from the C/YP's behaviour or bodily mechanics, rather than from adult action, as Julie suggests, "…we don't use our size and strength to overpower them. That's not what we do. It is almost using their body against the mechanics of the body.", seemingly reducing the adult's role in the process.

Additionally, participant accounts suggested that when a C/YP might have been hurt, these situations were managed by shifting focus away from the C/YPs experience by framing future actions as contingent on the C/YP's behaviour, or onto institutional processes. As Nick reflects, "…But if I say sorry, it means I'm not going to do it again. I can't promise them that because it depends on their behaviours and the actions that they choose….", and as Zara reflects, "…parents saying, well, actually, he was a bit red when he came home, there was a few bruises. And it's just making sure that you've followed all the protocols, you've done everything right, so that it can be quite…draining." I interpreted that it may be difficult to stay emotionally close to the possibility that one's own actions, even with good intent, could cause harm. In this way, the emotional weight of potential harm appeared to become defensively organised through justification.

On reflection, I noticed that I also did not ask in depth about the possible emotional impact of causing harm to C/YP in the interview context. It is possible that I unconsciously avoided exploring harm too closely, perhaps reflecting the sensitive terrain of this topic, and offering a glimpse into how my own unconscious processes

interacted with the participants as we navigated these emotionally charged reflections.

At the same time, participants appeared to avert their gaze from the C/YPs' experience by focusing on supporting colleagues when witnessing incidents, as Sophie says, “even though you’re not directly involved with that, you’re still there as a witness. I’m supporting those members of staff…”. Similarly, Julie reflects on staff experience when speaking about restraint, “…Because I never want someone [staff] to feel like they’re doing it [restraint] constantly.” What felt particularly striking to me during analysis was what remained unsaid. The C/YP’s welfare in these moments did not always appear to be the articulated concern. I found myself wondering whether worries about the intensity or cumulative impact of reasonable force on the C/YP were rarely articulated because they may be difficult to hold in mind. I interpreted this as turning away from what feels most threatening; the distressed C/YP and the possibility of having caused harm. In this sense, keeping the C/YP out of view may offer a form of psychological protection.

As accounts continued, participants also described positioning reasonable force as separate from the self or professional identity. Consequently, reasonable force was subtly ‘disowned’, here Edward attributes reasonable force belonging to the C/YP’s story rather than his own “…it’s not just my experience, it’s the…child’s experience. And it’s almost their experience. It’s not mine to share…” Similarly, Anna described her choice of stone, as seen in Figure 5, for the lead-up to reasonable force as something she would like to throw away.

> It’s an ugly thing. But just, yeah, you don’t look at it and think, oh, that’s pretty. You look at it and think... If you were on a beach, you’d throw that one back

away. You'd keep the other ones, but you'd throw that back away because it's just an ugly rock.

(Anna)

Here, reasonable force is something Anna seemingly does not want to be associated with, and it is regarded as barely tolerable. Anna's choice of stone stood in contrast to a lilac stone chosen to represent herself, and later to a clear stone representing 'cleanliness' after incidents. I interpret these moments as symbolic attempts to displace reasonable force, perhaps because it brings discomfort or because the association endangers her sense of morality.

Figure 5

Photograph of Anna's stones



Note: The 'ugly' stone representing the build-up to using reasonable force is placed at the top away from the others; the lilac stone representing herself is bottom right. Photograph taken by the researcher in July 2025.

Consequently, disowning and relocating seemed to function as ways of managing the unpleasantness of reasonable force, including the threat of being the one who may harm another, or of being associated with that potential harm. This does not suggest an absence of care; rather, it perhaps offers protection against the possibility of being experienced, or experiencing oneself, as potentially harmful. In this sense, psychological survival in role could at times depend on this fragmentation, as if staying too close to the possibility of harm would be harder to sustain.

4.6 *Theme*: Under the Moral Gaze

‘Under the Moral Gaze’ explores how staff navigate the emotional demands of working under perceived evaluation and scrutiny. Under this ‘gaze’, participants' actions are felt to be judged as good or bad, which can evoke fears of accusations. In response, participants appear pulled toward justification and toward staying on the ‘right’ side of a moral line, especially when perceived mistakes raise fears that their practice will be seen as unethical. As a result, participants appear to strive to keep a sense of professional goodness in systems where error can feel intolerable. In this dynamic, intention becomes an ethical ‘anchor’, while feeling evaluated seems to drive a fear of making errors. In this sense, participants seem hypervigilant about others' judgment, with paperwork or training becoming ways to protect against the danger of mistakes.

4.6.1 No room for error

I interpreted a sense of perceived scrutiny across participant accounts. For example, practice was often described as being highly visible and potentially subject to complaint.

> ...I think increasingly staff can feel very professionally vulnerable about it in terms of complaint, litigation. We live in that kind of increasing climate anyway. There are 1.5 million complaints about schools a week…apparently….(pauses)….I think people are worried about doing the wrong thing, worried about blame, worried about hurting someone, worried about their decision being criticised…
>
> (Veronica)

Here, concern about reasonable force appears intertwined with societal pressures, contributing to a sense that practice is accountable beyond the immediate setting.

Participants also expressed a desire to share their decision-making. For example, Anna described paperwork as a way of managing this, "…you know what's happened, you've done what's happened, you write it all down so it's clear for everybody…" I wondered if this might function as an institutional defence against perceived scrutiny.

This sense of scrutiny also occurred during the interviews. For example, Zara expressed self-doubt about a recent incident. I recall that she began to berate herself regarding leaving herself open to potential questioning, as she said, "…why did I do that? Why did I even open myself up to being questioned about…that happening? Why did I not get it right the first time?" and there was a sense that error was simply intolerable.

This self-criticism may contribute to heightened vigilance during incidents. For example, participants seemed preoccupied with the risk of reasonable force and the threat of making mistakes, as Nick explains, "…I'm concentrating so much on not

hurting the child, as well as ensuring that what I'm doing is correct...” However, participants also appeared to struggle to accept possible mistakes, as Nick continues, “…you know, as long as you are thinking of…not doing it and how you can mitigate against that, then I think, you know, you're doing the right thing...”, and Joy explains, “…So, I always feel like from reflection, I know it was the right thing…”, and Veronica says, “…it was the right decision in the moment because you kind of always got to say, well, if you felt that that was the right thing in the moment, then that was the right thing…” I interpreted the emphasis on the phrase ‘right thing' as a feeling under pressure, either from themselves or others, with no room for error. Consequently, narratives were shaped by a sense of ‘unconvincing’ reassurance as they appeared to try to convince themselves that their practice was beyond reproach.

Participants also emphasised the importance of drawing on professional skills. For example, as seen in Figure 6, Julie chose a highly polished stone to represent reasonable force. I recall feeling curious about this choice during the interview, and when I asked Julie about it, she said, “But it needs to be good. That's what I mean. It needs to be polished. It needs to be right. And that's why, you know, we do hold on to a regular basis. But we also train constantly…”

In my interpretation, the significance here lies in the stone itself. A polished stone can reflect something of perfection, and I found myself wondering whether this symbolised an expectation that practice, too, must be ‘perfectly’ defensible.

In this sense, an intolerance of ‘getting it wrong’ may lie between the societal context and lived practice. For example, error may feel dangerous, and participants may carry the effort to remain perfect within what may have been internalised as an

unforgiving professional and social landscape. Consequently, in this state of hyper-vigilance, participants rely on institutional structures, such as paperwork and training, to protect against the feared consequences of mistakes, leaving no room for error.

Figure 6

Photograph of Julie's stone landscape



Note: The perfectly polished stone top right, the only smooth stone selected, perhaps expresses the need for the application of reasonable force to be perfect and beyond reproach. Photograph taken by the researcher in October 2025.

4.6.2 The pressure to be a 'good person'

Alongside a feeling of 'no room for error', reasonable force was interpreted as an act that may reflect on one's moral identity. Under a perceived sense of evaluation, participants described navigating a 'moral tightrope', where their actions felt open to judgement by others, and by themselves, not simply for what it involves, but what it may signify about who they are as people. Edward's reflection indicates this feeling of judgement when he said, "…to explain it to anyone outside the profession, they would almost say it's not good practice and it's ethically unkind, but we know that we're doing it for that child…".

The possible pressure to be seen as a good person also became noticeable during the interviews. This was, perhaps, most prominent with Zara, where I had been feeling a mistrust between us. This feeling permeated the interview until, at the end, Zara asked me a question.

> Zara: Can I ask what your thoughts are on it?
>
> Libby**:** On reasonable force and restraint? That's interesting you say that because I felt that as we were talking. I felt you thinking, ‘I wonder what she thinks’. I'm actually really pleased you've asked because I was sitting here thinking about it. And I think, what do I think about it? I think that, do you know what? I don't really know, if I'm honest. I don't really know…

I felt the dynamic shift after this interaction, and I noticed Zara sit more comfortably in her chair, perhaps indicating relief that she was not being judged. In this sense, feared judgment from external audiences appears to shape how participants made sense of their actions, perhaps intensifying the need to frame reasonable force as justified.

This also extended into how participants spoke with C/YP. For example, Julie described reflecting with children after incidents, which seemed to serve as a learning opportunity and a way to explain her decision and maintain her sense of good intention.

> You know, I always say to them, what else could I have done? What would you have liked me to do? Because actually you were doing this. What would have been a better response? And they haven't really got one because actually there isn't one…
>
> (Julie)

Notably, across accounts, there was a sense that actions were proportionate, with reasonable force framed as the ‘lesser evil’ in relation to an imagined future they felt responsible for preventing.

> …I think it is a necessary evil. We do not teach these children that a natural consequence of punching someone in the face isn't acceptable. And actually, if that means we need to get your hands on and involved in a restricted physical intervention……(pause).....then because they're unable to stop with a voice command or they're unable to regulate themselves, you know, secondary school, they'll get expelled. College, they'll get expelled. Adulthood, you get arrested. Jail, you know.
>
> (Nick)

> …does that mean they're more likely to end up in the criminal justice system? Are they more likely to do something awful? Are they going to be a perpetrator of domestic violence? ...And that feels like a responsibility again, doesn't it?
>
> (Veronica)

Therefore, reasonable force becomes necessitated by a future-oriented ‘logic’ in which failing to intervene now is imagined as producing greater harm later. On the other hand, this future-oriented logic might not represent moral justification alone. During the interviews, I recall wondering if this might reflect how educational staff conceptualise C/YP development, seeing a variety of their actions now as formative for the C/YP future trajectory.

Consequently, participants experienced fear of error and anxieties about moral identity. This may suggest that participants managed the tensions associated with reasonable force by positioning themselves as acting in service of the future

C/YP and society. Moments within the interview itself also suggest a possible sensitivity to being judged, which may help explain why justification and moral self-positioning felt significant.

4.7 *Theme*: All for One and One for All

'All for One and One for all' explores how emotional and professional safety is organised in the staff teams who conduct reasonable force. I interpreted safety as produced through shared experiences and collective validation, where the team appears to function as a container for the emotional impact and potential risk of accusations. While this collective support is valuable, it also creates boundaries of insider and outsider positioning, with those who are not in the team considered unable to fully understand the burden involved.

Within this context, participants express heightened responsibility, often self-neglecting their needs in 'sacrifice' for others. In this way, protection becomes organised through an active safeguarding of colleagues, but is accompanied, at times, with a sense of uniqueness in being someone who can carry risk for others. Consequently, I interpreted shifts in expressing the team as a support network and, more implicitly, the team as a defended structure that manages the inherent risk of holding a C/YP.

4.7.1 Only we understand each other's experiences

Participants expressed a sense of shared experience with team members who also practised reasonable force within their setting. This commonality appeared to create relational bonds, strengthening connection through a sense of having 'been in it together', as Julie explains "… we do all know what we're doing, and we're there for each other…". Similarly, Edward expressed team solidarity, "…we've all cried

together, we've all…screamed in a cupboard together and things like that. So, we kind of, we've learned to understand each other's emotions and to support each other.” However, alongside this belonging, Edward also expressed that those who had not used reasonable force could not fully understand it’s emotional impact, “Nobody understands until you've had to experience…such things.” This sense of isolation extended beyond the workplace, as participants described difficulties sharing experiences at home, as Zara shared, “… I'll go home, and I don't even talk about it to my husband because he'll just be like, what on earth are you doing? Is that what goes on?”

I also noted participants' challenges of sharing experiences beyond the immediate team within institutional contexts, where I perceived a feeling of ‘insider’ or ‘outsider’ positions. For example, Helen reflected on this, describing how restraint training itself can contribute to isolating staff groups, as those who ‘do’ restraint, and those who ‘don’t’.

> …we will only ever train a maximum of 12 members of staff in a mainstream school. And does that become then that they're a bit isolated, and you can't have that transparent communication, because they are almost like a separate…group, aren't they?...
>
> (Helen)

Within this dynamic, participants expressed elements of mistrust towards staff who did not use reasonable force in their setting, doubting that it would be used appropriately, as Joy suggests, “…some staff call when I think actually, we could de-escalate this before we get to this point. And that's another reason why not everybody may be trained because it could be used too often…”. Having said this,

this insider–outsider dynamic could also reflect a projection of internal uncertainty, and I wonder, perhaps, if the participant's apparent mistrust of others could be intertwined with a deeper worry about their own ability to judge when restraint is necessary.

Consequently, participants appeared to move between moments of shared solidarity, where the team provides comfort, and moments where this same solidarity produced boundaries between themselves and others, creating isolation. At times, team togetherness also seemed dependent on an implicit assumption that those outside the team could not practice as safely as themselves, which may help sustain belonging while reducing who can be trusted to hold the complexity of using reasonable force.

4.7.2 Self-sacrifice within professional identity

Participants also described elements of self-neglect as they put their own needs aside for the sake of the setting, or C/YP, creating a sense of self-sacrifice in their role. For example, participants expressed the need to put on a 'brave face' and return composed to practice, even after distressing incidents.

> …for me, it's like, having a walk, you know, chat to whoever I need to chat to. Come back, come back. Back in the room, guy. You know, back to the fun, exciting teacher that I need to be in order to engage with or, you know, whatever, you know. And then carry on.
>
> (Nick)

During analysis, I found myself affected by this pull towards quick recovery. At times, I noticed an emotional response within myself, reminding me of my previous experience with reasonable force, where there would be a brief rest after an incident,

but an ultimate turnaround that required a steeling of composure. This perhaps made me especially attuned to the way authentic feelings seemed to be sacrificed for professional identity. I wondered if Nick's insistence on quickly returning to being 'fun' left little space to process what might have been felt. In this sense, this extract illustrates the possible emotional effort involved in keeping distress contained so that school life can continue.

Across accounts, adult emotion was frequently put aside for the demands of the setting, as Helen's choice of stone to represent herself perhaps indicates.

> The colours in it are quite optimistic, I think. And it looks a little bit shiny. I'm trying, I normally am quite a positive person, and I think when you work with children that can show behaviours that challenge or behaviours that harm, it's important that you can reset…and…(short pause) look at the bigger picture of why that's happening and not get bogged down in that behaviour. So, I think it looks like an optimistic stone.
>
> (Helen)

I offer this extract as an illustrative example of how working in systems where reasonable force is used and where behaviour can be experienced as challenging may require an 'optimism' to keep going, even when this comes at personal cost. I interpreted Helen's pause, alongside her phrasing of "I'm trying", as hinting at the effort involved, suggesting that optimism may be worked at, rather than simply available.

Consequently, this dynamic across accounts suggests a form of self-sacrifice, where the adult absorbs harm in the service of the C/YP or setting, as Kevin describes, "You stood there, you took it, it was…you didn't react, and you were there

when they needed you…". However, I also interpreted moments where participants described an importance, and even enjoyment, in being the person who could step in when others could not, as Joy alludes to "…I always feel really strange saying that I enjoy that part of my job, because actually once you get to know the children, you build that relationship with them…….you're that safe person…", and Edward reflects "…to be one of those adults in the group, I think…it's almost feeling that you've got that little bit of responsibility and respect as well from the others…".

This was further expressed through glimpses of a possible inner sense of uniqueness, suggesting a positioning of being the people in the system who can provide protection for others. For example, as seen in Figure 7, Nick's choice of a sparkly gold stone to represent coming in to help a distressing situation is interpreted as a sense of 'specialness'.

> (Nick chooses a stone quickly) …….but when I arrive, it's to be the golden boy. It is to calm the child. It's to swap in if I need to. It's to, you know, wipe spit off my colleague's face. It's to, true fact, walk into the room with a pillow and slip it between my colleague's breasts and the child's teeth.
> (Nick)

The phrasing of "golden boy" brings to my mind both competence and a rescuing identity. For me, this feels particularly relevant where a colleague's bodily vulnerability is emphasised against the possible damage inflicted by teeth.

I interpreted a similar dynamic in Kevin's account, where being in the middle of incidents is intertwined with a sense of being someone others can turn to, as he says "…I always find myself in the middle of things, trying to potentially calm the situation or de-escalate. Or just being that person that people can come to if they

need…". Consequently, professional identity appeared, at times, to become associated with being 'the people' who can step into danger. I found myself wondering whether this can carry an implicit positioning, in which being able to keep others safe by setting aside one's own needs becomes part of how professional worth is silently evaluated. As such, this may offer a sense of responsibility within a setting, while also creating a uniqueness that can reinforce self-sacrifice as necessary.

Figure 7

Nick's Stone Landscape



Note: The last stone on the far right is interpreted as a sense of specialness in role, highlighting the unique ability to protect others. Photograph taken by the researcher in October 2025.

On the other hand, I found myself wondering whether these narratives, of stepping into danger and self-sacrifice, particularly from Nick and Kevin, could be considered through a 'gendered lens'. For example, Nick's identification with being the "golden boy" and stepping into a situation to 'rescue' a female colleague, whilst importantly emphasising her vulnerability as related to her female anatomy (breasts), alongside Kevin's accounts of being central to protecting others, could reflect how

masculine roles might shape professional identity within reasonable force events. In this sense, I wondered whether gendered expectations might shape how involvement in reasonable force events is experienced, with the role of protector perhaps subtly reinforced within the male experience.

4.7.3 Protective responsibility for the team

Participants also described the staff team as a structure that protects against the emotional impact of reasonable force and the accompanying sense of professional vulnerability. In particular, debriefing appeared to become a site where professional protection could be enacted, perhaps in ways that were not fully conscious. For example, debriefing was regularly framed as an exercise to improve practice, as Sophie suggests, “It's being able to sit down as a team who's been there to really unpick it and think about…did we do that right? Could we have done anything else?” However, as the interview continued, Sophie described the debrief, perhaps less consciously, as a site of security from potential threat, “… I think some people really struggle with having to do it. But I think it's never caused me…worry or… stress or, or what have you, because I think in those conversations afterwards, it's always been validated…”

Similarly, Veronica describes debriefing as a cycle of reflection centred on professional improvement. However, as shown in Figure 8, she chooses to arrange her stones in a circle and then expresses being ‘backed up’ by the team, possibly suggesting the exposure she may feel without team validation.

> …Do you feel supported? Do you feel backed up because I think the worst thing is to hold, then maybe to have accusations from the child, accusations

from the parent, and then feel like your colleagues… don't…aren't supportive of that.

(Veronica)

Figure 8

Veronica's Stone Landscape



Note: Veronica's 'circle of support' is seen top right, perhaps suggesting a need to feel supported by the team.

I found myself wondering whether this placement might suggest a shift towards a more defended function of the team, as an unconscious search for safety, in which validation reduces the threat of accusation. In this way, support appeared organised through shared accountability, with the team functioning as a protective boundary when the possibility of blame feels close.

Amidst this, perhaps an unconscious desire for protection, was a sense of not judging your colleagues, particularly when you are witnessing an incident, as Helen reflects, "…I think actually, you are there to support. And it is non-judgmental…" Additionally, the physical presence of colleagues appeared to offer an embodied sense of security where professional risk could be reduced and safeguarding shared.

> … you have to trust each other. And you can feel how secure your hold is with that other adult. You can feel each other's body through that child, in terms of making sure you're safeguarding each other as well.
>
> (Zara)

This protection appeared closely tied to a desire to protect colleagues from physical and emotional impact. For example, Joy expressed a sense of guilt, suggesting an internalised responsibility for others', alongside a sensitivity to being judged for not doing enough.

> …I prefer to be the one in the hold, not on the edge, because I feel like, I feel guilty, I guess, for letting staff go through that and seeing them get hurt….. Yeah. I think it's just that, the other staff are amazing, they're more than capable, but I feel guilty watching them being hurt. Like you said, more I could do…
>
> (Joy)

This feeling of guilt seemed to become projected in the interview when Joy attributed to me an implication that she could have done more, "Like you said, more I could do", despite my not saying this. This moment perhaps offers a glimpse of how a desire to protect the team may be made sense of, with the protection of colleagues positioned as paramount.

I also found myself wondering if protective responsibility towards colleagues links to the sub-theme of 'Managing the threat of being the one who may harm'. Here, attention is drawn again to colleagues' vulnerability rather than the child's, suggesting how the staff team may become a primary focus of concern within the emotional experience of reasonable force. Consequently, protective responsibility is

often expressed as a split duty of care between the C/YP and adult. Overall, I return to the feeling that participants' emotional experience is not static, but pulled in different directions, with the team understood as key to making the work bearable.

4.8 Summary of themes

I have generated a central theme and five main themes that offer a sense of what it may feel like to '*Hold On In Role*' when using reasonable force. Together, the themes offer an account of emotional experiences shaped by unpredictability, working at the threshold of safety, relational risk, and the necessity of making decisions in situations where outcomes cannot be guaranteed, and systems are imperfect. Within this context, participants return to the body as a sure site of knowing, where danger is felt through adrenaline.

Alongside this, reasonable force is constructed as a highly relational adult-child encounter in which care is enacted through containing distress. However, this closeness carries the threat of rupture. Repair may be sought through renewed connection, but this may become guarded as staff protect themselves against being hurt again. This suggests that staff emotions shift between moments when the complexity of care can be held, and moments when closeness is cautiously managed.

I have also interpreted that working in such environments may involve managing emotional pain through distancing while the experience remains unconscious. In particular, the threat of causing potential harm seems difficult to consciously tolerate, and may be managed by relocating responsibility elsewhere, helping the moral pressures of the work feel more bearable. These pressures appear especially relevant under a moral gaze, where staff feel there is little room for error

and that mistakes can carry high-stakes consequences. In this context, professional competence and best intentions may become stabilising anchors. Reasonable force is also, at times, understood as a necessary evil that protects against feared outcomes in a C/YP's future.

Finally, I interpreted the staff team as offering safety and exposure. Shared experience can provide support, while a sense of belonging can create insider positioning, a sense of uniqueness, and self-sacrifice as an 'essential' part of professional identity. Consequently, responsibility becomes organised with colleagues protecting one another from physical harm and professional risk.

Overall, these themes suggest staff's emotional experiences involve continual movement between more integrated moments, where complexity is tolerated, and more fragmented moments that protect against anxiety. Furthermore, institutional and societal dynamics appear to intersect with practice, causing fear of complaint, where the debrief, training or recording practices offer some relief from the anxiety this threat causes. Consequently, staff's emotional experience is not static; shifts towards integration and fragmentation can be read as part of what working under such conditions might be like.

However, I regard what can be known as partial, limited by the likelihood that unconscious dynamics shaped what was understood, leaving many things outside awareness. As a result, I accept uncertainty as a fundamental part of this research and offer themes as contributions rather than definitive claims, acknowledging that alternative readings remain possible.

Discussion

5.1 Overview

This chapter discusses the research contributions and will:

- Offer a response to the research questions in relation to the reviewed literature and generated themes.
- Discuss a synthesised conceptualisation of the generated themes related to ORT (Klein, 1935, 1946), and further contributions by Sharhar (2021, 2024).

5.2 Responding psychosocially to the research questions

A unifying aspect of psychosocial research is its attention to the possible connections between the intrapsychic, intersubjective, group, and social structures of experience (Redman, 2016). However, this does not mean that all psychosocial research adopts the same field of vision; rather, the disciplines multiplicity offers a strength, creating opportunities for different forms of understanding (Stenner & Taylor, 2008). As previously discussed in Section 1.13.1, psychosocial research encompasses a range of different dialects, and my research reflects one particular iteration of what it means to research ‘psychosocially’.

My research draws primarily on an object relations theoretical framework (Klein, 1935, 1946) to explore how staff’s emotional experiences regarding reasonable force may be organised. This framework emphasises aspects of the internal world, including “the ways in which our encounters with people and things can be said to be mediated by drive and object-related unconscious fantasy, transference, projective identification and introjection” (Redman, 2016, p.81). As such, it provides a rich vocabulary for attending to and interpreting staff experiences, ultimately shaping the analytical process through which the themes of my research

were generated. This has inevitably influenced what became visible, how it was articulated and how meaning was made.

This orientation was particularly reflected in my attention given during analysis to the defence against anxiety through fragmentation and integration, perhaps reminiscent of the paranoid-schizoid and depressive positions (Klein 1935, 1946), as explored further in Section 5.2.2. Indeed, during analysis, I also noticed what I could tolerate and what felt too difficult to attend to, along with the turbulence this caused and a sense of needing to 'hold on' (Section 4.2). As such, the generated themes offer a way to think about reasonable force as an emotional and relational experience. The central theme, '*Holding On In Role',* illustrates what it may feel like to psychologically hold experiences of reasonable force in mind, shifting between more integrated and fragmented positions as anxiety arises. As a result, staff are not just applying reasonable force as a procedure but navigating a complex relational experience. Consequently, reasonable force can be understood as an interpersonal, relational encounter through which emotional experience is negotiated and, at times, defended against.

Although this Kleinian theoretical framework provides a rich language for the unconscious and affective experiences of reasonable force, it does not define the psychosocial field as a whole. In this research, it offered a theoretical vocabulary for interpreting staff's emotional experience. It helped bring together the internal and social dimensions of experience, inviting "close attention to the affective, emotional, irrational and unconscious dimensions of subjective and social life" in relation to reasonable force (Redman, 2016, p.84).

This, however, raises the question of what may become less visible when reasonable force is understood through this field of vision; since while theoretical structures can support interpretation, they can also close down other possibilities (Redman, 2016). For example, my research explored staff experiences of the institutional and societal conditions surrounding reasonable force primarily through how staff negotiated and defended against them, rather than analysing those institutional conditions in their own right. An alternative psychosocial orientation, perhaps with a stronger sociological focus, may have given greater analytical attention to those processes.

Alternatively, other psychosocial approaches may have drawn on the limitations of psychological and sociological explanations to foreground the unknown aspects between the psychic and social, that neither discipline can arguably adequately account for independently (Stenner & Taylor, 2008). As such, I recognise that my analysis is partial and that the theoretical framework explored above may make some aspects of reasonable force less visible. Ultimately, I cannot know what alternative interpretations I might have generated had I oriented this research differently.

In this sense, I recognise and accept a tension in my analysis between holding space for uncertainty and articulating a meaningful understanding of staff experiences through the principal language of ORT (Klein, 1935, 1946). This may reflect the dynamic relationship between the negative practice and positive structure in psychosocial research, where theoretical knowledge provides a structure or language for interpretation while its inquiry seeks to “undo what we believe” by exploring what remains outside existing understanding (Redman, 2016, p.84). This highlights how this research’s psychosocial dialect both enabled meaning-making

while also simultaneously setting the boundaries of what could be meaningfully articulated.

Furthermore, both the participant and I may be understood as “unreliable narrators” (Thomas, 2018, p.7). Our interpretations and narratives are shaped by defences against anxiety. Accordingly, consistent with this research's critical realist foundations, neither the participant nor I can fully access the multidimensional reality of reasonable force, since human perception can grasp only part of such a vast phenomenon (Bhaskar, 2012; Fletcher, 2017; Lawani, 2021). Consequently, the following discussion responds to each research question in turn, remaining situated within the outlined psychosocial research orientation which has foregrounded aspects of interpersonal experience, alongside recognising the epistemological limits of this research, in which the knowledge generated is necessarily partial and fallible, limiting what can ultimately be claimed (Hanly & Fitzpatrick Hanly, 2001).

5.2.1 What can be understood about educational staff’s emotional experiences of using reasonable force with C/YP?

- Reasonable force involves significant emotional complexity and danger.
- Staff appear to emotionally distance themselves from the unpleasant and challenging nature of reasonable force, particularly avoiding acknowledgement of potential harm.
- Staff appear to fear judgment and experience self-criticism.
- There is a desire to repair relationships with C/YP after using reasonable force, but staff may fear being hurt again.

I interpreted reasonable force as unpredictable and dangerous, involving embodied adrenaline. Staff recounted incidents of being stabbed in the leg, punched,

bruised, bitten, or being stamped on, with a sense of being at the edge of danger, anticipating using their bodies as boundaries for control or care. This aligns with Mullowney's (2023) findings, which report that staff experienced “crying, shaking, breathing issues, changes in adrenaline, and hypervigilance” during ‘positive handling’ encounters (p.73). This suggests that staff may experience reasonable force as dangerous, implying vulnerability.

However, the potential dangers staff face are not widely acknowledged by the reviewed media or literature. For example, although media reports and advocacy documents highlight children’s harm (Adams, 2022; Adams & Jarvis, 2023; Clegg & Adnitt, 2024; ICARS, 2023), there is a limited focus on staff injuries. This ‘silence’ prompts reflection on why this remains underexplored and suggests that staff experiences have not been prioritised. Furthermore, this raises concern about the effectiveness of training and whose harm matters most in these situations.

My research suggests the psychological effort required for staff to manage their emotions, and this effort appeared to shape how they were able to hold distressing incidents in mind. For example, staff kept painful experiences at a distance, with some being trivialised, while pressures to maintain composure meant that emotions sometimes remained unprocessed. These interpretations support Mullowney's (2023) findings, which described the emotional labour of staff as an ongoing effort to manage feelings and maintain professionalism, and the need for supervision and post-incident reflection. This supports the view that using reasonable force can be emotionally challenging and that staff may benefit from support to make sense of their actions.

My research also interpreted staff anxieties about being judged alongside self-criticism. For example, staff conveyed feelings of being judged by external audiences, such as parents or family members. They also shared fears of complaints, which made professional risk in role feel particularly significant. At the same time, they felt unable to talk to others about these feelings, and there was a sense that doing so would lead to criticism. This is consistent with findings from Mullowney (2023), who reported that staff suppressed their feelings due to the perceived taboo around reasonable force and experienced self-doubt and fear of judgment.

It is important to reflect that these emotional experiences are situated in a sociopolitical landscape of increasing accountability. The DfE guidance (2025a, 2026) foregrounds accountability through statutory recording processes, and recent media has played a central role in bringing reasonable force into the public eye (Adams, 2022; Adams & Jarvis, 2023). Consequently, such a climate of accountability may create a heightened sensitivity to external judgment and fear of error.

My research also interprets staff's desire to repair with C/YP after using reasonable force, often through renewed affection. This resembles findings of Willis et al. (2021), who found that relationships between C/YP and staff may not necessarily be permanently damaged, and that positive relationships with adults could aid C/YPs' post-support and recovery following reasonable force. Similarly, work by Stothard (2022) noted kindness as a protective factor in the adult-child relationship, aiding understanding. Consequently, contributions from my research add to a growing understanding that the desire for repair may be felt by both staff

and C/YP as a way of making sense of the disruption that reasonable force may initiate.

However, repairing relationships is complex. While staff expressed a desire to care for C/YP, they also showed feelings of guardedness, sometimes creating boundaries of care, perhaps due to fears of being hurt. This resembles aspects of research on C/YPs' experiences, which suggested that although C/YPs understood that reasonable force was used for safety, they still experienced mixed feelings, including anger towards staff and fears of future incidents (Hodgkiss & Harding, 2024; Stothard, 2022; Willis et al., 2021). Consequently, my research supports a growing understanding that emotional experiences of staff and C/YP are deeply relational, influenced by a desire for repair and worries about relational rupture, and as a result, guarded closeness may help manage the fear of being hurt again. This further suggests distress and reassurance can coexist and may indicate that staff and C/YP continually negotiate emotions, as they try to rebuild relationships.

Taken together, my research highlights that staff's emotional experiences shift in response to the interpersonal dynamics experienced within the reasonable force encounter, creating experiences that may be felt in the body but are not always easy to articulate. This invites reflection on how unconscious processes may interact with staff's emotional experiences.

5.2.2 How might unconscious processes interact with educational staff's emotional experience of reasonable force?

- Staff appear to experience a continuous movement between positions reminiscent of the paranoid-schizoid and depressive positions (Bion, 1963; Klein, 1935, 1946).

- Within a paranoid-schizoid position, staff appear to fragment difficult feelings through splitting and projection, alongside possible instances of idealisation and denial.
- Within the depressive position, staff appear to show concern about possible damage to C/YP and desire repair, which gives rise to a mixture of guilt, resignation and a sense of responsibility.
- Staff appear to understand the complexity of reasonable force through the experience of reverie, in which a caregiver helps make distress tolerable (Bion, 1962).

Drawing on ORT (Klein, 1935, 1946), which positions anxiety as a central organiser of the psyche, my research suggests staff experience anxious states of the paranoid-schizoid and depressive positions. The paranoid-schizoid position is related to persecutory fear, from internal or external forces, resulting in the separation of difficult feelings, while the depressive position shifts the individual from a concern about the self to a fear of damage to a loved object and a desire for repair (Roys, 1999). However, the paranoid-schizoid and depressive positions oscillate, bolstering and augmenting each other (Shahar, 2024). Bion (1963) suggested that the two positions were in a bi-directional equilibrium, and as such, there is continuous movement between them, so neither overtakes the other with any degree of permanence (Steiner, 1987). This shifting dynamic was noted within the central theme '*Holding On In Role',* as integration and fragmentation, indicate that emotional experiences may shift depending on the extent to which feelings can be tolerated. The following sections explore each position and how they relate to the knowledge generated in my research and the reviewed literature.

The Paranoid-Schizoid Position. The paranoid-schizoid position is characterised by persecutory anxiety (Klein, 1946; Roys, 1999). When a person feels threatened, the psyche may protect itself by splitting, projecting unpleasant feelings away from oneself, or internalising them (introjection), alongside possible instances of idealisation and denial (Kennedy & Eastwood, 2021; Spillius, 2007). Consequently, idealised good objects may be kept at a distance from persecutory bad ones. This position is preoccupied with self-survival, leaving little room for nuance (Steiner, 1987).

This position was interpreted at multiple points, notably when staff seemingly projected the unpleasant possibility of making mistakes, or unethical practice, away from themselves. For example, although staff acknowledged the importance of improved practice, there was a sense that there was no room for error, and their actions had to be justified, as Veronica said, “because you kind of always got to say, well, if you felt that that was the right thing in the moment, then that was the right thing”. In these moments, reasonable force became a ‘lesser evil’ to the C/YP’s imagined future of antisocial behaviour, which in turn became a way of justifying practice and remaining a ‘good person’, with the badness of unjust behaviour being split away. As such, this possible splitting may have allowed staff to lessen the professional risk associated with reasonable force while retaining their virtue as moral individuals.

My research also suggests that although staff consciously reflect on improving practice, they may sometimes be unable to psychologically tolerate the possibility of mistakes. Interestingly, ICARS (2023) reported parental concerns that schools were concealing or not recording reasonable force. This was explored in the literature review as possible positions of splitting, in which schools were positioned as the bad

objects and the home was located as an object of safety. However, the interpretations generated during my research, particularly the subtheme ‘no room for error ’, which suggests staff found it difficult to tolerate the possibility of less than perfect practice, prompt further reflection about whether staff’s emotional experiences could negatively influence communication with families, impacting what is shared about practice. Yet, careful interpretation is needed; it is not known if the feeling of ‘no room for error’ has transpired into recording practices, and certainly no misconduct was reported by participants in my research. As discussed in Section 1.6.1, the heightened expectations and new statutory duties for staff under the DfE guidance (2025a, 2026) may lead to increased anxiety, as actions become more visible and mistakes more apparent. Consequently, the anxiety arising from the possibility of making mistakes draws attention to how defensiveness could be enacted across systems wider than the incident itself, and remains an area for further reflection and research.

Additionally, the psyche may attempt to displace threatening emotions through projection (Roys, 1999). Based on my analysis, I interpreted moments when staff located the possible anxiety of harming another elsewhere. For example, staff sometimes appeared to subtly shift the responsibility for using reasonable force onto the C/YP. As such, parts of the self, regarded as possibly ‘bad’, like being responsible for potential harm, were projected onto another (Spillius, 2007). Moreover, within this context, best intention became a narrow way of making sense of practice. As such, staff became ‘innocent’ of potential harm because their intentions were benevolent, thereby further distancing themselves from any potential harm they might cause.

There were also moments where projection was cautiously interpreted in the researcher/participant relationship. For example, possible feelings of guilt or shame were attributed to me, such as Zara asking about my views on reasonable force, and Joy seemingly attributing to me a sense of judgment for not protecting her colleagues, even though I did not express this. In this sense, unpleasant feelings were projected elsewhere so the psyche could remain safe.

Based on my analysis, I also suggest that at times, potentially painful emotions were distanced from aspects of the self. I interpreted this through moments in which staff disowned reasonable force, denied vulnerability, and used humour to account for injuries. Consequently, there was a sense of denial of the harm staff themselves experienced. This denial may function as a way of splitting off vulnerability within settings where emotional pain may be present but cannot be fully acknowledged.

Additionally, there were moments of idealisation. Idealisation can be understood as the way in which the psyche protects the good away from the bad, internalising it as safe (Roys, 1999). This was interpreted in moments where staff expressed desire for perfect practice, or a ‘dream setting’. In this sense, ideals were held away from the imperfect complexities of experience where harm exists, and thus, in the moment, avoided. Consequently, within these moments, staff seemed less able to integrate the complexity of practice. However, it is important to note that this position was not singular and often occurred alongside the depressive position.

The Depressive Position. The depressive position is characterised by the integration of good and bad, held together as a whole object (Klein, 1935). Within this position, the person begins to develop a concern about possible damage to a

loved object and desires repair (Roys, 1999). However, this realisation is unpleasant and gives rise to a mixture of guilt and a sense of responsibility for possible relational damage (Spillius, 2007).

The reviewed literature presents a mixed emotional and relational picture of the impact of reasonable force, including C/YP experiencing fear and anger alongside moments of understanding and repair (Hodgkiss & Harding, 2024; Stothard, 2022; Willis et al., 2021). This reviewed literature offers an understanding of the emotional and relational aspects as central to reasonable force experiences; however, they do not apply psychodynamic theory. I would also argue that this creates space for the contribution of my research to speak into by bringing a psychodynamic theoretical framework and considering how unconscious processes may shape these experiences.

My research suggests staff make sense of reasonable force as a complex caring relationship that holds C/YP emotional distress. For example, staff may feel they are helping C/YP bear the frustration and pain of distress, akin to holding a distressed infant, as explored in sub-theme ‘Containing the adult child encounter’ when Julie said, “…We’re not in a battle with them…”. In these moments, staff are implicitly placed in a caregiving role, wanting to help C/YP make sense of their emotions rather than simply control them.

This is suggestive of ‘reverie’ (Bion, 1962). Reverie refers to the caregiver's capacity to receive, engage with and process another’s emotions, helping distress become more tolerable (Bion, 1962). Implicit within ‘reverie’ is the presence of unconscious processes between the caregiver and the child; the caregiver contains the child's projected emotion and, when responding to them with love, creates a

container/contained dynamic in which emotional distress can be made sense of (Bion, 1962; Waddell, 2002). This is a dynamic process in which the container influences the contained, and the contained influences the container (Armstrong & Rustin, 2017).

Personal reference points such as parenthood became particularly significant for staff in these moments. Staff appeared to use experiences of parenthood as a moral compass, offering a familiar template of what it means to hold a C/YP physically and emotionally. I am not suggesting that reverie is synonymous with the depressive position, but rather staff accounts are suggestive of reverie, for example, when participants described tolerating the distress of the C/YP, being alongside them as they displayed challenging behaviour, or thinking about how they would like their own child to be treated in such moments. As such, in describing these moments within parental framing, staff were better able to hold the complexity of practice in mind, perhaps unconsciously responding with attempts at ‘love’, internalising both the good and the bad within the experience of individuals.

However, although ‘reverie’ (Bion, 1962) has been highlighted as a possible way staff make sense of reasonable force, accounts in the reviewed literature indicate C/YP’s psychological harm resulting from reasonable force, suggesting it is not reliably experienced as emotionally containing. For example, there are reports of C/YP experiencing fear of touch, nightmares and self-harm (ICARS, 2023). It may be that staff make sense of their experience as responding positively to C/YP’s emotional distress, but C/YP may not experience the container/contained dynamic in which they feel that their projected emotions are responded to authentically. This supports a cautious interpretation, in which containing the C/YP's distress is

understood as a way staff make sense of their actions, rather than necessarily what C/YP experience.

Nevertheless, I interpreted staff as recognising that the C/YP they worked with were fundamentally good, understanding their behaviour as communicating a need, and expressing a desire to repair relationships with them after reasonable force events. This desire to repair relationships was enacted physically and verbally as staff sought positive interactions, such as hugs, and opportunities to explain their approach. It may be that, in a depressive position, staff seek ways to ensure that the object (C/YP), other than themselves, is not irreparably damaged, and that, if the object can empathise with their position, this lessens feelings of guilt (Spillius, 2007).

The paranoid-schizoid and depressive positions are not static states. I suggest that staff's emotional experiences can be marked by rapid fluctuations between integrated and fragmented positions of what can be held in mind. These positions work simultaneously to create an understanding of the self, the world and the self within that world (Shahar, 2024). In the next section, we consider how the external world may interact with these unconscious processes.

5.2.3 How might institutional and societal structures intersect with unconscious processes to shape staff experiences of reasonable force?

- Institutional structures, such as training or paperwork, appear to become ways to protect against the feared consequences of mistakes.
- Team solidarity and particularly the 'debrief' are interpreted as a social defence against the anxiety of professional risk.

- The increased responsibilities of the role appear to require self-sacrifice, influencing a professional identity characterised as ‘the people’ capable of stepping into danger.

Staff accounts were interpreted to include fear of complaint, experiences of heightened vigilance, and pressure for perfect practice. The reviewed literature and examined media offer a way to consider these anxieties within the sociopolitical context. For example, the frequency and intensity of reasonable force instances as foregrounded by ‘the advocates’ included unlawful and punitive practices, severe injuries, and lapses in staff judgment (CBF & PABSS, 2019, 2020; ICARS, 2023), while the media discourse, as outlined in Section 1.10, was interpreted to suggest narratives of right and wrong, and calls for accountability. This demonstrates the high risk of reasonable force for C/YP alongside the high professional risk for staff, where mistakes have serious consequences. Consequently, feeling under a moral gaze, staff may unconsciously rely on institutional structures such as training and paperwork to become sites for ‘polished’ practice, which may help alleviate anxiety about the professional risks associated with reasonable force.

As staff experienced high professional risk, the team became an important support network. This is resonant with findings from Danby (2020), who noted the importance of the staff team in providing personal strength and emotional support within the complexity of practice. However, I also interpreted the team as a form of social defence. Social defences are understood as the ways in which institutions and their members unconsciously cope with anxieties, embedding structures within their organisations to support their psychic survival (Armstrong & Rustin, 2017). For example, reasonable force was rarely enacted alone and was often carried out as a team response. Staff appeared highly connected and invested in the team, fostering

a sense of solidarity and reinforcing the need to protect one another. However, this team structure also sometimes segregated them from those who did not use reasonable force, creating a sense of being a separate group.

The debrief was interpreted as an active group process where social defences were embedded. It can be said that every group has a purpose, and all groups convene in order to do ‘something’ (French & Simpson, 2015). This purpose can be called many names, such as aims or agenda, but there can also be unconscious processes that replace the group's aim with a pseudo-purpose (French & Simpson, 2015). For example, I would suggest that the debrief was consciously acknowledged by staff as an opportunity for practice improvement, but it was also framed as a way to lessen the anxiety of professional risk. Consequently, the debriefs unconscious function may be to protect staff's professional vulnerability. It may be that this is a form of social defence in which the institutional culture emphasises positive feelings to keep criticism at bay (Halton, 2015).

Furthermore, institutions can be viewed as having their own distinctive ‘thought styles’ (Papadopoulos, 2015). Thought styles can be understood as behavioural patterns that reinforce institutional practices, becoming the causal engine that generates social defences (Papadopoulos, 2015). For example, based on my analysis, I suggest that being part of the team relied upon to deliver reasonable force may reinforce a pattern of needing to protect the team, and to be protected by them, often accompanied by elements of self-sacrifice. I wondered if a circular process is reflected here, where group processes feedback to individuals, shaping their thoughts and feelings, while individual behaviour in turn reinforces the institutional defences that have been co-created (Papadopoulos, 2015). This may

help explain why some participants expressed reasonable force as conflicting with their own values yet remained part of the team using reasonable force.

Similarly, responses to anxiety can include mental representations that organise how roles and relationships are experienced (Shahar, 2021). For example, in the context explored above, staff are positioned within the institution as uniquely equipped to deal with challenging behaviour by using reasonable force. In my research, staff sometimes described their role in terms of speciality, as the people who can rescue others from behaviour that can cause harm. Consequently, the mental representation of their professional identity appears to be influenced by the institutional structure of being part of a distinctive group.

Such experiences have not yet been widely explored in the reviewed literature; Mullowney (2023) is the only academic work reviewed that directly addresses staff experiences of reasonable force. In this work, Mullowney (2023) and an additional author, Kelly (2023), synthesised ten areas of practice into a model for ‘positive handling’ (reasonable force), highlighting the interconnectedness of relationships, emotions, communication, and context in shaping practice (Mullowney, 2023). This model describes areas for schools to consider regarding reasonable force and highlights the importance of communication between staff teams to reflect on practice, seek feedback, and engage in joint problem-solving to foster a sense of belonging and self-efficacy when managing challenging behaviour (Mullowney, 2023). Consequently, this highlights the central importance of the team in the use of reasonable force.

However, the interpretations from my research on the emotional and defensive roles of teams extend the work of Mullowney’s (2023) and Danby (2020)

by viewing the team not merely as a resource for professional practice or support but also as a container for anxiety and a mechanism of social defence. This suggests that teams both alleviate the anxiety linked to the professional risks of using reasonable force and influence the context in which professional identity is schematised. Consequently, the current research may help draw attention to the functions of teams beyond practice reflection, illustrating how staff's emotional experiences are complex and nuanced in their enactment within institutions.

The following section synthesises the exploration of the research questions into a conceptual framework for understanding staff's emotional experiences of reasonable force, illustrated through a visual representation based on Sharhar (2021). This includes emotional experiences, unconscious processes, and intersections of institutional and societal factors.

5.3 Visualising staff's emotional experience of using reasonable force.

ORT (Klein, 1935, 1946) has provided a useful theoretical framework to view the contributions of my research. It has helped develop an understanding that staff emotional experiences shift between possible paranoid-schizoid and depressive positioning, with enacted defence mechanisms and coping strategies. This has allowed reflection on how unconscious processes and institutional and societal factors intersect to create the conditions of emotional experience.

Accordingly, these emotional experiences are complex. Sharhar (2024) posits that experience repeatedly and rapidly oscillates between levels of consciousness in a continuous 'experience-near' way. As a result, defence mechanisms and coping strategies become ways of regulating emotional affect. As illustrated in Figure 9, this dynamic is accompanied by an axis of time, dominant emotions, schemas and

scripts about the self (Sharhar, 2021). Schemas and scripts refer to how the self and others are mentally represented. The past produces memories from experience; in the present, there are active exchanges between the self and others, and the future refers to how futures are imagined through hope and dread (Sharhar, 2021). Furthermore, the affective spectrum refers to the dominant emotions experienced, and affective regulation refers to the defence mechanisms and coping strategies a person may use un/consciously.

I believe contributions from my research strongly resonate with this visualisation. I have interpreted this dynamic in a number of ways, as explored through the discussion above. These include defence mechanisms within the paranoid-schizoid and depressive positions to manage difficult feelings, and how institutional processes, such as the team, become coping strategies for professional risk. Danger was experienced through adrenaline as an affective site of knowing, and uncertainty was consciously recognised, with coping strategies like planning being articulated. Themes also explored how staff held onto past feelings, imagined C/YP's futures, and stayed vigilant about harm when using reasonable force. Furthermore, my research recognised that these emotional experiences are situated within a sociological landscape marked by increased accountability and scrutiny.

5.3.1 Conceptual contributions from this research

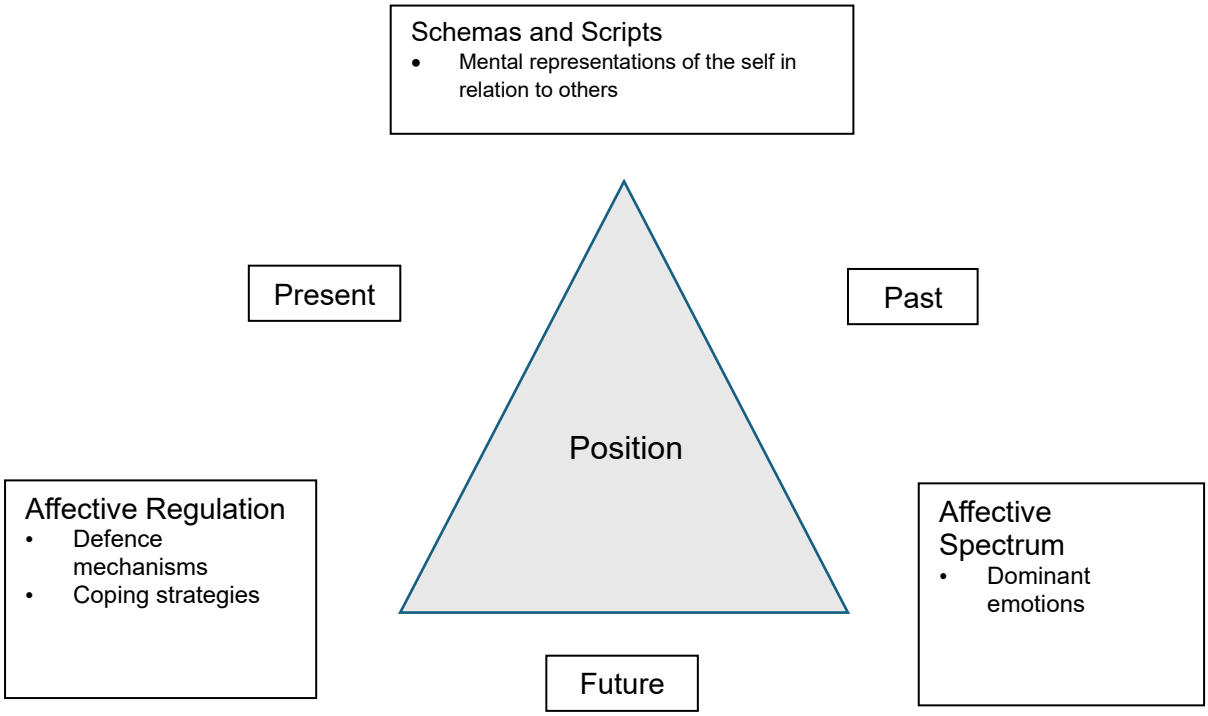
This conceptual contribution, as seen in Figure 10, offers a rich understanding of staff's emotional experiences of using reasonable force. Staff are not just using reasonable force procedurally, but are navigating embodied reactions to danger, relational complexity, and uncomfortable emotions. In these experiences, unconscious processes continually disrupt their ability to tolerate what can be held in

mind. Additionally, institutional procedures are used to create safety in a society where accountability and professional risk feel high.

I would argue that by providing a conceptual model of staff's emotional experiences, I offer a lens through which EPs can view the latent and hard-to-reach emotions of experience and understand them in context. It is only by recognising this complexity that we can begin to support staff in making sense of their practice.

Figure 9

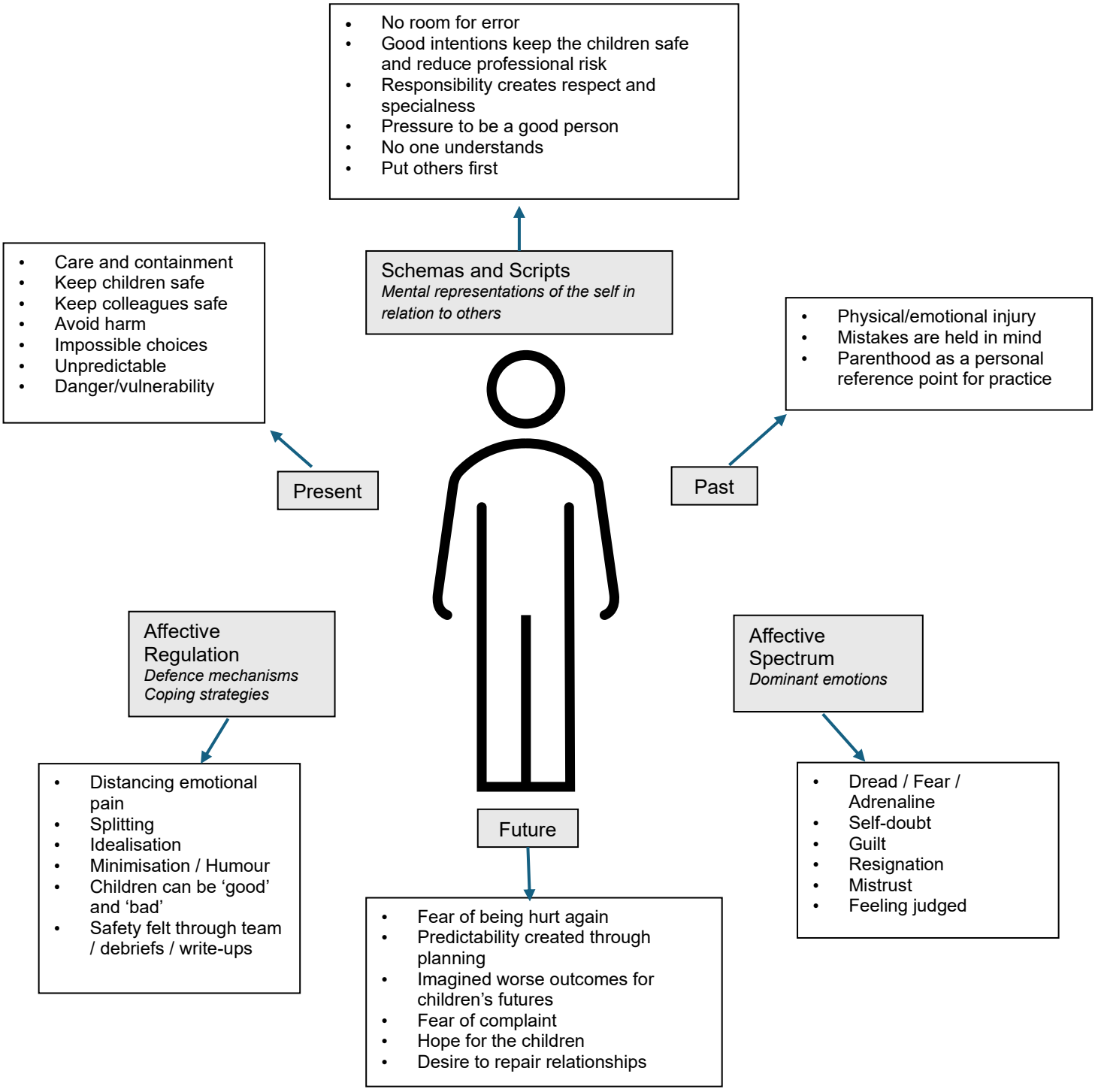
Graphical representation of reformulated Object Relations Theory (Sharhar, 2024)



Building on this visualisation, Figure 10 aims to synthesise the knowledge generated from my research, recognising that it is partial rather than complete.

Figure 10

A visualisation of staff's emotional experience of using reasonable force



Note: Adapted from reformulated object relation theory (Sharhar, 2021), using synthesised contributions from this research, encompassing the paranoid-schizoid and depressive positions.

Implications

6.1 Overview

The previous section highlighted my research's conceptual contributions, offering a new perspective on staff's emotional experiences of using reasonable force. The following section considers the implications of this within Educational Psychology, ultimately arguing that EPs are uniquely positioned to support staff in processing their experiences to support wellbeing. Additionally, this chapter presents a reflective tool for EPs that synthesises the research into a practical resource.

Accordingly, this chapter will:

- Discuss the implications of this research to support staff wellbeing and introduce a new resource.
- Reflect on the methodological implications of using talking stones.
- Consider the research's limitations and suggest areas for future research.
- Respond to dissemination.
- Offer a personal reflection on the research journey before presenting a conclusion of the research.

6.2 Supporting staff's emotional well-being

My research contributes to a small but growing body of work indicating that staff may benefit from post-incident reflection and supervision on the use of reasonable force (Mullowney, 2023). It further suggests that staff may benefit from support in processing emotional and relational material that may be difficult to articulate. One way to support staff is through reflective practice.

Reflective practice with educational staff is already well established within Educational Psychology. Approaches such as Solution Circles (a group problem-

solving tool) have been successful in developing staff wellbeing and problem-solving capabilities (Brown & Henderson, 2012). Additionally, reflective spaces and supervision are increasingly recognised as important when working with vulnerable C/YP, empowering staff in their practice and supporting emotional wellbeing (Earle et al., 2017; Ellis & Wolfe, 2019). Evidence also shows that reflective practice helps practitioners critically evaluate their approaches, navigate difficult decision-making when managing challenging behaviour, and reduce emotional burnout and stress (Goodall et al., 2024; Hawkins & McMahon, 2020). Consequently, EPs are uniquely positioned to support staff in processing their emotional experiences of reasonable force, using my research's insights to consider latent emotions and unconscious processes, alongside recognising the intersections between the internal and external worlds.

In response to these considerations, I have created a resource called '*Helping staff hold on in role*' (Appendix M), translating these conceptual contributions into a reflective tool for EP practice. This resource is organised around the Kolb (2015) learning cycle, drawing further inspiration from the many ways reflective supervision can take shape (Earle et al., 2017). It addresses the emotional experiences discussed in my research in a way that supports reflection rather than seeking to solve problems. The tool is visualised as a clockwise wheel, with an adapted version of Kolb's (2015) learning cycle at the centre, beginning with *experience*. The next layer of the wheel provides prompts for the EP to engage in inward reflection during the reflective space. This is surrounded by abbreviated themes I generated in my research, offering concepts for the EP to keep in mind. Encircling the entire wheel are reflective questions designed to be asked to staff to assist them in processing their reasonable force experience.

This can be seen as EPs helping staff to *hold on in role*. I have already examined the concept of ‘reverie’ (Bion, 1962) in how staff might make sense of their role in containing C/YP distress. Accordingly, EPs can support staff in processing their own potential distress, thereby containing the containers. When difficult emotions are held and made sense of by another, unmanageable emotions can be tolerated (Bion, 1962). Therefore, EPs are specially positioned to create reflective spaces that address the emotional and relational conditions of reasonable force.

Any use of this resource would need to be guided by professional judgement and be sensitive to context and relational dynamics with staff and settings. This is important because reflective spaces could feel exposing, especially when judgment, as my research suggests, may be acutely felt. Therefore, high-quality relationships are essential for positive outcomes in reflective practice (Goodall et al., 2024; Hawkins & McMahlon, 2020). As a result, this resource is assumed to be integrated within practice that prioritises contracting and relational rapport, so staff feel secure enough to explore the themes the resource offers.

6.3 Methodological implications of using talking stones

Creative approaches in psychosocial research are long-established. Methods such as visual matrices (Manley, 2018), grid elaboration (Joffe & Elsey, 2014), and the free association narrative interview (Hollway & Jefferson, 2013) have facilitated the production of data with defended subjects with the aim of researching ‘beneath the surface’. However, there is limited empirical use of talking stones (Henderson, 2009; Wearmouth, 2004), and none, to my knowledge, in psychosocial research.

My research, therefore, illustrates how talking stones can be used to explore defended material in an interview-based encounter. Talking stones encouraged

metaphor-rich narratives about reasonable force, providing insight into implicit emotional material, and complemented the acknowledgement of the ‘defended subject’ through the application of the projective hypothesis (Rapaport, 1942). Additionally, meaning developed through interpretation during the research encounter, influenced by language and broader relational contexts (Grossen, 2010). Accordingly, it supported participants in expressing what was not always easy to put into words, helping produce rich material for RTA (Braun & Clarke, 2022). This suggests that talking stones is a viable methodology in psychosocial research, capable of generating data which remains compatible with the epistemological limits of what can be known. The use of talking stones is open to further reflection and research; its application is not limited to psychosocial inquiry but can be a source of inspiration for others. The next section turns to how I will disseminate the insights from my research.

6.4 Dissemination

I recognise that dissemination is an ongoing process and will remain so. This section considers key dissemination areas, including stakeholder engagement, targeted outputs, networking and partnerships, and context and timing (Capili & Anastasi, 2024).

Stakeholders include, but are not limited to, the research participants, EPs, staff who use reasonable force and wider professional communities. To engage these communities, several strategies will be used. For example, I will approach sharing the research with participants who requested it, providing opportunities to discuss the research's contributions. Additionally, I aim to present the research to my LA’s EP team, who are a primary audience that can engage with the reflective tool and trial its use.

I plan to pursue publication in targeted journals and advocacy groups to assess interest in reporting staff experiences. Additionally, my research could be further developed for conference presentations, such as those organised by the BPS and the AEP, as well as education-focused events that emphasise staff wellbeing. I also intend to disseminate contributions and the reflective tool through EP-related social media, for instance, blogs on ‘Ed Psy’, or likewise, helping to offer an accessible application for practice. This is particularly relevant as DfE guidance (2026) is being implemented nationally and is of current interest to the profession.

During the research journey, I have been part of the AEP consultation for the DfE guidance (2025a, 2026), and I anticipate a growing movement to review the new legislation. I intend to use this existing link as a route to share a research summary with relevant professional networks. Additionally, I have already begun work within my LA's EP team to share elements from my research, including meeting with the EP team for SEMH to share recent DfE guidance (2025a, 2026) and discuss reflection methods that support staff well-being. Furthermore, multidisciplinary work has also taken place between my LA's senior EP, the Early Years team, and myself to develop reasonable force advice based on the DfE guidance (2026) and its application to early years settings. Overall, I anticipate that dissemination would continue and take between one and two years.

6.5 Limitations and areas of future research

This section explores the limitations of my research alongside potential areas for future research, highlighting how these limitations can inspire alternative paths that lead to new opportunities for generating knowledge.

For my research, I drew on the theoretical framework of the ‘defended subject’ (Hollway & Jefferson, 2013). As such, I have interpreted an inherent anxiety associated with reasonable force. Critics may argue that such an interpretation lacks an objective measure and note that neither themes nor interpretations were returned to participants for validation. However, I do not claim objectivity, and the knowledge I have produced is inherently partial (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Frosh, 2010). My research’s aim was to explore the topic in depth, which I believe has been achieved. Further research in this area may wish to engage directly with staff as co-researchers. Positioning staff as active co-researchers in future studies may provide a unique perspective and foster a sense of agency (Dembele et al., 2024). This may be especially relevant in a field heavily shaped by legislation, empowering staff to contribute to knowledge about their experiences and propose practical recommendations.

Since the DfE guidance (2026) became effective in April 2026, it could not be fully incorporated into the introduction due to time constraints before submission, limiting the full representation of the most recent sociopolitical context. Notably, the DfE guidance (2026) has established statutory responsibilities for reporting the use of force and seclusion, and it also addresses the ambiguity of terminology explored in Section 1.4 of the introduction. It notably clarifies previously ambiguous terms, such as 'significant incident'[1], and reiterates the four examples of when reasonable force can be used (DfE, 2026). Although these changes in guidance have not been fully explored, they emphasise that my research is situated within ongoing policy developments, enhancing its relevance. Future research may consider reviewing the

[1] Significant incident is defined as “any incident where the use of force goes beyond appropriate physical contact between pupils and staff” as described in the ‘Other physical contact with pupils’ section within the DfE (2026) (DfE, 2026, p.5)

impact of the DfE guidance (2026) on staff and C/YP experiences of reasonable force.

Interestingly, the DfE guidance (2026) now notes that schools should continue to monitor pupils' and staff's well-being and provide additional support, such as counselling or other resources, if needed. This highlights the timeliness of my research, as there is now recognition that staff and pupils may require support following incidents of reasonable force. This reinforces the unique role EPs can play in supporting staff reflection, as well as the potential advantage of reflective tools, as I offer in my research, to support staff wellbeing.

Although I did not aim for generalisability, a key consideration is the focus on UK sources in the literature review, which limits cross-cultural comparisons. While this decision was intended to align the review with the research's sociopolitical context and relevance to UK educational practice, this focus may have limited opportunities to explore how reasonable force is understood internationally. Consequently, this review, in line with its epistemological foundations, should be seen as primarily an internal dialogue rather than a definitive overview.

However, this points to a potential area for future research. For example, Hodgkiss and Harding (2023) have already reviewed international research to evaluate practices aimed at reducing restraints, and Mullowney (2023) has created a model of ‘positive handling’ (Mullowney, 2023). Such research could involve trialling recommended positive behaviour strategies within UK settings. This could provide insight into how positive behaviour techniques function in reducing the use of reasonable force. This is particularly relevant, given the DfE guidance (2026) that emphasises embedding preventative approaches within schools.

In this research, I offer innovative methodological insights through its use of talking stones; however, reflection on its data sampling is necessary. For example, the participant sample lacked diversity; notably, there were only 3 males compared to 7 females. Although some aspects of possible gendered experiences were considered during analysis, they were not fully explored. I am mindful that unconscious processes may have shaped what I attended to and foregrounded, as well as what remained outside my field of vision, limiting the depth of exploration of gendered experience relating to reasonable force. Additionally, I did not consider identity in the questions I asked participants, raising questions about how these factors influence relational and emotional encounters, a topic that has not been fully explored in the reviewed literature. This suggests that future research could explore how identity may intersect with the experiences of reasonable force from the perspectives of C/YP and staff. This is an important area of consideration in EP practice, as the HCPC (2023) requires psychologists to recognise the impact of culture, equality and diversity on practice and to actively challenge barriers, supporting change. Consequently, further research exploring these dynamics would provide valuable perspectives on this topic, which remains under-researched.

Another methodological consideration is the exclusion criteria, which stated that reasonable force had to have been used within the last 18 months from the time of recruitment. This was introduced to help participants recall events while reflecting on current educational practices. However, upon reflection, I believe this was unnecessary. For example, some participants discussed past incidents (beyond 18 months) alongside current ones, suggesting that recent and past experiences intersected in their meaning-making. This raises questions about the impact of reasonable force over time, and further research could explore how individuals

understand these events within their overall experience. This is significant because the reviewed literature did not include longitudinal studies on the impacts of reasonable force. As a result, the media remains the primary source for understanding these experiences over time.

Finally, while my research centred on educational environments and involved various educational sites, education also occurs in other locations. This meant that medical, judicial and other similar institutions were excluded, limiting the representativeness of the research contributions across these settings. Consequently, future research has considerable scope to examine reasonable force experiences in settings where education may coexist with other needs.

Personal Reflection

Before concluding my research, the following section offers a personal reflection on my research journey. It focuses on the process of conducting research within my lived experience of using reasonable force and on my development as a practitioner-researcher (Fox et al., 2007; Hawkins & Shohet, 2012).

7.1 Researching my lived experience

As discussed in Section 1.13, my research is rooted in early-career experiences that have stayed with me. However, I recognise that the psychosocial orientation of my research is heavily shaped by my psychodynamic-centred training at the NLFT, which influences the research design and shapes what I observe, providing me with a language and direction for exploring aspects of latent experience. Consequently, the research was initiated from emotion and shaped by my institutional context.

However, in reflection, there have been methodological decisions, such as using talking stones, that were perhaps ways I managed the anxieties of the topic. This was explored with a peer and recorded in my research diary.

> During a recent lecture, we were invited to share positive developments in our research. I spoke with X about how my methodology has felt beneficial and creatively engaging; in fact, it's been lots of fun. X reflected back to me that my use of talking stones seemed like a fun approach, which seemed at odds with the content I was exploring. She wondered whether this could be a defensive position to protect myself against the discomfort of what I might hear from the participants. This comment got me thinking more deeply about what my choices might reflect. Given the emotional nature of my research topic, I now wonder whether my focus on creativity might also represent a defensive response to the anxiety the subject brings, and, of course, perhaps the memories it might bring up for me, having done restraint before.
>
> (Research Diary, 15th October 2025)

Therefore, one possible effect of researching reasonable force, having used it myself, was that defences were disrupting the conscious development of my research from the very beginning.

Having a lived experience similar to the participants undoubtedly shaped the relationship I developed with them during the research encounters and my interpretation of the data. For example, some moments during interviews felt distinctly resonant, as I recorded in my field notes from Edward's interview.

> I felt there was a strong sense of mutual understanding between us in the interview. When he said, “no one understands it unless they’ve done it,” I immediately recognised that feeling as something which I shared, a sense that “you couldn’t possibly understand unless you’ve done it, so don’t you dare judge me” type of feeling.
>
> (Field Notes, 15.09.2025)

In this sense, the observer and the observed were intertwined (Fox et al., 2007). I have tried to lean into this interdependency as a reflexive tool, rather than shy away from it. However, reflexivity has its complexities, and there was always a risk that I might reflect more on my own emotions (Fox et al., 2007). Abductive reasoning, understood as a way to ‘puzzle out’ meaning during analysis, played a key role in supporting this process. It helped me trace threads of possible meaning through the data and examine whether my initial interpretation was further reflected. This involved holding both my experience and the participants' together, without allowing my emotions to overtake, but to be useful. It was a challenging balance, and difficult to determine if it was successfully achieved.

Supervision provided a space to make sense of these processes, particularly during analysis. A particularly important reflection occurred after an intense phase of analysis when I felt exhausted and deflated. In supervision, we explored these feelings, and my supervisor asked me what it felt like after having done a restraint. I suddenly realised that my feelings were strikingly similar to those I remembered from my early career, as if the feeling of ‘wrestling the data’ was akin to restraint. This mirroring was an important acknowledgement; it allowed me to view the analysis as an embodied experience connected to my own history.

Looking back across the whole research process, I recognise a tension in how I approached the design and writing of the thesis. Perhaps similar to how reasonable force requires a member of staff to apply only enough pressure as necessary when holding a C/YP, I now question whether I also maintained a balance between care and control in my research. For example, I have come to realise that I have approached this topic of reasonable force with deliberate caution, avoiding making definitive claims or strong judgments. I suspect that this caution stems from a concern about causing harm, whether to participants, the subject itself, the field, or even myself if I were somehow too direct. This hesitation has inevitably influenced the research design, the writing, and the knowledge produced, resulting in a tentative approach that others may feel while reading.

7.2 Being a practitioner-researcher

I entered this journey occupying a dual role as a researcher and trainee EP. Being a practitioner-researcher recognises the knowledge and experience of those working within a professional field to generate research, creating opportunities for the research to be meaningful and applicable to practice (Fox et al., 2007). This felt particularly important in my research, because, as previously explored, I had used my professional and personal curiosity and experience to notice the possibility of researching reasonable force. However, being a practitioner-researcher was not without tensions. For example, there were times when I felt compelled to enter the EP role and offer advice, and I had to actively work to counteract this, as this extract from Helen's interview illustrates.

> Libby**:** Yeah, and I guess I'm reflecting as you're talking that, yeah, **…**(longer pause)… I'm just trying not to go into EP role, I'm trying to stay researcher,

(joint laughter) it's hard because it's, yeah, it's that boundary to practice and research, but yeah, I guess…

I can remember feeling the discomfort of leaving participants' experiences unresolved. However, overall, the research experience has strengthened my sense that I can tolerate others' discomfort or unresolved practice; as such, research can change us and challenge who we think we are (Cummins & Williams, 2018).

This journey has certainly changed something about who I am and what I feel I can achieve. It has given me confidence to approach complex topics creatively as a legitimate way to explore difficult material. It has also enhanced my ability to confront complexity and turn potentially anxiety-provoking situations into productive outcomes.

The psychosocial approach has been a fulfilling and exciting way to conduct research. However, psychosocial research isn't something you can simply ‘take off the shelf’ and use. It has required a commitment to engaging with theory and personal exploration. A key experience that has supported me in these areas was participating in the NLFT multidisciplinary psychosocial research group. This provided a space to connect with researchers from various fields who were also using psychosocial methodologies. We shared enthusiasm for innovative methods, such as talking stones, and explored theoretical concepts that helped me articulate nuanced ideas. As a lone practitioner-researcher, your work can feel like a solitary island; this space has offered connection and inspiration, strengthening my confidence in using innovative research techniques to deepen our understanding of human experience. Ultimately, I've learned that at the core of being a practitioner-

researcher lies the courage to confront challenging topics and actively participate in the ongoing conversation that research produces (Montuori, 2005).

Conclusion

My research has explored the emotional experiences of educational staff who use reasonable force, emphasising the interconnections between unconscious processes and institutional and societal factors. I offer this work as a timely contribution, given recent legislative changes (DfE, 2026) and the limited research on staff experiences. Consequently, my research provides a rare psychosocial exploration of staff's perspectives on reasonable force.

Throughout my research, I have actively and creatively stepped into the conversation surrounding reasonable force. I have utilised intersubjectivity, interpretation and reflexivity throughout, using the projective hypothesis through the application of talking stones to access and interpret latent emotional material. My analysis, conducted through RTA (Braun & Clarke, 2022), suggests that staff's emotional experience of reasonable force is often difficult to articulate. Nevertheless, applying a theoretical framework informed by object relations theory (Klein, 1935, 1946) has enabled these complexities to be meaningfully conceptualised.

Based on my analysis, I generated five main themes: 'On The Edge Of Danger,' 'When Care Hurts', 'Out Of Sight But Still Held In Mind', 'Under The Moral Gaze', and 'All For One And One For All.' These themes are accompanied by a central theme, *'Holding On In Role*.' I interpret these themes as illustrative of how staff fluctuate between possible paranoid-schizoid and depressive positions, where unconscious processes interact with emotional experiences, influencing what feels safe to hold in mind. I propose that institutional and societal dynamics further

intersect with the interpersonal and relational experiences of practice, contributing to anxiety and the mobilisation of social defences.

A key contribution I offer, drawing on ORT (Klein, 1935, 1946) and further work by Sharhar (2021), is the conceptual insights used to visualise these experiences. Additionally, I have developed a reflective prompt sheet for EPs to use with staff, offering a practical resource to support EPs in creating and facilitating reflective spaces where staff can make sense of their experiences. I now encourage EPs to engage with the uncertainty and complexity inherent in reasonable force experiences, to support educational staff through reflective practice that attends to making sense of the unspoken and emotionally charged aspects of their work.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Reasonable force definitions

Term	Definition	Source	Reflective Notes:
Reasonable Force	"Physical contact by a member of staff on a pupil to control or restrain their actions/movements. Reasonable means using no more force than is necessary for the least amount of time, the application of which will depend on the circumstances. Any use of reasonable force is an example of a restrictive intervention and may or may not involve the use of restraint".	DfE (2025a, p. 4)	This feels more broadly defined than restraint and includes the use of control without explaining what that means.
	"The term 'reasonable force' covers the broad range of actions used by most teachers at some point in their career that involve a degree of physical contact with pupils. Force is usually used either to control or restrain. This can range from guiding a pupil to safety by the arm through to more extreme circumstances, such as breaking up a fight or where a student needs to be	DfE (2013, p 4)	It is interesting that the use of reasonable force is positioned as expected within a teacher's career; this is absent from the DfE guidance (2025a)

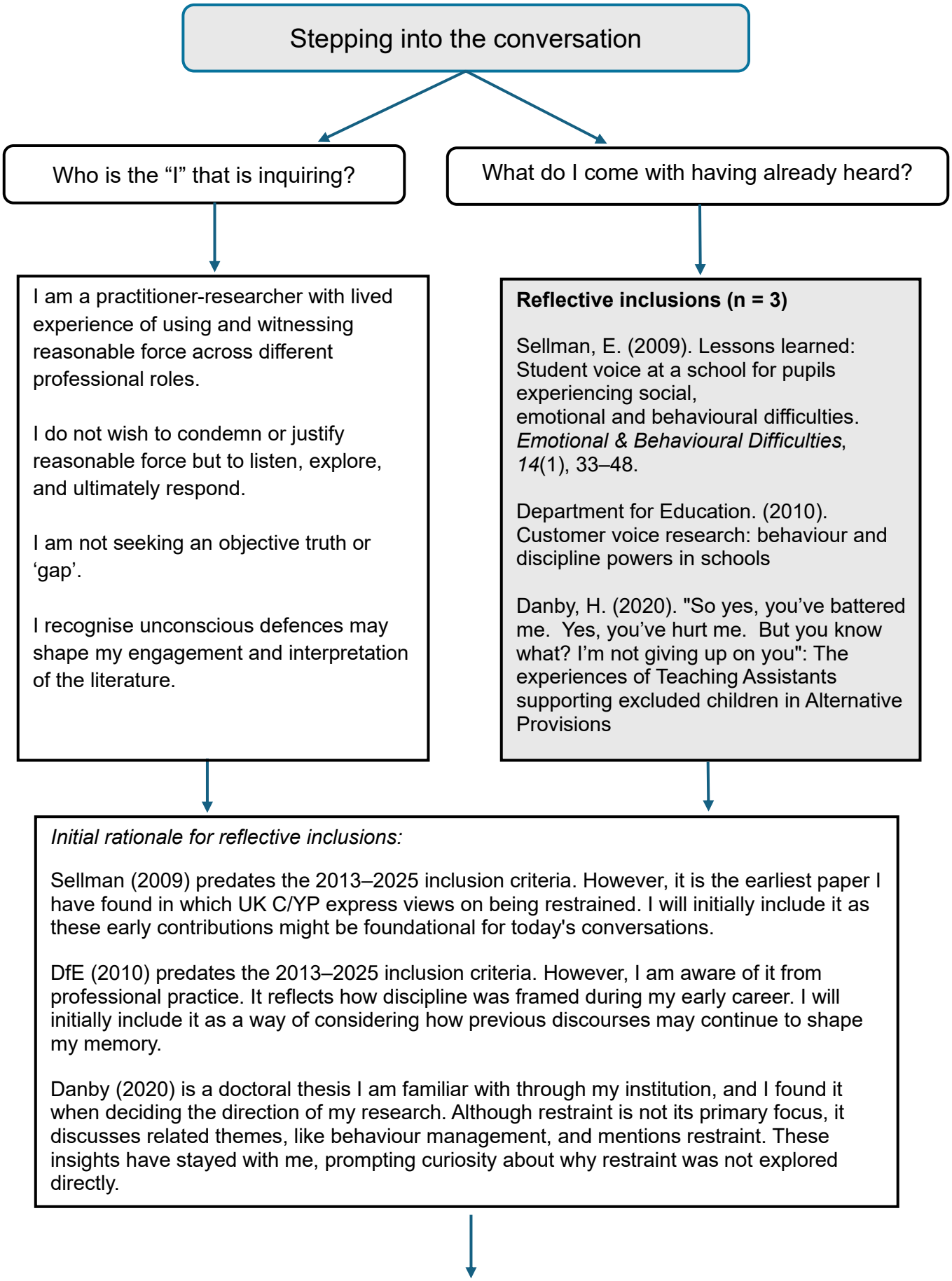
	restrained to prevent violence or injury.”		
Restrictive Intervention	“Any planned or reactive action which limits a pupil’s movement, liberty or freedom to act independently. Restrictive interventions may include use of equipment, medication or seclusion. Restrictive interventions may or may not involve the use of reasonable force.”	DfE (2025a, p. 5)	For me, this feels very broad as it may or may not involve reasonable force. I find the word intervention misleading.
Control	“Control means either *passive* physical contact, such as standing between pupils or blocking a pupil's path, or active physical contact, such as leading a pupil by the arm out of a classroom.”	DfE (2013, p. 4)	I wonder if this may not always be perceived by staff as force, perhaps reflecting expected classroom management.
Restraint	“Restraint means to hold back physically or to bring a pupil under control. It is typically used in more extreme circumstances…”	DfE (2013)	It is considered for use in more extreme circumstances. Chemical and mechanical definitions are absent.
	“A form of restrictive intervention involving direct physical contact and force where the intention is to prevent, restrict, or subdue	DfE (2025a, p. 5)	This involves direct force in the definition, but also includes mechanical and chemical

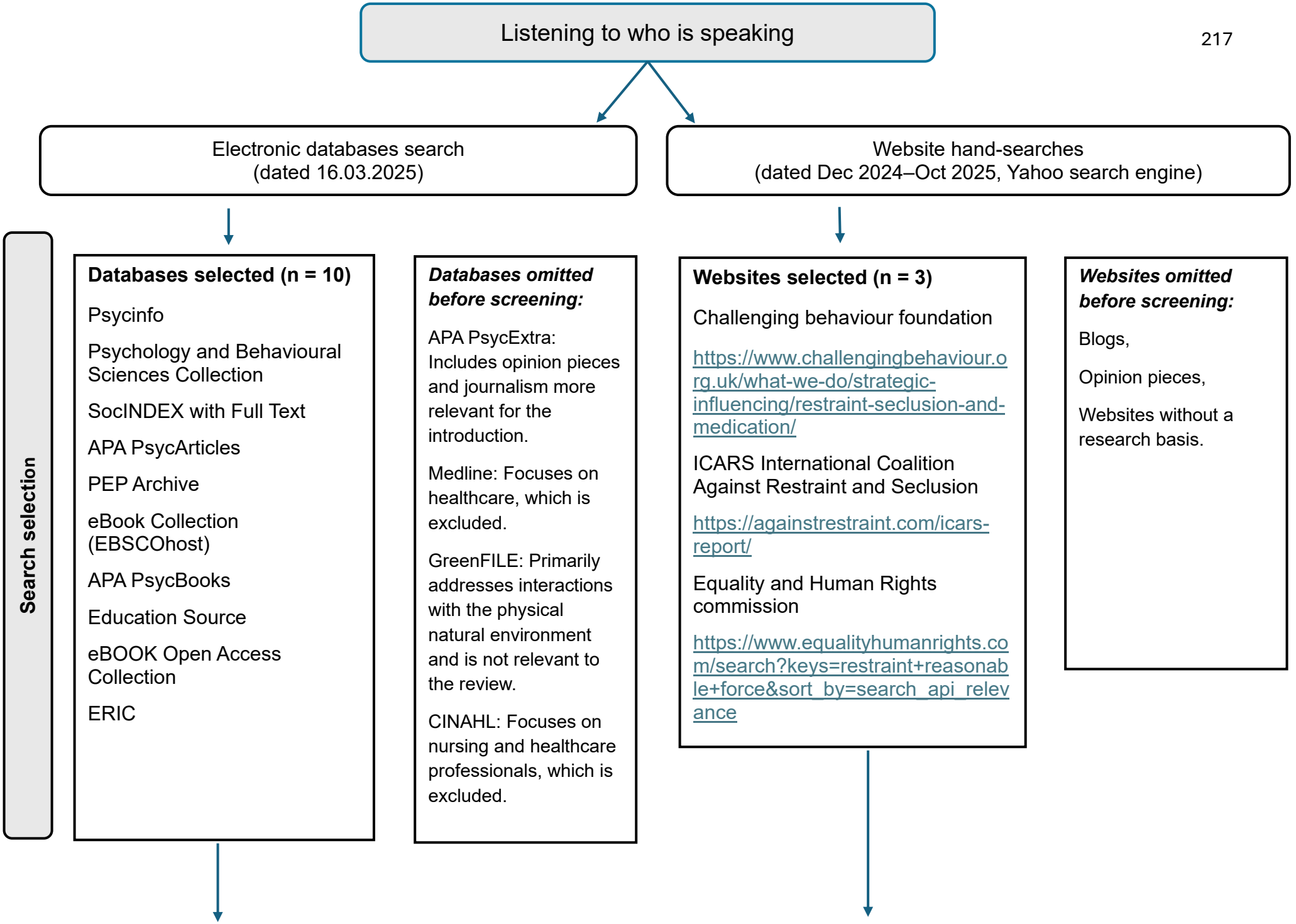
	movement of the body, or part of the body, of a pupil. Restraint may also include mechanical or chemical restraint. Restraint may or may not involve the use of force."		restraint, creating confusion.
	"Restraint' is an act carried out with the purpose of restricting an individual's movement, liberty and/or freedom to act independently".	EHRC (2019 p.4)	This definition includes chemical, mechanical and physical forms of control, and notably coercion.
Active Physical Interventions	"A method of restrictive practice in which a pupil's actions or movements are controlled by the active use of force."	EHRC Restraint in Schools Inquiry (2021, p. 10)	This suggests that physical force is actively used to control another person. EHRC (2021) use the term intervention, stating it is more familiar to schools.
Passive Physical Interventions	"A method of restrictive practice that involves direct physical contact, but not active force, to restrict or control a pupil's movement or actions."	EHRC Restraint in Schools Inquiry (2021, p. 10)	This overlaps with DfE (2013) definitions of control.
Mechanical Interventions	"The use of materials or equipment by school staff to restrict a pupil's ability to move or act, such as arm splints, belts or cuffs. This also	EHRC Restraint in Schools Inquiry	This is absent from DfE (2013) but included in DfE (2025a) under restrictive

	includes the removal of an auxiliary aid such as a wheelchair or walking stick to prevent a pupil from being able to move independently."	(2021, p. 10)	interventions and restraint.
Chemical Restraint	"When assistance is sought from a medically trained member of staff to administer medication to control or subdue a pupil's behaviour and the medication is used."	EHRC Restraint in Schools Inquiry (2021, p. 11)	Included under restrictive interventions and restraint in DfE (2025a), but absent from DfE (2013).
Seclusion	"The withdrawal of a pupil from a classroom or other school situation against their will and involuntary confinement of a pupil, apart from others, in a place where the pupils must remain alone separate from other pupils."	EHRC Restraint in Schools Inquiry (2021, p. 10)	This differs from disciplinary practices such as detention in DfE (2025a)
	"…the supervised confinement and isolation of a pupil, away from other pupils, in an area from which the pupil is prevented from leaving of their own free will"	DfE (2025a, p. 5);	

Appendix B: Prisma-style diagram for Literature Search

PRISMA-style diagram of literature identification and selection




Listening to who is speaking
Electronic databases search
(dated 16.03.2025)
Website hand-searches
(dated Dec 2024–Oct 2025, Yahoo search engine)
Search selection
Databases selected (n = 10)
Psycinfo
Psychology and Behavioural Sciences Collection
SocINDEX with Full Text
APA PsycArticles
PEP Archive
eBook Collection (EBSCOhost)
APA PsycBooks
Education Source
eBOOK Open Access Collection
ERIC
Databases omitted before screening:
APA PsycExtra: Includes opinion pieces and journalism more relevant for the introduction.
Medline: Focuses on healthcare, which is excluded.
GreenFILE: Primarily addresses interactions with the physical natural environment and is not relevant to the review.
CINAHL: Focuses on nursing and healthcare professionals, which is excluded.
Websites selected (n = 3)
Challenging behaviour foundation
https://www.challengingbehaviour.org.uk/what-we-do/strategic-influencing/restraint-seclusion-and-medication/
ICARS International Coalition Against Restraint and Seclusion
https://againstrestraint.com/icars-report/
Equality and Human Rights commission
https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/search?keys=restraint+reasonable+force&sort_by=search_api_relevance
Websites omitted before screening:
Blogs,
Opinion pieces,
Websites without a research basis.

Search Terms

Key words	‘Reasonable force’ Restraint ‘Physical restraint’ ‘Restrictive practices’ ‘Physical interventions’ ‘Use of force’ ‘Control’ ‘Positive handling’ ‘Step up’	AND	Schools ‘Educational settings’ ‘Educational institutions’ ‘Primary schools’ ‘Secondary schools’ ‘Special educational needs schools’ ‘Alternative provision’ ‘Pupil referral units’	AND	Use Experience Implementation Perspectives Views ‘Student experiences’ ‘Staff experiences’ ‘Parent experiences’
Search field	TITLE		TITLE		ABSTRACT
Rationale	The search terms were selected to focus on the ***topic*** of reasonable force (by various names), ***outcomes*** (experiences, perspectives, etc), ***population*** (parents, child etc) and ***contexts*** (schools, educational settings) to ensure alignment with the review question. The title field addresses the topic and context, while the abstract field allows for a broader view of population and outcomes. This approach helped search for a wide range of possible sources.				
Results	**1177**				

Key words used to guide searches on websites

“research”

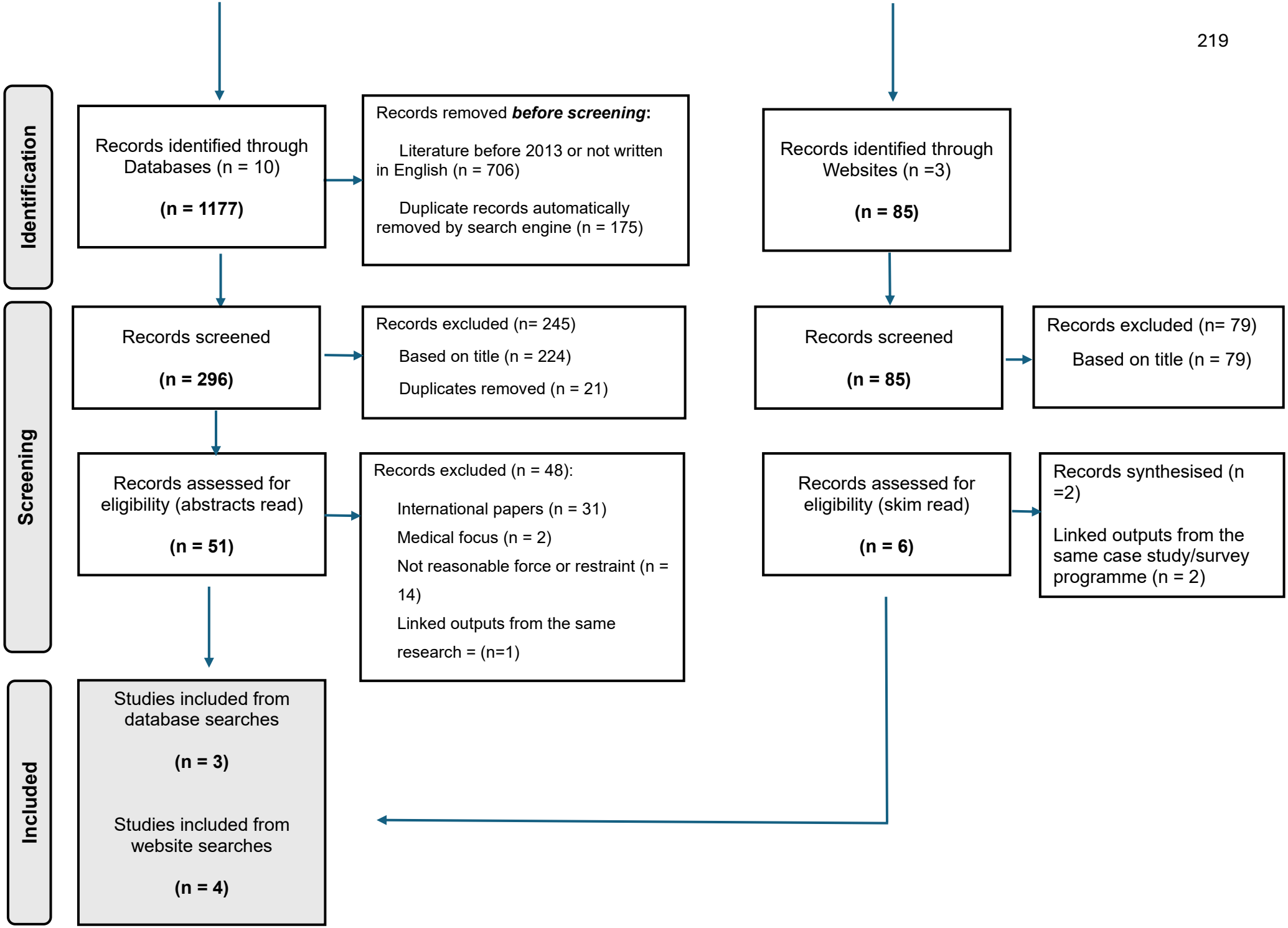
“projects”

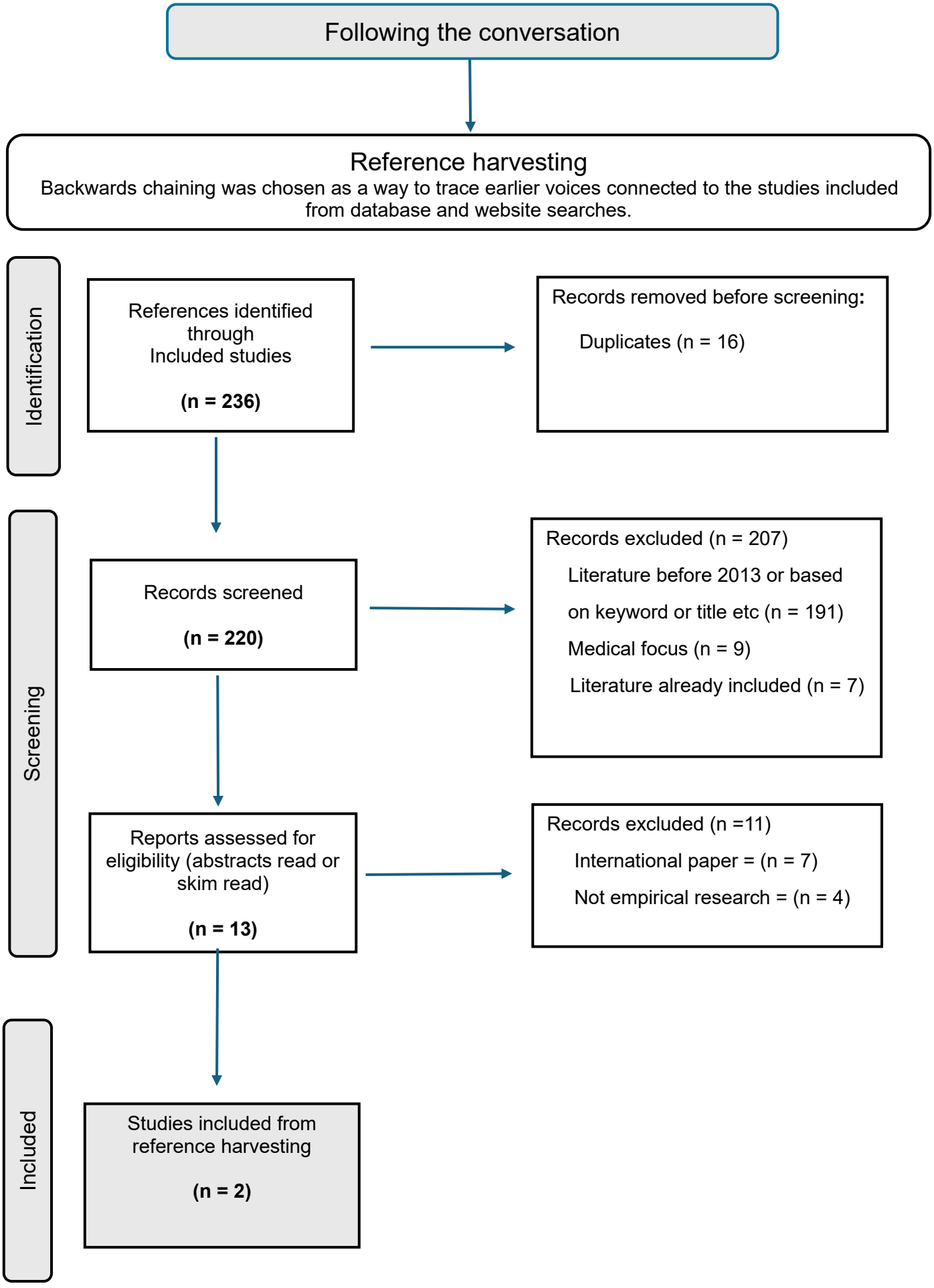
“reasonable force”

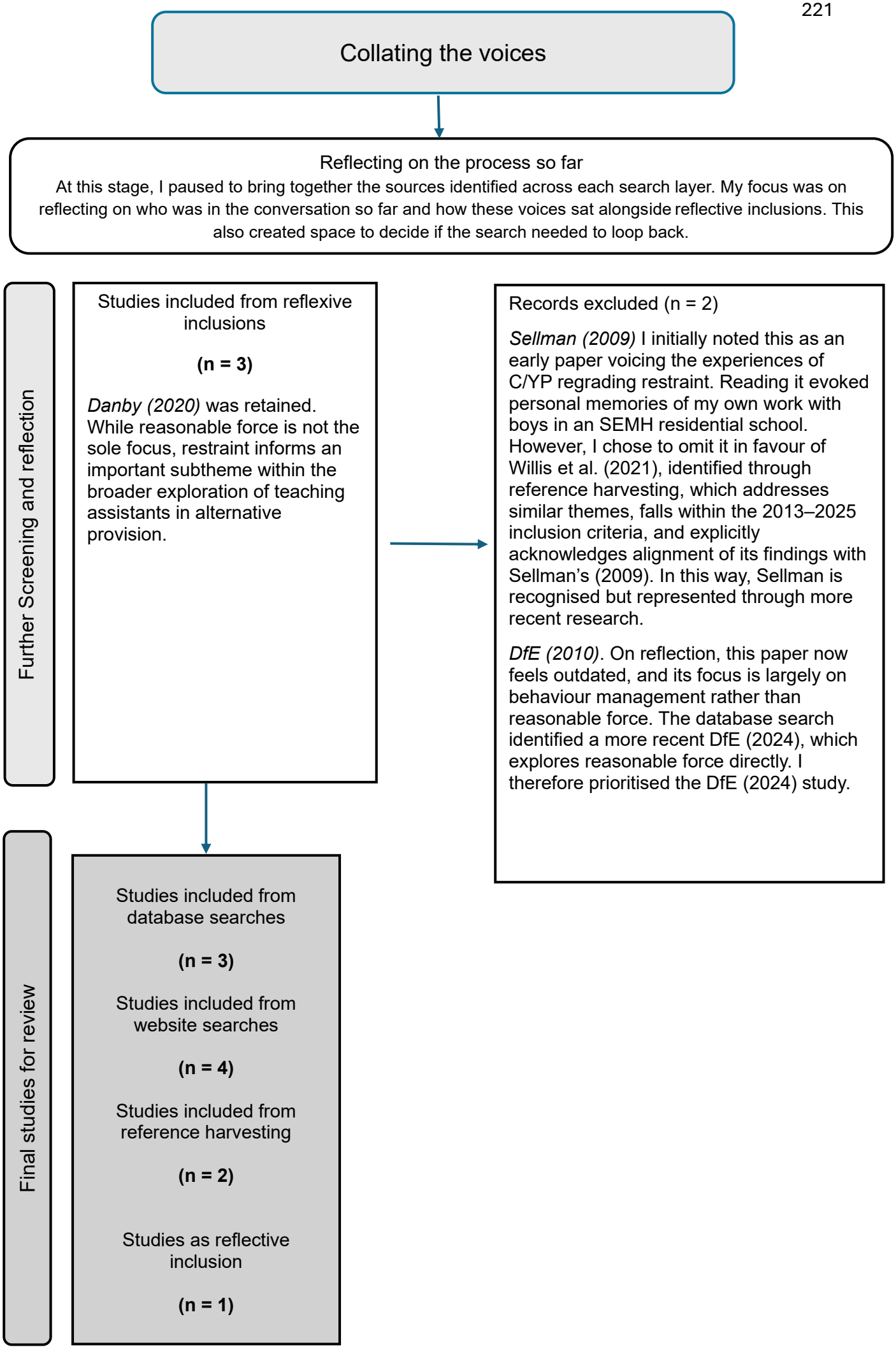
“restraint”

“education”

“schools”


Identification
Screening
Included
Records identified through Databases (n = 10)
(n = 1177)
Records removed before screening:
Literature before 2013 or not written in English (n = 706)
Duplicate records automatically removed by search engine (n = 175)
Records identified through Websites (n =3)
(n = 85)
Records screened
(n = 296)
Records excluded (n= 245)
Based on title (n = 224)
Duplicates removed (n = 21)
Records screened
(n = 85)
Records excluded (n= 79)
Based on title (n = 79)
Records assessed for eligibility (abstracts read)
(n = 51)
Records excluded (n = 48):
International papers (n = 31)
Medical focus (n = 2)
Not reasonable force or restraint (n = 14)
Linked outputs from the same research = (n=1)
Records assessed for eligibility (skim read)
(n = 6)
Records synthesised (n =2)
Linked outputs from the same case study/survey programme (n = 2)
Studies included from database searches
(n = 3)
Studies included from website searches
(n = 4)


Following the conversation
Reference harvesting
Backwards chaining was chosen as a way to trace earlier voices connected to the studies included from database and website searches.
Identification
References identified through Included studies
(n = 236)
Records removed before screening:
Duplicates (n = 16)
Screening
Records screened
(n = 220)
Records excluded (n = 207)
Literature before 2013 or based on keyword or title etc (n = 191)
Medical focus (n = 9)
Literature already included (n = 7)
Reports assessed for eligibility (abstracts read or skim read)
(n = 13)
Records excluded (n =11)
International paper = (n = 7)
Not empirical research = (n = 4)
Included
Studies included from reference harvesting
(n = 2)


Collating the voices
Reflecting on the process so far
At this stage, I paused to bring together the sources identified across each search layer. My focus was on reflecting on who was in the conversation so far and how these voices sat alongside reflective inclusions. This also created space to decide if the search needed to loop back.
Further Screening and reflection
Studies included from reflexive inclusions
(n = 3)
Danby (2020) was retained. While reasonable force is not the sole focus, restraint informs an important subtheme within the broader exploration of teaching assistants in alternative provision.
Records excluded (n = 2)
Sellman (2009) I initially noted this as an early paper voicing the experiences of C/YP regrading restraint. Reading it evoked personal memories of my own work with boys in an SEMH residential school. However, I chose to omit it in favour of Willis et al. (2021), identified through reference harvesting, which addresses similar themes, falls within the 2013–2025 inclusion criteria, and explicitly acknowledges alignment of its findings with Sellman's (2009). In this way, Sellman is recognised but represented through more recent research.
DfE (2010). On reflection, this paper now feels outdated, and its focus is largely on behaviour management rather than reasonable force. The database search identified a more recent DfE (2024), which explores reasonable force directly. I therefore prioritised the DfE (2024) study.
Final studies for review
Studies included from database searches
(n = 3)
Studies included from website searches
(n = 4)
Studies included from reference harvesting
(n = 2)
Studies as reflective inclusion
(n = 1)

Appendix C: Critical Engagement Examples

Adapted TAPUPASM framework (Ryan & Rutty, 2019, p.19)

This reflective prompt was used to critically reflect on the selected literature. These reflections aim to encourage critical engagement rather than serve as a quality checklist. While all TAPUPASM framework areas are considered, not every reflective prompt was necessarily used. Due to their length, two examples are included.

Study 1: Challenging Behaviour Foundation, & Positive and Active Behaviour Support Scotland (CBF & PABSS). (2019–2020). ***Reducing restrictive intervention of children and young people: Case study and survey results.*** **Challenging Behaviour Foundation.**

Quality Criteria		Reflective prompts	Notes:
T			
Transparency	*This considers how the researchers came to their research questions and if they are clear about their philosophical position.*	**Is the generation of knowledge clear?**	***To some degree***
		Are the research questions, aims, and methods clear?	This was really implicit throughout the report, and I felt I could extrapolate it out, but no clear aims were listed – no research question that I could find.
		Are the researcher's values and their own assumptions clear?	Neither the *Challenging Behaviour Foundation (2019)* nor the *PABSS (2020)* reports explicitly articulate researcher positioning. However, having said this the context of the reports are clearly stated such as their advocacy positioning.
		Is there a rationale for methodological choices?	No – the report speaks about how they used online surveys, but not why they chosen this – I assume this is because it links directly to their audience and intended participants.
		Can decisions trace back to ontology and epistemology?	This is not psychological research – it is advocacy and the philosophical position is not explored.
		Could I follow the research design myself and repeat the study?	They have included the survey questions.

A			
Accessibility	*This considers how the research has been disseminated and who can access it.*	**Is the research accessible for who might read it, how they might and where or when?**	***Yes***
		Who can access the research?	The findings are online on the CBF website – easy to find
		Are the findings presented in a way that stakeholders can use? Is it easy to read for the intended audience?	Yes, I think the results are clear. I believe that families and charity advocates can make use of the paper and read the tables and graphs etc
		Are dissemination methods appropriate? Can it only be found in academic areas?	On the internet and advocacy websites – but I have found it referenced in academic papers (Hodgkiss & Harding, 2024; Mullowney 2023), and another advocacy report/research (RRISC 2021). I assume that other researchers are picking it up and using it.
		Have the researchers thought about wider audiences than their own field?	It doesn't feel intentionally directed toward other researchers however, as noted above, it is being found by others including academic research. I think they intended this to be more advocacy and to petition government etc and drive change.
P			
Purposivity	*This considers if the research is 'fit for purpose'.*	**Have the methods achieved the research aims?**	***To some degree***
		Do the methods help the aims and objectives?	The *CBF & PABSS (2019, 2020)* reports use a mixed-methods approach. They use survey data and case studies to understand the frequency and experiences, etc. However, it was over a long time period, which could create confusion about how and when incidents are being referred to, etc.
		Are the research questions and design fit for purpose?	No clear research question
		Do ontology and epistemology shape the design, or does it feel mismatched?	It feels a little mismatched between the survey data and case studies. There is no explanation of how these datasets were integrated or compared, or if participants are the same. I feel this adds some confusion and weakens the methodological clarity and limits how the findings can be meaningfully interpreted.

U			
Utility	*This considers if the generated knowledge is of any use to the practitioner or field.*	**Does the research provide useful knowledge?**	***To some degree***
		Are the findings useful in the intended context?	Yes – it feels useful to hear family experiences and for thew charity to advocate for them
		Is the need for the research justified?	Yes – they situate the research in the context of growing concern about restraint and need for reform.
		Does it provide practical and useful answers to the research question?	Unclear if there was a direct research question but it does provide a useful understanding of family experiences.
		Can the findings be applied to inform decisions or on the ground practice? If I were a practitioner, how easy would it be for me to use this research?	There is some caution due to the lack research question and some concerns how the survey and case studies integrate. However, this gives some clear indication to family experiences which has not been looked at in other reviewed literature.
		Does the research explain how results can be used?	Recommendations are given – which is useful for practitioners and policy makers etc
P			
Propriety	*This considers if the research was conducted in an ethical way.*	**Is the research legal and ethical?**	***Yes***
		Is data protection, confidentiality, and informed consent addressed?	Partly – privacy notices given in case study data gathering, but I am unsure about the survey, however quotes etc are anonymous which suggests ethical practice related to confidentiality.
		Did the research protect participants' dignity and safety or minimise harm?	Yes, case studies are anonymous, such as not keeping personal information
		Were legal or ethical standards were followed? Was ethical approval gained?	
		Am I worried about what it 'felt' like to take part in this study?	No, I am not worried about this – I can also imagine it might have felt good for families to share their views and the report/survey and case study helped facilitate this.
		Is the ethical practice appropriate to the respective	

		research methods e.g.: online etc	
A			
Accuracy	*This considers how the researcher has represented the participant experiences and was a critical review of the context being investigated.*	**Are the claims made based on appropriate information?**	***To some degree***
		Are participants' perceptions and experiences represented?	Yes
		Is there a balance between participants' voices and the researcher's interpretation in line with the research's ontology and epistemology?	I am unsure if terminology used in the survey (such as impact, risk, seriousness etc) has a shared meaning, and if everyone's understanding of completing the survey will be the same.
		Is the evidence presented accurately, without exaggeration?	Participant responses are taken as accurate (this is not necessarily a problem – but no limitations are noted, or the context for incidents/experience are asked for)
		Is there evidence of peer review or member checks?	No
S			
Specificity	*This considers if the research 'holds up' in its own professional/practice context.*	**Does the research meet the standards of its professional/practice area?**	***To Some Degree***
		Was the research designed in a way expected for the given professional/practice context?	I think that for a charity/advocacy report, their data collection method made practical sense – to ask families within their network; however, this potential impact or limitation was not addressed.
		How well does this research align with the professional standards in its field?	It feels like it is conducted in a similar ways to the ICARS report

M			
Modified Objectivity	*This considers the researchers positioning and assumes that researchers can never overcome their own assumptions and perspectives.*	**Does the research draw the most likely conclusions?**	***To Some Degree***
		Are limitations acknowledged?	No
		Are multiple forms of evidence explored/used to get the 'big picture' of 'reality'? E.g.: Literature review, observation, data collection, etc	To some degree, I feel it uses case studies and survey data, but there could be crossover between participants, and the integration of these datasets is confusing and ambiguous
		Do the researchers discuss their own role or values?	Somewhat – the research is situated in the context of calls for reform and increased societal concern, but researcher positioning is not explicitly addressed.
		Is it clear what might be researcher interpretation? Are underlying assumptions explored?	The intention is advocacy – as a group
		Does the research discuss the nuances of what is being studied?	No – context of survey data is not asked for – quite factual etc
		Is uncertainty acknowledged?	No as above
		Are areas of future research suggested with recommendations to acknowledge the fallibility of knowledge?	Recommendations are given including areas for government reforms and recommendations for in practice such as having more skilled staff etc.

Personal Reflection	*This explores my own affective responses to the research to consider how it might have influenced interpretation.*	How did this research make me feel? What stood out to me? What make me 'nod along' or 'shake my head'? Did any aspects of it make me feel uncomfortable?	*At first, I found the reports shocking to read. The frequency and types of experiences were unsettling, and the accounts of restraint and seclusion were distressing. However, as I read more closely, I became increasingly critical of the studies themselves. For example, the two datasets, a short survey and a longer series of case studies, were collected over different time periods and are not clearly integrated or cross-referenced. This leaves me uncertain about duplication among participating families, which weakens the clarity of the findings.* *However, I can't help but feel that this advocacy report helps pave the way forward and is trying to find out something important that hasn't been researched very much, namely family experiences. I feel it empowers families and gives them an avenue to channel their experiences and concerns. This also makes me consider how this advocacy report has perhaps paved the way for other researchers, as other researchers have mentioned it as a reason for conducting their own research.*

Study 2: Danby, H. (2020). *"So yes, you've battered me. Yes, you've hurt me. But you know what? I'm not giving up on you": The experiences of teaching assistants supporting excluded children in alternative provisions* (Professional Doctorate thesis, Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust / University of Essex). University of Essex.

Quality Criteria		Reflective prompts	Notes:
T			
Transparency	*This considers how the researchers came to their research questions and if they are clear about their philosophical position.*	**Is the generation of knowledge clear?**	***Yes***
		Are the research questions, aims, and methods clear?	Yes – exceptionally clear *"What are the experiences of TAs supporting excluded children in AP"* (p.55)
		Are the researcher's values and their own assumptions clear?	
		Is there a rationale for methodological choices?	Yes – the researcher used IPA which fit coherently in the philosophical position
		Can decisions trace back to ontology and epistemology?	Yes - Ontology was relativist and epistemology was constructivist – clearly stated
		Could I follow the research design myself and repeat the study?	Yes – clear research design and inclusion/exclusion criteria etc and interview procedure detailed
A			
Accessibility	*This considers how the research has been disseminated and who can access it.*	**Is the research accessible for who might read it, how they might and where or when?**	***To some degree***
		Who can access the research?	Unsure – it was a dissertation accessed through the Tavistock repository – retained through reflective contributions of prior reading
		Are the findings presented in a way that stakeholders can use? Is it easy to read for the intended audience?	Unpublished – seems to have remained as a doctoral thesis
		Are dissemination methods appropriate? Can it only be found in academic areas?	As above
		Have the researchers thought about wider audiences than their own field?	Yes – the implications for the research are clearly laid out in diagrams which are easy to understand and apply in practice to multiple professions.

P			
Purposivity	*This considers if the research is 'fit for purpose'.*	**Have the methods achieved the research aims?**	***Yes***
		Do the methods help the aims and objectives?	Yes – in-person semi-structured interviews are very suitable for IPA data analysis, and the research question of understanding lived experience.
		Are the research questions and design fit for purpose?	Yes – clear research question, which is open-ended, not hypothesis-driven
		Do ontology and epistemology shape the design, or does it feel mismatched?	Very coherent Relativism / Constructivist / IPA
U			
Utility	*This considers if the generated knowledge is of any use to the practitioner or field.*	**Does the research provide useful knowledge?**	***Yes***
		Are the findings useful in the intended context?	Yes, as a trainee EP, I get a sense of what it is like for staff in alternative provision and a clear indication of how to support them as an EP
		Is the need for the research justified?	Yes, recruitment and retention are mentioned in the context of the need to look at staff experiences in alternative provisions
		Does it provide practical and useful answers to the research question?	Yes, implications are practical to EP practice
		Can the findings be applied to inform decisions or on the ground practice? If I were a practitioner, how easy would it be for me to use this research?	Yes, Danby suggests practice recommendations for the Local Authority, the EP, and the educational setting to support TAs in alternative provision.
		Does the research explain how results can be used?	Yes, as above
P			

Propriety	*This considers if the research was conducted in an ethical way.*	**Is the research legal and ethical?**	***Yes***
		Is data protection, confidentiality, and informed consent addressed?	Yes – all names are pseudonyms
		Did the research protect participants' dignity and safety or minimise harm?	Yes - anonymity throughout
		Were legal or ethical standards were followed? Was ethical approval gained?	Yes – ethical approval by institutional for doctoral research
		Am I worried about what it 'felt' like to take part in this study?	No – I can imagine that it was a positive experience to talk about experiences of practice.
		Is the ethical practice appropriate to the respective research methods e.g.: online etc	
A			
Accuracy	*This considers how the researcher has represented the participant experiences and was a critical review of the context being investigated.*	**Are the claims made based on appropriate information?**	***Yes***
		Are participants' perceptions and experiences represented?	Yes, experiences feel empathetically and sensitively reported
		Is there a balance between participants' voices and the researcher's interpretation in line with the research's ontology and epistemology?	Yes – themes are coherently and clearly developed, aligning with expectations for IPA
		Is the evidence presented accurately, without exaggeration?	Two participants did not meet the inclusion criteria because of their broader roles within the alternative provision but were included. This may have influenced the data and reduced sample homogeneity. The author accounts for this as a limitation.
		Is there evidence of peer review or member checks?	

S			
Specificity	*This considers if the research 'holds up' in its own professional/practice context.*	**Does the research meet the standards of its professional/practice area?**	***Yes***
		Was the research designed in a way expected for the given professional/practice context?	Yes, very much so – it adheres to expected doctoral standards
		How well does this research align with the professional standards in its field?	As expected – as above
M			
Modified Objectivity	*This considers the researchers positioning and assumes that researchers can never overcome their own assumptions and perspectives.*	**Does the research draw the most likely conclusions?**	***Yes (in line with philosophical position)***
		Are limitations acknowledged?	Yes, Danby acknowledges their attempts at psychoanalytic depth. Some psychoanalytic interpretation was attempted, but the focus remained on narratives and may have missed defensive or affective aspects of experience.
		Are multiple forms of evidence explored/used to get the 'big picture' of 'reality'? E.g.: Literature review, observation, data collection, etc	Only literature review and semi-structured interviews, but this makes sense within the research design
		Do the researchers discuss their own role or values?	
		Is it clear what might be researcher interpretation? Are underlying assumptions explored?	Limitations are acknowledged, and any psychoanalytic interpretation that was attempted was not overclaimed
		Does the research discuss the nuances of what is being studied?	Yes, themes and generated knowledge are held within the philosophical position of the research
		Is uncertainty acknowledged?	Yes – it is acknowledged that findings are context-specific and based on a small sample from a single setting, limiting their applicability to wider educational contexts.
		Are areas of future research suggested with recommendations to	Yes

		acknowledge the fallibility of knowledge?	
Personal Reflection	*This explores my own affective responses to the research to consider how it might have influenced interpretation.*	How did this research make me feel? What stood out to me? What make me 'nod along' or 'shake my head'? Did any aspects of it make me feel uncomfortable?	*I enjoyed this research, perhaps because I had previously worked in similar settings in my early career. I found the use of IPA was an appropriate data analysis method. However, reasonable force appeared only tangentially in the participant accounts. I found myself wanting to read the original transcripts, to notice what was said but not further explored, or not said at all. This led me to wonder how restraint might be present in the participants' accounts across a variety of similar research, even if not explicitly foregrounded.* *While the analysis was transparent and aligned with IPA, it remained at the level of conscious narrative and did not fully explore unconscious or relational processes. This is understandable in the context of the study, but highlights why my own psychosocial approach can view similar experiences through a different lens. I feel excited that my research could extend this work by attending to what may be emotionally difficult to acknowledge. Overall, the study provides a strong foundation for exploring experiences of challenging behaviour, and I found it very interesting, and it ignited my curiosity about why restraint wasn't mentioned more. This is why it was important to keep it in the literature review as a reflective inclusion.*

Appendix D: Synthesis Matrices

These synthesis matrices were supported by the charting process (Arksey & O'Malley, 2002). They map key extractions into synthesised areas that address the two psychosocial creative inquiry questions, who is speaking and what they are talking about, to conceptualise the conversation.

Synthesis Matrix 1:

This matrix was used to map the voices in the conversation and the key areas for discussion.

Paper	**Whose experience are they looking at (from the sample and participants)**	**Area of discussion** *(What are they talking about)*	**What is their literature type and aims**	**Characterised voice** *(Who is talking)*
CBF and PABSS (2019, 2020)	Parents and carers	Family experience / Children's experience	Advocacy Report Document frequency and the impact of reasonable force Inform policy change	Advocate
RRISC (2021)	Parents and carers / Staff	Staff experience / Children's experience	Advocacy Report Determine the impact and use of reasonable force during COVID-19	Advocate
ICARS (2023)	Parents and carers	Family experience / Children's experience	Advocacy Report Examine the frequency and the impact of reasonable force and seclusion Draw attention to the family experience and their voice	Advocate
EHRC (2021)	School process	Review and improvement	Inquiry Understand how schools are collecting data on restraint and how they use this data to improve outcomes	Reviewer
DfE (2024)	School process	Review and improvement	Research report Understand how reasonable being used is and learn what schools think is effective to minimise it	Reviewer

Danby (2020)	Teaching Assistants	Staff experience	Research Explore the lived experience of TAs supporting excluded children's alternative provision	Researcher
Willis et al. (2021)	Children (Boys)	Children's experience	Research Explore direct experience and witnesses' experience of restraint with children with SEMH needs	Researcher
Stothard (2022)	One child (Boy)	Children's experience	Research Gain the views and experiences of children who have been physically restrained	Researcher
Mullowney (2023)	Scoping Literature review / Staff, including head teachers	Review and improvement / Staff experience	Research – and – Scoping review Examine guidance on positive handling Explore staff views on implementing positive handling in schools.	Researcher / Improver
Hodgkiss and Harding (2024)	Children (Boys and Girls)	Children's experience / review and improvement	Research Gather children's views of children who have been restrained and ask their perspectives on alternatives	Researcher / Improver

Synthesis Matrix 2:

This matrix was used to map my interpretations of the literature through iterative reading in response to the review question.

Who is speaking?		What are they talking about?									
		Families			**C/YP**			**Staff**		**Review and improvement**	
		Poor communication	Powerlessness	Mistrust	Danger/ harm / bad practice	Emotional Impact	Relationship between adult and child	Emotional labour	System Pressures	Inconsistency and accountability	Alternatives and solutions
CBF and PABSS (2019, 2020)	Advocates	x	x	x	x					x	
RRISC (2021)	Advocates				x			x	x		
ICARS (2023)	Advocates	x	x	x	x					x	
EHRC (2021)	Reviewers									x	
DfE (2024)	Reviewers									x	
Danby (2020)	Researchers							x	x		
Willis et al. (2021)	Researchers					x	x				
Stothard (2022)	Researchers					x	x				

Mullowney (2023)	Researchers							x		x	x
Hodgkiss and Harding (2024)	Researchers					x	x				x
Mullowney (2023)	Improvers							x		x	x

Appendix E: Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form

Libby Brown

Trainee educational psychologist and researcher

A Psychosocial Exploration of Staff's Emotional Experiences of Using Reasonable Force and Restraint



The Tavistock and Portman NHS Trust

Research Supervisor – Dr Dale Bartle

This research has ethical approval from Tavistock and Portman Trust Research Ethics Committee (TREC)

NHS
The Tavistock and Portman

A bit about me

- I'm interested in understanding the use of **reasonable force and restraint** with children and young people.
- I have personal experience using reasonable force and restraint, and I understand they can be complex and involve a range of emotions.
- By listening to staff experiences, I hope to provide insights that foster understanding and support for those working in challenging educational settings.

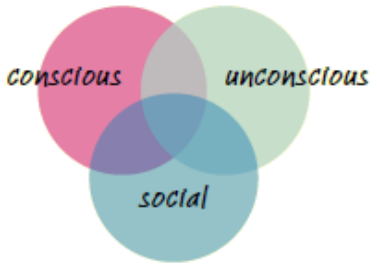
What's involved?

- A one-to-one interview with me which is **audio recorded**.
- We will use an activity called ***Talking Stones*** (see the video provided for more details).
- This will take about 1 hour.
- I will listen carefully and be sensitive to your experiences.
- After the interview, there will be a debrief to ensure you feel supported.

Research focus

What can be understood about educational staff's emotional experiences of the use of reasonable force and restraint with children and young people?

My research recognises that our feelings and experiences are influenced by internal factors (like *unconscious* thoughts), our *conscious* descriptions of events, and the *social* world around us.



Instead of looking for one 'right' answer, I aim to understand experiences more deeply. This involves exploring and interpreting people's unconscious thoughts and making sense of what they say and think while appreciating that everyone experiences things differently.

Confidentiality

- All names and setting details will be anonymised.
- Participants should be aware that, due to the small sample size of the research, their identity may still be recognisable.
- All data will be kept confidential, but confidentiality is subject to legal limitations.
- Any disclosures of malpractice or child safeguarding concerns will be shared with the safeguarding lead at the school or setting, and the interview will be stopped.
- This means that I may need to inform someone, such as a manager, if you tell me something that suggests you or someone else is not safe, or that the practice you describe is unsafe or illegal.

Important Information

- Participation is entirely voluntary and will not affect any access to educational psychology services.
- You can withdraw at any time without consequence, and any unprocessed data you have provided can also be withdrawn.
- The data generated in the course of the research will be retained in accordance with the Trusts 's Data Protection and handling Policies.
  https://tavistockandportman.nhs.uk/about-us/governance/policies-and-procedures/
- If you have any concerns about my conduct or any other aspect of this research project, you can
  contact the Head of Academic Registry (academicquality@tavi-port.nhs.uk)

Signposting to support

[redacted] **Health NHS – Wellbeing Resources:** This includes advice on sleep, relaxation, and overall wellbeing[redacted] Health NHS Wellbeing Services for guidance on self-care and mental health support.

[redacted]**Schools Web – Wellbeing Suppo**[redacted]nformed about wellbeing services specific to educational staff through th[redacted]e Schools Web, which includes mental health and wellbeing resources available in th[redacted]ontext.

Better health – Sleep Advice: This includes advice on sleep hygiene and managing anxiety and stress https://www.nhs.uk/every-mind-matters/mental-wellbeing-tips/how-to-fall-asleep-faster-and-sleep-better/

Mental Health Support: For urgent mental health advice, participants will be encouraged to call 111, a 24/7 service that provides immediate support.

Educational Support Teams:

- Education Psychology Team: Available at eps@[redacted]gov.uk
- Public Health Team: Available at publichealth@[redacted]ov.uk
- School Improvement Team: Available at sis[redacted]gov.uk



The Tavistock and Portman NHS Trust
Research Supervisor – Dr Dale Bartle
Researcher – Libby Brown
This research has ethical approval from Tavistock and Portman Trust Research Ethics Committee (TREC)

Consent Form
A Psychosocial Exploration of Staff's Emotional Experiences of Using Reasonable Force and Restraint

Please read the following statements, tick the ones that apply to your participation in this research, and sign to confirm your consent:

I understand that this research is part of Libby Brown's doctoral studies for a thesis.	
I understand that participation in this research is voluntary.	
I understand that interviews will be audio recorded.	
I know I have two weeks after the interview to tell you not to use something I shared or withdraw my information completely.	
I understand that if any child protection, illegal, or professional misconduct issues arise the researchers have a duty to pass this information on to the relevant safeguarding professionals.	
I understand that while my data will be anonymised, due to the small sample size, complete anonymity may not be fully guaranteed.	
I consent to participate in the research under these conditions.	
Please sign or write your name	Date

Appendix F: Ethical Approval Letter

The Tavistock and Portman NHS
NHS Foundation Trust

Quality Assurance & Enhancement
Directorate of Education & Training
Tavistock Centre
120 Belsize Lane
London
NW3 5BA

Tel: 020 8938 2699

https://tavistockandportman.nhs.uk/

Elizabeth Brown

By Email

14 April 2025

Dear Elizabeth,

Re: Trust Research Ethics Application

Title: 'A Psychosocial Exploration of Staff's Emotional Experiences of Using Reasonable Force and Restraint'

Thank you for submitting your updated Research Ethics documentation. I am pleased to inform you that subject to formal ratification by the Trust Research Ethics Committee your application has been approved. This means you can proceed with your research.

Please be advised that any changes to the project design including modifications to methodology/data collection etc, must be referred to TREC for review.

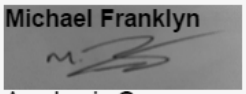
Failure to obtain prior approval for such changes may result in academic and/or research misconduct.

If you have any further questions or require any clarification, please do not hesitate to contact me.

I am copying this communication to your supervisor.

May I take this opportunity of wishing you every success with your research.

Yours sincerely,



Academic Governance and Quality Officer
T: 020 938 2699
E: academicquality@tavi-port.nhs.uk

cc. Course Lead, Supervisor, Research Lead

Appendix G:Participant Wellbeing Form

Participant Wellbeing Form

NAME:

This form outlines the steps I will take if you become distressed during the research interview. It also allows you to explain what actions or support you feel would help.

To support you I will ...

- check in with you how you are feeling and if you want a break.
- stop the interview if you request it.
- offer a calm and empathetic response to validate your feelings.
- refer to your self-identified preferences for managing distress.
- signpost you to support services if needed or requested.
- record the nature of the distress and the steps taken for support in my research journal (while maintaining confidentiality).

How will I know you are distressed?

Please tick any options below that you feel apply to you

- [ ]Tearfulness or crying
- [ ]Becoming visibly agitated and fidgeting
- [ ]Difficulty continuing with the interview
- [ ]Physical signs such as fidgeting, sweating, or avoidance of eye contact
- [ ]Verbally expressing discomfort or distress
- [ ]Other (please specify):

_____

What support would you like if you become distressed?

Please tick any options below that you feel would help

- [ ] I would prefer to have a short break to gather myself.
- [ ] I would like to continue the interview another day.
- [ ] I would prefer to stop the interview entirely.
- [ ] I would like to be signposted to support services.
- [ ] Other (please specify):

_____

Acknowledgment

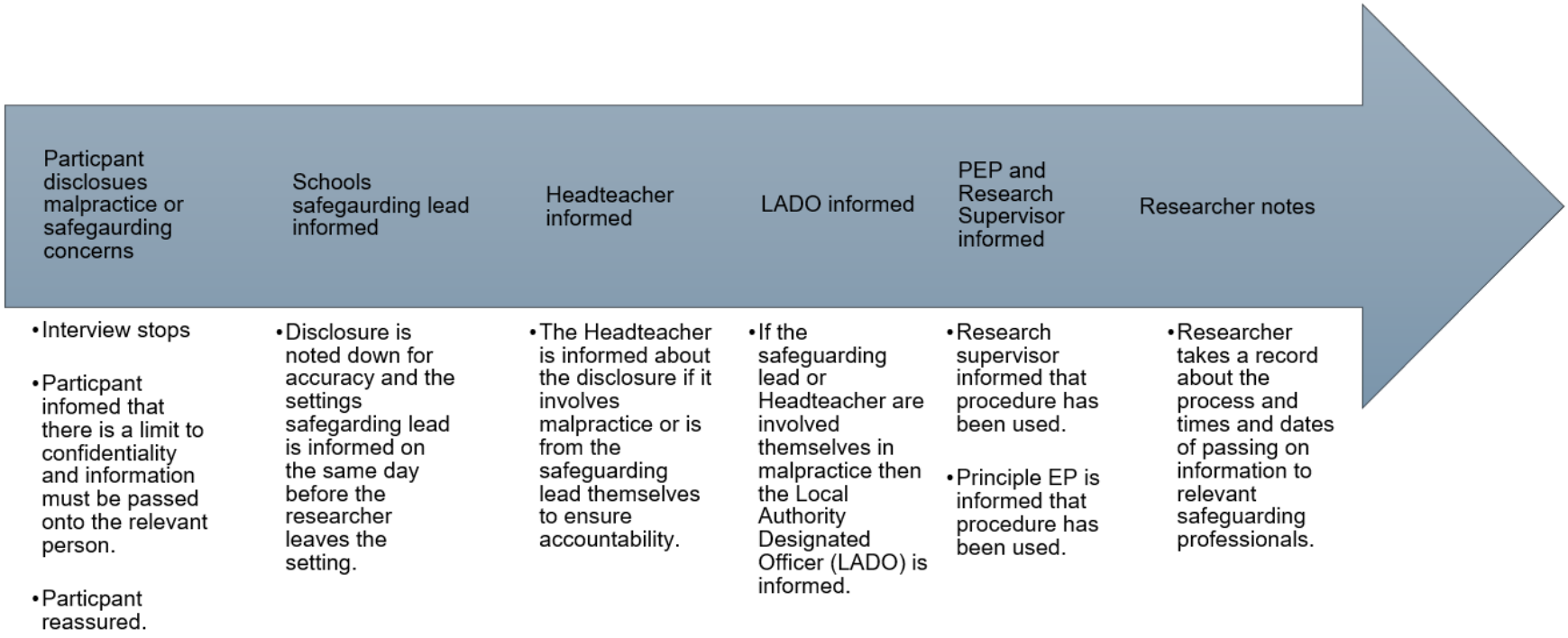
By signing below, I acknowledge that I have read and understood the steps that will be taken to manage distress and the options available to me.

Participant Name (Printed): _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Appendix H: Safeguarding and Malpractice Procedure



Appendix I: Diary Extract IPA Reflection

I have been mulling over the most appropriate way to analyse the data. I am mindful that I will be exploring lived experience, and at first, I felt that IPA might offer a useful avenue into the embodied and emotional experiences of participants. IPA acknowledges that experience emerges through situated relationships between people and their worlds (Cerbone, 2006; Larkin et al., 2006), which feels in keeping with bringing together the social and the individual. Additionally, the double hermeneutic process, involving the researcher interpreting the participant's sense-making, supports an interpretative stance that initially appeared complementary with the talking stone interviews, as I will inevitably be interpreting their interpretations of experience. But ultimately, I am left wondering about how I can bring in the psychodynamic theoretical framework.

In my reading to explore this, I noted that some researchers have used psychodynamic concepts within IPA. For example, Dennison's (2016) research on teachers' experiences of perceived C/YP's negative behaviour used IPA and psychodynamic theory to explore possible relational patterns between teachers and pupils and between researcher and participants. Their reflections on projection in the research encounter suggest IPA can potentially support the psychodynamic concepts. However, IPA is grounded in phenomenological philosophy that prioritises participants' reflective accounts as meaningful descriptions of lived experiences (Smith et al., 2022). I do not think this aligns with the researcher's orientation that foregrounds the assumption that narratives may be shaped by unconscious and defensive processes that obscure experience rather than portray it faithfully (Hollway & Jefferson, 2013). I feel that IPA aims to document lived experience (Willig, 2013),

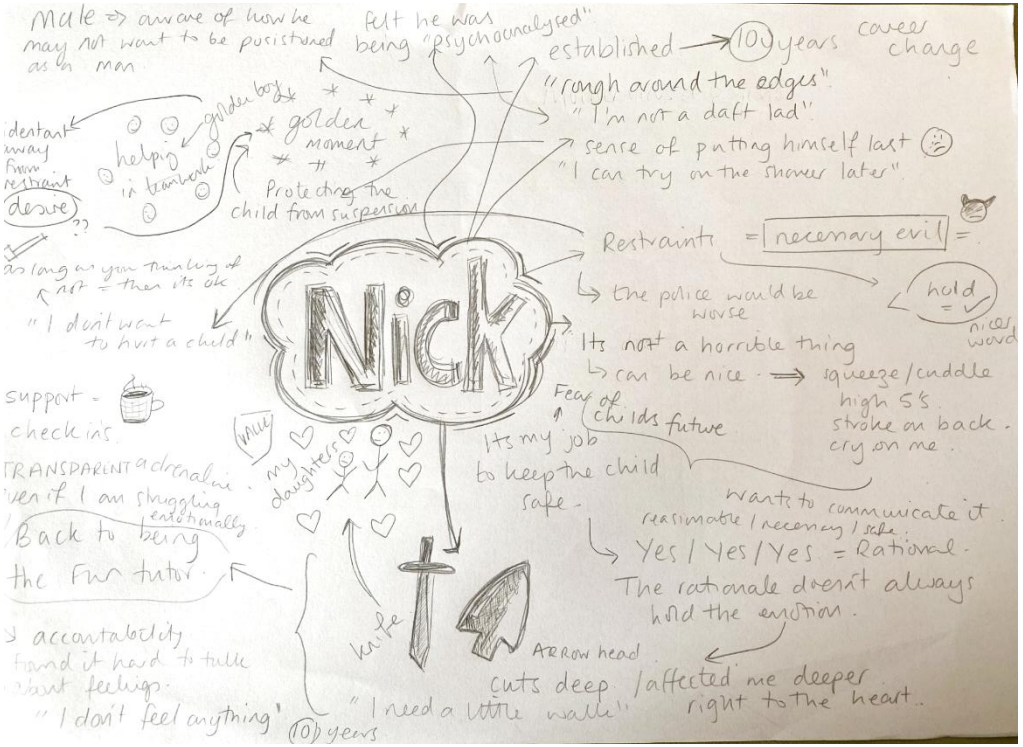
which I believe is inconsistent with the orientation of my research. My data analysis needs to consider latent meaning and symbolic expression.

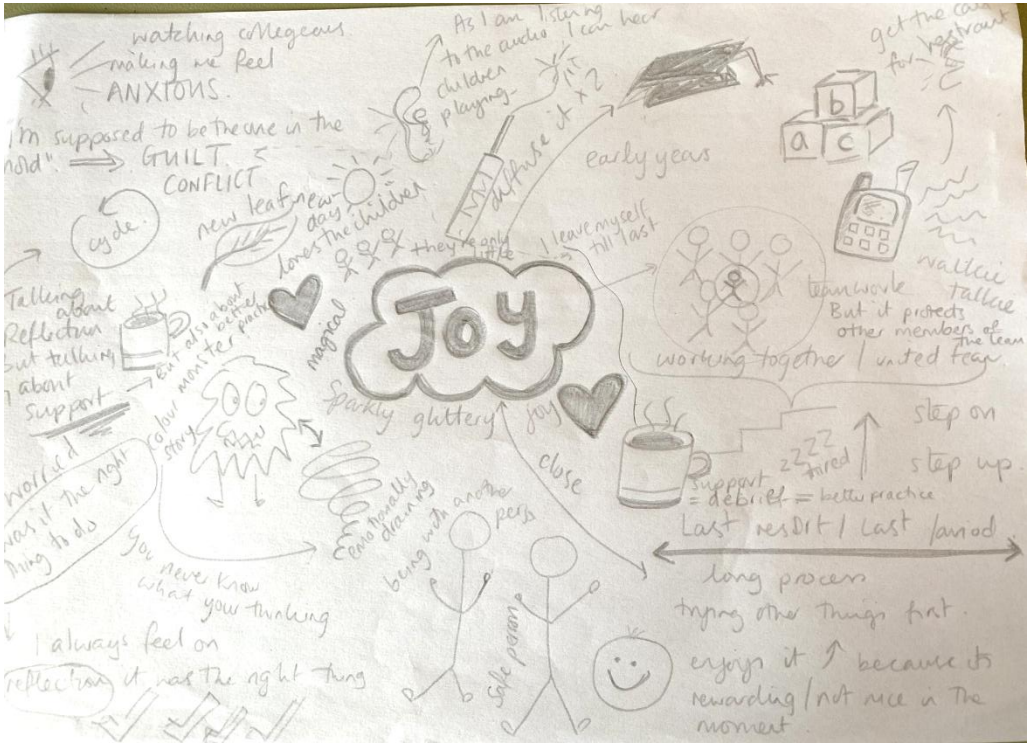
(Research Diary, 15.05.2025)

Appendix J: RTA Familiarisation Mind Map

A familiarisation mind map was created for each participant. This was made by immersing myself in the audio of the interviews and allowing a free flow of notes and sketches with ideas and initial thoughts as I started to engage with the material.

These two examples are from participants Nick and Joy.





Appendix K: RTA Coding Screenshots

These screenshots display examples of coding. It includes both participant transcript line numbers and code summaries.

Anxiety	Zara	231–237	Participants openly express feelings of anxiety in a conscious or direct way. They may mention feeling anxious about particular tasks, children or any moment where they articulate their anxiety in relation to their experiences.
Anxiety	Joy	327-336	
Anxiety	Julie	350–352	
Anxiety	Joy	217-223	
Anxiety	Veronica	802-808	
Autopilot - Emotional distance in the moment	Sophie	577–578	Participants describe, or it is interpreted, as going into a kind of autopilot mode. They describe a sense of emotional detachment, such as feeling like they are just going through the motions, or 'aren't bothered' about it. It is moments when they describe operating on a kind of automatic pilot.
Autopilot - Emotional distance in the moment	Sophie	333–338	
Autopilot - Emotional distance in the moment	Nick	332–335	
Autopilot - Emotional distance in the moment	Sophie	531–541	

Physical support from colleague is physical group safety	Joy	157-171	Participants describe experiences of feeling their colleagues' presence and support during restraint/reasonable force, like feeling the body of a colleague.
Physical support from colleague is physical group safety	Zara	781–784	
Physical support from colleague is physical group safety	Zara	756–761	
Physically shaken up	Veronica	406-410	Participants share feelings of being 'shaken up' physically by restraint/reasonable force, either before, after or during.
Physically shaken up	Anna	295–298	
Physically shaken up	Anna	302–303	
Procedural closure as a way to manage anxiety of professional vulnerability	Nick	482–516	Participants describe a sense of relief and security by thoroughly documenting and finalising procedures related to reasonable force. For exmaple, writing everything up to ensure transparency providing a sense of emotional reassurance and control.
Procedural closure as a way to manage anxiety of professional vulnerability	Anna	358–361	
Procedural closure as a way to manage anxiety of professional vulnerability	Anna	384–386	

Appendix L: RTA Theme generation tables

Coding to the initial theme generation table:

These initial codes were clustered into 30 initial themes before being refined into subthemes and main themes.

	Codes	Initial Theme
1	Holding contradictions with a situation or child (possible depressive positioning)	**The interview as a site of movement, shifting positions in reflection, from black and white to nuance**
2	Movement towards possible paranoid-schizoid positions within reflections	
3	Movement towards the depressive position within reflections	
4	Splitting the behaviour and the child apart	
5	Unpredictability of outcome	**You never know what will happen, working within uncertainty, anxiety, loss of control, and planning**
6	Unpredictability of practice, environment, or setting	
7	Unpredictability of the incident	
8	Importance of creating predictability and planning for responses to incidents	
9	Anxiety	
10	Loss of control	
11	Emotionally Draining	**The emotional toll, difficult to predict and articulate, lingering and draining**
12	Helplessness	
13	Long aftereffects / deep emotional impact	
14	Mixed Emotions or emotional confusion	
15	Sadness	
16	Unpredictability of emotional experience	
17	Physical feelings (adrenaline) /shaken up	**Feeling it in the body**
18	Physical exhaustion	
19	Fear or apprehension about entering a reasonable force	**On the edge of safety, fear, vulnerability and the body**
20	High stakes (life or death high risk)	
21	Shared metaphor of vulnerability or risk in the sharpness of stone	
22	Using your body as a boundary or to communicate	
23	Dread and Panic	
24	Sense of responsibility in decision-making	**Caught between competing duties, no good options and impossible choices**
25	Split duty of care between the adult/students/other students	
26	Internalised pressure	
27	Caught between a rock and a hard place / Trying to make the best decisions	
28	Guilt (about the decision made)	
29	Using "gut" feeling or emotion as guidance for decision-making	
30	Having to use a practise you don't want to, or you see issues with	**Living with imperfection, conflict, fantasy, and resignation**
31	Desire for a perfect system or environment	
32	Resignation – a sense of acceptance of an imperfect situation	
33	The past was worse (practice was worse in the past)	
34	Provision inadequacy or inflexibility/unveiling of systemic flaws	**System failures and doubt in reasonable force practices**
35	Reassuring self, it is the system and not their fault	
36	Loss of confidence in restrictive practise	
37	Love - values children and care	**Holding care and love for the child in mind**
38	Empathy	
39	Child-centred care/perspective	
40	Fear of hurting a child	

41	Being alongside the child as an emotional container	**Holding the child's feelings, like containment and moral benchmarks**
42	Maternal/paternal feelings and empathy put on the situation or the students	
43	Using one's own children as a moral benchmark/guidance in practice	
44	Justifying or rationalising restraint as in the best interests of care for the child	**Benevolent framing of reasonable force**
45	Reassurance of self/practice (through articulating care for the child)	
46	Restraint as kindness (framed as a caring, protective, or helpful act, positioned as the kind option or in the child's best interests)	
47	Relational rupture / Fear of relational rupture	**Fear of relational rupture and longing for repair and caregivers need for physical and emotional holding**
48	Desire for comfort and intimacy after restraint (relational repair through physical reassurance)	
49	Possible need for care and control	
50	Acknowledging / Mutual humanity or humanising oneself	
51	Emotional bruising, having your feelings hurt	**Guarded trust in children, when closeness feels risky**
52	Lack of trust in children	
53	Tension between professional and personal boundaries	
54	Shared metaphor moving unpleasant feelings or unachievable feelings away with the stones	**Making emotional pain manageable and locating feelings elsewhere**
55	Unconscious emotional displacement	
56	Emotional darkness - Navigating an emotional darkness	
57	Desire (to move on and forget about it)	**Suppressing and moving on, and closing down vulnerability**
58	Disassociation or coping by compartmentalising	
59	Emotional suppression and desensitisation	
60	Denial/minimisation of impact	
61	Autopilot - Emotional distance in the moment	
62	Emotional Distancing	**Turning away from emotional impact or emotional deflection, or being unable to articulate emotions**
63	Deprioritising mental impact (switching talk to physical)	
64	Unknown impact on self	
65	Avoidance (of acknowledging the physical elements of restraint or its harmful potential)	**Stepping away from harm and relocating responsibility elsewhere**
66	Avoiding or renouncing responsibility - shifting responsibility to others	
67	Shifting responsibility to the child	
68	Witnesses of restraint positioned as helping or looking at colleagues, not children	
69	Disownership of reasonable force	**Reasonable force as something participants do not want to hold as part of self, identity, or private life**
70	Split between home and work life	
71	Splitting roles from restraint practice	
72	Unpleasantness/dislike	
73	Sense of Failure	**Inadequacy, doubt, and self-reproach**
74	Self-criticism	
75	Doubting	
76	Feelings of Inadequacy	

77	Fear the system will not protect you	**It's not safe to get it wrong; there is scrutiny, fear of blame and lack of protection**
78	Fear of complaint	
79	Fear of professional vulnerability	
80	Intolerance of getting it wrong or it not being ok	
81	Perceived Scrutiny (feeling watched, monitored, checked, and audited, feeling like they could be investigated)	
82	Reflection is used for professional improvement (not emotional processing)	**Professional armour, safety and competence as reassurance**
83	Reassurance through professional competence and training	
84	Procedural closure as a possible way to manage anxiety of professional vulnerability	
85	Perceived Judgement (feeling evaluated as good/bad/moral/immoral/competent or not)	**Under the moral gaze, feeling evaluated as good or bad**
86	Justification or rationalisation of restraint as a last resort	**Last resort narratives and imagined worst-case futures**
87	Reassurance self by saying it was right / needed to happen	
88	Restraint is the lesser of two "evils" (framed as an unwanted but necessary choice, taken to prevent any possible worse harm when there are no good options)	
89	Fear of imagined possible outcomes	
90	Group safety in togetherness	**In it together, group safety, solidarity, and shared experience**
91	Physical support from a colleague is physical group safety	
92	Shared experiences bring the group/team together	
93	Shared metaphor of group safety as stones together	
94	Isolation, cannot share experiences - others will not understand	**Only we understand, but also isolation and insider positions**
95	Possible splitting – the previous setting or outside is bad, their setting is good	
96	'Othering' people who have not used restraint or reasonable force or are part of the restraint team	
97	Putting on a brave face	**Containing, hiding or masking the self so you can manage how others see you**
98	Pain or pleasure of adults is not allowed in the system or at home	
99	Neglecting the self to prioritise others' needs	
100	Sense of being a saviour in the system	**Being the saviour in the system and a sense of indispensability**
101	Sacrificing yourself	
102	Self as central to practice	
103	Protecting others from potential pain	**Responsibility to others, work team, family, children**
104	Sense of responsibility due to institutional role or position in the system	
105	Sense of responsibility to protect the student or other students	
106	Feeling safe and non-judged by the "group"	**Team containment and debrief as validation and protection**
107	Reflection and debrief as protection from professional vulnerability	
108	The "group" or team validating your experience and saying you were right	
109	Shared accountability	
110	Desire to protect colleagues from physical harm or accusations	**Protecting colleagues**

Table for generating initial themes, subthemes, and main themes.

This table demonstrates the systematic process of theme generation from initial themes to sub-themes, main themes and central theme; this was an iterative process with many revisions.

Initial Theme	Central organising concept (reflexive notes where relevant)	Subtheme it went into	The main theme it went into
The interview as a site of movement, shifting positions in reflection, from binary thinking to nuance	This recognises a possible oscillation between integrated and fragmented positions among participants, where the complexity of practice or of a person can be tolerated or where there is a move towards more binary thinking. *Reflexive note: This theme gathered codes about movement towards possible paranoid-schizoid or depressive positioning, such as splitting behaviour from the child, and holding contradictions or seeing something as all good or bad. I did not consolidate this into other main themes, because I felt it reflected a central dynamic across the dataset. Therefore, it became a central theme alongside other main themes.*		**CENTRAL THEME:** Holding on in Role
You never know what will happen, working within uncertainty, anxiety, loss of control, and planning	There is a pervasive sense of unpredictability, or a loss of control; nothing can be predicted, like the outcomes of incidents, which creates a feeling of anxiety. Participants seem to respond by building pockets of predictability through planning, or routines etc.	When nothing can be predicted	On the Edge of Danger
The emotional toll, difficult to predict and articulate, lingering and draining	Reasonable force is emotionally draining but hard to articulate. There are mixed feelings that are not always easy to name or predict. But there is a sense of helplessness, sadness, or a deep emotional impact.	Vulnerability at the edge of safety	
Feeling it in the body	Emotions are registered as adrenaline, shock, exhaustion, or a bodily experience, situating emotions as embodied experience and a sure site of knowing.		
On the edge of safety, fear, vulnerability and the body	Reasonable force is experienced as a threshold of safety, with fear and vulnerability felt through dread/panic, there is a sense of stepping into danger, these feelings are also represented through symbolic representations of danger.		
Caught between competing duties, no good options and impossible choices	Decision-making is sometimes a matter of rock and a hard place, with competing duties of care. They use gut decisions and try to make the best decisions or the least harmful option under difficult circumstances, leaving room for regret or guilt.	Impossible choices in an imperfect system	
Living with imperfection, conflict, fantasy, and resignation	Using reasonable force against one's own values alongside a longing for an ideal environment, resignation and weary acceptance of an imperfect situation reflects that the past was worse.		
System failures and doubt in reasonable force practices	A recognition that there are system constraints and provision gaps that contribute to a loss of confidence in reasonable force, with responsibility for failures or provision inadequacy treated as systemic failure rather than personal practice.		

Holding care and love for the child in mind	There is a warmth for C/YP as individuals or in general, empathy is shown for their needs, and child-centred values are spoken about when thinking about the decisions they have made. There is a sense of relational concern and holding the child in mind.	Containing the adult child encounter	When Care Hurts
Holding the child's feelings, like containment and moral benchmarks	Reasonable force is an emotionally charged experience where the adult contains possible projected feelings of distress. Participants seem to use parental reference points to shape their practice and response in these moments to help understand the ethical boundaries of practice.		
Benevolent framing of reasonable force	Reasonable force is framed as caring, helpful act which is enacted for the child's best interests. This may support a sense of morality in practice and reassurance that, in the emotional distress, they are making the right decision.		
Fear of relational rupture and longing for repair and caregivers need for physical and emotional holding	There is an un/conscious fear of relationship breakdown with C/YP. Repair is sought through reassurance, closeness, and seeking comfort in the relationship again or in the system; sometimes they humanise themselves with kind self-talk or, in more unconscious ways, seek comfort and emotional holding.	Repairing rupture and guarded closeness	
Guarded trust in children, when closeness feels risky	Care can be emotionally exposing and risks being emotionally hurt or physically. Closeness is therefore managed through guarded trust and tightened boundaries to protect from being hurt again.		
Making emotional pain manageable and locating feelings elsewhere	Emotional pain is relocated, or made more tolerable by externalisation or displacement, maybe because it is too painful to hold in direct awareness.	Distancing emotional pain	Out of sight but still in the mind
Suppressing and moving on, and closing down vulnerability	Shutting down emotions, minimising impact, denial, going into autopilot or pushing incidents out of mind, may be seen as a form of unconscious coping rather than an absence of emotion. Suppressed or repressed emotions seem to emerge during the encounters.		
Turning away from emotional impact or emotional deflection, or being unable to articulate emotions	Emotional vulnerability is managed by avoidance and deflecting the narrative into physical feelings rather than emotional or redirection, or they are unable to put into words what the impact is. There is a sense of turning away from painful experiences.		
Stepping away from harm and relocating responsibility elsewhere	Shifts in focus and accountability, or acknowledging the potentially harmful nature of restraint, often move attention and responsibility away from harm and towards safer positions, such as behaviour support or colleagues' safety, which may help to reduce the possible moral threat associated with reasonable force.	Managing the threat of being the one who could harm	
Reasonable force as something participants do not want to hold as part of self, identity, or private life	Reasonable force is treated as difficult to be associated with and a possible threat to identity; it is regarded as unpleasant, so it is managed through disowning it or splitting it off from other aspects of life to protect identities and relationships.		
Inadequacy, doubt, and self-reproach	Mistakes or failure become personalised, and participants criticise themselves, doubt, uncertainty, inadequacy, and self-criticism are narrated as being their fault.	No room for error	Under the Moral Gaze

It's not safe to get it wrong, there is scrutiny, fear of blame and lack of protection	Perceived scrutiny and lack of trust in the settings protection seem to intensify vigilance and intolerance of error. There is a fear of complaint and professional risk and a feeling of being watched or checked, ultimately feeling very exposed.		
Professional armour, safety and competence as reassurance	A sense of competence, training, etc., protects the feeling of making mistakes, and this seems to offer reassurance and reduce feelings of professional risk.		
Under the moral gaze, feeling evaluated as good or bad	There is a prevalent sense of feeling evaluated as good or bad and of being judged as a particular type of person. This includes feeling condemned for using reasonable force and perceiving an external audience evaluating your actions.	The pressure to be a good person	
Last resort narratives and imagined worst-case futures	Reasonable force is legitimised by its necessity to keep C/YP and society safe and is enacted in response to feared future outcomes. This positions it as the lesser of two evils, ensuring that the self stays good by performing these moral acts.		
In it together, group safety, solidarity, and shared experience	There is a sense that the group or team brings safety through togetherness and shared experience, creating solidarity and in it togetherness.	Only we understand each other's experiences	All for one and one for all
Only we understand, but also Isolation and insider positions	Being in a reasonable force team creates insider/outsider positions, intensifying separation and isolation, which leads to 'othering' outsiders as mistrustful or unable to carry out the reasonable force work.		
Containing, hiding or masking the self so you can manage how others see you	A sense that presenting a composed, professional self, keeping vulnerability and authentic feelings out of view, or putting on a brave face and neglecting the self to help others is an expectation of the role or needed in the context to keep functioning in settings, is not about suppressing feelings but is linked to professional identity.	Self-sacrifice within professional identity	
Being the saviour in the system and a sense of indispensability	Using reasonable force means you are uniquely relied upon, with a professional identity tied to being the one who can step in and carry risk for others, rescue or sacrifice their own vulnerability.		
Responsibility to others, work team, family, and children	Duty of care is not limited to just the use of reasonable force but seems to travel across an extended system aimed at preventing harm in both workplace and home environments. This includes protecting others from pain, supporting students who are trying to work, and safeguarding family life.		
Team containment and debrief as validation and protection	The group/team represent feeling non-judged and safe, debriefing/shared accountability with the team seems to function as emotional containment and professional protection.	Protective responsibility for the team	
Protecting colleagues	There is a strong desire to safeguard colleagues from the immediate physical threats of reasonable force and potential allegations that could arise. This protective attitude may foster a sense of responsibility and moral obligation, and if this fails, guilt may arise.		

Appendix M:Helping Staff ‘hold on in role’: A resource for EP practice

A resource made for EPs to use with educational staff when reflecting on the use of reasonable force.

(FRONT)

Helping staff
‘hold on in role’



This resource is a prompt sheet intended for EPs to use with staff to help assist in reflecting on their emotional experiences of reasonable force. It is organised around the Kolb learning cycle (2015)

How to Use the Resource

The cycle is visualised as a clockwise wheel.
The centre of the wheel describes Kolb’s learning cycle, starting with ‘experience’.
The next layer of the wheel offers prompts for the EP to engage in *inward reflection*.

The centre of the wheel is encircled by abbreviated themes from Brown’s (2026) research on the emotional experiences of staff using reasonable force, offering concepts for the EP to hold in mind. Surrounding the entire wheel are reflective questions that can be asked to staff to help them process their experiences.

Experience

- Start by describing the experience in detail. This sets the context and helps staff articulate their experience.

Reflective Observation

- Reflect on and observe the reactions and emotions to the situation.

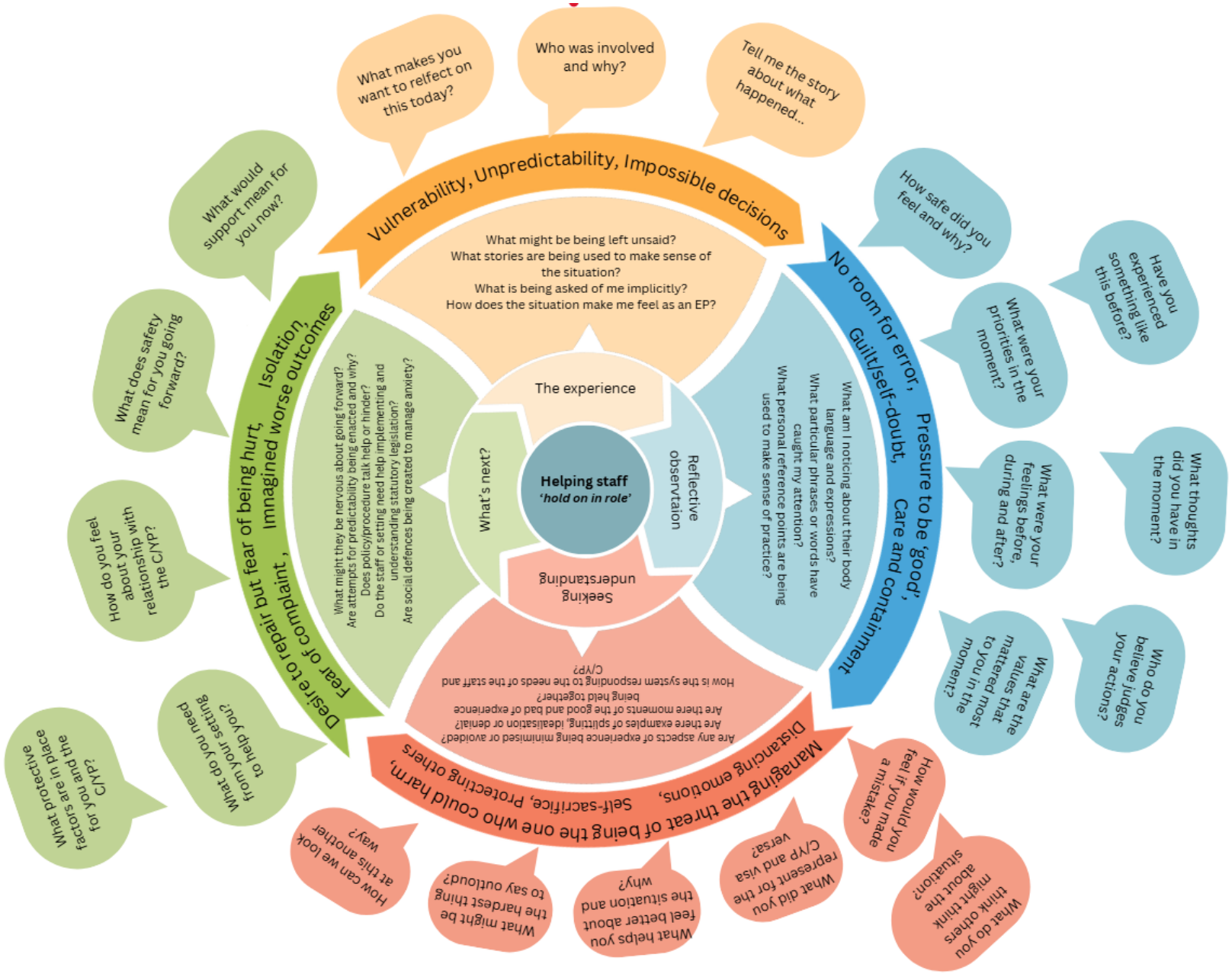
Seek Understanding

- Consider the reasons behind certain reactions and behaviours
- Consider unconscious mechanisms and system influences.

What’s Next?

- Consider how insights can inform future actions.

(BACK)


Vulnerability, Unpredictability, Impossible decisions
What makes you want to reflect on this today?
Who was involved and why?
Tell me the story about what happened...
What might be being left unsaid?
What stories are being used to make sense of the situation?
What is being asked of me implicitly?
How does the situation make me feel as an EP?
No room for error, Pressure to be 'good', Guilt/self-doubt, Care and containment
How safe did you feel and why?
What were your priorities in the moment?
Have you experienced something like this before?
What were your feelings before, during and after?
What thoughts did you have in the moment?
What are the values that mattered to you in the moment?
Who do you believe judges your actions?
Managing the threat of being the one who could harm, Self-sacrifice, Protecting others
Distancing emotions,
How would you feel if you made a mistake?
What do you represent for the C/YP and vice versa?
What helps you feel better about the situation and why?
What might be the hardest thing to say outloud?
How can we look at this another way?
What do you think others might think about the situation?
Desire to repair but fear of being hurt, Isolation, Fear of complaint, Imagined worse outcomes
What would support mean for you now?
What does safety mean for you going forward?
How do you feel about your relationship with the C/YP?
What protective factors are in place and what are the factors for you and the C/YP?
What do you need from your setting to help you?
The experience
What's next?
Reflective observtaion
Seeking understanding
Helping staff
'hold on in role'
What might they be nervous about going forward?
Are attempts for predictability being enacted and why?
Does policy/procedure talk help or hinder?
Do the staff or setting need help implementing and understanding statutory legislation?
Are social defences being created to manage anxiety?
What am I noticing about their body language and expressions?
What particular phrases or words have caught my attention?
What personal reference points are being used to make sense of practice?
Are any aspects of experience being minimised or avoided?
Are there examples of splitting, idealisation or denial?
Are there moments of the good and bad of experience being held together?
How is the system responding to the needs of the staff and C/YP?