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'A Melting Pot': Challenging Student Behaviour in the United Kingdom's Further Education Sector

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MANUSCRIPT DETAILS

TITLE: 'A Melting Pot': Challenging Student Behaviour in the United Kingdom's Further Education Sector

ABSTRACT:

Challenging behaviour among school pupils has been the focus of extensive research in the UK and beyond; however, there has been a lack of recent comparable research on these issues in the further education (FE) sector. This paper reports the findings from a larger PhD research examining the introduction of interventions based on restorative justice implemented in colleges. This study focuses on the extent and nature of challenging student behaviour, as explained and understood by the students and staff.

I employed an interpretivist exploratory case study design and mixed qualitative research methods. The institute considered in the case study, Restorative College (pseudonymised), has education provisions for students aged 16+ years and enrols over 16,000 students annually. In the academic year 2017/18, Restorative College committed itself to becoming a 'restorative' institution. Data collection consisted of three stages (including semi-structured interviews, analyses of institutional policy documents, and focus group discussions) and was conducted over 14 months.

The extent and nature of challenging student behaviours in the FE sector are significant and merit further research and analysis to support policy development.

Given the research methods adopted (single case study and qualitative research), the findings do not necessarily represent experiences across the FE sector.

CUST_PRACTICAL_IMPLICATIONS__(LIMIT_100_WORDS) :No data available.

CUST_SOCIAL_IMPLICATIONS_(LIMIT_100_WORDS) :No data available.

This study emphasises the need to expand research on challenging behaviour in the FE sector, which has been limited thus far, also making a contribution in this direction.

'A Melting Pot': Challenging Student Behaviour in the United Kingdom's Further Education Sector

Abstract

Purpose: Challenging behaviour among school pupils has been the focus of extensive research in the UK and beyond; however, there has been a lack of recent comparable research on these issues in the further education (FE) sector. This paper reports the findings from a larger PhD research examining the introduction of interventions based on restorative justice implemented in colleges. This study focuses on the extent and nature of challenging student behaviour, as explained and understood by the students and staff.

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Findings: The extent and nature of challenging student behaviours in the FE sector are significant and merit further research and analysis to support policy development.

Research Limitations/Implications: Given the research methods adopted (single case study and qualitative research), the findings do not necessarily represent experiences across the FE sector.

Originality/Value: This study emphasises the need to expand research on challenging behaviour in the FE sector, which has been limited thus far, also making a contribution in this direction.

Keywords: Behaviour, Crime, Exclusion, Education, Further Education, Colleges, Restorative Justice

Paper type: Research paper

Introduction

Schools and colleges expect appropriate conduct from students; however, this can often test students' boundaries (Hayden, 2011), sometimes resulting in reactions varying from

disagreements to drug-related violence and sexual assault (Porteous, 1998, 2014; Hayden, 2011). The nature of student behaviour in such cases and how best to deal with it are subjects that have long interested researchers, policymakers, and practitioners. In the context of this study, 'challenging behaviour' can vary from disagreements to physical violence, illicit drug use and related activities, and sexual harassment and assault (Squires and Stephen, 2005; Millie, 2009; Hayden, 2010; Millie and Moore, 2011; Martin *et al*., 2011a).

In England, schools must have a behaviour policy that sets out students' behaviour expectations and the sanctions imposed for misbehaviour (Department for Education (D*f*E), 2016). Schools may only impose reasonable sanctions or penalties and are free to develop policies and strategies for managing behaviour to meet their respective circumstances and needs, which can vary across schools. Notably, schools possess this power because the government believes that they are best placed to recognise their students' needs. In 2010, the White Paper titled '*The Importance of Teaching*', released by the D*f*E, expanded teachers' powers to deal with violence; these powers, to some extent, resemble those that police forces and other security agencies are vested with (Cremin and Bevington, 2017). Some powers stipulated in the White Paper (2010) allow the following: more authority to discipline students, expanded search powers, power to maintain discipline beyond the school gates, and removing the requirement of a 24-h notice for detentions. Teachers can discipline students for misbehaving outside the school premises (D*f*E, 2016). The government produced a document advising schools on the aspects that should be included in the behaviour policy and ways to develop effective strategies to manage student behaviour(see D*f*E, 2016). This document covers topics such as designing the behaviour policy, school discipline, punishing poor behaviour, behaviour and sanctions, and pupils' conduct

outside school gates. It should be noted that such advice and support are lacking in the further education (FE) sector, which relies on resources available in other sectors, such as secondary schools.

In this study, I first review the literature on challenging behaviour in schools and underscore how research on challenging behaviour in the FE sector has been limited. Next, I consider my PhD study that explored restorative justice (RJ) and its practices in the FE sector, and particularly examine the findings on the behavioural challenges and experiences shared by participants. In this paper, I present the key findings from the data, including how the FE sector's '*diverse community*' impacts challenging behaviour, how institutions deal with '*violence*' and '*gangs*', and how some conflicts are exacerbated by '*social media*'. Finally, I call for further in-depth empirical research to better understand such challenges faced by FE institutions, staff, and students, and emphasise the need to aid and develop policies specific to the FE sector.

Contextualising and Defining Challenging Behaviour in Education

Schools play a primary and valuable socialising role and are at the forefront of didactic responses to social ills, thus aspiring to improve society (Hendrick, 2006; Martin *et al*., 2011a). Based on these ideals, from 1997 to 2010, Tony Blair and the New Labour Administration focused on and invested in education and tackling crime (Martin *et al.*, 2011a). Tony Blair's speech during the Labour Party Conference in 1996, where he assures to prioritise '*Education, education, education…*' (Martin *et al.*, 2011a, p. 3), became the zeitgeist, cementing his victory to govern the country (Deakin and Kupchik, 2012).

During the 1990s, research into challenging behaviour in education was undertaken primarily to draw attention to the high levels of victimisation (Aye Maung, 1995; Porteous, 1998, 2014) among children and young people; however, this research

took on a new meaning under the New Labour Administration, which viewed schools as

spaces wherein youth crime could be addressed. This agenda was encapsulated in the

Crime and Disorder Act (1998) and the 'Respect' agenda (Martin *et al.*, 2011a); thus, the

state sees schools as having a crime prevention role (Hayden, 2005). Consequently, the

management of crime and anti-social behaviour (ASB) has begun to play a pivotal role

in the education system (Martin *et al.*, 2011a). In this context, Millie and Moore (2011)

argue that schools' aims and objectives have shifted from teaching, learning, discipline,

and truancy control to crime control; Millie and Moore (2011) define crime control

following Hirschfield (2008):

> …the shift toward a crime control paradigm in the definition and management of
> the problem of student deviance. Criminalisation encompasses the manner in which
> policy makers and school actors think and communicate about the problem of
> student rule violation as well as myriad dimensions of school praxis including
> architecture, penal procedure, and security technologies and tactics. [Hirschfield,
> 2008, p. 80; cited by Millie and Moore, 2011, pp. 18-19]

Previously, schools used to manage behaviour using tools and available

measures, such as suspensions and exclusions; however, at present, institutions are

seeking police intervention (Millie and Moore, 2011). Connelly *et al.*'s (2020) project

on police officers in schools in Greater Manchester and Joseph-Salisbury's (2021)

analysis of teachers' perspectives regarding police officers in English schools offer

invaluable insights, reporting that participants demonstrated negative feelings pertaining

to police presence in schools. Parents and guardians were concerned about sending their

children to a school with police presence. Further, police officers' presence was noted to

be predominately in schools based in working-class areas, thus inflaming the discourse

and feelings of inequality and stigmatisation. This phenomenon is further exacerbated

by the fact that the 'knife crime' label, when used by the media, politicians, and others, refers to a:

> [P]articular context and demographic that has now become common knowledge in public discourse. As such, when 'knife crime' is mentioned in Britain, it will likely be assumed that we are talking about a type of crime that is distinctly youthful, that this is a problem located in the inner-city (particularly London), and that this crime type is characterised by youth culture disproportionately represented by Black or Asian young people. [Williams, 2023, p. 2]

Participants from Connelly *et al.*'s (2020) and Joseph-Salisbury's (2021) studies also argued that police officers discriminate against people of colour and minorities; their presence negatively affects schools and creates a climate of fear, anxiety, and hostility. Concerns have also been expressed regarding criminalising minor behaviours, thus leading to a school-to-prison pathway. Participants reported observing or experiencing inappropriate behaviours from police officers, such as offensive language, sexism, sexualisation of young people, police violence, and harassment. A minority of participants argued that police officers in schools would ensure safety, deter violence, and improve police relations with the local community. Connelly *et al.* (2020) and Joseph-Salisbury (2021) argue that investing in more staff trained within the education sector, rather than police officers, to supervise students' behavioural challenges and other difficulties would benefit the institutions. More recently, police presence in schools triggered public outrage when a 15-year-old female Black student, Child Q, was strip-searched (Quinn, 2022); an investigation concluded that racism was likely to have been an influencing factor (Quinn, 2022).

The use of language in education is crucial (Hayden, 2010). The Crime and Disorder Act (1998) defines ASB as an act '*…that caused or was likely to cause harassment, alarm or distress to one or more persons, not of the same household as the*

perpetrator' (S.1 (1a) Crime and Disorder Act (1998). S.1 (1a) has been considered

problematic (Martin *et al.*, 2011a), '*because it includes behaviour 'perceived' to be a*

threat rather than actual threatening behaviour' (Martin *et al.*, 2011a, p. 6). This loose

definition of ASB suggests that it can lead to acts not previously considered ASB to fall

under its umbrella (Squires and Stephen, 2005; Millie, 2009; Millie and Moore, 2011).

The term '*violence*' also causes issues, as its definition differs across countries and

disciplines; further, an issue relates to whether psychological harm must be included,

alongside physical harm, when defining the term (Osler and Starkey, 2005; Waddington

et al., 2006; Martin *et al.*, 2011a). Finally, some 'challenging behaviour' could be

influenced by other factors such as '*disaffection, special educational needs and testing*

the boundaries' (Martin *et al.*, 2011a, p. 5). Nonetheless, the education sector in the UK

has adopted a quasi-judicial approach to managing student behaviour and the language

from the criminal justice system (McCluskey *et al.*, 2008), reflecting the Western

criminal justice system (Thorsborne and Vinegrad, 2003).

Challenging Behaviour in Education

Maung (1995) conducted one of the earliest studies on crime in schools using the

British Crime Survey, which included a subsample of students from 11 to 15 years old.

It should be noted that victimisation surveys with young people began in the 1990s

(Porteous, 2014). Undoubtedly, studies on crime and challenging school behaviours

were conducted before 1995 (Willis, 1977; Corrigan, 1979); however, literature review

commenced with Aye Maung's (1995) study and research conducted thereafter. I

regarded this as an ideal starting point for the literature review because of the use of

British Crime Survey. Further, more recent comparable research is lacking, highlighting

the urgent need for empirical research in this field. Some contemporary studies with

young people from schools and colleges as participants have sought to understand

student experiences with gangs (Broadhurst *et al.*, 2008), stop-and-search (Murray *et al.*, 2021) and knife crime (Silvestri *et al.*, 2009; Skarlatidou *et al.*, 2023).

Aye Maung (1995) found that a high proportion (46%) of offending among young people occurred inside schools, and that theft of personal property (76%), assault (62%), and harassment (39%) were among the most common offences committed in schools. Gill and Hernshaw (1997) found that among 3,986 schools, 57.6% reported that pupils were subjected to violence, where violence took the form of physical abuse, and some acts included weapons or other objects; 1.9% of these schools reported theft with threats or actual violence.

In another study, staff from an inner London comprehensive school expressed that they were increasingly required to deal with conflicts (Porteous, 1998). Tension from the streets was brought into the school setting; thus, teachers invested considerable time in dealing with such incidents (ibid). Name-calling, racist name-calling, threats of violence, assaults, sexual harassment, students carrying weapons, theft, and drug-related offences are typical in a school setting (ibid). Such acts can occur inside or outside the school setting (Porteous, 1998; Bottrell *et al.*, 2010). Porteous (1998) observed that many students were victims of violence, antisocial behaviour, and bullying in the schools examined in his study. In these schools, '*…most young people at…school are at some time likely to be involved in some form of physical and verbal violence, as victims and/or perpetrators*' (Porteous, 1998, p. 135). Porteous argues that his research '*provided quite graphic and convincing evidence of the high levels of anti-social behaviour and violence which children and young people experience*' (Porteous, 2014, p. 50). Boxford's (2006) research concurred with Porteous's findings that assault, vandalism, theft, robbery, and break-ins were committed inside schools.

The Edinburgh Study of Youth Transitions and Crime (The Edinburgh Study) (Smith and McVie, 2003; McAra and McVie, 2002, 2010) presents findings regarding young people's offending behaviour. The study comprised 4,300 young people in education in the City of Edinburgh and asked respondents whether they were involved in delinquent behaviour in and out of school. Fourteen response options presented to respondents fell under the umbrella of criminal offences, including vandalism, physical assault, arson, theft, robbery, burglary, graffitiing, and carrying a weapon (Smith and McVie, 2003). Of the 4,300 young people, 8.4% of those aged 11–12 years were involved in offending behaviours (ibid). The study also found that among 15-year-olds, 33% of the boys and 12% of the girls were involved in violence (McAra and McVie, 2010). Further, 96% of the 4,300 young people admitted to committing at least one offending behaviour by the age of 24, but the study emphasises that most of these are misdemeanours such as shoplifting, graffitiing, not paying the correct bus fare, and minor breaches of peace (McAra, 2018).

A survey involving 14–15-year-old students from a deprived provincial city in England provides further insight into school behaviour (Hayden, 2011). This study included 1,426 students from 14 mainstream state secondary schools in the city. The study found that 30.8% of the students were bullied either inside or outside the schools, noting that '*Students who have been bullied are more likely to worry about being bullied…*[and] *feel less safe in school*' (Hayden, 2011, p. 98). In this study, more boys admitted to bullying someone compared to girls. In addition, 19.3% of the students reported carrying a weapon, either in or out of school. Unsurprisingly, a lesser number of girls (23%) reported carrying a weapon compared to boys (77%); this is supported by news reports on the current surge in violence, people carrying weapons, and knife crime in the UK, which have percolated into schools (Coughlan, 2019). Although Hayden's

(2011) study presented some alarming findings, it also showed that 80.8% of students

felt safe or very safe in the classroom, 71.2% felt safe in school but outside the

classroom, and 54.5% felt safe outside of school. According to Martin *et al.* (2011b),

the most serious offences reported in schools were rape, attempted rape, and sexual

assault, which often took place outside the school premises but in proximity to the

schools. For example, in a rape incident examined in the study, the victim knew the

perpetrator, who also attended the same school.

Meanwhile, there has been an increase in the number of teachers who are subject

to some degree of physical violence (Neill, 2008). However, limited evidence is

available of violence against school staff (Millie and Moore, 2011). In Gill and

Hernshaw's (1997) study, 21.6% of schools reported that staff members were subject to

violence, which took the form of physical abuse and included weapons or other objects

in some cases. In a survey of 300 teachers, respondents expressed being verbally or

physically assaulted (Wright and Keetley, 2003). The Teacher Support Network (2005)

found that students physically assaulted 29% of teachers; approximately 12% of the

teachers reported being abused or attacked by students' parents. In a subsequent study

by the Teacher Support Network (2007), teachers claimed to have been physically

assaulted by weapons in the forms of objects, furniture, equipment, knives, and guns.

The Department of Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) published findings

highlighting that 176 teachers were subject to violence from their students (Health and

Safety Executive, 2008). In another report based on 'On-Track' studies, involving 'at

risk' students mainly from deprived areas, 29% of the students expressed that they saw a

teacher being attacked by a student from the school (Bhabra *et al.*, 2006). Martin (2008)

and Martin *et al.* (2011c, 2012) found that 73.4% of teachers in their study experienced

some form of violence, and over 90% stated that they experienced violence during their

careers as teachers; among them, 90% and 79% were subject to violence from students.

Behavioural challenges in education are a global problem. Findings from the UK

reverberate in the USA; large public schools are often considered crime locations

(Steinberg *et al.*, 2019). Burdick-Will (2013) claims that many underperforming schools

in the USA, particularly in Chicago, deal with violence regularly:

> Violent crime is a serious issue in some of Chicago's public high schools. Many
> students are exposed to violent crime on a routine basis just by entering school
> grounds. Just a few high schools each year account for the large majority of violent
> crimes in the whole district. However, within any given school, violent crime rates
> appear to fluctuate dramatically year to year without any clear trend over time,
> either in specific schools or in the district as a whole. [Burdick-Will, 2013, p. 357]

In the USA, schools have experienced violence that has resulted in fatalities; this

has led the state, schools, and other agencies to prioritise school safety and ensure that

the learning environment is safe and conducive to education (Losinski *et al.*, 2014).

Such incidents include fatal shootings inside school premises; for instance, in

California, a teenager shot and killed several classmates in a high school (The Guardian,

2019). In addition, Neiman (2011) found that in schools, 11% of students in grades

9–12 were involved in a physical fight, 6% of adolescents carried a weapon, 4% drank

alcohol, and 5% used marijuana on school grounds (Neiman, 2011). According to

Espelage *et al.* (2013), teachers' experiences of violence are also a concern in the USA.

In a study by the American Psychological Association Task Force on Violence Directed

Against Teachers (2011), 80% of the teachers reported at least one incident of

victimisation; 94% reported being victimised and experiencing offending behaviours

from students. Among the 94%, nearly half of the teachers reported that the

victimisation incidents included a parent or another adult as a perpetrator. In addition,

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72.5% of the teachers stated that they had experienced harassment, 50% reported

property offences, and 44% reported physical attacks.

Challenging Behaviour in the FE Sector

Millie and Moore (2011) claim that challenging behaviour has started to permeate the

FE sector, supported by Deuchar and Ellis (2013); however, this is not substantiated by

evidence. In the UK, the FE sector is a complex and diverse environment; it came into

existence in 1821 but was formally established only in 1944 by the Education Act

(Lobb, 2017). When the New Labour Party won the election in 1997, its principal

objective was to improve the quality of and raise standards in education; consequently,

the FE sector has witnessed several reforms.

One of the earliest and among the few publications on behaviour management in

FE was a manual by Mitchell *et al.* (1998) and colleagues in Northern Ireland to support

educators in Britain in their efforts to manage student behaviour. Mitchell *et al.* (1998)

argued that an interactive methodology to manage behaviour should be adopted as a

whole-college approach. The researchers took a firm stance against the '*us and them*'

attitude when handling behaviour.

A study by the University and College Union (UCU) led by Parry and Taubman

(2013) sheds light on behavioural challenges in the FE sector. Behaviour management

became pivotal since more students with behavioural challenges started to attend

colleges, which is exacerbated by the lack of support for behaviour management in FE

institutions (also see Millie and Moore, 2011; Deuchar and Ellis, 2013).

Parry and Taubman (2013) argue:

The literature review on behaviour management supported an initial hypothesis

that there was little available material on policy around managing behaviour in FE

colleges, despite a wealth of material on behaviour management in schools,

alongside strong support from the government and media. Although colleges were recognised as being larger with a more diverse student body, some transferable material was nonetheless identified, as well as processes and procedures for policy development. [pp. 3-4]

One of the issues raised, which provides the foundation for policy development in the FE domain, is that the student body in this sector is diverse and comprises adults and young people. Based on recommendations from the Woolf Report (DƒE, 2011) and supported by the then-2012 coalition government, FE colleges started enrolling students from the age of 14 years. This enrolment change led to an increasing number of young learners in FE, which is seen as a strategy to avoid the exclusion of 14–16-year-olds (Macnab *et al.*, 2008). Some of the behavioural concerns experienced by FE institutions highlighted in the 2013 report include fighting, bullying, drugs, stealing, physical abuse, vandalism, and racial abuse (Parry and Taubman, 2013). Parry and Taubman (2013) express that many of these students lead chaotic lives; their learning is impacted by employment issues, unemployment, and other personal and social difficulties, leading to behavioural challenges. Additionally, the FE sector attracts many disengaged students from mainstream schools and the curricula on offer (ibid). As such, the FE industry provides an alternative qualification for these students that primarily focuses on vocational courses.

Methods

As established above, educational institutions face many challenges related to student behaviour, ranging from simple mischief to criminal behaviour. Hence, schools are keen on discovering innovative ways to deal with such challenges, thereby aspiring to promote discipline, reduce violence, restore good relationships when conflict or harm occurs, improve student attendance, and develop the school's ethos (McCluskey *et al.*,

2008; Hopkins, 2011). Further, the concept of responsibilisation developed in the criminal justice system (Garland, 1996, 2001) has permeated the education sector, where punishment is replaced with reparation, and individuals take responsibility for their actions and make amends for the harm inflicted (Martin *et al.*, 2011a). Therefore, RJ practices have become alluring to schools as an appropriate response to challenging behaviours in school settings (Hopkins, 2011). A plethora of research has focused on the effectiveness and implementation of and satisfaction with RJ processes, practices, and outcomes in education. However, as with behavioural challenges in FE, research on RJ in education is also limited (Maywom *et al.*, 2016; Katic *et al.*, 2020; Zakszeski and Rutherford, 2021; Lodi *et al.*, 2022; Mas-Exposito *et al.*, 2022), especially in the FE sector. To address the abovementioned research gaps, the current study aimed to explore the extent and nature of challenging behaviour in academic institutes and how students and staff explained and understood it. The study was based on a larger PhD project that investigated understanding of and experiences with RJ practices and processes of staff and students, as well as successes, opportunities, constraints, and limitations in implementing RJ in FE colleges.

Owing to the nature of the PhD programme, the research adopted an interpretivist exploratory case study design framework and mixed qualitative methods. This research was grounded in constructionism, which is based on the view that there is no objective reality or truth; reality is constructed through interactions with the world. According to constructionism, there are no absolute truths, knowledge is not limited to being created by the senses alone, and research focuses on constructing meanings (Sarantakos, 2013, p. 38). The epistemology underlying constructivism is interpretivism. Interpretivists believe that reality is created by social actors and people's perceptions (Sarantakos, 2013, p. 40); human understanding and experiences are

subjective and contribute to the construction of reality in the social world. Therefore, social reality can change and have multiple perspectives (Hennink *et al.*, 2011).

The data collection process consisted of three stages that commenced at the beginning of April 2018 and ended towards the end of May 2019. Although the research was conducted a while ago, issues are still apparent in the sector, particularly in the FE sector, which must consider students' diverse needs and lived experiences. This suggests that the extent and nature of challenging behaviour in the FE sector is significant and merits further research and analysis.

A non-random and purposive sampling technique (Thomas, 2011) was used to identify participants for semi-structured interviews and focus groups. Purposive sampling allows researchers to 'think critically about the parameters of the population we are studying and choose our sample… carefully on this basis' (Thomas, 2011, p. 141). Stage 1 comprised 20 semi-structured interviews with staff members from a Pupil Referral Unit (PRU), a Special Sixth Form School, and four FE colleges. Two of the four colleges are located in North London (NL1 and NL2), one in South East London (SEL), and another in the West Midlands (WM) region. Stages 2 and 3 involved an interpretivist exploratory case study of an FE college, the Restorative College in West Yorkshire. The case study incorporated mixed qualitative methods, including the analysis of documents and RJ cases, 10 semi-structured interviews with staff members, and three focus groups with students. Stage 2 explored the staff's and students' initial understanding, experiences, and implementation of RJ. Stage 3 involved reinterviewing the participants from Stage 2 later in the academic year to follow-up on how their understanding, experiences, and implementation had developed over time.

Given the nature of this study, ethical considerations were paramount (Creswell, 2014). We strictly adhered to the British Sociological Association's (BSA) (2017)

statement on ethical practice. Ethical approval from the Middlesex University School of

Law Ethics Committee was obtained prior to data collection. The names of all the

participants and institutions presented in this paper are pseudonyms. The rationale

behind only conducting semi-structured interviews with staff, rather than conducting

focus groups, was to minimise inconvenience for the participants and the institution.

Staff and teachers/lecturers within the education sector are extremely busy during term

time, and their timetables differ, making it almost impossible to bring a group of

teaching staff together during term time. Asking staff to give up their time outside their

teaching timetable could inconvenience them, especially for teaching staff who usually

spend that time preparing lessons, marking work, or dealing with other teaching- or

student behaviour-related issues. Asking staff to participate during their holidays or

outside term time would also be unreasonable, and it is highly likely that such proposals

would be declined. Semi-structured interviews were ideal, suitable, and convenient as

requests could be made for an appropriate day and time for discussions. In case of

cancellations, rebooking for another convenient time was always an option.

Focus groups were used only for the students. The purpose of focus groups is to

facilitate participant discussion (Thomas, 2011). Focus groups enable researchers to

recruit and assemble participants (Yin, 2014) and trigger discussions among

participants, thereby attempting to draw out their views and opinions (Barbour and

Kitzinger, 1999; Krueger and Casey, 2009). An advantage of focus groups is that they

can help researchers observe how participants interact with each other and facilitate an

exchange of their views, bringing topical issues to the forefront of discussion (Morgan,

1998; Culley *et al.*, 2007). Such conversations encourage other group members to

contribute to and participate in the discussion, allowing for fruitful and in-depth

analysis; thus, the group's understanding and perceptions regarding a given topic can be

examined (Waterton and Wynne, 1999; Barbour and Kitzinger, 1999; Bloor, 2001).

Therefore, using focus groups for students was ideal to ensure and stimulate

participation, contribution, and discussion. Interviews may have limited such

opportunities, primarily among unconfident students. The researcher's teaching

background helped to ensure inclusivity among participants and encourage, regulate,

and develop discussions. Using focus groups for students also had a logistical purpose;

arranging individual student interviews would have meant disrupting their learning, and

it would have been unreasonable to ask students to be available outside of their

timetable hours. Arranging a time with teachers at their convenience to hold a focus

group with a class randomly proved to be an uncomplicated and effective approach in

our data collection process.

Based on the methodological framework adopted in this study, an interpretive

inquirer studies the meanings constructed by social actors to understand the social

world; thus, the ideal tool to analyse data for this research was the constant comparative

method developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967). According to Thomas (2011), the

constant comparative method is the primary method used by interpretive inquirers. The

basic principle governing this analytical method is that researchers immerse themselves

in the themes that capture or summarise the essence of the data. Thus, the constant

comparative method (Thomas, 2011) was used to analyse all of our study data.

Findings

Results from this study on behavioural challenges in the FE sector echo the findings

from the literature discussed above. However, the findings from this research are more

current, and capture how the problems of challenging behaviour in general (and of

victimisation) have evolved with more significant concerns, particularly around gangs,

county lines, criminal and sexual exploitation, and the role of social media (Bateman,

2020). For instance, 'sexting' is a sexual offence, and in 2018, 37% of young people were cautioned or conditionally cautioned for sexual crimes (Ministry of Justice, 2019). There is also evidence of student sexual violence in higher education (Humphreys and Towl, 2020); such research is lacking in other sectors.

Data from the Restorative College on 'Discipline Statistics' from 2017/2018 reveal disciplines/sanctions issued for academic attendance, behaviour, bullying, and racism, thus, providing further insight into the types of behaviour challenges faced in the FE sector. In the 2017/2018 academic year, the Restorative College enrolled 11,151 students; 2,343 (21%) of them were issued disciplinary sanctions. Regarding academic challenges, 388 students received disciplinary sanctions; among them, eight students were permanently excluded.

Regarding attendance challenges, 1,180 students were issued disciplinary sanctions, and nine were permanently excluded. Further, 737 students were disciplined for behavioural challenges, and 36 were permanently excluded. Thirty-two students were issued disciplinary sanctions for bullying, and only one was permanently excluded. Finally, six students were disciplined for racism and only one was permanently excluded. There were 55 (0.5%) permanent exclusions and 29 (0.3%) temporary exclusions; thus, 2,259 (20.3%) cases consisted of cautionary and formal warnings.

It should be noted that research focus on exclusions in the FE sector is also scarce; 'there is relatively little quantitative research into the causes of success or failure in this environment' (Groot *et al.*, 2017). Further empirical research is fundamental to understanding the rationale and impact of exclusion in the FE sector, which already consists of students excluded from education.

Diverse Community

The FE sector community consists of foreigners/asylum seekers fleeing war-torn countries seeking a better life in the UK. However, their experiences and trauma impact their processes of adjusting to a new life. The FE sector includes many students enrolled in courses of English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL), some of whom have had to overcome many traumatic challenges to seek refuge in the UK. Many students have had no education and some have never attended school; therefore, this is a new environment and culture. Many students have experienced psychological trauma. Some have not seen their parents for a long time, do not even know if they are alive, and come from war-torn countries.

Furthermore, the FE sector often has student groups from challenging backgrounds, and for most of these students, life outside of their education settings is also difficult. Consequently, the staff must be mindful and prepared to manage students who have already encountered challenging issues. As such, the staff do not have high expectations from their students. The participants shared that the diverse community results in a 'melting pot' of all these different issues; therefore, the FE institutions part of this study experience behavioural problems among many of the students they enrol. Monika expresses:

> It's such a melting pot. Different people with different opinions come from diverse educational backgrounds and do not have that rigid educational backgrounds; for example, in primary and secondary schools. They have different experiences. [Monika, Staff, FE College, NL2].

The phrase *'a melting pot'* is intriguing, suggesting that the institution's environment is volatile. Factors leading to this volatility can be multifaceted, as the

learning environment consists of students who require support for learning, foreigners/asylum seekers, and students with diverse demographics.

Violence, Gangs and the Role of Social Media

Students stated that conflicts occurred daily during social time, outside class, and lunchtime in the canteen. In contemporary times, technology (The Steer Committee, 2009) and social media have been found to lead to or exacerbate conflicts. Staff mentioned cases in which students had been bullying each other on Facebook and threatening to fight physically. Disputes are also escalated by others recording the incident and posting it on social media, which can cause revictimisation and retraumatisation for the parties involved:

> Last year, this girl fought with this lad. Students were video-recording it, and it did get passed around on Snapchat. I think it was on Facebook, and it got so many views on Instagram. [Hakim, Restorative College, Student, Stage 2, Focus Group 1]

There was evidence of conflicts from outside being brought into the institution (Porteous, 1998), and then escalating onto social media where families were involved, as expressed by Sophia:

> A fight took place between two girls who went to school together. They fell out about a boy; they were friends, and they fought over the summer this year. The police were called, and so both the families were then at war. And then they both turned up here, and they realised they were both at the same College, and Student A launched an attack on Student B. But we weren't stopping there and weren't quits because before we could turn around, the mothers were involved. Student A's mother ran in and hit Student B. So, we had a mother hitting a student. And by this time, the sisters had got involved, and the cousins had got involved, and there was absolute vile abuse flying around on social media. [Sophia, Staff, Restorative College, Stage 2]

In the above incident, it seems that the role of social media was to exacerbate the conflict, resulting in the involvement of family members. Other conflict incidents have been recorded. For example, an RJ case file identified an incident in the Restorative College that occurred outside the library between two students. Both were socialising with their friends when Student X brought up an incident. X reminded the other student, Y, that he had pulled down X's zipper and laughed about it. This infuriated Y, who lashed out at X; Y punched X. Their friends stopped the fight, and the security guards intervened and immediately suspended the parties until the college resolved the matter. This demonstrates that there is a regular occurrence of violence in these institutions. Another RJ case file illustrates an incident at the Restorative College: a female student reported to a staff member and other students in the class that her ex-boyfriend was aggressive towards her. He had also uploaded an inappropriate picture of her on his social media profile; this affected her severely as she takes modesty very seriously. This incident points to the occurrence of sexual violence in the sector, which is often overlooked.

Students expressed issues relating to gangs: *'They're all into gang stuff and fighting'* (Freddy, Restorative College, Student, Stage 3, Focus Group 2). Issues surrounding gangs were also reported by the staff: *'We've seen a recent surge in fights. There's an increase in gang culture, which does spill over here'* (Jack, Restorative College, Stage 2). Staff have voiced that student behaviour is worsening, resulting in violence in the broader society, such as knife crime (Coughlan, 2019); notably, staff reported feeling unprepared or ill-equipped to deal with such challenges. Musa explains that knife crime is an issue in the institution in which he works, and inferences can be made that these incidents are gang-related: *'There are always issues involving knife crime. Most recently, there was a group of about 10 students from two different parts of*

the Borough' (Musa, Staff, FE College, NL1). Evidently, students are experiencing gang-related violence and knife crimes inside these institutions; the severity of the issue warrants further research on this topic.

In the quote below, Bethany reveals how vulnerable the staff feel. She referred to a gun incident and how the staff were concerned about safety. The staff expressed wanting support and guidance on managing challenging student behaviour and the need for a renewed focus on policies and tools specific to the FE sector. Bethany explains:

> We've noticed a real shift in behaviour; it's becoming much more of an issue; there's much more bad behaviour. So, I think this needs to be a real focus of all colleges because, in society as a whole, I think the behaviour is worse than ever. I have been here for 17 years, and what we see now is much worse than we did before. Behaviour is just getting worse and worse and worse. Staff are feeling more threatened this year than any other year. There seems to be a bit of a menacing shift in some of the students. We had an incident at one of our other sites, where somebody had come in with a gun. Staff feel a bit vulnerable when they have to deal with challenging behaviour; staff are really reluctant to challenge now because they're frightened of the repercussions. Staff are saying that, openly to me, they're worried and don't know if a student has a knife. I know it sounds dramatic, but this is how the staff are feeling. There have been serious fights this year and ambulances were called in, so there is some ground for the way they're feeling. [Bethany, Staff, Restorative College, Stage 2]

Discussion and Conclusion

Challenging behaviour is a common and longstanding element of school and college life. In the 1990s and the 2000s, a particular focus was on challenging (sometimes labelled criminal) school behaviour. The literature reveals that theft, assault/violence against students and staff, harassment, name-calling, racist name-calling, verbal/threats with violence against students and staff, sexual harassment, students carrying weapons, and drug-related offences are common in schools (Aye Maung, 1995; Gill and

Hernshaw, 1997; Porteous, 1998; Wright and Keetley, 2003; The Teacher Support

Network, 2005; Bhabra *et al.*, 2006; Boxford, 2006; The Teacher Support Network,

2007; Health and Safety Executive, 2008; Martin, 2008; Neill, 2008; Bottrell *et al.*,

2010; Martin *et al.*, 2011c, 2012). Research also identifies that the offending age among

young people is between 11–24 years (Smith and McVie, 2003; McAra and McVie,

2002, 2010). However, research has primarily focused on schools, while the FE sector

student body consists of students aged 11+ years and enrols permanently excluded

students from schools, PRU, and Special Schools, as well as adults. PRUs, an

alternative to mainstream schools, specialise in supporting students whose behaviours

cause problems. Students who attend a PRU might have been excluded from a

mainstream school for behavioural issues or difficulties, among other reasons. Special

Schools support students with tailored needs relating to communication and interaction;

cognition and learning; social, emotional, and mental health; and sensory and physical

inputs. Therefore, it seems rather unproductive for the FE sector to rely on resources

and tools from other sectors, using which is unlikely to yield positive outcomes in the

FE context.

     This study establishes that the FE sector comprises a diverse community and can

be unstable. Prior research in this field has largely overlooked challenging student

behaviours in the FE sector. In this study, the participants reported that conflicts

occurred during social times and were exacerbated by social media. In addition,

disputes are brought into the college settings from outside, and bullying, gang-related

violence, and sexual offences are common. Government support and guidance on

behavioural management for institutions within the FE sector are also lacking. In this

context, further advice, support, research, and literature are integral because the FE

industry is dynamic, demographically different, and diverse from the primary and secondary education sectors.

Clearly, there are also risks associated with drawing attention to these issues, but perhaps the greatest risk lies in denying or ignoring them. Thus, this study sheds light on an underexplored area in the education sector, highlights contemporary concerns/issues that resonate with youth crime research (mainly the focus on gangs and serious violence), and calls for a renewed focus on challenging behaviour in education settings in general and on that in the FE sector in particular to support policy development.

This research also established that the FE community comprises disengaged students excluded from school. It is quite perplexing that while research has focused on exclusion in schools, and that students who are excluded from schools are likely to enrol in an FE institution that also utilises exclusions as a disciplinary strategy, research on exclusions in the FE sector is lacking. While the findings of this study resonate with research in schools, an in-depth empirical enquiry is needed to understand the experiences and impact of exclusion in the FE sector.

The principal argument of this study is the dearth of literature and research on behaviour and other challenges among students, the management of student behaviour, and exclusions in UK's FE sector; thus, more in-depth empirical research is needed to understand and support this sector. This research focus is essential for developing behavioural policies for FE institutions because reliance on guidance and support from primary and secondary schools can be problematic. The FE sector is disparate in terms of space and community both demographically and dynamically. Acts and behaviours that can be classified as crime transpire in institutions. Indeed, literature has highlighted the occurrence of violence against teachers by students, parents, and other adults.

The FE institutions in this study experienced many daily challenges. While this was not the focus of the study and more research is needed, rich data were obtained in our study, justifying the rationale for the staff seeking support with student behaviour and other related challenges. The environment of FE institutions is volatile, or a 'melting pot' as described by participants in this study, where conflicts are more likely to erupt due to the community's diverse student body. These challenges range from possessing a knife or gun to gang-related issues, bullying, conflicts on social media that are brought into institutions, and skirmishes. Such challenges can fall within the scope of crime and ASB. The staff expressed feeling vulnerable and ill-equipped to deal with such challenges, which they believe are increasing, and thus seek tools, guidance, and support to address these issues.

It should be noted that this research used the interpretivist exploratory case study and mixed qualitative methods, albeit complemented by a review of the existing literature; thus, a limitation of this study is that the findings cannot be generalised (Thomas, 2011; Sarantaakos, 2013; Yin, 2014), as the results do not necessarily represent experiences across the FE sector. Future research could employ quantitative methods, and increase the sample size and access to respondents nationally through technology and online platforms, to gain a more comprehensive understanding of knowledge about and experiences with RJ practices among staff and students in the FE sector.

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