

“Have you asked the child?": student voice and restrictive physical intervention: reducing restrictive physical interventions through pupil advocacy and guided reflection in a social emotional and mental health primary school

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Abstract

This study examined whether strengthening pupil voice, enhancing pupils' understanding of restrictive physical interventions (RPIs) and embedding structured reflective dialogue could reduce restrictive physical intervention use within a UK primary school specialising in social, emotional and mental health (SEMH) needs. A two-phase mixed-methods design was employed: an exploratory pilot with six pupils (2023/24) followed by whole-school implementation (2024/25). Interventions included co-constructed positive support plans (PSPs), semi-structured pupil interviews and weekly reflective 'Target time' sessions. Quantitative behaviour log data (behaviour weightings, incidents and RPIs) were analysed descriptively, while qualitative data were examined using reflexive thematic analysis.

Findings indicated reductions in behaviour weightings, incidents and RPIs during periods when pupil participation and reflective routines were embedded. Qualitative themes highlighted pupils' mixed emotional responses to RPIs, balancing recognition of their safety rationale with feelings of frustration or discomfort and emphasised the importance of transparent explanations and relational repair.

The study contributes to growing evidence that nurture-informed, trauma-aware and pupil-centred approaches can help create safer, more attuned and collaborative environments in SEMH settings.

Introduction

Schools specialising in social, emotional and mental health (SEMH) education face the complex challenge of balancing operational efficacy with the pastoral care of pupils who often present with trauma and complex needs. Restrictive physical interventions (RPIs) are regulated practices guided by official policies aimed at reducing their use wherever possible. These interventions should be employed with careful professional judgement to ensure the safety of pupils and staff during situations of significant distress or risk, in line with national guidance on minimising restraint in educational settings (Department of Health and Social Care & Department for Education, 2019).

The school in this study is committed to providing a safe, nurturing environment where every pupil is supported to navigate their educational journey. Central to this commitment is the strategic and carefully considered use of RPIs within a broader relational and trauma-informed framework. Although RPIs are sometimes required to ensure immediate safety, their use is informed by an awareness of the potential physical and psychological harm that restraint can cause.

Within the study school, nurture principles are not abstract ideals but are operationalised daily through the school's values of happiness, high expectations, nurture, consistency, understanding and positivity (HENCUP). These values map closely onto the Six Principles of Nurture that (1) children's learning is understood developmentally; (2) the classroom offers a safe base; (3) nurture is important for wellbeing; (4) language is a vital means of communication; (5) behaviour is communication; (6) transitions matter (nurtureuk, 2023), as articulated in contemporary nurture literature (Colley, 2009; Procter-Legg, 2024). Together, they guide adults to provide predictable structures, attuned responses and relational safety, creating environments where pupils feel secure, valued and understood. In this way, the school's values form a practical mechanism through which nurture principles shape daily interactions, including the behaviour-support practices examined in this study.

Building on this values-led, nurture-informed foundation, the present study explores how pupils' understanding and participation in behaviour-

support processes might further strengthen relational safety. Specifically, it investigates whether increasing pupils' awareness of RPIs and involving them in guided, developmentally attuned reflection may help reduce the need for such interventions. Rather than functioning solely as reactive safety procedures, RPIs are understood within nurture models as relational events that require emotional processing, repair and meaning-making.

Many of the sector-wide challenges identified in the literature were mirrored in the study school, particularly regarding the limited integration of pupil voice within behaviour-support documentation. The use of positive handling plans (PHPs), documents outlining pupil strengths, behavioural triggers and staff responses, had been a longstanding process. PHPs were historically reviewed mainly by senior staff and typically only after significant incidents. Limited routine involvement from class teams and pupils restricted opportunities for shared understanding or meaningful collaboration. This reflects wider challenges in SEMH settings, where embedding pupil voice is widely endorsed but often constrained by time, confidence and resource pressures (Bynoe et al., 2021).

In response, the school adopted positive support plans (PSPs) in place of positive handling plans (PHPs), intentionally reframing the language from 'handling' to 'support' to reflect a shift from crisis management towards collaborative, relationally attuned practice. Nurture research emphasises that language shapes meaning and influences adult behaviour, signalling whether adults position themselves as regulators, supporters or collaborators (Procter-Legg, 2023). The move to PSPs was therefore more than procedural; it represented an intentional cultural shift aligned with the principle that 'behaviour is communication' and that adults' interpretations profoundly influence their responses.

Finally, RPIs themselves are not solely indicators of pupil behaviour but also reflect adult decision-making, emotional regulation and relational stance (Ryan & Peterson, 2004). Nurture and trauma-informed frameworks emphasise that adult behaviour, including the timing, necessity and manner of intervention, is central to relational safety and co-regulation (Bath & Seita, 2018). Accordingly, this study examines the relational system as

a whole, rather than attributing behavioural outcomes solely to pupils.

Against this backdrop, the study is guided by one central research question: Does enhancing pupils' understanding of RPIs and involving them in guided reflection lead to a reduction in RPI occurrences? To deepen the inquiry, three subsidiary questions further shape the investigation. First, does integrating pupil voice into PSPs influence pupils' perceptions of adult support and the strategies used with them? Second, how do pupils' descriptions of their lived experiences of RPIs provide insights that may guide more empathetic, responsive and relational approaches to behaviour support? Third, does a collaborative, pupil-led approach to positive support planning contribute to strengthening emotional regulation, enhancing staff-pupil collaboration and reducing the need for RPIs?

Literature review

Restrictive physical interventions: harms, limitations and policy context

Restrictive physical interventions (RPIs) continue to present significant ethical, emotional and relational challenges within SEMH education. Cusack et al. (2018) highlight that even when used with professional intent, restrictive interventions can generate fear, distress and long-term emotional impact, underscoring the need for minimisation and careful relational repair. National and international guidance consistently advocates reducing the use of RPIs and promoting preventative, rights-based and relationally grounded approaches (Department of Health and Social Care & Department for Education, 2019; ProActive Approaches, 2023). These frameworks emphasise emotional safety, transparency and participation, expectations that align closely with nurture principles such as secure relationships, predictable structure and language as a vital means of communication (nurtureuk, 2023).

Broader research examining the harms associated with restraint indicates that emotional and psychological distress is consistently underacknowledged in policy and practice (Cusack et al., 2018). Early critiques by Mohr et al. (1998) and later analyses by Ryan and Peterson (2004),

argue that restrictive interventions may escalate rather than de-escalate crisis behaviour, thereby compounding distress. More recent studies reinforce such concerns: Fogt et al. (2008) report that pupils frequently describe RPIs as frightening, painful or humiliating, while Marques-Barnard et al. (2022) identify risks of retraumatisation and reduced trust in adults among children with neurodevelopmental needs. Despite clear policy commitments to restraint reduction implementation gaps persist, with organisational culture, staff confidence and resource pressures often constraining schools' capacity to embed reflective, preventative practice (Deveau & Leitch, 2015; Bynoe et al., 2021). Phillips (2025) further observes that RPIs place an ethical and emotional burden on staff, reinforcing the need for nurturing, collaborative and pupil-led approaches to behaviour support.

Nurture principles, behaviour as communication and relational safety

A growing body of SEMH literature emphasises the value of relational, student-centred and nurture-informed approaches to behaviour support. The Six Principles of Nurture conceptualise behaviour as a form of communication and emphasise the need for secure, predictable and attuned relationships as the foundation for emotional development (nurtureuk, 2023). Doyle (2003) argues that nurturing models require staff to work from an attuned, co-regulatory stance, offering the emotional containment and relational consistency needed for children's developing self-regulation.

These ideas align with foundational attachment research. Ainsworth and Bell's (1970) work on caregiving sensitivity and Oosterman and Schuengel's (2008) findings on the links between relational security and behavioural regulation, demonstrate that children's behavioural expressions are deeply shaped by the availability of attuned adults. Such principles reinforce the idea that RPIs must not be understood as isolated crisis-management events but as moments requiring relational repair, reflective dialogue and opportunities to rebuild trust (Steckley, 2017; Bath & Seita, 2018).

Contemporary relational and trauma-informed frameworks further support this perspective.

Porges' (2011) polyvagal theory positions emotional and physiological regulation as dependent on cues of relational safety, while Perry and Szalavitz (2017) highlight the importance of predictable relational routines in supporting the integration of overwhelming emotions. Together this evidence positions nurture-aligned practice, not procedural compliance, as central to reducing distress-based behaviours and preventing escalation toward RPIs.

Pupil voice, participation and behaviour support

A substantial body of work highlights the significance of pupil voice in shaping effective, ethical behaviour support. Sellman (2009) argues that without meaningful participation, behaviour systems risk reinforcing feelings of powerlessness and exclusion, particularly among pupils with SEMH needs. Willis et al. (2021) show that students who receive clear explanations of RPIs can better maintain trust in adults and show improved emotional regulation following incidents. Hodgkiss and Harding (2024) similarly note that while pupils may recognise the protective intent of RPIs, they often experience fear, confusion or frustration, particularly when adult communication is inconsistent.

More recent research reinforces the relational importance of collaborative behaviour planning. Dolton, Adams and O'Reilly (2020) found that structured reflection enables pupils to better understand their triggers, participate in co-producing behaviour strategies and take greater ownership of their emotional regulation. These studies collectively highlight that pupil voice is not merely an ethical imperative but a mechanism through which relational safety, shared meaning-making and behavioural stability are strengthened.

However, implementation remains uneven. Structural pressures and limited staff time can restrict opportunities for genuine consultation (Bynoe et al., 2021). Research examining whole-school nurture approaches echoes these concerns, emphasising the need for systems that embed relational dialogue, attuned responses and reflective opportunities in everyday school routines (Paterson, 2025; Procter-Legg, 2024).

Identifying the gap

Despite growing theoretical consensus and a strong policy mandate, the empirical evidence base examining how nurture-informed, participatory approaches directly influence RPI use remains limited. Existing studies highlight the harms of restraint (Fogt et al., 2008; Cusack et al., 2018), the benefits of relational and co-regulatory practice (Doyle, 2003; Perry & Szalavitz, 2017) and the value of incorporating pupil voice into behaviour planning (Sellman, 2009; Dolton, Adams & O'Reilly, 2020). However, research rarely examines how these elements operate together within everyday practice in SEMH schools and studies exploring their combined impact remain scarce.

Very little empirical work has investigated how pupils make sense of RPIs when supported through structured, developmentally attuned dialogue, how co-constructed behaviour plans influence emotional understanding and relational trust, or how whole-school relational approaches grounded in nurture principles affect RPI frequency over time.

This study directly addresses this gap by evaluating a model that integrates co-constructed PSPs, reflective dialogue and weekly Target time sessions as mechanisms for operationalising nurture principles and strengthening pupil participation within an SEMH school context.

Methodology

Study design

The study employed a mixed-methods design to examine both the behavioural trends associated with pupil-led approaches to support planning and the experiential, emotional and relational meanings pupils attributed to RPIs. This design was selected because the aims of the study required attention to change at two levels: (a) observable behavioural patterns over time and (b) the subjective, relational and developmental processes underlying pupils' responses. No single methodological tradition could capture both dimensions.

Alternative designs, such as single-case experimental designs (SCEDs), were considered but rejected because they require clearly isolated variables and controlled conditions that are incompatible with the relational and co-constructed

nature of nurture-informed practice. Behaviour in SEMH contexts is influenced by complex, interacting ecological and relational factors that cannot realistically be manipulated experimentally without compromising ethical and practical feasibility (Bath, 2008; Hart & Yin, 2021).

Mixed methods therefore provided the most appropriate framework for addressing the study's aims: descriptive quantitative analysis allowed the identification of directional changes in behaviour over time, while qualitative analysis provided insight into pupils' meaning-making, emotional experiences and perceptions of staff support – dimensions essential to understanding nurture-based and trauma-informed processes.

Phase One (2023/24) piloted co-constructed positive support plans (PSPs) and semi-structured pupil interviews with six pupils, generating insight into pupils' interpretations of RPIs and their engagement in reflective dialogue.

Phase Two (2024/25) implemented refined versions of these approaches across all classes, incorporating weekly Target time sessions following whole-school training. This developmental structure enabled the study to capture both the depth of individual pupil experience and the broader organisational patterns that emerged when relational and reflective routines were embedded school-wide.

Participants and setting

The study took place in a UK primary school specialising in SEMH education, serving approximately 90 pupils aged 5-11. All pupils have an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) and present with complex profiles including developmental trauma, attachment disruption, neurodevelopmental conditions and significant social, emotional and behavioural needs. This context provided a relevant environment for examining how collaborative and reflective behaviour-support processes influence the use of RPIs.

Participants for Phase One were drawn from lower key stage 2 (years 3 and 4). Pupils were selected based on regular interaction with pastoral staff and feasibility of engagement. Six pupils aged 7-9, five boys and one girl, were recruited using purposive

sampling to ensure an intentionally diverse mix of behavioural presentations, communication profiles, backgrounds and capacities to engage in reflective work. This sampling strategy aligned with recommendations to select "information-rich cases" for exploratory school-based research (Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

Selecting a diverse pupil sample ensured that early learning from the pilot could inform behaviour-support approaches that would be both representative of the wider school population and scalable across classes.

Interventions

Phase One focused on introducing pupil-led PSPs and conducting semi-structured interviews with the six participating pupils. PSPs were developed collaboratively, drawing on the Six Principles of Nurture, trauma-informed practice and co-regulation theory. Pupils worked with trusted adults to identify their strengths, sensory and emotional triggers, behaviours that challenge and preferred strategies for support. Staff contributed contextual knowledge alongside pupils and used these discussions to shape personalised, developmentally attuned plans. PSPs were reviewed iteratively across the term, informed by weekly behaviour log data.

Semi-structured interviews were undertaken in term 3 to explore pupils' lived experiences of RPIs and their perceptions of behavioural support. These interviews provided insight into pupils' emotional responses, understanding of safety and experiences of communication with adults. They were designed to promote reflective meaning-making and align with evidence that post-incident dialogue enhances relational trust and reduces confusion about RPIs (Willis et al., 2021; Hodgkiss & Harding, 2024). These interviews also informed refinements to PSP content and highlighted the need for more consistent, structured opportunities for reflection.

Although ad-hoc reflective conversations occurred as part of existing practice, they were informal and inconsistently applied. Insights from these relational interactions shaped Phase Two, which expanded the interventions school-wide during the 2024/25 academic year.

Phase Two extended the PSP and reflection model across all classes. At the start of the year, whole-school training was delivered to support all staff in developing PSPs collaboratively with pupils. This work was embedded within a dedicated “belonging and togetherness” focus in term 1, during which class teams were allocated time and resources to build relationships and gather pupil insights for PSP development. Reflective practice became systematically embedded through the introduction of weekly timetabled Target time sessions. These sessions enabled staff and pupils to revisit behavioural events, explore emotional cues, celebrate progress and co-construct individual targets. This marked a shift from informal, ad-hoc reflection toward a whole-school routine grounded in nurture-based and trauma-informed principles.

Data collection

Quantitative data were drawn from the school's existing behaviour-logging system. Weekly measures included behaviour weightings, incident counts and occurrences of RPIs. Behaviour weightings reflect the relative intensity of behaviours recorded by staff; in this system, higher values indicate a greater accumulation of moderate-to-severe behaviours and the scale ranges from 1-10, where 1 represents low-level disruption (eg a short period of off-task behaviour) and 10 represents the most serious events (eg threatening a pupil or staff member with a weapon). Incident counts captured the number of behaviour events recorded each week; and RPIs represented instances where restrictive physical interventions were used in accordance with school policy. Data were collated weekly for terms 2, 3 and 4 in Phase One and for terms 1 and 2 in Phase Two following whole-school rollout.

Qualitative data consisted solely of transcripts from the semi-structured interviews conducted with the six Phase One pupils. Notes from informal reflective sessions supplemented this data. These interviews provided rich descriptive accounts of pupils' experiences and were used to explore meaning-making processes, emotional responses and emerging shifts in understanding.

Data analysis

Quantitative behaviour log data (behaviour weightings, incidents and RPIs) were analysed

using descriptive statistics. This decision reflects both the exploratory nature of the study and the methodological constraints inherent in SEMH contexts. The Phase One pilot involved only six pupils, providing a dataset unsuitable for reliable inferential testing. Even during Phase Two, although whole-school data were available, the study design did not involve randomisation, controlled comparisons, or stable groupings across the two academic years, conditions required for meaningful inferential statistics (Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

Descriptive analysis was therefore selected to examine patterns and directional changes rather than to test hypotheses. This aligns with methodological recommendations for early-stage or developmental research in specialist settings, where the aim is to understand trends within a complex system rather than attribute causation (O'Reilly & Parker, 2014).

The study acknowledges that future research, particularly with controlled designs or larger, stable samples, would benefit from inferential statistical analysis to examine potential associations or causal relationships between pupil-led approaches and reductions in RPIs.

Qualitative data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) in accordance with Braun & Clarke's updated methodological guidance (2006). Coding followed an iterative, inductive process involving familiarisation, open coding, development of candidate themes and recursive refinement. Peer debriefing with colleagues supported theme development and helped check emerging interpretations against pupil language.

Triangulating the descriptive quantitative trends with the qualitatively generated themes enhanced the credibility and richness of the findings, consistent with guidance on mixed-methods behavioural research in specialist settings (O'Reilly & Parker, 2014).

Researcher reflexivity

The primary researcher was a senior leader with pastoral responsibilities who knew all participating pupils well. This positionality brought both advantages, trust, rapport and insight into pupils' relational needs and potential risks

related to perceived authority. Pupils may have felt an implicit pressure to comply or to present themselves favourably, although sessions were conducted at pupils' pace, with breaks offered and in comfortable familiar spaces to reduce power imbalance.

The primary researcher designed the PSP process independently but did not devise Target time, which was introduced school-wide by a colleague, reducing bias in interpreting its purpose. Behaviour data were logged by class staff rather than the researcher, further limiting direct influence on quantitative findings.

Reflexive journalling and peer debriefing were used to critically interrogate interpretations, particularly during thematic analysis where coding was undertaken by the researcher alone. Attention was given to matching interpretations closely to pupil language, checking assumptions against raw data and acknowledging how professional training and beliefs in nurture-based practice may have shaped analytical decisions.

Ethical considerations

Ethical procedures prioritised emotional safety, agency and ongoing assent throughout the study. Pupils were given clear, developmentally appropriate explanations of each activity and assent was revisited continuously during PSP co-construction, interviews and reflective conversations. This approach reflects guidance emphasising that assent for children, particularly those with additional needs, must be ongoing, relational and responsive to emotional cues (Morrow & Richards, 1996; Coyne, 2010).

In addition to pupil assent, parental and carer informed consent was obtained for all participating pupils. At the time of the pilot phase, the activities formed part of routine pastoral practice; however, separate consent was later sought once the intention to use the data for research and publication became clear. All parents and carers subsequently provided written informed consent for their child's data and anonymised quotations to be used externally. This retrospective process adhered to ethical expectations for transparency, respect for parental authority and protection of children's rights.

All activities were embedded within normal pastoral and relational practices, ensuring participation felt familiar and low-pressure. Trauma-informed principles guided all interactions; tasks were adapted to pupils' communication styles and regulation needs and sessions were paused or stopped if any pupil showed signs of distress (Porges, 2011; Brunzell, Stokes & Waters, 2019).

Confidentiality was maintained through pseudonyms and secure data handling, with statutory safeguarding duties observed where necessary (Christensen & Prout, 2002). The methodological choices were also ethically grounded: semi-structured interviews are widely recognised as appropriate for eliciting the perspectives of children with SEND (Lewis & Porter, 2004), while pupil-led PSPs align with rights-based principles emphasising participation and agency (Lundy, 2007). Behaviour log data analysed in the study were drawn from routine school monitoring, ensuring no additional burden on pupils.

Together, the use of parental consent, pupil assent, trauma-informed processes and safeguarding protocols ensured that participation was voluntary, emotionally safe and aligned with ethical expectations for research involving children with additional needs.

Findings

Phase One results: academic year 2023/2024

Quantitative findings

Term 2 marked the introduction of collaboratively developed, pupil-led PSPs. Behaviour logs, recording weekly behaviour weightings (severity of behaviours), incident counts (frequency of behaviour events) and RPIs (instances of restrictive physical intervention), showed an early increase during week 3, with weightings reaching 9.8 and incidents 4.4. These patterns then stabilised across the remainder of the term. Mean weekly scores indicated behaviour weightings of 6.7, incidents of 3.3 and RPIs of 1.2 (**table 1**), providing an initial indication of how pupils' behavioural presentations shifted following the introduction of pupil-led planning.

Table 1. Term 2 behaviour data 2023/2024

Week	Behaviour weightings	Behaviour incidents	RPI occurrences
1	7.0	3.5	1.3
2	8.2	4.0	1.4
3	9.8	4.4	1.6
4	6.0	3.0	1.0
5	5.5	2.8	1.0
6	5.6	2.7	1.1
Average	6.7	3.3	1.2

Note: RPIs are calculated as weekly averages over each academic term.

Term 3 (Addition of semi-structured pupil interviews)

Following the introduction of semi-structured interviews at the start of term 3, behaviour data for the same six pupils showed greater fluctuation. Behaviour weightings ranged from 4.0 to 7.6 weekly, while incident counts varied between 2.3 and 3.5. RPI use remained relatively stable, averaging 1.3 per week (table 2). Although the quantitative trends varied, the qualitative findings later demonstrate how pupils’ increasing understanding of RPIs shaped their emotional responses and capacity to engage in reflective conversations, offering contextual explanation for this variability.

Table 2. Term 3 behaviour data 2023/2024

Week	Behaviour weightings	Behaviour incidents	RPI occurrences
1	4.0	2.3	0.0
2	5.2	2.7	0.8
3	6.1	3.0	1.0
4	7.3	3.3	1.2
5	7.6	3.5	1.4
Average	6.0	3.0	1.3

Note: RPIs are calculated as weekly averages over each academic term.

Term 4 (Continuation of pupil-led planning and ongoing ad-hoc reflection)

Behavioural data for term 4 continued to be collected for the pilot pupils. As shown in table 6, behaviour weightings averaged 7.2 per week, incident counts averaged 3.2 and RPIs averaged 0.9 per week – the lowest weekly RPI average across the three terms reviewed. Weekly fluctuations were evident: behaviour weightings ranged from 4.8 to 11.8, incidents from 2.3 to 4.5 and RPIs from 0 to 1.5 (table 6). Taken alongside pupils’ qualitative accounts, term 4 data illustrates how behavioural presentations fluctuated while emotional understanding and communication began to shift, reinforcing the need to interpret quantitative patterns alongside lived experiences.

Table 3. Term 4 behaviour data averages

Week	Behaviour weightings	Behaviour incidents	RPI occurrences
1	4.8	2.3	1.0
2	5.0	2.8	0.0
3	11.8	4.5	1.0
4	7.8	3.4	1.5
5	6.6	2.8	1.0
6	6.8	3.1	1.3
Average	7.1	3.2	1

Across terms 2-4, descriptive analysis shows that behaviour weightings, incidents and RPI occurrences for the six participating pupils fluctuated week to week but demonstrated broadly consistent averages across the three terms. Notably, term 4 recorded the lowest mean RPI frequency (1 per week), although behaviour weightings and incident counts remained comparable to earlier terms. These results provide the quantitative foundation for the qualitative findings that follow and inform the transition into the whole-school implementation described in Phase Two.

Phase One results: academic year 2023/2024

Qualitative findings

Semi-structured interviews conducted in term 3 provided insight into how the six participating pupils understood RPIs and experienced behaviour support. All interviews were conducted by the

researcher in their pastoral role, a familiar adult known to pupils, which likely contributed to pupils' willingness to speak openly. Thematic analysis identified two overarching themes that reflect pupils' emotional responses, perceptions of safety and preferences for communication and support.

Theme 1: The balance of safety and sensibility – navigating student perspectives on RPIs

This theme captures the varied and often ambivalent emotions pupils hold toward RPIs. While all participants understood RPIs as safety measures, their feelings ranged from reluctant acceptance to discomfort, frustration and distress, mirroring findings in previous research that pupils often interpret RPIs through both protective and punitive lenses (Willis et al., 2021; Hodgkiss & Harding, 2024).

Many pupils articulated an awareness of the adults' intention to keep them safe. Blue contrasted the physical discomfort of RPIs with the reassurance provided by adult protection:

"Hurts a lot... [adults] keep me safe... I'm still a little bit frustrated that they have to hold me."

Similarly, Red emphasised the safety rationale for RPIs:

"I think they're just trying to keep me safe and the other children safe and the adults safe. They don't want me to get hurt or for another child to lash out because I'm making too much racket."

For some pupils, increased understanding helped them manage the emotional impact of being held. Green stated:

"Once I had done enough learning about RPIs... if I get angry and have to go into a hold, I'll be able to understand it and keep calm."

Across interviews, pupils consistently expressed mixed emotional reactions. Five of the pupils described predominantly negative feelings, frustration, anger, sadness or feeling overwhelmed, while one pupil conveyed a more neutral or increasingly accepting perspective over time. These qualitative accounts reflect the complexity of children's interpretations and their need for clarity, predictability and relational security surrounding RPIs.

Theme 2: Voices heard: bridging gaps with meaningful dialogue

The second theme highlights pupils' clear desire for communication and relational support before, during and after RPIs. Effective communication, both verbal and non-verbal, emerged as central to helping pupils regulate their emotions and maintain trust in adults, an emphasis strongly aligned with trauma-informed and relational models of practice.

Red described a simple but effective emotional signalling system that helped them communicate escalating feelings:

"Thumbs up is okay... sideways is getting angry... thumbs down is when I'm not okay... I think I should just have an adult to chat to me about my feelings."

Blue similarly emphasised the therapeutic impact of a supportive adult presence:

"How did it feel when the teachers came to help you?"

"Good"

"Why did it feel good?"

"Because I had someone to actually talk to"

Pupils consistently highlighted the importance of adults listening carefully, explaining what was happening and providing space to express their emotions. These insights illuminate the relational dynamics that influence how pupils make sense of RPIs and provide essential context to the behavioural data observed in Phase One.

The behavioural fluctuations observed in the quantitative data correspond with pupils' qualitative descriptions of confusion, emerging understanding and emotional ambivalence surrounding RPIs. As pupils developed clearer understandings of the purpose of RPIs through PSP discussions and interviews, their narratives indicated greater emotional regulation and trust. These qualitative insights provide important interpretive context for the stabilisation of RPI averages and reductions observed by term 4.

Phase Two results: academic year 2024/2025

Quantitative findings

Following the pilot with six pupils, PSPs and weekly reflective routines (Target time) were implemented across the whole school, a population of 90 pupils, at the start of 2024/2025 academic year. Whole-school behaviour data for 2024/2025 was then compared with the previous academic year to examine whether the patterns observed in the pilot were reflected at scale (**table 4**).

Whole-school behaviour data comparisons for 2023/2024 to 2024/2025 academic years showed that although behaviour weightings and incident counts increased across terms 1-3, the use of RPIs nevertheless declined. Term 1 RPIs decreased from 262 to 247 (a 5.7% reduction), term 2 RPIs fell from 253 to 147 (a 41.9% reduction) and term 3 RPIs reduced from 168 to 139 (a 17.3% reduction). From term 4 onwards, behaviour weightings, incidents and RPIs all showed steady reductions, indicating a sustained downward trend across the final three terms of the year. The total number of RPIs from 2023/24 to 2024/25 saw a decrease from 1,418 to 922 (34.97% reduction).

These reductions in RPIs from the start of the 2024/2025 academic year occurred during the period in which every class developed PSPs collaboratively and embedded weekly reflective routines through Target time. Although the study cannot isolate the cause of these changes, the magnitude and consistency of the reductions in RPIs align with the introduction of whole-school collaborative planning and weekly structured reflection.

Discussion

This study explored whether strengthening student voice, enhancing pupils' understanding of RPIs and embedding structured reflective dialogue could contribute to a reduction in RPI use within a UK SEMH primary school. Findings from both phases, the small pilot with six pupils in 2023/24 and a full-school implementation in 2024/25, indicate that relational, participatory and nurture-informed practices may support improvements in behavioural patterns and reductions in restrictive interventions. Although no causal relationship can be inferred, the overall direction of the findings aligns with theoretical and empirical work emphasising the importance of relational safety, emotional containment and pupil participation for children with SEMH needs (Doyle, 2003; Ainsworth & Bell, 1970; Perry & Szalavitz, 2017). These processes reflect the Six Principles of Nurture, including the provision of a safe base, understanding behaviour as communication and supporting developmentally appropriate transitions, each of which is directly enacted through the participatory practices examined in this study.

In Phase One, the behavioural data remained broadly stable, with only modest fluctuations rather than a clear downward trend in behaviour weightings, incident counts and RPIs followed the introduction of pupil-led PSPs and reflective conversations. Although limited in scale, these patterns still align with nurture-based and attachment-informed practice, which asserts that predictable, attuned and co-regulated relational environments promote children's capacity for behavioural stability and self-regulation (Doyle, 2003). The collaborative construction of PSPs

Table 4. Whole-school behaviour data comparison 2023 / 2024 – 2024 / 2025

	Weightings academic year 23/24	Weightings academic year 24/25	Incidents academic year 23/24	Incidents academic year 24/25	RPIs academic year 23/24	RPIs academic year 24/25
Term 1	2779.5	3815.5	1037	1791	262	247
Term 2	2944	3313	1294	1570	253	147
Term 3	2193.5	2318.5	912	1162	168	139
Term 4	2711.5	2002	1177	1036	252	101
Term 5	2445	1581.5	1085	828	197	82
Term 6	3240.5	2334	1445	1144	286	106

emphasised pupils' communication needs, emotional cues and preferred strategies for co-regulation, echoing the trauma-informed emphasis on relational clarity and shared understanding (Cusack et al., 2018; Kelly et al., 2023). While Phase One did not demonstrate strong behavioural change, the stability observed may itself indicate the beginnings of relational safety and predictability, processes identified as precursors to more sustained behavioural regulation (Dolton, Adams & O'Reilly, 2020; Willis et al., 2021).

However, the fluctuations recorded across both phases of the data set highlight the non-linear nature of behavioural change often seen in SEMH contexts. Many children with developmental trauma or communication needs demonstrate cycles of progress and regression as part of their regulatory development (Porges, 2011; Bath & Seita, 2018). The variability seen in the behaviour logs is characteristic of this developmental complexity and emphasises the importance of the relational consistency and emotional containment that sit at the core of nurture-oriented and trauma-informed practice. Rather than signalling intervention failure, such fluctuations reflect what relational neuroscience describes as "expected dysregulation" during periods of emotional learning and relational adjustment (Perry & Szalavitz, 2017).

The qualitative findings provide further insight into the emotional meaning-making processes underpinning these behavioural shifts. Pupils described RPIs as simultaneously protective and distressing, a duality widely reported in the literature (Steckley, 2017; Hodgkiss & Harding, 2024). Some pupils clearly recognised that adults were attempting to maintain safety, which aligns with research showing that when the rationale for RPIs is understood, pupils' trust in adults can be preserved (Willis et al., 2021). Yet the pupils also shared feelings of fear, frustration and confusion, reaffirming longstanding concerns that RPIs can compromise relational security when communication is insufficient (Ryan & Peterson, 2004; Mohr et al., 1998). The pupils' desire for clear explanations, emotional check-ins and opportunities for reflective dialogue reinforces Sellman's (2009) contention that meaningful student participation is essential for fostering engagement and reducing feelings of disempowerment.

Phase Two findings, drawn from whole-school implementation during 2024/25, further illuminate the potential value of these relational and reflective approaches. Unlike Phase One, where behavioural patterns remained largely stable, Phase Two demonstrated reductions in behaviour weightings and recorded incidents from terms 4-6 and in RPIs across the entire academic year.

While these reductions cannot be attributed solely to the intervention and may also reflect broader contextual, staffing or cohort-related factors, they correspond with broader evidence that whole-school relational and preventative approaches are associated with reductions in restrictive practices (Deveau & Leitch, 2015; Bynoe et al., 2021). The embedding of weekly Target time sessions, predictable opportunities for reflective conversation, emotional processing and collaborative target-setting, appears consistent with nurture principles and the wider literature that identifies structured relational reflection as a key mechanism for reducing distress-based behaviours (Perry & Szalavitz, 2017). These findings particularly reinforce attachment-informed frameworks that emphasise the role of predictable, attuned adults in supporting regulatory development (Oosterman & Schuengel, 2008).

The early-year focus on belonging, relationship-building and PSP development through whole-school continuing professional development also mirrors findings from attachment-informed research, which demonstrates that the availability of attuned, predictable adults is a core predictor of children's emotional and behavioural regulation (Oosterman & Schuengel, 2008). The school's values of happiness, high expectations, nurture, consistency, understanding and positivity (HENCUP) were operationalised explicitly during this phase and appear to have provided a framework for enacting nurture principles reliably across classrooms. This explicit values-led structure likely strengthened the relational culture within which the behaviour-support processes were embedded, a factor repeatedly linked to reductions in restrictive practices (Bynoe et al., 2021).

When considered together, the findings suggest that relationally grounded, pupil-centred and reflective practices may help to strengthen pupils' emotional understanding, foster shared ownership of behaviour planning and reduce reliance on

RPIs. The data indicate a general reduction in RPIs during phases of increased pupil involvement, though this study does not demonstrate correlation or causation. The findings should therefore be interpreted as associative rather than indicative of direct intervention effects; nevertheless, the alignment between the data and existing theoretical frameworks strengthens the plausibility of the relationships observed.

Implications for practice include the systematic embedding of pupil voice within behaviour planning, the use of structured reflective routines such as PSP meetings and Target time and continued staff development in relational attunement and co-regulation. These practices operationalise key nurture principles, particularly providing a safe base, understanding behaviour as communication and modelling attuned relationships, and may support schools in reducing their reliance on restrictive interventions.

Limitations

A notable limitation is that the study did not collect staff-perception data. Given that RPIs are enacted by adults, understanding staff decision-making, confidence, relational approaches and experiences of the PSP/Target time model would provide valuable contextual insight. Future research should incorporate staff perspectives to explore how adult behaviour, interpretation and relational stance interact with pupil-led approaches to influence RPI frequency.

The qualitative sample was small, reflecting the exploratory nature of Phase One and cannot therefore be generalised beyond this context. The sequential introduction of interventions complicates the isolation of their individual effects. Behavioural patterns in SEMH settings are highly context-dependent and likely influenced by staffing, environmental factors, group dynamics and external stressors, none of which were controlled within this design. Behavioural data were analysed descriptively rather than using inferential statistics, meaning conclusions are illustrative rather than statistically robust. Future research should incorporate inferential analyses, larger samples and multi-informant perspectives (including pupils and staff) to deepen understanding of how relational and nurture-informed approaches influence behaviour over time.

Conclusion

This study examined whether strengthening pupil voice, enhancing pupils' understanding of RPIs and embedding structured reflective dialogue could contribute to reducing the use of RPIs within a UK SEMH primary school. Across both phases of implementation, findings suggest that nurture-informed, relational and participatory approaches can support more regulated behavioural patterns and contribute to safer, more emotionally attuned environments.

Behavioural data showed consistent indicative reductions in behaviour weightings, incidents and RPIs following the introduction of pupil-led PSPs and reflective practices. While causation cannot be inferred, the correspondence between these reductions and the relational practices introduced offers plausible evidence of positive association, consistent with research emphasising predictability, co-regulation and emotional safety as mechanisms for reducing restrictive practices (Kelly et al., 2023; Ryan & Peterson, 2004).

The qualitative findings highlighted pupils' mixed emotional responses to RPIs, balancing recognition of safety with feelings of discomfort or frustration, mirroring wider evidence of the emotional strain connected to restraint (Cusack et al., 2018; Hodgkiss & Harding, 2024). Their desire for clearer explanations and relational repair reinforces research showing that transparent communication and reflective dialogue support trust and emotional regulation after incidents (Willis et al., 2021; Steckley, 2017). These insights strengthen the argument that RPI processes must be embedded within emotionally literate, relationally attuned communication.

The study also supports foundational theoretical perspectives: that behaviour communicates need (Ainsworth & Bell, 1970), that attuned and predictable adult responses enable containment and regulation (Doyle, 2003; Colley, 2009) and that meaningful participation enhances agency and belonging (Sellman, 2009). By situating PSPs and Target time within a nurture-based relational framework, the school operationalised principles widely recognised as essential in SEMH contexts. However, behavioural change in SEMH settings is influenced by multiple interacting variables and reductions should therefore be interpreted

cautiously and without implication of direct causal impact. Future research would benefit from longer-term controlled or quasi-experimental designs to examine these relationships more robustly.

Overall, this study adds to evidence demonstrating the value of nurture-informed, trauma-aware and pupil-led approaches in SEMH behaviour support. By foregrounding pupil voice, embedding relational safety and creating regular opportunities for reflective dialogue, schools may move towards cultures that rely less on restrictive interventions and more on shared understanding, collaboration and emotional development.

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LIST OF APPENDICES

Appendix A: Pupil voice positive support plan


Appendix B: Interview questions

Appendix C: Student interviews

- Interview with Blue
- Interview with Green
- Interview with Red
- Interview with Purple
- Interview with White
- Interview with Yellow


Appendix D: Target time

Appendix A: Pupil voice positive support plan (example)



Positive Support Plan

2024 / 2025



Charlie Brown Year 3

ROBLOX



Things I think I am good at or enjoy:

- 'I like Minecraft and Roblox'
- 'I like drawing and a little bit of lego'
- 'I'm really good at reading'
- 'I like playdough modelling stuff'

Things adults think I am good at or enjoy:

Charlie has an amazing imagination and can be very playful.




Charlie is affectionate and caring towards adults and peers






Things that make me worry about how I am:

- 'When I find work tricky or too long'
- 'When I start biting or scratching'
- 'If I start shouting'






Things that make adults worry about how I am:


Charlie may show he is frustrated by growling

When Charlie is frustrated he may rip up his work, shout and crawl under the table.


Charlie may attempt to bite or scratch adults when he is heightened.




Nervous




Angry



Sad



Worried



Confused

This is how my school supports me



Working in small groups with lots of adults ready to help me

Adults are trained to help keep me and others in the school safe

There are lots of adults around the school that are ready to help me when I am having a tricky time

Adults use mend-it meetings and encourage reflection to help me think about my behaviour and the impact on others

Adults are positive and tell me when I am doing a good job

If I leave my classroom please help me by:
 'If i can handle my anger, the adult can walk me to the reflection room'

I feel...

This is how adults can help me when I leave the classroom:

- Ask Charlie how the adults can help him.
- Distract Charlie using humour and by being playful.
- Offer Charlie a cuddle and suggest some reading.

Charlie likes to play with a soft green ball out of class, this helps him feel ready to return to class.

HA HA HA!

In my classroom these are the strategies I think people can use to support me:

- 'I like an adult to sit near me'
- 'I like to do the things, I like art'

When I am in my classroom this is how adults can support me:

- Offer Charlie a quiet spot on the sofa when he comes in to school or if he appears unsettled. Charlie can do a quiet activity such as playdough or reading until he is settled.
- Charlie likes it when adults are cuddly and playful.
- Charlie likes to read books and sit with adults on the sofa.

Here is what I think I need in the reflection room:
 'Play with me to keep me calm'

Here's what adults can do to support me if I need the reflection room and once I am in there:

- Engage Charlie by playing some games and then see if he is ready to talk about what has happened
- Talk to Charlie about what safe behaviour looks like
- Offer Charlie a hug

Appendix B: Interview questions

1. Introductory questions:

Can you tell me about your experiences at school? What is your favourite part about coming to school?

What do you think about the teachers and staff at your school?

2. General questions:

Can you describe a time when you needed some help from your teachers or other adults at school? What happened?

How did it make you feel when you received support from teachers or staff?

Can you tell me about a time when you felt scared or upset at school? What caused those feelings?

3. Questions about physical support:

Sometimes the adults have to support you in school to help keep you and others safe, which might mean adults have to stand and sit with you or move you.

How did you feel when someone had to stand and sit with you or move you?

Can you describe what it's like when a teacher or staff member supports you in this way?

What are the adults trying to do when they stand and sit with you or move you?

4. Coping and emotional questions:

How do you usually calm down when you're upset or angry at school?

Can you tell me about a time when you felt like you didn't need any help, and you were able to manage your feelings on your own? What did you do?

5. Suggestions and feedback:

If there is something you could change about how adults help you at school, what would it be?

Do you have any ideas to make school feel even better for you or your friends?

6. Closure:

Is there anything else you'd like to share about your experiences at school or the support you receive from teachers and staff?

How do you feel after talking about these things today? Is there something you'd like to do or talk about now to help you feel better?

Appendix C: Target time

