Creating and sustaining a trauma-informed organisational culture: promoting organisational learning and change in educational settings

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Abstract

It is widely evidenced that educational outcomes for young people considered most vulnerable are collectively considerably below their peers. Reasons for this are multi-dimensional, but recent research suggests that childhood trauma and its resulting impacts may contribute, impacting on educational outcomes and beyond. Whilst this area has significant current interest, with much research suggesting the benefits of employing trauma-informed practice within educational settings, research considering the processes and mechanisms involved at organisational level to learn about and embed these theories into practices is lacking. Furthermore, questions around how these practices translate into organisational cultures in ways that are sustainable over time remain unanswered.

In consideration of this context, this research aims to better understand the processes and mechanisms required for an educational organisation to learn about and sustainably embed trauma-informed approaches into organisational culture.

To meet this aim, this study comprises two case studies. The first, a national educational organisation supporting disadvantaged young people with their educational development. The second, an Alternative Provision provider for young people who have been, or are at risk of, being excluded from mainstream school settings. Within the boundaries of a case study framework, broadly ethnographic methods are employed over two academic years, with qualitative data collected through one-to-one and group interviews, document analysis, and observations across the participant-observer spectrum. A reflexive thematic approach to analysis is used: findings from each case are analysed in turn, before then being discussed in unison.

The findings from this study both deepen and expand current understandings of the enabling and constraining factors impacting the learning and development of a trauma-informed organisational culture. Importantly, the findings suggest that approaches to learning and change at an organisational level that align with a trauma-informed approach to learning contributes to the development of a facilitative learning environment, which promotes development of a trauma-informed organisational culture. This finding promotes a framework for organisational learning and change, currently unconsidered across preceding literature.

Through interrogation of the findings considering existing research, this study suggests that a trauma-informed approach to learning and change not only has significant implications practically – for organisations seeking to learn and embed trauma-informed approaches into practices but additionally sheds new light on existing organisational learning and change theories, too. The findings are therefore not only relevant at a case-by-case level, but implications for policy, practice and theory extend far beyond the boundaries of this study, providing a timely contribution with potential for significant positive impact across educational organisations and beyond.

Acknowledgements

For a long time I fantasised about writing PhD acknowledgements, but it always was just that: a fantasy. And now I am here, for real, faced with a blank page and at a loss for words. Reflecting on this journey is hard. It has (somewhat ironically) been one filled with many traumas, many challenges, much learning and change. But ultimately one of substantial growth, in more complex ways than I ever anticipated. Suffice to say I could not have got this far alone and there are many I owe the utmost gratitude to for helping me throughout.

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"Late one Autumn day when she was at her lowest she watched a squirrel storing up nuts for the winter, one at a time he would take them to the nest. And she thought, if that squirrel can take care of himself with a harsh winter coming on, so can I. Once I broke my problems into small pieces, I was able to carry them, just like those acorns, one at a time."

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List of abbreviations

AP - Alternative Provision

CiC - Children in Care

CiN - Children in Need

CP - Child Protection

CPD - Continuous Professional Development

DfE - Department for Education

LA - Local Authority

NEET - Not in Education, Employment or Training

NICE - National Institute for Health and Care Excellence

PTSD - Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder

SEND - Special Educational Needs and Difficulties

SEMH – Social, Emotional and Mental Health

SLT – Senior leadership team

UK - United Kingdom

US - United States

Glossary of terms

All-Through school
A school providing education to young people from 4-18 years old.

Alternative provision
An education provider for pupils who, because of exclusion, illness or other reasons, would not otherwise receive suitable education.

Attainment 8
A government measure in England that calculates a pupil's average GCSE score across eight subjects. Points from grades are added to form the Attainment 8 score, which helps to understand pupil performance and school effectiveness.

Care Experienced
A legal term applied to those who were in the care of a local authority at any point in their life, whether as a child or young person, including those in foster care, residential homes and kinship care.

Care Leaver
A legal term describing a person aged 16+ who was in the care of the local authority before 17 years old.

Child in Care
A legal term describing a young person under 18 who is looked after by their local authority because they cannot live with their own family. Known as a child in care, looked after child or child looked after.

Children in Need
Under The Children Act 1989, a child is considered a "Child in Need" if their health or development is likely to be impaired without local authority services.

Child Protection Plan
A formal plan created when a child is assessed to be at risk of significant harm. The plan outlines specific actions and responsibilities for a "core group" of professionals and family members to ensure the child's safety, promote their welfare, and support the family.

Continuous Professional Development
A planned, ongoing process of learning and training that professionals undertake to increase their knowledge, skills, and experience throughout their careers.

Early Intervention, or Early Help
The practice of identifying risks or problems in children and young people and providing support to prevent negative outcomes or to address them before they worsen.

Educational Organisation

A structured group whose primary purpose is to deliver education through systematic instruction and coordinated activities, including schools, universities, non-profit and for-profit organisations.

Headteacher
Headteachers have interchangeable names including Headmaster or Headmistress as well as Principal and Head of School. The Headteacher traditionally oversees a school.

Intervention
A targeted, short-term action or program implemented outside of regular teaching to help students improve their progress, skills or well-being.

Local Authority
A local authority is a democratically elected body responsible for providing public services and facilities within a defined geographical area.

Organisation
A group of individuals who work together to achieve common goals and objectives, often with a structured approach and defined roles.

School Exclusion
The formal removal of a student from school for a temporary period (a fixed-term exclusion or suspension) or permanently (a permanent exclusion), due to serious or persistent breaches of the school's behaviour policy.

Secondary School
An educational institution for students typically aged 11 to 18, which follows primary school and precedes higher education or the workforce.

Staff
Professionals, semi-professionals and practitioners, including those working in community teams for adults or children and educational staff.

Trust Board
The primary decision-making and strategic body responsible for the governance, integrity, and overall direction of an organisation. Key functions include setting strategy, overseeing financial health, ensuring high standards of governance and acting as the accountable body.

Trustee
A statutory role within organisations. A trustee's main job is to hold the organisation’s leadership to account to delivering their objects. This is done by making strategic decisions and ensuring the organisation meets its goals.

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Chapter one: Introduction

Prelude

It is inset day at Willow Academy. The theme is inclusion; the aim, to become a trauma-informed school. An external speaker is there discussing trauma-informed practice in the classroom. Around the room, in between stifled yawns and under-the-table lesson planning, the speaker talks about childhood trauma, attachment theory, and the impact of trauma on learning. In small groups, the staff are asked to think of a student whose behaviour impacts their learning. The same few names are heard across the room: the boy who gets into fights all the time; the girl who storms out of lessons; the boy that refuses to do work. Staff are asked to think about why these students might behave this way: what needs are their behaviours communicating? I wonder what is making him so angry; why can't she cope in the classroom; is the work too hard for him? The speaker asks staff to role play situations where they might see these behaviours, testing out different approaches for responding in trauma-informed ways. Staff (reluctantly) do so; the speaker is pleased with their responses.

In the staffroom over lunch, a group of teachers are talking about the training. "I'm glad that's over; what a waste of time; a whole day for about five students. I've got so much planning to do', Kieran yawns. "As if our job wasn't hard enough, now we've got to be their parents and counsellors and who knows what else as well", Evie replies. Aaron joins: "Yeh, it's all very well saying, 'make sure to check in with them more', but when it's just one student and then you've got a whole class sat there too it's just not fair". "I just don't see how we're meant to sit there with them

and give them a whole therapy session when they're kicking off in the middle of a full class and we've got a curriculum to get through!" Kieran sighs. "Well, we need to follow the behaviour policy. If they kick off, they're out. It's as simple as that. Whatever is going on at home", Aaron states. "Welcome back hey; back to the mad house!" Evie laughs, and the group head back for the afternoon session.

Back at reception, Janet pins the small certificate up next to her desk at the entrance to the school: Willow Academy has completed trauma training; Willow Academy is a trauma-informed school.

1.1 Introduction

The use of trauma-informed practice has become increasingly popular across educational organisations. Following significant advancements in neurobiological and psychological research, there is now widespread recognition of the complex impacts of experiencing psychological trauma in key developmental stages of childhood. Much research suggests that repeated exposure to distressing events that overwhelm a person's capacity to cope can lead to long-lasting and pervasive impacts (WHO, 2021; National Health Service, 2020; Courtois, 2008).

Whilst initial conceptualisations of trauma encompassed the impacts of childhood abuse or neglect (e.g., Van der Kolk, 2005), research since suggests that the range of what can be trauma-inducing for children and young people is much broader. For some, poverty can be a cause (Berridge et al., 2020). For others,

peer relationships can be traumatic (Kirkham et al., 2022). School itself can also be a traumatic experience for some (Madia et al., 2022).

Young people considered most vulnerable to experiencing the impacts of trauma collectively and consistently have educational outcomes below the national average (Department for Education, 2025a; 2025b; National Audit Office, 2024; House of Commons, 2025). The reasons are multifaceted, but there is considerable empirical support suggesting that the impacts of trauma can significantly disrupt educational development. Traumatic experiences can impair academic experiences and outcomes, disrupting developmental, psychological, and psychosocial development and functioning (e.g., The National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN), 2008; MacLochlainn et al., 2022; Eiberg, 2024; Ardino, 2020).

Given that an estimated one in 13 children are trauma-experienced (Frearson & Duncan, 2024; Lewis et al., 2019; 2021), it is increasingly common for education providers to seek to become ‘trauma-informed’: i.e., practice in ways that are grounded in understanding of how trauma can impact an individual, and seek to mitigate and protect from these impacts (Office for Health Improvement and Disparities, 2022). Consequently, interest in employing trauma-informed approaches in educational settings as a response to better meeting the needs of trauma-experienced students is fast increasing.

Recent contextual factors have further heightened the focus on trauma-informed approaches across educational settings. The disruption caused by the Covid-19

pandemic (Diamond, 2024), along with the collective experiences of trauma during the pandemic (Frearson & Duncan, 2024), has brought increased focus on how a trauma-informed approach to practice could better support experiences and outcomes within educational organisations.

Widely considered a traumatic stressor (Frearson & Duncan, 2024), research suggests that the impacts of the pandemic may have increased experiences of trauma for both young people and practitioners alike. Research suggests the pandemic may have increased the numbers of young people experiencing trauma and could have intensified the psychological and psychosocial impacts observed across educational contexts (e.g., Frearson & Duncan, 2024; Thomson et al., 2022; Arowolo et al., 2023). Concurrently, educational organisations have faced significant challenges and changes because of both the impacts of the pandemic and increasing financial pressures resulting in significant adjustments to ways of working and changes to staffing structures. Much research has suggested these changes often increased workload and negatively impacted well-being for practitioners within these contexts (Worth & Faulkner-Ellis, 2021; Norwich et al., 2022; Beauchamp et al., 2021; Thomson et al., 2022).

In response to this increased understanding, research suggests the benefits of schools adopting trauma-informed approaches centered on equity, relationships and belonging for *all* within them (e.g., Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2015; National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE), 2015; Greany et al., 2024b; Moses & Villodas, 2017; Crosby et al., 2017).

However, despite increasing focus on trauma-informed approaches in education, consensus around what a trauma-informed school *looks like* in practice is lacking (e.g., Martin et al., 2024; Muttillo et al., 2022; MacLochlainn et al., 2022). Additionally, whilst this area has gained significant interest from both theoretical and practical perspectives, research considering the processes involved for educational organisations to learn about and embed these theories into practices in sustainable ways is lacking (e.g., Jacobs et al., 2024). What it looks like to learn about trauma impacts at an organisational level, how learning translates into practices and how practices translate into organisational cultures in ways that benefit the experiences of students and practitioners alike within such cultures remains largely unexplored within educational research (Martin et al., 2024; Muttillo et al., 2022; MacLochlainn et al., 2022).

In consideration of this context, this research aimed to better understand the processes required for an educational organisation to sustainably learn about and embed trauma-informed approaches into organisational culture. This chapter will introduce the study by first discussing the background and context, stating the research problem. After presenting the rationale behind this research, the language used throughout policy and practice relating to this study is presented, and how these terminologies are used throughout this study are outlined. This chapter follows with an outline of the research aims and objectives, the research questions under study and the significance of the study, and concludes with an outline of the structure of the thesis in sum.

1.2 Context

It is widely evidenced that educational outcomes for young people who are deemed most vulnerable are collectively considerably below their peers (Department for Education, 2025a; 2025b; 2025c; National Audit Office, 2024; House of Commons, 2025). Reasons for this are multi-dimensional, but recent research suggests that childhood trauma and its resulting impacts may contribute to this, impacting educational outcomes and beyond (Thomson-Link, 2023; MacLochlainn et al., 2022; Eiberg, 2024; Ardino, 2020). Advancements in understanding around trauma, risk factors for experiencing trauma and how trauma can impact development, outcomes and experiences have prompted a surge in research and practice alike, seeking to better understand how to better support positive outcomes for vulnerable young people (e.g., Sempowicz., 2018; L'Estrange & Bentley, 2025; Harrison et al., 2022).

1.2.1 Defining vulnerability

Whilst there is currently no one acknowledged definition of what constitutes childhood vulnerability, Public Health England (2020) defined childhood vulnerability as: 'any children at greater risk of experiencing physical or emotional harm and/or experiencing poor outcomes because of one or more factors in their lives' (p.6). Necessarily broad to account for the diversity of individual experiences, this definition includes young people at risk of safeguarding concerns, in local authority care, health and disability factors, economic circumstances, family circumstances and characteristics, offending and anti-social

behaviours, abuse and exploitation, missing and absent children and minority populations (Public Health England, 2020; Bright, 2017; Department for Education, 2023).

Whilst somewhat impossible to quantify exact numbers, estimations portray the scale of which childhood vulnerabilities permeate the population at any given time. In 2020, it was estimated around 2.3 million children within the UK lived with one or more risk factor (Children's Commissioner for England, 2019), and these numbers since continued to rise. In 2024, over 400,000 (3%) of children were in the social care system, more than 84,000 children were in care (Ofsted, 2025), and around 50,000 children were on Child Protection Plans (Department for Education, 2024).

1.2.2 Associated outcomes

Much data portrays a bleak presentation of outcomes for such vulnerable groups throughout education and beyond, with childhood vulnerabilities identified as a risk factor for experiencing difficulties psychologically, educationally, and across the life course. Studies suggest that those experiencing adverse childhood experiences are more likely to experience poorer mental and physical health, poorer educational and employment outcomes, as well as difficulties in forming and maintaining relationships and experiences with criminal justice systems and incarceration (e.g., Public Health England, 2020).

At the school level, educational progress of those considered most vulnerable is collectively consistently below their peers. Data from 2023-2024 states the average Attainment 8[1] score for children in care was 18.3; significantly lower than the 46.2 for all children, with only 9% achieving grade 5 or above in GCSE English and Maths (Department for Education, 2025a; 2025b). Educational outcomes for children in need are similar (Sebba et al., 2015; Crosby et al., 2017; Leonard et al., 2016; Maclean et al., 2018). Research suggests poor attainment is more linked with 'background risk factors' as opposed to a direct result of being in care, suggesting that those experiencing multiple vulnerabilities are likely most impacted (Maclean et al., 2018, p.292; Berridge et al., 2020).

Childhood vulnerabilities can impact on overall life outcomes too (e.g., Harrison et al., 2021; Mendes et al., 2014; Salazar et al., 2016). For example, in 2024 only 15% of care-leavers went to University (Department for Education, 2025e), with care-experienced young people more likely to enter higher education later in life than their non-care-experienced peers (Harrison, 2020b; Montserrat et al., 2013). School attainment accounts for many participation rates (Harrison and Waller, 2018; Driscoll, 2013), along with lack of adult support, stability in care and school placements and financial barriers (Jackson & Cameron, 2012; Gazeley & Hinton-Smith, 2017). Participation in higher education has been linked with more overall positive outcomes such as career prospects, earnings, health, social and community relationships and self-esteem (Mendes et al., 2014), with social

[1] Attainment 8 is score assigned to students following key stage 4 examinations, usually completed at 16 years old, to measure exam performance. Attainment 8 is calculated through combining assigned point scores corresponding to graded results from English and Maths, 3 subjects from Sciences, Languages and History, and 3 additional qualifications from an approved list. (Department for Education, 2024).

mobility through education cited as even more important for the most vulnerable populations ‘to achieve successful integration into adult society’ (Jackson & Cameron, 2012, p.1113).

1.2.3 Trauma theories

It is not surprising that these statistics underpin motivation behind numerous studies seeking ways to better understand this context. In combination with advancements in neurobiological understandings, it is now widely acknowledged that impacts of such risk factors can promote psychological trauma (e.g., Somo, 2024; Alayarian, 2015; Eiberg, 2024). Research suggests psychological trauma can significantly impact on psychosocial and cognitive development, contributing to the overall poorer outcomes documented (e.g., MachLochlainn et al., 2022; NCTSN, 2008; Ofsted, 2006).

The term ‘trauma’ is laden with diverse meaning; understanding of childhood trauma and its implications is complex. Broadly, trauma within this context can be defined as experiences of ongoing, repeated exposure to circumstances which overwhelm a person’s capacity to protect their psychic wellbeing (e.g., Stone et al., 2010, p.13). Repetitive and ongoing exposure to circumstances from which ‘escape is difficult or impossible’ (WHO, 2021, p.442) can threaten our sense of ‘safety, dignity and belonging’ (Haines, 2019, p.74). Impacts are multidimensional; however, trauma theory suggests that when a child’s understanding of the world is formed within this context, their neurobiological systems can become affected and this can have diverse negative consequences on their psychosocial functioning (Hovens, 2010; Van der Kolk, 2005; Bailey et al., 2007; Briere et al., 2008).

Trauma theory suggests that behaviours can develop in response to such adversity, rooted in survival-based neurology, involving the central and autonomic nervous system (e.g., Archer et al., 2015). The prefrontal cortex - responsible for perceptions, cognitions, self-belief - can go ‘offline’ as a response to threat (Archer et al., 2015, p.14). There is considerable empirical basis supporting the argument that trauma can impair academic outcomes through the impacts on developmental areas of executive functioning like planning and decision-making (MacLochlainn et al., 2022; Eiberg, 2024), and as such trauma can impact on educational learning and outcomes (Ardino, 2020).

1.2.4 Trauma-informed education

It is estimated that around one in thirteen people within the UK experience trauma before adulthood (Frearson & Duncan, 2024; Lewis et al., 2019), approximately 20% of adolescents experience a traumatic event (Ardino, 2020, p.113), and around half of all lifetime mental health disorders start by the mid-teens (Newlove-Delgado et al., 2023). Given this, it is increasingly common for education providers to seek to *become* trauma-informed: i.e., engage in practices that acknowledge the potential impact of trauma on educational outcomes and adapting practices to create a safe, supportive, and inclusive environment where all learners can thrive (e.g., Haines, 2019; Parker et al., 2022; MacLochlainn et al., 2022). Trauma-informed practice additionally aims to avoid re-traumatisation; i.e., reduce the risk of school itself becoming a traumatising experience (MacLochlainn et al., 2022; Wolpow et al., 2009).

Much recent research suggests that trauma-informed practices in education may have a positive impact on those considered most vulnerable in educational settings (e.g., Sebba & Dingwall, 2018; Harrison et al., 2020) and consequently interest in employing trauma-informed approaches in schools is fast increasing. Considering this, in 2022 the Office for Health Improvement and Disparities published guidance around defining a trauma-informed approach to practice and across schools, this widespread call to action led to a surge in professional development initiatives, with school-wide staff training around trauma-informed practices increasing in popularity (e.g., L'Estrange & Bentley, 2025).

1.2.5 Implementation

Whilst understandings around childhood trauma and its impacts have increased, accompanied by an increase in educational organisations seeking to *become* trauma-informed, there is currently a distinct lack of research considering what successful implementation of trauma-informed practices looks like in practice at the organisational level (e.g. Martin et al., 2024; Muttillo et al., 2022; MacLochlainn et al., 2022). Whilst research increasingly considers that a trauma-informed approach founded on fostering safety, relationships and belonging could improve educational experiences and outcomes (e.g. Haines, 2019; Greany et al., 2024b), the current lack of guidance for organisations seeking to translate this into practice raises concerns across individual, collective, and wider organisational levels (Muttillo et al., 2022; Avery et al., 2021).

Trauma-informed practice aims to better support the outcomes of those who may be trauma experienced. However without considered application, this *label* has the potential to harm as much as heal. Despite increasing use of the term ‘vulnerable child’, application of this term requires consideration (e.g. Fradley et al., 2024; Ashford, 2019). Whilst quantifying the collective negative trajectories of vulnerable young people importantly highlights the need for change to better support outcomes, and identifying risk factors could enable better planning and implementation of service support (Public Health England, 2020), anticipating poorer outcomes based on such factors risks stigmatisation (Ashford, 2019). There is much research suggesting that the language professionals use to categorise and label young people can ‘other’ them from their peers, increase preconceived notions and ultimately influence the behaviour of both young people and the adults supporting them accordingly (Harris & Jones, 2020; Ashford, 2019). Additionally, this can promote a deficit model of support, whereby individuals are targeted for interventions and behavioural measures where individual shortcomings and lack are emphasised (Ashford, 2019; Alman, 2024). Whilst targeted interventions may promote positive changes at an individual level, this deficiency focused approach may serve to distract from the wider contextual, systemic, or societal factors contributing to individual and collective experiences of trauma impacts (Berridge et al., 2020; Alman, 2024).

This is especially important to consider given the loose nature with which the term ‘vulnerable’ is currently applied and the lack of measures to quantify or identify those who *are* vulnerable (e.g., Jacobs et al., 2024). The Covid-19 pandemic, for example, brought increased attention to the ways in which vulnerabilities are

identified. Those with underlying health conditions, with limited access to health services, whose households were at increased risk, whose parents or carers worked away from home for long hours, and many other additional family stressors and social circumstances that may not have previously been known to services became added to vulnerable population lists (Public Health England, 2020). Importantly, research stipulates that an environment causing a heightened sense of threat to a child can promote a trauma-response (Lewis et al., 2021; Latham et al., 2020). It could be argued that the pandemic and the resulting long-lasting impacts promoted a sense of threat for *everyone*, far beyond those previously labelled as ‘vulnerable’. In this case, applying trauma-informed intervention-based approaches at the individual level alone could neglect the needs of others who could equally benefit from such adaptations to practices.

Furthermore, there has been increasing attention on the ways that staff working within educational organisations can be at increased risk of experiencing trauma themselves, too. Working closely with trauma-experienced young people can promote vicarious trauma; psychological distress induced by indirect exposure to others trauma (e.g. Williamson et al., 2020). In addition, the Covid-19 pandemic brought with it considerable additional challenges and changes for practitioners, amplifying teacher's workload, and impacting overall well-being (Worth & Faulkner-Ellis, 2021; Norwich et al., 2022; Beauchamp et al., 2021). Much research argues that such pressures can seep into the fabric of an organisation, impacting all aspects of a system (e.g. Thomson et al., 2022). Theorists warn that when an organisation is under increased stress from the confounding of internal pressures and external challenges and changes, the organisation itself can

become vulnerable to trauma, producing a system that is reactive or crisis driven (e.g. Treisman, 2018; Thomson et al., 2022; Finegan, 2024; Greany et al., 2024b). Consequently, creating a trauma-informed organisation that understands the role of organisational level factors that can exasperate or reduce trauma for those within them is frequently highlighted as a protective factor against these impacts (e.g. Sutton et al., 2022).

1.2.6 A trauma-informed organisation

A trauma-informed organisation, research suggests, is one where all components of the system are evaluated considering the understanding of the role that trauma plays for all those within it (e.g. Jennings, 2009). A trauma-informed organisation would employ an 'inclusion for all' approach (Greany et al., 2024b, p.11), where safety and trust, relationships, belonging, connection, and collaboration are foregrounded throughout all aspects of the organisation (Treisman, 2018; Greany et al., 2024b; Francis et al., 2022).

Whilst there is increasing acknowledgement of the potential benefits of a trauma-informed organisation, there is currently limited research exploring the realisation of this in practice. Much emerging research begins to suggest that organisational level learning and change is paramount to implementing a trauma-informed approach across the collective organisation (e.g. Avery et al., 2021; Purtle, 2020), however how these changes occur and how learning is both circulated and retained over time is far less known (e.g. Purtle, 2020).

Additionally, broad literature on organisational learning is tricky to apply to educational organisations: schools are a ‘peculiar’ form of organisation (Ball, 2012, p.7), unique in nature (Torres, 2022). The complex nature of schools as organisations results in a web of variables contributing to the culture of a school. Models for analysing organisational culture, learning and change need to be adapted to the realities of schools as organisations (Torres, 2022). This can be additionally complicated through increasing structural changes that mean contemporary leaders face challenges more complex than their predecessors, which arguably require more adaptive and multifaceted approaches to learning and change (Greany et al., 2024a). However, much research suggests that the development of a culture of learning whereby learning itself is embedded throughout the organisation could support this (e.g. Greany et al., 2024a; Stoll, 2013; Stoll, 2020; Hopkins et al., 2014).

Despite this understanding, there is little research identifying the enabling and constraining factors in the learning and development of an organisational culture that is trauma-informed (e.g. Parker et al., 2022; Gee et al., 2021). Achieving whole-school trauma-informed change is complex, requiring system-wide investment of attitudes, beliefs, resources, and practices to embed a trauma-informed approach into the culture of an organisation (e.g. Long, 2022). However, research into how these theories translate into practice is currently lacking; the structure and delivery of implementing trauma-informed approaches at an organisational level requires more research (e.g. Kusmaul et al., 2015), and current research into trauma-informed organisational reforms is often confused by a lack of operational definitions and validated measures of its implementation

(Onipede et al., 2024). Additionally, there is oftentimes a disconnect between trauma theories and educational theory and practice (e.g. O'Toole, 2022), and therefore a lack of evidence for which strategies and under what conditions best encourage an organisational culture that supports a trauma-informed approach (e.g. Sutton et al., 2022).

1.3 Research problem

It is widely documented that educational outcomes for vulnerable young people are collectively below their peers (Department for Education, 2025a; 2025b; 2025c; National Audit Office, 2024; House of Commons, 2025). Such statistics have motivated much research suggesting that the impact of traumatic childhood experiences can have lasting negative impacts the experiences and outcomes for those who are trauma experienced (Thomson-Link, 2023; MacLochlainn et al., 2022; Eiberg, 2024; Ardino, 2020). Given that an estimated one in 13 children are trauma-experienced (Lewis et al., 2019; Lewis et al., 2021), it is increasingly common for education providers to seek to become 'trauma-informed': i.e. learn about trauma and its impacts and adapt practices to better support those who are trauma-experienced (NICE, 2015; Parker et al., 2022; MacLochlainn et al., 2022).

However, whilst there is significant research suggesting the potential benefits of trauma-informed approaches in educational organisations (e.g. Harrison et al., 2021), there is a considerable lack of research around how such approaches can be embedded into practices in ways that are sustainable over time (e.g. Martin et al., 2024; Muttillo et al., 2022; MacLochlainn et al., 2022). Addressing this lack is

not only useful from a theoretical perspective but could have significant implications for practice and policy alike (e.g. Watson & Astor, 2025).

Across the UK, schools continue to invest vast amounts of resources into trauma training for staff, with time constraints and costs of external training providers oftentimes cited as a barrier to the implementation of training (e.g. de Stiger et al., 2022). There is significant disparity between the type, duration, and content of such training, and how these trainings are put into practice vary even more so (de Stiger et al., 2022). Whilst trauma theories highlight the individual nature of trauma and its impacts, the lack of research investigating how such approaches can be embedded into practices increases the precarity of the impact of these trainings and resulting changes to practice (e.g. Harrison et al., 2020).

Research suggests that oftentimes, these training sessions lead to targeted interventions for those considered most vulnerable (Public Health England, 2020; Hagborg et al., 2022). Whilst sometimes necessary, these approaches may employ a deficit model, which can highlight vulnerabilities and stigmatise the young people involved (Ashford, 2019; Jacobs et al., 2024). Additionally, it is not always possible to quantify or identify those most needing of trauma-informed support, particularly because of often hidden factors contributing to vulnerability and the equally hidden ways in which trauma can impact an individual (Berridge et al., 2020). Consequently, employing a trauma-informed approach to isolated practices alone potentially excludes the needs of others (Jacobs et al., 2024). Not only may this be ineffective from a resource perspective but potentially misleads an organisation into believing the community and culture of the organisation is

trauma-informed when instead such practices may be isolated to individual levels (e.g. Jacobs et al., 2024).

Trauma-informed approaches are currently promoted in high regard, held as a solution to better supporting the outcomes of vulnerable young people (e.g. Public Health England, 2020; NICE, 2015). However, without rigorous research into the ways in which learning and practice around trauma and trauma impacts can be embedded into the culture of an organisation, the retention and utilisation of learning becomes precarious at individual, collective and wider organisational levels (e.g. Avery et al., 2021; Purtle, 2020; Boreham and Morgan, 2004; Lawler and Sillitoe, 2013).

This raises many questions requiring consideration across research. Attention needs to be paid to how organisations learn such knowledge: how knowledge around trauma is produced and transferred between key actors within an organisation; how this learning circulates and penetrates an organisation at the cultural level to better support the outcomes of all within the organisation; how these approaches can be applied at a whole organisational level, to create a whole system that does not stigmatise and isolate through its practice but instead focuses on the practices that can be employed across every aspect of an organisation to promote positive outcomes for all.

Research investigating how educational organisations learn and embed trauma-informed approaches into practices in ways that are sustainable over time are currently lacking. Additionally missing from existing research within this field are explorations of organisational factors that can contribute to and exasperate traumas

at both the individual and organisational level, and the steps organisations can take to mitigate these impacts and protect against future challenges and changes. Whilst preceding research across both fields of trauma-informed educational approaches and organisational learning and change theories provide a useful lens through which to understand how organisational learning can contribute to the changing of a culture, there is a significant scarcity of studies exploring how this translates into practice; particularly for educational organisations, whose contexts are complex and dynamic. Additionally, there is a significant lack in research applying such theories when exploring how organisations can embed and sustain a culture that is trauma-informed.

Existing research highlights the potential significant implications of educational organisations adopting a trauma-informed culture, to better support the outcomes and experiences of all within the community. Currently, there is a significant lack of research outlining enabling and constraining factors at individual, organisational and wider contextual levels within this. Rigorous research exploring the processes and mechanisms required for educational organisations to adopt and embed trauma-informed approaches into practices in ways that are sustainable over time is therefore not only contextually relevant but findings from such research could have significant implications for practice, policy and theory alike. Set against this backdrop, this study aimed to address this gap.

1.4 Research overview

Considered within the context of preceding literature and in consideration of the contextual circumstances within which this study sits, this study sought to better understand the processes and mechanisms involved in learning about and embedding trauma-informed approaches into practices at the culture level of educational organisations. To meet this overarching aim, this study comprised of two case studies. The first, a national educational organisation working alongside UK secondary schools to support disadvantaged young people with their educational development. The second, a provider of Alternative Provision (AP) for young people who either have been, or are at risk of, being excluded from mainstream school settings.

Within the boundaries of a case study framework, this study aimed to address the following overarching research question:

> *What are the processes and mechanisms required for an educational organisation to successfully embed trauma-informed approaches into their practices in ways that are sustainable, to best support trauma-experienced young people in their educational development?*

To better understand the phenomena under study, enquiry was guided by the following sub-questions:

1. *What are the required processes of organisational learning and change and how is that learning manifested at different levels within an organisation?*
2. *How can learning around trauma-informed approaches be produced and transferred between key actors within an organisation?*
3. *How do key stakeholders conceptualise success in relation to embedding trauma-informed approaches into practices in ways that are sustainable?*

Whilst respecting the unique differences between the two organisations which contributed to this study, the design and methodology employed across both case studies remained consistent. Within the boundaries of a case study framework, broadly ethnographic methods were employed over a sustained period to collect qualitative data in respect of best meeting the aims and objectives of this study. A broadly thematic approach to analysis was used: findings from each case study were analysed in turn, before then brought together to discuss in unison within an extended discussion. Consideration of each case as an individual study before turning to a more combined analysis enabled a rich understanding of the research questions and sheds new light on the phenomena within the context of preceding literature. That is not to say that this study is not without limitations. These limitations are considered in depth within Chapter Eight.

1.5 Positionality

Within any ethnographic research it is imperative that the role and positionality of the researcher, their inference and interpretative positions and the impacts of the presence of the researcher within the field are given reflexive attention. I am not naive to the ways my positionality, perspectives and experiences impacted throughout each phase of the research. I came to this research with both personal and professional experiences of the impact that trauma can have, both within educational development and beyond. My personal experiences with trauma have undoubtedly shaped me long into adulthood. For me, experiences at school additionally exasperated these impacts; highlighting my perceived differences, threatening my sense of safety and belonging (Haines, 2019), brandishing labels

of disadvantage that have had lasting pervasive impacts. For me, trauma was, and continues to be, an embodied experience (Carless and Douglas, 2015). To acknowledge this is to recognise and accept it would be impossible to separate this version of myself from that which forms the researcher within this study. However, it is equally important to acknowledge the unique differences between individual experiences of trauma: to recognise the different ways in which trauma impacts, and to accept that personal experiences do not qualify a claim to *know* experiences of others (Bittenger and Zoellner, 2004).

Professionally, I gained insight into many organisational factors considered within this study. As a teacher within a large secondary school with additional responsibilities for supporting educational outcomes of those ‘most vulnerable’, I witnessed firsthand the complexities at play within the school's desire to *become* more trauma-informed. Whilst these experiences brought me a drive to answer questions underpinning this study, I also acknowledged, recognised and accepted the uniqueness of each organisation. Organisations are complex: a unique combination of individuals, contexts and circumstances that form their communities. Whilst my personal and professional experiences sparked my initial interest in this research, leading me to this line of enquiry, I came to this research with a reflexive and reflective approach. Not only with recognition of my positionality and the ways this can shape research, but also with respect for the research process itself and my role within this. Whilst recognition of this is threaded throughout each chapter, how researcher positionality was both recognised and accounted for throughout are discussed in more depth across chapters Three and Eight.

1.6 Contributions

This study contributes to the growing body of knowledge around the processes and mechanisms involved in an educational organisations learning and change towards embedding trauma-informed approaches into practices. Whilst much existing research argues for the benefits of employing a trauma-informed approach to practices, there is a significant lack of research considering both how organisations learn to employ such approaches as well as how such learnings can become embedded at the culture level to encourage sustainability of such practices over time. This study sought to address this gap and the findings from this study lend themselves to significant implications; not only practically, but implications for policy, methodological implications and theoretical contributions too.

At the practical level, this study highlighted processes and mechanisms from individual, collective and wider organisational levels that enabled and constrained learning, suggesting particulars effective for stimulating learning processes and transferring learning between key actors within an organisation. The findings from this study have significant practical implications across diverse organisational contexts, through providing recommendations for organisational learning and change. From a policy perspective, the findings from this study draw attention to the ways policies could enable or constrain organisational learning and change, highlighting the need for considerations of how policies that support and enhance learning could be developed and embedded. The findings from this study have

theoretical implications, too. Through drawing together two different theoretical fields – trauma-informed educational approaches and organisational learning and change theories, the findings from this study not only contribute to each field but also shed new light into areas of each that are currently lacking in preceding literature. The findings from this study additionally raise questions beyond the scope of this study. These questions are considered in more depth within Chapter Eight.

This study sought to better understand the processes and mechanisms required for an educational organisation to embed trauma-informed approaches into practice. Through this enquiry, this study not only contributes to research through addressing this question, but additionally the findings suggest implications for practice, policy and theory, as well as exposing additional gaps in preceding research. The contributions and implications of this study are discussed in more depth within Chapter Eight.

1.7 Overview of thesis

This chapter has introduced the research presented within this thesis. The study has been contextualised through introducing the reader to the study's context and the research problem this study aimed to address. Following this, Chapter Two contextualises the study further through reviewing existing research underpinning this study. The motivations, purpose and aims of this study are highlighted within this review through the interrogation of existing literature on trauma and its impacts, trauma-informed approaches in educational organisations, and research

exploring organisational learning and change processes and mechanisms. This chapter concludes by summarising the significance of the work reviewed, contextualises this study within the context presented throughout this chapter and summarises how this study addressed the questions raised through this review.

Chapter Three outlines the research design and methodology used within the study. To begin, the ontological and epistemological assumptions underpinning the study and the research design used are summarised. Then the methods used are described, considering the choice and execution of case studies included. Within this, researcher positionality is considered, specifically in relation to each case study in turn. Analysis of data is outlined, whilst considering how researcher positionality both facilitates and limits knowledge claims. Complexities of the research design and methodology meant that ethical considerations were embedded, emerging and reflexive and this chapter concludes with a reflection on the ethical considerations present throughout.

Following on from this, the findings from the study are presented across two chapters. Firstly, Chapter Four presents the findings from the first of two case studies: Fernville Academy. Within this chapter, findings are presented systematically. First presented are the findings from the earlier period of data collection; exploratory in nature. Next, this chapter presents the findings reflecting the temporal learning and change across the case study. Finally, this chapter reflects on the depiction of organisational learning and change at the close of data collection. A reflection on strategies promoting learning and change is considered, as well as a reflection on barriers towards learning and change that remained

unresolved. Chapter Five then turns to present the findings from the second case study: Riverford College. This chapter begins by presenting the perceived barriers to learning and change running through the findings, outlining recurring themes within this. Then, a presentation of the ways in which the overarching impact of change manifested in different ways throughout the study is presented. Finally, this chapter presents how learning manifested throughout the study; how the act of learning became visible in different ways. This chapter concludes by reflecting on these findings in conjunction, and a consideration of the wider question of the organisational learning and change journey presented within this chapter.

Chapter Six then discusses the findings of both case studies in combination, through contextualising them within existing research. Whilst situated within their own unique contexts, when combined and compared the findings from both cases provide a detailed lens through which to critically examine existing literature that underpins the research questions of this study. This chapter first summarises the key findings from this study, stating the research findings in comparison with the initial study objective. The findings are then interpreted and contextualised through the evaluation of existing theories: where and how the findings support or challenge previous work. Through critical examination of the findings considering existing research and considering the research questions, aims and objectives, enabling and constraining conditions of organisational learning and change at individual and relational level, internal system level and wider organisational level are discussed in turn.

The findings of this study lead to a conceptualisation of a new framework for organisational learning and change: a trauma-informed approach to organisational learning and change. The key components of this framework arising from the findings and in consideration of existing research are presented and discussed within Chapter Seven; the implications for policy and practice highlighted. The final chapter concludes the study by first relaying a summary of its contributions. Then, implications for practice, policy implications, methodological implications and theoretical contributions are considered, and limitations of the study are considered in more depth. This chapter then considers enabling impact considering the findings, providing recommendations for future research, before lastly concluding with closing remarks.

1.8 Conclusion

This chapter has introduced the study that follows. This chapter has contextualised the research problem this research sought to address through providing an outline of both the context within which this study is situated and the limitations within existing research. This study aimed to address these limitations, providing an investigation of the processes and mechanisms involved in organisational learning and change towards developing a culture that is trauma-informed across two complimentary case studies. The following chapter further situates the study through critically examining existing research.

Chapter two: Literature review

2.1 Outline of the chapter

This study explored the processes involved in educational organisations seeking to develop and embed trauma-informed approaches into practices, to better support those who are trauma-experienced. The motivations, purpose and aims of this study are contextualised within this review, through the interrogation of existing literature on trauma and its impacts, trauma-informed approaches in education, and organisational learning and change theories.

First presented is a contextualisation of trauma for the purpose of this study. The term 'trauma' is laden with diverse meaning. This section summarises the development of the concept of trauma as used within this study. This is followed by a contextualisation of trauma, where the potential impacts of trauma on educational outcomes are discussed. The chapter then turns to a critical evaluation of existing research exploring trauma-informed approaches within educational contexts, with consideration to what is known and what questions remain unanswered. Whilst many studies suggest the potential benefits of trauma-informed approaches within education, these studies predominantly focus on improving the educational outcomes of trauma-experienced students. However, evidence suggests that a trauma-informed approach could better support employees within these contexts, too. Evidence suggests there are significant contextual organisational factors that contribute to the psychological wellbeing of

those working with trauma-experienced young people, and these are explored in more depth here.

Existing research suggests that the benefits of a trauma-informed organisational culture could extend beyond the experiences of young people, suggesting for the benefit of embedding trauma-informed approaches into organisational culture. Considering this, this chapter then examines theories of organisational culture, learning and change, to consider what is already known regarding the processes involved in implementing changes to organisational culture. Following this, studies exploring the development of a trauma-informed organisational culture are reviewed. Whilst this highlights the scarcity of such studies, particularly within an educational context, the review highlights some key considerations within this, prompting further questions which ultimately underpin this study. This chapter concludes by summarising the significance of the work reviewed, contextualises this study within the context presented, and summarises how this study addresses questions raised through this review.

2.2 Contextualising trauma

2.2.1 Childhood trauma in context

The term ‘trauma’ is laden with diverse meaning. Understanding of childhood trauma and the application of such understanding across the education sector is both complex and oftentimes controversial and contested (e.g. Ashford, 2019; Jacobs et al., 2024; Alman, 2024). This review therefore begins by summarising

the development of trauma as a concept in the ways it is used within the context of this study.

Psychological trauma was first categorised in 1980 as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD); a ‘circumstance in which an event overwhelms or exceeds a person’s capacity to protect his or her psychic wellbeing and integrity’ (e.g. Stone et al., 2010, p.13). This encompassed both experiencing and/or witnessing a single event that was threatening and provoked intense fear. However, researchers found some forms of trauma were more complicated, more pervasive, than others (e.g. Courtois, 2008), and numerous diverse symptoms did not meet the diagnostic criteria for PTSD. In 2005, based off findings that suggested multiple or ongoing exposure to violence, threat, and fear in early childhood was causing PTSD-like symptoms, a diagnostic classification of Developmental Trauma Disorder was proposed:

> *Isolated traumatic incidents tend to produce discrete conditioned behavioural and biological responses to reminders of the trauma, such as those captured in the posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) diagnosis. In contrast, chronic maltreatment or inevitable repeated traumatization - have a pervasive effect on the development of mind and brain (Van der Kolk, 2005, p.401)*

This classification considered that multiple or ongoing exposures to threat in early childhood could cause PSTD-like symptoms well beyond the early years into adulthood.

Following significant advancements in neurobiological and psychological research, there is now more widespread recognition of the complexities of early childhood trauma. In 2021, complex trauma was added to the International Classification of

Diseases list: ‘a disorder developing following exposure to an event or series of events of an extremely threatening or horrific nature, most commonly prolonged or repetitive events from which escape is difficult or impossible’ (World Health Organisation (WHO), 2021). The difference in diagnostics considers ‘children who have repeatedly experienced traumatic events, such as violence, neglect or abuse’ (National Health Service, 2020). Complex PTSD recognises that repeated exposure to ‘traumatic stressors’ in key developmental stages of childhood can have diverse psychological impacts (Courtois, 2008). Studies in psychological sciences support the framework. Childhood trauma, rather than only isolated incidents in childhood, can be related to anxiety and depressive disorders (Hovens., 2010) and multiple exposures to different traumatic events or stressors can induce different internalised and externalised symptoms (Knefel and Lueger-Schuster, 2013).

Exposure to extreme stress can result in a broad range of cognitive, affective, and psychological impacts that when perpetuated over time are associated with the development of trauma symptoms (Ardino, 2020, p.113). The more our sense of safety, dignity and belonging is threatened, the more traumatised we can become (Haines, 2019; Alayarian, 2015). Toxic stress, the resulting impact of prolonged sense of extreme threat, is theorised to have an enduring impact on brain development (e.g. MacLochlainn et al., 2022). However, not all overwhelming experiences are considered traumatic. Children interpret their unique experiences differently: a life experience that is traumatic for one child might not be traumatic for another (Centre for Child and Trauma, 2020). Diagnostic labels such as PTSD, whilst an advancement on previous categorisations, may be too narrow, missing

some whilst inflexibly categorising others. Thain et al. (2024) warn that complex trauma may still be an immature concept, however does provide a lens through which to better understand impacts of prolonged exposure to traumatic experiences on the developing brain.

2.2.2 Attachment and trauma theory

Much research suggests that traumatic experiences can disrupt the relationships needed to develop foundations for psychological functioning. This understanding forms the basis of attachment theory, a theoretical model providing a useful lens through which to understand potential impacts of trauma exposure during key developmental stages.

First explored in depth by Ainsworth and Bowlby (1969), attachment theory suggests that ‘children learn to regulate their behaviour by anticipating their caregivers' responses to them’ (Archer et al., 2015, p.13). Attachment theory suggests the brain develops in differing ways as a response to how children's needs are met (Bowlby, 1988). How caregivers interact with children can lead to the development of different attachment ‘styles’ in a child’s brain: ‘secure, insecure-avoidant, insecure-ambivalent, disorganised’ (Ainsworth, 1969; Bowlby 1969; Bowlby 1973). Different attachment styles suggest different internal working models in the brain, promoting different behaviour responses.

The ‘triune brain’ model has been used to contextualise attachment theory (Van der Kolk, 2015, p.59): the argument that the brain is developed in three sections, starting

with brainstem, ending with the prefrontal cortex. This model suggests a ‘dance of attunement and attachment’ between young children and their primary caregivers: ‘we pick up not only another person’s movement but [their] emotional state and intuitions as well’ using ‘mirror neurons’ (Van der Kolk, 2015, p.58). This model suggests it is through this process that neurological structures are developed:

> *The ‘dance of attunement and attachment’ … promotes bottom-up development, from the brainstem, through the limbic areas into the neocortex. In turn, each of the three ‘layers’ of the human brain come ‘online’… Good caregiving establishes good biological ‘foundations’ for establishing sound neurological structures and healthy neurological functioning. (Drury, 2015, p.43).*

Such neurological structures are responsible for acquiring traits such as ‘self-regulation, self-awareness, self-control, self-confidence and self-efficacy’ (Drury, 2015, p.43). In a securely attached child, these ‘foundations’ are established. However disorganised attachments, or relationships between caregivers and children where attachment and attunement needs are not consistently met, are ‘highly correlated with early abuse and neglect’ (Archer et al., 2015, p.13). Young people experiencing prolonged abuse and neglect are therefore less likely to have formed secure and healthy attachments with caregivers. The model suggests that when this ‘dance of attunement’ is not consistent this can have significant consequences for the formation of the prefrontal cortex:

> *The prefrontal cortex is developed last, and also is affected by trauma exposure, including being unable to filter out irrelevant information. Through life is it vulnerable to go off-line in response to threat (Van der Kolk, 2015, p.59).*

As the prefrontal cortex is responsible for logic, reasoning, analysing (de Thierry, 2015, p.30), this suggests that when faced with perceived threat, one is less able to engage with such concepts.

There is a school of thought arguing that when disorganised attachments are consistently reinforced, changes to brain functioning can be detected. When children are maltreated, 'the sequential development of their neurobiological structures and functioning is compromised' (Drury, 2015, p.43). Research suggests those with disorganised attachments 'miss out' on 'co-regulation, empathy, positive role models and social skills' and consequently can struggle to regulate their own sensory and emotional arousal, impacting relationships, cognitions, self-awareness and self-belief (Archer et al., 2015, p.14). Children's 'trauma-normal' behaviour evolves as a developmental response to adversity, with foundations in survival-based neurobiology involving the central and autonomic nervous system (Archer et al., 2015, p.14). Without these foundations, children can struggle to develop relationships where they feel 'safe and secure' (Drury, 2015, p.30). This could be challenging for adults working with vulnerable young people: without the secure attachment that enables them to 'internalise 'social rules' as reasonable and safe' (Archer et al., 2015, p.14), traumatised children could be 'deeply resistant to anyone trying to help them 'calm down'' (Drury, 2015, p.38), interpreting attention from adults as a threat and initiating internal threat responses.

Attachment and trauma theories, whilst complex and oftentimes contested, provide insight into the current neurobiological understanding of how traumatic experiences at key developmental stages can impact the developing child.

Research suggests that childhood trauma can disrupt not only their neurobiological development, but impacts on educational experiences and outcomes can span long into adulthood. The possible implications of such experiences are now explored in more depth.

2.2.3 Possible implications

Implications of childhood trauma are complex and not yet fully understood. Due to the individual nature of traumas, the length of exposure, and the developmental stage at which the traumatic exposures occur, both internalised and externalised 'symptoms' vary from person to person (Hovens., 2010; Van der Kolk, 2005; Bailey et al., 2007; Briere et al., 2008). The extent to which characteristics of traumatic events, individual differences, and the interaction between the two vary means that the impact on neuropsychological functioning is poorly understood (Ardino, 2020, p.125), however many studies suggest possible implications. These include: rigid personality structures e.g. intolerance for ambiguity, aggression, dissociative behaviours, self-identity complexes, relationship problems, inflexible and possibly dangerous coping strategies, depression, anxiety, disrupted age-typical prosocial skills, hyper- or hypo- vigilance and physical symptoms such as headaches, dizziness and stomach aches (e.g. Summerlin & Panajian, 2009; Ford, 2012; Bailey et al., 2007; Spinazzola et al., 2018; Bennett et al., 2023; MacLochlainn et al., 2022; National Health Service, 2020). Studies have also suggested that if unresolved, childhood trauma can have detrimental effects on adult mental health, including through emotion dysregulation, anxiety disorders

and relationship difficulties (e.g. Clarke et al., 2024; Richardson et al., 2024; Arbeau et al., 2025).

However, there is considerable debate around the impact of trauma on the brain, particularly around whether these impacts are reversible. Some theorists suggest that the brain has a 'natural neuroplasticity', and that if secure attachments are formed later in life, the brain can 'rewire': the prefrontal cortex can be 'trained' to reconnect and overtime the perceived threat response will become easier to regulate (e.g. Van der Kolk, 2015). The developing brain's plasticity could therefore have far-reaching implications; serving as a protective factor, such as in the case of exposure to a nurturing and healthy environment, or as a risk factor for later psychopathology in the case of exposure to neglectful, abusive, or otherwise traumatic early experiences (e.g. Ardino, 2020, p.114). Children learn self-regulation through co-regulation, or modelling (EMDR Institute Incorporated, 2020), and this can occur at any age. In this case, any key adult in children's lives can provide 'co-regulation' for children lacking this from primary caregivers. However, such theories run the risk of a reductionist, or deterministic standpoint, given that traumatic experiences and their impacts are unique and individual. What these theories do offer, however, is an indication of how educational settings could respond to better meet the needs of those who are trauma-experienced.

2.2.4 Risk factors

It is estimated that around one in thirteen young people within the UK experience trauma before adulthood (Frearson & Duncan, 2024; Lewis et al., 2019). Attachment

theory can help to better understand factors that may put some people at greater risk of developing trauma and its resulting impacts.

Firstly, as abuse and neglect are highly correlated with disorganised attachments (e.g. Archer et al., 2015; Tanzer et al., 2021), and abuse and neglect are the primary factors resulting in social care interventions, young people in receipt of social care support are therefore at increased risk of trauma. Additionally, several studies indicated that placement instability for those within the care system can be a predictor of externalising behaviours, mental health difficulties and PTSD symptoms (e.g. Maguire et al., 2024; Eiberg, 2024), suggesting placement instability can exasperate trauma impacts. Studies exploring the mental health of refugee children also suggest this group to be particularly vulnerable to trauma (e.g. Somo, 2024), and Alayarian (2015) found that refugee children displaced more avoidance and protective behaviours and often lacked emotional support (p.133; p.135).

Some studies also suggest that those with learning disabilities are more likely to experience traumatic life events during childhood in comparison to their peers (e.g. O'Connell and Berger, 2025). Young people with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) have been found to sit within the 'high' or 'very high' psychological difficulties range (Barnes and Harrison, 2017, pp.68-69), and young people with Social Emotional and Mental Health difficulties (SEMH) historically can be further disadvantaged through being 'the least likely to receive support and the most likely to receive support too late' (Ofsted, 2006, p.6).

However, neurodivergences can present similarly to symptoms of trauma, particularly within a learning context. Whilst much research suggests that SEND, as well as care system experience, are risk factors for trauma, a deterministic view should be avoided. Broader forms of disadvantage such as gender, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status, have a significant impact on educational outcomes (e.g. Berridge et al., 2020), and terminology used to label such ‘vulnerable groups’ not only can stigmatise and ‘other’ (Ashford, 2019) young people but also fails to capture individual differences and nuances within this.

Some research argues that a deficit of teachers knowledge around trauma and its impacts leads to assumptions around behaviours, instead highlighting a need for schools to build knowledge to better recognise factors that promote trauma and develop skills to respond effectively (Fradley et al., 2024). Several school-based factors have been argued to promote trauma symptoms in young people, and a better understanding of these could assist to reduce the risk of trauma for many. For example, bullying, and school policies and practices around preventing and responding to bullying, have been found to have an impact. Kirkham et al. (2022) found that perceived stress was higher in pupils that had experienced bullying within the school environment.

Additionally, exclusion from school and other exclusionary punitive practices could exasperate trauma symptoms and could be considered a traumatic experience itself. Research suggests exclusion can be detrimental to students’ academic, social, and mental well-being as mental health difficulties can be exasperated by exclusion and reintegration practices (Tawell et al, 2015; Tickle, 2017; Kaip et al.,

2024; Madia et al., 2022). Much research argues that a lack of staff knowledge around trauma and its impacts can lead to assumptions that student's behaviour is disruptive and problematic, as opposed to in need of additional support (e.g. Cole et al., 2013; Dorado et al., 2016). This can exasperate trauma symptoms as misinterpretation of behaviours and resulting exclusionary practices can lead to isolation and shame.

Within the context of this study, it is also important to consider the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic, which has been widely considered as a traumatic stressor (Frearson & Duncan, 2024; Thomson et al., 2022). Much research has suggested that the widespread closure of schools brought with it a lack of support for social and emotional wellbeing, particularly for young people facing adversities at home (Diamond, 2024). This can be impacted further still by caregiver's experiences of trauma and how caregivers responded to additional stressors of the pandemic (Arowolo et al., 2023). However, the pandemic brought heightened attention on institutional policies and procedures for supporting those whose experiences may have been traumatic (Kim et al., 2024), and the noticing and naming of trauma within educational settings increased during these 'triggering times' (Henshaw, 2025, p.224). Furthermore, there has since been research suggesting that young people generally may have good resilience to the prolonged exposure to the adversity experienced within the pandemic (Fradley et al., 2024). Whilst recognition of the pandemic as a traumatic stressor is important, to assume that the impacts of the pandemic translate to trauma symptoms across the general population of young people who experienced this would be a deterministic view that could miss the nuances within this.

2.3 Trauma-informed education: student-focussed perspective

Whilst the assumption of trauma based around categorisations of vulnerabilities risks stigmatisation and problematic categorisations, research suggests that the recognition of risk factors for trauma could lead to early intervention and targeted support that could reduce the severity and longevity of disruptive trauma symptoms. As children and adolescents spend vast time within educational environments, how trauma impacts education and the resulting ways that educational providers can provide this support has gained much traction. These considerations are now reviewed in more depth.

2.3.1 Overview of the context

Given that research indicates around half of all lifetime mental health disorders start by the mid-teens and approximately 20% of adolescents experience a traumatic event (Newlove-Delgado et al., 2023; Ardino, 2020), it is not surprising that traumatic and adverse experiences within childhood can oftentimes *show-up* within the school environment. Research suggests that trauma-experience can significantly impact educational experiences and outcomes.

There is considerable empirical support suggesting that trauma can impair academic outcomes through the impacts on developmental areas of executive functioning like planning and decision-making (MacLochlainn et al., 2022; Eiberg, 2024; Ardino, 2020). Additionally, research suggests that hypersensitivity to

perceived threat can impact concentration and memory, which in turn can prevent access to learning (Frearson & Duncan, 2024). Internalised anxiety, fear, and worry can also impact concentration in school (NCTSN, 2008), and externalised behaviours that mask this such as hyperactivity, problems self-regulating and changes in behaviour such as becoming withdrawn can become visible (Frearson & Duncan, 2024; NCTSN, 2008). Socially, relationships can become impacted, whether that be relationships with staff members or relationships with peers (e.g. Crosby et al., 2017; Moses & Villodas, 2017).

Consequently, it is increasingly recognised that establishing perceived safety is of primary importance when working with a young person who is trauma experienced. When sense of safety is threatened, this can increase managing behaviours that can prevent access to learning (Thomson-Link, 2023). A positive school environment has been frequently raised as a protective factor against additional trauma symptoms (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2015), and several studies highlight that school engagement, peer companionships in schools, and positive attachments in schools are associated with a sense of belonging and lower trauma symptoms (Greany et al., 2024b; Moses & Villodas, 2017; Crosby et al., 2017).

There is shared consensus throughout research that understanding how young people experience trauma can enable more individualised approaches to practices. ‘Quantifying’ risk and protective factors could enable better planning and implementation of intervention services that are appropriate for meeting the needs of traumatised young people (Public Heath England, 2019). However, the

need for greater agreement on outcome measures for working in trauma-informed ways has been consistently highlighted (e.g. Jacobs et al., 2024).

In response to this, outside of the UK there has been a plethora of initiatives designed to quantify risk factors of trauma, screen young people for trauma and measure impacts of trauma on young people. This ranges from surveys created for assessing trauma in students (Meurer et al., 2025), different measures for screening for adverse childhood experiences (Kerr-Davis et al., 2023), checklists for trauma symptoms (Purvis et al., 2015), and questionnaires used for retrospective screening of childhood traumas in adults (Hagborg et al., 2022). Whilst such initiatives have oftentimes have been well-accepted as trustworthy measures (Hagborg et al., 2022), studies investigating the uses and impacts of these measures frequently lack generalisability due to small sample sizes, self-survey considerations and the lack of longitudinal studies exploring impacts and uses of these measures over time.

Additionally, much research around trauma and its impacts and trauma-informed evaluation research has been produced within the US (e.g. MacLochlainn et al., 2022). Throughout existing theories and resulting research there is a strong Western bias; the field of trauma theory has been predominantly shaped by white Western perspectives. This ‘demographic skew’, Alman (2024) argues, reflects deeper systemic issues, and can lead to ‘flawed research outcomes and clinical practices’ that do not reflect a representation for outside of this demographic (p.7). Without addressing this Western bias and without robust research into the purposes and uses of such measures, measurements of trauma impacts should

be viewed with caution to avoid reductionist and deterministic viewpoints that risk disrupting and preventing a young person from receiving the care they may need (e.g. Jacobs et al., 2024).

Furthermore, strategies for identifying or screening for traumatised students could increase the risk of stigmatisation (Ashford, 2019). This is especially important given the many nuanced factors that can contribute to the educational outcomes of those considered disadvantaged (Berridge et al., 2020). When looking to better understand an ‘inclusive’ approach to classroom practices, much research argues that a ‘person-centered’ approach (Sheffield and Morgan, 2017, p.50) that aligns with the ‘unique differences position’ (Lewis and Norwich, 2011, p.4) may be more appropriate. Research suggests that a ‘classroom community’ is crucial to inclusion:

> *It requires a shift - towards [an approach] that involves the development of a rich learning community characterised by learning opportunities that are sufficiently made available for everyone (Florian and Black-Hawkins, 2011, p.814).*

A collective approach to learning, through fostering an 'ethos which is built upon removing barriers to participation’ (Grimes & Ekins, 2009, p.12), aims to prevent stigmatisation that may be attached to labelling and categorisation of vulnerable groups of young people. Whilst the adoption of screening tools for trauma may assist in early identification of those requiring additional support, these should be applied with caution. Trauma-informed approaches to education attempt to address this, through the application of approaches to practices aimed at better meeting the needs of traumatised young people and ‘removing barriers to

participation' across a whole school community. By doing so, schools could move closer towards an 'inclusion for all' approach, 'founded on equity, relationships and belonging' (Greany et al., 2024b, p.12).

2.3.2 Trauma-informed schools

It is increasingly common for education providers to seek to become 'trauma-informed': i.e. practice in ways that are grounded in understanding of how trauma can impact an individual (Office for Health Improvement and Disparities, 2022). In 2015, the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) published guidance for professionals on supporting trauma-experienced students. The review highlighted the prevalence of attachment difficulties within this population group (p.8) and recommends that all staff working in education settings should be trained on attachment and educational providers should have strategies in place to meet the needs of students presenting with attachment difficulties (p.12). However, approaches for practice are lacking: the review highlighted there was 'little known' about meeting the needs of students with complex trauma and highlighted the need for further research into this (p.44).

Despite the increasing focus on trauma-informed approaches in education, consensus around what a trauma-informed school looks like in practice is lacking (e.g. Martin et al., 2024; Muttillo et al., 2022; MacLochlainn et al., 2022). Generally, there is much agreement that a trauma-informed approach to practice promotes nurturing relationships that create a sense of safety amongst staff and students alike (e.g. Parker et al., 2022; MacLochlainn et al., 2022). Collaboration promotes trust

and safety, and trust reinforces collaboration (Watson and Astor, 2025). Trauma-informed education would focus on an understanding of life circumstances of a young person, as opposed to a focus on negative or problematic behaviours (e.g. MacLochlainn et al., 2022; Wolpow et al., 2009). Many researchers additionally argue that trauma-informed approaches could benefit practitioners, too, and could lead to lower staff turnover and increased morale (e.g. Watson and Astor, 2025; Bloom and Yanosy Sreedhar, 2008). Again, however, research considering the realisation of this in practice is lacking.

In response to the lack of empirical evidence on whole-school responses to trauma, Watson and Astor (2025) carried out a theoretical review exploring the components of existing conceptual models from a school-based lens from across the UK, US, Australia and Canada. The reviewers found a lack of clear understanding around trauma-informed approaches, calling for an increase of studies exploring what a whole-school approach might look like in practice. Without this, they argue, progress towards their creation is likely to be inconsistent. Trauma-informed approaches and practices are not standardised and this can promote inconsistency between different school initiatives and approaches (e.g. Muttillo et al., 2022). This has instigated a rise in initiatives to create prescriptive programmes and plans for schools to follow, for example the 'International Trauma-Informed Practice Principles for Schools (ITIPPS)' from Western Australia (Martin et al., 2024).

Across the UK, several counties trialed variations of an 'Attachment aware schools programme', for example Derbyshire (2014), Bath and NE Somerset (2015), and

Leicestershire (2016). Each programme broadly involved training schools within the county on attachment awareness across the course of an academic year (Cullen et al., 2020; Sebba and Fancourt, 2018; Sebba & Dingwall, 2018). Within this, emotion coaching - a technique whereby children are assisted in distinguishing and managing emotional responses (Gottman, 2011), was raised as a core part of training. Sebba & Dingwall (2018) found that emotion coaching helped school staff to 'distinguish between behaviour and feelings that underlie that behaviour' (p.7), and the findings from relevant studies suggest that emotion coaching training was beneficial.

Despite the differences between the different models and initiatives that have been previously studied, however, there are overlapping elements within them. In their review, for example, Watson and Astor (2025) identified four core components shared across existing models: understanding trauma and committing to addressing it, emphasising the physical, emotional and psychological safety of all within a school, taking a strengths-based approach towards students and families, and creating and sustaining trusting, collaborative and empowering relationships. This provides a useful starting point for developing consensus on what a trauma-informed approach to education might involve.

However, all educational organisations are unique in context and therefore should proceed with caution when looking to apply a prescribed framework tested from different contextual conditions (e.g. Greany and McGinity, 2021). Whilst maintaining consistency without a model for implementation may be a challenge

(Muttillo et al., 2022), flexibility importantly allows for responsiveness to organisational and contextual differences (e.g. Greany and McGinity, 2021).

2.3.3 Professional development strategies

Shared across research exploring trauma-informed educational approaches is a consensus around the importance of professional development as an initiator of change, whether through a one-off training session or more ongoing professional development plans.

Within existing research in this area, several studies suggest teachers needed further training in supporting trauma-experienced students. For example, Berridge et al. (2020) suggest teachers need to be trained in ideas about social wellbeing, fostering non-cognitive skills for improving outcomes. Sempowicz (2018) further this, arguing for a trauma-informed curriculum development, too. Teachers should be 'empathetic and supportive towards children with complex family and personal histories' when it comes to designing a curriculum: 'understand the need to be flexible in allowing children to respond to these tasks in a variety of ways according to their individual needs and personalities' (p.615).

Considering this, professional development for trauma-informed practices for school staff has increased in popularity (e.g. L'Estrange & Bentley, 2025). Despite this, however, there is a distinct lack of studies exploring what successful implementation of professional development around trauma-informed practices looks like in practice, and how this translates into the everyday practices of an

organisation. Through their review of school-wide trauma-informed approaches in the UK, Avery et al. (2021) found that professional development was consistently reported as a ‘change catalyst’ (p.12) and was most successful when used as a ‘spirit of enquiry’ and supported ‘as a means of achieving ‘buy-in’ from staff’ (p.12). A small-scale study by Brunzell et al. (2015) depicts this in practice, as the findings suggested that teachers integrated their own learnings about increasing regulatory capacities when incorporating intervention strategies into everyday classroom practice.

On a wider scale, as part of the ‘Attachment aware schools’ programme, staff completed questionnaires around their perceptions of the training and how it impacted their practices (Cullen et al., 2020; Sebba and Fancourt, 2018; Sebba & Dingwall, 2018). All studies reported an increase in staff awareness of attachment needs and confidence in supporting vulnerable learners (Cullen et al., 2020: p.14). Teachers stated schools felt ‘more inclusive’ (Cullen et al., 2020: p.28), and students' well-being was broadly impacted as a result (Sebba & Dingwall, 2018: p.5).

Wider still, the Alex Timpson Attachment and Trauma Awareness in Schools Programme (Harrison et al., 2022) engaged 305 schools across England to broadly explore the impact of attachment and trauma training. Participating schools organised and delivered training for staff and the perspectives of staff and young people were gathered. Key findings depicted that training was well-regarded, with 84.6% of staff respondents pointing to changes in policies and practices within their school. Additionally, nearly all headteachers reported a

positive impact from the training, including less use of sanctions and improvements in attendance, learning and attainment of vulnerable children (Harrison et al., 2022).

Despite increasing evidence of the benefits of trauma-informed professional development education, pre-service teacher training programmes oftentimes miss a focus on meeting the needs of trauma-experienced students, and many researchers argue for the need for increased education around trauma-informed approaches for pre-service teachers (e.g. O'Connell and Berger, 2025; MacLochlainn et al., 2022). However, L'Estrange & Bentley (2025) explored how teachers applied learning after a university-based course on trauma-informed education. The study found that implementing learning into practice was not predicted by initial intentions of the teachers, but that perceived 'buy-in' at an organisational level was the most important factor. Organisational factors were influential barriers, leading to the suggestion that implementation requires learning to extend beyond individual knowledge and towards more system-level supporting structures. What these structures involve, however, was beyond the scope of the study.

Whilst individual training and development is evidently an important factor within the development of trauma-informed education, it is important to better understand too the processes and mechanisms around how knowledge gained from training translates into policies and practices that reflect this learning. However, what successful implementation of professional development around trauma-informed practices looks like in practice is understudied (e.g. L'Estrange & Bentley, 2025).

The findings from the Alex Timpson Programme (2020) concluded that 'training is a necessary, but not sufficient, element in building a school's awareness of attachment and trauma issues': it 'provides a starting point', but 'more far-reaching changes' are needed (Harrison et al., 2020, p.17). Purtle (2020) reviewed interventions that included a trauma-informed staff training component and whilst the review indicated that trauma-informed training had a positive impact on staff knowledge, what was less clear was how these learnings can be retained over time. This again highlights that the mechanisms through which organisational level learning and change occurs requires further attention.

Additionally, there has been a dominant reliance on perspectives of teachers gathered through surveys or interviews to understand the impacts of this training on practice. Avery et al. (2021) found that the 'range of stakeholder views regarding interventions under investigation needs extending beyond the consideration of school staff, to represent all stakeholders, especially the views of students and caregivers' (p.14):

> *Trauma-impacted students have typically experienced voicelessness and vulnerability… Lack of consultation with students serves to reinforce these experiences and increases the risk of re-traumatisation … Giving voice to students can result in modifications to classrooms that enhance the learning environment, reducing triggers and supporting relationships (p.13).*

This highlights the importance of future studies to include a wide range of stakeholder views and perspectives to enable holistic joined-up communication when designing and implementing trauma-informed approaches.

A lack of data on staff wellbeing was also a concern for the reviewers, which they suggest is an essential aspect of trauma-informed education (p.13). This was the focus of a study since by MacLochlainn et al. (2022), who explored the benefits of professional development training in trauma-informed approaches on teacher's attitudes towards trauma-informed care. The researchers interviewed teachers before and after a two-day professional development workshop. The study found that this training not only brought improvements to perceptions of trauma-informed care but also found a decrease in burn-out at a six-month follow-up in comparison to a control group. This suggests that teacher attitudes to trauma-informed care impact their day-to-day work life.

Currently, there is limited research exploring trauma-informed approaches from an Alternative Provision (AP) perspective (e.g. Kaip et al., 2024; Ward, 2024). Given that those attending AP are more likely to have experienced traumatic schooling experiences than their peers, the lack of research around implementing trauma-informed approaches across these spaces is concerning. Through their study exploring teacher's perceptions of the complex needs of the young people they support within an AP site, Kaip et al. (2024) found that staff reported feeling ill-equipped to support these students. Alongside this, participants reported that students' mental health difficulties were exasperated by many of the organisational level practices. In recognition of the need for trauma-informed approaches across AP sites, Ward (2024) carried out practitioner researcher to explore the development of reflective practice between colleagues and the impact this had on teacher’s enactment of attachment and trauma-informed practices. This study

depicted some success in the development of reflective practices, however notes this impact was inconsistent across wider staff team practices.

Whilst there are some studies following training programmes or interventions over the course of an academic year, for example the Alex Timpson Programme (2022), there is a distinct lack of longitudinal studies exploring the longer-term outcomes of such training within schools. Long-term impacts of such training programmes are therefore not yet known. Of the studies using more longitudinal approaches, the lack of diversity in methodologies means there is little consensus on the impact of the programmes compared to other factors involved. De Stigter et al. (2025) conducted a longitudinal pre-post-test design study exploring the outcomes of a school-wide trauma-informed approach across eight schools examining student's perceptions of school class climate during this period. Results showed an increase in positive scores within the second year of the study, however what this school-wide approach involved, alongside any other contributing factors impacting these scores, are not detailed and therefore it is difficult to apply conclusions. Similarly, the Leicestershire review of attachment training programmes (Sebba & Fancourt, 2018) found that 'the wider justification of attachment theory as support and preparation for life-skills behind school was put into question against the messy realities of life outside school' (p.19). Within this, the 'demographic skew' resulting from the strong Western bias of existing research could reflect deeper systemic issues, and this can lead to 'flawed research outcomes and clinical practices' that do not reflect a representation for outside of this demographic (Alman, 2024, p.7).

Whilst research around the benefits of a trauma-informed approach to educational practices is not without its pitfalls, there is growing consensus around the benefits of employing such approaches. This suggests the necessity for future research to continue within this field, to better develop knowledge around supporting the educational outcomes of those who are trauma experienced.

2.4 Trauma-informed education: an organisational perspective

Concurrently, there has been increasing calls for trauma-informed education to consider an organisational wide perspective. Driven by a heightening awareness of the impacts on staff of working with trauma-experienced young people, along with increased insight into wider organisational factors that can contribute to trauma, emerging research suggests the need for a more embedded, organisational wide approach to trauma-informed education. A contextualisation of this is now presented.

2.4.1 Burn-out and vicarious trauma

Teachers are leaving the profession at a high rate (e.g. Reinke et al., 2025), and there is mounting evidence suggesting that stress and exhaustion are causal factors within this (Grant et al., 2019; Thomson et al., 2022). Many studies suggest that enduring challenges such as time poverty and limited administrative or management support significantly contribute to the increased 'burn out' that many teachers experience (Liu et al., 2025; Frearson & Duncan, 2024; Cappe et

al., 2025; Cunneen and Anderson, 2024; Reinke et al., 2025). Furthermore, some studies suggest a direct relationship between the intensity of performance targets, accountability measures, inadequate leadership from government structures and overall testing cultures within schools and the relationship on teacher's workload, job satisfaction and overall well-being (Smith and Holloway, 2020; Thomson et al., 2022; Skinner et al., 2021). Alongside this, much research suggests that teaching trauma experienced students can increase and perpetuate burn out for teachers (Cunneen and Anderson, 2024; Ormiston et al., 2022; Frearson & Duncan, 2024). The psychosocial and developmental challenges that trauma experienced students can face can exasperate challenges for teachers and can contribute to feelings of stress and exhaustion.

Research suggests that overtime, burn out can lead to secondary traumatic stress; a trauma response to working under conditions that promote and induce toxic stress (Smith, 2021; Sutton et al., 2022; Phelps et al., 2025; O'Toole, 2022). Secondary traumatic stress can lead to symptoms impacting teachers professional work, as well as contribute to poor mental health outside of the workplace. These could include feelings of blame and shame, isolation, emotional numbness and de-personalisation and reduced capacity for supporting others (Denne et al., 2019; Frearson & Duncan, 2024; Cieslak et al., 2014). Some research suggests that secondary traumatic stress can be masked through fatigue and burnout (e.g. Smith, 2021), however when secondary traumatic stress endures unresolved, this can lead to vicarious traumatisation; the cumulative impact of consistent exposure to other's traumatic experiences (Treisman, 2018). Recent studies suggest that teachers could benefit from more prevention-orientated work around burn out and secondary

traumatic stress (e.g. Kamtsios and Kakouris, 2025; Cunneen and Anderson, 2024), suggesting that teachers too could benefit from trauma-informed support.

In addition, external contextual factors can further exasperate traumatic stress in teachers. For example, the Covid-19 pandemic brought with it considerable additional challenges and changes, amplifying teacher's workload and resulting well-being (Worth & Faulkner-Ellis, 2021; Norwich et al., 2022; Beauchamp et al., 2021; Thomson et al., 2022). Growing concerns around climate change has also increased anxiety, with teachers under additional pressure to deliver curriculums that support and teach sustainable education (Bhuiyan et al., 2025).

2.4.2 Organisational trauma

Theorists warn that when an organisation is under increased stress from the confounding of internal pressures and external challenges and changes, the organisation itself becomes vulnerable to trauma (Treisman, 2018; Finegan, 2024). Treisman (2018) argues that organisations can respond to trauma similarly to individuals – i.e. by operating in survival mode. Unacknowledged stress and anxiety can become ingrained into the organisation at its core, producing a system that is reactive or crisis driven. This can in turn undermine its adaptive ability (e.g. Bloom, 2013), making the organisation ill-equipped to adapt to challenges and changes; a quality ever more important within the increasingly complex and dynamically changing current educational landscape (Greany et al., 2024a). Additionally, like people, organisations carry their own historical traumas (Fraiberg

et al., 2003), and how they responded to traumas in the past can determine how they adapt and respond to internal or external traumas in the present.

Much research focuses on individual level factors leading to burn out and secondary traumatic stress, however, understanding the role of organisational level factors exasperating or reducing trauma for staff is of importance (e.g. Sutton et al., 2022). For example, a study of organisational trauma within an Irish school argued for the necessity of the introduction of methods for containing trauma in schools in ways that are trauma-reducing (Finegan, 2024). Whilst there is increasing acknowledgement of the potential benefits for a trauma-informed organisation, there is currently limited research on what this might look like in practice and the processes required to achieve this.

2.4.3 A trauma-informed organisation

A trauma-informed organisation, theorists suggest, is one where all components of the system are evaluated considering the understanding of the role that trauma plays for those within it (e.g. Jennings, 2009). A trauma-informed organisation would promote safety and trust, relationships, connection, and collaboration and would aim to foster acknowledgement, support and trust between all those within it (Treisman, 2018; Francis et al., 2022). Additionally, a trauma-informed organisation would promote trauma-informed spaces – i.e. a physical working environment that conveys a 'secure base' through increasing feelings of calm, security and containment (Treisman, 2018).

In their study of organisational resilience strategies across healthcare organisations during the Covid-19 pandemic, Roos et al. (2025) found that organisational wide problem-solving strategies were associated with higher team performance and increased learning and development throughout the impacts of the pandemic. Similarly, multiple studies have suggested that cohesive teams, support from management and a collaborative working environment that enhances teacher autonomy decreased teacher stress and could be crucial for mitigating secondary traumatic stress in teachers (Jansen in de Wal et al., 2020; Greany and Maxwell, 2017; Chen, 2025; Worth and Van den Brande, 2020).

However, despite mounting evidence suggesting that trauma-informed organisational practices could better support teachers, there is concurrently research suggesting that the current lack of targeted training around trauma impacts reduces teachers confidence in meeting the needs of traumatised young people, and this impacts motivation for working in trauma-informed ways (e.g. Frearson & Duncan, 2024; Pines, 2002). Schools can also be reluctant to engage due to concerns around exposing practices not already aligning with these approaches (Frearson & Duncan, 2024). However, research suggests that training around trauma-informed approaches increases relational capacity and increases psychological resources for both teachers and organisational systems alike (Brunzell et al., 2019). Additionally, research suggests that a combination of adequate training and supervision strategies for supporting this training (e.g. Shohet & Shohet, 2019) could begin to mitigate these anxieties.

2.5 Organisational learning and change

Existing research suggests that a trauma-informed approach to education could better support the outcomes of students who have experienced trauma. Research additionally highlights the need for organisational level changes, to better support those working within these communities.

Understanding how trauma-informed approaches can be reflected and embedded throughout an organisation is important if these learnings are to be translated into culture in sustainable ways. Several researchers found that organisational level changes were paramount to implementing a trauma-informed approach (e.g. Avery et al., 2021), however how these changes occur and how learning is retained over time is less clear (e.g. Purtle, 2020). In response to this, there has been consensus towards the necessity of frameworks for organisational change towards addressing the prevalence and impact of trauma (e.g. Lewis et al., 2023). Watson and Astor (2025) argue that a shift in unit of analysis towards the setting itself should be considered when evaluating organisation-wide trauma-informed approaches. Understanding how policy and practice change occurs and the enabling and constraining conditions that impact the potential for such changes to impact organisational culture within this should be considered to better understand the impact of trauma-informed approaches across an organisation in its entirety (e.g. Greany and Maxwell, 2017).

2.5.1 Organisational culture

Organisational culture can be defined as a ‘set of values and assumptions inherent in the behaviour of organisational members’ (Oh, 2020, p.1); a ‘sense making mechanism that guides and shapes the values, behaviours and attitudes of employees’ (Wang and Pervaiz, 2002, p.11). Research suggests that organisational culture not only defines the way in which an organisation operates (e.g. Bhuiyan et al., 2025), but also shapes assumptions about ‘ways of thinking, what knowledge is worthwhile - and how knowledge will be used’ (Oh, 2020, p.1).

As such, organisational processes can enable members to ‘focus collective effort in one direction’, thus ‘promoting learning activities’ (Oh, 2020, p.2; p.11). Much research suggests that organisational culture can impact the commitment of employees to the organisation itself (Greany and Maxwell, 2017; Triguero-Sanchez et al., 2022), and that the broadness and stability of values within an organisation can make them an important predictor of behaviours at different levels throughout the organisation (Greany, 2024; Arieli et al., 2020). However, for this to be possible, employees must understand the values and aims guiding the organisation. A study by Trevor (2019) found that only 41% of participants understood what their company stood for (p.3), suggesting that perceptions of organisational cultures vary.

However, there is contestation around what exactly organisational culture is comprised of in real-world organisations, and how understandings of organisational culture can be utilised for learning and change. For example, Torres (2022) argues that organisational culture is often interpreted too simply and does not consider other variables. Several researchers argue that the cultural

backgrounds of staff can impact their perceptions of organisational culture: what they expect around how leaders communicate, how to build trust and how decisions can or should be made (Hofstede, 1991), whilst others argue it is the responsibility of leaders to understand the values of their communities to make better forward-looking decisions (Fisher, 2021). How far individual values influence organisational culture is contested (Greany, 2024). In a synoptic review on the influence of school leader's values on organisational decision-making, practice and outcomes, Greany (2024) found that values-based choices are sometimes compromised through the need to respond to policy, accountability, funding pressures and incentives, arguing that the influence of leadership values and policy enactment on organisational culture should be seen on a spectrum.

2.5.2 Organisational change

Organisational change has oftentimes been conceptualised through four categories: changes in process, changes in functions, changes in values, changes in power (Cao et al., 2000, p.6). However, these concepts are interrelated, and any change requires consideration of all categories (p.6).

Research suggests that organisations face a 'paradox' of change, needing change 'to maintain their competitive position', whilst also needing stability 'to try to control uncertainty' (Dominguez et al., 2015, p.413). As such, organisational change is inherently complex, and despite the growing body of research on strategies for change processes, many organisational change processes fail (Johansson and Heide, 2008, p.289). This is further complicated by the fact that theory building is

challenging due to the way that the exact processes by which change evolves within each case are unique (Johansson and Heide, 2008, p.298), and the lack of comparative research into organisational culture change means that a strong understanding of how culture change actually happens is limited (Peter & Wilderom, 2004, p.577).

Organisational cultures can, however, be resistant to change (Lozano, 2013). Organisational cultures often reinforce themselves through the attraction of employee applicants holding values that align with the exiting culture of an organisation (Peter & Wilderom, 2004). By nature, organisations have identifiable boundaries (Igbokwe et al., 2021). As such, organisations can seek to establish common membership; to 'draw lines between those inside and outside the organisation' (p.678). Consequently, organisations – explicitly or implicitly – set out 'guidelines for admission' (p.678), and thus new employees will often be selected for the way in which their values align with existing organisational cultures. Sharman et al. (2020) also argue that new employees will often adopt the dominant behavior of others within the organisation (p.17) and therefore impact the reinforcements of existing cultures within an organisation, too.

Some research suggests that a change in leadership is necessary for organisational change (e.g., Morris et al., 2020), whereas other research suggests that employee's openness to change can be increased through opportunities that enhance psychological ownership over the change process itself (Kayaalp et al., 2024; Triguero-Sanchez et al., 2022).

Organisational change can be a necessary response to adapting to changes in the environment. Some change strategies are initiated by 'significant jolts' in the environment – for example the Covid-19 pandemic restrictions (Spicer, 2020, p.1737). Such jolts create pressure for culture change, where an organisation is required to adapt (p.1737). Disruptions, instability or crisis within the external environments can create legitimacy challenges, resulting in perceived or actual failure in institutional practices and values that organisations are forced to respond to. Since the Covid-19 pandemic and the resulting implications on practices, much research argues that crisis and change management are now essential skills required for management and leadership (Harris & Jones, 2020; Thomson et al., 2022; Gurr and Drysdal, 2020). This is heightened when facing periods of austerity, that can impact organisational change through the reduction in training and development budgets and need for localised innovations (Elliott, 2020).

Given this context, effectively managing crises has become essential (Thomson et al., 2022), however some research suggests that slow and rigid organisational decision-making procedures can be a barrier to adaptation (Thulani and Vezi-Magigaba, 2025). Change may therefore also be triggered by needs within the internal functioning of an organisation as organisations realise the need for system change to sustain growth and development (Johansson and Heide, 2008, p.288).

However, some research argues that organisational change that is prompted by external challenges, whilst necessary for adaptation, can be met with resistance from organisational members (Spicer, 2020, p.1737). Organisational change of this nature can be 'threatening' for employees, and lead to defensive responses,

denial or avoidance (p.1738), which can impact the change process and resulting trajectory of change. In response, some researchers argue for the re-centering of the position of interests and values for organisations (Amis and Greenwood, 2021), with a focus on understanding the context, setting the direction, and developing the skill sets of organisational members to manage the change process effectively (Gurr and Drysdal, 2020).

Organisational culture is deeply embedded into the heart of an organisation; values and assumptions of those within an organisation not only shape a culture but can reinforce existing culture too. As such, changing an organisational culture is a complex process, often precarious and sometimes met with resistance. However, research suggests that creating a culture of organisational learning can support the change processes themselves.

2.5.3 Organisational learning

Whilst there are limited studies exploring the effects of organisational culture on organisational learning, several researchers agree that organisational culture is a catalyst for what organisational learning - if any - takes place (Rashman et al., 2009; Oh, 2020; Wang and Pervaiz, 2002; Pathak, 2010).

Organisational learning can be loosely defined as the learning processes within and of organisations (Karatas-Ozkan and Murphy, 2010; Baxter et al., 2017; Wang and Ahmed, 2002). The concept has been criticised as being ‘excessively broad’ (Wang and Ahmed, 2002, p.8), contested for being a ‘powerful emotive symbol

which excites enthusiasm - but has little substance in fact' (Boreham and Morgan, 2004, p.308), and lacking in agreed definitions (Chiva and Alegre, 2005, p.49). The broad nature is in part due to the differing schools of thought which contribute. Different disciplines, for example: sociology, psychology, social anthropology, management theories, systems dynamics and economics; all play a part in the overall understanding of organisational learning (Karatas-Ozkan and Murphy, 2010).

Despite this, there is general consensus that organisational learning is a process of both individual and shared thought and action (Rashman et al., 2009); a continuous learning where everyone within the organisation is engaged in 'identifying and solving problems', enabling the organisation to continuously improve (Lawler and Sillitoe, 2013, p.496). Organisational learning is not an 'isolated occurrence' (p.495) but is where a 'culture of learning is deeply embedded in the organisation' (p.496), promoting positive change when faced with new challenges or changing contexts.

There is no one-size-fits-all approach to establishing sustained organisational learning practices (Trevor, 2019; Wang and Ahmed, 2002; Baxter et al., 2017). Boreham and Morgan (2004) argue that theories of organisational learning are 'typically weak in spelling out the specific processes or actions that make the learning process' (p.308). Empirical evidence for how organisational learning takes place is lacking (p.308). It is somewhat agreed that the different facets contributing to organisational learning include contextual, policy, psychological, cultural and structural (Baxter et al., 2017), with successful implementation of

learning requiring a 'blend' of focusses 'according to the organisations specific situations' (Wang and Ahmed, 2002, p.15). Amongst the differing schools of thought contributing to organisational learning theories, there is much consensus that organisational learning requires a 'readiness' to learn, commitment and behaviours of those learning change, and a collaborative approach to learning and change.

Firstly shared is that organisational learning requires 'readiness' to learn (Choi, 2011, p.481), and that this readiness, or 'the extent to which an individual believes that a change at the individual level is needed and whether [they] have the capacity for it' is key to organisational change (p.481). Employees form individual impressions regarding the necessity for change and the potential impacts of such changes: under this assumption, employees need to be individually 'ready' and 'committed' to changes proposed for them to be successfully realised within the context (p.482-483). The level of commitment to change can be linked to the 'strength of an individual's linkage to the organisation' and is arguably directly related to change outcomes (p.483).

Secondly, existing research highlights that leadership commitment and behaviours are essential to realising organisational learning and achieving policy goals (Mallen-Broch et al., 2014; Weckowska, 2014; Heyden et al., 2017; Trevor, 2019). This is in part due to the way in which a 'dominant power group' within an organisation can have major influence over organisational culture, which can in turn impact organisational learning (Pathak, 2010, 2.3). Across schools, leaders have been collectively positioned as key drivers of change, however the

complexities of balancing values-based decisions whilst adhering to systemic pressures can complicate this picture (Greany, 2024). In respect of this, Trevor (2019) argues that the 'challenge' for management is to seek to continuously 'better understand their increasingly complex world' to make 'better forward-looking decisions' (p.4). Strategic goals resulting from this perspective can 'shape the learning trajectories' through deliberate, planned, forward-looking change goals (Weckowska, 2014, p.15). Consequently, managerial characteristics such as 'experimentation, risk acceptance, interaction with the environment, and participation in decision making' have been oftentimes highlighted as conductive of effective change (Mallen-Broch et al., 2014, p.42).

Additionally, much research suggests that a collective, collaborative approach to organisational learning can enhance employee's commitment to learning and change, therefore increasing the probability that change goals will be realised in practice (Triguero-Sanchez et al., 2022; Greany et al., 2024a). Much research suggests that learning objectives should be agreed upon and shared between all employees (e.g. Briggs, 2007; Pathak, 2010; Erkelens et al., 2015). Creating shared policy goals collaboratively enables the collective 'will' to improve the realisation of such goals (Briggs, 2007, p.123), and involving all employees, regardless of hierarchical status within the organisation, in the creation of policy goals can enable 'empowerment' amongst employees, in turn contributing to their will and readiness to improve (Pathak, 2010, 10.5.8; Greany and Maxwell, 2017). This requires effective dialogue and communication between employees (Garud et al., 2011; Mallen-Broch et al., 2014), and Boreham and Morgan (2004) suggest embedded 'relational practices' can stipulate effective learning dialogues (p.314).

Relational practices for learning consist of: ‘opening space for the creation of shared meaning, reconstructing power relationships and providing cultural tools to mediate learning’ (p.314). Co-workers can discuss and explore differing perspectives and experiences, thus engaging in ‘the pedagogy of organisational learning’ (p.315; p.322).

2.5.4 Sustainable learning

Given that organisational learning is not an ‘isolated occurrence’ (Lawler and Sillitoe, 2013, p.495), strategies promoting a culture of learning within an organisation are required for organisational learning to be realised in practice in ways that are sustainable over time. Additionally, when viewing existing research in conjunction with one another, it could be argued that an organisational culture equipped for learning could be better prepared for adapting and changing when faced with crises and changes to the external environment, too (Greany et al., 2024a).

A culture of organisational learning implies sustainability. Researchers have differentiated between transactional learning and transformational organisational learning through the terms single-loop and double-loop learning (Lawler and Sillitoe, 2013; Garud et al., 2011; Pathak, 2010). Single-loop learning involves ‘learning new skills and capabilities through incidental incremental improvement’ (Lawler and Sillitoe, 2013, p.496). This is transactional: problem-solving based on current abilities of the problem solver (p.496), relying on ‘past routines and present

policies' (Pathak, 2010, 10.1.1). In contrast, sustainable organisational learning is focused around reflection on the learning processes itself (Garud et al., 2011; Lawler and Sillitoe, 2013). This is double-loop learning: an interactive problemsolving process whereby all involved are actively engaged in a process of reflection on the underlying patterns of thinking or behaviour: learning challenges are expected and encouraged, and reflections on assumptions and norms within the organisation are encouraged (Lawler and Sillitoe, 2013; Garud et al., 2011). Double-loop learning 'provides opportunities for radically different solutions to problems' (Pathak, 2010, 10.1.1) rather than responses to problems 'determined by predefined templates' (Garud et al., 2011, p.588). This can lead to a sustainable culture of learning.

Research further suggests that engaging with learning processes collectively, as an organisation, can promote a culture of learning where learning itself can become embedded into organisational culture (Lawler and Sillitoe, 2013; Garud et al., 2011). Through collective learning, organisations and the actors within them are more likely to engage with reflective practice (Spicer, 2020), consider alternative ways of working and respond to changes to the environment in productive ways. Additionally, a culture of learning could enable organisations to view 'failures' as learning opportunities through equipping an organisation with the strategies for understanding how characteristics of perceived or actual failures interact with the organisation (Horck, 2024).

2.5.5 Schools as organisations

Learning is the ‘core purpose of schools’ (Stoll and Temperley, 2009, p.65). It is becoming more prevalent that a school which priorities learning for all - staff and the organisation included - is necessary for effectively adapting to changing circumstances and dealing with challenges (Hopkins et al., 2014; Stoll, 2020). However, broad literature on organisational learning is tricky to apply to schools: schools are a ‘peculiar’ form of organisation (Ball, 2012, p.7), unique in nature due to the influence of complex external networks on internal policy creation and enactment (Greany et al., 2024a; Torres, 2022). Models for analysing organisational culture, learning and change need to be adapted to the realities of schools as organisations (Torres, 2022).

Schools contend with a complex web of connections. Stakeholders include staff and students but also families, local authorities, community organisations and neighbouring schools (Greany et al., 2024a). To each stakeholder there are ‘multiple and overlapping areas of interest and jurisdiction’ (Ball, 2012, p.8), particularly within a context of structural changes (Greany et al., 2024a). Decision-making processes and enactment are therefore particularly complex.

Crucial to understanding how schools as organisations change and learn is an understanding of how policies are developed and enacted in school contexts. Both governmental and localised policies both ‘change what we do (with implications for equity and social justice) and what we are (with implications for subjectivity)’ (Ball, 2015, p.306). Policy implementation within schools is a combination of ‘top-down national vision, government steering and support with professional involvement and public engagement all for the purpose of promoting learning and results’

(Hopkins et al., 2014, p.272). Furthermore, educational policy guidelines can increase the pressure for schools to internalise a culture that is driven by measurable results (Torres, 2022). Implementing change within schools is thus a 'preeminently political process' (Ball, 2012, p.28), and analysis of which is a 'value-laden activity' which 'makes judgements as to whether and in what ways policies help to make things better' (Henry, 1993, p.104).

This can complicate both localised policy enactment and the analysis of its effects: 'practice and the 'effects' of policy cannot be simply read off from texts and are the outcome of conflict and struggle between 'interests' in contexts' (Ball, 1993, p.13). Policy discourses provide schools with ways of thinking about what constitutes 'good' practice and 'what works', however the enactment of policy is 'not always linear and rational', and what works within one context may not readily transfer to another (Ball, 2015, p.307). Lieberman (2000) argues: 'quick fixes only serve to frustrate people and alienate them from the ultimate aim of learning over one's lifetime'; goals are better achieved when 'participants are engaged in the real problems of teaching in a supportive environment over time' (Lieberman, 2000, p.202). However, research suggests that policies that specifically aim to develop a more positive school culture can significantly increase staff motivation (Wilson Heenan et al., 2023), and some studies suggest that focusing on improving school culture can promote employee and student mental health alike, leading to better results overall (e.g. Jessiman et al., 2022).

A complex web of variables contributes to the culture of a school (e.g. Greany et al., 2024a; Greany, 2024). Consequently, *changing* the culture of a school is

equally complex. As existing research suggests that sustainable approaches to organisational change depend on the development and embedding of a culture of learning, this implies that a culture of learning amongst the organisation itself would support schools within this process, too (e.g. Stoll, 2020; Hopkins et al., 2014).

Sustainable organisational learning in schools has been explored through the lens of creating professional learning communities, or learning organisations (e.g. Lieberman, 2000; Stoll and Kools, 2017). A professional learning community involves a collaborative focus on professional learning within a cohesive group, collective knowledge production, prioritising broad and deep learning: ‘a group of teachers sharing and critically interrogating their practice in an ongoing, reflective, collaborative, inclusive, learning-orientated, growth-promoting way’ (Stoll & Louis, 2007, p.2). Alongside necessary adaption to changing external environments, developing professional learning communities could also benefit teachers through improved skills, greater job satisfaction and greater commitment to their role and organisation (Sinnema and Stoll, 2020; Ventista and Brown, 2023; Azorin et al., 2020).

Some practices suggested to promote learning communities within schools include honouring teacher knowledge, situating learning in practice, promoting an inquiry stance, opportunities for sharing practice and experimentation and risk-taking (Lieberman, 2000; Sinnema and Stoll, 2020; Stoll and Kools, 2017). Creating space for sharing frustrations and challenges between colleagues can help to build trust and enables inquiry into new ways of thinking (Lieberman, 2000).

However, whilst research suggests that a professional learning community could support sustainable learning (Admiraal et al., 2021), the concept has been criticised as too broad, lacking clarity in theory and practice (e.g. Kools et al., 2020). Additionally, research suggests that developing embedded learning within a school context can highlight challenges specific to teachers. For example, teachers are required to be positioned simultaneously as learners, which can 'undermine established identities' and threaten 'ideological interests' (Ball, 2015, p.32). Vested interests of staff may be threatened by new learning and policy changes, due to the potential redistribution of resources or job allocations (p.32). Capacity for learning can also present challenges for teachers. Capacity for learning requires being open to the necessary transformations required to address complexities of change (Stoll, 2020, p.422). Such conditions present a challenge for schools, particularly where community size and departmental structures may be barriers to the time, space, and flexibility required to build community and connections organisation-wide (Stoll & Louis, 2007; Stoll and Temperley, 2009). A further challenge is the common 'wariness about giving up on embedded normativities' within long established school communities (Ball, 2015, p.312): 'we are often much happier if we know where we stand and what we think - rather than having to think about how we think' (p.312). Enabling individual capacity for learning is of equal importance to creating time and space for collective capacity for learning amongst the staff body.

Sustainable learning presents another key challenge for schools. As public institutions, schools have a 'limited ability to manage their own policies' (Stoll &

Louis, 2007, p.8; Thomson et al., 2022), and so changes to policies externally can impact the sustainability of an internal agenda. Furthermore, staff turnover and the rapid development of different technologies make ‘sustaining connections and community’ ever more complex (Stoll & Louis, 2007, p.8). Sustained organisational learning requires engagement over time, and therefore the instability of school settings may be a barrier to this.

Whilst there is no ‘reform in a box’ to be implemented across such complex organisations (Hopkins et al., 2014), previous research suggests some key considerations for schools seeking to embed a culture of organisational learning, namely commitment from leadership, understanding the complex network in which each school operates, creating capacity for learning, and building in reflection on student voice. Hopkins et al. (2014) call for deeper understanding of schools as learning organisations (p.257): ‘what is needed is the development of a series of potentially testable theories of systemic change in education’ (p.257). Practical and applied research into ‘managing system reform over time’ (p.272; p.276) is needed to better understand how schools as organisations learn and subsequently equipping them with the skills and strategies for sustained organisational learning within them.

2.6 Developing a trauma-informed organisation

Existing research suggests that the implementation of trauma-informed approaches requires organisational-wide change. To create change that is sustainable, as well as providing the tools to better adapt to challenges and

changes in the future, an organisational culture that facilitates learning is required, incorporating all levels of the organisation into the learning and change process (e.g. Kusmaul et al., 2015). However despite this, there is little research that identifies the enabling and constraining factors in developing an organisational culture that is trauma-informed, particularly in educational contexts (Parker et al., 2022; Gee et al., 2021). Achieving whole-school trauma-informed change is a complex task, requiring system-wide investment of attitudes, beliefs, resources and practices to embed a trauma-informed approach into the culture of an organisation (Long, 2022).

The interrelationships between managerial, psychological, relational, training, and supervision support, as well as staff's psychological resilience, competency, efficacy and agency can all contribute to overall experiences with trauma-informed approaches (Finegan, 2024). As such, organisational members can experience the implementation of trauma-informed approaches differently (Kusmaul et al., 2025), further nuancing the process of organisational change. Consideration of school contexts and their challenges, as well as structural and environmental support is required (Gee et al., 2021), and awareness of the current lack of attention paid to social injustices that also majorly contribute to trauma and its impacts within the workforce is necessary (O'Toole, 2022).

However, research into how these theories translate into practice is currently lacking; the structure and delivery of implementing trauma-informed approaches at an organisational level requires more research (e.g. Kusmaul et al., 2015), and current research into trauma-informed organisational reforms is often confused by

a lack of operational definitions and validated measures of its implementation (Onipede et al., 2024). Additionally, there is oftentimes a disconnect between trauma-informed theories and educational theory and practice (e.g. O'Toole, 2022), and therefore a lack of evidence for which strategies and under what conditions best encourage an organisational culture that supports a trauma-informed approach (e.g. Sutton et al., 2022). There are, however, some studies that highlight the barriers to implementation of organisational-wide trauma-informed approaches at school-level. Of these studies, there is consensus that barriers predominately include limited time and capacity, a lack of financial resources, competing priorities and concerns around logistics (Chudzik et al., 2023; March et al., 2022; Long, 2022; Hudson et al., 2020).

In addition, there is a significant gap in understanding around the sustainability of implementations, both as an outcome but also as a process of equipping organisations for adaption and development in the future (e.g. March et al., 2022), despite the increasing recognition for embedding support-based approaches within institutional cultures for adults in stressful supporting roles (Luthar and Mendes, 2020). Some research suggests that professional development strategies built in at the organisational level could support the implementation of trauma-informed practices, through building organisational capacity to improve and sustain these practices (Douglass et al., 2021), however there is increasing recognition for the need to move beyond training and focus instead on implementing policies and practices that are trauma-informed at all organisational levels (Watson et al., 2024).

Despite a wealth of research suggesting the need for more organisational level approaches to trauma-informed approaches, there is a significant gap in the literature around what this might look like in practice. Theories of organisational culture, learning and change provide a useful lens through which to examine this through, and lead to the recognition that a culture of learning embedded at the heart of an organisation better equips an organisation to manage and adapt to changes, as well as increase the likelihood that changes will be sustainable over time. When viewed in conjunction, this literature suggests that a culture of learning at the organisational level is a necessary starting point for organisations to embed trauma-informed approaches into practices in ways that are sustainable over time, however research examining what this looks like in practice – and the enabling and constraining factors involved within this process of learning and change – is lacking.

2.7 Conclusion and implications

The review presented within this chapter contextualises the motivations, purpose and aims of the resulting study, and frames the dialogue within which this study sits. The review begins with contextualising the significance of the study through a presentation of trauma theory and existing research considering potential impacts of trauma on educational outcomes. The review then critically evaluates existing research exploring trauma-informed approaches within educational contexts. A distinctive gap in how educational organisations can learn and embed these approaches into practices in ways that are sustainable over time is highlighted. Additionally missing from existing research are organisational factors that can contribute to and exasperate traumas at both an individual and organisational level,

and organisational factors that can mitigate these impacts and protect against future impacts, too. In acknowledgement of this lack, the review then interrogates theories of organisational culture, learning and change. Whilst this provides a useful lens through which to understand how organisational learning can contribute to cultural level change, there is a scarcity of studies exploring how this translates into practice, particularly for educational organisations, whose contexts are complex and dynamic. Additionally, there is a significant lack in research applying such theories to embedding and sustaining a culture that is trauma-informed.

This review highlights the implications for educational organisations adopting a culture that is based on trauma-informed approaches in practice; however, a critical examination of preceding literature exposes gaps in research that require addressing. This study aims to address this gap.

Framed within this context, the overarching objective of this study is to better understand the processes and mechanisms required for an educational organisation to embed trauma-informed approaches into practices in ways that are sustainable over time. This study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the processes of organisational learning and change and how is that change manifested at different levels?
2. How can learning around trauma-informed approaches be produced and transferred between key actors within an organisation?
3. How do key stakeholders conceptualise success in relation to embedding trauma-informed approaches into practices in ways that are sustainable?

Through an interrogation of these questions, the aim of this study is twofold. Firstly, through creating a dialogue between the fields of both trauma-informed

approaches in education and organisational learning and change, this study aims to deepen and nuance current understandings of both fields. The findings from critically evaluating the research presented within this review suggest that a dialogue between both existing fields could shed new light on both, addressing some of the questions currently left unanswered. Additionally, guided by the research questions and in dialogue with existing research, this study aims to identify practical implications for educational organisations seeking to develop and embed a trauma-informed culture to better support the experiences and outcomes of all organisational members.

Chapter three: Research design and methodology

3. Introduction

To begin, the ontological and epistemological assumptions underpinning the study are summarised and the research design used is outlined. Then the methods, including choice and execution of case studies used, are described. Within this researcher positionality is reflected on, specifically how this impacts each case differently. Analysis of data is then outlined with consideration to how researcher positionality both facilitates and limits knowledge claims. Complexities of the research design and methodology meant that ethical considerations are embedded, emerging and reflexive and this chapter concludes with a reflection on the ethical considerations present throughout.

3.1 Philosophical underpinnings

The ontological assumptions behind the research questions broadly lie within a realist ontology - there is a physical world we can experience - but with a social constructivist epistemology - that individuals understand the world through subjective meaning making and these knowledges are constantly reformed through interaction with others within differing contexts forming varied and multiple versions of realities that require interpretation (Creswell, 2013, p.24; Punch, 2013, p.18; Flick, 2007, p.12). Realities are therefore 'local, specific and constructed', based on social and individual experiences and depend on those who 'hold' them (Punch, 2013, p.18). Realities are the social products of the actors within them, the interactions between them and the institutions that bind them (Flick, 2007, p.12).

Understanding the processes of meaning-making within an organisation starts with observing and documenting how individuals and collectives within that context construct their social realities (Flick, 2007, p.13). Through observing, experiencing and participating in these contexts, we can gain insight into the interactions, actions and behaviours within these social realities (Basit, 2010, p.16; p.122). Within the assumptions behind the research questions under study, there is a careful balance between theory and the everyday. The questions seek to understand how concepts and ideas from theory are executed in real-life situations: 'how these are objectified and anchored in routines and practices' (Flick, 2007, p.19). However, to understand further the socially constructed meaning-making processes as they play out within an organisation requires a grounded theory approach - what phenomena and practices can be observed and what explanations can be generated from them (Flick, 2007, p.19).

To take a social constructivist perspective is to seek to understand the meaning of phenomenon from the views of participants: to establish theory on how a collective organisation develops shared patterns and behaviours over time (Cresswell, 2013, p.19). The aim is therefore to generate patterns of meaning (Cresswell, 2013, p.8) through interactions with the social world studied. This pattern of meaning-making leads to the production of knowledge: we are not seeking to uncover representations of existing knowledge, but rather to understand interactions with the social world that are themselves part of the knowledge production process (Flick, 2007, p.79). Whilst individuals within organisations seek to understand the world in which they work, multiple meanings will be generated within the same environment. The role of researcher is to interpret these meanings and therefore the generation of meaning is social, 'arising in and out of interaction with a human community' (Cresswell, 2013, p.8). Theory can then be generated through development of systematic construction of knowledge of this social world (Basit, 2010, p.37).

Respecting the socially constructed nature of reality, this research collects qualitative data: 'one cannot add together or subtract what are essentially social or personal constructions, each intelligible with a unique and distinct life story' (Pring, 2000, p.247). Qualitative data allows for nuances of social and personal constructions to be explored. Social reality is not something to be 'discovered', since human interactions and perceptions are influenced by subjectivities and therefore social reality is context specific (Basit, 2010). Qualitative methodology

thus enables the researcher to ‘illuminate social phenomena’, explaining social reality as it is perceived and created by participants themselves (Basit, 2010, p.16). Different participants will have different perspectives and analysing these collectively contributes to generated findings (Yin, 2018, p.17). The aim is to ‘achieve depth rather than breadth’ (Basit, 2010, p.16); to provide a holistic view of organisational culture and practices from a collective and individual level. Conducting research within existing settings requires consideration of the researcher as an instrument for data collection (e.g. Cresswell, 2013, p.185), as the findings will be observer dependent.

As meaning making is subjective, arising from socially constructed situations, one can argue that evidence presented for theory generation is subjective, too context dependent to count as knowledge. However, Oancea and Pring (2008) remind that what it is to understand the social world is inevitably complicated. They argue there are many ways people distinguish between ‘conclusive, good, supportive and poor evidence’ (p.34). Little evidence can be conclusive and we ‘have to live with uncertainty - always open to criticism, revision and further refinement in the light of further evidence’ (p.34). Considering this, research does not claim objective evidence, but rather to contribute to knowledge through generating theory that recognises it is grounded in context, emerging out of subjective and collective meaning-making through interactions.

3.2 Overview of research design

The study addresses research questions about complex social phenomena at the collective organisational level; to understand processes required for an

organisation to embed trauma-informed approaches into practices. I wanted to provide an in-depth account of the phenomena: how an organisation learns about trauma-informed approaches and what processes contribute to changes to organisational culture and practices. A case study approach enabled detailed and holistic investigation of the research questions. Through including two cases, a thorough investigation of research questions was explored.

A case study approach involves employment of a range of methods to interpret the whys and hows of phenomena (e.g. Cohen et al., 2017). A range of methods can lead to contextualised knowledge of a specific case. Through including two different organisations the phenomena can be explored at different phases and a journey of learning and change can be considered.

Case studies provide examples of 'real people in real situations', rather than 'abstract theories or principles' (Cohen et al., 2017, p.376). Case studies can aid understanding of theories in practice (Yin, 2018): rich descriptions can provide a sense of the setting in practice, from the viewpoint of the 'natural actors' within it (Check and Schutt, 2011, p.5). The case study method requires consideration of the complex and interconnected nature of social relations. Case studies require the rejection of a single reality, considering instead multiple realities operating within a context (Cohen et al., 2017, p.377). The case study methodology therefore lends itself to the study of organisational culture and practices, since organisations are not 'naturally occurring phenomena' but are 'constituted and maintained through cultural definition and social strategies' (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007, p.32).

A criticism of a case study approach is that since cases are set within the boundaries of a single context, they do not naturally represent 'a sample' population (Mann, 2003, p.20). Instead, the aim is that 'generalisations, principles, or lessons learned - may potentially apply to a variety of situations' (Mann, 2003, p.20; p.41; Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007, p.32). Although the organisations chosen are unique in context, the case study approach enables the findings to be generalised following 'replication logic' rather than 'sampling logic' (e.g. Yin, 2018). Whilst research is affected by values and therefore there is no expectation that two researchers will yield the same findings (e.g. Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007; Angrosio, 2007), through conducting research systematically, repeating methods across cases and providing reflexive accounts of the process, repeated investigation can test the findings within differing contexts (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007; Angrosio, 2007). Furthermore, through examining the cases in detail, research can complement other, 'coarsely grained' large scale studies (Cohen et al., 2017, p.378), contributing to existing knowledge within the field.

Both organisations selected share the commonality that they were identified as participants due to an existing desire to learn about and develop trauma-informed approaches, to better support trauma-experienced students.

Fernville Academy - an educational organisation supporting disadvantaged young people with educational development through coaching programmes - chose to participate due to a recognition of a growing intake of young people who were - or had been - care experienced. The case study therefore represents an organisation

at the start of their enquiry into what becoming trauma-informed may have looked like for them and how they could adapt their practices to meet this. Riverford College - an alternative provision provider supporting young people who had been - or were at risk of being - excluded from school – had been learning about trauma-informed approaches at an organisational level for a sustained period and had started to adopt some organisation-wide trauma-informed approaches. Riverford College therefore represents an organisation seeking to understand what processes could aid the embedding of trauma-informed learning to ensure these processes are sustainable over time. Whilst their organisational practices differed, both cases adopted a collaborative approach, with research primarily responding to the needs of each organisation at the time.

The organisations both shared core aims relating to the research, as they were looking to develop and embed trauma-informed approaches into practices. For both, an understanding of the processes of organisational learning and change, and how this change manifested at different levels, was paramount. Both cases sought to embed trauma-informed approaches into organisational culture in ways that were sustainable. This involved understanding how learning could be produced and transferred between key actors. For both cases, an understanding of how key stakeholders conceptualised success could be useful for understanding if and how learning could be embedded in practices over time. The cases were therefore selected in part for their overlapping contextual circumstances, however, simultaneously may have produced contrasting results at different points, but for predictable reasons - I.e. their position on their journeys of

learning and change (e.g. Yin, 1994, p.46). Consequently, both organisations provided useful and complementary cases for meeting the overall research aims.

Using a multiple-case design (Yin, 2009), an instrumental case study was employed, seeking a deeper understanding of the processes involved in organisational learning and change (e.g. Crowe et al., 2011). Cases are in part exploratory, seeking to answer 'what' questions, whilst also touching on 'how' questions through describing events and interactions as they occur (e.g. Yin, 2009, p.4). To answer research questions and meet the research aims, the unit of analysis for each research question is either the organisation as a collective unit, or the individual within the organisation (e.g. Yin, 2009; Kumar, 2018). Research question one sought to understand the processes of organisational change: the unit of analysis is the organisation. Research question two sought to understand how learning is produced and transferred, again the unit of analysis here is the organisation itself. Research question three, however, sought to understand how key stakeholders conceptualise success: for this, the unit of analysis shifts to the individuals within the organisation to better understand individual perspectives and how these impacted learning and change outcomes. Table 1 demonstrates the unit of analysis, data collection and unit of observation for each research question.

Research question	Unit of analysis	Data collection	Unit of observation

What are the required processes of organisational change and learning and how is that learning manifested at different levels within an organisation?	Organisation	Observations Document analysis	Individuals Documents
How can learning around trauma-informed approaches be produced and transferred between key actors within an organisation?	Organisation	Observations Interviews	Individuals Groups
How do key stakeholders conceptualise success in relation to embedding trauma-informed approaches into practices in ways that are sustainable?	Individual	Observations Interviews	Individuals

Table 1: Unit of analysis (Adapted from Kumar, 2018, p.77)

To provide a holistic overview of research questions, methods employed within each are parallel in design, but with flexibility to allow for the sequential development of organisational progress towards meeting the aims (e.g. Vrikki et al., 2019). To examine phenomena at a real-life level, qualitative enquiry was chosen (Guest et al., 2013, p.14). I wanted to capture both the ‘non observable as well as observable phenomena, attitudes, intentions and behaviours’ (Cohen et al., 2017, p.288). A flexible, emerging and reflexive research design was chosen. Beginning with a ‘loosely defined’ qualitative design (Cohen et al., 2017, p.287),

the design developed as research progressed: I was aware that components may need modifying in response to new developments (Check and Schutt, 2011, p.3). Exploratory research questions, focusing on *how* and *why* questions, were necessarily flexible, designed to 'capture educational reality as participants experience it', rather than in 'categories predetermined by the researcher' (Check and Schutt, 2011, p.3). Through an unfolding research design (e.g. Punch, 2013, p.33), questions and methods could be adapted considering the data, to give voice to participants and 'probe issues that lie beneath the surface of presenting behaviours and actions' (Cohen et al., 2017, p.288; Check and Schutt, 2011, p.3). Musante & Dewalt (2010) warn this approach positions the researcher as 'less in control' of research, needing to react and interact in unfolding situations that cannot always be anticipated (p.3). As well as allowing for 'real-world' emerging challenges and changes, a flexible design approach also enables the refinement of research questions in line with the knowledge that research skills develop over the course of research. An emergent, flexible approach was therefore chosen, sitting within the broader case study framework.

Within both cases I undertook a broadly ethnographic approach. Ethnography is a holistic approach, orientated toward studying shared meanings and practices (Krzyworzeka and Gaggiotti, 2021, p.186; Guest et al., 2013, p.9). Krzyworzeka and Gaggiotti (2021) argue that organisations are constituted by local acts of communicating: organisational forms are not given, but 'emerging and constantly produced' (p.186). Ethnography is an 'active process' (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007, p.9), requiring an active researcher role: the dynamic flexibility of the approach therefore compliments organisational enquiry.

Calas et al., (2021) argue for inter-ethnography as an effective approach for study of organisations. Inter-ethnography, they argue, serves to 'destabilise' the notion of organisational ethnography as an individual and subjectivist project, through drawing attention to the 'social construction of reality' (p.91). Organisational ethnography requires a 'dynamic field presence', where interaction with different actors is crucial to understanding phenomena (p.92). Researchers move away from a static observer positioning and must embrace knowledge creation as a process of collective accomplishment (p.106). Researchers should reflect individually on what was learnt as a collective, whilst collectively discussing what was learnt as individuals (p.106).

Similarly, Robson and McCartan (2016) argue that social properties are constructed through interactions between people, rather than having a separate existence: 'meaning does not exist in its own right; it is constructed by human beings as they interact and engage in interpretation' (p.24). The task of the researcher is to 'unearth' meaning and knowledge within interactions (p.25). Mann (2003) argues that researchers must stay adaptive, have a firm grasp of issues being studied, ask questions fairly and listen well (p.73). To ensure I met these attributes, I was reflexive, reflecting on how methods could be adapted to better meet research aims at each stage. Furthermore, a criticism of an ethnographic approach is its subjectivity to researcher bias, as in producing descriptions 'we always rely on criteria of selection and inference' based on our own positionality and perspectives in any circumstance (e.g. Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007,

p.32). In consideration, I took a staggered approach to data collection. Data collection for Fernville Academy took place within two points: September to December 2021 and March to June 2022. Data collection for Riverford College was conducted between September 2022 and January 2023. This enabled a reflexive approach. In between stages, I could step back and reflect on my learning and could refine the design to ensure I was meeting research aims. Data collection breaks also enabled me to be reflexive about my own positioning, reflecting on my research skills and allowing for further researcher development (e.g. Vrikki et al., 2019; Robson and McCartan, 2016). Broadly following an inter-ethnographic approach, reflective discussions were held with key stakeholders prior to and after each data collection period (p.106).

Under an ethnographic design a variety of methods were employed to ensure 'holistic examination' of the phenomenon (Jorgensen, 1989, p.19). Qualitative data was collected through collaborative planning sessions following a focus group methodology; one-to-one interviews with staff from different roles; observations of practices, and participant observations. Whilst interviews gave an understanding of individual perspectives, I also wanted to capture the 'here and now of everyday life' (Jorgensen, 1989, p.15). I employed observational methods and participant observations to offer more 'complete' explanations (Morgan et al., 2017, p.1060). Musante & Dewalt (2010) state: 'the balance between observation and participation achieved by an individual researcher can fall anywhere along the continuum' (p.9). Through observations of organisational practices, I could observe interactions between groups and observe what people *do* rather than relying on self-reported accounts (Morgan et al., 2017, p.1061; p.1060). Through

participating in organisational activities, I could build relationships with participants whilst gathering data in-situ (Check and Schutt, 2011, p.2). Combining different qualitative data gives different perspectives on the same phenomena, and thus aids to strengthen the case for the findings. A delicate balance between insider and outsider researcher perspective was required (e.g. Guest et al., 2013, p.11), to ‘look afresh at everyday behaviour that may go unnoticed’ (Cohen et al., 2017, p.542), and to ‘uncover, make accessible, and reveal the meanings (realities) people use to make sense of their daily lives’ (Jorgensen, 1989, p.15).

3.3 Trauma-informed research methods

Qualitative inquiry is deeply relational (Campbell et al., 2023; p.825). This is especially true of ethnographic research: often involving prolonged engagement in participants communities, relationships between the researcher and the participants are central to the research development. In recognition of the necessity for research to be a safe experience for participants, many researchers advocate for the need for trauma-informed approaches to research principles and practices.

Trauma-informed research considers the core principles of trauma-informed care: prioritising safety, trust and transparency, support, collaboration, empowerment, voice and choice, and cultural, historical and gender issues within all practices (e.g., Dietkus, 2022; Edelman, 2023; Robinson and Ickowicz, 2022). Trauma-informed research involves planning studies that are trauma-aware and avoid re-traumatising, and being prepared to *respond* to trauma throughout the process.

Trauma awareness means recognising and responding to diverse experiences of trauma (Robinson and Ickowicz, 2022, p.626); being trauma-informed involves accounting for the potential presence of trauma within research practices and examining how research designs can be more trauma-informed (Dietkus, 2022, p.28).

By incorporating a trauma-informed approach to research practices can be more inclusive and safer, with the aim for participants to feel emotionally, psychologically and physiologically protected within the process (e.g. Edelman, 2023, p.681; Dietkus, 2022, p.28). Bringing awareness of trauma into research practices enables a critical examination and adaption of research protocols, approaching research with 'universal precautions' and shaping research designs to 'minimise negative impacts' (Robinson and Ickowicz, 2022, p.626). Whilst there is not a 'checklist' or single approach to working in trauma-informed ways (e.g. Dietkus, 2022, p.28), recent and emerging research provides guidance for researchers seeking to adopt trauma-informed approaches into research principles and practices.

Through adaption of the core principles of trauma-informed care, there is much emerging guidance for incorporating trauma-informed approaches to research. Throughout this study, from conception to completion and beyond, I incorporated a trauma-informed approach to research, prioritising the 'safety, dignity and belonging' (e.g. Haines, 2019) of participants throughout. Principles outlined for researchers within existing guidance were considered at all stages of the research process.

3.3.1 Research measures

Much research suggests the foundation to trauma-informed research approaches is that the researcher should learn about trauma: developing a basic understanding of trauma impacts can help shape research approaches from the start (e.g. Alessi and Kahn, 2022; Edelman, 2023). From this point, before beginning fieldwork the trauma-informed researcher should carefully consider the ways they gain consent from participants (Robinson and Ickowicz, 2022; Campbell et al., 2023) and consider how to best include participants in the design process to emphasise collaboration and ensure participants choices are considered and prioritised (Dietkus, 2022; Robinson and Ickowicz, 2022; Edelman, 2023). The trauma-informed researcher should ensure they are transparent, to build trust and encourage psychological safety within the researcher-participant relationships (Alessi and Kahn, 2022). The trauma-informed researcher should also consider the environments they intend to conduct fieldwork, considering both the physical and psychological safety of participants (e.g. Isobel, 2021). In line with this guidance, a trauma-informed lens to the planning of fieldwork was employed from the conception of this study.

During fieldwork, the trauma-informed researcher should take a dynamic, ongoing approach: reflective and reflexive; flexible to respond to emerging needs of the participants and the communities within which they reside. This may mean adapting research environments, for example moving locations for interviews if necessary (e.g. Isobel, 2021). The researcher should remain acutely conscious of

participants psychological and physical safety. A relational approach to fieldwork enables the researcher to remain in touch with participants' ongoing needs: establishing relationships takes time, however building connections with participants assists the researcher in understanding the impact of their research (Dietkus, 2022; Robinson and Ickowicz, 2022). The trauma-informed researcher will remain flexible and make adjustments necessary to enable participants to retain a sense of choice, voice and validation within the process (e.g. Isobel, 2021; Edelman, 2023). Furthermore, the researcher will ensure participants are not only aware of opt-out options available to them throughout the process, but will also take accountability for ensuring an ongoing, reflexive and reflective approach to consent (e.g. Campbell et al., 2023; Alessi and Kahn, 2022).

This ongoing approach to consent should be continued beyond the boundaries of the fieldwork itself. Ensuring participants know how to redact their inputs, and retain their voice and choice within this is crucial (e.g. Robinson and Ickowicz, 2022). Researchers should consider ways to ensure there is a mutual exchange and reciprocal benefit for participants after fieldwork ends (e.g. Robinson and Ickowicz, 2022), and trauma-informed protocols for data sharing that minimise risk to participants are important to consider when working with populations more vulnerable to trauma (e.g. Campbell et al., 2023, p.825).

Considering a trauma-informed approach to research methods was a priority within this study. From the planning of fieldwork to fieldwork and long after the boundaries of the case studies were completed, a trauma-informed lens to this study was employed to ensure the prioritisation of the 'safety, dignity and

belonging' (e.g. Haines, 2019) of all who participated. Whilst the same approaches and principles of research were applied across both cases, in line with a trauma-informed approach the particulars of each case differed in respect of their unique differences. This chapter now outlines the research processes and particulars for each case study in turn.

3.4 Fernville Academy

Fernville Academy was a national charity working to improve social mobility for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds. The organisational programme provided support to learners over a four-year period, spanning school years 10 to 13, through one-to-one coaching, workshops and residential courses. The programme aimed to equip young people with skills and confidence to boost attainment, as well as facilitating links between learners, employers and higher education institutions. The organisation operated across areas of the UK characterised by deprivation and low access to higher education. Participants were typically from low-income families, received support from social services, cared for a sibling or parent or were first in family to consider higher education pathways.

Fernville Academy were identified for their desire to learn about and develop practices that were trauma-informed, with the aim to better support trauma-experienced students; whether that be childhood trauma or traumatic schooling experiences. The organisation came to understand that their existing programme was not optimal for trauma-experienced participants, primarily due to difficulties in

building and maintaining relationships between young people and staff. Consequently, the organisational strategy for 2020 to 2025 planned to increase work with care-experienced young people through adapting practices in line with trauma-informed approaches.

The Covid-19 pandemic unpredictably impacted the organisation, as practices had to adapt to national restrictions. Existing programmes were adapted for remote working and research plans had to adapt to the organisation's emerging needs. The pandemic highlighted the need for strategies for adapting to changes and creating and sustaining organisational learning practices. Emerging research on trauma-informed approaches suggests that sustainable change requires an organisational approach: long-term adoption of trauma-informed approaches is necessary for best supporting trauma-experienced students, and long-term action plans are required to ensure this change is sustainable. Currently, research on organisational learning and change towards trauma-informed practices is lacking. Research therefore took an organisational perspective, seeking to understand the mechanisms required for organisational learning and change in line with a trauma-informed approach to practice.

3.4.1 Researcher positionality

The process of *becoming* trauma-informed at an organisational level was manifested in the everyday activities within the organisation. Therefore a key site of organisational change is the design and implementation of organisational practices: strategic planning for organisation-wide practices as well as staff

training and development. Mapping organisational change meant working collaboratively with staff in the design and implementation of wider organisational activities. My role as researcher was twofold. Firstly, to collaboratively plan for learning and change at an organisational level with the leadership coordinating the involvement and collect and analyse data to inform reflections on learnings. Secondly, to observe, document and reflect on the mechanisms involved in organisational level learning.

The anticipated outcomes were also twofold. As collaborators, the organisation would benefit from reflections on the learning and change processes. More broadly, the research aimed to contribute towards knowledge of how organisations embed trauma-informed approaches into practices, providing recommendations for future practice that can be applied across differing educational organisations.

To meet these aims a deeper understanding of organisational practices was required, however my role of researcher meant I would remain *outside* the organisation, providing an academic, research centered lens. Due to my previous personal and professional experience, I came to this research with practical knowledge of adopting trauma-informed approaches within schools. However, my role here was as researcher, not practitioner. There was, however, an element of knowledge exchange, as research informs practices and data collected informs academic findings.

3.4.2 Participants

All members of staff employed within the organisations across all roles were considered participants. During initial project design, this was ~25 staff. However, the Covid-19 pandemic impacted both staff retention and redundancies, and consistent throughout were 16 members of staff. The staff body consisted of three teams: programmes, communications and fundraising. Within these, six progression coaches worked face-to-face with young people. Additionally, participants included the director, and members of the trustee board.

Two members of senior leadership volunteered to coordinate research involvement and the learning and change process. The initial desire to participate came from the director, who had prior understanding of the impacts of trauma through previous work. The assistant director also co-coordinated the process, due to prior experience of leading organisational change initiatives, however had no prior understanding of the educational impacts of trauma.

Table of participants

Pseudonym	Primary role	Additional roles
Jane	Director	Study coordinator
Pete	Assistant director	Study coordinator
Taylor	Senior leadership team	Programmes
Viktoria	Senior leadership team	Programmes
Elaine	Senior leadership team	Programmes
Jon	Senior leadership team	Communications
Sebastian	Senior leadership team	Finance
Gaby	Senior leadership team	Fundraising
Martin	Student coach	Programmes coordinator
Mo	Student coach	Programmes coordinator

Jean	Student coach	
Zadie	Student coach	
Paul	Student coach	
Penny	Student coach	
Nina	Trustee	

Table 2: Fernville Academy table of participants

3.4.3 Overview of data collection

Data collection for Fernville Academy spanned longer than Riverford College. This was in part due to the emergent collaborative design of the study, but primarily was the result of the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic and consequential organisational changes. Overall involvement spanned from October 2020 to July 2022, however within this were two focused data collection points: Autumn term 2021 and Spring term 2022.

The first focused point took place within the Autumn term of 2021 (September to December). Throughout this period, I collected qualitative data from: three observations of whole-staff briefings; two design and planning sessions with key gatekeepers; three participant observations of coaching sessions with the chief executive; three one-to-one semi-structured staff interviews; one participant observation of a whole-staff learning lunch. The first aim was to understand where the organisation was starting from. This meant understanding current practices, and individual conceptualisations of trauma-informed approaches. Furthermore, an understanding of where the organisation wanted to take learning and change

from a strategic perspective was sought, which included exploring potential barriers to this.

Following planning and reflection in January 2022, the second focused point took place within the Spring term 2022 (March to June). Here I collected qualitative data from: five observations of staff briefings; one design and planning session with key gatekeepers; four one-to-one informal meetings with key gatekeepers; five one-to-one staff interviews; one one-to-one interview with a trustee; one participant observation of a whole staff learning lunch.

Research was not conducted in specific *phases*, but rather involved an ongoing process of learning, observing, discussing, and rethinking aims: a constant process of reflection and adaption. Particularly within early stages, ongoing negotiation, relationship building, and document reading were key to understanding the organisation, as well as enabling access to events. As involvement progressed and developed over time, bringing different perspectives together into discussions over an extended period enabled extended reflection, and the findings depict a journey towards a deeper understanding and practice of trauma-informed approaches at an organisational level as engagement with the research process progressed.

Design and planning sessions

On three occasions I met with the director and assistant director with the aim of designing the research involvement. These meetings took place early in the

research - December 2020 - and prior to both data collection timepoints - May 2021 and February 2022. Conversations were held online via Microsoft Teams and spanned 2 hours. With the focus on the granular details of how learning and change happens at an organisational level, these conversations provide a rich contribution to the findings. Detailed notes were made during and following each meeting to document the conversations and both participants member-checked the data retrospectively.

Discussions took a focus group structure. Focus groups enable relatively informal discussions of topics and issues common to participants (Parker and Tritter, 2006, p.24). The researcher facilitates discussions, and participant dynamics are important (Parker and Tritter, 2006, p.26). Within these meetings, I observed and facilitated discussions between the director and assistant director whereby they shared views and beliefs on the research phenomenon and brought different perspectives on how the research could be applied to their organisation. Wilkinson (1998) argued that focus groups presuppose that sense-making is produced collectively, during social interactions between people (p.186). Focus groups can offer an opportunity to see how views are 'constructed, expressed, defended and (sometimes) modified during conversations with others'; 'to observe the process of collective sense-making in action' (p.193). Discussions were a social activity - and under the social constructionist view, understandings are built through shared social activities. Through these sessions, I observed this social sense making in action, and gained a deeper understanding into individual and organisational views around organisational learning and change.

Observations

I used observational data - or ‘gathering data in situ’ (Basit, 2010, p.118) to enrich the findings due to the direct access to activity in real time it enabled (e.g. Check and Schutt, 2011; p.1063). Observational methods enabled a deeper understanding of ‘the culture and language’ of the organisation (Jorgensen, 1989, p.13), offering insight into how people behave within specific contexts (Simpson and Tuson, 2003, p.12).

Observations of practices enabled direct access to social interactions, to ‘see’ what participants cannot: ‘many events occur in the life of a social group so regularly that they are never commented on, or questioned, by the participants’ (Foster, 1996, p.13). Records of observations can give permanent, systematic records of interactions which are usually transient (Foster, 1996, p.16). Furthermore, observations can reveal insights not accessible through other data - e.g. natural social interactions - and shows what people do *in situ* compared to what they say they do in *theory* (Check and Schutt, 2011, p.1061).

Observational methods are varied and flexible (Foster, 1996, p.18), and therefore the type of observation and my role within it worked along a continuum. For observations of staff meetings, I remained an ‘observer-as-participant’, holding ‘peripheral membership’ to the organisation (Angrosio, 2007, p.54-55). I conducted brief observations (~30-minutes) and was known as a researcher. I interacted with the participants as researcher but did not participate in organisational activities.

I initially thought gaining access online would be easier, however this was not the case. As I was not staff, I was often inadvertently left off meeting invites and had to request access individually. I wanted to remain unobtrusive, but due to using my university email I had to request additional access to enter. This could have caused disruption to meetings and it was less possible for my presence to *blend in*. I felt uneasy emailing repeatedly for access and it became a balancing act of knowing when to ask again or when to step back. Perry et al. (2021) argue that managing participant flow throughout a study is particularly challenging within virtual observations. Technical issues, disruptions and access can impact the quantity and quality of data (p.990). Foster (1996) reminds that 'the pursuit of truth' may clash with subjects' right to privacy, and this became apparent in my struggle for access to potentially useful data. Remote meetings impacted the quality of data, too. Conversation flows differently remotely: intricacies of conversation, such as interruptions, and asides, are replaced by polite turn-taking. Lively debate is more strenuous; passive listening is easier to manage, and these are considered within the findings.

I observed three briefings in Autumn 2022 and five throughout the following Spring. None were audio-recorded; instead, detailed field notes were made immediately afterwards. This was in part to reduce the level of 'threat' posed by my researcher presence (e.g. Simpson and Tuson, 2003, p.62). The briefings were a regular organisational activity, and recordings may have impacted attendance or affected behaviours (e.g. Basit, 2010, p.120; p.130). A transcript would have made clear who was speaking; staff were called on to speak within

their role and it would have been complicated to ensure confidentiality. Furthermore, briefings covered multiple topics, many of which irrelevant to the research agenda, and it would be unethical to collect data I had no intention to use (e.g. Flick, 2007 p.70; p.75). Instead, I made notes by hand. I followed loosely structured observational methods (Cohen et al., 2017, p.543), noting themes of staff training, wellbeing and anything related to trauma (e.g. advising staff to prioritise getting fresh air). I also noted practices that fit with a trauma-informed approach (e.g. flexibility of work hours) and language supporting a trauma-informed framework (e.g. 'a gentle reminder'; 'communicate respectfully'). After each meeting, I typed notes, uploading and filing them within NVivo. These were then analysed alongside other qualitative data.

Participant observations

Throughout data collection my role shifted and I often acted as 'participant as observer'; more integrated with the group, although my role and activities as a researcher were still acknowledged (Angrosio, 2007, p.55; Musante & Dewalt, 2010, p.10). Here I undertook more of an 'active membership' (p.56): I engaged in some core activities, although still 'refrain[ed] from committing - to the group's values, goals and attitudes' (p.56). I hoped to gain a deeper understanding of organisational practices by taking part in 'relevant processes and 'observing how they unfold' (Flick, 2007, p.90). I hoped to view social intricacies of organisational culture and practices through experiencing it myself: to 'see the world as the research subject sees it' (Check and Schutt, 2011, p.6). I participated through

completing coaching sessions as a participant and through leading whole staff learning lunches.

Coaching sessions

The organisation employed a coaching model within their programmes (Kline, 1999; Whitmore, 2002; Starr, 2012). Ratner and Yusef (2015) argue that through the coaching process, young people devise goals and make progress towards them in ways in which their ideas are self-generated, promoting agency. The organisation required that all staff undertake their own coaching programme: they were assigned a coach and completed coaching sessions covering similar (but age appropriate) topics as a participant. As this was central to initial staff training, it was useful for me to participate, too. The aim was to deeper understand the coaching process and initial staff training practices and to reflect on the experience of being coached in this format.

The director acted as my coach and I undertook three coaching sessions throughout the summer term, 2021. My positionality impacted my experiences as participant observer here. I thought my previous *professional* experiences would guide my reflections, however found that my *personal* experience of trauma would need to be accounted for within my reflections too. The sessions spanned two hours each, held online via Microsoft Teams, and consisted of one-hour coaching, ten-minute comfort breaks and a ~45-minute collaborative reflection. I planned to audio-record for transcription, however the personal nature of sessions made this challenging. I was surprised at how challenging I found the first session: it was

very personal, and the topics covered - including family values, perceptions of the self and self-worth - were tricky to navigate, especially with the director, and conducted online. I decided not to audio-record, instead writing reflections after each session. Within these notes I used questions to guide reflections: *what aspects of the practice reflected a trauma-informed approach; what aspects did I find more challenging considering my own experiences why; what aspects of practice may be more challenging to a young person who has experienced trauma?*

Observational data and field notes are liable to bias, as data is influenced by what the observer chooses to record (e.g. Check & Schutt, 2011, p.1063; Foster, 1996); choices made inevitably reflect value judgements of what is considered important or not (Simpson and Tuson, 2003, p.19), and therefore observations are theory and experience laden (Cohen et al., 2017, p.542, p.554). Throughout all collection and analysis of observational data it is important to be reflexive: to 'set out some of the underlying assumptions - that you bring' (Simpson and Tuson, 2003, p.18). This is especially important given my personal and professional experiences of trauma impacts. I therefore ensured to reflect on the assumptions that I brought throughout every stage of the research - paying particular attention to this throughout analysis.

Learning lunches

Later in the study, the organisation began to hold 'learning lunches' bi-weekly. All staff were invited to join an online space during lunch breaks, for ~30 minutes, led

by a different staff member each time. Topics varied and usually included an introduction to a new practice. We decided it would be useful for me to lead discussion around trauma-informed practices. I was given two extended (one hour) slots, in March and June 2022.

The first session was hosted by the assistant director and all staff were invited. Staff were encouraged to attend during the prior briefing, where I briefly summarised the research. Out of 16 staff, ten attended. Initially, I outlined the purpose of the meeting and sought consent to take notes. Nine staff members consented to audio-recording; one member of staff requested notetaking only. I therefore took notes during (although less than anticipated given the participatory nature) and typed more detailed reflective notes immediately afterwards. The session was intended as an introduction to my research and an overview of trauma and its impacts on educational outcomes. Observations were unstructured, but paid attention to staff's prior understandings of trauma and how they felt trauma-informed practices fit into their current practices. I also reflected on the use of the 'learning lunch' space for training, noting things such as staff participation and engagement during.

The second learning lunch was advertised in the same way and nine members of staff attended. All participants consented to audio-recording, so I recorded and transcribed the meeting alongside my notes. For this session, the director and I focused more on the processes involved in organisational learning and change. Staff were notably more comfortable asking questions and fruitful discussions required little prompting. By this stage, staff were all aware of my role within the

organisation: relationships had time to develop, and I believe this impacted participation and engagement (e.g. Basit, 2010). Both the transcript and reflections from each were uploaded to NVivo and coded along with other qualitative data collected during the data collection period.

Interviews

I wanted to conduct one-to-one staff interviews to understand individual perspectives (e.g. Flick, 2007), and to supplement and enrich observational data (Robson and McCartan, 2016, p.324). In September 2021, during an all-staff briefing, the director introduced the interviews, and I presented a brief overview of the project, the purposes of interviews and procedural details. A letter of consent and a sign-up sheet then was circulated via the director, including an overview of topics to be covered and the overarching guiding questions. Interviews were semi-structured: I wanted the focus to remain on predetermined topics to increase the comprehensiveness of data (Yin, 2018; Cohen, 2017), but at the same time remain fairly conversational to aid relationship building and to be open and flexible to emerging insights and themes (Yin, 2018; Cohen, 2017). I wanted participants to know the structure and topics in advance in acknowledgement of the intricacies of consent. As Kostera and Modzelewska (2021) argue: ‘interview is a controlled conversation, where both parties acknowledge and accept how and why the control is done’ (p.74). I hoped that by preparing participants in advance, this would alleviate potential issues of control, whilst also enabling more informed consent. Within these interviews, I wanted to capture participants perspectives on the following: *what professional training on trauma-informed practices they had*

received; in what ways trauma 'showed-up' in young people from the perspective of their role; what are the organisational needs around better supporting young people with experience of trauma.

Five staff initially volunteered and we arranged times to fit their working schedules. Conducting interviews virtually - whilst being mandatory due to Covid-19 restrictions - served the additional benefit of enabling more flexibility with schedules. However out of the initial five arranged, two did not attend with no response to follow-up emails. The remaining three consented to audio-recording, and transcripts were made.

In March 2022 I repeated the process. By this stage I was better known by staff and had presented in several staff briefings and led a learning lunch on trauma-informed practices. This meant staff had a better understanding of the purpose of my presence and the topics of enquiry. I decided to retain the previous interview structure, adapting questions considering previous findings. I asked staff to reflect on the following areas ahead of discussions: *what is working well for supporting staff and students who have experienced trauma; what are the learning needs of the organisation around trauma and its impacts; what do you think the barriers may be to implementing trauma-informed approaches into practices.* I invited all staff, including those previously interviewed. Seven staff signed up this time; out of these, five attended. Three consented to audio-recording and two opted for notetaking instead.

Invitation to interview was later extended to trustees; questions adapted to reflect the different roles and responsibilities. Recruitment followed the same procedure, and they were sent an overarching question in advance: *How might you see your role as a trustee impacting on the development of organisational cultures, that enable staff to develop trauma-informed ways of working.* Out of eleven trustees, one signed-up to interview.

Following each interview I read back notes and recapped key points to member check. I was aware of the potential for bias within the flexibility of semi-structured interviews (e.g. Cohen, 2017). To account for this, noted after each my impressions, general insights and potential for biases to ensure a reflexive approach. I was also aware that interviews are a ‘testimony to the context - from the point of view of the participants’ (Kostera and Modzelewska, 2021, p.74): an account that could reflect what an interviewer *wants* to hear as opposed to a truth (e.g. Yin, 2018, p.107). I hoped that interviews held at different time points would help account for this: whilst interviews are ‘nongeneralizable findings - pertinent to a situation or context’, they can be ‘replicable or transferable to another situation’ (Basit, 2010, p.110).

Document analysis

Additionally, I included analysis of publicly available organisational documentation related to relevant policies. These included a five-year strategy report (2020 - 2025), Impact report (2019), annual reports (2019), safeguarding policy (2020), and online safety policy (2021). I also included relevant online training content for

staff, including topics of mental health and wellbeing; safeguarding; domestic violence. I was aware of my own selectivity biases: using an 'incomplete' collection of sources meant I was selecting documentation I felt was relevant, and documentation could have been excluded that may have affected my analysis (e.g. Yin, 2018, p.107). However, using documentation is a 'stable' and 'unobtrusive' form of data collection; given the challenges and changes within the organisation, documentation analysis enabled data collection without disrupting the organisation beyond what was necessary (Yin, 2018, p.107; Basit, 2010, p.139). Access to relevant pages was granted to me by the communications manager in March 2022. Documentations were uploaded to NVivo and searched for content related to trauma-informed language or practices and excerpts generated were grouped. I initially searched text excerpts for themes related to research questions. I coded text using the code index developed within the analysis of other data and noted additional themes. The two types of documentation served different purposes and this was considered during analysis. Policy documentation and reports are statutory for public review, serving the broader audience of prospective clients, inspectors and investors. The online portal was for staff only, for training purposes. Differing audiences and purposes could impact content, however including both could increase rigour (Yin, 2018, p.107). Through mixing data from documentations with interview and observational data I could cross-check themes and note patterns both between and within data sets.

3.4.4 Case study reflection

The timing of when to *leave* the field shifted over the course of data collection. This decision was made considering both the challenges and changes within the organisation and the emerging findings.

Throughout data collection the organisation experienced multiple changes resulting in multiple redesigns of the research and a necessarily flexible approach to data collection (e.g. Robson and McCartan, 2016). This was in part due to the impacts of Covid-19. The first academic year of participation occurred during the national lockdown: schools were closed, face-to-face work was postponed, and many worked from home. This meant that organisational practices were far from ‘normal’, and organisational priorities shifted to manage disruptions and change. Once national restrictions lifted, the research had already seen multiple redesigns reflecting the changing practices and priorities within the organisation.

Musante & Dewalt (2010) argue that ethnography must be flexible in design. Through documenting real-world situations, the researcher becomes less in control of the research situation. The researcher is forced to react to unfolding and unpredictable circumstances: ‘any discussion of ‘how to do it’ must necessarily be abstract. There is no way to anticipate more than a small proportion of the situations in which investigators will find themselves’ (p.3). In October 2020, it seemed unfathomable that the impacts of the pandemic would continue beyond that year, and that the longevity of such impacts would have lasting impacts on decisions made by organisations such as this one. The circumstances were unpredictable and required a very flexible approach (Robson and McCartan, 2016, p.147).

To work with the emerging nature of design, I employed multiple data collection techniques to improve the ‘accuracy and completeness’ of the case, and to ‘strengthen the credibility of the research findings’ (Check and Schutt, 2011, p.1061). Through an ongoing approach to analysis, it was clear when ‘theoretical saturation’ had been reached (e.g. Angrosio, 2007, p.58). Considering the challenges and changes the organisation had been - and continued to be - faced with, organising and completing staff training on trauma-informed approaches and adapting programmes subsequently was not a priority. As a result, conversations and learning around trauma and its impacts resulted instead from the research involvement itself. This meant that learning around trauma and its impacts was slow, and data from each timeframe proved largely similar in findings. Angrosio (2007) stated that theoretical saturation is achieved when the ‘generic features of new findings consistently replicate earlier ones’ (p.58). As explored within the findings chapter, whilst some developments unfold within the data, the findings between the time points are circular in nature.

3.5 Riverford College

Riverford College was an all-through Alternative Provision (AP) Academy within a single school trust. Riverford provided education for young people aged 5-16 through a variety of means. Riverford supported schools within and outside of the local authority through offering varying length programmes to students who were, or were at risk of being, permanently excluded from school. They also offered short term vocational courses, provided outreach support including postplacement

integration support and in-school consultations and offered longer term on-site provision for Key Stage 4[2] students. Schools, local authorities and carers could refer a young person for provision. A key feature was a commitment to adopting restorative principles and practice and a focus on supporting positive behaviour and relationships within the classroom and beyond. The organisation was split across three sites within the County.

Recent changes within the leadership structure and the trust board brought a new trajectory of change. Recognising that students may have experienced traumatic schooling experiences, along with a heightened awareness of educational impacts of trauma because of the Covid-19 pandemic and increasing numbers of students requiring additional therapeutic support, school improvement plans included a whole-school target of furthering staff learning around trauma-informed approaches. Key documentation for the school, such as websites and mission and values statements, make claims to trauma-informed practices, and questions around accountability were an organisational focus for the academic year 2022-2023.

Additionally, my positionality within Riverford at the time not only lent itself to gaining access at a pivotal time of learning and change but also provided a unique perspective for research. Since March 2022, I held a governance role at Riverford. Governance have independent control over, and legal responsibility for, a charity's management and administration. Within this role, I attended ~6 trust board meetings per academic year, ~6 education committee meetings and ~3 business

[2] Key Stage 4 (KS4) is the phase of secondary education in England, Wales and Northern Ireland for pupils aged 14-16; typically covering school years 10 and 11.

committee meetings. These meetings discussed strategic and financial decisions and their implications on the organisation and individuals within it. Alongside other board members, I had to ensure the charity carried out its obligations, always acting in the organisation's best interests. The trust board was composed of a chair, a clerk, and nine further members including the headteacher, business manager, one teacher within the school and an interim trust board advisor. All also sat on the business committee; six members additionally sat on the education committee. My role meant I had access I may not otherwise have had. I had DBS clearance, positive relationships with key stakeholders and access to key documentation. Entry into the 'social and symbolic world' had already been established (Robson and McCartan, 2016, p.323); research was therefore unobtrusive, low cost and aligned with organisational strategic planning.

I was drawn to the governance role in part due to involvement with Riverford through previous employment. As a teacher, I previously held additional duties involving organising alternative provision placements for those at risk of exclusion. I worked closely with staff at Riverford to seek advice, and arrange provision, for students. Consequently I had experience of working with Riverford as a client as well as holding a governance role. Research is commonly stimulated by previous experience (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007, p.24): such experiences developed my professional understanding of the organisational culture, values and ethos, as well as the challenges it faces (e.g. Robson and McCartan, 2016, p.323).

Riverford provided a rich complementary case study. Not unlike Fernville, Riverford experienced several challenges and changes. Riverford faced financial

implications from the Covid-19 pandemic. Budgets required careful management, and financial outputs exceeded income and staff redundances occurred.

Furthermore, there were recent changes to the trust board with many new trustees recruited. This was in part due to significant upcoming decisions needed regarding the future of the trust considering recent Government publications on expectations of all schools to join established multi-academy trusts. Decisions made will impact the organisation and individuals within it, and an interim advisor was contracted to assist. The trust board were required to reflect on the culture, values and aims of the school and the trust, to develop a single external message. Alongside this, the headteacher resigned in April 2022 and an interim headteacher was appointed. Recruitment for a permanent headteacher began, initiating further conversations around the culture and values of Riverford to ensure the recruitment pack and process reflected this and to attract applicants whose values aligned.

Such discussions highlighted that Riverford held core values reflecting a commitment to trauma-informed approaches. There was acknowledgement that all young people accessing their services had experienced trauma, as well as consensus that all staff dealt with other traumatic experiences within their roles. All-staff training on restorative practices, emotion coaching and trauma-informed approaches was scheduled for September 2022; discussions around the allocation of resources to support supervision for staff who work with particularly traumatic situations were underway. Discussions around the future of the school and trust revolved around how to continue a learning and change trajectory in line with a trauma-informed culture, in sustainable ways.

Consequently, Riverford complements the first case well. Both organisations shared the learning and change trajectory of embedding trauma-informed approaches into practices, to better support the outcomes of vulnerable young people. However, the organisations were at different stages of moving towards this goal. Fernville depicted processes required to *begin* learning around trauma-informed approaches, and the challenges within this. Riverford College depicted processes required *after* learning has begun; how learning can be progressed, and the challenges in ensuring these are reflected consistently and sustainable throughout other changes too.

3.5.1 Researcher positionality

Since I held a governance role, Riverford incorporated a practitioner research approach (Punch, 2013; Vrikki et al., 2019). Consequently, I was always acting from *within* the organisation *within* the responsibilities of my role. This can assist with collaborative knowledge creation. Teachers are often framed as 'users' instead of 'producers' of knowledge (Vrikki et al., 2019, p.185). Through the perspective of practitioner, social actors within the organisation are enlisted in knowledge production (e.g. Phillips & Kristiansen., 2012, p.258). There is a mutual exchange of learning, as practitioners can develop their practice at the same time the researcher learns from the engagement with colleagues (e.g. Vrikki et al., 2019, p.186). Dimmock (2016) argues that, at the school level: 'the concept of research engagement offers a powerful and promising strategy to achieve close alignment between knowledge production, mediation and application, and a way

of maximising knowledge mobilisation' (p.52). Mitigated by my involvement, key stakeholders were also involved in the research process, from design to dissemination, and in this way closing the gap between knowledge production and application. My practitioner role also enabled access to social situations that may otherwise have gone undocumented (e.g. Simpson and Tuson, 2003, p.16). Oftentimes processes and behaviours are so embedded it is easy for them to go unnoticed, and drawing attention to both the successes and the challenges present could assist organisational learning and change agendas. Furthermore, undertaking practitioner research can reduce the level of 'threat' of research (Simpson and Tuson, 2003, p.62).

Practitioner research is not without limitations. There is additional risk of observer bias: 'the observer records what - they - thought occurred' or what they wish to be recorded (Simpson and Tuson, 2003, p.18). As I held a governance role, I was obligated to work within the organisation's best interests and therefore the risk of bias was greater. To account for this, I ensured participants were always aware of my researcher identity and purpose (Guest et al., 2013, p.332), considering both goals of knowledge creation and the mutual learning of participants simultaneously (Phillips & Kristiansen., 2012, p.278). When researching a familiar setting it is also important to 'make the familiar strange' (Simpson and Tuson, 2003, p.3; Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007, p.9). Researchers should somewhat detach from the familiar, viewing events from different perspectives throughout (Simpson and Tuson, 2003, p.3). However, Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) also argue there is value in 'exploiting' how people respond to the presence of a practitioner as researcher, as it 'may be as informative as how they react to other

situations' (p.16). It was therefore imperative to remain reflexive of my positioning throughout.

Holding an active position within the board required additional ethical considerations to ensure that I was acting within the boundaries of the role during my time as researcher there, too. National guidelines for acting board members specify that members must always act within the organisation's best interests, whilst ensuring that the organisation carries out its purposes for public benefit (Charity Commission for England and Wales, 2018). Board members must make balanced and informed decisions that comply with governing laws, ensuring the organisation is accountable. Within this, guidance stipulates that decisions must not conflict with personal interests or lead to the receipt of personal benefit from the organisation.

In line with this guidance, the decision to include Riverford as participants within this study was given careful consideration, as their participation in this study did, of course, benefit me, as researcher. At the same time, it could also be argued that the in-depth study of Riverford may have brought to light factors within organisational policies and practices that may have reflected negatively on the organisation. However, the aims and motivations of this study are not to expose 'bad' practices as an example of what not to do, but to provide an understanding of the granular details involved in organisational learning and change. Better understanding of the ways in which organisational policies impact practices and vice versa, could only work to assist the organisation moving forward. My position within the organisation meant that I already had access to board meetings and

documentations etc.; it was less intrusive for me to carry out this research than an external researcher.

After careful collaborative consideration it was concluded that with an ethical duty to ensure that the data collected reflected the *true* experiences of the participants involved in the research, and an acute understanding of the diverse and subtle ways in which research can promote harm, the benefits of the research for both the organisation itself and the wider implications for 'public good' were worth pursuing (UK Statistics Authority, 2022). As part of my reflexive and reflective approach to consideration of the ways in which my governance role could impact this study, it was agreed I would have frequent check-in meetings with Anita, the headteacher of the school, and Louisa, the deputy chair of the trust board. Within these meetings, time was set aside to reflect on my positionality within this, and any concerns had the time and space to be aired and worked through. Through a thorough, transparent and rigorous research process, I am confident that my dual role has been given appropriate reflexivity within this study.

3.5.2 Participants

Whilst at Fernville all staff members employed were participants, the increased number of staff meant this was not as possible for Riverford. All 12 trustees and committee members were participants due to the use of notes from meetings as data. This included: the headteacher, assistant headteacher, chair, assistant chair, clerk, one dual role teaching staff, the HR manager and the business manager, plus 4 external trustees, including myself. Consent was sought individually each

time and several trustees also volunteered for interviews. The headteacher and deputy chair of trustees acted as coordinators of the research, and three planning meetings were included as data. Additionally, participants included five members of senior leadership, via a focus group, and five additional members of staff volunteering for interviews. The call for participation was circulated via the headteacher, using an all-staff email, as well as during an all-staff briefing. A reminder email was sent to staff two weeks after the first. Staff volunteering for interviews included two site leaders, one class teacher, and two staff holding dual roles of teaching positions and therapeutic support.

With a larger staff body, I anticipated more volunteers. Discussions with the headteacher suggested this may have been in part due to the timing in the academic year: the Autumn term is notoriously a 'settling in' period for young people transitioning to the school which can put additional pressure on staff.

Table of participants

Pseudonym	Primary role	Additional roles
Anita	Headteacher	Trustee; SLT link; study coordinator
George	Assistant headteacher	Trustee; safeguarding lead
William	Chair of trustees	External
Louisa	Deputy chair of trustees	Study coordinator
Toni	Clerk to trustees	External
Donna	HR manager	Trustee
Sarah	Business manager	Trustee
Mabel	Trustee	Class teacher
Ivan	Trustee	External
Connie	Trustee	External
Miguel	Trustee	External

Josie	Governance role	Practitioner researcher
Levi	Senior leadership team	Teaching and learning lead
Harry	Senior leadership team	Attendance lead
Gabriel	Senior leadership team	Behaviour lead
Nadine	Class teacher	Site leader
Beth	Class teacher	Site leader
Anton	Class teacher	Subject lead
Emma	Class teacher	Therapeutic mentoring
Sylvia	Class teacher	Therapeutic mentoring

Table 3: Riverford College table of participants

3.5.3 Overview of data collection

Data collection for Riverford took place between September 2022 and January 2023; a shorter timeframe than Fernville. This was dictated in part by the organisational focus for that term. School improvement plans included a heightened focus on trauma-informed approaches and strategic plans included two whole-staff in-person inset days, one at the start of September and a follow-up to refresh learning in January. It therefore made practical sense to bookend the data collection period with the two parallel inset days, concluding by the end of January.

From a research perspective, this shorter timeframe made sense too. The initial time spent with the first case gaining a deeper understanding was not necessary. My positioning meant that whilst I did still seek to understand staff perspectives, I already understood the organisation itself. Additionally, all data was collected in person, on-site. I could collect similar amounts of data over a shorter timeframe:

staff routines aligned with the school day, so negotiating interview times was simpler, sometimes interviewing several staff on the same day I was on-site for meetings already. Furthermore, learning from Fernville meant I approached the second with sharper focus. The more time spent with Fernville, the more I refined how to meet research aims. Simultaneously, I had invested more time developing my own research skills which inevitably improved my practices. The shorter timeframe, however, was not without potential negative consequences. Within the second case this longitudinal perspective is lacking and requires reflexive consideration during analysis.

Observations

The line between observer and participant was more precarious within Riverford due to my governance role. During the research process I attended four trust meetings included as data: one board meeting, two education committee meetings, and one business committee meeting. For each I held a dual role of participant as well as researcher. The decision was made to include only information relevant to the research agenda as data. Whilst all attendees consented to participate, the consensus was made that inclusion of content not relevant to the research would cross an ethical boundary. It was agreed that included would be any areas where trauma-informed approaches were discussed; anywhere discussing strategic plans involving staff training, teaching and learning practices, polices related to well-being and managing processes of organisational learning and change. This was broad; the boundaries not set in stone. It was therefore agreed I would not audio-record entire meetings but would seek verbal

permission during meetings if I wished to audio-record a section on the agenda. Meeting minutes were, however, included, as these were anonymised and signed off by each member as practice. During meetings I recorded notes and post-meeting reflections which were then shared with participating members.

One requirement of holding a governance role was to link with senior leadership on a specific area of practice to monitor progress, offer support and for accountability. My link role was with the headteacher, around supporting disadvantaged students. Within the research period two link meetings were held. Both focused on trauma-informed organisational strategies and so meetings were included as data. Meetings were audio-recorded, transcribed, combined with post-meeting reflections and member checked. Whilst these meetings were part of my role, the data complements other findings, offering an interesting perspective.

Another source of data was whole staff training. I attended four inset days throughout; two in September 2022, one in November 2022 and one in January 2023. I again held a dual role of participant and observer. For these, I sought permission from the headteacher to attend. The focus was relevant to the research as well as for me within my governance role due to the all-staff context and opportunity to observe strategic plans in action. Data was collected through notes made as-it-happened and reflections. Following the first inset day, I shared notes with the headteacher. The headteacher decided it would be useful to share my notes during the following board meeting. From a research perspective this was also useful: sharing prompted discussions with other members which fed into collective learning.

I also used planning meetings with key staff coordinating the research as data. For this, the headteacher volunteered due to their strategic oversight and vested interest in developing trauma-informed approaches. The deputy chair of trustees also volunteered. Outside of their trust role, they had a background of working with services supporting care-experienced young people and advocated for trauma-informed practices across services. Throughout the research we met three times, and these participatory discussions are included as data within the findings.

Outside of participatory observations I also observed staff briefings. Staff met every Friday for a short in-person collective briefing. These were led by the headteacher, who re-capped events of the week, and shared notices. From October 2022, the headteacher introduced a ‘thank yous' section, where staff could email in ‘thank yous’ ahead of the briefing, to any staff and students that they wanted to thank. Consent was given from the headteacher and staff at the main school site for me to audio-record briefings, with the understanding that all identifiable information – for the organisation and individuals – would be omitted. Gaining access proved challenging. The time of briefings often changed at short notice, because of absences, internal events, school closures and unforeseen circumstances. Changes often weren’t communicated to me as an outside observer. This meant I attended only four staff briefings in person. Minutes were emailed to me afterwards, to include as data.

Interviews

In total, nine interviews took place. Participating were the headteacher; chair of trustees; deputy chair; education committee member; five staff members holding differing additional roles, including a teacher, two site leaders, and two staff holding dual teaching and therapeutic roles. Each participant held different responsibilities and had worked across different roles over different lengths of time, providing different perspectives.

Interviews were semi-structured, loosely following the same questions as before. Interviews did become slightly less structured, however: whilst aiming to keep to pre-determined questions, I let the inputs of participants dictate the direction of the interview more than before. This was in part due to the deeper understanding of the organisation I had: less time was needed to understand current practices. I also recognised that the context, ways of working, and staff roles were different. The looser structure enabled a deeper understanding of the perspectives of staff from their unique contexts within the organisation and led to a deeper understanding of the organisation as a whole.

Separately to this, one focus group with senior leadership was held. There were five members of senior leadership, and all attended the focus group. Each held an additional responsibility, overseeing different organisational aspects, including teaching and learning, behaviour, attendance and safeguarding. The structure was semi-structured: I brought questions for discussion, however allowed space for conversation to go in different directions when appropriate, as my role was more of facilitator than interviewer. The aim was to understand the processes of organisational learning and change around trauma-informed approaches from the

collective perspective of leadership. Whilst interviews and observations provide individual perspectives and collective practices, observing leadership as a team, and interviewing leadership as a collective, provided insight into the ways of working within the organisation at a strategic level and complimented other data.

Document analysis

I additionally included key documentation as data. Where possible I kept to similar documentation as Fernville, however my positioning gave access to a wider pool of documents. Those included were school improvement plans; strategic planning documentation; related policy documents e.g. safeguarding policies and mental health policies; new staff recruitment and new starter documentations. To mitigate data saturation and respect ethical boundaries around the holding of data outside of the research agenda, in collaboration with the headteacher and deputy chair of trustees I omitted any content – whether entire documents or sections – that did not contribute to the research agenda.

3.6 Data analysis

‘Analysis begins when the participant observer collects information in an everyday life setting and considers it in terms of a study problem’ (Jorgensen, 1989, p.115). This statement is especially true considering the emergent nature of the study. Early analysis involved ‘uncovering specific issues of study’ (p.107): at Fernville, collaboratively designing the research with the organisation offered a rich view of processes occurring within the local context (Miles and Huberman, 1984, p.21). As

different challenges emerged priorities of the study shifted and research questions were adapted in line with ongoing and iterative analysis of emergent data. Through asking different questions of the design itself at each stage, in collaboration, and making sense of the data within these early stages, I was engaged in ‘the construction of meaningful patterns and organisations of facts’ (Jorgensen, 1989, p.107). Miles and Huberman (1984) argue:

> *From the beginning - the qualitative analyst is beginning to draw conclusions, to decide what things mean, and to note regularities, patterns, explanations, possible configurations, causal flows, and propositions. The competent researcher holds these conclusions lightly, maintaining openness and skepticism, but the conclusions are still there, inchoate and vague at first, then increasingly explicit and grounded (p.26).*

The emergent design combined with early engagement with analysis required several considerations. An ongoing and reflexive awareness of the role of researcher as a tool for data collection and analysis was essential. Qualitative researchers construct a ‘reality’ through their interpretations which is informed and guided through experiences, relationships in the field and knowledge of the research field (Check and Schutt, 2011, p.300). Different researchers would therefore interact with and construct this ‘reality’ differently, reaching differing conclusions (p.300). Consequently, qualitative researchers become the instrument for analysis (Nowell et al., 2017, p.2; Check and Schutt, 2011, p.300). Analysis therefore requires an iterative and reflexive approach from the beginning, with progressive focusing (Check and Schutt, 2011, p.300). The researcher must therefore ‘know [themself], [their] biases, and preconceptions’ (Check and Schutt, 2011, p.300).

Consequently, collecting multiple data types to 'establish a chain of evidence' (Yin, 2018, p.45) was useful, alongside a systematic and transparent record of decisions made relating to data collection and analysis (e.g. Miles and Huberman, 1984; Nowell et al., 2017). Data was collected through a combination of interviews, informal conversations, participant and non-participant observational notes, and document analysis. Collecting multiple forms adds to the 'construct validity': through correlating data from different methods, I could assess patterns between and within data sets (Yin, 2018, p.45). This also enabled both inductive and deductive engagement: I could 'generate concepts and linkages between them based on reading the text; [and] check the text to see whether - concepts and interpretations are reflected in it' (Check and Schutt, 2011, p.301). This process could be repeated across different data, enabling interpretations to be deemed either consistent or anomalies.

The differing methods did however mean that a systematic method for 'coding, labelling - sorting, shifting, constructing and reconstructing' materials was essential (Jorgensen, 1989, p.115). Interviews were transcribed as soon as possible, either immediately or at the end of the day, as were observational field notes. Following observations and discussions, I assigned a period of reflection before writing notes up and sharing summaries with participants for member checking. On occasion I chose to omit from notes when content was either too personal in nature, identifiable to the participant or not relevant to the study (e.g. Angrosio, 2007, p.85; p.86). For Riverford I followed a similar procedure of documenting data collection, however the in-person nature of data collection

meant in some cases the period between collecting the data and transcription was longer.

I chose to transcribe interviews by hand rather than through transcription software. Whilst there are timesaving benefits to using transcription software, transcribing by hand meant I “got to know” the data well and quickly: I could note first impressions and emerging themes and patterns as I was listening and reading. However, due to time constraints, transcriptions generally followed what Guest et al., (2013) described as ‘clean’ verbatim transcripts: ‘responses of the participants are transcribed verbatim, but filler words and interviewer confirmations (mms) are omitted’ (p.285). Transcriptions, along with other data sets, were uploaded to NVivo, and saved under unidentifiable codes (e.g. Angrosio, 2007, p.86), where I then used both deductive and inductive coding to explore the data.

I employed a broadly thematic approach to analysis: I familiarised myself with the data, generated initial codes through indexing, mapping, and searching for patterns and drew out key emerging themes (Nowell et al., 2017; Elliott, 2018; Angrosio, 2007). The application of initial codes enabled an exploration of themes emerging from literature and initial readings of the data, whilst staying open to the additional codes found during analysis (Elliott, 2018, p.2855). Srivastava and Hopwood (2018) argue that, whilst an inductive approach allows for emergence of patterns, themes and categories from the data, these are ‘driven by what the inquirer wants to know and how the inquirer interprets what the data are telling her or him according to subscribed theoretical frameworks, subjective perspectives, ontological and epistemological positions, and intuitive field understandings’

(p.77). I therefore applied reflexive iteration throughout analysis- revisiting data and connecting with emerging insights (p77). I followed the reflexive analysis framework presented by Srivastava and Hopwood (2018), checking in with the following questions during analysis: what is the data telling me? What do I want to know? What is the relationship between the two? From here, I was able to begin to work towards testing answers to my research questions through looking for qualifying examples as well as ‘playing’ with the data to check for anomalies in the data or negative findings (e.g. Yin, 2018; Jorgensen, 1989).

A criticism of thematic approaches is a lack of substantial literature outlining how it *should* be done (e.g. Nowell et al., 2017; Elliott, 2018). This flexibility could lead to inconsistencies, or incoherence (Nowell et al., 2017, p.2). I therefore used several techniques to remain reflexive in my approach. Miles and Huberman (1984) argue:

> *Verification may be as brief as a fleeting second thought crossing the analyst's mind during writing, with a short excursion back to the field notes, or it may be thorough and elaborate, with lengthy argumentation and review among colleagues to develop intersubjective consensus (p.26)*

In part, using multiple data collection methods allowed for a triangulation of results: I could check for similar findings across data sets within the same case (Miles and Huberman, 1984), testing the internal validity of my analysis within a case (Yin, 2018, p.45). I could also somewhat test external validity through ‘replication logic’ across both cases (Yin, 2018, p.45; Miles and Huberman, 1984, p.28), although always considering the differences in case samples and my positionality within them.

Furthermore, multiple data collection methods enabled me to check for both consistencies and inconsistencies in what ‘knowledge informants’ told me: through reviewing interviews and observational data, I could check what informants told me about behaviours against what evidence was presented (Angrosio, 2007, p.69). Angrosio (2007) argues: ‘a true pattern is one that is shared by members of the group (their actual behaviour) and/or one that is believed to be desirable, legitimate, or proper by the group (their ideal behaviour). Multiple data collection methods enabled me to capture these patterns, as well as being open to ‘negative evidence’ that may not have been validated through data checking (p.67 - 69).

I also used a systematic data log to track what decisions I made, when, and why, to cross check when necessary (e.g. Miles and Huberman, 1984, p.22; Elliott, 2018, p.2858; Nowell et al., 2017, p.1). Elliott (2018) argues that consistency over time as you develop understanding of the data is unlikely, and consistency between two raters will not necessarily be desirable (p.2859). The emergent, iterative nature of research meant that my understandings of data and the ways it provided understanding of its local contexts developed and shifted throughout. Coding of early interviews differed initially to those coded later. Keeping a systematic record of decisions made at each stage was crucial to enable transparency (Nowell et al., 2017, p.1), and returning to earlier data as my understanding of the data developed over time was useful (Elliott, 2018, p.2859). Nowell et al., (2017) argue that trustworthiness, credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability are all enhanced through transparent and systematic recording and disclosing of methods and analysis (p.1), and Miles and

Huberman (1984) argue that this enables creativity within analysis to flourish (p.22).

Alongside this approach to analysis I also used a narrative writing approach simultaneously, to ensure that the findings from the analytical process aligned with my experiences and perspectives of each case and effectively captured the organisational learning and change trajectory. This study involved organisational ethnography with multiple participants with multiple forms of data collection at different stages and phases. I aimed to capture nuances within the organisational learning and change processes, however the learning and change trajectory of course was not linear. What I was left with, then, after each exit from the field, was 'scrambled' data and 'unstoried information' (e.g. Gersie, 1997, pp.33–34). I needed to un-scramble the story within the data gathered to inform my understanding of the research questions considered. To do this, I needed to understand the narrative in the spaces *in-between* the data.

There is a body of literature spanning different disciplines arguing for the strengths of narrative writing and storytelling methods for processing experiences. Much of this research explores how narrative writing can provide the space to work through experiences (e.g. McArdle and Byrt, 2001; Armstrong, 2018). Gersie (1997) argues we can become 'preoccupied with our inner world' (p.33). The inner story which we create can then be 'insufficiently checked to see that it actually matches the circumstances' (p.33). However, using narrative writing can provide the distance required to better understand the circumstances we have experienced

(e.g. McArdle and Byrt, 2001, p.520). Within the safety of a story one can explore 'intense emotional expression' and can investigate the 'multiple manifestations' of one's own experiences through the 'dissonant lenses of others' (Armstrong, 2018, p.329).

Whilst such research explores narrative writing as a tool for understanding inner narratives, it can also be applied to the research context. The ethnographer not only bears witness to multiple people's experiences but also hears such experiences from the perspectives of multiple people too. Additionally, the ethnographer also lives through their own experience of the research journey. Holding – and making sense of – multiple realities is complex.

Considering these understandings, I explored narrative writing for myself, as a tool to help me process my experiences and perspectives of fieldwork. I began this process by re-reading through fieldwork notes, matching these notes with the various forms of data gathered alongside them. From here, I explored writing the story of each case study as if it *was* a story to help make sense of the narrative, which in turn helped make sense of the data. I then edited this, turning it into a series of vignettes (e.g. Miles, 1990), illustrating the data as well as the spaces *in-between* the data, too.

Gersie (1997) argues that though a person's circumstances or experiences may be confusing, the capacity to relate a story remains (p.34). Writing about an event through the form of a story can help make it more broadly accessible: 'writing - forces a structure on an otherwise overwhelming and oftentimes chaotic experience' (McArdle and Byrt, 2001, p.520). Narrative writing throughout

fieldwork helped me make sense of ‘unstoried information’ (Gersie, 1997, pp.33–34). This process helped inform my understanding of both my data and the spaces in-between and consequently my findings resonate with my ‘emotions as well as the intellect’ (Kroll and Harper, 2013, p.181).

Once I was satisfied with my analysis it was member-checked by key informants (e.g. Yin, 2018; Berli, 2021). Feedback from informants has confirmatory power over the findings (Miles and Huberman, 1984, p.28), however informant checking is an ethical consideration. The primary responsibility of researchers is to the people and cultures studied (Angrosio, 2007, p.85): the research process is a dialogue between researcher and community (p.88), and this should continue when data collection ends. Check and Schutt (2011) argue: ‘the meaning of a text - is negotiated among a community of interpreters, and the extent that some agreement is reached about meaning at a particular time and place, that meaning can only be based on concential community validation’ (p.299). Patterns, themes, and presentation of data must represent the community, and generalised abstractions from data should be presented to collaborating organisations for validation. Draft findings were therefore presented within staff meetings at each collaborating organisation. Berli (2021) reminds that ‘interpretations are never finished’; ‘researchers employ specific conventions to coordinate and wrap up ‘definite’ versions’ (p.787). This was specifically important for this research where the intention was to document the journeys of the organisations, not to present a *complete* story.

3.7 Ethical considerations

The complexities of the design and methodology of this research meant that ethical considerations are embedded, emerging and reflexive. Consequently, ethical considerations specific to each stage are embedded throughout. The collaborative nature required a reflexive and ongoing approach to ethical considerations. Organisational practices changed over time and priorities shifted and changed too. Research had to adapt to challenges and changes within each organisation through adopting differing strategies and using different methods (due to practice changes), different participants (due to staffing changes) and different time frames (due to organisational challenges). Considering this, ethical considerations were considered as a continuous cycle. Consequently, University-based ethical approval required multiple amendments. This was useful as a reminder to always hold ethical implications at the forefront when conducting research with human participants, as ethics must be an 'everyday' practice (Mockler, 2014; Small, 2001; Cowles, 1988).

Some considerations unique to both collaborative and practitioner research include issues of consent (i.e. pressure from an organisation for staff to participate), voice and ownership, transparency of the process, negotiation of expectations and practices, relationships and trust (Mockler, 2014; Cohen et al., 2017; Pittaway et al., 2010). These are amplified considering the ethnographic approach. As Pittaway et al. (2010) argue, there needs to be a 'negotiated reciprocal benefit' that 'challenges researchers to justify their projects with reference to the benefits delivered to the vulnerable groups' themselves' (p.248). There should be a shared understanding of ethical principles for all stakeholders

(Troyna and Foster, 1988), which ‘matches aspirations with reality’: a ‘shared consensus of what constitutes ‘effectiveness’ and ‘constraints’ in the professional context’ (Troyna and Foster, 1988, p.296). Relationships should be built on mutual trust and openness, and I was reflective of this throughout.

3.7.1 Working with staff

Collaborative and practitioner research ‘take[s] issue with the objectification of research participants - [blurring] the distinction between participant and researcher’ (Locke et al., 2013, p.107). There needs to be consideration of the ‘intersection’ between professional and research codes of ethics (e.g. Phillips & Kristiansen., 2012). Staff participating must feel part of the research, as research is with - not on - the organisation. There may be ‘resistance to change’ from longstanding colleagues (Locke et al., 2013, p.118). This is something which as both an outsider researcher and practitioner researcher I was sensitive to.

Working with practitioners also requires reflection on power relations, individual and organisational values and time commitments. Power relations are ‘inescapable’ and require critical reflection (Van der Meulen, 2011). Collaborative research means roles may differ and change over time: power conflicts can exist as ‘perceived difference of status between research players’ unfolds (Savvides et al., 2014: p.414). Ultimately, the researcher ‘maintains the authority of representing the community or situation’ (Bruce et al., 2011). This can be a source of conflict.

Furthermore, as positionality is evolving and 'nonlinear', working relationships require 'constant negotiating' (Lofthouse et al., 2015). There is a complex interaction between our moral, personal and social values: 'values will always impact upon research' (Greenbank, 2003: p.798). All observations are position-dependent: 'not a "view from nowhere," but one "from a delineated somewhere' (Sen, 1993, p.127). This requires consideration when many observers are involved. Additionally, a commitment is required, as research relies on observations over time. Mixed agendas and commitment needed means that support from parties can vary, leading to implications for research and practice (Cowie and McNae, 2017). Flexibility to adapt research schedules was therefore necessary.

3.7.2 Trauma

Sensitive topics in research can be hard to define, however generally include anything with the potential to be threatening to those studied (Lee and Renzetti, 1990). The topic of trauma has the potential to be threatening to those who are trauma experienced.

Researchers of trauma are concerned with the potential for emotional distress for participants (e.g. Newman, 2006; Jaffe, 2015). Burke et al. (2009) describe this as the 'Pandora's box phenomenon': 'in-depth interviews - may unleash painful emotions and memories' (p.349). Furthermore, research with trauma-experienced participants needs to be wary of the impacts of trauma on relationship building - e.g. 'skepticism, stigma, disgust, intimidation' (Newman, 2006, p.32): trauma survivors 'may approach research with elevated suspiciousness - because

traumatic events may render people powerless' (p.32). Whilst the study aimed to better support trauma-experienced young people, staff may too have been trauma-experienced. For these participants, the topic of trauma may itself have been traumatising. Building in opportunities for participant control - i.e. around schedules - was crucial (Cowles, 1988). Therefore, the research process was made transparent to participants; their involvement planned to best suited them.

Participants may also see interviews as a therapeutic opportunity - i.e. a chance to tell someone about their experiences to help with coping or healing. There is literature around the similarities between qualitative interviewing and therapies and the therapeutic value of interviews (e.g. Rossetto, 2014), however this was not the intended nature of this research. Seedat et al., (2004) suggest that the 'nature and working of questions and the skill and sensitivity of the interviewers are paramount' (p.263). Whilst it was crucial to consider potential distress, the idea was of a managed risk - i.e. a contingency plan in place in case there was need for it. Following safeguarding procedures was crucial, as well as having a clear, accessible 'opt-out' or 'pause' option available (British Educational Research Association (BERA), 2018: p.18; p.19; p.25).

3.7.3 Dissemination

It is important to consider dissemination as an ethical issue (BERA, 2018, p.33; p.34). As this research concerns organisations outside of academia, it is important public reach has 'a positive impact on the lives of the - people who contributed' (Von Benzon and Van Blerk, 2017, p.903). Furthermore, Morrow and Richards (1996) emphasise the responsibility researchers bear for how vulnerable people

are represented and the risks of sensationalising findings (p.102). Whilst vulnerable young people were not *directly* involved as participants, the aim of the study recognised that vulnerable young people supported through the organisations could have been affected by changes to practices. Additionally, sensationalising the impacts of trauma on vulnerable students risks further stigmatisation to already stigmatised groups. It was also crucial that participants were not indirectly identifiable (BERA, 2018, p.11). Cross-checking writing, anonymising data at the point of collection and not including identifiable data was essential (BERA, 2018, p.22; p.24).

3.7.4 Position in the field

My position within the field required a constant and considered approach. Informed consent, voice and ownership, transparency and negotiation, confidentiality, anonymity and trust are all ethical considerations that require more deliberative action when conducting practitioner research (e.g. Mockler, 2014), and my dual position as researcher and practitioner within the second case required an open and transparent negotiation with key stakeholders. Coupal (2005) reminds that there should be a greater emphasis on ethical principles of justice and inclusiveness when conducting practitioner research in schools. For both case studies, gaining access and gathering data as a practitioner and participating observer came with intertwined ethical and practical implications (Alcadipani and Hodgson, 2009). It was crucial to establish formal research access despite existing relationships, to uphold a high standard of ethics. As Alcadipani and Hodgson (2009) remind, ‘the manner in which access is negotiated

and maintained reflects and forms the ethical aspect of the researcher in action, as s/he becomes implicated in the instrumental manipulation of research subjects and her/his conscience plays a very important role'. Establishing clear, formal guidelines for access in a constant and ongoing manner acts to 'relieve researchers from the burden of following their own conscience and making their own ethical choices', therefore protecting myself as researcher, participant and practitioner, as well as the organisations and the individuals within them.

Whilst conducting organisational change research on sensitive topics is not a straightforward process, there is potential for positive change. My position within the field may be complex, however provided a unique insight into organisational learning and change in-situ. Furthermore, practitioners working to support trauma-experienced young people have the right to have a say in changes made to practice. Protecting individuals and the collective within the boundaries of research required an ongoing reflexive approach to ethical considerations. As such, ethical considerations and reflections on my positionality within the field have been embedded throughout each stage of the research.

With this in mind, the following two chapters will now present the findings from each case study in turn, beginning with Fernville Academy.

Chapter four: Fernville Academy

Prelude

It was Autumn 2020. For many of us, life had become somewhat stagnant. Whilst daily updates from the news became increasingly bleak and frightening, as we approached seven months into the Covid-19 pandemic many of us had become used to the mundane, repetitive rhythm of working from home. Whilst the external world felt unstable with ever changing regulations and restrictions, many of us took comfort in the familiarity of routines we had built for ourselves within the confines of our homes. Wake up – feed the cat – feed ourselves – daily walk – bed – repeat.

Of course, this wasn't the case for everyone. For Jane and Pete, the director and assistant director of Fernville Academy Educational Trust, work was far from familiar, mundane, routine. Prior to the pandemic, Fernville Academy delivered in person sessions to disadvantaged young people. These, of course, had to stop. When the impacts of the pandemic continued long into Autumn, Jane and Pete were faced with a dilemma: figure out how to continue supporting the young people remotely or stop organisational activity until things returned to 'normal'. The problem was, the long-standing national organisation were a registered charity, reliant on funds raised through partnerships, benefactors, sponsors and donations. They couldn't take the financial risk of ceasing services any longer. To survive, they needed to adapt.

For Fernville Academy, what followed was a period of rapid change. Jane and Pete had to think quickly, making on-the-job strategic and practical decisions that would inevitably impact everyone within the organisation. The necessity of adaption led to some innovations initially well received, such as the online learning

platform created by Taylor and Viktoria, and the recruitment of Jon to assist with communications. However, a significant reduction in funding increased financial pressures and resulted in several redundancies with workloads yet to be reallocated.

Amidst this context of instability, with internal and external pressures mounting, Jane and Pete volunteered their organisation – and themselves – to participate in this research. They had assumed that restrictions would have eased by Autumn; that everything would be back to 'normal', but decided to continue, nonetheless. Afterall, the pandemic itself had now brought more attention to those most 'vulnerable', and the impacts of 'trauma' were beginning to ripple throughout society. And so, with the Covid-19 pandemic forming an uncertain backdrop, the organisation began its journey towards learning about – and embedding – trauma-informed approaches into practices.

Initiating the process of learning and change, however, proved challenging at first. Despite initial enthusiasm, disagreements between Jane and Pete about what it might mean them, and their organisation, became apparent. Pete, for example, held expectations of the creation of one targeted intervention, led by specific staff receiving specific training. Jane did not share this view; the argument between them often circling repetitively with neither quite willing to budge. An early planning meeting highlighted this. Pete came to the meeting agitated about the disruption to his already mounting workload, with a very apparent desire to withdraw from the process altogether:

> There's so much going on now. We have a massive changeover of staffing, people are having to adjust, people's roles are all over the place; we're still figuring that out. I just don't know if we can engage with this right now.

Jane was also agitated, but her frustrations, it seemed, were increased by Pete's difference in understanding:

> No because we already do some of these strategies that support staff to work in trauma-informed ways anyway, so I don't think you understand?

I took a step back: observed their frustrations, listened to their contrasting perspectives, wondering if they'd see eye-to-eye for long enough for learning to begin. Thankfully, agreement to move forward was met. Alongside several other meetings following the same pattern of disagreement, I began to interview staff across other roles within the organisation. Whilst their roles and responsibilities varied, one thing was consistent: not only was there tension across the organisation, but apathy and resistance to change echoed throughout.

Staff briefings exemplified this. Pete really did keep briefings brief. Initially not longer than five minutes, they always followed the same structure: Pete said "hi", recapped weekly bulletins, and then everyone went their separate ways. I wondered if this worked for staff, only five minutes of their already busy days, however interviews suggested otherwise: 'The meetings are too short and structured to ask questions'; 'It's basically a repeat of the email'. Others took this further still, arguing that the meetings made relationships between the leadership team and the wider staff body worse: 'Trust needs to be built and there just isn't the space for it'; 'They're just checking we're actually working'.

During the early stages of the data collection, I felt a creeping sense of concern. With the ongoing threat of the pandemic lurking, and this amount of tension, apathy and resistance to change, how would this organisation actually realise the change goals?

Nevertheless, research continued, and my involvement increased. I attended staff briefings, participated in training, completed coaching sessions, met frequently with Jane to discuss all things trauma. I also increased the frequency of meetings between myself, Pete, Jane, and the wider leadership team. A month or so later, in a meeting with the extended leadership team, I first realised things were starting to change. Unprompted, Pete wondered aloud:

> I do always think of trauma as being this really big thing; something kind of like a big life changing event, so I was wondering whether sometimes we can underplay the smaller trauma? Do you know what I mean?

A conversation then played out between Pete, Jane and Viktoria, where I observed, for the first time, all three sharing anecdotes of times they've felt the impacts of working with traumatised young people, through traumatic situations.

After that, I noticed a difference in staff briefings. Where briefings before were transactional, I now observed Pete posing discussion questions instead:

> What I want to do is for you guys to discuss. I want ideas, thoughts, on as an organisation what is our culture right now? What would a trauma-informed culture look like for us?

In response, the virtual room fell silent. As usual, most cameras were off, but I imagined staff pausing from whatever activity they were working on, looking up at

the screen with furrowed brows. 'Well, anyway, something to have a think about perhaps': Pete quickly filled the silence with an awkward laugh. Pete did, however, persevere, asking the same question in a later learning lunch. I braced myself for another awkward silence, however this time, a slow ripple of cameras turning on and hands starting to raise could be seen:

> Martin: Perhaps it would be good to have a more informal, lower stakes meeting and conversations with other members of staff?
>
> Jean: To just share what's hard.
>
> Penny: Yeh, we don't have a lot of space with that at the moment.

Pete seemed shocked, clearly also expecting another cold silence: 'I want to keep having these conversations. Let's really think about what we can do here'.

From then, excitement grew. Engagement and interest from all grew; it really felt like everyone was keen to share, learn and develop. Pete and Jane were on the same page. Pete was leading staff sessions with a decidedly trauma-informed lens; one-to-one discussions with Jane highlighted her own learning and reflection on leading the organisation towards a trauma-informed culture. I was confident that what I was observing was organisational learning in action. Learning that, I believed, would inevitably lead to change.

I started to think differently about the earlier tension, apathy, resistance that I had before observed. Perhaps, the difficult conversations, the disagreements, the expose of differences, wasn't an indicator of future failure after all. Perhaps instead, these could be a vital part of the process. Perhaps, in order to change,

they needed to first discover what it was they needed to change and why. Perhaps they needed to expose their vulnerabilities, discover what learning needed to happen and why.

However fast forward a couple of months, and after a concerningly long and unexpected period of 'out-of-office' automatic replies from Jane, I heard from Pete:

> Sorry for the radio silence! Lots of change here - Jane's no longer working with us and I'm taking on the director role. Super excited to get back on track though – lots of ideas!

This raised alarm bells, however a conversation with Pete reassured me of his excitement to continue with the learning trajectory. Plans were again set out, however my previous suspicions were confirmed when after another period of silence I was informed that Pete had also left the organisation, and as such they no longer 'had the capacity' to engage:

> We're trying to fill Pete's role and navigate our way forward as an organisation. Lots of changes are underway as you can imagine. - We just don't have the capacity now to continue this work.

When I came to this study, I envisaged that collaborative route mapping, collective learning, and opportunities for putting learning into practice was a clear-cut route to change. I anticipated challenges, however believed that the process of learning would result, in the end, in change. I felt disheartened, left with more questions than answers. What will happen now they've both left? Will anyone carry on these conversations? Will they continue with what they set out to do? How will I know if anything has actually *changed?*

Despite this, I continued analysis: reading and re-reading and re-reading the data. On the surface, the trajectory of change was a negative one. However, through the process of analysis, I realised this was, of course, not the full story. The journey of learning and change captured is not a story with a linear beginning, middle and end, but instead the narrative depicts what happened in-between*.*

The f*indings depict what happened and when and aid theoretical understandings into* why*. Whilst the unplanned ending of fieldwork caused frustration at the time, in hindsight these experiences provide a valuable contribution to the narrative journey of the organisation, and shed light on how learning and change around embedding trauma-informed approaches into practices can be conceptualised on a wider scale.*

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the findings from the first of two case studies: Fernville Academy. Fernville Academy was an educational organisation working alongside vulnerable young people delivering a coaching programme to support vulnerable learners with their educational development. Following a broadly ethnographic approach, different forms of qualitative data were collected.

Within this chapter the findings are presented systematically. First presented are the findings from the earlier period of data collection; exploratory in nature, the findings depict an organisation at the start of conceptualising what a trauma-informed culture would look like to them. As the research process progressed and

discussions around trauma and its impacts increased, the findings reflect a deeper engagement with learning and subsequently subtle changes in practices were observed. The findings are presented to reflect the temporal journey of the organisation whilst simultaneously acknowledging this is a reductionist view of the *messy* nature of reality. Finally, this chapter reflects on the depiction of organisational learning and change at the close of data collection. A reflection on strategies promoting learning and change is considered, as well as a reflection on barriers towards learning and change that remained unresolved. This provides a platform for considering the wider question of what learning and change looked like from an organisational perspective and how sustainable this change may be.

4.2 Initial exploration

> *Zadie: They claim that we're doing a good job with supporting the more vulnerable students; they claim we're well equipped to support them. But with what time? We barely get any time with the young people. And then, they claim that we should be taking on more of the kids that are trauma-experienced.*
>
> *The ones that are in care; the refugees. With what training? We haven't been trained to do this. Some of us have been asking for more training. We just get met with "we don't need more training"; "we're already doing it all as we should be". They're so resistant to look at where we could improve, that they aren't seeing where the system isn't working for us.*

Whilst key themes from the findings during initial exploration are presented here, this does not fully represent the complexities within the data. As is representative of the socially constructed nature of reality, oftentimes themes intertwine and contradict dependent on contexts. Within this, however, the overarching themes presented here - tension, apathy and resistance – are the most pervasive, interleaved within interactions observed.

4.2.1 Tension

The most prominent theme within initial exploratory data is tension. Tension is depicted through different contexts, between different actors, for different reasons, and through different forms, throughout many interactions during early stages of engagement. Despite participants within the leadership team showing initial enthusiasm, observed interactions depict tension between the different actors. Interviews with staff depict tension existing *between* the hierarchies too. Interviews suggest that tension also existed at an organisational level: policies and practices did not always align, and reporting policies sometimes did not match the values and aims of the intended organisational culture, and this is depicted through the lack of time and space for relationship building staff felt they had between themselves and students, external agencies, and each other.

Tensions within the leadership team

Tension within the leadership team initially stemmed from differences in conceptualisations of trauma-informed approaches in practice. Debates around who trauma-informed approaches are for, and what a trauma-informed approach looks like, caused tension within early planning phases.

In early planning meetings, enthusiasm for learning about trauma-informed approaches from the director, Jane, and the assistant director, Pete, stemmed from organisational change itself. With strategic plans in place to 'work with a whole new cohort of specifically children in care', initial conversations conveyed a

sense of necessity to equip staff to work with ‘increasing numbers’ of 'children in care’. Additionally, the organisation saw an increase in young people from refugee backgrounds, with additional educational needs and in receipt of social service support. As such, Jane and Pete’s initial motivation for developing trauma-informed practices stemmed from the argument that such young people are more likely to have experienced trauma: ‘they’re going to be coming with a history of trauma, I guess’. During these initial conversations, Pete conveyed they planned to deliver ‘specific training’ on working with certain groups: ‘we’ll have to put specific training in place for working with looked after children’; ‘we’ll get someone in to talk about working with refugees for those staff that do that’.

As time progressed and further planning meetings took place between the wider leadership team, a difference in conceptualisations of trauma-informed practice was conveyed:

> *Pete: What do you think we should do? Design a new programme?*
>
> *Jane: No, I don’t think that’s at all what we should do.*
>
> *Viktoria: I think what we already do now is great? We don’t need to change it just for those that have experienced trauma.*
>
> *Pete: We haven't got a system for sorting them out, anyway?*
>
> *Jane: Well, we work with vulnerable young people so we should assume that lots of them have experienced some kind of trauma?*

Different understandings of trauma-informed approaches caused tension between the team, as each participant depicted a different approach for implementing strategies for support. Whether a ‘new’ programme was designed for those who have experienced trauma or whether it was best to ‘assume’ that all vulnerable

young people have experienced ‘some kind’ of trauma caused debate amongst the participants. Later in the discussion, Jane acknowledged the tension: ‘it’s clear that we’re all coming at this with different understandings’, prompting Pete to reflect:

> *I have no idea what we even mean by trauma half the time; it’s clear I need to go away and do my reading before I can understand it better.*

Through discussion, perceptions of understanding shifted and changed. Whilst all initially agreed that learning was needed, different understandings of the *reasoning* behind this were revealed. Whilst actors present initially cited the organisational strategy of recruiting a larger population of ‘more vulnerable’ groups as the prompt for discussions, disagreements were brought to light when methods of delivery were under discussion. Whilst Pete began the discussion clear that the strategy would require ‘specialist training’ for *specific* staff members, through disputes and discussions with Jane, Pete acknowledged that his own misunderstandings may cause tension, and that learning was required *before* setting out a new strategy.

Differences in understanding of trauma-informed approaches and implications for practice were intertwined throughout the course of data collection. Prior knowledge of trauma-informed approaches impacted perceptions of the organisational learning and change processes required to move towards a culture that is trauma-informed. Whilst perspectives shifted and changed throughout, within initial exploratory stages, these differences resulted in tension within the leadership team.

Tensions between the hierarchies

Initial perspectives from the wider staff body also highlighted tensions between the perceptions and understandings between the hierarchies. Interview and observational data collected within earlier stages depicted a widely present difference between the perspectives of current practices from those in senior leadership roles, and the experiences of staff that interact with students day-to-day. For example, perspectives held by the assistant director Pete, and those with leading responsibilities within the programme's teams, did not always reflect the reality of the perspectives and experiences of those who were student coaches, and consequently such staff felt unsupported.

Firstly, due to differences in understandings and perspectives, many coaching staff expressed that guidance and support on working with vulnerable students was lacking, and this caused tension between the hierarchies. Often, staff suggested they would benefit from more guidance on how to 'manage situations where it's not working'. A conversation between staff members reflects this:

> *Mo: It can be quite stressful, working with young people who are struggling.*
>
> *Zadie: Any situation that causes a lot of stress on us as individuals.*
>
> *Mo: Toxic stress, yeh.*
>
> *Zadie: That's something leadership need to be better at supporting us with.*
>
> *Martin: We don't have the training on how to deal with this at all.*
>
> *Zadie: That means we can't do our jobs effectively and we're under extra pressure.*

Themes raised here were echoed throughout interviews, too: lack of training for working with young people who were ‘struggling’ could cause ‘toxic stress’ in staff, and the leadership team could have been ‘better’ at supporting this. Zadie and Mo further reflected:

> *Mo: We used to be able to bring hard sessions to the conversation with leadership, but these were brought up and just left there and not addressed as they should be and you just feel so unsupported.*
>
> *Zadie: Why would we listen to their new ideas when they don’t help us with the real stuff?*

This conversation suggests that a lack of guidance left staff feeling ‘unsupported’, and therefore less likely to ‘listen’ to ‘new ideas’ brought in. Learning and change towards trauma-informed practices was ‘new’ to the organisation; without support from the leadership team, this could exasperate tensions between the hierarchies.

Tensions between policies and practices

Another area causing tension within the organisation was the misalignment of policies and practices. The findings suggest there was a tension between the policies set out and the actual practices in place. Where policies were brought in without staff training given to meet these agendas, this caused further tension. Staff frequently raised concerns around the development of trauma-informed approaches to policies when formal training wouldn’t be provided to staff to meet these in practice:

> *Martin: What I think is missing now as I said is the specific training for staff.*

Jean, a student coach, further argued that by not providing formal training, the organisation enforced 'trial and error' practices, which could promote 'differences between us; 'some would get it right, but some wouldn't and that's not really fair to put it all on us like that'.

Several student coaches argued formal training on adapting practices for trauma-experienced students was necessary, so they could know when to 'change tact'; 'to know better when it's the time to kind of use a different approach'. Generally, they expressed a need for more guidance on the practical application of trauma-informed approaches, as opposed to 'just the knowledge':

> *Penny: We need to see what a different approach would look like.*
>
> *Mo: What we need to think about more is practical application around this.*

The findings suggest that these differences between policies and practices created further tensions between the leadership team and student coaches. Whilst policies reflecting a trauma-informed culture may have been in place, student coaches felt they 'needed' training, and more guidance on 'practical application', before these policies could be enacted.

Reporting policies

Tension between policies and practices also manifested in the inconsistency of reporting policies. Several staff argued this was a barrier to trauma-informed practice, as there needed to be 'official guidance' on responding to 'potentially distressing conversations': there were no policies guiding student coaches on

‘how to adapt behaviours and how to report these situations to colleagues too’. Without this, there was disconnect between policies and practice: ‘Otherwise, we’re all just doing our own thing aren’t we?’.

Nina, a trustee, similarly raised concerns that if reporting and monitoring policies aligning with a trauma-informed approach were not in place, then there would be no system for accountability for following through with policies that create a trauma-informed culture. Nina argued this was particularly crucial when there is ‘a lot of change’ happening at once:

> *There is a lot of change within the organisation now. If you say, “right ok, we want a focus on wellbeing”, you must ensure that support mechanisms are in place. Then you need a way of regularly challenge it to say, “are these things working?”, otherwise they can just fade into everything else that’s going on.*

There was concern that policies would be left un-challenged when lots changes simultaneously. As trustees hold a crucial role in holding organisations accountable for upholding policies in practice, reporting and monitoring policies need to be in place to reflect this, so new policies do not ‘just fade into everything else’.

Relationships

Tension was further found within student coaches' perspectives of policies that prevented opportunities for relationship building, both between students and staff, and relationships between the wider staff body. Several student coaches argued

this was the main barrier towards working in trauma-informed ways within current practices.

Student coaches emphasised the lack of time spent with students as a concern. Initiated by the Covid-19 pandemic restrictions, a significant reduction in contact time with students was seen. With most learning being delivered online, coaches then met with students ‘three times a year’. Coaches Paul and Jean argued that whilst this worked for some, the lack of time for relationship building proved difficult for those ‘more vulnerable’: ‘we're not hearing about the reasons they can’t engage or whatever’; ‘we literally don’t have that relationship with them that we used to’.

The coaching model employed encouraged students to visualise possible future selves, aiming to help them realise the ‘next steps’ required to meet future goals: ‘the purpose is that they reach a deeply reflective space’. Whilst these practices worked for some, several coaches argued: ‘it’s going to be very different for those [vulnerable] students’, often citing the lack of time to build ‘trust’ and ‘rapport’ with students as challenging, and frequently referring to themselves as ‘strangers’ within the processes:

> *Zadie: I'm not saying any of the questions are horrible, but for example we’ve just done self-worth and it’s really hard to do that with a stranger. I think it can be intrusive.*

Concerns around ‘triggering’ the students during sessions reoccurred throughout the findings. Coaches worried that students became ‘closed off’ due to the lack of

trusting relationships built, often expressing that this impacted their confidence, too:

> *Penny: I don't want us to blunder in with these questions about what you really want to do in the future and it not actually be the right question to be asking for that student at that time. We don't want to scare them off and we want to give them the right support for what they need, but we're not equipped to do that at the moment. We don't know them well enough.*

Paul further commented: 'they used to talk to us about stuff and they don't anymore'; 'I've definitely not had as many of those unguarded moments from a young person – it feels really rigid now'.

These findings suggest the lack of opportunity for relationship building with students prevented trust-building with staff, and therefore connection and safety within relationships was lost. This prevented students from fully engaging, impacting their learning. These findings therefore suggest a possible tension between the organisational desire for a trauma-informed culture, and the lack of time and space for staff to enact this in practice.

Relationships with external agencies

The findings similarly suggest that the lack of opportunities for relationship building with external agencies too was a barrier against trauma-informed practices. Enrolment of students onto programmes required a referral from schools. Several coaches argued this was simply a 'tick box exercise', providing broad information on academic outcomes, and to 'categorise' students based on perceived

vulnerability: ‘schools tick a box to say if they’re in care or pupil premium, but that’s all’. Elaine argued this can be positive for students: ‘we don’t have anything about them so we can offer them a completely fresh start’. However, many coaches felt that information provided ‘just isn’t good enough for us to know what we’re working with’.

Generally, coaches argued that the lack of communication with schools was a barrier for working in trauma-informed ways. Jean conveyed concern that, without prior understanding of a student's background, they were at risk of asking questions that were ‘uncomfortable’ or ‘too personal’ for some:

> *You can be listening and open and approachable, but you don’t know anything about who they are as a person, and where they’re speaking from that day or that week, let alone in their lives beforehand.*

The findings suggest that a lack of contextual information about students could be challenging for coaches. Penny argued that schools should share ‘specific things’ that ‘work’ for students with additional needs, to better inform their own practices:

> *A quick chat with teachers could give you that understanding of the whole child. If there's things they know work there's no reason for us to try things that might make them feel uncomfortable. When you're talking about the safety or perceived safety of the child, it's an important area to think about.*

This suggests that a lack of contextual knowledge and understanding of the ‘whole child’ could potentially risk the ‘perceived safety’ of the child in the one-to-one environment, arguing that a ‘quick chat’ with teachers could be a useful approach.

Similarly, lack of parent engagement was also cited as a barrier to working in trauma-informed ways. Jon reflected:

> *As standard we wouldn't have a conversation with parents. They would know their child was on the programme, but we don't do things like parents evening or reporting. Could we make space for when a student has specific additional needs or social care support? Do we make space for that extra communication? It shouldn't be seen as extra communication.*

Whilst Jon reflected that 'making space' for 'extra' communication with carers could be beneficial, if the student context was more complex, this dialogue depicts a questioning of the way 'extra' communication is currently viewed. Similarly, Taylor reflected: 'I guess it's bringing in those perspectives right from the beginning, about how we can do joined up support'. Organisational policies around communication with carers extended only so far as a requirement for parental consent. Throughout interviews, a view that 'perspectives' from parents and carers could be beneficial for adapting practices to meet the needs of 'vulnerable' young people was presented, arguing for 'joined up support', 'right from the beginning'.

Isolation

The lack of relationships between staff too was often raised as a concern, with the impacts of isolation frequently discussed during interviews with staff. Many staff across different roles raised that the 'community element' that 'we used to have' has 'really been missing since we've made loads of changes to our practices'.

In the early phases of research, national Covid-19 restrictions meant staff worked remotely. Fortnightly online all-staff briefings were held, for the leadership team to check in and pass on notices. When restrictions lifted, the organisation retained this structure. The switch to remote working was cited by most staff as a barrier to working in trauma-informed ways. Several student coaches commented that the nature of briefings created isolation between coaches and the leadership team, referring to the length and structure of meetings as the primary barrier: 'the meetings are too short and structured to ask questions'; 'not much room for discussions or questions, the directors just speak for the majority of meetings'. Several coaches also argued this impacted on relationships between the hierarchies: 'trust needs to be built and there just isn't the space for it'; 'Communication with the directors has been patchy and relationships just aren't there'; 'they're just checking we're actually working'.

Isolation between participants was a recurring theme, with many arguing that the 'community element' they 'used to have' was 'missing' since 'we've made loads of changes'. The geographically diverse nature of the organisation was often cited as a source of isolation:

> *Gaby: We've got different sites across the country but even within them there's a lot of lone working. Staff work online or they travel in and out of different schools. There isn't one big office we all come into every day. It's been really isolated.*

During a learning lunch, several participants reflected that the geographically diverse structure exasperates the sense of isolation because 'you can't always apply learning or policies or strategies across different locations' due to the ways

in which different areas were ‘operating inherently differently’. However, isolation was also present between those working within the *same* geographical locations, with several participants that were yet to meet colleagues in person: ‘I haven’t actually met most of the staff. They might come to a meeting online, but not in person’. Elaine reflected on the impacts of this isolation:

> *I think we’ve all had similar concerns, although I don’t know whether other people have had as many quite extreme experiences, because we don’t get a chance to talk and share.*

Without the opportunity to share collectively, understanding of each other's practices – including challenges – was limited; opportunities for accessing information and support from each other was restricted, and therefore opportunities for learning were reduced.

Isolation was present between the relationships between staff and trustees too. When reflecting on the processes of learning and change, Nina commented:

> *You've got to be able to have those conversations to figure stuff like that out. The problem is it's not something that can be done properly over an email.*

Nina reflected that learning – or ‘figuring stuff out’ - requires conversations and connections. Nina argued for a more ‘open culture’ of communication:

> *I really feel trustees need a bigger presence in the organisation and staff members need a bigger presence in the board. There needs to be a reasonably open culture where people can approach one another.*

During a later planning meeting, Jane reflected on her role in preventing isolation within the organisation:

> *The challenge is how we make sure everyone feels connected within this network. Empowered to work on their own, through their network, with the rest of the teams, but also supported and connected to everyone else too. How do we do this? I don't know.*

Jane acknowledged the need for staff to feel 'connected' to feel 'empowered' to work independently and simultaneously recognised that current organisational structures could be a barrier to achieving this.

4.2.2 Apathy

During initial exploration, apathy around learning and change with regards to trauma and its impacts was conveyed through both observations and interviews. Apathy was observed most frequently within interactions between the leadership team. This oftentimes manifested as a general sense of inertia; other times apathy was conveyed through the ways in which actors assigned or relinquished responsibility for learning and change to those in different roles both within and external to the organisation. Within interactional and observational data, apathy presents as a potential barrier to learning and change.

Examples of those in leadership roles conveying apathy towards engaging with learning around trauma-informed approaches was seen in both planning meetings and interviews. Viktoria reflected:

I feel a bit out of touch with where we're up to with the trauma stuff. I haven't actually thought about this research at all, about trauma or anything, since we last spoke. I'm sorry. There's just loads of areas that we really want to develop next year.

This conveys a lack of interest in learning about the topic whilst simultaneously depicting excitement for developing different directions. Viktoria specifically cited 'research' into trauma-informed approaches as opposed to general trauma-informed practices. Pete later echoed this: 'research just isn't a priority for us'. There was a separation between the conceptualisation of what it means to develop a trauma-informed culture, with participants quick to dismiss engagement with 'research' in favour of 'prioritising' day-to-day practice.

Inertia

Interview data also depicts those in middle-senior leadership roles conveying a sense of inertia, with many expressing that current organisational processes and practices worked well for vulnerable students and so the need for change wasn't there. This comes across through the dismissal of trauma-specific staff training:

Viktoria: The staff that need to know about vulnerable children do already. It's hard to think why we'd need more training on it?

Taylor: I believe staff feel they are prepared as best as they can be.

Viktoria and Taylor here reflected that staff were well prepared; they 'already do' know how best to support students and therefore 'more training' was not necessary. Similarly, the wider leadership team oftentimes conveyed that the

structure and delivery of the current programmes worked ‘really well’ for ‘most’ students:

> *Jon: We’ve got a general programme that works well for most students already.*
>
> *Elaine: The way it’s all run now has really helped the kids but also the staff involved. I think it’s something different, something fun.*
>
> *Viktoria: At the end of the programme [students] feel really confident about who they are and where to find information about their future and that's great.*

A sense of inertia comes through; that ‘the way it’s all run now’ not only worked well for staff but also equipped ‘most’ students to ‘feel really confident’ about their futures. The perception of organisational practices conveyed through these interactions was one that worked well. As such, apathy and inertia acted as a barrier towards learning and change.

Perception of responsibility

Reoccurring throughout early findings is the theme of responsibility: specifically, tensions raised through different perspectives of *who* responsibility lies with when developing a trauma-informed culture. Differences in perspectives of responsibilities stemmed from both individual conceptualisations of trauma-informed approaches, and the role they held. Different conceptualisations of responsibilities began within the leadership team. In an initial planning meeting, Pete commented ‘I have no idea what we even mean by trauma’. When questioned on this, they replied:

Pete: I don't need to know about it for my role though. I don't work with the young people.

Jane: But you do oversee the work that support the young people?

Pete: But I deal more with strategies you know?

Here, Pete divides the responsibilities into two separate roles: those who work with the young people, who 'need' to know, and those who 'deal more with strategies', who 'don't need to know'. This separation of the roles was depicted also in a later interaction between the same two participants:

Pete: Staff need more training though. I guess that comes under [safeguarding lead] job to sort out as it's more relevant?

Jane: Well, no, I think it's a whole organisation thing, not a role for one person.

Pete: Yeh between us we can take a lead, but it's ultimately [safeguarding lead] responsibility, isn't it?

Pete was separating his own role – strategic; overseeing – with roles that they conceptualised as 'more relevant' to trauma-informed approaches. In both instances, Jane disagreed, arguing for a whole organisational approach. Again, tensions between Pete and Jane stemmed from differences in understandings of what a trauma-informed culture may mean, and these tensions then became a barrier to developing a trauma-informed culture.

Disagreement on who held responsibility for learning about trauma-informed approaches is intertwined throughout different data. Participants who held more administrative and oversight roles often conceptualised trauma-informed approaches as not falling under the organisations responsibility: 'we're not

counsellors'; 'there's a point where we have to demarcate what our role is with these students because they get a lot of support from other places and it would be easy to move into someone else's role from elsewhere'; 'we're trying to stay within our specific remit'. These responses separate trauma-informed practice as something specific to that of a 'counsellor'; falling under someone else's remit.

4.2.3 Resistance

Woven through interactions from earlier data is a subtle but reoccurring resistance to learning and change around trauma-informed approaches. From the leadership team, this resistance often stemmed from a perception of resources required; other times, resistance came from competing priorities. From staff in student facing roles, a lack of confidence in knowledge and practices of trauma-informed approaches caused resistance. The findings suggest that individual resistance was a barrier to organisational learning and change.

Perception of resources

Initially, perception of resources required caused resistance and further tensions between the leadership team. Pete and Sebastian depicted negative perceptions of costs associated with learning: 'how much is it going to cost us though'; 'we can't afford it'; 'it's all very well saying yeh we need to learn about trauma but how can we do this in ways that aren't expensive'. Alongside this, Elaine raised concerns around competing organisational priorities: 'there's loads of areas that we really want to develop next year'. In many instances, when resources were questioned, other changes to practices were cited as a priority, for example

‘massive changes of staffing’; ‘people's roles are all over the place’; ‘we’ve been doing a lot of firefighting’.

Competing organisational priorities exasperated the perception that resources could not stretch to meet the learning required to develop trauma-informed practices. In meetings with the leadership team, several participants argued they were ‘hesitant to commit’ to engaging in ‘new learning’ due to multiple changes within the organisation at the time:

> *Taylor: We’ve been doing a lot of firefighting this year I’m not trying to make excuses.*
>
> *Elaine: Staff are managing lots of different things; it could be quite overwhelming to add something else in too.*
>
> *Jon: I don’t want staff to be like, “eurgh; another thing to learn”.*

Engagement with trauma-informed approaches was conceptualised as ‘another thing to learn’; an additional task for staff to have to ‘add’ into their already busy schedules. Reference to multiple changes within the organisation were cited frequently throughout staff briefings throughout both timepoints of data collection, including staffing changes through role changes, redundancies and long-term absences, and changes to practice such as moving to wholly online learning, reducing contact time with students and changes to reporting systems.

Again, differences in understandings related to resources created tension between Pete and Jane specifically:

> *Pete: I don’t know; there's so much going on now. We have a massive changeover of staffing, people are having to adjust, people's roles are all*

over the place, we're still figuring that out. I just don't know if we can engage with this right now.

Jane: I think we already do some of these strategies that support staff to work in trauma-informed ways anyway, so I don't think you understand?

Pete: We have the briefings where we all check in and see each other's faces, and line management meetings, and people can chat online after sessions and stuff, but that's nothing to do with trauma, is it?

Jane: So yes, we're already doing it? We're already using trauma-informed approaches in our organisational practices through building connections with each other.

Pete: I don't know though. I just don't think we can learn about something big and new like this now. People need time to adjust.

Jane reflected on what existing practices could provide staff opportunities to connect with each other, those enabling staff to 'check-in' with each other and 'chat'. Conversely, Pete reflected on the process as requiring 'big' and 'new' changes that would be an additional pressure on staff. Even though Jane named the current organisational practices as trauma-informed, Pete remained unable to conceptualise this. The tension between Pete and Jane was a barrier towards learning and change as differences in understandings prevent the implementation of strategies; debates around perceptions of resources delay decision making.

Confidence

Whilst resistance from those in leadership roles often stemmed from perception of resources and competing priorities – aspects of organisational and strategic planning – for those in student-facing roles resistance instead came from a lack of confidence. Participants oftentimes referenced a lack of confidence in understandings of, and practices using, trauma-informed approaches as a

resistance to learning and change: ‘I don’t want us to just blunder in. We don’t want to scare them off’.

Student coaches frequently reflected feeling ‘uncomfortable’ during sessions, feeling ‘guilty’ for not knowing how to ‘get it right’ and feeling ‘ill-prepared for each individual’. Subsequently, Penny expressed concern that her actions during sessions impacted student retention: ‘I've had some students; they've not come back for the second session. I've lost them basically’. Paul argued that this prevents buy-in to current practices: ‘the lack of contact and lack of continuity is honestly why I can’t say it’s successful in my view’.

Staff came to their roles with different understanding of trauma-informed approaches, and no specific trauma-training was provided by the organisation. Several participants had received ‘informal’ training in previous employments and described more ‘on the job experience’ of ‘working with refugees or you know like that’. Several student coaches commented this impacted their confidence: ‘when students have been impacted by trauma yeh how you deal with that none of us had that specific training, so we just don’t know’. Mo commented:

> *There needs to be more training as staff aren’t often equipped to notice the small things. And yes, we all come from different backgrounds, so a lot of us are bringing aspects of our past work into this work to help us adapt and make the coaching structure more flexible for these students. But they can’t guarantee that we all have these skill sets. We’re all just trial and error with what we then do next.*

Issues raised here reoccurred throughout interviews with student coaches, oftentimes staff expressing feeling ill-equipped, missing ‘the small things’, and

worried about their ‘skill sets’. Furthermore, several coaches argued that not providing formal training to coaches on supporting trauma-experienced students, the organisation enforced a ‘trial and error’ way of working which reduced staff confidence in supporting vulnerable learners. Zadie argued that sometimes they could ‘see things aren’t working’ but had no training on how to navigate these situations. Jean suggested that training would assist confidence in knowing when to ‘change tact’; ‘to know better when to use a different approach’. Student coaches generally desired guidance on the practical application of trauma-informed approaches, as opposed to ‘just the knowledge’: ‘we need to actually see what a different approach would look like’; ‘what we need to think about more is practical application of the information or knowledge around this’.

4.3 Learning and change

As research progressed, observed discussions began to depict learning and change in action. The more discussions the leadership team engaged in around trauma and trauma-informed approaches, the more trauma-informed approaches to leadership strategies itself were observed across staff briefings, staff training sessions and informal conversations. Accountability to the research process itself catalysed a deeper engagement to learning and change, and evidence of learning began to feed into practice.

Consequently, curiosity for learning and engagement in trauma-informed practices led to increased support and empathy from the leadership team towards the wider staff body, and a heightened awareness of collective responsibility. Through

engaging with these concepts, a more open culture of communication was observed. Observed interactions depicted a deeper engagement in reflection: both participants own individual reflection and subsequently holding open space for collective reflection between staff too.

Through doing so, the theme of vulnerability began to interleave within observed interactions. Within the confines of open, reflective communication, the vulnerability of learning and change was revealed. This oftentimes presented itself through the depiction of the inherent vulnerability of being a teacher and a learner; other times, a fear of judgement was revealed. Furthermore, the inherent discomfort of change became apparent. Within observed interactions, encouraging and exploring vulnerability oftentimes promoted learning. At other times, exposing and exploring the vulnerabilities of staff as individuals as well as the vulnerabilities within the organisation itself brought up further challenges. These themes are now explored in greater depth.

4.3.1 Leadership learning

Learning from each other

Continued and longer-term engagement with the research process led to more discussions between myself as researcher and the leadership team around trauma-informed approaches and what a trauma-informed culture could look like for the organisation. The more discussions that were had, the more observed interactions between the leadership team began to depict a curiosity around individual learning. This began with the acknowledgment that individual knowledge

of trauma-informed approaches takes practice, to ‘take this forward’ within the organisation: ‘we need to learn about this stuff first you know we need a better understanding first I think before we can take this forward’; ‘I think we as leaders need to be talking about that more about being curious about it all individually’. The acknowledgment of the necessity for their own individual learning first then prompted Jane to reach out to Viktoria, for resources and support:

> *Jane: If you have this down, please share your strategies with me. I’m always looking for me. If you don’t, or you would find it useful to explore how you do this more or different or better, then, while I don’t have all the answers, I would be happy to carve out time to explore this with you.*

This not only depicts Jane asking Viktoria to ‘share’ ‘strategies’ with them but also offers up space to explore learning together. Whilst acknowledging that they ‘don’t have all the answers’, this depicts acknowledgment that they could have benefitted from ‘do[ing] [trauma-informed practices] more or different or better’. This interaction suggests curiosity for learning, developing practice and a desire to be working towards a deeper understanding of what trauma-informed approaches could look like in practice.

During a later conversation, it was observed that both Viktoria and Pete had been exploring the topic individually and brought to the conversation observations and points for discussion. Pete, who previously stated having ‘no clue’ what was meant by trauma-informed approaches, reflected:

> *I always think of trauma as being this really big thing like a big life changing event, so I was wondering whether sometimes we can underplay the smaller trauma? Do you know what I mean? If something traumatic has happened in our own lives, too, we maybe underplay it and think, “oh I need to get over that, I can't make a big deal out of it”. But actually, we can think*

about how it's ok to use the language of trauma, if we find something traumatising, isn't it?

A curiosity for learning about trauma is observed through language choices used, depicting an interest as opposed to resistance or apathy seen previously: 'I was thinking about trauma'; 'it's interesting isn't it'. This depicts Pete at the early stages of learning, seeking reassurance: 'I was wondering whether'; 'do you know what I mean'; 'isn't it'. Pete began to think about how to engage with learning around trauma, however seeking reassurance conveys their lack of confidence at this stage.

Learning from the wider staff body

The more the leadership team began to learn through conversations together, the more they sought staff perspectives too. The leadership team began to reflect collectively on the importance of recognising strengths within their staff. They discussed how staff perspectives could inform changes to practice:

Viktoria: I like the idea that the things we might do will be coming straight from the staff.

Taylor: We need to be listening to what they're asking for; they're the ones actually working with the young people.

Whilst earlier findings depicted tension, and a disconnect, between perspectives of different organisational roles, here Viktoria and Taylor suggest they 'need to be listening' to the perspectives of staff for changes to have the most impact.

Observational data from staff briefings depicts this in practice. Pete chaired briefings, and began to incorporate recognition of staff successes, for example: 'you're all doing amazingly so thank you to each and every one of you'. Later conversations depict Pete framing staff as 'experts' in the organisation: 'you're the experts in your roles'. This language was echoed throughout following staff briefings and training sessions, with the wider leadership team often reinforcing the 'collaborative' nature of organisational learning and change: 'in your teams you are the experts, we want this to be a collaborative process where we can all learn from each other'.

As time progressed, these reflections are furthered, as Pete asked staff to contribute to discussions around how to create a trauma-informed organisational culture:

> *Pete: What I want is for you guys to discuss. I want ideas, thoughts, on as an organisation what is our culture right now? And what would a trauma-informed culture look like for us?*

By seeking staff perspectives, Pete demonstrated further a desire for staff-led changes, whilst also reinforcing their own curiosity for learning. When Pete demonstrated a curiosity for learning to wider conversations, this encouraged staff to do the same. Through framing staff as experts and seeking staff-led changes, tensions around responsibility shift, and the task instead became collective.

4.3.2 Staff support

As engagement with the research process and learning itself increased over time, the findings reflect a shift in the way that the leadership team supported staff. This was reflected in differing ways and suggests an ongoing process of learning in action.

Empathy

The more those in leadership roles engaged in learning around trauma and its impacts, the more trauma-informed language was observed within different interactions. Firstly, conversations between the leadership team began to acknowledge the challenges staff had faced has a result of changes to practice. They commented on the challenge of online working: 'never meeting anyone in the flesh you know it can be a bit weird', as well as acknowledging that an additional pressure on staff was the changes to practice because of this:

> *Jon: Covid caused change out of our control in quite a dramatic way.*
>
> *Pete: It can feel really hard to keep going. Everything feels very relentless at times.*

They acknowledged the precarity of changes, showing they were too impacted by the changes in negative ways through use of negative language choices such as 'dramatic', 'relentless' and 'horrid'. This was reinforced by the acknowledgement that many of the changes were 'out of our control', and that it could feel 'really hard to keep going'. Staff needed to trust that they were supported.

The negative language used here could arguably have contributed to a negative culture within the organisation, however these interactions could also be viewed as useful, too. The vulnerability conveyed could suggest an understanding of and

empathy for challenges student coaches may have faced; an area raised by coaches previously as lacking.

Open communication

Observed interactions began to depict a gradual journey towards a more open culture of communication between the hierarchies. Earlier observed briefings depicted a closed communication between the directors and coaches. For example, when introducing a new framework for logging student concerns, Pete directed questions away from the briefing: ‘if you have any thoughts, I guess just raise them with your line manager or email me’. However, observational data collected from a later briefing depicted a shift in how Pete communicated changes with staff. Where previously questions regarding changes were directed elsewhere, within this meeting, Pete instead asked for staff perspectives on the structure of future meetings. This led to more extended discussion:

> *Martin: Perhaps it would be good to have a more informal, lower stakes meeting and conversations with other members of staff?*
>
> *Jean: To just share what's hard.*
>
> *Penny: We don’t have space for that at the moment. Since schools are all back, everyone's working on their own schedules.*
>
> *Mo: Those of us on our laptops can catch up whenever. We have a good system of casual catch ups.*
>
> *Penny: But those in schools; we set our timetables. We’re bouncing between laptops and in schools.*
>
> *Elaine: That must be hard, not having anyone to catch up with like that.*
>
> *Pete: I guess we need to have a proper think about what we can do about that.*

The findings suggest that when the leadership team engaged in individual learning, this led to individual reflection and prompted conversations around the vulnerability of learning itself. When Pete demonstrated this within conversations with the wider staff body, this encouraged staff to do the same. Through framing staff as experts and seeking staff-led changes, tensions around responsibility shifted, and the task instead became collective.

A curiosity for learning about what trauma-informed approaches could look like in practice appeared to be a catalyst for other strategies for organisational learning, too. As the leadership team became more curious about trauma-informed approaches, they urged staff to do so too: 'we're genuinely excited for the project'; 'let's learn all that we can and then we can have a bit of a think about how we can apply it to us'. Not only do they advocate for the relevance of trauma-informed approaches, but their language choices reflect their shift in perspectives. For example, the personal pronoun 'I' was replaced instead with the collective pronoun 'we'. This conveyed a sense of collective inquiry, as opposed to a directive, again reinforcing their invested interest in an encouragement to staff to participate.

The directors consequently also increased opportunities for discussions around trauma-informed approaches with staff. An additional one-hour discussion with the whole staff body was arranged, initiating discussions around trauma-informed approaches and what this might look like in practice. Jane was positive about the potential for the session: 'it's an excellent opportunity to address the subject matter properly', however the meeting was not well attended, with less than half of

staff attending. Conversations with staff suggested that reasons for this were twofold. Firstly, the discussion was held during lunch. Many student-facing staff worked between different schools with different schedules. Matching differing lunch breaks therefore proved challenging. Furthermore, not all staff believed the session was relevant to them: ‘I work in admin only so it’s not for me is it’.

However, during the next briefing, Jane urged staff from all roles to participate: ‘we want to hold more learning sessions with you all where you can engage in sort of low stakes ways with areas of development that are relevant to your roles and to the organisation as a whole’. Furthermore, Pete summarised what was explored within the discussion: ‘I don’t know if anyone can remember what Jane talked about before, but we’ll give a recap to refresh our memories’; ‘perhaps Elaine can you circulate the information and then if anyone is interested, they can have a little read through’. By repeating the content and extending the invitation to all staff, Jane and Pete demonstrated a commitment to learning.

Earlier interviews suggested that student coaches would have liked more training opportunities, and observational data depicted coaches verbalising this desire:

> *Zadie: We don’t want this to be just you have training once and it’s a tick box and it’s done and it’s never spoken about again. But actually to really think about it deeply.*
>
> *Paul: Yeh we can’t just do it once, can we? We need to keep refreshing it.*
>
> *Penny: It would be good if we could have training on trauma like a programme for staff before it was needed, assuming it was always needed, for everyone.*

Up until this point, staff hadn’t raised this with directors. Whilst the meeting was initiated by Jane with the purpose of including staff in conversations around trauma-informed practices, what was observed was staff communicating their learning needs. A more open culture of communication began to develop through the meeting; a ‘catalyst’ for conversations created.

Confidence

Earlier findings suggest that many staff felt resistant to trauma-informed approaches due to a lack of confidence. The findings suggest that when more opportunities were created for discussions around policies and practices, these concerns were brought to the directors.

When learning opportunities increased, so did staff confidence. Staff reflected on things they may have been ‘already doing’ that align with the approach. Jean reflected:

> *I've only recently heard about trauma but thinking about it, I'm actually already doing lots of things that are trauma-informed. But we never really get a chance to sit back and think about our own work and name it and think, “hang on a minute, that’s what I'm doing”.*

When staff began to learn about trauma-informed approaches, it assisted reflection on aspects of practice that were already trauma-informed. During a learning lunch, staff conveyed that repeated discussions and training could assist with their confidence too:

> *Mo: We can't just do it once; we need to keep refreshing it.*

Jean: So it becomes part of the language that we use naturally and overtime, we need to feel more confident in working with these issues. I guess the confidence comes with it.

Mo: Yes, I was going to say about the confidence in these embedded things.

Repeatedly ‘refreshing’ learning assisted development of ‘confidence’, and ‘overtime’ could result in such practices becoming more ‘embedded’ into organisational practices.

Language

The findings further suggest that student coaches felt embedding the language of trauma-informed approaches into practices would have increased their confidence when communicating with external agencies. Martin argued that using the language of trauma-informed approaches could help them to ‘tell people you know this is why we’re doing this and be able to talk about trauma confidently’. Staff reflected it is important to talk ‘confidently’ about the ‘why’ behind their practice. Conversations with the directors reflected a concern that the ‘language of trauma’ was ‘missing’ currently. Jane and Elaine both argued that many current organisational practices ‘often do reflect a trauma-informed approach’; that staff ‘do recognise traumatic responses in young people’ and ‘the awareness and the care and kindness is there’, however the language of trauma was ‘missing’:

Jane: We’ve got really experienced staff and they don’t have the theory. It’s a practice-based approach only, but there is the awareness.

Elaine: They might not call it trauma but they do they recognise traumatic responses in young people. But it’s the language that’s missing.

Whilst a ‘practice-based approach’ was there, staff ‘don’t have the theory’, and therefore ‘might not call it trauma’. Jane further argued that embedding trauma-informed language could increase staff confidence, assisting articulation of the ‘value’ in staff's work. This suggests there could be value in ‘naturally’ and ‘explicitly’ using the language of trauma-informed approaches: value for staff in developing their confidence and reflexive practice, but also value for the organisation, as the ‘why’ behind practices could be communicated externally.

Within discussions, staff also argued that embedding the language of trauma-informed approaches into organisational documentation could have helped develop their confidence too. Staff reflected that training as a standalone intervention would not be enough to develop this, due to the 'abstract’ nature of theoretical learning:

> *Penny: It does feel abstract. It’s a concern that these things could happen and we wouldn’t remember what we'd been trained to do.*

This suggests a concern that training alone would not be enough. Retaining knowledge from training is important for learning to be embedded sustainably. If training was too ‘abstract’, then staff argued it would not be remembered, and therefore would not lead to culture change. Staff discussions suggested that embedding the language of trauma-informed approaches into key policies and documentation could help mitigate this:

> *Penny: We also need something that we could look through and turn to and read for advice if we needed to; if we’d forgotten.*

Martin: I suppose then the documentation that the organisational provides staff for training, the resources, should provide some trauma-informed contexts so that staff can turn to the documents if they need support.

Zadie: Hopefully if we had access to support resources for us that we could look through, we then wouldn't need to look at it over time because it would be more ingrained. We'd learn about it.

Penny: And we need it to be embedded in our language, so that we are using language that is trauma-informed all the time. So that we are always looking at everything through that lens, rather than having to go, "hang on, let me think about how to apply a trauma-informed approach".

Zadie: Yes, the aim would be that we would always look through that lens and these things would become embedded in our practices and our language over time.

Documentation provided for initial training could include information of 'trauma-informed contexts'; something for staff to 'turn to' if they need 'support', or if they'd 'forgotten' training. Access to resources on trauma-informed approaches could help learning be 'more ingrained': knowledge could be embedded 'over time' through repeated use. Staff also argued that embedding the language of trauma into key documentations could impact *everyday* language too. Staff argued that the more they are reminded to 'look through that lens', the more such language could become 'embedded'.

Practical application

As opportunities for open communication between the hierarchies increased, student-facing staff began to share their desire for more practical support from leadership too. Penny reflected that organisational sessions discussing theory wasn't enough to develop a trauma-informed approach, due to the 'abstract' nature of learning:

> *Penny: It does feel abstract. It's a concern that these things could happen, and we wouldn't remember, would we?*

Retaining knowledge from training is important for learning to be embedded in organisational culture. If staff feel discussions are too 'abstract', there is risk that this would not translate into practice. Paul and Zadie instead suggested the organisation created a practical guide for trauma-informed practice: to 'turn to' if they had 'forgotten' training.

4.3.3 Reflection

As discussions around trauma-informed approaches continued over time, conversations around reflective practice led to a progressive increase of time and space for reflection. The leadership team spent time reflecting on their own learning practices and the challenges of learning and change through semi-structured and unstructured conversations around the research process. This individual reflective practice prompted discussions around the benefits of time and space for reflection, which in turn led to the beginnings of the development of collective reflective space for the wider staff body too.

Modelling individual reflection

Modelling reflection began to present throughout staff briefings. Jane, for example, advised staff to take breaks: 'take this extra five minutes to go and take a break away from the screens and think about nature'. Pete offered staff flexibility with their workloads: 'don't be trying to do everything at once and give 100% to

everything because working in this way is going to need some compromises, we know that'. Jane reminded staff to put personal needs first: 'it's easy to deprioritise personal need, or to see it as a luxury. It isn't'; and demonstrated how they managed their own stressors: 'I've been really trying to start my day with some kind of settling routine, so I've been going outside with my morning cuppa and thinking about what new bulbs and plants are coming up in my garden'. Examples given here center around creating space for reflection. These examples depict the use of space in a literal sense, 'away from the screens' and 'going outside', however examples of different forms of space were observed through adaptations of practices in line with learning about – and implementing – trauma-informed approaches.

Collective reflection

As the leadership team developed their own learning through planning meetings, they began to acknowledge and recognise that the geographically dispersed nature of staff may have been a barrier against opportunities for collective reflection:

> *Taylor: That must be hard for them; not being able to chat about you know what behaviours they're seeing in the young people and what they might mean.*

As a group, the leadership team discussed that creating time and space for staff to meet collectively could be beneficial. They suggested staff could benefit from sharing strategies for working with vulnerable young people: 'staff should be able to share learning'; 'if we team up people from different sites different schools and

locations they might have things to offer each other I suppose from their different backgrounds and expertise'; 'I think meeting more regularly as a group I think that would help share resources and knowledge'. They specifically acknowledged the different 'expertise' within the staffing body, reflecting that meeting 'more regularly as a group' would promote sharing of resources, learning and knowledge. Furthermore, discussions explored that a collective space could promote better staff relationships: 'because building relationships as a staff is really important'; 'yeh for support and advise and signposting for each other'; 'so staff don't always try and sort it all out themselves'. This conveys an understanding that positive relationships between staff were important for 'support and advice', as opposed to taking on responsibility alone.

Earlier findings from interviews with student coaches depicted the lack of communication, time and space within the organisational routines and practices to build relationships collectively left staff feeling isolated and unsupported. This was especially heightened when faced with challenging situations with students.

Following planning meetings, Jane created a separate all-staff meeting to seek staff input on developing strategies for whole-staff reflection. Firstly, coaches argued for 'more informal, lower stakes meetings and conversations', 'just to share what's hard'. They reflected that such spaces could be especially useful for learning content that can be emotionally charged 'like safeguarding or trauma stuff'. They argued that learning about challenging student contexts could be 'harrowing'; sometimes needing to 'walk away' from it to get space from the conversations. However, they

also suggested that ‘reflection and sharing and having those spaces’ to communicate collectively when things are hard, could ‘really help actually’.

Later during data collection, Jane planned another ‘learning lunch’. This session was held online, again during lunch, and was intended to be a starting point for creating an ‘informal’ and ‘lower-stakes’ space for staff to reflect together about developing a trauma-informed organisational culture. Whilst the session was useful for gathering staff perspectives, it was intended as a one-off, with no follow-up sessions planned. Staff quickly brought to the conversation a reflection that a trauma-informed organisational culture needs to support its staff in trauma-informed ways, to better equip them to work with vulnerable students, highlighting the need for more longer-term plans for learning and change.

4.3.4 Vulnerability

As the research process progressed, it became increasingly apparent that engagement in learning and change brings about, and requires, both individual and organisational vulnerability. There is a vulnerability required in learning new things; particularly in the balance of leadership responsibilities, and teachers, as learners. Fear of judgement, of not knowing, of getting things wrong, is woven within interactions. Change itself demands individual vulnerability too. There is discomfort in change, which requires vulnerability. Furthermore, learning and change at an organisational level requires vulnerability. Exposing practices and policies not in line with the change agenda is necessary, however exposing organisational vulnerabilities brings about challenges.

Teachers as learners

Firstly, staff highlighted the vulnerability required in the positionality of both educator and learner throughout the process. Jon reflected that ‘learning new things as an adult is hard actually’: they will need to bring a level of vulnerability to learning new content and learning to work in different ways. Elaine argued that whilst they were keen to learn about trauma-informed approaches and ‘figure out’ what this meant for them, the idea of adapting and learning was ‘simultaneously exciting and scary’. Viktoria reflected:

> *People need to be able to say, “help; I'm stuck”. That’s part of it, isn't it? We need to be supported through new things. That includes making mistakes: we all need to be vulnerable with each other when we ask for help and that can be scary especially at work.*

Learning something new as an adult can make us feel vulnerable. This was particularly heighted for the leadership team, because of their enhanced visibility within the organisation, and the necessity for them to uphold professional practices that frame them as facilitators of change. As curiosity for learning about trauma-informed approaches developed, reflections on the vulnerability required for being leaders and learners simultaneously was present.

Fear of judgement

Within the learning lunch, staff further explored the difficulties of being vulnerable with each other, citing a fear of judgement and shame as a cause of resistance.

Penny: It can be harder for us as adults to reflect.

Martin: All tied up with ideas of shame. Am I doing my job properly if I think like that?

Paul: Will someone else think I'm not doing my job properly?

Penny: It's that kind of fear of judgement that can get in the way of us reflecting properly.

Similar themes of fear of judgement and shame surrounding the vulnerabilities associated with learning – and the unknown – can be seen throughout interviews too. Pete reflected 'I suppose we also you know we want to present as managing everything super well don't, we don't want to look bad or like we can't cope with changes in front of our line managers': the desire to present as coping with changes can prevent staff from asking questions or seeking help. Reflecting on such ideas during the staff learning lunch, Pete argued that fears of judgement and shame can be a barrier to developing a trauma-informed culture, arguing instead a need for more open and honest communication:

Pete: Maybe we could say a trauma-informed culture would be somewhere where you feel confident and safe to bring questions about things we're not sure about? To be able to say, "we're not all here to solve the problem", and feel confident enough as a member of staff within any role to bring that question to someone and know that that's ok.

Pete reflected that 'safe' relationships between staff can be a catalyst for staff to feel 'confident' to bring questions about their practices, and thus continuously learn and progress.

Discomfort of change

Observational data from the learning lunch suggests that such considerations were more important considering ongoing changes to organisational practices. Martin and Viktoria reflected on the impacts of changes to practice because of the Covid-19 pandemic:

> *Martin: All of us have been impacted. But thinking about the process of changing together - trauma feels too strong a word but can maybe promote this feeling of lack of control or hopelessness sometimes; when all your practices are up in the air.*
>
> *Viktoria: Yes, you can sometimes see traces of trauma in our staff, in our conversations, that may have been caused by the changes. And you think, "oh ok maybe you're not coping very well", and we need ways of working together.*

With significant organisational change, there was potential for feeling a 'lack of control' or 'hopelessness'. Martin argued trauma was 'too strong a word', however research defines trauma as a series of instances creating a feeling of 'hopelessness' and a 'lack of control' (e.g. Van der Kolk, 2015). Viktoria demonstrated learning about trauma and its impacts through arguing that 'traces of trauma' can be seen in staff because of changes to practice. In line with literature, they reflected that this indicated a need for 'ways of working together'.

Jane reflected: 'we're all humans within that together and how do we support each other through traumatic events'. Jane raised this in a planning meeting with the extended leadership team. Whilst at first there was tension between participants' perspectives, the earlier learning lunch initiates reflective discussion. They argued:

> *Pete: If we're talking about staff traumas then I guess it could have been quite unsettling for staff going through all this, but we're talking about supporting students, aren't we?*

Elaine: Yes, but a trauma-informed organisation supports all its members, doesn't it? Remember what staff were saying in the meeting about change and trauma to them?

Pete: Yes, I suppose you're right actually. I keep focusing on the students, but sometimes we forget don't we that staff are in this too. We all put on that brave face or just get on with it. You don't really have the space to talk about it. That's hard.

At first, Pete remained focused on trauma-informed approaches as for the benefit of vulnerable students, but through recalling staff discussions, Elaine guided reflection on the impacts for staff, too. Such reflection prompted a deeper understanding of the potential for organisational changes to be 'hard' for staff if they 'don't really have the space to talk about it'. Following on from this, they reflected:

Jane: It should be minimum that everyone feels safe at work. All staff feel safe and comfortable with each other and with the young people. It's not about everyone loving their job every day, of course it's not, but it's about those moments, days, weeks, where we are struggling for whatever reason. Maybe just a shitty morning; maybe a bad session with a student; anything at all, where we can say, "you know what I'm not feeling great today, this is hard, I'm struggling with this, what are your thoughts on this?". So we can be so open and honest about what we're feeling and it is always a safe space.

Elaine: Things are hard in life. It's not all fun and games. But we need to help each other to feel safe and comfortable to be vulnerable and uncomfortable.

Prompted by the learning lunch, they reflected on the value of staff having 'safe' and 'comfortable' relationships with each other. Trauma-informed approaches are not about 'everyone loving their job everyday', but instead about safe spaces and safe relationships where staff can be 'open and honest' together. Here they acknowledged that day-to-day practice was not always 'all fun and games', and

can be challenging, and that they ‘need to help’ each other through collective reflection, safe relationships and a more open culture of communication.

Vicarious trauma

Vulnerability was heightened further through the nature of the subject matter. Learning around trauma and its impacts required reflection which could bring up personal challenges for some. This was brought to the attention of the leadership team, following the learning lunch:

> *Elaine: I think for us and young people and everyone really, if these things happen all the time to us and we think, “oh gosh I mustn't talk about that because it's not a big deal”, then over time we may be suppressing all this inside of us instead of sharing it and talking about it all.*
>
> *Jon: Different things impact us all differently, don’t they? Something small to someone will be a big deal to someone else.*

How young people may process traumatic experiences can be compared to ‘us’ as adults too: repetitive challenging situations may lead to minimising things over time as ‘not a big deal’. We can suppress emotions and think that we ‘mustn't talk about’ them, and this can ‘impact us all differently’. The conversation shows empathy for the staff within the organisation. In a one-to-one meeting with Jane, she reflected on what experiencing trauma can feel like ‘as a grown up’:

> *Jane: It’s hard when you're a grown up in a responsible position and you need to balance looking after yourself whilst looking after your family and your staff. Ultimately if we don’t look after ourselves, we can’t support our staff. We can’t burn the candle at all the ends at once.*

As understanding of trauma-informed approaches deepened, Jane reflected on the challenges of leadership. When things are stressful, it can be hard to 'look after ourselves' in ways that enable us to also support both family and staff. In response to the question of how we *can* look after ourselves best in ways that equip us to support others, Jane commented:

> *We need to acknowledge that things can be tough at work, but also remember that life exists outside of work. Don't get me wrong, this can be a hard balance if your life outside of work also feels hectic and fast paced and I suppose traumatic and unsupported at times.*

This raised further questions around how to look after ourselves at work when things outside of work feel 'traumatic' or 'unsupported' too. Jane later took this question to the wider leadership team meeting. Several responses featured the importance of creating routines and boundaries that enable individual reflection, for example: 'just taking five ten twenty minutes to ourselves in the morning you know just to be with yourself to check in with yourself or just do and think absolutely nothing'. Responses also cited support networks outside of work as important: 'maybe me and my friend we'll sit together and eat a takeaway and chill in our pajamas you know and just slob out on the sofa talking about whatever and this really helps to switch off but also to connect with someone – to recharge our batteries'. Initial reflections around the risk of vicarious trauma centered around activities and actions that leadership could develop at home. Initial responses suggest that the participants felt the personal work involved – of reflecting, supporting each other, creating boundaries – has to happen in their own time, creating a dichotomy between the presentation of themselves at work - I.e. a

leader – and the version of themselves at home, needing to 'rest and recover', requiring 'support and connection'; a more vulnerable presentation of themselves.

These reflections centered around outside of work activities and therefore placed responsibility on the individual. This led questioning to turn to what they could do *within* the workplace instead, to better support staff, but also themselves. Similarly, discussions centered around reflection, acknowledging and supporting vulnerabilities, and connection:

> *Viktoria: We need to help staff to know what supporting each other looks like. We need to model it first and then give opportunities for them to put this into practice, I suppose?*
>
> *Jane: I think the reflection between staff and individually, our own reflection, all the time, is what's going to help us keep learning and keep trying to always do better. We need to be asking, "why is this happening? What can I do about it? What is so and so doing here? What used to happen? What is happening elsewhere?" and zooming in on bits of our practice and thinking about it together from different angles and perspectives, and through reflecting on it that's how were going to keep on learning.*

They argued they had a responsibility to 'model' strategies to staff, and to provide opportunities for staff to 'put this into practice'. Different platforms to prompt reflection could be helpful, as collective reflection could become a strategy for continuous learning from each other.

The findings from the latter stages of the research depicted an organisation engaged in strategies for learning and change. The findings from observed interactions and interviews depicted a growing theme of vulnerability; woven within observed interactions is the underlying idea that learning, and change is inherently a vulnerable process, both individually and as an organisation. Exposing

vulnerabilities, areas of policy and practice not aligning with goals, was necessary but uncomfortable; the more the organisation engaged in the process, the more vulnerabilities were exposed, and this brought up challenges.

4.4 Reflection

Substantial changes within the organisation, including the resignation of Jane, led to the end of data collection. The departure of Jane saw the handover of the research process, as well as co-ordination of the learning and change trajectory initially set out, to Pete. Whilst initial discussions for continuing the research agenda were positive, engagement in the research process began to dwindle. Where previous observed interactions depicted more commitment to learning and change, themes of apathy, inertia and resistance began to seep into interactions once again. Consequently, communication around the research agenda became patchy, and gaining access to meetings for observational research became more challenging. With changes to directorship came change to organisational priorities, and thus the organisation's involvement in the research had run its course. Whilst at the time this felt frustrating, due to the desire to observe the trajectory of learning and change in action, this provided opportunity for reflection. Interactions observed within the closing stages of the research provided useful insights into questions around what extent organisational learning had occurred, what conceptualisations of learning and change are communicated through these final stages of data collection, where learning may sit within an organisation, and, ultimately, what learning can be taken from this case.

4.4.1 Strategies promoting learning

Reflecting on the temporal journey of learning and change, catalysed by engagement with the research process, several strategies, or aspects of practice, developed which promoted learning and change. Relational leadership, combined with collaborative involvement of staff, led to more inclusion of staff voice. The findings suggest that creating time and space for reflection on current practices, challenges and potential strategic directions was a trauma-informed strategy itself, along with strategies promoting honest communication around the vulnerabilities of learning and change.

Relational leadership

The findings suggest that leadership strategies and practices promoting a relational approach – for example through developing strategies for building empathetic and positive relationships with staff – was useful, through guiding and supporting staff through learning. Communication from Pete demonstrated this in practice, through reminding staff frequently of where they already worked in trauma-informed ways. In a learning lunch, Pete emphasised:

> *We already do a lot of this stuff in our work with young people. You're all really experienced staff, and part of our reflective and reflexive practices is that we try to recognise - I mean, we might not call it trauma, but we do - they recognise traumatic responses in young people and adjust their work based off that.*

Pete not only reminded staff they were 'really experienced' but also named the practices that were in line with a trauma-informed approach. Pete argued staff already worked in 'reflective and reflexive' ways; they already 'adjust' their

practices to meet the needs vulnerable students, even if the language of trauma was not embedded. Pete tried to increase staff confidence through recognising the work they already did. Similarly, in a later leadership meeting, Pete argued of the benefit of additional staff training:

> *I think that's really starting to do the job. Staff are saying they're way more confident with this stuff.*

Once again, Pete reflected on progress made towards trauma-informed practices. Through acknowledging progress, Pete communicated a sense of success, which could increase staff confidence. By re-iterating the success of training, Pete reinforced his advocacy for the organisational strategy employed. Pete felt that conveying support to the wider leadership team could increase wider staff buy-in. The wider the buy-in, the more likely that learning will continue, and that changes made will be embedded and sustainable over time. Pete began to echo that if the organisation sought to develop a trauma-informed culture, the leadership teams support of changes was crucial.

Collaboration

The findings demonstrate that a collaborative approach to leading learning and change was beneficial for learning to develop and become realised in practice. This was shown through the ways in which the leadership team sought staff perspectives, framed staff as experts, and held open space for communication, led to increased attention on learning and change. The leadership team acknowledged that staff were the ones 'actually working with the young people',

beginning to frame staff as ‘experts’ in their roles. They then sought to create a ‘collaborative process’ of learning ‘from each other’. Structures facilitating collaboration led to innovative thinking, and different ideas and perspectives were gained and shared. Through this, the leadership team started to alter their perceptions of what strategies could promote learning and change. Creating shared goals is seen to increase individual and collective will to realise such goals. Using staff voice to inform changes could therefore lead to longer term impact, increasing sustainability of changes over time.

Reflection

The findings depict the impact of reflection – both individual and collective - for facilitating learning and moving towards the realisation of change. As the leadership team engaged with individual reflection, they demonstrated a curiosity for learning, and tensions between them were replaced by a desire to ‘share strategies’ and ‘explore more’ together. The findings show modelling reflective strategies with the staff body, too: ‘I’ve been really trying to start my day with some kind of settling routine’. Such practices led to a recognition that sharing ‘knowledge’ between staff could be helpful:

> *Taylor: I think meeting more regularly as a group could help share resources and knowledge.*

The findings later depict that space for collective reflection provided staff with a platform to communicate their learning needs: staff argued for ‘more informal, lower stakes meetings and conversations’, ‘just to share what’s hard’. Staff

reflected that such spaces could be especially useful for learning emotionally charged content ‘like trauma’. In line with research, through reflection, a greater understanding of organisational learning needs was conveyed.

Vulnerability

The findings suggest that vulnerability played a significant role in learning and change, particularly in relation to the realisation of a trauma-informed culture. Vulnerability was required for organisational change to take place. Without open conversations around current organisational policies and practices, tensions between hierarchies' perceptions of practices could remain un-exposed and unresolved. Vulnerability is required for exposing practices not in line with a trauma-informed approach.

The findings also suggest that fostering ‘open’ and ‘honest’ staff relationships facilitated a sense of safety between staff. Staff reflected that ‘safe’ relationships encourage vulnerability as opposed to shaming it: ‘Where we can say this is hard, I’m struggling’; ‘and know that that’s ok because we’re all learning’. The findings suggest that supportive relationships between colleagues were essential for organisational learning. When space was created for collective reflection, this built trust, seen through increasingly vulnerable reflections. This facilitated collaborative enquiry by exposing challenges faced by staff and offering a platform for support. The findings suggest that developing strategies for sharing vulnerabilities between staff could be useful for promoting organisational learning and change.

4.4.2 Unresolved issues

The findings suggest that there were issues left unresolved at the end of research engagement, that may have impacted the trajectory of trauma-informed learning and change. Questions around how to sustain responsibility, and accountability, for the learning and change process remained unanswered, and this was exasperated by different conceptualisations of success between key actors. Furthermore, questions around the vulnerability of the learning and change process and how to prepare for and manage this were raised, and consequently precarity and organisational trauma was brought into question.

Responsibility

The findings suggest that Jane instigated learning initially, advocating for change when met with resistance. An earlier conversation depicts concern around what happens when key staff leave:

> *Jean: The issue is that if we leave, is it guaranteed that staff will pick up those things and take them forward?*
>
> *Jane: Exactly. How do we make sure that we're following through, so that these things really stick over time?*

Ensuring learning and change is continued when key staff leave is not 'guaranteed'. The findings highlight the realisation of this concern in the absence of Jane. Striking a balance between acknowledging collective responsibility, whilst also acknowledging the vital role of leadership to manage change, is important for the realisation of learning and change goals. The findings confirm this, as research ended with Jane's departure. These findings suggest that responsibility

was unbalanced, falling to those leading the initiative. Without explicit organisational recognition of collective responsibility, learning was less sustainable.

Conceptualisations of success

Earlier planning meetings suggest the leadership team held an ‘end goal’ in mind; a point in where learning would be completed: ‘what will it look like when we’re finished’; ‘when and how will we see that we’ve done this well’. Later, however, this perspective shifted:

> *Viktoria: I’m starting to see it's a constant thing. It is never and never will be like, “right we’ve done trauma”.*

Whilst this conceptualises learning as ‘constant’ and ongoing, the lack of strategies later implemented suggests this had not translated into practice. Later, Pete reflected on the impact of training: ‘staff are happy with the training; it’s really sorted out the whole trauma-informed thing’. Here, Pete referred to the learning lunches held during research. Whilst acknowledging these were beneficial, Pete expressed a view that they had completed their task of learning and change. However, tensions between perceptions of success between the hierarchies once again became apparent, as observed interactions between staff depicted a concern that the content of sessions would not be repeated or continued:

> *Penny: I can’t say it’s been successful, and that’s due to the lack of continuity.*

Paul: What we need is ongoing, repeated, reminding and stuff; not just one session and, tick, that's done.

The findings suggest that different conceptualisations of success could be a barrier towards continued learning and sustainable change. Whilst Pete believed that training had 'sorted out' practices, staff perceptions differed. The findings therefore suggest that tension between the hierarchies, and between policies and practices, remained unresolved.

Precarity

The findings further suggest that learning was precarious. Later discussions with staff portrayed a negative view of the sustainability of any learning and change implemented over the past duration of research:

Zadie: Maybe we'll keep it up for a term, but I can't see this lasting.

Jean: It will just fall by the wayside once the next thing comes along that they want to change.

Those participants who conveyed earlier enthusiasm for proposed learning and change strategies now criticised the sustainability, believing changes wouldn't be long lasting, only until the leadership team - 'they' - moved on to their next agenda. During the final observed learning lunch, Mo argued: 'it shouldn't just be something we do because we have to, but something we have to believe in'. Perhaps through not implementing more opportunities for staff to collectively learn and reflect, Pete demonstrated a conceptualisation of training on trauma-informed approaches as something needing to be 'done', as opposed to something they

truly ‘believe in’.

Nina argued that trustees could work with the directors to support the agenda: ‘you have to ensure that support mechanisms are in place you need a way of regularly challenging it to say right ok well are these things working or not’. Learning around trauma-informed approaches can’t be a ‘tick-box’ exercise if it is to be embedded into practices over time. The role of trustees is to hold organisations accountable and offer support where necessary. Mechanisms for challenging organisations, holding key actors accountable, and supporting where necessary could mitigate the potential precarity involved in learning and change.

Organisational trauma

The findings depict an organisation that was going through significant changes. Impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic meant the organisation had to adapt, with practices changing rapidly. Staff turnover was high, and the roles and responsibilities of staff were in flux. This was consistently emphasised during interviews: ‘that’s a new position’; ‘we’ve had lots of title changes’; ‘it’s a new role’; ‘it’s going through a lot of changes and guises’. Staff frequently raised that this put ‘extra pressure’ on them: ‘we’ve also lost three members of staff in that time so we’re really stretched for people’; ‘we’ve had to do a lot of firefighting’, and often caused confusion: ‘I don’t even know who leads that anymore’; ‘not sure if they’re here in that role or not’; ‘I imagine it’s being covered by someone else but I don’t actually know’. Not only did multiple changes to practice put extra pressures on

staff, but staff were less secure in their understanding of organisational practices, structures and routines as a result.

In the final all staff learning lunch, staff reflected on the impacts of such changes:

> *Gaby: All of us have been impacted, whether that's staffing structures or practices. But thinking about the process of changing together is also, um, trauma feels too strong a word but can maybe promote this feeling of lack of control or hopelessness sometimes. When all your practices are up in the air.*

Gaby made a connection between the 'process of changing together' and the impacts of trauma, arguing that changes to practice promoted a 'lack of control', and a sense of 'hopelessness'. This feeling was echoed by Jane: 'You can sometimes see traces of trauma in our staff, in our conversations, that may have been caused by the changes, you know?'. Jane raised again that the volume of changes may have 'caused' staff to show 'traces of trauma'. In a later conversation, Sebastian argued:

> *What's hard in those situations is how it has an impact on everyone within an organisation, at every level. And then that becomes your trauma too as staff; how trauma passes around like that.*

Themes of tension, lack of control, and helplessness echoing throughout these comments reflect a sense of organisational trauma. Treisman (2018) argues that the organisation itself 'can become 'trauma-organised' and 'trauma-soaked', meaning it can be dominated by survival needs' (p.4). Treisman argues:

> *What we might see and feel when this is the case is that trauma, loss, dissociation, dysregulation and toxic stress can spread like a contagion or a*

wildfire throughout an organisation. It can interrupt the organisation's flow; the ripple effects can be felt throughout the system's multiple layers and if it isn't attended to it can continue to spread and intensify (p.4).

Data depicts staff reflecting on how organisational trauma impacted their practices. This exemplifies the 'ripple effects' felt throughout 'every level' of the organisation. Data suggests that multiple changes to practices, within the context of the global pandemic – with its accompanying sense of lack of control – may have caused organisational trauma.

Whilst organisational trauma would require all the strategies discussed – e.g. reflection, open and honest communication – it is important also to consider that such changes to practice, whilst potentially supporting staff through organisational trauma, may further overwhelm people's capacity to engage. Staff could be sensitive to even *more* changes, causing additional pressure, and therefore become less likely to buy-in to further changes.

4.5 Conclusion

Mo: It shouldn't be something we do because we have to, but something that we really believe in. If we're doing it because we have to, because we've been told to do it, because some document says this is what we need to do, because someone comes in and tells us to, it's not going to last.

I think most of us do believe that this is how we should be working. Trauma-informed practices just make sense. For the young people. For us, working in these weird hybrid ways, trying to work with these super vulnerable students, in an organisation that's going through loads of change with loads of internal and external challenges. Most of us really see the benefit of putting these approaches into practice. We really want to learn more about it all. For us, our individual practice, and as an organisation.

> *What I'm worried about, though, is that Pete sees this as something that we've completed now. Tick; done. Because we've had you here talking about this stuff. We've had a couple of learning lunches on it. Now they're going to move onto the next thing. Will we ever talk about this stuff again? I really don't know.*

After the final learning lunch, a conversation with Mo reminded me of Pete's earlier glee: *'it's really sorted out the whole trauma-informed thing'.* Organisational culture is defined through the 'values and assumptions' of the actors within it. The values of key actor's shape 'ways of thinking, what knowledge is worthwhile - and how knowledge will be used' (Oh, 2020, p.1). Research suggests that key actors' 'ways of thinking' shape what learning occurs (e.g. Rashman et al., 2009). If those leading change don't 'believe in' the values of trauma-informed approaches in practice, learning becomes something to be 'done' as opposed to ingrained in culture and may be less sustainable.

The duration of fieldwork prevents reflection on whether a trauma-informed *culture* was developed, however, the findings depict an organisation on a complex journey. Collaborative and relational leadership practices, time and space for reflection, and strategies developing safe, open and honest relationships between hierarchies promoted learning, and could have been a catalyst for organisational change. However, different conceptualisations of success, perceptions of responsibility and vulnerability ultimately stalled progress. Whilst it is unknown whether Fernville continued the learning and change agenda, reflections on the findings depict *some* learning, *some* changes, even if only temporarily. This final conversation with Mo did, however, suggest that the learning and change agenda within the organisation may not be over. Mo argued that 'most' really did 'believe

in' the fundamental benefits of learning about and working in trauma-informed ways and expressed that 'most' of them 'really want to learn more about it all'. Whether or not those responsible for organisational level decision making 'believed' in the agenda, if it is the ways of thinking within actors within an organisation that shape what learning is seen as valuable, perhaps the beliefs of 'most' would, overtime, outweigh the few.

Chapter Five: Riverford College

Prelude

I look up as I approach the school gates, squinting in the fresh September sunshine. Funny how I expected the site to look different somehow, at the start of a new school year. But I am greeted, of course, by the same grey breezeblock walls, wrapped in their entirety by the same metal bars of the same towering security fence. I press the buzzer and wait for the familiar greeting: "just scan your card". "I can't", I reply, as ever: "It's a visitor badge, not a staff card; I hold a governance role". "Oh", the intercom responded, after a long (and loaded) pause: "There's not a board meeting today; it's inset day for our staff". "I'm here for the inset day", I quickly respond, "Anita invited the board to join".

"Hang on...", the faceless voice replied, as I anxiously wait for the familiar buzz of the gates unlocking; the scream of metal as they part ways to grant my entry. "Josie! I'm so sorry to keep you waiting! It's been a crazy morning as ever". I look up to see a slightly disheveled Anita rushing towards me. I glance at my watch; it's

7.59am. I wonder what time she had to get here to have already had a 'crazy morning'.

"I wasn't expecting you to come! You're the only one here out of the board. I'm so pleased you could make it!". I smile. She really does seem genuinely surprised – and pleased – that I'm here.

"You know, this is the first time we've invited the board to an inset day. When I sent the invitation early in the summer, most people didn't respond. I had a couple of emails saying thanks but no thanks but that's it. I guess they might think it's weird to be invited to the staff training. Anyway sorry, let's go and get you a coffee". Despite the small room in the corner being no more than twenty feet from the entrance of the building, the walk there together took us no less than eight minutes.

"Nadine, hello, it's so good to see you"; "Harry how was Italy?"; "Did little Jake get off to nursery ok this morning, Emma?". Anita greeted everyone we passed with the same warm tone, and each time was met with a genuine smile back, Anita's presence welcomed in the room. The same, however, could not be said for my presence. Wary eyes cast over me, an air of confusion, whispers of "is she new?", "who's that girl with Anita" echo behind me. Each time, Anita beams back at them, informing them I'm not actually new at all: "Josie's on the board. She's here with her governance role; I invited the board for the training day today. Josie's also the one doing the research project; remember we spoke about it in briefings last term?

Well, this is Josie! Let's make her feel welcome, shall we".

Once we're armed with what must be the world's strongest filter coffee, Anita runs through the agenda for the day with me. She's arranged for an external speaker who will be delivering training on trauma-informed approaches. "Everyone's going to moan about it", she laughs; "we've had this training before, but that was years ago now" ... "We say we're a 'trauma-informed school'; that's what's on our website, but I'm not convinced everyone even understands those words, let alone puts them into practice. We don't all know it properly. We've got loads of new staff and have a high staff turnover. They won't have had that training here. We've also got long-standing staff that absolutely don't buy into it at all. We all need reminding. We don't use the language consistently; we don't practice in this way consistently. We don't all have the theory to back our practices if we do. Tomorrow, we've got a different speaker coming in to talk about restorative practice; another thing we claim to do. Lots of it's going to be repetitive and staff might whine about that but it's deliberate. You ask staff in what ways we practice and some will say we're trauma-informed; some will say we use restorative practice. Do they know what these words mean? Do they know the difference? Do they know that trauma theory underpins restorative practice? They – or I should say we - need to understand trauma theory before we can claim to understand restorative practice.

The structure – straight in at 8.30 in the morning on day one of the new school year; that's deliberate too. I want this to be the first thing we hear, before any curriculum planning, before lesson planning. It needs to underpin our thinking in

every decision we make, every email, every interaction. But yeh; they're going to whine about this for sure". Anita laughs... and then sighs...

"And that's why I invited the board. I'm actually a bit gutted they haven't come, to be honest with you. I was chatting with the speakers coming in before the summer break, and we've made sure there's quite a heavy focus on us as a collective organisation. We're talking about our school values, our ethos, our culture. How these things underpin everything we do. The board won't think training days like this are their business – day-to-day, ground level practice – but this really is their business. It's absolutely their business. The board is so important for guiding us, holding us accountable, making sure our actual practices match what we're claiming. They approve of the policies and monitor our progress. They need to understand this stuff too. I'm not sure how they can do that if they don't know us.

Anyway... I'm rambling on... you're here, and that's great! I hope you can get some learning and value out of this day too, Josie. And please, any feedback for us as well is always welcome! Outside perspectives are so valuable!

Oh! The time! I've got to dash else we'll never get started on time! Make yourself at home and I will catch up with you later!"

I watch Anita make her way to the front of the room, her attempts to start on time derailed by yet more post-summer break greetings. I smile to myself as I get settled in with my notebook, trying to ignore the snippets of conversation I can hear from the next table...

"Trustee... No not new support staff... why would the board be here... have you seen any others... wouldn't recognise them to be fair... are they checking up on us... best behaviour then everyone ha-ha..."

5.1 Introduction

Presented within this chapter are the findings from the second case study: Riverford College. Riverford, an all-through Alternative Provision (AP) Academy, provided education for young people aged 5-16. At the beginning of their participation, Riverford resided within a single school trust. Having not long before joined the board of governance, I was aware not only of recent significant organisational changes, but that plans for more changes were underway.

Around six months prior to their participation, circumstances led to the resignation of the headteacher. This prompted the board to expand and diversify in recognition of the necessity of a range of experience when such challenges arise. The new board – upon which I then sat – oversaw the temporary covering of the headship role by the assistant headteacher, Anita, who later came to hold the post permanently. The change in headship and absence of assistant headteacher considering Anita's promotion combined with concerns around post-Covid financial recovery initiated substantial restructuring. This required examination of the roles of senior and middle leaders and debates around what changes should be made began. Against this changing backdrop, my second case study

investigating organisational learning and change towards embedding a trauma-informed organisational culture within Riverford began.

Concurrently, the Department for Education (DfE) published their ‘white paper’, setting out visions for all schools to join ‘strong’ Multi-Academy Trusts (MATs) by 2030. The call, intended to ensure schools have ‘strong’ support, also encouraged organisations to ‘pose themselves a series of challenging questions – to support them in engaging constructively with the Department’ (Department for Education, May 2022). This raised questions about the future of Riverford. Could the single-school trust, with a comparatively small and relatively new trust board, confidently provide support as ‘strong’ as long-standing MATs?

Suggestions to disband the trust and seek alternative MATs began. Starting with the board, these deliberations moved through senior leadership teams, to middle management teams, and shortly afterwards, teaching and support staff began raising questions around the trust, the schools, the students, and, ultimately, their futures within this uncertainty and change. Before long, an external consultant was contracted and investigation into potential directions began.

A thorough investigation was needed; the responsibility behind decisions weighed heavily. However, as a *researcher*, this presented a unique opportunity. This study investigated organisational learning and change; explored how organisations develop a *culture* based on trauma-informed approaches in practice. This study sought to understand how practices can be adapted to support organisational learning and change, how learning is produced and transferred and how key

stakeholders conceptualise successes. Within the context of significant organisational change and with pre-existing claims to a trauma-informed culture, Riverford provided a rich complementary case study. The following chapter now presents the findings.

Chapter overview

Whilst the findings within chapter four are presented temporarily, at Riverford, learning and change was less linear and so instead this chapter presents the themes running throughout. Each theme ebbs and flows in prominence and impact at different times and for different reasons throughout the findings. Analysing these themes in combination enables a closer understanding of the spaces *in-between* the data itself; shedding light on nuances within the processes of learning and change.

First presented are the perceived barriers to learning and change running through the findings. The hierarchal dynamics within the organisation and how perceptions of responsibility within this dynamic influenced learning and change are presented. Then the impact of misalignments, contradictions and inconsistencies within the learning and change process are explored. Running throughout the findings, however, was shared consensus on the barriers to learning and change. The chapter presents how these barriers did not reduce over time, but rather continued throughout learning and change. The chapter then presents how the overarching impact of change manifested throughout the study. Initially, Riverford entered a state of flux. This section begins with a presentation of the impact of these

changes, highlighting the uncertainty and unsettlement within this. Then presented are the impacts of these changes on organisational practices, policies and procedures. This depicts the role of the headteacher within this, as well as the impact of these changes on learning at the organisational level. Finally, this chapter presents how learning manifested throughout. The findings shed light on how learning occurred between actors and how this learning was realised in practice. This chapter concludes by reflecting on these findings in conjunction, with consideration to the wider organisational learning and change journey presented.

5.2 Part one: perceptions; misconceptions; challenges

William; chair of the trust board:

> *There is a danger that these things are a bit jargon. 'Nurturing'; 'trauma-informed'; I see them as lazy terms. We use terms like that because they're handy little words to fill the space where we can't really explain what we want to say. I have heard those words and I they are the 'values' being pushed here, but the danger is of buzzwords and tick boxes and we don't know what they really mean. What on earth does 'trauma-informed practice' actually mean?*
>
> *I have heard the word; it's used when Anita speaks about her plans. It's quite pejorative, using the term 'trauma'. But what does it mean? I don't know. They want the culture to be 'trauma-informed'. It's a lazy term; I just ignore that jargon mostly. They're wasting their energy on silly buzz words.*
>
> *Anyway, I don't need to know what 'trauma-informed' means and I don't need to know about making the culture 'trauma-informed'. Anita can keep going with that if that's her agenda. It doesn't matter to us anyway, on the board. We don't need to understand the culture; that's for her to steer. We just need to check financials, check money in and money out, make sure documents are in order. Everything culture-related; that's for leadership to work on.*

> *We sit above that. We wouldn't have time anyway. That's part of leaderships actual jobs; they've got time and resources. But again, it's not anything to do with us. We'll stick to what we know and leave them to whatever they are doing.*

The findings suggest several individual, collective and wider organisational level factors contributing to the constraining of learning and change throughout the duration. How these factors interacted, challenged and impacted each other throughout the study are now presented.

5.2.1 Hierarchical dynamics

The findings suggest that perceptions of responsibility for learning and change differed between the hierarchal levels within the organisation, and this impacted individual and organisational learning and change.

Governance

William expressed a view that responsibility for creating and sustaining a trauma-informed culture lay with Anita as headteacher: 'Anita can keep going with that, if that's her agenda'. William expressed his role sat 'above' the culture; 'everything culture-related; that's for leadership'. He expressed a separation between the knowledge required of board members within this process of learning and change, distinguishing between 'what we know' and 'whatever they are doing'. William argued the board need not understand the organisational culture to fulfill their roles, instead arguing that 'everything culture-related' was instead the 'job' of the leadership team.

The board was changing; several new members were appointed, bringing with them a range of backgrounds and experiences. The findings suggest this brought with it different perspectives and experiences of working with trauma-informed approaches. Oftentimes, board members shared William's frustrations, rebutting Anita’s attempts to bring conversations around developing a trauma-informed culture to meetings: ‘I don’t think we need to discuss that stuff in these meetings; that’s not what we’re here for’. Other times, board members questioned whether bringing a trauma-informed lens to policy development was possible: ‘I don’t know if trauma-informed practices can be reflected in policies. Would it even exist in policy speak? I doubt it’.

Such views were not shared universally and oftentimes other trustees shared Anita’s desire to explore the process of creating and sustaining a trauma-informed culture within these spaces:

> *Louisa: I don’t feel there’s many of us trying to bring it back to these core relational things that should be at the center of all our conversations.*
>
> *Mabel: Are the young people ever at the center of the conversation here? Are staff viewed as actual human beings or are they all just pawns in the business plan?*

Louisa expressed a view that ‘our’ conversations as trustees ‘should’ focus on these ‘core relational things’. Mabel too raised concerns around the separation of roles between the staff forming the day-to-day school community and those working with the ‘business plan’. Where William viewed his role as separate, this was a concern for Mabel and Louisa. The differences between perceptions of

responsibility expressed suggest tensions between the board and the wider school community and distrust between board members, too.

Head of School

Anita's role saw her not only guiding the day-to-day but brought her to the forefront of board meetings, too. Sitting across both sides, Anita held much responsibility for developing practices and holding staff accountable as well as holding the board accountable to the wider school community.

The findings depict Anita's attempts to fulfill this responsibility within the board meetings. She often brought concerns around the culture of the school to the board:

> *I hear what people say, that we're really good at trauma-informed practices, that it's part of our culture. But it's not. I see it day-to-day and I'm telling you it's not there and it needs to be.*

Anita also raised concerns around the board's role within this:

> *It's really important that you all see what type of training we do and why. How are you supposed to hold us accountable for something that you don't understand?*

Anita consistently viewed it as her responsibility to hold both staff and the board accountable for the development of a trauma-informed culture. However, more broadly the findings depict inconsistencies between the ways participants perceived their responsibilities within this. This oftentimes caused disconnect and mistrust between the hierarchical structures.

Senior leadership team

Conversations between the wider leadership team holding individual additional responsibilities oftentimes showed disparities between their perceptions of the current organisational culture. Additionally, expressed within these conversations were different perceptions of how their individual additional responsibilities fit within this. Oftentimes, participants within these roles expressed a positive view of current policies, arguing these policies do translate into practices:

> *Levi: Staff feel really supported; they know who their people are to go to within the system.*
>
> *George: Trauma-informed practices are really good here. I'm confident all staff buy into this and we see it across their practices.*

However, concurrently, the findings depict responsibility for upholding these cultures was often passed to staff within other roles:

> *Levi: We have staff who know loads because of their backgrounds so we're covered there.*
>
> *Gabriel: Some people are keener to learn than others and take it upon themselves to learn more, so that's all good for us.*

Additionally, oftentimes the same participants expressed feeling that staff needn't have built knowledge and understanding beyond what was outlined within existing policies for these to be translated into practices:

> *Levi: They don't need to know the why behind trauma-informed stuff to do it. It's just for Ofsted anyway; it doesn't mean much.*

The disparities between perceptions of knowledge required, as well as conversations around wider accountability and responsibilities within this, were explored within a meeting between the senior leadership team:

> *Anita: Well maybe they do need to be able to have a deeper knowledge base to be able to feel confident to say, "yes, I know why I am doing what I am doing".*
>
> *Harry: That's all fine except in such a busy place it's not the place to unpick such things.*
>
> *Gabriel: Sometimes we're just in crisis management mode. In those instances is it important to have that deeper knowledge base?*
>
> *Harry: Also, people that have been here a long time are set in their ways. They'd see this as red tape: "You can't do this. You must do that". People would be resistant.*

Harry and Gabriel questioned whether they could support staff in developing a 'deeper knowledge base' around trauma-informed approaches, arguing that the pace of the day-to-day and concerns they would be met with resistance were barriers within this. These responses were misaligned with previous comments from these participants, who previously expressed staff already did 'buy-in' to, and practice in, trauma-informed ways.

Middle management roles

Sat in-between senior leadership teams and teaching staff, those holding middle management roles, for example site leaders or subject leaders, frequently expressed feeling pressure from both 'above and below' within the hierarchal dynamics. Nadine and Beth, both site base leaders, expressed the impact this had on them:

Beth: You've got SLT feeling pressures from above so they pass it down to us. They know we don't have capacity, but do it anyway so it's ticked off their list and it's our problem if it doesn't work out.

Nadine: And then we have pressures from the teachers to sort out stuff that should have been dealt with by SLT but hasn't picked up; we see teachers struggling and there's nothing we can do about it. We're trapped in the middle.

Beth felt that senior leadership teams knew they lacked capacity but that offloading their own to-do lists took priority for them. They expressed feeling 'trapped' within this, unable to meet senior leadership's expectations, whilst simultaneously unable to support 'struggling' teachers. This oftentimes resulted in a lack of 'trust' in senior leadership teams to 'do anything to change these issues', creating a disconnect between these hierarchal positions.

However, middle management role holders concurrently frequently expressed feeling 'pressures' from teachers, arguing this pressure negatively impacted them. Nadine argued: 'it's so hard to keep yourself sane within this. We're supporting everybody, but nobody supports us'. This suggests that a lack of clarity between the roles – i.e., which staff member was responsible for what – was a barrier for middle management to carry out their roles effectively, and raised questions around the hierarchal structure, and what support existed, for whom, within this.

Teaching staff

Interviews with and conversations between teachers confirmed this narrative; teachers too expressed struggling within the current hierarchal system. They

frequently expressed feeling unsupported by both line management *and* support staff and therefore felt disconnected from the wider teams.

Like those in middle leadership roles, teachers frequently expressed feeling ‘worn out’ and ‘emotionally battered’ because of ‘constant and increasing pressure’ from ‘both sides’:

> *Mabel: We need to hold people accountable because it’s all falling to us. It's a domino effect but we’re getting it from both sides. Management passing their crap to us; support staff passing their crap onto us. We’re honestly knackered.*

Communication, whether from ‘up there or down here’, was frequently raised as a tension ‘between the different levels’, with emphasis on how senior management communicated – or did not communicate – with them: ‘it’s like Chinese whispers; they don’t know how to communicate with us’.

Concurrently, teachers frequently discussed additional pressures due to either the lack of support staff, or the lack of training support staff received, and how this impacted their ability to carry out their roles in trauma-informed ways:

> *Anton: Support staff are dropping like flies. It sounds rude but they’re useless now. Half the time they’re not there because they’ve been reallocated; they’re not trained; we have to train them but we’re also meant to be doing extra stuff for our line managers.*
>
> *Teachers become the bad cops and the good cop role falls to behaviour support, but then relationships with teachers are fraught – both with students and leadership - and that puts huge pressures on us that support staff don’t get.*

Using the ‘good cop, bad cop’ narrative, Anton depicted a tension, and separation, between teachers and support staff, and argued these binary ‘good’ and ‘bad’ positions they perceived themselves in impacted their relationships with both students and line managers. A sense of threat to their positions came through; anxieties around how line managers perceive their abilities to carry out their roles.

Supporting roles

The findings from interviews with those in supporting roles – teaching assistants, behaviour support, therapeutic support workers – oftentimes aligned with this with many sharing the view that they were both under-utilised and undervalued. The ‘good cop, bad cop’ narrative again echoed through, however this time from opposing sides. Emma argued:

> *Support staff are not seen as equal. We're used for the rubbish jobs. it’s a really stressful job for very little money and very little regard and the teachers often see themselves as better. That’s traumatising in itself. There's an imbalance there.*

Similarly Sylvia argued that when support staff ‘pick up the pieces of the stuff teachers can’t handle’, this made them ‘look and feel bad’: ‘We’re constantly being put in that bad cop position’. Emma and Sylvia likewise argued that teachers were prioritised for training which would have benefitted their capacity to carry out their roles:

> *Emma: I applied for more training after an inset day a year or so ago but that got rejected because I’m just support staff. I was told teachers are priority.*
>
> *Sylvia: Training would have been crucial for my role. Having that knowledge makes a huge difference. Why aren’t we getting it but teachers are?*

Emma: It means we're not equipped to deal with the stuff that gets handed down to us.

Sylvia: That just perpetuates the idea that we're not as good as teachers and then we get less opportunities for development. Then obviously we're not as knowledgeable as teachers because of this.

Whilst teachers expressed frustrations with how the structures dictated ways of working for support staff, support staff likewise were frustrated by how they perceived the roles of teachers in comparison to their own.

Differences between the hierarchical structures and how roles and responsibilities were perceived and constructed in relation to others echoed throughout each layer. The lack of clarity of responsibilities and roles was oftentimes a significant barrier to collective learning and change. The findings depict staff feeling isolated from those in other roles, as expressed by Sylvia: 'there's a long-standing clique culture that causes isolation'. This oftentimes prevented collaborative learning, constraining organisational change.

Additionally, participants oftentimes placed blame on those in different roles for different organisational practices: 'there's a lot of finger pointing going on'. Repeatedly occurring blame seen throughout the findings suggests there was disconnect between the hierarchies, which led to distrust in others and the systems themselves: 'how are we supposed to trust in these people and these systems?'. This shifting blame and disconnection was expressed by Louisa as 'a battle of the bureaucracies', drawing further attention to questions around who was responsible for decision making, how decisions were made and who was impacted by these decisions.

5.2.2 Misalignments, contradictions, inconsistencies

Anita:

> *We want to work on continuing to improve our approaches and practices to be more line with a trauma-informed approach. To change these things I'm very aware we need to get to the bottom of what exactly it is we need to change first. To understand that we need to get a better understanding of where we are right now.*
>
> *What I'm really interested in finding out, and this research work will help me, is what our staff think and feel about current practices, what they think our current culture is and what they envision a trauma-informed culture to be. As you know, I'm new to this role and I've been talking a lot to staff about developing a culture that is trauma-informed. And I know at first the senior leadership teams and wider leadership roles, everyone's been like, 'well our culture is already trauma-informed so what do you mean develop it?'. And I think it's interesting actually; peoples mixed definitions of what it might look like for an entire organisational culture to be trauma-informed. It's all different. There's a lot of inconsistency. A lot of misconceptions.*
>
> *What I see a lot is staff who have engaged with the training. Yes, they might often work in ways that are inherently trauma-informed, and by that I mean we have a lot of focus on relational practice, developing positive relationships with the young people, supporting wellbeing generally. But I don't think that often reaches the culture. I may be wrong. But I don't think I am. At this point in our journey, as an organisation, I do not think we have a culture that is trauma-informed.*

Anita argued that to be 'more in line' with a trauma-informed approach, they needed to 'get to the bottom of' what 'exactly' it was they were trying to change, first. To do this, she argued, they needed a 'better understanding of where they are *right now*'. Anita perceived that 'everyone' questioned the need to develop this; she saw a collective belief that Riverford's culture was 'already trauma-informed'. However, she also observed 'mixed definitions' of what this meant; lots of 'misconceptions'; lots of 'inconsistency'. Anita argued that inconsistencies and

misconceptions between staff represented a lack in a shared trauma-informed culture. She questioned:

> *Are we all on the same page about what a trauma-informed culture looks like? Because I'm not sure that we are at the moment.*

The findings validate Anita's concerns, depicting misconceptions and inconsistencies at interpersonal, individual and wider organisational level of conceptualisations of trauma-informed approaches, and trauma-informed culture.

Interpersonal and individual level

Perceptions of what trauma *meant* within this context were mixed. Oftentimes, staff perceived 'trauma' as associated with 'labels of disadvantage': 'it's just the kids that are in care'; 'they haven't had a trauma, so they don't need this approach'; 'they've just been excluded, they don't have any additional needs'. Other times, 'trauma' was associated with poverty: 'it's all about poverty'; 'poverty is what's causing trauma'. Some participants referenced young people's behaviour as traumatic for other students: 'when [student] kicks off, that's what's causing trauma for the other kids'.

Some participants argued that staff were 'very aware' of trauma and its impacts: 'a lot of teachers are very aware here of trauma, trauma processes, and looking out for trauma in young people'. Conversely, others argued that 'talking about trauma' would not be useful: 'I can't see how talking about trauma's going to stop all the kid's behaviour anyway'.

Zooming out to view the wider organisation depicted an even more mixed picture. Often participants struggled to conceptualise the value in developing a trauma-informed culture:

> *Levi: I think it's about us as a whole though.*
>
> *Nadine: What do you mean?*
>
> *Levi: Remember, she said it's about us too, and the whole school, or whole organisation and everyone.*
>
> *Beth: I haven't been through a trauma though. I'm not a student. I don't need to improve my behaviour.*

Across the organisation, the findings depict a shared concern around the ways the 'label', trauma-informed, was used. Many argued that trauma-informed practice was merely a 'buzzword'; a 'selling point' for schools to use:

> *William: The danger is that these things are a bit jargon: 'nurturing'; 'trauma-informed'. They're lazy terms. We all use terms like that because they're handy little words to fill the space.*
>
> *Gabriel: It's very easy for schools to say that they're trauma-informed these days; there's a lot of buzzwords coming in.*
>
> *Beth: We must be careful about our labels because it just becomes a great selling point, and unfortunately schools are becoming businesses.*
>
> *George: All just buzzwords: slogans, labels. It's just a selling point.*

However, despite often arguing these labels were 'slogans'; 'selling points', the findings concurrently highlighted participants locating where their practice aligned with a trauma-informed approach and where it did not:

> *Beth: Perhaps here, trauma-informed approaches are still what we should be saying we do, because we're looking at the environment, we are reflective staff, we're making connections.*

George: These buzzwords coming in; I notice them here. I'm noticing reflective practice, reflective spaces. I'm hearing these words more and I'm thinking: 'great, it's maybe happening.

Gabriel: What it isn't, is it isn't pastries on a Friday morning. That's lovely but it's not what we're talking about here. It's talking deeply and openly about how interactions and responses are making you feel and we don't do that yet.

Whilst there was shared mistrust in using 'buzzwords' like trauma and frequent inconsistencies in using these terms, the findings suggest that underneath this, there was some consistency around the identification of trauma-informed approaches within practices. Interestingly, this was not a linear development; rather, shared understandings, misconceptions and inconsistencies were embedded concurrently throughout, with the same participants contributing both perspectives simultaneously. The findings therefore depict inconsistencies in participants conceptualisations of trauma-informed approaches, both at interpersonal and individual levels.

Wider organisational level

At the wider organisational level, the findings suggest further inconsistencies impacted these disparities in conceptualisations. Firstly, the findings depict inconsistencies in communications between leadership teams and the wider staff body that impacted how agendas were realised in practice. Anton stated:

George read about how important it was for all the bases to communicate with each other, but he never really facilitated it, he just told us and expected us to crack on with it.

Similarly, Emma reflected:

> *They [leadership] made all these claims about wanting to push for better support for mental health and wellbeing for staff. They said all this stuff, but obviously nothing came of it. So, it all just stays the same.*

Many participants argued that ‘mixed signals’ and a ‘real lack of consistency’ came through leadership teams, which induced ‘inconsistent and unfair practices in reality’. Nadine argued: ‘staff with more time can work in more reflective ways. Some have more capacity than others. Then they get praised for working in more reflective ways’. Furthermore, Nadine argued this resulted in staff feeling unsupported:

> *They [leadership] were too relaxed with student support, then not relaxed enough, and we don’t know where we stand here. We don’t feel supported within that structure. It's too inconsistent; we need clearer boundaries.*

Several participants suggested these inconsistencies either ‘coincided’ with, or had ‘not been helped by’, ‘the fact that our staffing changes so much’; ‘how are we meant to know what’s what when they don’t even know what’s what’; ‘there’s no clear message about what to do and why’.

Alongside this, participants often raised concerns around the misalignment between policies and practices, and the unclear and inconsistent use of language throughout. This was raised at several board meetings. Connie asked: ‘if we were inspected against our documentation in practice then how would we fare?’; ‘are we actually doing this stuff in practice or are we just using the language with no evidence to back it up?’. This concern was shared by several participants outside of the board, too. After a staff meeting, Emma reflected:

I was sitting there thinking, ‘hang on. We’re meant to be trauma-informed. We’re meant to be nurturing. They're using these words, but actually none of these things are seeping down into our practices.

Anita frequently conveyed this concern: ‘policies don’t match up with practice, but at the same time, some practices don’t match up with policies – in a good way’. She argued: ‘this language needs to run through everything we do here, but it also needs to be about more than the language as well. Where are our actions? I don’t see them sometimes, either’.

Questions around how language choices conveyed ‘superficial’ verses ‘real’ knowledge occurred repeatedly across the findings. Sylvia argued: ‘there’s superficial knowledge, and then there’s actual knowledge where it translates into your work, and these are not the same thing’. Board member, Ivan, argued:

Whether the staff can name it as trauma-informed practice or not isn’t the point. If it’s just the language, then that’s not an indicator of learning. It's then about the tick box.

It would be saying the right things but would it be doing the right things? Would we just be looking good on paper, but not actually doing the right things? That's the risk.

Ivan questioned how to know the ‘right things’ were being done, expressing a ‘risk’ in masking superficial knowledge with the ‘right’ language. Similarly, Sylvia argued that striving to ‘look good on paper’ masks ‘actually believing in the things that you’re doing’. ‘Actual knowledge about these things’, she argued, ‘has to mean believing in them’.

Interestingly, however, whilst many interactions throughout the study depict a call for deeper knowledge around trauma-informed approaches, when training opportunities arose, these often received mixed receptions:

> *Beth: Why are we even doing this, we've done it before.*
>
> *Nadine: We literally do this stuff all the time, we don't need more training.*
>
> *Levi: I don't think we need to know the ins and outs of trauma-theory really.*
>
> *Anton: I'd rather just be lesson planning to be honest.*

Misalignments, misconceptions, and inconsistencies ran throughout, and inconsistencies between participants' attitudes towards additional training highlight this. There were mixed perceptions around what – if any – further training and development was required to realise 'actual knowledge' around trauma-informed approaches into practices. This increased tension between the hierarchies, often constraining learning and change.

5.2.3 Shared consensus on challenges

Within this mixed picture, however, the findings consistently highlight shared consensus around many factors constraining individual and organisational level learning and change.

School as a site of trauma

Firstly, many participants shared a perception that school itself can be a 'site of trauma' for students, and this trickled down to impact staff too. The *type* of school,

a large all-through alternative provision, was often referenced in this way: ‘students are coming from schools where nobody wants them; that must be so hard for them’; ‘they’re coming to us with those feelings of deep rejection, shame, isolation’. Also referenced within this was the ways in which parents and carers perceived school: ‘they’ve also often had dire experiences with their kids' schools’; ‘exclusion is rough on them, too’; ‘they come to us feeling pretty lost and alone as well’. George argued:

> *There’s a lot of fear around here. Fear in the institution; fear of the institution. That really comes through the students, their parents and carers. That leaks through to us; we really feel it. It's tough working with traumatised young people. It's hard on our staff.*

Anita saw this, too: ‘things can be really traumatic for staff day-to-day, and they have to just keep coming in and giving everything every day’. Anton expressed the impact this can have:

> *You can’t not bring this home with you and this can impact your own relationships with your family, your sleep, your health.*

Many participants shared this view, using terms like ‘relentless’; ‘intense’; ‘cycle of stress’ to describe their experiences working within this environment.

The impact of the school building itself was also highlighted: ‘the site itself is rubbish, it’s rough and ready’; ‘they don’t treat it with respect because they don’t value it and that’s because they don’t feel valued in it’; ‘it gives off this message of ‘this is a shit school for shit people’. Oftentimes, staff argued this ‘reputation’ impacted staff hiring and retention, resulting in high staff turnover, low recruitment,

and frequent cover staff. Many staff referenced feeling almost always 'overcapacity' because of this, which increased pressure, anxiety and burn out. Nadine argued:

> *Staff are getting worn out and tired. The pace of the day is so fast and at times it's all about crisis management. We'll often then revert to those coping mechanisms. Those ways we cope when we're exhausted and feel like we can't cope.*
>
> *In the same way that we see with the young people, you can tell with us because we'll get snappy, frustrated with each other, short tempers. Our lessons get that little bit worse.*
>
> *Your window of tolerance gets really squished in and you get a bit less creative, a bit less patient. I know for myself that if I'm not finding ways to deal with that, I'm going to get home and snap at my own son. I might skip the gym, open some wine, argue with my husband.*

Similarly, Anton stated: 'it's hard to keep ourselves sane; that's for sure. That cheesy phrase: 'you can't pour from an empty cup'. Well, our cups are empty'. In a wider leadership meeting, Anita and George reflected on how trauma within young people 'leaks through' to staff:

> *George: The problem is how do we find ways of supporting that doesn't involve an extra layer of work?*
>
> *Anita: We need to make sure that our deeper organisational practices are supporting that.*
>
> *George: But when? How? I'm also feeling these things too – overcapacity; burn out. I know you are too. We all are. How and when do we fit this in, because the way I see it is it's extra work for us now too.*

Whilst George saw the impact current structures had on the wider staff body, he felt these impacts too. George's reaction to Anita's suggestion depicts the 'fear' he felt at the prospect of an 'extra layer of work' to his already 'overcapacity' schedule. The findings suggest that school itself could be a site of trauma for

young people, and this felt trauma impacted staff, too. Working with traumatised young people, in a system under pressure, impacted staff. This constrained learning and change, as participants often perceived learning and change as threatening their workloads.

Isolation

Within this context, the findings suggest a shared consensus that the lack of opportunities to meet as a team constrained learning and change. Participants frequently expressed this was both a consequence of additional pressures within the system and a barrier to staff feeling supported within this. Anton argued:

> *We need the team to be tight. We need to be able to speak to each other in ways that are honest, but also supportive, so you can say when things are going wrong and know you'll get support back.*

Within the current structure, he followed: 'we don't come together as a collective and actually think about our practices collectively; it's all down to the individual'. This view was shared across multiple participants. Mabel argued there was a lack of opportunities for 'deep discussions as a staff body', and this 'prevents us from learning and sharing and growing'. She argued this meant they remained in 'this tense situation', and 'nothing can change'. Harry further argued: 'the lack of collective time means that supporting staff's wellbeing, it's all individual'; 'there's nothing collective in place to address this'.

Whilst there was shared understanding of the need for time together as a team, for learning, 'growth', and supporting wellbeing, the findings suggest a lack of

structures supporting this. Anton argued: ‘working together is made harder because we don’t really know each other that well – we just don’t have the time in the current systems’. This issue was brought, by Anita, to an Education Committee meeting, and Louisa argued it was a responsibility of the board to ‘continue to hold to account’ the ‘improvement journey’, ‘particularly when it concerns carving out space within structures to help staff learn from each other and feel supported’. There was shared recognition across roles that if structures were not there to support all members, then the system itself was not working in a trauma-informed way. The findings depict participants across multiple roles expressing concerns around this, citing lack of time and space for collective reflection and relationship building as a barrier to developing a trauma-informed organisational culture.

5.3 Part two: in a state of flux

William: [November 2022]

> *I would like to take this opportunity to update you on progress about key matters affecting Riverford...*
>
> *I want to make sure you are fully informed and involved in the next steps...*
>
> *I would encourage you all to take part by asking any questions you have.*
>
> *... Details will follow in due course...*
>
> *As many of you may be aware, there is pressure on smaller academies to join MATs...*
>
> *We have not yet made the decision which trust is right for us but are working on a timeline...*
>
> *We shall then be undertaking a thorough due diligence process to verify our initial conclusions and ensure our final choice meets our aspirations...*

I will communicate an update early...

Trust board meeting: [December, 2022]

William: I'm sorry Anita but we won't have time for your section on culture and values. The agenda has had to change considering these updates. I hope that's ok.

Anita: Um, right. Isn't it more relevant now though?

William: How so?

Anita: Well, we're talking about finding a MAT that is a best fit for our unique school.

William: Yes, that's right.

Anita: Don't we need to develop a shared understanding of our current culture, our aspirations moving forward, before we can represent ourselves fully? We don't have an up-to-date strategic plan for developing and embedding our aspirations for a culture that is trauma-informed right now; that's why we're looking at this.

William: The trauma stuff is about ground-level teaching practices. That's not the focus of this meeting.

Anita: Um. Right. No, sorry, I don't think you understand what I'm trying to say here.

William: Sorry, Anita. This is an interesting debate but we should park it for now. Perhaps that's a conversation you can have with Louisa separately to this meeting? We have a tight agenda now and our priority is to talk about moving forward with this upcoming change. Louisa, can this be picked up separately?

Louisa: Yep. Anita, I will chat to you afterwards.

Anita: Fine, ok.

Meeting between Anita and Louisa: [December, 2022]

Anita: I don't mean this disrespectfully but they are wrong there. I disagree with them. Trauma-informed practice is something that underpins

everything we do so I don't know that it's right of them to say it's just a ground-level, practice-level, thing.

Louisa: It's about everything: how the canteen happens, or meetings happen, or people speak to each other, or anything. It would be like saying our restorative practice is separate, our education is separate.

Anita: Let's go back to the board and say that we're not comfortable talking about this just from an education point of view because it's an underpinning value of Riverford. And to be honest, I don't think the way William approached that was trauma-informed in itself.

Louisa: It feels a bit 'us against them' with this stuff doesn't it.

Anita: Also, and I cannot stress this enough, we need this more now than ever. So much change is brewing. That communication that went out to staff is already causing whispers of anxieties. Everyone's going to get nervous about this. It's going to put everyone on edge. What we really need exactly now is a clear plan for embedding a culture that is trauma-informed. To support staff. To support us.

Louisa: It's very short-sighted that it's being dismissed because of the changes when we need it because of the changes.

The study began with Anita taking the acting headteacher post after the former headteacher's resignation. Throughout the study, interviews for the permanent post took place, Anita was appointed, several new board members were appointed, and financial and operational pressures led to organisational wide restructuring. Concurrently, pressures from Government releases meant the trust decided to disband, and the processes of joining a different MAT began. In the following section, the findings are presented with this changing backdrop in mind.

First presented are the impacts of these organisational changes on staff. Uncertainty and unsettlement run throughout. Then presented are the impacts on organisational practices, policies and procedures themselves. The visibility of governance increased; communication with staff as a collective changed, and

such changes impacted on the original learning and change agenda too. Decision-making practices, collecting and responding to staff feedback, and providing time and space for collective reflection developed as pressures of organisational change increased, and data presented captures the impact this had throughout the organisation.

Underpinning this is the significant role Anita played. Trust and confidence in her leadership was consistently highlighted, and her continuous promotion of the development of a trauma-informed culture when faced with resistance propelled learning *through* the changes. Through doing so, the findings presented suggest that the organisational changes were *not* the barrier that was originally anticipated. Instead, the findings suggest that the nature of the changes underway helped to propel the learning and change trajectory, highlighting the necessity of a trauma-informed culture within the circumstances.

5.3.1 Uncertainty and unsettlement

From the start, participants referenced the ways that organisational level changes increased anxieties. This first stemmed from uncertainties around changing staff: 'we used to have [Gail] but she's left, and I don't know what we'll do now'; 'with a change in head there's a lot of shuffling around'; 'everyone's getting used to the new dynamic and it's a bit anxiety inducing'. There was much confusion surrounding who would take on aspects of each role: 'I'm not quite sure who does that anymore'; 'need to check who to go to for line management stuff now'; 'it

shouldn’t be down to one person, but now she’s left we’ve lost her expertise in that area’.

Once the agenda to join a new MAT reached the wider staff body, these uncertainties became anxieties:

> *Beth: I’m worried about what’s going on in the institution at the moment. People's anxieties are really raised by this.*
>
> *Nadine: The anxiety of change is such a big thing at the moment; the impact this is having on staff is massive.*
>
> *Emma: We're all existing in this heightened state of anxiety now.*

Mabel, who held the dual role of trustee and teacher, argued that the threat of upcoming changes on a system level was uprooting staff’s ‘sense of safety’:

> *There's a sense of safety in knowing how things will be approached. At the moment things are out of the staff’s control. What I’m seeing and hearing is that this is unsettling for staff and I’m not sure that they feel safe within this system.*

A conversation between Nadine and Emma confirmed this:

> *Nadine: It's making us feel worried and scared because we’re feeling the knock-on effects of these systems around us failing.*
>
> *Emma: How are we going to pick up the pieces? How are we supposed to cope if the system isn’t coping itself?*

Initially observed between participants was a separation between the ‘system’ and those working within it. Repeatedly referenced was the failure of the system itself, as opposed to the individuals within it. The proposed change in Trust was initially

viewed as a fault of the system, rather than a decision made by individual actors. Despite reassurance that those currently within the system and current ways of working would remain the same, the sense of threat to 'safety' was still apparent.

5.3.2 Setting the agenda

Amongst the substantial 'threat of change' within the organisation, Anita remained focused on setting and retaining the agenda to develop and embed a trauma-informed culture. In discussion with myself and Louisa, Anita outlined how she hoped to begin this change:

> *I'm interested to get the boards perspectives, especially now. Obviously, there's new people on the board and that means the people steering the organisation throughout these changes are relatively new. It would be good to get some perspective on their interpretations of what a trauma-informed culture for us might look like.*
>
> *I want to start by focusing in on how they see their role fitting into culture and change questions.*
>
> *I was going to start with mind mapping what our culture is right now, and what a trauma-informed culture might look like, and what steps might lead us there. I think that's a nice informal way to do it. I was thinking just a good old-fashioned session of getting these conversations started.*
>
> *I feel like this is absolutely the right time to be getting into this. We need to solidify our understanding of where we are right now and where we want to take it before we make any big decisions.*

Anita sought to start by understanding board members 'interpretations' of what they believed a trauma-informed culture would encompass, and how they saw their role within this. Anita emphasised the 'need' to do this work 'before' any 'big organisational decisions' could be made. However, whilst time for this was built into the agenda of an upcoming board meeting, this was later removed. Despite

her efforts to persuade William that this agenda may be 'more relevant now than before', William dismissed this as 'ground-level teaching practices', arguing 'we should park it for now'. Later, Anita reflected:

> *We've got all the values of trauma-informed approaches plastered all over our documents, but we don't yet have the systems and processes to ensure that all of this is actually being realised in practice. We need to make changes to the school development plan to reflect this.*
>
> *We've got huge areas that I feel are essential, and they are going to require strong leadership. There are big holes there currently. Well, I will just have to be that strong leader then! I'm going to follow this through regardless.*

Following this, Anita continued to raise this agenda throughout every opportunity. Sometimes this was rebutted; sometimes a short window allocated. Outside of these meetings, Anita continued to share this agenda with the wider staff body. Two consecutive inset days were arranged, each focusing on trauma-informed organisational culture. Language within weekly briefings shifted; a focus on recognising challenges, modelling reflection, sharing vulnerabilities, and recognising staff as experts came through: 'it's been full on and challenging but you're all amazing'; 'When I'm feeling anxious at work I...'; 'I noticed you're all having more reflective conversations with each other and that's really useful...'.

The findings depict Anita consistently promoting the development of a trauma-informed culture, *despite* facing resistance. Through doing so, Anita began to embed trauma-informed approaches into *her* practices as headteacher.

5.3.3 Moving through changes

Concurrently, the threat of upcoming organisational changes began to impact organisational practices, policies and procedures. The visibility of governance increased, and communications with staff as a collective changed too.

Communication regarding upcoming changes was initially sent through an all-staff email via William: ‘I would like to take this opportunity to update you on progress about key matters affecting Riverford’. This was followed with a short virtual briefing, led by William and Louisa, joined by an external consultant contracted to assist the transition. Prior to this, the board had been largely invisible to the wider organisation, with limited interaction across the two. Board members were invited to inset days to attempt to address this, however attendance was minimal. As such, these initial communications regarding the future of the trust were, for many staff, their first direct interaction with the board. Presence of governance continued to increase as the decision-making trajectory progressed. All-staff emails were sent via the external consultant; William hosted site visits with potential new MAT leaders; board members and staff members alike attended presentations from prospective MATs.

Interestingly, the findings suggest a correlation between the increase in visibility of governance with an increase in tension between the hierarchal dynamics. The more that individuals overseeing changes became *visible,* the more mistrust and blame shifted away from the ‘system’ and on to these actors themselves:

> *Anton: The organisational vision stuff – it's all a tick box for the board.*
>
> *Nadine: Their decision-making is not in the best interest of our actual communities.*

Sylvia: To us it's a school but to them it's just a money-making system.

Emma: Their changes won't match our ethos and people will leave.

There was no longer separation between the 'system' and those within it; the separation now lay between those perceived to have decision-making powers, and those that perceived themselves to not. Within these statements, a separation of 'us' and 'them' comes through; 'their' decisions will affect 'us'. The visibility of the board gave face to the 'system'; instead of an abstract concept, there were now people to blame. Furthermore, regardless of William's communication stating that staff would be 'fully informed and involved in the next steps', there was an explicit view that decisions made 'will be negative'. Definitive terms like 'is not', 'won't, 'will be', were repeated: 'staff will leave'. This once again reflects the impacts of the hierarchal dynamics that are seen throughout the findings.

Through her role as headteacher enabling insight into both the governance and the day-to-day, Anita became aware of the mistrust building. Anita expressed concern that this may constrain the enactment of a trauma-informed culture, and sought ways to more effectively involve staff perspectives:

I really don't want to be one of those leaders that just imposes something on staff that I think is great but then staff think is totally missing the mark.

I want staff to feel really listened to. If staff feel valued and listened to and I follow through with this feedback then I think they will feel better about being part of this organisation. They will feel better about being at work. That's what we're ultimately trying to do here: create a culture where everyone feels valued and listened to and where they can trust in me.

In recognition that a trauma-informed leader would ensure staff felt 'listened to' and 'valued', Anita created opportunities to seek staff feedback on the impending

changes. A survey was sent, two forums held, and a longer all-staff meeting held where questions were explored further. Within this space, Anita shared her own concerns:

> *Everything's happening faster than anticipated. I feel there's a lot of extra pressure being put on us because of the precarity. But what I want us to think about, together as a team, is our culture. What about our culture is unique to us? What makes this special? And what isn't working so well for us right now? Because if we can really know ourselves as a collective and we can really know what we want and what we need, then this will help us, as a collective, make the right choice of MAT for us.*

Anita shared her feelings: 'I feel like...'; 'I personally feel...', inviting staff to reflect in this way, too. Anita emphasised 'collective' reflection: 'us'; 'together'; 'our', inviting staff to consider the organisation as a whole, to feel part of the team. In response, staff shared their concerns:

> *I'm worried that those of us that have been here for a long time and are a bit set in our ways and used to how things happen might find it tough if we make big changes.*
>
> *We're lacking in opportunities to learn and develop as teachers at the moment. I would really like some more professional development opportunities.*
>
> *Some of us aren't as qualified as others. I'm a bit anxious that I will get replaced under new MAT policies if there's others more qualified than me.*

Concerns around job precarity and resistance to change were shared, as well as reflections on where current structures and policies may be lacking.

Interestingly, whilst observed interactions following on from this meeting retained the same sense of mistrust in those perceived to have decision-making powers, a deep sense of trust in Anita came through:

Anton: I'm definitely confident with her. I trust her now.

Sylvia: I am quite hopeful, with our new head, for the future now.

Mabel: I trust that when she makes decisions, she's going to do it with the best intentions in mind.

Nadine: I feel like if something was to go wrong it would be a genuine mistake. I trust her to actually do what's best for the whole community.

Where previous interactions depicted a widespread threat to safety within an unpredictable system, opening conversation between staff, sharing vulnerabilities, and creating time and space for reflection began to shift this narrative. 'Trust', 'confidence', and 'hope' replaced feelings of anxiety and concern. Anita reflected: 'if we keep this going over time, even without the threat of change, perhaps this could really help embed into the culture of the school these collective reflection times'; 'that's definitely a step in the right direction towards a culture that is more trauma-informed'.

Decision-making practices, collecting and responding to staff feedback, and providing time and space for reflection developed as the pressures of organisational change increased. Whilst at first these practices were motivated by the pressure of changes, the findings suggest that doing so enabled the development of trauma-informed culture to progress *through* the changes. Not only then were organisational changes not the barrier which some initially considered, but the threat of change instead helped propel the learning trajectory, as practical applications of trauma-informed approaches became a necessity under the circumstances.

5.4 Part three: learning

5.4.1 Prelude

I once again look up as I approach the school gates, the summer sun already radiating a heat that's borderline uncomfortable. A year has passed since I started my fieldwork with Riverford. I press the buzzer and wait for the familiar greeting: "Josie, hello! Wait hang on..." buzz... Jill's beaming face appears from behind the reception desk: "Good to see you again Josie! How's your week so far? It's been mad as ever here... let me grab you a coffee; Anita and Louisa will be down in a sec!"

Before I can protest, Jill arms me with the world's strongest filter coffee and I settle into my now familiar surroundings. I'm here this time for a planning meeting with Louisa and Anita. We were meant to meet in two weeks' time; however, they've asked to bring the meeting forward. I'm aware that it's a busy time and with plans for the trust merger being brought forward I imagine what little time Anita does have will be quickly filled for her...

Quickly into the start of our meeting, my suspicions are confirmed:

> Negotiations and investigations are happening faster than anticipated... there's a lot of extra pressure being put on us because of the precarity... financial precarity too...
>
> The meetings will all be focused on this now... There's got to be forums with staff... that's going to take loads of staff time... we want staff as involved as possible... it requires a big time and energy commitment...
>
> Everyone's getting a bit burnt out...
>
> When we started this there were lots of changes but... Nobody anticipated that this extra load would happen so quickly... a lot to squish into this year...

I brace myself, knowing what they're going to say next...

> I don't think we have the capacity for this right now.

As I listen to these words I've heard before, a familiar sense of disappointment begins to creep over me. My mind swims with the same questions I worried over when I heard these words before, as my time with Fernville Academy came to an unexpected early end: what will happen now that priorities are shifting? Will anyone carry on these conversations? Will they continue with what they set out to do? How will I know if anything has actually changed? Suddenly, Anita's voice brings me back into the room:

> Anita: I think we've done a good job through engaging with the research process. If I was pushing this agenda on my own with everyone's busyness we all know it would have been lower down the priority list. But by engaging with the research process, that's really helped to elevate the conversations.
>
> Louisa: It's really drawn attention to this as an area for learning.
>
> Anita: We have and do talk about it all, but through having you here with this focus it's helped to keep it at the forefront of people's minds. Everything from mentioning it in an email, having you present at briefings, our SLT focus group, interviewing staff. It's just really getting everyone talking about it and thinking about it.
>
> Louisa: And don't forget Jeremy and Neil and the rest of the board. They'd never heard of the word trauma in this context before, and if nothing else, now they know what that means. They have at least a bit of understanding of what we mean by that in context, which they didn't before.
>
> Anita: It's helped us develop a shared language throughout every level of the organisation. I don't know if we would have got everyone – from the board to the support staff, to that point, without this focus.

This is different, I think to myself. This isn't a dismissal; far from it. This isn't giving up, abandoning learning, accepting defeat. Through engaging with the research

process, Anita felt supported in her agenda for learning and change. She felt that she wasn't on her own. That it's 'elevated' conversations; raised the priority.

Through bringing the learning and change agenda into the board, trustees developed 'at least a bit' of understanding of trauma-informed approaches within this context. Drawing attention to this as an area for learning got 'everyone talking about it'; kept it at 'the forefront of people's minds'; helped develop a 'shared language'.

As I listen to Anita and Louisa, I realise that the research process itself, the year spent planning, interviewing, observing, presenting, emailing and generally raising questions may have aided the learning and change process, or at the very least, contributed to its progression.

As Anita, Louisa and I wrap up our meeting, Anita remarks:

> I think we won't see the benefits for a while, but we will, over time. Because it's like a seed isn't it. By having you focus on this, even just in the background, it's planted that seed in people's minds. And maybe they won't pay attention to it now but it's there. And at some point, it will start to sprout and grow.
>
> These things don't change all at once. They're a process of slowly planting seeds. Having little conversations and getting a little bit more time and space to talk about these things. And then the seeds; they grow and grow, and eventually, as an organisation, I'm sure we'll see the rewards.
>
> And I, sorry: we; are very much on this path. We'll do what we can to keep this going. I really can assure you of that.

Thinking back to my time at Fernville Academy, I am reminded once again that the journey of learning and change captured is not a story with a linear beginning,

middle and end, but instead the narrative depicts what happened in the spaces in-between.

Anita remarks that growth is not always visible. Once seeds have been planted, it can often seem like nothing is changing. However, whilst not yet visible beneath the surface change and growth is happening and before long the seed will have germinated, sprouting shoots through the earth within which it is buried. Of course, to survive and thrive, the seedling will need careful maintenance: some sunlight, some water, some pruning, a little weeding. But given the right conditions, this seed that was planted will eventually change and grow. A slow process, requiring management and care, but a process, nonetheless.

...

The findings from Riverford depict an organisation striving for learning and development within a challenging and rapidly changing context. Within this, the findings shed light on wider organisational conceptualisations of trauma-informed approaches, as well as suggesting the potential value to be gained from doing so.

Throughout the research the act of learning became visible in different ways. The findings shed light on the learning that occurred between actors, depicting how this translated from individual to organisational level learning and change.

Often, actors were observed to be learning from each other, whether through resolving tensions, developing shared language, or through reflective conversations. Oftentimes, this learning became visible through resulting changes to practices. The findings also suggest that learning – at both individual and

collective level – occurred through engagement with the research process itself. Again, the findings highlight the significance of the role of the headteacher within this. Participants repeatedly expressed their confidence and trust in Anita to guide and support them, even when trust and confidence in the systems themselves was absent. The findings suggest that this sense of safety enabled learning itself.

Additionally, Anita consistently sought to cultivate a culture of learning, encouraging the circulation, distribution, and generation of knowledge at individual, collective and organisational levels. Such learning progressively began to seep through to different levels of practice. Language became embedded in key documentations; a shared language around a trauma-informed culture began to be developed and utilised; practices increasingly demonstrated a trauma-informed approach. The generation, circulation and expression of learning within the findings is now explored in greater depth.

5.4.2 Learning from each other

> *Beth: I was so done at the end of last term, I found it so hard at the end. I'm so worried about getting into the term again and feeling that again.*
>
> *Nadine: What? But you're amazing at this! You do this constantly; you're the one that always takes one look at us when we're clearly knackered and burnt out and just swoops in and makes everything ok.*
>
> *Beth: Yeh, but at the end of term I felt so bad because I said to a student: 'oh I give up', when I was dealing with them and I just felt so guilty afterwards because obviously I don't give up.*
>
> *Nadine: But you really felt that in that moment.*
>
> *Levi: You need to show them that you're only human. Its modelling, isn't it? You're human; you're going to feel these things.*

Nadine: Yeh, and it's about what you do afterwards. You can go back and say, "sorry I don't give up on you, but in that moment I just felt exhausted and didn't know where to go", and they really appreciate that.

Beth: I suppose, but I still feel guilty about it.

Nadine: Did you talk to anyone at the time about this?

Beth: No I didn't because I just felt so bad.

Nadine: Would it have helped if you could have done?

Beth: Yeh, I suppose?

Levi: Ha-ha, see I get it now!

Nadine: What do you mean?

Levi: This is us talking about trauma-informed practice, isn't it?

Beth: I don't get what you mean.

Levi: You had an experience here at school with a kid and it made you feel guilty, but you just need to talk to someone here about it, and we need to share stuff like this. I didn't know you felt guilty! We just see you as smashing it every day.

Beth: Yeh, I do put on a bit of front I guess, with you guys.

Nadine: I get it; we don't want to seem weak.

Beth: Thanks though. It's good to talk about it, I guess...

This interaction occurred at the end of the third inset day at Riverford that focused on trauma-informed approaches. Beth described feeling 'worried', 'bad', 'guilty' for times she felt overwhelmed at work. Levi and Nadine suggested ways of coping with these emotions, 'modelling' with students, how 'talking' about it can 'help'. Levi then named this as trauma-informed practice, explaining why this was trauma-informed using language considered during the previous inset days. Collectively, the participants acknowledged challenges, conveyed vulnerability

with each other, and reflected on ways to better support themselves and each other through trauma-informed approaches. In a later conversation, Anton echoed the progress made towards such practices:

> *Now, I feel like everyone's coming together a lot more. I think because they know that if they mess up, it's not the end of the world. You'll learn from that. And you are supported with this. These are human feeling to feel; we're all here as a team*.

The vulnerability required to learn is emphasised here. Anton argued that within a 'team', you feel 'supported' to 'learn' from instances where you feel you've 'messed up', as opposed to 'seeming weak', and through these processes we learn.

The more the organisation began to embed these approaches, however, the more the need for a 'team of experts' was emphasised. Nadine stated:

> *Nadine: It shouldn't be down to one person, but when we lost members of staff before, we lost their expertise in this area. It can't all sit with one person.*

Nadine argued that if 'expertise' sat with just one person, their knowledge would be lost if they left. This knowledge, she argued, would not be embedded within the organisation, but instead held by individual actors within it. This call for knowledge and expertise to be distributed more widely occurred frequently throughout later findings:

> *Emma: We have Anita now and she knows loads and loads, she really is an expert, but I think we need more experts to help knowledge circulate.*
>
> *Beth: It can't just be, "oh can you do this and that" and everything passed to one person just because they're the expert.*

Mabel: Staff need to know there's a whole team of people they can go to and that team can model and teach them and share their learning.

Clearly expressed was a desire for 'more experts': a 'team' of staff to ensure responsibility is spread more widely and this knowledge remains within the organisation. Mabel suggested that strategies for ensuring this knowledge would be embedded within the organisation would include 'modelling', 'teaching' and 'sharing' learning widely.

Over time the findings depicted the addition of actions seeking to cultivate a culture of learning, encouraging the circulation, distribution, and generation of knowledge at individual, collective and organisational levels. Learning progressively began to seep through different levels of practice. A shared language was developed and practices increasingly exemplified a trauma-informed approach in action.

A conversation between Anita, George and Louisa saw them considering how adapting policy documents could support this:

George: I don't know if trauma-informed practices can be reflected in policies. Would it even exist in policy speak?

Louisa: I suppose it could? The problem is that we see policies as bureaucratic *nonsense, don't we? But if they were more practice based and procedural then maybe this would reduce the anxiety that exists around policies and documents? They're so separate from staff.*

Anita: So we've just re-done the code of conduct for staff and tried to adapt the language within this.

Anita: Actually, I was just thinking that calling it a code of conduct is horrible, isn't it? It sounds like a rule book. It's more like a document outlining how we work together as a team. I like that much better. This is

how we work together. Because it's all about relationships, being trauma-informed; it's all about that relational approach and nurturing each other and our place and space and calling it a code of conduct is far too stilted to suit a relational approach.

George: How we use language and the ways of wording things in these documents should be important. I think we need to consider this a bit more moving forward, so that they are live and practical and supportive documents for staff use rather than just existing somewhere to tick a box and being a source of anxiety. How we word things can really convey different things, can't it?

Anita: We need to think about how the wording and how we name documents can reflect a relational approach and can impact how it's implemented too. We need to be seeing everything from this relational perspective and everything should be inclusive and everyone should feel a part of and encouraged by these documents.

Louisa: It's interesting; I haven't really thought about any of this side of it until now, but this would be good for us to take a deep reflective look into.

Anita, George and Louisa employed collective reflection here to learn from each other. George began questioning whether trauma-informed practices could be 'reflected in policies'; 'would it even exist...?'. This prompted Louisa to consider how policies could be adapted, which led Anita's reflection of the language used both within and about policy documents. Through reflecting together, they began to unpick the impacts of organizational-wide language choices on staff. Through reflecting collectively they questioned existing practices and suggested the next step for learning would be to 'take a deep reflective look' into these areas. The act of *learning* is woven through this interaction.

5.4.3 Learning through changes

At the start of fieldwork, inconsistencies between policies and practices and a lack of guidance at organisational level was frequently cited as a barrier to working in

trauma-informed ways. Considering this, the reflective interaction between Anita, George and Louisa suggests that broader learning had occurred over the duration of the year. Following on from this, relational ways of using policy documents were discussed in board meetings, and changes were made as a result. In a trust meeting, induction packs for staff were reviewed, with a focus on reflecting Riverford's vision, values and aims within them. The appraisal system for staff was reviewed, emphasising their developmental nature, continuous professional dialogue, and supporting purpose of these documents. School development plans, year expectations and focuses were reflected on and amended in line with a relational, trauma-informed approach: a focus on collective action and compassionate practice was embedded throughout.

Following this, an all-staff meeting was held. Amended documents were shared, and language reflecting a trauma-informed approach within them was emphasised: 'safety'; 'compassionate'; 'relational'; 'respect'; 'openness'; 'reflection'; 'collaboration'; 'community'. Outside of this, language used throughout whole-staff emails and briefings also increasingly reflected a trauma-informed approach, regardless of who was leading the communication:

> *Levi: Our perspectives are all different; I would encourage you to chat and reflect together.*
>
> *Harry: For each one of us this week there's something to be proud of, even though it's felt challenging at times.*
>
> *Gabriel: Please reflect on the small wins, look after yourself, relax and recharge.*
>
> *Levi: As leaders we can often get bogged down with noticing what's going wrong; it's important for us too to take a step back and feel proud of our team.*

Gabriel: My wellbeing target was to read more; I'd love to share what I've learnt this week, as it's particularly relevant to our conversations around collective reflection.

Anita: I have struggled with the dark mornings this week; that's really impacted my mood. Thank you to those of you who've given me time and space to vent when I've needed it.

Organisational communications increasingly used examples of trauma-informed approaches in practice. Staff were encouraged to take time and space to reflect individually and collectively; the need to rest and recharge was acknowledged; personal examples were shared; personal targets were shared; challenges were acknowledged; language around support, collaboration, openness, understanding, vulnerability, reflection became increasingly frequent. Through doing so, meetings became increasingly reflective of a trauma-informed organisational *culture*.

The findings depict many instances of actors learning from each other, whether through resolving tensions, developing shared language, or through collective reflection. Oftentimes, this learning became visible through changes to practices. Amendments to policies, conversations between staff, and the ways in which staff briefings were utilised and the language used within them, all exemplified manifestations of learning at both individual and organisational levels.

5.4.4 The role of leadership

The significance of the role of the headteacher within this process is consistently highlighted throughout the findings. Participants repeatedly expressed confidence and trust in Anita to guide and support them, even when trust and confidence in

the systems themselves was absent. The findings suggest that this sense of safety enabled learning.

Initially, William argued that, for culture level learning and change, a ‘change in leader is usually necessary’:

> *I know this is cynical but the first thing is a change of leader. A change of leader is usually necessary, because people get to know the leader, what they do and how they work and they get settled into their ways. If a leader changes people will wait for instruction and see how things are going to go, but if an existing leader tries to do it, without the support of everyone, it can create disruption and people can get uncomfortable and wary. But a change of leader can help propel a change in culture.*

William further argued:

> *But the person at the top needs to walk the talk. It's no good saying ‘we’re going to be this and that’, and then not doing it. If you want the organisation to be caring and compassionate, for example, you need to immediately be caring and compassionate to the people around you. It's the leader that sets the pace.*

At the start of fieldwork, a change in leader occurred. Louisa argued that confidence in Anita was apparent from the start: ‘I imagine that people might put their loyalty behind Anita. The recruitment process really did demonstrate that she has the loyalty, the support, of the staff here’. Louisa argued that Anita brought with her a desire to develop trauma-informed approaches:

> *In Anita we have someone who espouses trauma-informed, attachment aware, practice. She will incrementally work with staff because she’s also a collaborator, she’s a communicator, she’s a co-creator, and all these things will help to distill these practices and values that we need in our culture. She's also not afraid to unearth inconsistencies. She will look for flaws and issues; seek them out and bring them to the surface for everyone to see and to work with and work through.*

Qualities such as ‘collaborator’, ‘communicator’, ‘co-creator' are listed as aspects of a trauma-informed leader; someone ‘not afraid to unearth inconsistencies’ to be worked through. When reflecting on her role within the process, however, Anita argued it could feel ‘hard’ sometimes:

> *It can feel hard to give so much time to something that’s constantly dismissed, and you don’t know how well received it is or if it will have any impact. I’m just relentlessly pushing the same message and hoping that it goes somewhere.*

Despite her concerns, however, such qualities in Anita were frequently cited by staff as contributing to their trust in her, and their capacity for learning:

> *Gabriel: I have every trust in Anita because of how she manages relationships. It’s the genuine, caring, empathetic, supportive check-ins. It makes me question how I’m managing my line management check-ins; helps me reflect on how I’m supporting staff.*
>
> *Emma: It's definitely opening space for us to feel free of judgement. There's a certain ease that she’s creating where you’re able to be vulnerable because there’s trust in your ability that enables you to step back and question where you can improve.*
>
> *Anton: Because she trusts us, we trust her. If she says ‘this thing needs improving’, I don’t feel judged, I just see it as something I need to look into and learn about and work on and it’s weirdly empowering.*

The findings depict that by ‘relentlessly pushing the same message’, Anita showed consistency in her approaches. By doing so, trust in Anita developed. Through ‘opening space’ for staff and encouraging vulnerability that was ‘free of judgement’, Anita encouraged staff to ‘look into’ their practices. Through doing this, Anita helped staff to ‘step back’; ‘question’; ‘learn’. Anita’s role in developing a trauma-informed culture was consistently emphasised, with qualities such as

‘communicator’, ‘collaborator’, ‘co-creator’ cited as promoting trust in both her and the learning and change process itself.

5.4.5 Learning from the research process

The findings further suggest that learning at both individual and collective levels occurred through engagement with the research process itself. Anita argued she felt if she was ‘pushing this agenda’ alone, ‘it would have been lower down the priority list’, but that engaging with the research ‘helped to elevate conversations’. Initially, uptake for interviews was low. Anita used several approaches to encourage staff to sign up; Louisa repeated these approaches with the board of trustees:

> *Anita: What I will do is bring it up again in the next briefing. I will also send out another email.*
>
> *Louisa: Yes, I will do the same with the board.*

Later, many staff argued that the ‘repetition’ of bringing trauma-informed approaches to the ‘forefront of people's minds’ assisted the process of learning:

> *Mabel: This ongoing repetition of talking about trauma-informed approaches the whole way through the year has helped me come back to the ideas within it day-to-day. I keep thinking about what I’m doing in the classroom; how I’m speaking to colleagues. I think that’s because we’ve talked about it the whole year, not just in the one inset day.*
>
> *George: Training did help but that it’s been repeated and built on over this past year has helped it become more embedded in my mind.*

These findings suggest that repeatedly ‘talking’ about trauma-informed approaches over the year encouraged participants to ‘keep thinking about it’;

‘come back to the ideas within it day-to-day', which in turn, helped learning become ‘more embedded’.

Furthermore, Anita saw ‘capacity’ as a barrier to the senior leadership team's engagement, and used a scheduled after school meeting slot to hold a ‘focus group’ with these participants instead:

> *Anita: The main SLT group have expressed interest but they’re struggling to find capacity. Could a focus group setting all together help? Essentially, we’d be doing interviews, but if we used one of our scheduled after school SLT times this could be a nice way of helping people find the time.*

Levi and Harry later argued that engaging in this process helped them ‘support’ and ‘question’ better:

> *Levi: Before that group session we had we hadn’t thought about how we could use trauma-informed approaches to support staff as well.*
>
> *Harry: We’d always thought about our role as supporting staff to support students through trauma-informed approaches, but it works both ways. Using these approaches helps them, it’s supportive for them [teachers], but it also enables them to support the kids too.*
>
> *Levi: It's helped me question what I’m saying to staff; how I’m supporting them; what the language I use conveys to them. That's something that I hadn’t thought about deeply before we had that space.*

Through engaging in the research, Anita provided the ‘space’ for SLT to think ‘deeply’ about their leadership practices. The content of the session; questions raised, and conversations sparked, encouraged them to ‘question’ their practices in ways they ‘hadn’t thought about before’.

Louisa argued that the process had too encouraged the learning of board members. She argued: ‘they’ve never heard of the word trauma in this context before, and if nothing else, now they know what that means’. A ‘shared language’ was developing, through prolonged engagement with the research process: ‘I don’t know if we would have got everyone – from the board to the support staff, to that point, without this focus’. This suggests that, through prolonged engagement with the process, a shared language was developed across different organisational levels; the ongoing focus promoted and encouraged learning.

5.5 Part four: Looking ahead

William further argued that a ‘very clear destination’ is central to changing a culture of an organisation:

> *You need a very clear destination. People must buy into the destination, because people don’t like change; they don’t like doing things differently. You have to have a very clear vision, at an organisational level, of where you want to go and the steps needed to take to get there. If you don’t, people won’t buy into it. If they don’t buy into it, nothing's going to change.*

The findings suggest that factors constraining learning and change within the organisation were present throughout – in the form of hierarchical dynamics, perceptions of responsibility, misalignments and inconsistencies. During fieldwork, the organisation entered a state of flux. Whilst these organisational level changes brought about much uncertainty and unsettlement, the findings suggest that these changes emphasised a need for trauma-informed approaches to practices, and opportunities for development arose because of this. The act of learning became visible in different ways over the duration, and the findings shed light into the ways

in which learning occurred between actors and how this translated from individual to organisational level learning. William argued that a ‘very clear destination’ with ‘clear steps to get there’ is essential to realising cultural level change, however the findings suggest a shift in culture not only *despite* unpredicted changes and challenges but also *because of* these changes and challenges themselves.

Towards the end of the study, an external consultant conducted a review of Riverford, to provide feedback ahead of their proposals to shortlisted MATs. The review stated:

> *Whilst staffing pressures can lead to short notice changes and impact on workload, staff spoken to feel positive about the new direction and feel workload is considered. They felt well supported and listened to as well as suitably challenged. leaders are approachable and considerate of the wellbeing of staff. Across both sites, base leaders are highly valued for the support they give and how they communicate. The twice daily briefings were universally acknowledged as a strength of the system of communication and for sharing effective learning strategies.*

This feedback, when considered alongside the findings from this research, suggests a development of trauma-informed approaches across the organisation. Where inconsistencies in communication were highlighted previously, here communication was ‘highly valued’. Where staff felt unsupported, here leaders were considered ‘approachable’, and staff felt ‘well supported’; ‘listened to’. Where staff felt isolated previously, collective reflection was ‘universally acknowledged as a strength of the system of communication’ and provided time for ‘learning’. This paints a positive picture of organisational learning and change, however prompts questions around whether this was the final ‘destination’ for the learning trajectory.

During the final meeting of the study with Anita and Louisa, Anita remarked: 'I - sorry, I mean, we; are very much on this path':

> *I really feel like this culture that we've built is felt by everyone now and I think if you walk around the different sites through different subjects or different areas, the core aspects of what you'd see would be reflecting the same sense of culture. I think staff would carry on now working in those ways without me pushing this all the time. So, in that way, I think we're well on our way to having these approaches embedded in our culture.*
>
> *But moving forward, I would like to see the organisation moving constantly towards expanding and deepening our knowledge base on these things and understanding why we do what we do and really being able to add the language. I think that adds value to it all; it deepens staff confidence.*
>
> *I feel pretty confident that we're on the right trajectory, but it's important to stay mindful of the fact that this isn't something we can ever crack or solve or complete. This is an ongoing process that's going to require ongoing learning, adapting and reflection.*

Anita acknowledged where she saw successes in their journey to developing a trauma-informed culture: the culture 'felt by everyone'; 'core aspects' aligned'. However, Anita reflected on considerations for moving forward: 'expanding and deepening our knowledge base'; 'really understanding why'; adding the language; deepening staff confidence. A trauma-informed culture, she argued, isn't something to 'crack or solve or complete'; rather, an 'ongoing' process, where learning, reflection and adaptation are central.

At the final board meeting of the study, Anita, Connie and Miguel were discussing their progress towards culture change. Anita expressed concern that they needed to keep working towards 'establishing expertise' within 'every level':

> *Anita: We need to establish expertise within the organisation on every level. I think a team of people that are keen to promote this stuff would help.*

Connie: It could be really empowering for staff to see themselves as experts in this.

Miguel: Also, it could be really empowering for the organisation itself, too.

Connie: In what way?

Miguel: Well, not to always bring it back to Ofsted, but it is important to be able to show what we're doing and why, and we could really share this widely if we were clever about it.

Anita: To be able to share best practices with other organisations and external people we work with could be really interesting.

Miguel: It could be great if you were able to teach this to schools you work with through the language used, how we talk about young people, how we talk about our practices. It could be empowering for staff but also promote our organisation.

Anita: What might this look like?

Connie: I guess, develop it as a team, train staff in it, and then train staff to deliver the training?

Miguel: It could be really powerful for staff to deliver training to various stakeholders. It could help develop shared language around the approaches we use and why we use them.

Connie: And maybe if staff are trained in these ways, these languages and practices would be more likely to become even more part of their day-today practices. They'd be more confident in this stuff.

Anita: This is really interesting, especially now. If we want to get the ball rolling with this, we need to do it sooner rather than later. The more time we put into this now, the more embedded into our culture these things will become. The more embedded they are, the more likely they will stick when we transition to another MAT.

Miguel: Yes, you guys know what works best for supporting your young people and your staff; we all need to hold onto this, find ways to embed it, because this needs to stay with the organisation.

Anita: We need to keep learning – that's the key here. We need to keep learning; embed learning; learn some more.

This conversation depicts an understanding of the benefits of establishing expertise across the organisation at ‘every level’; the possible benefits of training staff to deliver training to external stakeholders argued. Learning was highlighted as ‘key’ to further developing their culture, and ensuring this culture was maintainable throughout further challenges and changes. They argued learning could be continued through taking expertise outside of the organisation, and that this could develop staff confidence, empower staff, promote the organisations strengths, and develop a shared language between Riverford and external stakeholders, too.

In combination, these reflections depict a conceptulisation of ‘success’ as through the learning itself. These findings question Williams’ initial argument, that a culture change requires ‘a very clear destination’ with ‘clear steps to get there’. These findings suggest that perhaps there isn’t a destination at all, but rather, growth, learning, and change happen within the journey itself. These findings instead suggest that the learning *is* the destination.

5.6 Conclusion

> *Anita: I think we won't see the benefits for a while, but we will, over time. Because it's like a seed isn't it. It's like, by having you focus on this for a bit, even just in the background, it’s planted that seed in people's minds. And maybe they won't pay attention to it now, but it's there. And at some point, it will start to sprout and grow.*

Within this chapter, the findings from Riverford College have been presented. Firstly, the findings suggest that hierarchical dynamics, and perceptions of responsibility and roles within this, caused tensions for actors within the

organisation. However, despite these tensions, there was a shared trust and confidence in Anita within her role. There was also a shared consensus around the barriers towards working in trauma-informed ways. Challenges around tensions, support, vulnerability, and change were highlighted consistency. Despite this, drivers of learning and change were continuously threaded throughout: repetition of learning, embedding language into documentations and communications, creating time and space for learning and reflection all drove the change agenda forward. The findings depict instances where participants learnt from each other, learnt from change itself, learnt from the research process, and depict instances where this learning became visible through changes to practice. Underpinning all of this is the significance of the role of the headteacher as a driver for learning and change.

The findings depict the organisation raising questions around how to continue forward with learning to best ensure that learning becomes embedded into organisational culture in ways that are sustainable throughout the changes that lay ahead. The findings show participants considering ways to expand the expertise both within and outside of the organisation, to ensure that learning itself becomes the core value embedded into organisational culture.

Anita argued that, over the duration of the year, the ‘seed’ had been ‘planted’: benefits may not be visible straight away, but like a seed, if you tend to the soil, give it time and space, meet its needs, and plan forward for the Spring, ‘it will start to sprout and grow’. These findings suggest that the development of a trauma-informed culture requires patience, trust and confidence in the processes of

learning and change, and a relentless desire to move forward through challenges arising along the way.

Chapter Six: Discussion

6.1 Introduction

The following chapter discusses the findings of both case studies in combination, through contextualising them within existing research. Whilst situated within their own unique contexts, when combined and compared the findings from both cases provide a detailed lens through which to critically examine the research questions underpinning this study.

The first part of the literature review in Chapter Two examined existing research into trauma-informed approaches in education and highlighted a distinctive gap in how educational organisations learn about and embed these approaches in sustainable ways. Discussed within this chapter are the ways the findings both align with and shed new light on research within this field. The second strand of literature reviewed considered organisational culture, learning and change theories. This provides a useful lens through which to understand organisational learning practices, however the review highlighted a lack in application of these theories to the development of trauma-informed approaches across educational

settings. The objective of this study was therefore to better understand the processes and mechanisms required for an educational organisation to embed trauma-informed approaches into practices in sustainable ways.

This chapter first summarises the key findings from this study stating the research findings in comparison with the initial study objective. The findings are then interpreted and contextualised through the evaluation of existing theories, discussing where and how the findings support or challenge previous work.

6.2 Summary of Key Findings

The benefits of organisational-wide training on trauma impacts to better support trauma-experienced young people in their educational development are highlighted throughout both practical guidance for educators and educational research alike (e.g. Lewis et al., 2023; Avery et al., 2021; Harrison et al., 2020). However, research suggests that training programmes for staff, whilst necessary, may not sufficiently develop organisational-level awareness: it ‘provides a starting point’, but ‘more far-reaching changes’ are needed (Harrison et al., 2020, p.15). Organisational change theories often suggest that a culture facilitating organisational learning is necessary for sustainable change: organisational change is not an ‘isolated occurrence’ (Lawler and Sillitoe, 2013, p.496) but requires a constant process of reflection and adaptation to meet the changing needs of the environments. However, the lack of research into organisational culture change alongside the challenge that cases are often ‘entirely unique’ (Johansson and Heide, 2008, p.298) means that understandings of how culture change happens is

limited (e.g. Peter & Wilderom, 2004). For schools this is complicated further through the influence of complex external networks on internal policy creation and enactment (Greany et al., 2024a; Torres, 2022). However, the findings from this study shed new light on the processes and mechanisms involved in the learning and development of trauma-informed approaches across educational organisations and lend themselves to significant implications for these approaches into organisational culture.

Found throughout both cases were that organisational processes aligned with a trauma-informed approach to *learning* in turn promoted the development of organisational wide trauma-informed approaches. When consistently employed, these changes manifested through different levels of the organisations as an increase in confidence, readiness to learn and increased resilience to adapting to further challenges and changes. These attitudes and behaviours overtime resulted in an increased use of trauma-informed approaches themselves, suggesting that a trauma-informed approach to learning and change itself promoted a trauma-informed culture.

At the individual and relational level, the findings suggest that encouraging and holding vulnerability through trusting relationships and using tensions as learning opportunities encouraged the production and transferal of learning. At the internal system level, the findings highlighted that security for organisational members through clarity of roles and responsibilities and transparency of decision-making processes were important considerations within learning and change.

Furthermore, questions around how to best utilise policies, spaces and places as sites for the production and transferal of learning are raised. The findings also suggest that wider organisational-level conditions such as external challenges and changes could constrain learning and change. The findings suggest that factors enhancing a collective conceptualisation of success alongside organisational level accountability measures could mitigate these impacts.

Through interrogation of the findings in consideration with existing research, enabling and constraining conditions at individual and relational level, internal system level, and wider organisational level, are now presented in turn.

6.3 Individual and relational level conditions

Relational level conditions are consistently highlighted through both theoretical fields of organisational learning and change and trauma-informed approaches (e.g. Brunzell et al., 2019; Boreham and Morgan, 2004; Finegan, 2024). Oftentimes, the findings from this study align with existing literature through emphasising the role of interpersonal and relational conditions for enabling learning and change. For example, across all fields, the role of leadership within learning and change is emphasised (e.g. Mallen-Broch et al., 2014; Weckowska, 2014; Heyden et al., 2017; Trevor, 2019; Sebba & Dingwall, 2018), as were ways in which a collaborative, reflective approach to learning and change enhanced the enactment of learning in sustainable ways (e.g. Garud et al., 2011). However, this study enabled a magnified lens into these phenomena, exposing nuances within them, and consequently the findings expand and shed new light on both

theoretical fields. Observing and interacting with each organisation through both insider and outsider perspectives enabled analysis of both the data itself and the spaces *in between.* The findings highlight individual factors that impacted learning and change, for example vulnerability both felt and required at a personal level within learning and change, and the strain this placed on individuals within leadership positions. The findings shed light on the nuanced ways in which these individual factors both enabled and constrained learning and change.

The presentation of the ways in which vulnerabilities, tensions, resistance and misunderstandings and leadership responses and impacts are now discussed in turn, contextualising their significance in relation to existing literature in consideration of the research questions.

6.3.1 Vulnerability *of* learning and change

Attachment and trauma theories suggest that the act of learning itself requires vulnerability (Drury, 2015; Archer et al., 2015). The presentation of this vulnerability required was particularly evident and heightened across both cases, as the balance between positioning teachers as learners and juggling leadership responsibilities within this dynamic was oftentimes raised as a challenge. Fear of judgement, of not knowing, of getting things wrong, was woven through interactions across both cases. The process of change demanded vulnerability too. Change was inherently uncomfortable, requiring and demanding those involved to embrace a vulnerable position. Learning and change at organisational level also required vulnerability. Exposing practices and policies not aligning with

the change agenda was necessary, however exposing organisational vulnerabilities could be a sensitive process. In line with recent research, across both cases the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic placed additional precarity upon participants, which impacted the progression of learning and change (Worth & Faulkner-Ellis, 2021; Norwich et al., 2022; Beauchamp et al., 2021; Thomson et al., 2022).

Whilst existing research touches upon themes of vulnerability within both organisational learning and change theories and trauma-informed approaches alike (e.g. Spicer, 2020; Gee et al., 2021; Drury, 2015; Archer et al., 2015), the findings further add to both strands of research in different ways. Whilst the findings depicted the initial impacts of vulnerabilities at an interpersonal level that constrained learning and change, the findings further highlighted the necessity of vulnerability itself within the learning and change process. Through examining the ways in which fostering and embracing vulnerabilities through interpersonal and relational levels enabled the learning and change agenda through the lens of both trauma-informed approaches and organisational learning and change theories, the findings suggest that a trauma-informed approach to fostering and embracing vulnerabilities at an interpersonal and relational level could be beneficial to organisations seeking to embed trauma-informed approaches into practices at the cultural level.

Precarity

Significantly, the findings highlighted the vulnerability felt by participants across both cases due to contextual factors – i.e. the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic, and the precarity this placed upon the individual actors within the organisations. At Fernville, Martin and Viktoria discussed how the need for 'changes' to meet changing requirements 'impacted' them, arguing this caused 'traces of trauma' throughout staff:

> *Martin: All of us have been impacted. But thinking about the process of changing together - trauma feels too strong a word but can maybe promote this feeling of lack of control or hopelessness sometimes.*
>
> *Viktoria: Yes, you can sometimes see traces of trauma in our staff, in our conversations, that may have been caused by the changes.*

Organisational change can be a necessary response to adapting to environmental changes. Some change strategies are initiated by 'significant jolts' in the environment – for example the Covid-19 pandemic – requiring organisational-level adaptation (Spicer, 2020, p.1737; Norwich et al., 2022; Beauchamp et al., 2021). Disruptions, instability or crisis within external environments can create 'legitimacy challenges', resulting in perceived or actual failure of institutional practices and values that organisations are forced to respond to (Spicer, 2020, p.1737). My findings suggest that under these conditions, participants felt a 'lack of control' or 'hopelessness'. Martin argued trauma was 'too strong a word', however research defines trauma as instances creating feelings of 'hopelessness' and a 'lack of control' (e.g. Van der Kolk, 2002); experiences impacting our 'inherent need for safety' (Haines, 2019, p.74). Exposure to extreme stress can result in a broad range of cognitive, affective, and psychological impacts that when perpetuated over time, are associated with the development of trauma symptoms (Ardino, 2020, p.113). The findings suggest that prolonged exposure to such environmental

‘jolts’ promoted stress for participants, inducing impacts that indicated trauma symptoms for many.

Such environmental challenges can highlight the necessity of organisational structures that are equipped for crisis and change management (Harris & Jones, 2020; Gurr and Drysdal, 2020), however research suggests that slow or rigid decision-making procedures can prevent necessary adaptation (e.g. Thulani and Vezi-Magigaba, 2025). Organisations can face a ‘paradox’ of change, needing to adapt, whilst also needing stability ‘to try to control uncertainty’ (Dominguez et al., 2015, p.413). Each case provides a unique example of this research in practice, depicting how the start of the Covid-19 pandemic impacted Fernville, and how the lasting impacts of the pandemic impacted Riverford some time later. When viewed through a trauma-informed lens, there were ‘traces’ of trauma present through both the individual actors and the organisations themselves (e.g. Treisman, 2018; Jennings, 2009). However, the findings evidenced how these traumas drew heightened attention to the vulnerability within learning and change, and that this in turn impacted learning and change itself.

Organisational learning and change required vulnerability. Exposing practices and policies not in line with the change agenda was necessary, however exposing organisational vulnerabilities raised challenges across both cases. Research stipulates double-loop learning as essential for sustainable change; a problem-solving approach where learning challenges are expected, and reflections on assumptions and norms within the organisation are encouraged (Lawler and Sillitoe, 2013; Garud et al., 2011; Pathak, 2010). Through doing so, double-loop

learning ‘provides opportunities for radically different solutions to problems’ (Pathak, 2010, 10.1.1) rather than responses to problems ‘determined by predefined templates’ (Garud et al., 2011, p.588). However, there is a delicate balance when organisations are at risk of trauma. Factors influencing organisational trauma include sudden changes to personnel and practices (e.g. Treisman, 2018; Jennings, 2009), something both cases were experiencing. When at risk of trauma, organisations can operate in ‘survival mode’ (e.g. Treisman, 2018), resulting in distress, dissatisfaction and hopelessness within actors within them. Encouraging reflection on organisational level challenges across both cases initially led to mistrust between the hierarchies:

> *Mabel: Are staff viewed as actual human beings or are they all just pawns in the business plan?*

Across both cases, contextual factors increased isolation. Gaby argued: ‘it’s been really isolated’. The impacts of isolation on trust building between the hierarchies was frequently raised. Practitioners at Fernville particularly raised that the ‘community element’ that ‘we used to have’ had ‘really been missing since we’ve made loads of changes to our practices’; ‘Trust needs to be built and there just isn’t the space for it’.

Without the ‘community element’ required to build trusting relationships, participants from both cases frequently raised this made them more resistant to relational engagement:

> *Anton: Working together is harder because we don’t know each other well.*

Boreham and Morgan (2004) suggest embedded ‘relational practices’ stipulate effective learning dialogues (p.314). This includes ‘opening space for the creation of shared meaning’, and ‘reconstructing power relationships’. Under the circumstances, exposing organisational vulnerabilities brought about challenges, as these ‘power relationships’ were present and therefore ‘working together is made harder’. There was discomfort in organisational change, which required vulnerability. Without a trauma-informed approach to learning and change, participants lacked in the ‘trust’ required to build relationships where they were comfortable exploring these vulnerabilities.

Additionally, my findings highlighted there was vulnerability inherently required for learning new ways of thinking or adapting to new practices, and this was particularly heightened within the context of teachers as learners within an educational setting. A deep fear of judgement, shame around not knowing and resistance to getting things ‘wrong’ was woven within interactions:

> *Penny: It can be harder for us as adults to reflect.*
>
> *Martin: All tied up with ideas of shame, you know? Am I doing my job properly if I think like that?*
>
> *Paul: Will someone else think I'm not doing my job properly?*

Research suggests that ‘fear of failure’ can be a primary obstacle preventing students in schools from engaging in learning (Elliott and Dingwall, 2017, p.74). Trauma theory suggests this is in part due to the way in which it fosters a sense of being ‘out of control’:

> *People tend to project internal states of disorganization or fear onto the outside in order to defend themselves and regain a sense of power and control. People are programmed to control and inhibit when they feel out of control. (Van der Kolk, 2002, pp.20-21)*

The findings suggest that ‘shame’ and ‘fear of judgement’ prevented participants from initially engaging in reflections around trauma-informed approaches to their practices:

> *Viktoria: People need to be able to say, “help; I'm stuck”. That’s part of it, isn't it? We need to be supported through new things. That includes making mistakes yes, I mean we all need to be vulnerable with each other when we ask for help and that can be scary especially at work.*

Across both cases, it was challenging for participants to engage in reflections that promoted and required vulnerability. The contextual circumstances of both meant that participants' roles were more precarious. Financial pressures, rapid changes to practices and significant restructuring were underway within both. Practitioners at Fernville reflected often on how ‘scary’ it can be to question whether they were ‘doing my job properly’ during this time, for fear of the precarity of their roles, echoing recent research suggesting the impacts of the pandemic amplified negative well-being amongst teachers (e.g. Worth and Faulkner-Ellis, 2021; Norwich et al., 2022; Beauchamp et al., 2021). The findings depicted that frequently during this time, ‘fear’ and ‘shame’ around ‘making mistakes’ and ‘judgement’ prevented collective reflection. Given that reflections on practices is essential for double-loop learning through the ways it enables organisations to explore ‘radically different solutions to problems’ (Pathak, 2010, 10.1.1), these findings suggest that without the feelings of ‘safety, belonging’ (Haines, 2019,

p.74) that a trauma-informed approach prioritises, the vulnerability required for this process was inaccessible, instead replaced with worry and mistrust between the hierarchies.

Tensions, resistance, misunderstandings

Across both cases, tensions between the hierarchies often stemmed from resistance to learning and change alongside misunderstandings around trauma-informed approaches. When individual tensions, resistance and misunderstandings interacted at a relational level between the hierarchies without an underlying acceptance of the vulnerabilities at play, this constrained learning and change.

Organisational learning theories stipulate the necessity of collective buy-in: learning objectives should be agreed between all employees (e.g. Briggs, 2007; Pathak, 2010; Erkelens et al., 2015), as creating goals collaboratively enables the collective 'will' to realise such goals (Briggs, 2007, p.123). Existing research on trauma-informed education aligns with this notion: employees should understand the overarching goals and a collective 'buy-in' is necessary (e.g. Lewis et al., 2023; Avery et al., 2021). At times, the findings align with these theories. At Fernville, Pete and Jane initially disagreed on the learning objectives, stemming from differences in understandings of trauma-informed approaches:

> *Jane: So yes, we're already doing it? We're already using trauma-informed approaches in our organisational practices through building connections with each other.*

Pete: I don't know though. I just don't think we can learn about something big and new like this now. People need time to adjust.

When Pete did not understand the overarching goals, he struggled to 'buy-in' to the agenda, and this later manifested in a lack of 'will' to realise these goals (Briggs, 2007, p.123). This was initially seen through the findings from Riverford, too. Misunderstandings around trauma-informed approaches initially prevented collective 'buy-in':

Beth: I haven't been through a trauma though. I'm not a student. I don't need to improve my behaviour.

Across both cases, when differences in understandings were not explored, this resulted in the reinforcement of existing practices: 'it's hard to think why we'd need more training on it?'; 'we're already doing it as we should be'. This oftentimes caused increased tension between the hierarchies:

Zadie: They're so resistant to look at where we could improve, that they aren't seeing where the system isn't working for us.

Organisational change theories argue that organisational learning requires a process of problem-solving where learning challenges are expected and encouraged (e.g. Lawler and Sillitoe, 2013; Garud et al., 2011; Pathak, 2010).
Across both cases, the findings suggest that when misunderstandings are not 'encouraged' or embraced, and not discussed and explored collectively, then this was often perceived by participants as failure; oftentimes student-facing staff perceiving a failure on leaderships part in the learning and change process. When these tensions were perceived as failure, then this constrained learning and change: 'it feels really rigid now'. When tensions and misunderstandings were seen as

failure, this impacted participants' 'inherent need for safety' (e.g. Haines, 2019, p.74): 'people are programmed to control and inhibit when they feel out of control' (Van der Kolk, 2002, pp.20-21). When there was a perceived sense of failure around disagreements and tension, participants were often seen to 'control' and 'inhibit' through their resistance to learning and change. This resulted in existing culture and values instead 'reinforcing themselves' (e.g. Peter & Wilderom, 2004). When viewed through this lens, the findings align with both strands of literature; that collective 'buy-in' is needed for realising learning and change.

6.3.2 Vulnerability *for* learning and change

Whilst vulnerability initially appeared as a barrier to learning and change, found across both cases were the ways in which embracing and fostering vulnerabilities through the boundaries of safe and trusting relationships bolstered learning and change at both the individual and organisational levels.

Safety

When relationships between the hierarchies prioritised the fostering of trust and safety, participants became increasingly inclined to share and reflect on their own vulnerabilities within the learning and change process. This change initially stemmed from those in leadership positions. At Fernville, when the leadership teams began to embrace and model their own vulnerabilities within the process, this promoted learning and change. Pete reflected 'I suppose we also you know we want to present as managing everything super well, don't we? We don't want

to look bad or like we can't cope': the desire to present as coping with changes prevented leadership from seeking help. Reflecting on such ideas during the staff learning lunch, Pete argued that fears of judgement and shame can be a barrier to developing a trauma-informed culture, arguing instead a need for more open and honest communication:

> *Pete: Maybe then we could say a trauma-informed culture would be somewhere where you feel confident and safe to bring questions about things were not sure about, isn't it? To be able to say, "we're not all here to solve the problem", but to feel confident enough as a member of staff within any role to bring that question to someone and know that that's ok.*

Pete reflected that 'safe' relationships between staff could catalyse staff to feel 'confident' to reflect and thus learn and progress. Trevor (2019) argues that the 'challenge' for management is to seek to continuously 'better understand their increasingly complex world' to make 'better forward-looking decisions' (p.4). Reflecting on his own vulnerabilities within his role led Pete to a 'better understanding' of the 'complexities' for the wider staff body, and these reflections prompted 'forward-looking decisions' later.

Leadership modelling vulnerability began to seep into organisational level practices, too. There was an increase in time and space created for reflecting on organisational level vulnerabilities, sharing concerns and challenges within existing practices. This in turn enabled more participants to express vulnerabilities at individual level too:

> *Anton: We need to be able to speak to each other in ways that are honest, but also supportive, so you can say when things are going wrong and know you'll get support back.*

There was a cyclical process depicted: the more vulnerability was embraced at individual level, the more this encouraged organisational level vulnerability. The more this was embraced and fostered, the more participants reflected on individual level vulnerabilities, too. Larson argues: ‘with less personal risk and a lower cost of failure, collaborators might be less anxious about solving a problem’ (122). Across both cases, fear of ‘failure’ reduced as vulnerability was increasingly encouraged and embraced:

> *Emma: It's definitely opening space for us to feel free of judgement. There's a certain ease that she’s creating where you’re able to be vulnerable because there’s a trust in your ability that enables you to step back and question where you can improve.*

Furthermore, research suggests that reflecting on ‘real life’ experiences can enhance learning: a ‘lack of authenticity’ can disconnect learning from reality and therefore learning is less likely to be realised in practice (e.g. Lamb, 2002, p.269). This study suggests that embracing and encouraging vulnerability at individual and collective level encouraged more ‘real life’ reflections, increasing ‘authenticity’ of learning through providing a ‘real life’ example of a trauma-informed approach to learning in practice:

> *Anton: If you mess up, it’s not the end of the world. You’ll learn from that. And you are supported with this. These are human feelings to feel; we’re all here as a team.*

Through encouraging, modelling and embracing vulnerability within an environment that encouraged ‘acknowledgement, support, trust’ (e.g. Francis et al., 2022), a more open communication between participants was created:

> *Anton: Because she trusts us, we trust her. If she says 'oh, this thing needs improving', I don't feel judged, I just see it as something I need to look into and learn about more and work on and it's weirdly empowering.*

This aligns with trauma theories, depicting how within a safe environment, with less perceived 'threat' (Van der Kolk, 2015, p.59), participants were more ready to engage in the learning process.

At Fernville, participants reflected on the value of staff having 'safe' and 'comfortable' relationships with each other. Through vulnerable collective reflections, participants concluded that trauma-informed approaches were not about 'everyone loving their job everyday', but instead about safe spaces and safe relationships where staff could be 'open and honest' together. They acknowledged that day-to-day practice was not 'all fun and games' and can be challenging, and that they 'need to help' each other through collective reflection, safe relationships and open communication. This demonstrates a 'relational' approach to practice, which contributed to effective learning dialogues through 'opening space for the creation of shared meaning' (Boreham and Morgan, 2004, p.314-315). Different perspectives and experiences were explored, thus engaging in 'the pedagogy of organisational learning' (p.322).

Tensions as learning opportunities

As engagement with the research process progressed and with increased reflection around the ways in which individual vulnerabilities contributed to relational level tensions, learning began to occur *through* exploring these differences themselves. The findings show instances where actors learnt from each other; through resolving tensions, exploring language and terminology choices, and reflective conversations.

Oftentimes, this learning became visible through resulting changes to practices.

At Riverford, this began with Anita. When initially met with resistance from different actors – from the board to the wider staff body – Anita questioned how misunderstandings were impacting organisational learning:

> *Anita: Are we all on the same page about what a trauma-informed culture looks like? Because I'm not sure that we are at the moment.*

This led to ongoing attempts to understand and unpick where tensions, resistance and misunderstandings stemmed from, to better understand where to intervene and how. The 'challenge' for leadership is to seek to continuously 'better understand their increasingly complex world' to make 'better forward-looking decisions' (Trevor, 2019, p.4). Through asking these questions Anita initiated a process of unpicking these differences to make 'better' decisions.

At Fernville this process began with Pete's realisation that culture change required understanding of where they were 'right now'. Pete raised this question during a whole staff meeting:

> *Pete: I want ideas, thoughts, on as an organisation, for us, what is our culture right now? And what would a trauma-informed culture look like for us?*

Seeking staff's perspectives here invited different perspectives. Rather than dismissing what may have been perceived as criticism, participants were invited to share. This exemplifies a trauma-informed approach to learning, whereby 'voice' is given to those previously silenced. Avery et al. (2021) argues this can result in

modifications that enhance the learning environment (p.13), and here, Pete invited these exploratory discussions. Furthermore, seeking different perspectives demonstrated a ‘pedagogy of organisational learning’ (Boreham and Morgan, 2004, p.322) through acting to ‘reconstruct power relations’. This led to a more collaborative approach to ‘meaning making’:

> *Nina: You've got to be able to have those conversations, to figure stuff like that out.*

Both cases suggest that a ‘person-centered’ approach to learning (Sheffield & Morgan, 2017: 50) was fostered through exploring different perspectives and experiences within environments promoting open communication. Open communication encouraged participants to contribute whilst also appreciating contributions of others (Yau et al., 2003, p.2). Space to reflect together promoted open communication, which increased participation from staff. When leadership encouraged this, instead of shying away from the existing tensions, staff offered more suggestions for learning and change.

Whilst participants may not have all ‘bought-in’ to trauma-informed approaches in principle, when opportunities to explore different tensions within this were met with acknowledgement, support, trust (e.g. Francis et al., 2022), participants increasingly demonstrated a ‘readiness’ to learn and change together; a quality research stipulates as essential for a trauma-informed organisation (e.g. Jennings, 2009). Much research argues that *spaces* are inter-relational; the emotion of spaces co-constructed by those within them (e.g. Massey, 2005; Low, 2017). The findings suggest that when tensions, resistance and misunderstandings were held within spaces fostering ‘safety, belonging, dignity’ (Haines, 2019, p.74),

participants were less likely to ‘project internal states of – fear’ through ‘defending themselves’ to ‘regain a sense of power and control’ (Van der Kolk, 2002, pp.2021). Instead, collective meaning making arose from explorations of tensions, resistance and misunderstandings, and learning instead happened through these differences:

> *Levi: Ha-ha, see I get it now!*
>
> *Nadine: What do you mean?*
>
> *Levi: This is us talking about trauma-informed practice, isn’t it?*
>
> *Beth: I don’t get what you mean.*
>
> *Levi: You had an experience here at school with a kid and it made you feel guilty, but you just need to talk to someone here about it, and we need to share stuff like this. I didn’t know you felt guilty! We just see you as smashing it every day.*
>
> *Beth: Yeh, I do put on a bit of front I guess, with you guys.*
>
> *Nadine: I get it; we don’t want to seem weak.*
>
> *Beth: Thanks though. It’s good to talk about it, I guess...*

6.3.3 The role of leadership

The findings consistently highlighted the key role of leadership within the process of creating and sustaining reflective, vulnerable and relational spaces. At Riverford, Anita fought against wider resistance to create space for reflections on tensions and misunderstandings:

> *They are going to require strong leadership. There are big holes currently. Well, I will just have to be that strong leader then! I’m going to follow this through regardless.*

Risk taking and risk acceptance are highlighted as managerial characteristics conducive of effective change (Mallen-Broch et al., 2014), and through persevering through resistance Anita demonstrated risk acceptance in practice. A ‘dominant power group’ within an organisation can have major influence over organisational culture, in turn impacting organisational learning (Pathak, 2010, 2.3), and this is demonstrated within the findings at Riverford. Through consistently demonstrating a trauma-informed approach to the learning process through meeting tensions and resistance with acknowledgement, support, and trust (e.g. Francis et al., 2022), Anita was in turn met with trust from the wider staff body, too:

> *Nadine: I trust that when she makes decisions, she’s going to do it with the best intentions in mind.*
>
> *Emma: I trust her to actually do what’s best for the whole community.*

Trust in Anita prevented further resistance when making wider ‘decisions’ impacting the ‘whole community’. In turn this encouraged participants to view tensions as learning opportunities:

> *Emma: I just see it as something I need to look into and learn about more and work on and it’s weirdly empowering.*

This demonstrates how Anita’s trauma-informed approach to learning supported the development of ‘learners’ autonomy’: ‘through an encouragement to reflect on their – beliefs about learning’ (Lamb, 2002, p.270). When this reflection was encouraged, working through tensions and resistance was instead an ‘empowering’ process.

However, whilst the findings from Fernville began to depict a similar progression initiated by Jane, conversely when tensions between herself and Pete remained a site of conflict, this had a negative impact on wider learning. Whilst Pete demonstrated individual learning within interactions with Jane at various points, when Jane left the organisation, Pete's initial conceptualisation of 'success' returned: 'well I think that's really done the job now'. With Jane's absence, Pete was now the 'dominant power group' (Pathak, 2010, 2.3), and his conceptualisation of learning as something to be 'done' now had 'major influence' over the organisational-level learning journey. This again depicted that leader's conceptualisations of learning influences organisational learning and change, suggesting that a shared understanding of what success may look at organisational level, regardless of wider buy-in, is important.

The findings draw additional attention to the ways in which the responsibility of fostering and embracing vulnerability at organisational and individual level could place a heavy burden on those leading the initiatives. Increasingly seen at Fernville was an increase of the use of negative language to describe the impact of these changes, such as 'dramatic', 'relentless' and at times even 'horrid'. This was reinforced through the acknowledgment that many of these changes felt 'out of our control', making it at times feel 'really hard to keep going'. Likewise at Riverford, Anita's push for reflective work around trauma and its impacts was frequently dismissed, and at times she expressed feeling isolated because of this: 'it can feel hard to give so much time to something that's constantly dismissed'. The exposure of organisational vulnerabilities also became more challenging as the need for system level changes became more pressing. When under external

scrutiny and pressure, the need to ‘sell’ themselves as an organisation at times prevented reflection and put additional precarity on the learning and change agenda. This too began to impact Anita on a more personal level.

Researchers agree that leadership commitment and behaviours are essential to realising organisational learning and achieving policy goals (Mallen-Broch et al., 2014; Weckowska, 2014; Heyden et al., 2017; Trevor, 2019). Likewise, the commitment of management is consistently highlighted through evaluations of trauma-informed approaches in schools to ensure longer term sustainability (e.g. Sebba & Dingwall, 2018, p.5). Those leading learning and change need to remain committed to the agenda for it to be realised in practice. Leadership qualities and behaviours frequently raised as conducive of effective change include ‘experimentation, risk acceptance, interaction with the environment’ (Mallen-Broch et al., 2014, p.42). However, my findings depict how these actions, particularly ‘experimentation’ and ‘risk acceptance’, placed leadership in a vulnerable position, having negative impacts over time.

Anita and Jane both expressed concerns around the individual strain of the vulnerability required for them to lead the agenda. However, different relational level conditions within each case led to different impacts. At Riverford, Louisa and Anita were united in the process from the start. As deputy chair of the board, Louisa was in a strong position to offer Anita support for her decisions and frequently refuted any dismissals of her arguments to the wider board. Concurrently, as part of the research process Louisa and Anita met with myself frequently for check-in meetings, or supervision. Throughout these informal, lower-stakes meetings, Anita frequently reflected on her vulnerability to Louisa. Anita felt

if she was ‘pushing this agenda’ on her own, ‘it would have been lower down the priority list’, but that these spaces helped her reflect and remain committed.

Conversely, Jane did not have the same support system. Whilst the same reflective meetings were held between myself, Jane and Pete, Pete’s prior misunderstandings frequently caused tension between them; conversations oftentimes depicting their disagreements. Unlike Anita, Jane was ultimately ‘pushing this agenda’ alone, and this had a personal impact on her: ‘it’s hard’. Increasingly, Jane expressed feeling burnt out and strained, and reflected on how hard it was to maintain ‘balance’ within this:

> *Jane: It’s hard when you're a grown up in a responsible position and how you need to balance looking after yourself whilst looking after your family and your staff. Ultimately if we don’t look after ourselves, we can’t support our staff. We can’t burn the candle at all the ends at once.*

Without the same inter-relational support throughout the process, leading the agenda added too much vulnerability on Jane. Ultimately, this impacted organisational learning and change, as seen through the impact that her departure had on the process.

My findings suggest that whilst vulnerability was necessary for learning and change, if this was too centered around the individual roles of leadership as opposed to a more collective approach, this could conversely negatively impact learning and change. As organisational learning is not an ‘isolated occurrence’ (Lawler and Sillitoe, 2013, p.496), an ongoing approach to managing vulnerability should be considered. Through depicting the impact of supportive, reflective spaces on Anita, the findings suggest that support for those leading change is

crucial. Additionally, sustainable, double-loop learning requires reflection on the learning process itself (e.g. Garud et al., 2011; Lawler and Sillitoe, 2013). The findings suggest that supervision for leadership could provide leadership with space for reflection, collaboration, and sharing the burden (e.g. Shohet & Shohet, 2019), which could mitigate the potential constraining impacts of vulnerability on organisational learning and change.

6.3.4 Sustainability of conditions

Whilst the findings depict the initial impacts of individual vulnerabilities at a relational level that constrained learning and change, highlighted too was the necessity of vulnerability itself within organisational learning and change. The findings suggest that fostering and embracing vulnerabilities through interpersonal and relational levels enabled learning and change, however a trauma-informed approach to managing these vulnerabilities was necessary for sustainable organisational change.

Organisational learning requires ongoing ‘interaction with the environment’ (Mallen-Broch et al., 2014, p.42) to better understand the complex social world an organisation sits within. Whilst ‘buy-in’ is highlighted throughout organisational change theories and trauma-informed practice alike, the findings depict there are nuances within this not currently considered within existing research. The findings suggest that through exploring different perspectives in ways that are trauma-informed – i.e. through interpersonal and relational reflection revolving around

acknowledgement, support and trust, tensions and resistance instead became a catalyst for a culture of learning.

One participant argued of trauma-informed approaches:

> *Gabriel: What it isn't, is it isn't pastries on a Friday morning. That's lovely, but it's not what we're talking about here. It's talking deeply and openly about how interactions and responses are making you feel.*

Learning occurred not despite tensions, misunderstandings and resistance, but through 'talking deeply' and 'openly' about them; interrogating their origins in a trusting, respectful and supported way. Within this, organisational learning occurred within spaces created for open communication and reflection. These findings suggest that 'buy-in' alone did not determine the realisation of organisational learning, but instead organisational learning occurred through understanding, exploring and unpicking different perspectives collectively. This could provide deeper clarity of current practices, promoting a generative learning environment of what learning and change is needed and how this can be constructed in ways that may be sustainable over time.

6.4 Internal structural conditions and impacts

Now discussed are structural and system level conditions within the organisations that both enabled constrained learning and change. Firstly, the findings highlighted the ways in which conditions which utilise the diversity of expertise within the organisation through a collective and relational approach promoted learning and change, highlighting the significance of fostering and maintaining a

collective identity. The findings also suggest that transparency and visibility of decision-making processes promoted safety and security which promoted a collaborative approach to learning. Furthermore, the ways in which space and place either fostered or constrained a generative learning environment are discussed. Finally discussed are the ways in which organisational policies could be used to enable a collaborative, relational approach to learning and change. These conditions are now discussed in turn, contextualising their significance in the context of existing literature and in consideration of the underpinning research questions.

6.4.1 Fostering and maintaining a collective identity

In line with existing research, the findings suggest that conditions which increased security and clarity for participants, alongside the acknowledgement and utilisation of the diversity of expertise across the organisation, overtime began to develop a sense of collective identity which in turn promoted learning and change. In expansion to existing theories of organisational learning and change, the significance of processes and mechanisms that employed a collective and relational approach to foster and maintain this sense of collective identity are highlighted through the findings.

Security

Firstly, the findings demonstrated the impact of external and internal precarity on learning and change, highlighting insecurity as a constraining factor within this.

Organisational change can be a necessary response to adapting to 'significant jolts' in the external environment where an organisation is forced to adapt (Spicer, 2020, p.1737). Disruptions, instability or crisis within external environments can create 'legitimacy challenges', resulting in perceived or actual failure in institutional practices and values that organisations are forced to respond to. This can create 'crucial juncture moments' for organisations, 'foregrounding organisational shortcomings' and requiring 'local innovation' (Spicer, 2020, p.1737).

Amidst the Covid-19 pandemic, Fernville exemplified this. An immediate shift to remote working combined with increasing concerns around future funding revenue led to heightened anxiety around the precarity of participants' futures at Fernville. Participants frequently described these environmental 'jolts' as trauma-inducing:

> *Gaby: All of us have been impacted, whether that's staffing structures or practices. But thinking about the process of changing together is also, um, trauma feels too strong a word but can maybe promote this feeling of lack of control or hopelessness sometimes.*

Trauma theories stipulates psychological trauma is an event or series of events causing prolonged and profound experiences of helplessness (e.g. Van der Kolk, 2015). The findings suggest that the environmental precarity was trauma-inducing, through the prolonged helplessness participants felt during this time.

Organisational change may also be triggered by needs within the internal functioning of organisations (e.g. Johansson and Heide, 2008, p.288). This was the case for Riverford, with significant changes to leadership and upcoming precarity around proposed changes to Academy Trust membership. These internally motivated changes prompted similar feelings of anxiety in participants:

Anton: I'm worried about what's going on in the institution at the moment. People's anxieties are really raised by this.

Mabel: The anxiety of change is such a big thing at the moment; the impact this is having on staff is massive.

Mabel argued that the threat of system level changes was uprooting staff's sense of safety:

There's a sense of safety in knowing how things are going to be dealt with and how things will be approached. At the moment, things are out of the staff's control. What I'm seeing and hearing is that this is really unsettling for staff, and I'm not sure that they feel safe within this system.

Organisational change theories suggest that organisations face a 'paradox' of change, needing change 'to maintain their competitive position', whilst also needing stability 'to control uncertainty' (Dominguez et al., 2015, p.413). Research suggests that instability, threat, and insecurity at system level can promote reactive or crisis driven organisations, operating in 'survival mode' (e.g. Treisman, 2021). This was exemplified at Riverford: 'we've been doing a lot of firefighting'. Organisations can consequently become resistant to change: creativity and innovation can be replaced with rigidity and inflexibility (e.g. Treisman, 2021). At Fernville, Pete was 'hesitant to commit' to 'new learning' under the circumstances, with Sebastian similarly concerned around the perceptions of resources that learning may require: 'we can't afford it right now'.

Additionally, oftentimes participant's resistance to learning and change stemmed from the ways the precarity of changes impacted their confidence in their practices. Oftentimes participants expressed feeling ill-equipped, missing 'the

small things', and worried about their 'skill sets'. In line with trauma theory, several participants raised concerns around their capacity for learning at this time:

> *Elaine: It could be quite overwhelming to add something else in too.*

For Fernville, precarity and instability increased with the departure of both Jane and Pete. Mo expressed 'worry' around the future directions of training and support within this:

> *Mo: Now they're going to move onto the next thing. Will we ever talk about this stuff again? I really don't know.*

Research suggests a trauma-informed organisation is one where individuals are given voice (e.g. Avery et al., 2021), and this is both recognised and responded to at a system level (e.g. Jennings, 2009). This promotes trust in the system (e.g. Francis et al., 2022). Throughout the extended precarity of external and internal changes, participants often expressed mistrust in the system, arguing current systems were a barrier against building a trauma-informed culture. Opposingly, when also faced with precarity from external and internal changes, Anita argued: 'this is absolutely the right time to be getting into this'. Instead of seeing trauma-informed approaches as 'another thing to learn' or too 'overwhelming' for staff, Anita argued that continued learning *through* the instability was important:

> *We need to solidify our understanding of where we are right now, and where we want to take it, before we make any big organisational decisions.*

The findings align with existing research through highlighting instability as a factor constraining learning, however in combination expands prior research through

suggesting that a trauma-informed approach to learning could mitigate these impacts. The findings suggest that risk acceptance is required from those steering learning (e.g. Mallen-Broch et al., 2014), however concurrently depict how without support or supervision (e.g. Shohet & Shohet, 2019) learning agendas can be abandoned in times of precarity.

The findings therefore suggest that a trauma-informed approach to learning within times of instability and precarity can enable organisational learning to continue throughout this time and further highlight the benefits of trauma-informed approaches at the system-level within this.

Clarity

Additionally, the findings suggest that lack of clarity around both the roles and responsibilities of individuals and where these roles sat within the wider organisation further constrained both individual and organisational level learning and change.

Research exploring trauma-informed organisations frequently suggests that overstepping boundaries of role responsibilities can be an indicator of vicarious trauma: a disproportional perception of responsibility can suggest emotional investment beyond the expectations of the role (e.g. Treisman, 2021). Significant role changes can contribute to this, leading to unclear and changing expectations, which can also contribute to overworking and consequently burn out (e.g.

Treisman, 2021). The findings from both cases confirm this: lack of clarity around roles and responsibilities caused tension between participants.

At Fernville, tensions raised through different perceptions of responsibility began within the leadership team. Pete, for example, separated responsibilities for learning around trauma-informed practice into two: those who worked with young people, who ‘need’ to know, and those who ‘deal more with strategies’, who ‘don’t need to know’. Pete’s perceptions of responsibility for learning led him to step back from taking part in learning opportunities and prevented him from facilitating further opportunities. Lack of clarity around responsibilities produced tension among the wider staff body too. Some participants argued that trauma-informed practice was only necessary for ‘counsellors’, whilst other staff argued they ‘need to know about these things’ within their current roles. This tension frequently left some staff feeling ill-equipped for their roles, whilst simultaneously preventing others from engaging in learning. This echoes findings from Kaip et al. (2024), who found staff across AP feeling particularly ill-equipped to support complex needs.

The findings from Riverford further demonstrated the additional pressure this lack of clarity placed on staff, again manifesting differently across different hierarchal levels. Teaching staff with additional leadership responsibilities expressed feeling pressure from both ‘above and below’. For example, Beth felt that senior leadership teams ‘knew’ they lacked capacity but passed responsibilities regardless to offload their own to-do lists. Lack of ‘trust’ in senior leadership teams to ‘do anything to change these issues’ was frequently expressed between middle

managers, depicting disconnect between the roles; a factor existing research highlights as a barrier to organisational learning and change (e.g. Mallen-Broch et al., 2014; Weckowska, 2014; Heyden et al., 2017; Trevor, 2019).

However, my findings suggest middle managers felt ‘pressures’ from teaching staff, too. Middle management role holders expressed feeling ‘trapped’ in-between the two roles, unable to support either side. Nadine argued: ‘it’s so hard to keep yourself sane within this. We're supporting everybody, but nobody supports us’. This suggests that a lack of clarity between roles and responsibilities prevented middle management from carrying out their own roles effectively and raises questions around what support should exist, for whom, within this. Similarly, those in supporting roles also felt under-utilised and undervalued within the systems. They often argued there was a ‘good cop, bad cop’ narrative, resulting in ‘finger pointing’ and blame across different positions. This narrative led to increased distrust which prevented reflection and learning between the hierarchies (e.g. Watson and Astor, 2025). These tensions were seen throughout wider structures, too. William felt responsibility for organisational learning and change lay with the leadership team: ‘We sit above that. That’s part of leaderships actual jobs - it’s not anything to do with us on the board’. This deferral of responsibility put additional pressure on Anita: ‘It can feel hard to give so much time to something that’s constantly dismissed’. Such disparities prevented focused collective effort (e.g. Oh, 2020), with staff often feeling leaders did not understand the values of their communities (Fisher, 2021). This not only prevented collective learning, but additionally unclear and changing expectations and boundaries contributed to overworking and burn out for some (e.g. Treisman, 2021), and deferral of

responsibility in others. These findings align with organisational trauma theories (e.g. Treisman 2018) and suggest this reduced both capacity for and opportunities of individual and collective learning (e.g. Jennings, 2009).

At Fernville, this lack of clarity impacted potential sustainability of learning through preventing the transferal of learning between key actors. This first stemmed from uncertainties around changing staff: ‘we used to have [Gail] but she’s left, and I don’t know what we’ll do now’; ‘with a change in head there’s a lot of shuffling around’; ‘everyone’s getting used to the new dynamic and it’s a bit anxiety inducing’. There was confusion surrounding who would take on different responsibilities: ‘I’m not quite sure who does that anymore’; ‘need to check who to go to for line management stuff now’. In contrast, at Riverford Anita initiated a process of exploring perceptions of roles and responsibilities across the hierarchies: ‘I want to start by really focusing in on how they see their role fitting in to culture and change questions’. This involved extended conversations between key actors, and as a result a restructuring of leadership roles and responsibilities began. The aim was to clarify roles and responsibilities within the learning process, to foster a collective organisational learning process where learning could be shared and transferred between key actors (e.g. Boreham and Morgan, 2004; Greany and Maxwell, 2017).

Ensuring learning and change is continued when key staff leave is not guaranteed. The findings highlighted the realisation of this with Jane’s departure. Striking a balance between collective responsibility, whilst also acknowledging the role of leadership in managing change, is important for the realisation of organisational

learning (Briggs, 2007; Greany and Maxwell, 2017; Mallen-Broch et al., 2014). At Fernville, responsibility was unbalanced. Without clear understanding of roles and responsibilities within this, learning sat with the individuals, and the circulation of learning around trauma-informed approaches was constrained. Contrastingly, this was acknowledged at Riverford, and the findings depicted that clarification of roles at system level began to enable the circulation and transferal of learning between key actors; a more sustainable, organisational approach to learning and change (Garud et al., 2011).

Diversity of expertise

The findings further expand existing research through drawing attention to how conceptualisations of how the diversity of expertise across the organisations was utilised at the internal structural level impacted learning and change. Tensions initially observed between the hierarchies often stemmed from how participants felt their roles within the organisations were perceived, and how these perceptions impacted individual and organisational learning and change. There were diverse skill sets and knowledge between actors within each organisation, however when these were unacknowledged or underutilised, this manifested in participants feeling undervalued or ill-equipped and caused tensions which impacted learning and change.

Participants frequently raised that their past experiences brought a diverse range of knowledge and skill sets: 'we all come from different backgrounds so a lot of us are bringing aspects of our past work into this work'. However, many raised

concerns that this knowledge was not circulated: ‘they can’t guarantee that we all have these skill sets’; ‘some people are keener to learn than others’. Consequently, the findings often depict further tensions between the hierarchies. At Riverford, perceptions of knowledge and expertise across the hierarchies created a ‘good cop, bad cop’ narrative between teaching and support staff, with both parties expressing feeling undervalued within this dynamic: ‘we’re used for the rubbish jobs’; ‘not seen as equal’.

Trauma theories stipulate that traumatic experiences disrupt or betray our inherent need for ‘belonging and dignity’ (Haines, 2019, p.74). When our sense of ‘belonging’ and ‘dignity’ are under threat, this ‘fear’ can manifest as ‘control’:

> *People tend to project internal states of disorganization or fear onto the outside in order to defend themselves and regain a sense of power and control. (Van der Kolk, 2002: 20-21)*

The findings suggest that when expertise was not recognised or utilised, participants felt undervalued, oftentimes turning to ‘finger pointing’, blaming others in defense of themselves. This exemplifies projection of ‘fear’ onto others to ‘regain a sense of power and control’. In other instances where participants felt their expertise was ‘ignored’ this was conversely projected inwards, and manifested as a lack of confidence as they compared themselves to their colleagues. In these cases, participants expressed feeling ill-equipped and worried about their ‘skill sets’. Treisman (2018) argues that unclear expectations because of significant personnel changes or changes to practice can promote trauma within staff. The findings suggest that the initial proposal to develop trauma-informed practices sparked concern within participants who doubted their expertise in these areas; the ‘safety’ of existing practices threatened.

Research does however suggest that a 'basic understanding' of trauma dynamics should be held by 'all staff' (e.g. Jennings, 2009, p.111); all actors within an organisation should hold a 'basic understanding' of trauma for an organisational *culture* to be trauma-informed. Across both cases, the findings suggest there was much knowledge around trauma within individual actors, however structures in place for transferring such knowledge across the organisation were initially lacking. The findings suggest that when such expertise was not transferred, this could impact organisational-level learning:

> *Nadine: It shouldn't be down to one person, but when we lost members of staff before, we lost their expertise in this area. It can't all sit with one person.*

When 'expertise' was held by only 'one person', this knowledge was 'lost' with the staff member. This was depicted in situ at Fernville, as Jane's departure brought an end to the learning journey at the time.

Existing research suggests that organisational cultures often 'reinforce themselves' through the attraction of applicants holding values aligning with exiting organisational cultures (e.g. Peter & Wilderom, 2004). Igbokwe et al. (2021) argues that by nature organisations have identifiable boundaries, consequently seeking to establish common membership to 'draw lines between those inside and outside the organisation' (p.678). Consequently, organisations explicitly or implicitly set out 'guidelines for admission' (p.678), and new employees are often selected due to aligning values. Furthermore, new employees often adopt the dominant behaviour of existing members (Sharman et al., 2020, p.17), which also reinforces existing organisational cultures. This

highlights the precarity of relying on individual knowledge and expertise around trauma-informed approaches, without systems in place for transferring this knowledge across the wider organisation. As the overarching objective should be change at the culture level rather than a personal agenda, these findings highlight the need for systems for transferring learning across organisational actors.

However, the findings expand these theories through depicting that when participants were framed as experts, their knowledge and expertise brought to the forefront of conversations and greeted with curiosity and interest, this increased confidence and led to a more generative collaborative learning environment. At Fernville this was observed through changes to the ways Pete addressed staff in meetings: 'you're the experts in your roles'. This language became echoed across different spaces, with the wider leadership team often reinforcing the 'collaborative' nature of learning: 'in your teams you are the experts, we want this to be a collaborative process where we can all learn from each other'.

This developed further still, and saw Pete seeking staff's input for wider organisational changes:

> *Pete: What I want to do is for you guys to discuss. I want ideas, thoughts, on as an organisation, for us, what is our culture right now? And what would a trauma-informed culture look like for us?*

Through framing staff as experts and seeking staff-led changes, tensions around responsibility began to shift, the task instead becoming collective. Structures facilitating collaboration led to innovative thinking and different ideas and perspectives were shared.

Oftentimes, this came with a shift from the repetitive use of 'I' and 'you' towards the collective pronoun 'our' across both cases. This suggests group cohesion, suggesting participants were working towards a 'common goal' (Livingstone, 2008: 8). This echoes Sheffield and Morgan's argument that the change was 'internal'; 'it was theirs, they had made it, and they were proud of that' (Sheffield & Morgan: 2017: 58). Trauma-informed approaches frequently argue that those who are trauma-experienced may have experienced 'voicelessness', and that a lack of consultation with learners serves to reinforce these experiences (Avery et al., 2021, p.13). Giving voice to learners can enhance the learning environment through reducing triggers (p.13). At the same time, research stipulates that a trauma-informed organisation should convey to those within it that they are valued (e.g. Jennings, 2009; Treisman, 2018). These findings therefore lend themselves to a conceptualisation of a trauma-informed approach to organisational learning itself. Through framing staff as experts, acknowledging the diverse expertise within the organisation and giving 'voice' to staff, staff in turn felt more valued and this enhanced the learning environment.

Additionally, organisational learning and change theories argue that involving all employees regardless of hierarchical status in the creation of policy goals can enable 'empowerment' amongst employees, in turn contributing to their 'will' and 'readiness' to improve (e.g. Pathak, 2010, 10.5.8; Briggs, 2007, p.123). Through removing barriers to participation in line with a trauma-informed approach to learning (Grimes & Ekins, 2009: 12), participants were able to discuss and explore different experiences and perspectives, thus engaging in the 'pedagogy of

organisational learning' (Boreham and Morgan, 2004, p.315; p.322). This created an open, generative learning environment, and prompted the development of strategies for learning and change at the organisational level. Furthermore, as these were created collaboratively, the individual and collective 'will' to realise such goals increased. This suggests that acknowledging and utilising the diverse expertise within organisations to inform changes could lead to longer term impacts, in turn increasing the sustainability of changes over time.

6.4.2 Decision-making processes

Internal processes and mechanisms for decision-making were consistently highlighted through the findings as contributing to both the enabling and constraining of organisational learning and change. Transparent accountability measures that encouraged and developed a trauma-informed open culture of communication throughout the organisation were highlighted as contributing to the promotion of effective organisational learning and change.

Accountability and transparency

The findings additionally align with existing research through suggesting that training on trauma-informed approaches was 'necessary, but not sufficient' for developing and embedding trauma-informed practice within the organisations (Harrison et al., 2020). Achieving trauma-informed change is complex, requiring system-wide investment (Long, 2022); plans, procedures and policies in place to

develop and sustain a trauma-informed organisation are necessary (e.g. Long, 2022; Watson et al., 2024). At Fernville, a lack of measures for accountability for learning and change spread distrust between the hierarchies:

> *Zadie: Maybe we'll keep it up for a term, but I can't see this lasting.*
>
> *Jean: It will just fall by the wayside once the next thing comes along that they want to change.*

Interrelationships between complex factors can contribute to experiences with employing trauma-informed approaches (Finegan, 2024), however structural and environmental support is required within the process of learning and change (Gee et al., 2021). Here, Zadie and Jean perceived a lack of such support, and this impacted their experiences of learning. In addition, trauma theories argue that experiences that 'break or betray our inherent need for safety' (Haines, 2019, p.74) can catalyse a traumatised psychological state: there is psychological safety within trust, and therefore distrust can threaten this. Amidst substantial organisational change, participants across both organisations frequently raised their mistrust in the 'system', and oftentimes this evoked anxiety: 'it's making us feel worried and scared'; 'the anxiety of change'. At Riverford, Mabel argued:

> *There's a sense of safety in knowing how things are going to be dealt with and how things will be approached. At the moment, things are out of the staff's control. What I'm seeing and hearing is that this is really unsettling for staff, and I'm not sure that they feel safe within this system.*

Knowing how things would be 'dealt with' provided a 'sense of safety'; the unknown was 'unsettling'. Within this, safety 'within this system' became under threat.

Trauma theories stipulate this can foster a sense of being ‘out of control’, instead projecting internal states of disorganisation or fear onto the outside to regain this control (Van der Kolk, 2002: p.20-21). If individuals fear the ‘disorganisation’ of ‘failure’, they could ‘project’ this ‘internal state’ onto the ‘outside’: i.e. this ‘trauma’ could manifest within the workplace. At a system level, this could induce organisational trauma (Triesman, 2018; Finegan, 2024), impacting both an organisations ‘readiness’ to learn and reduce their capacity for adapting and responding to challenges and changes (Greany et al., 2024a). The findings suggest that a lack of accountability measures for learning and change around trauma-informed organisational approaches inhibited trust within the system. This suggests that structures in place at the system level that provide accountability measures could increase the system-level trust needed to both enable learning and change, as well as mitigating potential impacts of organisational trauma.

Additionally found across both cases was that the degree to which decision-making processes were made visible across the organisation contributed to the enabling and constraining of learning and change. When systems for decision making, monitoring and evaluation were visible at a wider organisational level, this not only aided accountability for learning and change but also helped mitigate the potential of learning and change inducing organisational trauma.

Organisational learning theories suggest that effective dialogue between employees across all hierarchical positions equally contributes to effective learning dialogues (Boreham and Morgan, 2004). Dialogue between employees promotes an ‘openness’ where learning objectives can be shared and agreed

upon, in turn contributing to a ‘will’ and ‘readiness’ to engage with learning and change (e.g. Briggs, 2007; Pathak, 2010; Boreham and Morgan, 2004). Likewise, transparent communication and a collaborative working environment is often cited as an important aspect of a trauma-informed organisation (e.g. Jansen in de Wal et al., 2020; Greany and Maxwell, 2017; Chen, 2025; Worth and Van Den Brande, 2020).

Across both organisations, without transparency around decision making processes, participants expressed concern. Feedback gathering from leadership was seen as a ‘tick-box’ exercise where ‘nothing will change’: ‘it’s all a tick box for the board’. This led participants to question the motivations of decisions made: ‘their decision making is not in the best interest of our actual communities’; ‘it’s all just a money-making system’. Consequently, participants frequently argued this caused blame between the hierarchies: ‘then it’s our problem if it doesn’t work out’. When decision making processes were not transparent, a polarised ‘us’ and ‘them’ came through, exemplifying the negative impact of ‘power relationships’ which research suggests prevents effective learning dialogues (Boreham and Morgan, 2004, p.314). The findings align with this, depicting this promoted mistrust and consequently resistance to learning and change:

> *Jean: It will just fall by the wayside*
>
> *Zadie: Why would we listen to their new ideas when they don’t help us with the real stuff?*

There is safety in predictability; knowing how things will be done. Without this, a lack of perceived control can cause fear of failure (e.g. Van der Kolk, 2002; Elliott and Dingwall, 2017). The findings suggest that a lack of visibility around decision-

making processes induced ‘fear’ that initiatives would ‘fail’, and this caused resistance amongst participants.

An open culture of communication

Interestingly depicted across both cases, however, was that the more the organisations engaged with learning around trauma-informed approaches, the more interactions began to depict a gradual shift towards a more open culture of communication between the different hierarchies (e.g. Briggs, 2007). At Fernville, earlier interactions depicted closed communication between the hierarchies. When introducing a new initiative, Pete directed questions away from the briefing: ‘if you have any thoughts, I guess just raise them with your line manager or email me’. However, later briefings saw a shift in how Pete communicated decisions with staff, instead asking for staff perspectives on proposed decisions. This led to more extended discussion and collective inquiry:

> *Martin: Perhaps it would be good to have a more informal, lower stakes meeting and conversations with other members of staff?*

Relational practices for learning were employed: ‘opening space for the creation of shared meaning making, reconstructing power relationships’ (Boreham and Morgan, 2004, p.314), and catalysing further discussions around decisions.

Research argues that trauma-informed practice aims to give voice to those that are trauma-experienced (e.g. Avery et al., 2021). Where decision-making practices were not visible at organisational level, mistrust brewed between the

hierarchies, causing tension and constraining learning and change. However, when space was created for discussion, within the parameters of open decision-making processes, participants were 'given voice'. The findings from Riverford depict the ways in which collective inquiry around decision-making processes, overtime, developed trust between the hierarchies, 'reconstructing power relationships' and 'giving voice' to staff:

> *Anton: Because she trusts us, we trust her. If she says 'oh, this thing needs improving', I don't feel judged, I just see it as something I need to look into and learn about more and work on and it's weirdly empowering.*

By 'relentlessly pushing the same message', Anita showed consistency in her approaches. In doing so, trust in Anita developed. Through 'opening space' for discussion that was 'free of judgement', Anita encouraged staff to 'look into' their practices, to 'step back'; 'question'; 'learn'. Involving all employees in decision-making processes, regardless of hierarchal status, can enable 'empowerment', and contribute to their 'will' and 'readiness' to learn (Briggs, 2007, p.123; Pathak, 2010, 10.5.8). When participants saw systems in place for discussion, and trust that this would be 'free of judgement' and would contribute to decision-making (i.e. not as a performance review), they felt more empowered to 'learn more'.

Through increased visibility of decision-making processes, trust in the decisions made increased. As trust developed, and contributions were encouraged, participants became increasingly more inclined to share. Consequently, knowledge informing decisions was more context-specific, more grounded in day-to-day experiences of staff, less abstract: produced and transferred across the hierarchies. This suggests that sharing responsibility of decision-making

processes across different organisational levels mitigated earlier tensions, blame and shame between the hierarchies, and ultimately enabled learning and change.

Whilst these findings echo existing research through emphasising the impact of navigating the complex web of complexities within decision-making processes (e.g. Ball, 2012; Greany et al., 2024a), the findings interestingly suggest there were additional nuances within this when the trust board became more visible. Participants across both cases raised concerns around the role and visibility of the board within decision-making processes; a consideration currently under researched across both theoretical fields.

At Fernville, the board remained mostly ‘invisible’ to the wider organisation. Several participants argued the board needed to be seen to better support directors within decision-making processes: ‘they must ensure that support mechanisms are in place’. The role of trustees is to hold organisations accountable and offer support where necessary. Mechanisms for challenging organisations, holding key actors accountable, and supporting where necessary is oftentimes argued as necessary for mitigating the precarity of learning and change. Without the visibility of the board within this, there was mistrust within that system.

Whilst this was initially echoed at Riverford, the significant external and internal challenges and changes raised the visibility of the board. Communications between the board and the wider organisation increased due to the imminent need

for significant forward-looking organisational decisions to be made. The findings interestingly depict how the visibility of both those responsible for system level decisions and the decision-making processes involved increased initially increased tensions between the hierarchies:

Emma: To us it's a school but to them it's just a money-making system.

Nadine: Their changes won't match our ethos.

Emma: Their choice will be negative.

There was no longer separation between the 'system' and those within it; the separation instead now between those with decision-making powers, and those without. A separation of 'us' and 'them' came through; 'their' decisions will affect 'us'. The visibility of the board gave face to the 'system'; instead of an abstract concept, there were now people to blame.

Whilst previous findings align with research suggesting involving employees in decision-making enables 'empowerment', contributing to their 'will' and 'readiness' to change (Pathak, 2010; Greany and Maxwell, 2017), this theory does not readily transfer to these findings when the board become more visible within this. Trauma theories suggest that relationship building takes time: this is particularly heightened when actual or perceived power dynamics are present (Archer et al., 2015, p.14; Drury, 2015, p.38; Archer et al., 2015, p.14). To apply trauma-theories at a system level – i.e. to stipulate that an organisational going through significant challenge and change contributes to collective 'threat to safety' (Haines, 2019, p.74), it could be argued that those within this system perceived the *power* of the board as a 'threat' to their safety and security within this system. A trauma-

informed approach would suggest that developing trust between the board and the wider organisational community requires time. Given that this was the first time the board and their decision-making powers and processes were made visible at Riverford, it is not surprising this was initially a ‘threat’ to those impacted by these decisions.

Given the immediate mistrust between the board and the wider community when decision-making processes were first made visible, this was a risk, as mistrust can not only constrain learning and change (e.g. Lieberman, 2000), but counters the basis of a trauma-informed organizational culture (Francis et al., 2022; Watson and Astor, 2025). However, organisational learning theories postulate that ’risk acceptance’ is essential for those leading learning (e.g. Mallen-Broch et al., 2014). Perhaps through continuing to promote the visibility of the board despite this risk, this ‘risk acceptance’ may over time instead enable learning and promote positive change. Perhaps, trust between these hierarchies may develop, which may in turn mitigate against further tensions, resistance, and ultimately trauma when presented with new challenges and changes.

6.4.3 Impacts of space and place

Like many organisations, the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic meant at the start of fieldwork with Fernville national restrictions required considerable adaption (Harris & Jones, 2020; Thomson et al., 2022). Where staff previously worked in shared physical spaces, all practices shifted to virtual spaces. Whilst national restrictions had lifted by the start of fieldwork with Riverford, most all-staff

meetings and briefings remained online. The significance of spaces and places at a system level within the enabling and constraining of organisational learning and change were consistently highlighted across both case findings.

The findings suggest that for many participants, this change in space caused isolation:

> *Gaby: There's a lot of lone working with our staff. There isn't anymore one big office we all come into every day. It's been really isolated.*

In line with existing research, many participants argued that the 'community element' they previously felt was missing, and this 'isolation' impacted significantly on collective and collaborative learning and reflection (Worth & Faulkner-Ellis, 2021; Norwich et al., 2022; Thomson et al., 2022). Research suggests that our physical environment impacts our overall wellbeing (e.g. Treisman, 2018). A 'secure base' conveying 'care', 'safety', and 'value' is core to trauma-informed practice (e.g. Treisman, 2018). The findings oftentimes corroborate this:

> *Elaine: I don't know whether other people have had as many quite extreme experiences, because we don't get a chance to talk and share.*

Without a shared 'base' for collaborative reflection, participants argued their confidence in their practices was impacted, and perceptions of 'extreme experiences' were heightened and isolating. Larson (2009) argues that a supportive group environment can 'promote reciprocal scaffolding' (p.122): learning can be produced through understanding other's experiences. Livingstone (2008) argues this promotes 'collective intelligence': 'the ability to pool knowledge and compare notes with others toward a common goal' (p.8). The findings suggest

this ‘reciprocal scaffolding’ was initially absent from virtual spaces, exasperating isolation felt by participants.

Furthermore, the findings suggest this initially impacted on individual and organisational learning. Without the ‘community element’, staff meetings became transactional, with meetings primarily used for notices or updates. This hindered generative conversations: ‘You've got to be able to have those conversations, to figure stuff like that out. And the problem is, it's not something that can be done properly over an email’. In turn, this prevented opportunities for collective reflection: ‘the meetings are too short and structured to ask questions’; ‘not much room for discussions or questions, the directors just speak for the majority of meetings’. Creating space for sharing between colleagues can help build trust and enable new ways of thinking (Lieberman, 2000). The findings similarly suggest this isolation exasperated tensions between the hierarchies: 'trust needs to be built and there just isn’t the space for it’; ‘Communication with the directors has been patchy and relationships just aren't there’; ‘they’re just checking we’re actually working’.

Much research suggests that collaboration enhances learning, through enabling people to draw upon other's ‘funds of knowledge’ (e.g. Moll and Greenberg, 1990, p.322). Collaborative learning can ‘reduce each group members cognitive demand’ (Larson, 2019, p.120), and enhance ‘strategy development’ (Morrison & Schoon, 2013, p.4). However, trauma theories argue collaboration is a ‘relational’ process, requiring ‘safety’, ‘trust’, and a ‘secure base’ to hold these relationships (e.g. Treisman, 2018; Parker et al., 2022; MacLochlainn et al., 2022). The findings

suggest that without the ‘secure base’ of the physical space participants were used to, meetings became less relational, less collaborative, and this consequently constrained the production and transferal of learning (e.g. Watson and Astor, 2025). Jane questioned how to develop a relational approach within these virtual spaces:

> *Jane: The challenge is how we make sure everyone feels connected within this network. Empowered to work on their own, through their network, with the rest of the teams, but also supported and connected to everyone else too. How do we do this?*

Taking both theoretical fields in conjunction suggests that a trauma-informed approach to space – i.e. a ‘secure base’ where ‘trust’ is sustained through relational approaches – may prove more challenging within virtual spaces. However, the findings suggest that questioning where learning happens can deepen understanding of developing a relational approach within virtual spaces. Some researchers suggest that *space* is an inter-relational construct (e.g. Massey, 2005): space is socially produced (Low, 2017), co-constructed by those within it (Massey, 2005) through the emotions expressed by key actors (Low, 2017, p.151). This suggests that relational approaches to virtual spaces as sites for learning could enable actors within the space to view these spaces as relational too. My findings support this claim, as when leadership teams from both cases took a more relational approach within these spaces, transactional interactions were replaced with increased reflection, collaboration, and collective meaning making. Language used within weekly briefings shifted. Recognition of challenges, modelling trauma-informed reflections, sharing vulnerabilities, and recognising staff as experts came through: ‘it’s been full on and challenging but you’re all amazing’; ‘When I’m feeling anxious at work I...’; ‘I noticed you’re all having more

reflective conversations with each other and that's really useful..'. Within these parameters, language used between participants began to reflect this too. Collective pronouns 'our'; 'we', began to replace the more directive 'you', or isolated 'I'. This suggests group cohesion and demonstrates awareness of working towards a 'common goal' (e.g. Livingstone, 2008, p. 8).

From here, participants began to share both concerns and suggestions for system level improvements:

> *Viktoria: I think meeting more regularly as a group? I think that would help share resources and knowledge.*

Larson (2009) argues: 'with less personal risk and a lower cost of failure, collaborators might be less anxious about solving a problem' (p.122). When 'removed from official frameworks of learning', instead entering a space where all are seen as 'meaning-makers' (e.g. McCallum, 2012, p.146), learners became 'active participants' (e.g. McIntosh, 2010, p.6). Through active participation in 'meaning making', participants frequently conveyed feeling increasingly empowered. This echoes Sheffield and Morgan's argument (2017), that through 'active participation', changes become internalised: 'it was theirs' (p.58). Given that organisational change theories stipulate a 'collective will' to realise change goals is required (e.g. Briggs, 2007), this suggests that lowering 'personal risk' and perceptions of 'failure' within these spaces not only enhances group cohesion and promotes learning, but that this could lead to a more sustainable realisation of organisational goals.

Active participation from participants across different hierarchies provided less 'abstract' and more actionable, practical, grounded feedback for leadership teams, which in turn prompted increased empathy and understanding of different internal perspectives:

> *Taylor: That must be hard for them; not being able to chat about you know what behaviours they're seeing in the young people and what they might mean.*

Within this, the findings depicted several changes to leaderships approaches across these virtual spaces. These changes led to increased collective reflection and more collaborative learning. Leadership teams acknowledged wider staff were the ones 'actually working with the young people', framing staff as 'experts' in their roles. They then sought to create a 'collaborative process' of learning 'from each other'. Structures facilitating collaboration led to innovative thinking, and different perspectives were shared. The leadership team began to alter their perceptions of strategies to promote learning and change. Creating shared goals was seen to increase individual and collective 'will' to realise such goals (Briggs, 2007).

My findings align with existing research on both trauma-informed approaches and organisational learning theories through highlighting the constraining factors within virtual collective spaces. However, my findings expand research through examining *where* learning happened and highlighting the factors promoting learning within this. These findings suggest that a trauma-informed approach to navigating space at a system level – i.e. through the development of 'safe', 'relational', 'collaborative', 'reflective' spaces, enabled virtual spaces to become sites for producing and transferring learning.

6.4.4 Policies

A significant finding across both cases was that the ways policies were both created impacted system level trust and accountability, and that this in turn impacted organisational learning and change. Participants frequently referenced tensions between policies and practices, however the cause of this tension and how this manifested shifted throughout the study. This highlighted significant inconsistencies in how policy documents were both perceived and used, prompting reflection around how policies can be utilised to instead promote individual and organisational learning and change.

Initially, tensions built when participants identified the lack of trauma-informed practice referenced throughout policies:

> *Emma: [Leadership] made all these claims about wanting to push for better support for mental health and wellbeing for staff. They said all this stuff, but obviously nothing came of it. So, it all just stays the same.*

The lack of policies supporting these ‘claims’ caused mistrust between participants (e.g. Francis et al., 2022), and the lack of ‘clear message’ within these documents caused confusion:

> *Anton: How are we meant to know what’s what when they don’t even know what’s what?*
>
> *Nadine: There’s no clear message about what to do and why.*

This was exasperated through the simultaneous occurrence of multiple changes. Participants oftentimes argued that reporting and monitoring policies that reflected proposed learning and change were needed, so new practices did not ‘just fade into everything else’. Whilst policies can ‘provide tools to mediate learning’ (e.g. Boreham and Morgan, 2004, p.314), when these were not ‘clear’, this caused ‘disorganisation’ (Van der Kolk, 2002, p.21). The findings suggest that participants sought the ‘safety’ of clear policies, and without this, ‘internal’ and ‘external’ ‘states of disorganisation’ became visible (Haines, 2019, p.74; Van der Kolk, 2002, pp.2021).

Additionally questioned were the ways existing policies were both presented and used within both organisations. Participants frequently expressed concern that existing policies were far removed from actual ground-level practices, existing only to fulfill a ‘business plan’:

> *Mabel: Are staff viewed as actual human beings or are they all just pawns in the business plan?*

Research suggests a trauma-informed organisation employs relational communication (Treisman, 2018). In addition, relational practices can not only stipulate effective learning dialogues (Boreham and Morgan, 2004), but also promote sustainable trauma-informed approaches (Finegan, 2024). Expressed by Mabel is the *dehumanising* impact of policy documents; far from relational. Perceptions of ‘Belonging and dignity’ are protective factors against the impacts of trauma (Haines, 2019, p.74) and giving voice to the previously voiceless can contribute to this sense of belonging (Avery et al., 2021) and remove barriers to participation across a community (Grimes and Ekins, 2009; Greany et al., 2024b).

The findings depict an absence of staff ‘voice’ within policies; a disconnect felt across many participants.

The ‘abstract’ nature of policies and the impact this had on learning was often cited:

> *Penny: It does feel abstract. It’s a concern that these things could happen, and we wouldn’t remember, would we? We wouldn’t remember what we'd been trained to do.*

Several participants argued this enforced ‘trial and error’ practices, promoting ‘differences between us’, causing further tension and preventing longer term learning and change. For example, frequently expressed was a desire for practical guidance on responding to ‘potentially distressing conversations’. Without this, practices became isolated: ‘Otherwise, we’re all just doing our own thing aren’t we?’. Many learning theories argue that ‘human thinking must be understood in its concrete social circumstances’ (Moll and Greenberg, 1990, p.319), as it is ‘through negotiations with the social world’ that we ‘ascribe meaning to events’ (e.g. Kehily and Swann, 2003). Lamb (2002) argues that a ‘lack of authenticity’ disconnects learning from ‘real life’: learners should reflect on ‘real life’ learning experiences to ‘ascribe meaning’ (Lamb, 2002, p.269). My findings echo these theories, depicting that when policies were ‘abstract’, disconnected from their ‘concrete social circumstances’, this impacted individual and organisational learning and change. The existing disconnect between trauma-informed theories and educational theories and practices currently contributes to the lack of understanding around implementation of a trauma-informed organizational culture (e.g. O’Toole, 2022;

Sutton et al., 2022), and the findings suggest this disconnect prevented learning and change across both cases.

However, the findings expand current research through the highlighting of tensions between perceived superficial and ‘real’ knowledge. In a Riverford board meeting, Connie asked: ‘if we were inspected against our documentation in practice then how would we fare?’; ‘are we actually doing this stuff in practice or are we just using the language with no evidence to back it up?’. Questions around how language choices conveyed ‘superficial’ verses ‘real’ knowledge were frequently raised. Sylvia argued: ‘there’s superficial knowledge, and then there’s actual knowledge where it translates into your work, and these are not the same thing’. Similarly, Ivan questioned how to know that the ‘right things’ were being done, arguing there is a ‘risk’ of masking superficial knowledge through using the ‘right’ language. Sylvia further argued that striving to ‘look good on paper’ can mask not ‘actually believing in the things that you’re doing’, preventing ‘real’ knowledge from circulating. This tension suggests that the alignment of policies and practices needs consideration, if the goal is to embed trauma-informed approaches at the organisational culture level.

The findings highlighted a disconnect between policies and practices across both organisations, that isolated staff and impacted confidence. Later findings from Riverford depict the wider leadership team discussing whether a more relational way to create and utilise policies was possible:

> *George: I don’t know if trauma-informed practices can be reflected in policies. Would it even exist in policy speak?*

Anita: We need to think about how the wording and how we name documents can really reflect a relational approach and how we name things can impact how its implemented too. Everything should be inclusive and including everyone and everyone should feel a part of these documents and encouraged by these documents.

Through questioning whether trauma-informed practices could ‘exist’ within policies, the findings highlight further tensions between formal policy documents and relational approaches to practice. Anita reflected that how policies are labelled can impact their implementation. Anita argued for ‘inclusive’, ‘encouraging’ and ‘relational’ language within policies. This expands theories suggesting that creating policy goals collaboratively enables the collective ‘will’ to realise these goals (e.g. Briggs, 2007, p.123), through drawing attention to the ways that language both within and describing policies can impact their implementation, too.

Additionally, whilst questions around how to reflect trauma-informed approaches within policies remain, feedback from participants suggests that doing so could enable the development of such approaches at a cultural level. Participants across both organisations argued that using trauma-informed language could contribute to building a ‘deeper knowledge base’ and increase ‘confidence’ through providing advice and ‘support’:

Martin: I suppose then the documentation that the organisational provides staff for training, the resources, should provide some trauma-informed contexts, so that staff can turn to the documents if they need support.

Jean: Yeh so it becomes part of the language that we use naturally, and overtime, we need to feel more confident in working with these issues. I guess the confidence comes with it.

Anita: Well maybe they do need to be able to have a deeper knowledge base, to be able to feel confident to say, "yes, I know why I am doing what I am doing".

This exemplifies research suggesting that policies can provide tools to mediate learning (Boreham and Morgan, 2004, p.314), further suggesting that embedding the language throughout policies could provide something to 'turn to' for support, in turn increasing confidence in practices. The findings align with research suggesting that 'one-off training' isn't sufficient for changing practice at a culture level (e.g. Harrison et al., 2020) and expand this through highlighting the potential enabling role of policy documents within this. A relational approach to the creation and utilisation of policies could promote learning and change at a collective, culture level in sustainable ways. Whilst the duration of this research prevents further exploration of this question, the findings begin to shed new light into the potential role of relational approaches to organisational policies for organisational learning and change.

6.5 Wider Organisational Level

Wider organisational level conditions enabling and constraining learning and change are now discussed. Firstly, the impacts of external challenges and changes are explored, and conditions that enabled learning and change within these contexts discussed. Following this, the way in which wider organisational conceptualisations of success impacted learning and change is discussed alongside the conditions which enabled the development of a collective identity which mitigated these constraints. Finally, external accountability measures

suggesting for longer term approaches to learning and change are discussed in depth. These wider organisational conditions are discussed in turn, contextualising their significance in relation to exiting literature in consideration of the research questions underpinning this study.

6.5.1 External challenges and changes

For each case organisation, contextual factors initially threatened learning and change. The findings suggest that these factors contributed to individual and collective traumatic experiences; the impacts of which over time began to seep into the organisation itself. These findings confirm theories of vicarious trauma, organisational trauma and their impacts on learning and change (e.g. Kamtosis and Kakouris, 2025; Cunneen and Anderson, 2024). However, the findings expand existing theories through suggesting a trauma-informed approach to learning and change itself through times of challenge and change at an external and organisational level could mitigate the impacts of these traumas.

Contextual challenges

Between the conceptualisation and beginning of fieldwork with Fernville, the UK entered what was then the second national lockdown in response to the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic. Amidst this external context Fernville was thrown into precarity, requiring necessary adjustments to practices at short notice in response: ‘people's roles are all over the place’; ‘we’ve been doing a lot of firefighting’. Organisational change can be a necessary response to ‘significant jolts’ in the

environment where an organisation is required to adapt (Spicer, 2020, p.1737); the Covid-19 pandemic caused a ‘significant jolt’, and changes were necessary. Research argues that disruptions, instability or crisis within external environments can create ‘legitimacy challenges’, resulting in perceived or actual failure in institutional practices and values that organisations are ‘forced’ to respond to (Spicer, 2020, p.1737). Like many organisations at the time, for Fernville this manifested through ‘massive changes of staffing’, including role changes, redundancies and long-term absences (e.g. Worth and Faulkner-Ellis, 2021; Norwich et al., 2022; Beauchamp et al., 2021).

Research suggests that such challenges can, however, create ‘crucial juncture moments’ for organisations: foregrounding ‘organisational shortcomings’, and thus ‘inviting local innovation’ (Spicer, 2020, p.1737). However, the findings suggest that, across both organisations, these ‘crucial juncture moments’ initially increased anxieties:

> *Mabel: People's anxieties are really raised by this.*
>
> *Emma: The anxiety of change is such a big thing at the moment.*

Research suggests that organisations face a ‘paradox’ of change, needing change ‘to maintain their competitive position’, whilst also needing stability ‘to try to control uncertainty’ (Dominguez et al., 2015, p.413). Organisational level changes were necessary at the time; however, the findings depict this tension between ‘needing to change’ and ‘needing stability’ resulted oftentimes in resistance to learning around trauma-informed approaches. Trauma-informed approaches became

‘another thing to learn’; an additional task to ‘add’ into their busy schedules. These findings align with trauma theories, depicting that ‘disorganisation’ within the external environment caused ‘disorganisation’ at an organisational level, which promoted symptoms of burn out and vicarious trauma (e.g. Smith, 2021; Sutton et al., 2022; Phelps et al., 2025). This oftentimes resulted in ‘fear’ which inhibited the learning and change agenda through undermining its adaptive ability (e.g. Bloom, 2013).

Research suggests that trauma-reducing strategies for organisations are essential for enhancing their adaptive abilities in such circumstances (e.g. Sutton et al., 2022; Finegan, 2024). When viewed in conjunction with organisational learning and change theories, this suggests that a trauma-informed approach to learning has potential to assist organisational change when organisations are ‘forced’ to change in response to ‘significant jolts’ in the environment (Spicer, 2020, p.1737), and that embedding this approach to learning could equip organisations to better respond to future environmental challenges; an essential quality within the increasingly complex educational landscape (e.g. Greany et al., 2024a).

The Covid-19 pandemic was not the only external context impacting organisational learning and change. At Riverford, external perceptions impacted organisational change. Participants felt that school itself can be a ‘site of trauma’ for students, and this trickled down to impact staff too. The *type* of school, a large all-through alternative provision, was often referenced in this way: ‘students are coming from schools where nobody wants them’; ‘they’re coming to us with those feelings of deep rejection, shame, isolation’. Also referenced was the impact of parents and

carers experiences: ‘they’ve also often had dire experiences with their kids' schools’; ‘exclusion is rough on them, too’; ‘they come to us feeling pretty lost and alone as well’. Research suggests that school exclusion can exasperate felt isolation (Madia et al., 2022). Research suggests the Covid-19 pandemic exasperated this, increasing loneliness and isolation in young people, and this heightened mental health and wellbeing concerns for those already more vulnerable (e.g. Department for Education, 2023; Madia et al., 2022). The findings corroborate this, suggesting these concerns were ‘only getting worse’. There is limited existing research exploring trauma-informed approaches from an AP perspective, however the findings align with existing research through highlighting the necessity of specialised support for those working within these settings (Kaip et al., 2024; Ward, 2024).

However, taking a trauma-informed lens to the concept of ‘space’ provides an interesting lens through which to consider the potential for change within this. Research suggests the ‘emotion of space’ is a social production from key actors within it (Low, 2017, p.151). If those within the space are feeling ‘lost and lone’, the space itself becomes a site of loneliness: a ‘site of trauma’. Participants oftentimes argued the school came with stigma, which exasperated these feelings for both young people and staff alike. However, if these perceptions are ‘socially produced’, then this implies that the ‘emotions of space’ can be changed. Under this stipulation, a trauma-informed approach to addressing these challenges could be beneficial. Creating a space fostering ‘safety, belonging and dignity’ (Haines, 2019, p.74) at an organisational level could mitigate these impacts, and over time develop a ‘space’ no longer a ‘site of trauma’. A trauma-informed approach to

mitigating contextual challenges such as stigma and isolation is therefore a consideration for developing a trauma-informed organisational culture.

Organisational trauma

Additionally, the findings align with research suggesting that challenges and changes within external environments and the resulting impacts within the internal environment can lead to vicarious trauma in staff (Worth & Faulkner-Ellis, 2021; Kamtsios and Kakouris, 2025).

Both organisations provided specialist education to ‘vulnerable’ students, whether through out-of-school interventions as with Fernville, or as an alternative provision academy as with Riverford. Research suggests that such ‘groups’ are considerably more vulnerable to trauma than their peers (e.g. Drury, 2015; Archer et al., 2015). Furthermore, loneliness and isolation in young people from the Covid-19 pandemic and negative experiences with school and exclusion can exasperate mental health and wellbeing concerns (Department for Education, 2023; Madia et al., 2022). In line with research, participants from both organisations repeatedly referred an increase in ‘more extreme’ vulnerabilities amongst students and therefore saw increasingly more ‘traumatised’ young people day-to-day (e.g. Thomson et al., 2022).

Research suggests that secondary traumatic stress – or compassion fatigue – can result from experiencing or hearing about another's trauma (Smith, 2021; Frearson & Duncan, 2024). Overtime, this can lead to vicarious trauma: the cumulative

effect of consistent exposure to other's traumatic experiences (Treisman, 2018). Theories around vicarious traumatisation suggest these repeated exposures contribute to burn out, and physical, mental and emotional impacts can be felt as a result (Frearson & Duncan, 2024; Cieslak et al., 2014). The findings from both cases align with such theories, with participants frequently referencing the negative impacts of working in such environments:

> *Anton: You can't not bring this home with you as it stands. And this can impact your own relationships with your family. It can impact your sleep. It can impact your health.*

Many participants used terms like 'relentless'; 'intense'; 'cycle of stress' to describe their experiences. Oftentimes, participants argued this resulted in negative 'coping mechanisms':

> *Nadine: We'll often then revert to those coping mechanisms, don't we? Those ways we cope when we're exhausted, and we feel like we can't cope.*
>
> *In the same way that we see with the young people, you can tell with us because we'll get snappy, frustrated with each other, short tempers. Our lessons get that little bit worse.*
>
> *Your window of tolerance I guess is the phrase; your window of tolerance gets really squished in, and you get a bit less creative, a bit less patient.*

This aligns with existing research, demonstrating the 'projection' of an 'internal state of disorganisation or fear onto the outside' (e.g. Van der Kolk, 2002, p.2021).

The findings further suggest these individual impacts, when left unaddressed, can impact the collective organisation too. Oftentimes, participants referenced how 'internal' states of 'fear' 'leak' into the institution:

George: I think there's a lot of fear around here. Fear in the institution.

Martin: Thinking about the process of changing together is also, um, trauma feels too strong a word but can maybe promote this feeling of lack of control or hopelessness sometimes. When all your practices are up in the air.

Themes of tension, lack of control and helplessness echoing throughout reflect a sense of organisational wide trauma. Treisman (2018) argues the organisation 'can become 'trauma-organised' and 'trauma-soaked' (p.4). Unacknowledged stress and anxiety get 'passed down' and 'pushed deeper' into the organisation (Treisman, 2021). Under these circumstances, organisations can become dominated by survival needs', where 'ripple effects can be felt throughout the system's multiple layers' (Treisman, 2021, p.4), and the organisation itself can become reactive and crisis driven (Bloom, 2013). The findings align with such theories, with participants frequently raising this as a concern:

Nadine: The pace of the day is fast and it's all about crisis management.

However, these findings further existing research through depicting a reciprocal effect: individual level vicarious trauma impacts at an organisational level, and organisational level traumas intensify the impacts felt at individual too; a theme presented throughout both cases:

Emma: How are we supposed to cope if the system isn't coping itself?

Within this context, the findings depict that 'fear in the institution' impacted access and participation in learning around trauma-informed approaches. Organisational level trauma was frequently referenced as a barrier to learning. At Fernville,

several members of the leadership were resistant to set a learning agenda with staff, conceptualising engagement with trauma-informed approaches as ‘another thing to learn’; an additional strain for staff to ‘add’ into their already ‘too busy’ schedules. These findings initially echoed at Riverford, too:

> *George: How do we find ways of supporting them that doesn’t involve an extra layer of work?*
>
> *Anita: We need to make sure that our deeper organisational practices are supporting that.*
>
> *George: But when? How? I’m also feeling these things too – overcapacity; burn out. I know you are too. We all are. How and when do we fit this in, because the way I see it, is its extra work for us now too.*

Feelings of 'burn out’ and ‘overcapacity’ were felt across all organisational levels regardless of hierarchal status. Finding ways of supporting staff to ‘fit in’ an ‘extra layer of work’ initially acted as a constraining factor within the landscape of organisational trauma.

The findings further suggest that ‘fear in the institution’ induced additional vulnerability amongst participants:

> *Anita: There's a sense of safety in knowing how things are going to be dealt with and how things will be approached. At the moment, things are out of the staff’s control.*
>
> *What I’m seeing and hearing is that this is really unsettling for staff, and I’m not sure that they feel safe within this system.*

Oftentimes participants referenced system level precarity as threatening their ‘safety’. When things were ‘out of the staff’s control’ they were ‘unsettled’. With

precarity around financial stability, readjustments of job roles and redundancies across both organisations, perceived vulnerability frequently comes through. Participants perceived their position within the organisations as vulnerable in these instances and therefore were more resistant to change as a result. ‘Fear of failure’ can be a ‘primary obstacle’ preventing engagement in ‘successful’ learning (Elliott and Dingwall, 2017, p.74). The findings suggest that a ‘fear of failure’ was felt across participants when they felt their safety ‘within this system’ was threatened.

Learning through external challenges and changes

Whilst the findings align with research through depicting the impacts of vicarious trauma and organisational trauma on learning and change, these findings expand existing research through suggesting that a trauma-informed approach to organisational learning could provide the enabling organisational level conditions to propel learning and change *through* challenges and precarities. At Fernville, relational approaches to leadership combined with collaborative involvement of staff led to increased empathy for staff:

> *Taylor: We need to be listening to what they're asking for; they're the ones actually working with the young people.*

From here, opportunities for discussions around trauma-informed approaches increased. The findings suggest that creating time and space for reflection on current challenges and potential strategic directions was a trauma-informed strategy itself, promoting open communication around the vulnerabilities of learning and change. Trauma-experienced young people typically experience

‘voicelessness’ (e.g. Avery et al., 2021, p.13). Practices that ‘give voice’ can enhance learning environments through reducing triggers and supporting relationships (p.13). The findings suggest that organisational level opportunities that ‘gave voice’ to staff helped mitigate some potential impacts of organisational trauma, promoting a generative learning environment.

Similarly at Riverford, all-staff communications increasingly deployed trauma-informed approaches in practice. Staff were encouraged to take time to reflect individually and collectively; the need to rest and recharge was acknowledged; personal examples were shared; personal targets were shared; challenges were acknowledged. Language around support, collaboration, openness, understanding, vulnerability, reflection became increasingly frequent. This helped reinforce development of a ‘secure base’ for participants, emphasising the message: ‘we value you’; ‘we prioritise your safety’; ‘we care for you’; ‘we hold you in mind’ (Treisman, 2021). Through doing so, these meetings became increasingly reflective of a *culture* that was trauma-informed (e.g. Watson et al., 2024).

Within both cases the findings depict correlation between practices promoting safety and the development of an organisational culture of learning. At Riverford, William dismissed the initial proposal for learning and change around trauma-informed approaches due to a perception that contextual factors meant learning needed to be ‘put on hold’. Anita and Louisa refuted this:

> *Anita: We need this stuff more now than ever. So much change is brewing. What we really really need exactly now is a clear plan in place for embedding a culture that is trauma-informed. To support staff. To support us.*

Louisa: It's very short-sighted that it's being dismissed because of the changes when we need it because of the changes.

The findings align with Anita and Louisa's arguments, suggesting that organisational learning around trauma began to mitigate impacts of challenges and changes. This suggests that the processes of learning around trauma could assist the development of organisational practices that could in turn assist with adapting to future precarity. This suggests that a trauma-informed approach to organisational learning could act as a protective factor, through a longer-term approach to navigating challenge and change (e.g. Greany et al., 2024a; Horck, 2024).

Anita argued*:* 'we need to really get a better understanding of where we are right now in this moment'. This depicts a conceptualisation that understanding their current context was a vital first step, before any significant decision-making. When viewed in conjunction, these findings suggest that a trauma-informed approach to organisational level learning and change requires a balance between *zooming in* and *zooming out*. It is important to zoom out; to be aware of the external environment and gain a 'range of stakeholder views' (e.g. Avery et al., 2021, p.14) to better understand the impact of external contexts on internal functioning. Simultaneously, it is important to zoom in too; to interrogate the internal factors, e.g. conceptions of the internal space (e.g. Massey, 2005), to understand where changes may be necessary to ensure there is the required 'stability' (Dominguez et al., 2015, p.413) for staff to view the organisation as a 'secure base' (Treisman, 2018). The findings suggest that doing so could mitigate organisational trauma whilst simultaneously fostering an open, generative learning environment.

6.5.2 Collective conceptualisations of success

The findings from both cases shed light into the ways in which conceptulisations of success at both individual, collective, and wider organisational levels impacted learning and change. Initially, mixed preconceptions around trauma-informed approaches and varied degrees of 'buy-in' to such approaches caused tensions which constrained learning and change. In expansion to existing research, the findings frequently depicted that the language and terminology associated with trauma-informed practices at wider organisational level contributed to these tensions. However, the findings importantly highlighted that organisational level conditions that contributed to the development of a collective identity, such as ways to work both through and with these tensions that promote trauma-informed, collective and ongoing learning itself as the marker for 'success', ultimately provided mitigation to these initial constraints. These findings expand existing research through suggesting that a collective conceptulisation of success as a trauma-informed approach to learning itself ultimately enabled the learning of trauma-informed approaches across the wider organisation.

Preconceptions and tensions

Arguments that collective 'buy-in' is needed for change to be 'successfully' realised in practice runs through both theoretical fields alike (Avery et al., 2021; Briggs, 2007; Pathak, 2010). Whilst the findings depict the initial impact on learning and change when collective 'buy-in' is absent, the findings contradict

existing research somewhat, through exemplifying the progression of learning and change *despite* tensions within it. Oftentimes, participants raised concerns around inconsistencies of the application of trauma-informed language. However, the findings also suggest how developing a shared language promoted feelings of collective identity which mitigated the impact of mixed ‘buy-in’. This raises questions around the positioning of the concept of ‘buy-in’ within both theoretical fields, suggesting instead the development of a collective learning identity could be beneficial.

Initially, the findings depicted the impact on learning and change when collective ‘buy-in’ to trauma-informed approaches was absent (Avery et al., 2021; Briggs, 2007; Pathak, 2010), however the findings show this through how individuals in different hierarchal positions *assumed* a lack of buy-in from other organisational levels. For example, some participants in leadership positions assumed a lack of buy-in from the wider staff body: ‘We’ve also got long-standing staff that absolutely don’t buy into it’. Other times, leadership assumed a lack of buy-in from trustees, expressing concerns it would be ‘dismissed’. Similarly, oftentimes the wider staff body assumed a lack of buy-in from leadership teams: ‘Now they’re going to move onto the next thing. Will we ever talk about this stuff again?’. Concurrently, the same participants questioning a lack of buy in sometimes stated the opposite; that there *was* collective buy in: ‘I’m confident that they all buy into trauma-informed practice’. Differences in conceptualisations of others buy-in oftentimes prevented learning and change across both cases. Either fear of being met with resistance or a perception there was no need for learning impacted motivation and increased resistance to implement learning strategies.

Regardless of the status of individual actual or assumed buy-in, however, the findings suggest a *collective* conceptualisation that universal buy-in to trauma-informed approaches was necessary before learning could begin:

> *William: People must buy into the destination. If they don't buy into it, nothing's going to change. If we're doing it because we have to - it's not going to last.*

These concerns align with existing research which suggests that the values of key actor's shape 'ways of thinking, what knowledge is worthwhile - and how knowledge will be used' (Oh, 2020, p.1), and that the broadness and stability of values within an organisation can make them an important predictor of behaviours at different levels throughout the organisation (Greany, 2024; Arieli et al., 2020). Through this lens, if key actors do not 'believe in' values behind trauma-informed approaches then learning would be constrained. Likewise, in their study of professional development implementation, L'Estrange & Bentley (2025) found that 'buy-in' was the most significant factor in the application of learning around trauma-informed approaches into practice, again aligning with these findings.

Not previously depicted through existing research, however, is how participants in this study referenced concerns around the language of trauma-informed approaches. Language choices were frequently questioned, often causing negative responses. There was frequent shared concern around how the 'label' of trauma-informed was used. Many argued trauma-informed practice is merely a 'buzzword':

William: These things are a bit jargon. 'nurturing'; 'trauma-informed'. I see them as lazy terms. We all use terms like that because they're handy little words to fill the space where we can't really explain what we really want to say.

It's quite pejorative, using the term 'trauma'. But what does it mean? I don't know. It seems like a lazy term. They want the culture to be 'trauma-informed'. It's a lazy term; I just ignore that jargon mostly. They're wasting their energy on silly buzz words.

Different conceptualisations of definitions of terms associated with trauma-informed approaches raised tensions, too:

Beth: I haven't been through a trauma though. I'm not a student. I don't need to improve my behaviour.

Conceptualisations of both the definitions of terms themselves and the ways they are used initially constrained learning, prompting resistance and tension between participants and oftentimes preventing learning initiatives to be realised in practice.

Developing a collective approach

However, both cases suggest these barriers can be broken down through a collective approach to learning; a focus on the process of learning itself. Across both cases, there was a commitment from those leading the initiative – i.e. Jane as director; Anita as headteacher, to persevere with learning and change despite the wider inconsistencies and misconceptions. Furthermore, Jane and Anita are both *encouraged* by these misconceptions. Anita argued:

I think it's interesting actually; people's mixed definitions of what it might mean and look like in practice for an entire organisational culture to be

> *trauma-informed. It's all different. There's a lot of inconsistency. A lot of misconceptions.*

Anita saw these ‘mixed definitions’ as ‘interesting’, unperturbed by the resistance and tension they raised. Much research expresses that leadership behaviours are vital to realising organisational learning in practice (e.g. Mallen-Broch et al., 2014; Weckowska, 2014; Heyden et al., 2017; Trevor, 2019). A ‘dominant power group’ within an organisation has major influence over organisational culture (Pathak, 2010, 2.3). If organisational culture shapes assumptions about ‘ways of thinking, what knowledge is worthwhile - and how knowledge will be used’ (Oh, 2020, p.1), then the ‘dominant power group’ can enable members to ‘focus collective effort in one direction’, thus ‘promoting learning activities’ (Oh, 2020, p.2; p.11).

From a position of curiosity, Jane and Anita began to implement a more trauma-informed approach to learning. They worked on cultivating an environment that conveyed acknowledgement, support and trust (Francis et al., 2022); they recognised and responded to different positions (Jennings, 2009). Within this framework, conversations around language use and buy-in were shared more exploratively:

> *Ivan: Would we just be looking good on paper, but not actually doing the right things? That's the risk.*

Through exploratory conversations different perspectives were explored and this raised questions around how languages were used at an organisational level: what language is used, and what these choices convey.

From here, conversations shifted away from fixed positions of ‘buy-in’. An open exploration of what it might look like at a collective organisational level was explored:

> *Gabriel: What it isn't, is it isn't pastries on a Friday morning. That’s lovely, but it's not what we’re talking about here. It's talking deeply and openly about how interactions and responses are making you feel, and we don't do that yet.*

This was not a linear development; rather, shared understandings and misconceptions and inconsistencies were embedded alongside each other throughout, with the same participants contributing both perspectives simultaneously.

The findings depict how conversations held through a ‘spirit of enquiry’ (Avery et al., 2021, p.12), encouraged sharing, listening and problem-solving. Questioning and reflecting enabled concepts like ‘buy-in’ and ‘buzzwords’ to be explored in a safe, ‘person-centered nature’ way (Sheffield and Morgan, 2017, p.50), aligning with the ‘unique differences position’: ‘while all learners are in once sense the same, they are also different’ (Lewis and Norwich, 2011, p.4). Through collectively reflecting on language uses, participants demonstrated ‘the pedagogy of organisational learning’ (Boreham and Morgan, 2004, p.322).

Both cases saw correlation between the increase of reflective conversations and a decrease in resistance to learning and change based on assumed ‘buy-in’ or perceptions of language uses. At Riverford, by the end of fieldwork one participant argued: ‘most’ staff now ‘really want to learn more about it all’. If key actor’s ways of thinking shape what learning is seen as valuable, perhaps the beliefs of ‘most’

will overtime out way the few. Nonetheless, the findings suggest that a trauma-informed approach to learning itself here enabled a generative learning environment.

At Fernville, participants often expressed concern that different conceptualisations of 'success' would be a barrier towards realising trauma-informed approaches into practices:

> *Mo: What I'm worried about, though, is that Pete sees this as something that we've completed now. Tick; done. - Now they're going to move onto the next thing. Will we ever talk about this stuff again? I really don't know.*

Interestingly, this highlights 'talking' itself as the *process* of learning and change desired by participants. This exemplifies how conceptualisations of 'success' come through the findings, oftentimes suggesting 'success' as development of a trauma-informed approach to the learning process itself. Exemplified through the findings is how this enabled the collective problem solving, producing and transferring knowledge through different actors through an exploration and interrogation of different perspectives and angles that much research stipulates as essential for organisational learning (e.g. Lawler and Sillitoe, 2013; Horck, 2024).

This demonstrated a trauma-informed approach to learning itself, which in turn promoted a generative learning environment. Developing shared language took time. Exploring disagreements, misunderstandings, tensions, through reflective conversations in emotionally safe environments helped develop a 'spirit of enquiry' (Avery et al., 2021, p.12). This enabled a 'person-centered' (Sheffield and Morgan, 2017, p.50) approach to learning, where different perspectives and

experiences were acknowledged and explored, thus engaging in the ‘pedagogy of organisational learning’ (Boreham and Morgan, 2004, p.322).

These findings suggest that developing shared language around approaches to understanding, developing and sharing learning concepts promoted a collective identity which mitigated the impact of mixed ‘buy-in’. This raises questions around the positioning of ‘buy-in’ within both theoretical fields, highlighting instead the impact of collective identity for developing a trauma-informed organisational culture.

6.5.3 Organisational accountability measures

Much research into trauma-informed educational approaches highlights the necessity of accountability for learning and change, however this is oftentimes explored from an individual values perspective; i.e. the role of leadership within this (e.g. Mallen-Broch et al., 2014; Pathak, 2010). Whilst this study did highlight the role of leadership within this, this study simultaneously drew attention to the role of organisational level accountability within this. In line with existing research, the study found a relationship between the lack of accountability measures at wider organisational level and felt impacts on participants job satisfaction and overall wellbeing (e.g. Smith and Holloway, 2020; Thomson et al., 2022; Skinner et al., 2021). Whilst Greany (2024) found that values-based choices are sometimes compromised through the need to respond to accountability measures, the findings from this study additionally highlighted that a lack of consistency, visibility, and collective measures for accountability could constrain learning and change. These findings highlight the impact that clear, consistent and visible

external accountability measures had on organisational level progress and shed light on the impact of the role of trust boards and governance within this process.

In line with these findings, with reflection on insights gained from impacts of the departure of key actors within Fernville in particular, the findings lead to a conceptualisation of a collective approach to organisational level accountability which considers how learning can be transferred between key actors to safeguard against the impacts of different conceptualisations of success for the sustainability of learning and change.

Consistency over time

Consistency over time is frequently discussed within existing research across both organisational change theories and research exploring the implementation of trauma-informed approaches alike. In line with existing research, the findings emphasise the importance of consistency over time for sustainability of change (e.g. Watson and Astor, 2025; Ward, 2024). Initially, the findings depict how a lack of continuity of learning and implementation approaches impacted the enactment of trauma-informed approaches (Ward, 2024). The findings highlighted that a consistent organisational level approach to learning increased the sustainability of the processes and mechanisms which propelled learning, and therefore additionally suggest that consistent application of learning processes over time themselves could better equip organisations to respond to future challenges and changes, too.

Initially, participants raised inconsistencies at organisational level as preventing the sustainability of learning: 'lack of continuity is honestly why I can't say it's successful in my view'. Many argued there was a 'real lack of consistency' from leadership teams and that this caused 'inconsistent' practices. Frequently participants wanted a more consistent approach to learning: 'what we need is ongoing, repeated, reminding and stuff; not just one session and, tick, that's done'. This aligns with existing research, suggesting that 'training is a necessary, but not sufficient, element in building a school's awareness of attachment and trauma issues': it 'provides a starting point', but 'more far-reaching changes' are needed (Harrison et al., 2020, p.17).

Whilst the findings align with this, they also shed further light onto the processes required at organisational level to encourage this consistency. At Fernville, repetition of conversations around trauma-informed approaches encouraged reflection on what 'successes' might look like for them, bringing awareness to the necessity of consistency over time: 'I'm starting to see it's a constant thing. It is never and never will be like, "right we've done trauma"'. As external and internal circumstances continued to provide different challenges and changes, this highlighted different ways that trauma-informed approaches may be utilised and brought with it a conceptualisation of learning about these approaches as a 'constant thing' rather than something to be 'done'. This echoed theories underpinning professional learning communities in schools (e.g. Lieberman, 2000; Stoll and Kools, 2017; Seashore-Lois, 2007), suggesting that a conceptualisation of 'success' as the process of ongoing, reflective, collaborative learning (Seashore-Lois, 2007, p.2) could be imperative for the implementation of a sustainable trauma-informed organisational culture.

At Riverford, Anita held a similar awareness, arguing that whilst she was 'confident that we're on the right trajectory', it was important to 'stay mindful of the fact that this isn't something that we can ever crack or solve or complete': 'This is an ongoing process that's going to require ongoing learning, ongoing adapting and reflection'. Anita demonstrated this awareness through her practices as headteacher. The findings depict that by 'relentlessly pushing the same message' Anita was consistent in her approaches. Consequently, trust in Anita developed. Through 'opening space' and encouraging vulnerability 'free of judgement', Anita encouraged staff to 'look into' their practices. This helped staff 'step back'; 'question'; 'learn'. Anita's role in learning and change was consistently highlighted; qualities such as 'collaborator' and 'co-creator' were emphasised as developing staff's trust in both her and learning and change itself. This depicts that Anita's values not only were not compromised through pressures to respond to policy, accountability or funding pressures (e.g. Greany, 2024), but through continuous interaction with the environment and participation in decision making, continued to be conducive of effective change (e.g. Mallen-Broch et al., 2014).

Research suggests that engaging with learning processes collectively can promote a culture of learning, where learning itself becomes embedded into organisational culture (e.g. Lawler and Sillitoe, 2013; Garud et al., 2011; Pathak, 2010).Through collective learning, organisations and the actors within them are more likely to engage with reflective practice, consider alternative ways of working and respond to environmental changes productively (Lawler and Sillitoe, 2013,

p.496). The findings align with this, expanding theories through depicting this focus can continue *through* challenges and suggesting that trauma-informed approaches – such as building trust, safety, and reflective collaborative practices (Roos et al., 2025; Brunzell et al., 2019), can assist with the development of an ongoing process of problem solving. This suggests that a consistent trauma-informed approach to learning at organisational level could promote a sustained culture of learning, and could assist future problem solving, too (March et al., 2022; Douglass et al., 2021; Greany et al., 2024a).

External accountability

Accountability is consistently discussed across both trauma-informed approaches in education and organisational learning theories alike. Much existing research considers internal perspectives, predominately the role of leadership within this (e.g. Mallen-Broch et al., 2014; Weckowska, 2014; Heyden et al., 2017; Trevor, 2019). Evaluations of school-based trauma and attachment training highlight the requirement of senior management commitment to 'ensure long-term sustainability' (Sebba & Dingwall, 2018: p.5). Organisational learning theories stipulate this is because a 'dominant power group' has major influence over organisational culture, which in turn impacts organisational learning (Pathak, 2010, 2.3). Whilst the findings likewise depict that leadership team's commitment and behaviours enabled and constrained learning and change at different points across both cases, the findings too contribute towards research through depicting the impact of external accountability measures on learning and change.

A key aspect found within this was the impact of trust boards and governance on learning and change. At Fernville, the absence of the board was often raised by participants as constraining learning and change, often perceiving an absence of board support. Board member Nina argued that trustees should work *with* directors here: ‘you have to ensure that support mechanisms are in place you need a way of regularly challenging it to say right ok well are these things working or not’. Learning cannot be a ‘tick-box’ exercise if it is to be embedded into organisational culture. The role of trustees is to hold organisations accountable, offering support where necessary (Charity Commission for England and Wales, 2018). The development of trauma-informed systems, like any long-term initiative, requires plans for development progress monitoring (e.g. Douglass et al., 2021; Watson et al., 2024). The findings suggest that the absence of mechanisms for challenging organisations, holding key actors accountable, and supporting where necessary placed precarity on learning and change.

At Riverford, the board were likewise initially invisible to the wider organisation. When invited to training days, their absence was felt by Anita as ‘disappointment’. She argued:

> *The board won’t think training days like this are their business – day-to-day, ground level practice – but this really is their business. It's absolutely their business. The board is so important for guiding us, holding us accountable, making sure our actual practices match what we’re claiming. They approve of the policies. They monitor our progress. They need to understand this stuff too. I’m not sure how they can do that if they don’t know us.*

Greany (2024) argues that values-based choices are sometimes compromised through the need to respond to accountability measures. The findings highlighted the complexities within the relationship between external accountability and the

employment of values-based choice and the impacts these complexities had upon learning and change.

Initially, the board perceived Anita's pursual of the learning and change agenda as more of a values-based choice: to them, it was 'Anita's agenda'; separate to the 'higher level' aspects of policy and practice they were accountable for monitoring. Under this thinking, the external accountability measures from the board threatened to compromise Anita's agenda. This left Anita feeling frustrated and unsupported by the board, frequently expressing the need for accountability measures from the board to make sure that 'actual practices match what we're claiming'. In line with research, this lack of accountability at wider organisational level began to impact participants job satisfaction and overall wellbeing through a perceived lack of support and a dwindling trust in the system (e.g. Smith and Holloway, 2020; Thomson et al., 2022; Skinner et al., 2021).

However, as organisational challenges and changes developed throughout fieldwork, the board became significantly more visible at 'ground level'. This had a reciprocal effect. As the board became more visible, trust began to build between the board and the wider staff body. However, simultaneously, day-to-day practices became more visible to the board. Anita continued to employ practices to increase organisational learning around trauma-informed approaches, and the board became increasingly involved in conversations around the agenda to implement trauma-informed approaches. Through bringing the learning and change agenda into the board, trustees developed 'at least a bit' of understanding of trauma-informed approaches within this context. Drawing attention to this area for learning

got ‘everyone talking about it’; kept it at ‘the forefront of people’s minds’; helped develop ‘shared language’. Involving the board began to develop acknowledgement and support felt organisation-wide.

When external accountability measures were directed to priorities that did not align with the learning and change agenda, this was felt as resistance and tension across the organization. However, the more those responsible for providing external accountability were involved within the learning and change agenda, the more they began to consider ways to implement external accountability measures as a collective organization to support the learning and change agenda. Trauma-informed approaches to these accountability measures – such as collaboration, support, and trust (Watson and Astor, 2025; MacLochlainn et al., 2022), promoted learning between the hierarchies and this significantly contributed to the enablement of learning and change.

In addition to this, research highlights the role of ‘supervision’ for those working with trauma-impacted clients (e.g. Shohet & Shohet, 2019). As the board’s acknowledgement of Anita’s learning and change agenda grew, they presented less resistance and therefore less tension towards Anita, instead supporting her role in wider organisational management in challenging times. Spreading accountability across external facets of an organisation through means such as boards and governance could reduce the ‘personal risk’ on the individual (Larson, 2009, p.117). With less personal risk comes a lower cost of failure, and collaborators may be less anxious when approaching problem solving (Larson, 2009, p.117). This suggests that involving governance in processes of learning

and change at organisational level could not only assist through providing external accountability but could also provide supervision for those leading through challenge and change, reducing their 'personal risk'.

The findings also suggest that wider organisational learning was enabled by engagement with the research process itself. At Fernville, longer-term engagement with the research process led to more discussions between myself as researcher and the leadership team around what a trauma-informed culture *could* look like for them. The more discussions were had, the more interactions between the leadership team began to depict a curiosity around learning. Several participants referenced engagement with the research process as a catalyst for conversations: 'because we've had you here talking about this stuff'.

This finding was similarly conveyed at Riverford. Anita argued:

> *Through having you here with this focus, it's really helped us to keep it at the forefront of people's minds. Everything from mentioning it in an email, having you present at briefings, our SLT focus group, interviewing staff. It's just really getting everyone talking about it and thinking about it.*

This was echoed across interviews, too:

> *Levi: That's something that I really hadn't thought about deeply before we had that space in that meeting.*

Engaging in the research process provided 'space' for participants to think 'deeply' about their practices. The content of the session, the questions raised and conversations sparked helped them to 'question' practices in ways they 'hadn't thought about before'. A 'shared language' was developing because of this

engagement: ‘I don’t know if we would have got everyone – from the board to the support staff, to that point, without this focus’. This suggests that through the research process a shared understanding of trauma-informed language was developed throughout different organisational levels; the ongoing focus enabled learning. Anita felt if she was ‘pushing this agenda’ on her own ‘it would have been lower down the priority list’, but that research engagement ‘helped to elevate the conversations’.

The external presence of a researcher combined with commitment to engage in the research process itself not only helped maintain momentum of conversations, but also assisted participants reflections of their practices. An evaluation of the impacts of an attachment and trauma training programme in Leicestershire found that ‘the wider justification of attachment theory as support and preparation for lifeskills behind school was put into question against the messy realities of life outside school’ (Sebba and Fancourt, 2018: p.19). The findings suggest that the external perspective from engagement in the research process prompted reflections on how the school itself interacted with external environments. This suggests several benefits to the involvement of an external presence for both accountability to learning and change and for the ways it draws attention to ‘life outside school’ too.

A collective approach

In addition, through reflecting on unique insights gained from the departure of key actors within Fernville in particular, the findings suggest for a collective approach

to accountability at organisational level. The findings suggest that a collective approach to accountability encouraged and promoted the transferal of learning between key actors which could safeguard against potential impacts of mixed conceptualisations of success as well as encouraging the sustainability of learning and change at an organisational level.

At Fernville, Jane and Jean reflected on what might happen if key staff involved in learning and change left the organisation:

> *Jean: The issue is that if we leave, is it guaranteed that staff will pick up those things and take them forward?*
>
> *Jane: Exactly. How do we make sure that we're following through, so that these things really stick over time?*

Continuation of learning and change when key staff leave is not 'guaranteed'. The findings highlight the realisation of this with Jane's later departure. The findings suggest that responsibility was unbalanced, falling to those leading the initiative. Without explicit guidelines for collective responsibility, learning was less sustainable.

Research suggests that organisations seek to establish common membership; to 'draw lines between those inside and outside the organisation' (Igbokwe et al., 2021, p.678). Consequently, organisations – explicitly or implicitly – set out 'guidelines for admission' (p.678), and therefore employees will often be selected for holding values aligned with existing organisational cultures. Sharman et al. (2020) further argue that new employees will often adopt the dominant behaviours of others (p.17) and therefore reinforce existing cultures, too. This increases the

precarity of learning and changes when key actors leave through suggesting that if learning is not embedded into organisational culture, then the existing culture would likely reinforce itself (Peter & Wilderom, 2004).

Opposingly, at Riverford conversations around how to embed learning into practice in sustainable ways became increasingly frequent. This was predominately seen through key actors discussing and exploring ways to 'establish expertise' and develop a 'team of people' to 'promote' the learning agenda:

> *Anita: We need to establish expertise within the organisation on every level. I think a team of people that are keen to promote this stuff would help.*
>
> *Connie: It could be really empowering for staff to see themselves as experts in this.*
>
> *Miguel: Also, it could be really empowering for the organisation itself, too.*

....

> *Connie: I guess, develop it as a team, train staff in it, and then train staff to deliver the training?*
>
> *Miguel: It could be really powerful for staff to deliver training to various stakeholders. It could help develop shared language around the approaches we use and why we use them.*
>
> *Connie: And maybe if staff are trained in these ways, these languages and practices would be more likely to become even more part of their day-today practices. They'd be more confident in this stuff.*

This demonstrates double-loop learning: an interactive problem-solving process whereby all involved are actively engaged in a process of reflection on the underlying patterns of thinking or behaviour: learning challenges are expected and encouraged, and reflections on organisational assumptions and norms are

encouraged (Lawler and Sillitoe, 2013; Garud et al., 2011; Pathak, 2010). Within this framework, organisational actors become ‘active participants’ (McIntosh, 2010, p.6) in collaborative learning.

Research suggests numerous benefits from collaborative learning at both Individual and collective levels (Larson, 2009, p.117). Collaborative learning can reduce ‘group member’s cognitive demand’ (p.120), and ‘with less personal risk and a lower cost of failure, collaborators might be less anxious about solving a problem’ (122). This could remove ‘fear of failure’ (Elliott & Dingwall, 2017) as a barrier to learning. Furthermore, supportive group environments ‘promote reciprocal scaffolding’ (Larson, 2009, p.122), fostering ‘collective intelligence’: ‘the ability to pool knowledge and compare notes with others toward a common goal’ (Livingstone, 2008, p.8). Collaborative learning therefore ‘provides opportunities for radically different solutions to problems’ (Pathak, 2010, 10.1.1) rather than problem-solving ‘determined by predefined templates’ (Garud et al., 2011, p.588). This can promote a sustainable culture of learning.

The findings demonstrate this in practice. Over time, the addition of actions cultivating a culture of learning, for example, encouraging the circulation, distribution, and generation of knowledge at individual, collective and organisational level, promoted a generative learning environment. Over time this began to seep through different levels of practice. Language became more embedded in key documentations; shared language around trauma-informed practice was beginning to be seen across different hierarchies; practices

increasingly demonstrated a trauma-informed approach in action. This suggests a conceptulisation of ‘success’ as through the learning itself.

These findings question Williams’ initial argument that culture change requires ‘a very clear destination’ with ‘clear steps to get there’. Instead, Anita argued that change happens gradually, overtime, through ‘little conversations’:

> *Having little conversations and getting a little bit more time and space to talk about these things. And then the seeds; they grow and grow, and eventually, as an organisation, I'm sure we'll see the rewards.*

The findings highlight the precarity of learning sitting at individual level alone. Learning should be transferred and circulated to be embedded into organisational culture in ways sustainable throughout future precarity (e.g. Horck, 2024). These findings expand existing research through suggesting that a trauma-informed approach to learning – i.e. encouraging collaborative learning through acknowledgement, trust, and safety, increased opportunities for ‘little conversations’, ‘a little bit more time and space to talk’, and it is through this that ‘seeds’ of learning can ‘grow’.

These findings suggest that a collective, trauma-informed approach to accountability at organisational level can promote the transferal of learning between key actors, which can in turn safeguard against impacts of different conceptualisations of success within the learning and change agendas, promoting the sustainability of learning and change.

6.6 Conclusion

Through contextualising the findings alongside existing research into both trauma-informed approaches in education and organisational learning and change, this chapter has provided a comprehensive examination of the research questions under study. This highlights where this research affirms, challenges and extends existing theories, and provides empirical evidence to support the development of a conceptualisation of a trauma-informed approach to organisational learning itself.

This chapter examined the conditions within each organisation that both enabled and constrained learning and change towards embedding trauma-informed approaches into organisational practices. At an individual and relational level, the findings suggest that encouraging and holding vulnerability through trusting relationships and using tensions, resistance and misunderstandings as learning opportunities encouraged the production and transferal of learning. At an internal system level, the findings suggest for the importance of security for organisational members through clarity of roles and responsibilities, the utilisation of diverse experiences, transparency of decision-making processes and organisational accountability measures for enabling and sustaining learning and change practices. Furthermore, ways to utilise policies, spaces and places as sites for the production and transferal of learning are suggested. The findings also suggest that wider organisational level factors such as external challenges and changes can constrain learning and change and suggest that factors enhancing both wider organisational accountability and the development of a collective identity could mitigate this somewhat. The findings from both cases further suggest that key

stakeholder's conceptualisations of success in relation to learning and change agendas can impact the sustainability of learning and change.

The findings from this study deepen and expand previous understanding of the enabling and constraining factors impacting organisational learning and change and further suggest that approaches to learning and change at an organisational that align with a trauma-informed approach to learning can contribute to the development of a facilitative learning environment. This could promote development of a trauma-informed organisational culture. This finding lends itself to the development of a new framework for organisational learning and change not yet considered across either existing theoretical field.

Through interrogation of the findings of this study in light of existing research across both theoretical fields, this research suggests that a trauma-informed approach to learning and change itself could not only have significant practical implications for organisations seeking to learn and embed trauma-informed approaches into practices at a cultural level, but sheds new light on both existing theoretical fields too. Therefore, the findings are not only relevant at a case-by-case level, but implications for policy, practice and theory extend beyond the boundaries of this study, too.

The conceptualisation of this framework for organisational learning and change and the key components within this framework arising from an interrogation of the findings of this study are now presented within chapter seven.

Chapter Seven: A Framework for Change

7.1 Introduction

The findings from this study suggest that organisational structures and processes aligned with a trauma-informed approach to learning contributed to the development of a trauma-informed culture at individual, system, and wider organisational level. When consistent over time, the employment of trauma-informed approaches to learning manifested through different levels of the organisations as an increase in confidence, a readiness to learn, and resilience to adapting to further challenges and changes. The findings suggest that these changes overtime resulted in an increased use of trauma-informed approaches themselves, suggesting that a trauma-informed approach to learning and change itself promoted learning and change towards a trauma-informed culture. The findings therefore suggest that a trauma-informed approach to learning and change can develop a facilitative learning environment, which could promote more sustainable change over time. This could not only be practically applicable for organisations seeking culture change, but additionally sheds new light into existing research across both theoretical fields considered. The findings are therefore not only relevant at a case-by-case level, but their implications for policy, practice and theory extend beyond the boundaries of this study.

The findings of this study lead to a conceptualisation of a new framework for organisational learning and change: a framework based around trauma-informed approaches to learning. Key components of this framework arising from the findings in consideration of existing research are now discussed; the implications for policy and practice highlighted.

7.2 A trauma-informed approach to organisational learning and change

Much existing research argues for organisational wide training on trauma and its impacts for schools to better support young people who are trauma-experienced in their learning and development (e.g. Lewis et al., 2023; Avery et al., 2021; Harrison et al., 2020). However, there is shared consensus that training, whilst necessary, is not sufficient in building organisational level change: it 'provides a starting point', but 'more far-reaching changes' are needed (Harrison et al., 2020, p.15).

Organisational change theories suggest that a culture that facilitates organisational learning is important for sustainable change. Organisational change is not an 'isolated occurrence' (Lawler and Sillitoe, 2013, p.496) and requires a constant process of reflection and adaption to meet changing needs of the environments. However, the lack of research into organisational culture change, alongside the challenge that cases are often 'entirely unique' (Johansson and Heide, 2008, p.298), means that understanding of how culture change happens is limited (e.g. Peter & Wilderom, 2004, p.577).

Whilst the findings from this study align with existing research into trauma-informed approaches in education through exemplifying that 'one-off training' oftentimes led to increased tensions, misunderstandings and resistance between participants. When viewed in conjunction with organisational learning and change theories the findings extend both fields of understanding, ultimately suggest that a trauma-informed approach to learning and change *itself* promoted learning and change around trauma-informed approaches.

Organisational learning facilitates organisational change (e.g. Lawler and Sillitoe, 2013; Garud et al., 2011; Pathak, 2010). This study aligns with this theory, depicting how 'learning activities' promoting reflection on the learning process itself (Garud et al., 2011; Lawler and Sillitoe, 2013) assisted organisational members to 'focus collective effort in one direction' (Oh, 2020, p.2; p.11), promoting more sustainable organisational learning.

However, the findings challenge existing research through the depiction of the impacts to organisational learning when faced with challenges and changes that were traumatising at an organisational level (e.g. Treisman, 2021). Organisational change can be initiated by 'significant jolts' in the environment – for example the Covid-19 pandemic – requiring adaptation (Spicer, 2020, p.1737). However, the findings depict how these 'jolts' and rapidly changing adaptations can threaten organisation members' 'inherent need for safety, belonging and dignity' (Haines, 2019, p.74). When these factors were under threat, participants across both cases depicted feelings of 'burn-out', often describing their roles as 'relentless'; 'exhausting'.

Furthermore, the ‘inconsistencies’ to practice resulting from ‘too much change all at once’ caused participants to feel unsupported or perceive their job itself as under threat. This caused tension between the hierarchies and participants often became defensive of their practices or resistant to change. Van der Kolk (2002) argues:

> *People tend to project internal states of disorganization or fear onto the outside in order to defend themselves and regain a sense of power and control. People are programmed to control and inhibit when they feel out of control. (pp. 20-21)*

Oftentimes, this manifested within each case as participants quick to pass blame and criticism when they felt vulnerable. Symptoms of vicarious trauma were observed (e.g. Treisman, 2018), suggesting that these changes to practice posing threat to job safety through role changes, restructurings and financial challenges could have been causing organisational trauma (e.g. Treisman, 2021).

Access to learning is oftentimes cited as a vital contributor to mitigating the impacts of childhood trauma and adversity, yet trauma-experience can impair access to learning itself (e.g. Van der Kolk, 2015; De Thierry, 2015; Lewis et al., 2023; Avery et al., 2021). The findings interestingly depict this cycle within the staff across the organisations, as they navigated learning and change within traumatised systems.

Concurrently, the findings suggest that utilising a trauma-informed lens to learning at individual, system, and wider organisational levels can help develop a generative learning environment conducive to learning and change. A trauma-

informed approach to learning could develop tools for learning, and when these tools are embedded into the foundations of organisational culture, then these could be transferrable regardless of the challenge presented. This suggests that when faced with challenges and changes in the future, this could help mitigate against organisational trauma. Instead, challenges become a learning opportunity, with trauma-informed approaches promoting resilience to the impacts of these challenges and changes.

The findings depict that embracing vulnerabilities, transparency, relational networks, adaptability, and language choices were core factors enabling a trauma-informed approach to learning and change at individual, relational, internal, and wider organisational levels. These factors form a conceptualisation of a trauma-informed approach to organisational learning and change; an extension to existing theories that uncovers additional conditions not yet accounted for within existing models of either trauma-informed educational approaches or organisational learning and change theories alike.

7.2.1 Vulnerability

Highlighted within the findings is the importance of embracing and creating space for organisational vulnerability as the first step to enabling a trauma-reducing (Petrone and Stanton 2021) approach to organisational change.

Learning itself inherently requires vulnerability. When faced with unknown concepts, fear of failure can become heightened due to perceptions of personal

risk involved (e.g. Elliott and Dingwall, 2017). When attempting organisational level change, this can become heightened further still, as risk taking and 'risk acceptance' are often highlighted as characteristics conducive of effective change (Mallen-Broch et al., 2014). Oftentimes, participants referenced the precarity of learning and change as a threat to their 'safety' within the system (Haines, 2019, p.74). When things were 'out of the staff's control', they felt 'unsettled'. Participants often felt a 'fear of failure' when faced with additional learning and change. However, the findings suggest that when these vulnerabilities were met with a trauma-informed lens, through acknowledgement, support, and trust (e.g. Francis et al., 2022), this humility created a facilitatory environment that enabled open dialogue and reflection. When vulnerabilities were avoided or seen as failure this inhibited learning and change. However, when vulnerabilities were embraced, instead seen as opportunities for learning, this enhanced learning.

The findings suggest that vulnerability is a necessary requisite for organisational learning and change. However, the findings highlight the need for systems in place to hold this vulnerability, in ways that mitigate the potential traumatising impact of exposing vulnerabilities. The findings from Fernville depict the constraining impact the absence of systems to support this vulnerability can have, as the exposure of organisational vulnerability without supporting structure in place resulted in further tensions and ultimately prevented learning from moving forward. These vulnerabilities enhanced feelings of 'disorganisation or fear' and saw participants instead projecting these states as controlling or inhibiting behaviours (Van der Kolk, 2002, pp.20-21).

Conversely, the findings from Riverford depict leadership teams that were supported through 'supervision' (Shohet and Shohet, 2019), despite this supervision being either informal or as part of the research engagement. With this additional support, leadership teams became less fearful of the process of exposing vulnerabilities, instead seeking opportunities to expose 'weaknesses' so to challenge and change them. As leadership teams commitment and behaviours are essential to realising organisational learning and achieving policy goals (e.g. Mallen-Broch et al., 2014; Weckowska, 2014; Heyden et al., 2017; Trevor, 2019), this suggests that ways of supporting the required processes of vulnerability exposure, through means such as supervision, are crucial considerations for learning and change around trauma-informed approaches to be realised in practice in sustainable ways.

7.2.2 Visibility of decision-making processes

A further key finding from this study was that a trauma-informed approach to the visibility of decision-making and accountability processes at interpersonal, system and wider organisational level could enable learning and change. Transparency and accountability are consistently highlighted throughout existing research as necessary for organisational learning and change; learning objectives should be agreed upon and shared between all employees (e.g. Briggs, 2007; Pathak, 2010; Erkelens et al., 2015). Whilst the findings from this study confirms the benefits of this approach, the findings expand these theories through highlighting that a trauma-informed approach to transparency and accountability can promote organisational learning.

Whilst much research argues for the necessity of ‘buy-in’ from organisational members for learning and change to be realised in practice (e.g. Briggs, 2007; Lewis et al., 2023), this study conversely suggests that transparency of decision-making processes could mitigate the impact of a wider lack of buy-in. The findings suggest that visibility of decision-making processes promotes trust between the hierarchies. Trusting relationships are central to a trauma-informed approach to learning (e.g. Van der Kolk, 2015; de Thierry, 2015). Trauma theories suggest this is in part due to our need for organisation, power and control (Van der Kolk, 2002, pp.20-21). In line with a trauma-informed approach, the findings depict that transparency in decision-making processes promoted a sense of organisation and control amongst participants. In turn, less defensive, controlling or inhibiting behaviours were observed. The findings suggest that trust between the hierarchies was more impactful as an enabling factor for learning and change than ‘buy-in’ itself, as trusting relationships built through transparency encouraged ‘safety’ (Haines, 2019, p.74) which in turn enabled ‘readiness’ for learning and change (Treisman, 2021).

Additionally, the findings suggest that visibility of organisational processes promoted accountability at individual, interpersonal, system and organisational wide levels in ways that align with trauma-informed approaches. An ethos which is built upon removing barriers to participations (e.g. Grimes and Ekins, 2009, p.12) ensures that every learner is given voice (e.g. Avery et al., 2021, p.13), thus aligning with trauma theories that stipulate the inherent need for ‘safety, belonging and dignity’ (Haines, 2019, p.74). Within this, power relations can be

reconstructed and shared meaning making replaces transactional learning (e.g. Boreham and Morgan, 2004, p.315; Lawler and Sillitoe, 2013). The findings suggest that transparency promoted this process of learning and discovery, which in turn assisted the spreading of accountability: responsibility for learning no longer sat with the individual, and debates around responsibility ('that's not my role though') reduced under this framework. As learning and change was now a collective responsibility, accountability was spread throughout the actors within the organisation. This reduced the 'fear of failure' (Elliott and Dingwall, 2017), as organisational practice and policy challenges were exposed as opposed to personal agendas. Sharing accountability across an extended team as opposed to an individual may also promote a more sustainable culture of learning, as evidenced by the ways in which learning priorities shifted at Fernville when Jane was no longer in her role of Director. This suggests that a trauma-informed approach to accountability – i.e. through promoting visibility and transparency, safety, and belonging within the decision-making processes, promotes learning and change around trauma-informed approaches themselves.

Alongside this, the findings also depict the impact that external accountability had on learning and change at organisational level. Most existing research views accountability from an internal perspective; predominately the role of leadership within this (e.g. Mallen-Broch et al., 2014; Weckowska, 2014; Heyden et al., 2017; Trevor, 2019; Sebba & Dingwall, 2018). However, the findings suggest that, as risk taking and risk acceptance are managerial characteristics conducive of effective change (Mallen-Broch et al., 2014), this can put leadership in a particularly vulnerable position. Whilst development of trauma-informed systems,

like any long-term initiative, requires plans for development and ways to identify and monitor progress (e.g. Jennings, 2009, p.112), the findings suggest this can put pressure on those leading learning and change. The findings suggest that spreading accountability across external facets of an organisation through means such as trust boards and governance could reduce the ‘personal risk’ on the individual (e.g. Larson, 2009, p.117). Alongside this, the findings highlight the benefits of supervision (e.g. Shohet & Shohet, 2019) for those responsible for the ‘challenge’ of making ‘better forward-looking decisions’ (Trevor, 2019, p.4). A trauma-informed system would be based on acknowledgement, support and trust at an organisational level (e.g. Francis et al., 2022). The findings depict that when accountability is viewed through this trauma-informed lens too, this can positively impact learning and change. How issues of transparency and accountability are deployed at a system and organisational level are therefore important to consider through a trauma-informed lens to promote a culture of learning.

7.2.3 Relational networks

Organisational learning theories stipulate that ‘the pedagogy of organisational learning’ (Boreham and Morgan, 2004, p.322) occurs when dialogue between actors is fostered through collaborative practices: embedded ‘relational practices’ stipulate effective learning dialogues (p.314).

From a trauma theory perspective, our physical environment can impact our experiences as well as our overall wellbeing (e.g. Treisman, 2021; Jennings, 2009). Some researchers suggest this is in part due to the nature of *space* itself

as an inter-relational construct (e.g. Massey, 2005). Space is arguably socially produced (Low, 2017), co-constructed by those within the space (Massey, 2005) because of the emotions at play within the actors within it (Low, 2017, p.151). The findings depict that when learning and change was not approached from a trauma-informed lens, this caused frictions between the hierarchies. The findings depict a cyclical relationship between the *emotions* present in organisational spaces, and the resulting impact the environment of these spaces had on the experiences and wellbeing of those within them.

Conversely, however, the findings suggest that when these spaces are approached from a trauma-informed lens – i.e. prioritse and foster the 'safety, dignity and belonging' (Haines, 2019, p.74) of those within it, this can assist in the development of strong relational networks that in turn not only enable learning and change but also help to mitigate impacts of organisational trauma (Treisman, 2021).

In line with a trauma-informed approach to learning, the findings suggest that when participants were met with acknowledgement, support and trust (Francis et al., 2022), they were more receptive to new ideas and initiatives. When 'given voice' (e.g. Avery et al., 2021, p.13), participants were more likely to share their concerns and ideas. Interactions became sites of shared meaning making, learning, exploration. Reflection on their experiences working in vulnerable systems with vulnerable learners became a 'spirit of enquiry' (Avery et al., 2021, p.13; Berridge et al., 2020). In these spaces, 'power relations' were 'reconstructed' (Boreham and Morgan, 2004, p.315); thus, engaging in the 'pedagogy of organisational learning' (p.322).

At Fernville, the findings depict a correlation between the increase of time and space for building relational networks and the resulting examples of trauma-informed approaches realised in practice. Staff were encouraged to take time and space to reflect individually and collectively; the need to rest and recharge was acknowledged; personal examples were shared; personal targets were shared; challenges were acknowledged; language around support, collaboration, openness, understanding, vulnerability, reflection became increasingly frequent. Through doing so, these meetings became increasingly reflective of a culture that was based on trauma-informed approaches in practice.

Similarly at Riverford, the findings depict that by ‘relentlessly pushing the same message’, Anita showed consistency in her approaches. By doing so, trust in Anita developed. Through ‘opening space’ for staff and encouraging vulnerability that was ‘free of judgement’, Anita encouraged staff to ‘look into’ their practices. Through doing this, Anita helped staff to ‘step back’; ‘question’; ‘learn’. These findings contradict existing research that argues for the need of ‘buy-in’ for trauma-informed approaches to be realised in practice (e.g. Lewis et al., 2023), instead depicting that within a strong, supportive, relational network, tensions, misunderstandings and resistance instead became opportunities for learning.

These findings also expand existing research through suggesting that the ways in which policy documents are constructed and utlised could prevent or contribute to a relational network at an organisational level. Research suggests that effective dialogue and communication between all employees is required for effective

learning and change (Boreham and Morgan, 2004; Garud et al., 2011; Mallen-Broch et al., 2014), however how policy documents themselves could contribute to this dialogue is not currently considered. The findings depicted that policy documents across both cases were viewed as static documents, existing out of necessity for external communications only; separate from the day-to-day practices of those within the organisations. Frequently raised was the need for guidance around working in trauma-informed ways for staff to ‘turn to’ if they ‘forget’. Participants often argued this could assist their confidence in their practices and further increase the sustainability of learning over time.

Towards the end of fieldwork with Riverford, the ways policy documents were used and their potential to be relational working documents was discussed. Participants argued that how language was used within these documents could either be inclusive or exclusive, with this attitude then seeping into all facets of organisational culture. These documents at the time demonstrated transactional learning; single-loop transferal of information to staff. However, using such documents more relationally across the organisation could transform these documents into a tool for transformational organisational learning, a double-loop learning process, instead (Lawler and Sillitoe, 2013; Garud et al., 2011; Pathak, 2010). Whilst not explored in more depth throughout this research, this finding prompts more systemic questions around how language in policy documents is used, how this translates into practices, and how these documents could be better utilised to contribute to a more relational approach to organisational processes and practices.

Organisational change can be a necessity when ‘significant jolts’ in the environment require organisations to adapt (Spicer, 2020, p.1737). However, organisations can face a ‘paradox of change’, also needing stability ‘to try to control uncertainty’ (Dominguez et al., 2015, p.413). At both Fernville and Riverford, the necessity of change continued throughout fieldwork, as each organisation was met with multiple ‘jolts’ which required an ongoing process of adaptation. Interestingly, whilst uncertainties could not be ‘controlled’, the findings suggest that these strong relational networks that continued to be built may have provided a sense of stability in themselves. Participants trust in these spaces as sites of ‘safety, dignity and belonging’ (Haines, 2019) increased. These reflective, relational spaces themselves provided a sense of stability and certainty: participants knew what to expect within these spaces.

When viewed in conjunction with organisational trauma theories, this suggests that the stability and certainty of the creation and use of these spaces over an extended period may act to protect and mitigate the organisation from organisational traumas when met with ‘significant jolts’ in the environment in the future. Challenges themselves cannot be predicted or prevented, however through strong relational networks they can be utilised as learning experiences and collaborative problem-solving. This finding suggests that systems for building relational networks embedded into organisational culture could provide a trauma-informed approach to organisational level learning and change that could be sustainable over time.

7.2.4 Adaptability

An organisational climate that is more equipped and ‘ready’ (e.g. Treisman, 2021) to face challenges and changes could be better equipped for learning itself. Actively seeking and uncovering issues to better understand what aspects needed addressing promoted a culture of learning within the cases. Organisational culture shapes assumptions about ‘ways of thinking’ (Oh, 2020, p.1). When a trauma-informed approach to learning is at the heart of organisational culture, this can in turn promote trauma-informed ‘ways of thinking’.

However, a ‘dominant power group’ within an organisation can have major influence over organisational culture, which can in turn impact organisational learning (Pathak, 2010, 2.3). The findings depict the ways in which conceptualisations of ‘success’ of learning and change from the ‘power groups’ within both organisations influenced this agenda. When learning was seen as something to be ‘done’; ‘completed’; ‘onto the next thing’, this prevented learning from reaching the culture of the organisation, instead creating more tensions between and within the hierarchies. However, when learning was seen as an ongoing process of discovery and trauma-informed approaches to learning itself were embraced, this supported learning. The longer-term approach to learning and change was more readily embraced when the organisations were more equipped to embrace the vulnerability required of learning and change:

> *Anita: I think we won't see the benefits for a while, but we will, over time. Because it's like a seed isn't it. It's like, by having you focus on this for a bit, even just in the background, it’s planted that seed in people's minds. And*

> *maybe they won't pay attention to it now, but it's there. And at some point, it will start to sprout and grow.*

These findings therefore suggest that a trauma-informed approach to learning and change may promote the sustainability of learning itself and thus may contribute to the development of a culture that is more equipped for learning and change.

7.2.5 Language and terminology

Whilst trauma-informed approaches to learning and change were consistently highlighted as enabling the learning and change agenda, participants raised concerns around how language and terminology was used within this framework. Existing research consistently highlights both the impacts of ‘trauma’ on learning and development (e.g. MacLochlainn et al., 2022; Eiberg, 2024; Ardino, 2020), and the potential benefits of embedding ‘trauma-informed approaches’ into educational practices (e.g. Parker et al., 2022; MacLochlainn et al., 2022). However, the categorisation of ‘trauma’ and ‘trauma-informed approaches’ and the terminology used to describe such practices frequently caused tension, resistance and misunderstandings across both cases. Whilst debates around *what it is* and *what it is not* were often sites of learning between participants, promoting collaborative reflection, simultaneously, concerns around the ways that the use of ‘trauma-informed approaches’ as ‘buzz words’ or ‘lazy terms’ used without meaning promote learning as a ‘tick-box’ exercise were frequently raised.

Alongside this, misunderstandings about what ‘trauma’ means and what ‘trauma-informed approaches’ might mean sometimes prevented any engagement at all: ‘I don’t need to know about it though I haven’t experienced a trauma’. This suggests

that whilst the findings from this study suggest that a trauma-informed approach to learning and change promoted learning and change at an organisational level, the application of terms like ‘trauma-informed approaches’ within an educational context may require reconsideration.

In this study, ‘trauma-informed approaches’ has been used to describe approaches to learning that are based on aspects raised by existing scholarly literature exploring trauma and it’s impacts, for example, ‘safety, dignity, belonging’ (e.g. Haines, 2019, p.74). However, the findings suggest that within this context, a reconsideration of the use of terminology around these approaches may be fruitful for learning and change. Participants frequently raised that language and terminology can lead to misconceptions that prevent learning and change at an organisational level:

> *Gabriel: What it isn't, is it isn't pastries on a Friday morning. That’s lovely, but it's not what we’re talking about here. It's talking deeply and openly about how interactions and responses are making you feel.*

Whilst not the primary focus of this study, the findings suggest that a deeper exploration of the use of categories and terminology around ‘trauma-informed approaches’ and the impacts that such choices have on practice would be a useful avenue for future research to consider.

7.2.6 A trauma-informed approach to organisational learning and change

This study suggests that a trauma-informed approach to organisational learning and change itself promoted learning and change in ways that may be more

sustainable over time. Trauma-informed approaches to learning and change, including transparency, fostering vulnerabilities, and relational approaches to leadership and learning began to build a culture that promoted an open, generative learning environment. When participants felt safe, secure, heard, and a sense of belonging, this promoted a collective approach to learning change; collaborative problem-solving that utilises different perspectives and experiences to generate learning at both an individual and organisational level. This trauma-informed, open, generative learning environment at a case level equipped organisational level responses to challenges and changes.

At an individual and relational level, trauma-informed approaches to learning involved embracing and utilising vulnerabilities, tensions, resistance and misunderstandings as learning opportunities, within the safety of trusting and secure relationships. At an internal system level, security, accountability, relational policies and the use of spaces and places are highlighted as trauma-informed learning approaches enabling learning and change. At a wider organisational level, the findings depict that a trauma-informed approach to learning and change considers the impacts of external challenges and changes and is mindful of triggers and symptoms of organisational trauma. Additionally, factors contributing to the development of a collective identity alongside supportive organisational accountability measures are highlighted as enabling learning and change to be realised in practice in ways that are sustainable over time.

The findings from this study not only advance the scholarly discourse across both fields of existing research through the conceptualisation of a trauma-informed

approach to organisational learning and change itself, but implications have the potential to extend beyond the isolated specifics of this study. At a practical level, this research suggests tangible real-world implications that could affect change across a diverse array of organisations; from educational organisations seeking to embed trauma-informed approaches into practices, to any organisation seeking to either promote sustainable learning and culture change or be better equipped to adapt and manage when faced with potential future challenges and changes. The findings suggest that a trauma-informed approach to organisational learning and change has the potential to positively impact at individual, organisational, and policy level. Rooted across two strands of scholarly discourse, this study advances the larger intellectual landscape, too.

7.3 Conclusion and Implications

Presented within this chapter is a conceptualisation of a trauma-informed approach to organisational learning and change: an organisational learning and change framework that sheds new light on both existing theoretical models on trauma-informed approaches and organisational learning and change theories alike. Through contextualising the findings of this study alongside existing literature around both trauma-informed approaches in education and organisational learning and change theories, in cross-examination with the research questions under study and the findings of this research, this chapter provides evidence to support the development of a conceptualisation of a trauma-informed approach to organisational learning and change.

Formed through an interrogation of the enabling and constraining conditions around embedding and sustaining an organisational culture that is trauma-informed, these findings suggest that a trauma-informed approach to organisational learning itself could create a facilitatory environment that enables open dialogue and reflection. These conditions could lead to a generative learning environment, embedded into the culture of an organisation.

The findings from this study suggest that a trauma-informed approach to learning and change itself facilitates the learning and change agenda. Within this study, this is shown through the cyclical process of learning and development of trauma-informed approaches. Enabling factors creating a system that facilitates sustainable change can be applied across different contexts and different initiatives, and therefore the findings are transferable across agendas that reach beyond a trauma-informed approach to the education and development of young people. An organisational climate that is more equipped to learn and change through tensions, misunderstandings and resistance may be more equipped to adapt to further challenges and changes stemming from internal and external contextual situations. By actively seeking and uncovering issues in ways that are safe and relational for those within the process, organisations could promote a culture that facilitates reflection which could in turn promote learning, adaptation and change.

This study suggests that a trauma-informed approach to organisational learning and change, comprising of conditions holding and creating vulnerability, visibility of decision-making processes, relational networks, adaptability, and considerations

around language and terminology, could provide insight into the current gaps in knowledge and understanding around developing and embedding trauma-informed approaches in educational organisations. Furthermore, this framework sheds new light into existing theoretical models considering the processes required for organisational change at a culture level. The findings therefore not only have significant implications for policy and practice at the organisational level but additionally offer significant contributions across two currently separate theoretical fields. Through doing so, the findings shed new light on the current gap within existing knowledge and understanding. The strengths and limitations of this study, alongside broader implications of this research at policy, practice and theoretical levels are now discussed in more depth.

Chapter Eight: Conclusion

8.1 Introduction

Motivation behind this study initially arose from my own experiences. Personal experiences sparked initial interest in trauma and the potential impacts on learning and development, and this led to deeper conceptual learning when teaching in a large diverse Secondary school with additional responsibilities for the outcomes of those considered ‘most vulnerable’: i.e. those in, or on the edge of, care. However, the more I learnt, the more I realised the *challenges* of putting this learning into practice.

Definitions of trauma and trauma-informed approaches varied widely. This led to widespread misconceptions throughout the organisation. Whilst whole-school training on trauma-informed practice was delivered, this 'learning' did not readily translate into practices at a system level. Language did not always match practices; conversations oftentimes depicted resistance to learning and change. The organisation was then hit with two-fold, widespread challenge: financial precarity led to restructuring, closely followed by the Covid-19 pandemic and its resulting impacts. This led to a system in crisis. The organisation became increasingly aware of trauma and its impacts at an organisational level, as well as for students considered most vulnerable. However, any structures in place facilitating staff learning fell by the wayside considering the additional challenges and changes at the time.

Experiencing this first hand raised questions for me around how organisations learn and embed trauma-informed approaches in ways that are sustainable over time. I was convinced for the need of a whole-system approach to learning and change, facilitated by structures and processes to support this, but did not know what these processes and mechanisms would look like in practice. Many years have now passed, yet my initial questions not only remain relevant now but the changing landscape since draws more attention to the importance and relevance of the questions under study.

At a school-level, rates of suspensions and permanent exclusions continue to increase, with a 21% and 16% annual increase respectively between the academic years of 2022/23 and 2023/2024 (Department for Education, 2025d).

Statistics still suggest that those most vulnerable to exclusion and its impacts are the nearly 400,000 CIN, and nearly 50,000 children on protection plans (Department for Education, 2024), as well as the over 1.7 million pupils in England with special educational needs (Department for Education, 2025c). Anxieties around inclusive and supportive practices within schools have heightened, particularly considering Government calls for improvement in SEND and AP provisions (Department for Education, 2023). Alongside this, there has been increased heightened climate anxiety and awareness of the potentially traumatising impacts of this felt by young people in particular (e.g. Dodds, 2021). Outside of schools, since this study began there has been increased instability and precarity within Government departments themselves, which, alongside increasing wide-spread financial anxieties (e.g. Bank of England, 2025), has resulted in a consistent underlying dialogue surrounding financial precarity. All of which takes its toll; not only on young people hearing these narratives but adults working within Government sector organisations too.

This study set out to better understand the processes and mechanisms required for an educational organisation to embed trauma-informed approaches into practices in ways that are sustainable, to better support trauma-experienced young people in their educational development.

Understanding this question was not only important at the time of its conception, but wider contextual circumstances since make understanding these processes not only an interesting scholarly exploration, but perhaps also a necessity. Calls for systemic change within the education sector echo nationally within the current

climate. To better understand these processes at individual, system and organisational levels could have implications far broader than the organisation itself.

Set against this contextual backdrop, this chapter will conclude the study by first relaying a summary of its contributions. Following this, implications for practice, policy implications, methodological implications and theoretical contributions will be considered. This chapter will then explore enabling impact considering the findings and provide recommendations for future research directions, before lastly concluding with closing remarks.

8.2 Summary of contributions

The findings from this study not only both confirm and expand existing research but also lend themselves to the conceptualisation of a new lens with which organisational learning and change could be considered.

The findings depict throughout both cases a cyclical process to the ways in which learning and change occurred, and how that change manifested at different levels. Organisational *processes* that aligned with a trauma-informed approach – such as transparency, encouraging and holding vulnerability through trusting relationships, and facilitation of environments promoting open dialogue and reflection - promoted the learning of trauma-informed approaches themselves. When consistent over time, these changes manifested through different levels as an increase in confidence, a readiness to learn, and increased resilience to adapting to further

challenges and changes. These attitudes and behaviours overtime resulted in increased use of trauma-informed approaches to existing practices.

At individual and relational levels, the findings depicted how encouraging and holding vulnerability through trusting relationships, using tensions, resistance and misunderstandings as learning opportunities, and acknowledging and utilising diversity of expertise at a relational level encouraged the production and transferal of learning. At an internal system level, the importance of security for organisational members through the clarity of roles and responsibilities, transparency of decision-making processes and accountability as enabling factors for readiness to learn and change were highlighted. Furthermore, ways to utilise policies, spaces and places as sites for the production and transferal of learning were brought to light. Additionally, the ways that wider organisational level factors such as external challenges and changes could constrain learning and change were considered, and the findings suggest that factors enhancing a collective identity alongside organisational accountability measures could mitigate these impacts.

Throughout both cases, how key stakeholders conceptualised success in relation to embedding trauma-informed approaches into practices impacted the sustainability of learning and change. When viewed in conjunction, the findings suggest that conceptualising success as the development of a trauma-informed approach to learning and change itself encouraged a culture of adaptability, therefore suggesting that learning and change conducted through trauma-informed approaches and practices could increase sustainability of change.

When viewed in comparison alongside consideration of existing research exploring both trauma-informed approaches and theories of organisational learning and change, this study uncovered an unexpected finding not initially considered: that a trauma-informed approach to learning and change itself was the overriding enabling factor contributing to learning and change around trauma-informed approaches.

8.3 Implications

The conceptualisation of a trauma-informed approach to organisational learning and change that emerged from this study lends itself to significant implications; not only practical implications, but implications for policy, methodological implications, and theoretical contributions too. These are now explored in more depth.

8.3.1 Implications for policy

Importantly, this study emphasised that the way learning needs are conceptualised should be considered at the core of policy for learning to be realised in practice. In recent years there has been increasing guidance for all schools to ‘become’ trauma-informed (e.g. Department of Education, 2024). Guidance for schools on how to ‘do’ this currently extends as far as delivering training to all staff, measuring staff knowledge, and creating written policies that incorporate trauma (Department of Education, 2024). Whilst acknowledgement of trauma and its impacts is highlighted as a useful starting point to a trauma-informed approach (e.g. Avery et al., 2021), research suggests that one-off

training is not enough: it provides a useful starting point but more far-reaching changes are needed (e.g. Harrison et al., 2020).

Organisational learning is not an isolated occurrence (e.g. Lawler and Sillitoe, 2013, p.495), and the findings from this study depicted that merely delivering training to staff on trauma not only did not lead to an immediate shift in culture but that training raised more questions than answers amongst staff. Arguing for the need for trauma-informed educational organisations is one thing, but to make this suggestion without policy level guidance on how this can translate to culture in actuality could result in schools describing themselves as trauma-informed without such approaches reaching practices.

The findings from this study provide an interesting lens into this debate through depicting that when learning itself was the focus, this narrative shifted to one far more productive for learning and change to be realised. However, this study highlighted the tensions, misunderstandings and resistance to learning and change arising when conceptualisations of ‘success’ in relation to learning were misaligned across the organisations. This was particularly constraining when those holding core responsibilities for learning and changed perceived learning as something to be ‘done’, as opposed to an ongoing process of discovery.

The findings suggest that conceptualisations of learning and the vulnerabilities involved at both individual and organisational level significantly impacted learning itself. When systems and processes were in place to foster a generative learning environment, this developed the required conditions – i.e. safety, dignity and

belonging (e.g. Haines, 2019), that facilitated further learning. This study therefore suggests that those setting out agendas for embedding trauma-informed approaches across educational organisations should consider how policies that support, foster and enhance learning may be developed. How learning was conceptualised at individual, system and wider organisational level impacted learning and change, and therefore guidance and support for creating and sustaining generative learning environments at an organisational level could have a significant impact on this policy-level agenda.

This study also brings into question the role and application of policy documentations themselves. Across both cases policy documents ignited feelings of indifference or dismissal at best, and at worst, references to policies ignited frustration, anger, and even fear. The findings question how policy documents can be used more effectively and lead to several resulting recommendations.

How language can be used within these documents was brought into question. Policies often lacked the language and terminology encapsulating a trauma-informed, relational approach to communication. This prompts necessary questioning: is the language used in these documents exclusionary, promoting distance between documents and the people they are designed to support? Where can language be adapted to promote inclusion and accessibility? Where in these documents does language promote safety, belonging, relationships? Do language choices within these documents convey a sense of purpose; does the language encourage learning, promote confidence? Similarly brought into question was the naming of these documents themselves. Should it be a

‘behaviour policy’, or named something more relational, more inclusive? How do the ways we name policy documents shape the ways in which these documents are accessed and applied in reality?

Also brought into question were the ways these documents did or did not align with practices. Many participants argued that policies and practices did not align and this further increased tensions as participants felt those designing policies were unaware of the organisational realities. Policy documents should reflect practices; practices should reflect policies, and this cohesion was often lacking.

This further draws attention to the ways in which policies are – or are not – utlised in educational organisations and the impact this has could have on enabling or constraining learning and change. Where do policies sit within these organisational systems? Are they accessible to all staff, with ease, or do they sit within a large folder of documents only opened at times of inspection or crisis? Could changing the location of the files, in combination with more carefully considered file names and more accessible, inclusive language enable these documents to be utilised better, as relational working documents that support the day-to-day practices within an organisation? Additionally, this study draws attention to the potential for policy documents to act as tools for accountability. Regular checking, adapting, monitoring policy documents in line with practices could enable a system of accountability, which in turn could promote the continuity and sustainability of learning and change.

It is a requirement for educational organisations to hold many different policy documents, however there is risk that these can serve only to satisfy external regulators. However, the findings suggest there could be significant unmet potential for these documents to instead be used in relational ways as accessible working documents; a tool for organisational learning. Understanding the impacts of language and terminology within these documents, as well as creating more accessible, user-friendly storage and systems in place for monitoring and adapting these documents could have significant impacts on organisational learning and change. These findings therefore suggest for better consideration of how policy documents are created and used across educational organisations and beyond.

8.3.2 Practical implications

There is still a considerable lack of research into the practicalities of embedding trauma-informed approaches into practices, despite the recent push from Government towards trauma-informed schools (e.g. Department of Education, 2024). Educational organisations should therefore consider what trauma-informed approaches might look like for their unique contexts at a practical level, before making any significant changes or claims to practicing in trauma-informed ways.

However, the findings from this study suggest practical implications for educational organisations seeking to embark on this learning and change process. Extending and sometimes challenging existing theories and previous research, this study suggests that organisational processes that align with a trauma-informed approach – such as transparency, encouraging and holding vulnerability through

trusting relationships, and facilitation of environments that promote open dialogue and reflection - promoted learning of trauma-informed approaches themselves. When consistent over time, these changes manifested through different levels as increased confidence, readiness to learn, and resilience to adapting to further challenges and changes. These attitudes and behaviours over time resulted in increased use of trauma-informed approaches themselves.

At individual and relational levels, the findings depict how encouraging and holding vulnerability through trusting relationships, using tensions, resistance and misunderstandings as learning opportunities, and acknowledging and utilising diversity of expertise at a relational level encouraged the production and transferal of learning. At the internal system level, the findings highlight the importance of security for organisational members through the clarity of roles and responsibilities, transparency of decision-making processes and accountability as enabling factors for readiness to learn and change. Furthermore, ways to utilise policies, spaces and places as sites for the production and transferal of learning come through the findings. The findings also depict the ways in which wider organisational level factors, such as contextual factors and organisational trauma can constrain learning and change and suggest that factors enhancing both organisational level accountability and collective identity could mitigate this.

Significantly, the findings suggest that a conceptual model of trauma-informed approaches to learning and change itself at an organisational level could equip organisations with the practical tools to ensure that learning becomes embedded throughout every level of the organisation in ways that are sustainable over time.

Furthermore, employing this conceptual framework for learning could also support organisations when faced with future challenges and changes. It cannot be predicted exactly what challenges organisations may encounter, nor what changes could occur as a result, however an embedded trauma-informed approach to learning could equip organisations with the structures and tools to meet such challenges with curiosity, resilience and adaptability. The findings suggest that this could reduce the precarity of such challenges, felt at individual, system and wider organisational levels, and therefore this approach could mitigate against some of the potential impacts of organisational trauma.

These findings could be applied across a diverse array of contexts, extending beyond educational organisations. A relational, trauma-informed approach to organisational learning and change promoted learning and change, encouraging change more sustainable over time. This approach to learning and change is relevant across many organisations, regardless of the context or the initiative seeking to be developed. The findings suggest that particulars involved – e.g. fostering safety, belonging, relationships, vulnerability, accountability, transparency, relational leadership – were effective for stimulating learning processes and transferring learning between key actors within the organisations, and therefore the findings from this study could have significant practical implications for diverse organisational contexts too.

8.3.3 Methodological implications

The two cases participating complimented each other well. Beginning from different stages of organisational learning and facing different organisational challenges and changes alongside this, the cases provided a rich research context. Not intended as comparison, the cases in combination enhance understanding of the research questions under study.

Methodologically, both cases provide argument for the research praxis of *zooming out*. Whilst both organisations initially sought to enhance the trauma-informed approaches they employed with the young people they supported, the more they engaged with learning around trauma and its impacts the more apparent the need for first zooming out to examine wider organisational structures and systems needed to create and sustain a culture that employs this approach became apparent. Equipping staff to employ these approaches involved equipping middle leaders to support staff. This involved equipping leadership and management to support middle leaders. Leadership and management required learning and support, too. This involved incorporating trustees and governing boards within learning and change agendas. Wider organisational structures and systems needed to be in place to ensure that trustees and governing boards could actualise their responsibility within this in practice. Contextual external circumstances impacted these wider organisational structures and systems, and so an understanding of contexts was necessary for learning and change.

Through zooming out in this way, focusing on wider organisational structures and systems, learning itself became conceptualised in more context-specific and trauma-informed ways. This led to more incremental changes based around staff

feedback and participation; more rooted in the actuality of day-to-day experiences of staff. In turn staff felt more supported, safer to explore the vulnerabilities required for learning, and became more confident in their practices as a result. Zooming out in this way as a methodological approach offered different perspectives throughout all the hierarchies within each organisation and enabled these perspectives and experiences to interleave one another to enhance understanding of the processes and mechanisms at play within learning and change. This study therefore has implications for methodological approaches to research, through depicting how the methodological praxis of zooming out enabled a richer understanding of the questions under study.

Additionally, my positionality within Riverford lends itself to further recommendations for research approaches. Throughout fieldwork with Riverford I held an active governance role. Aware of both the potential challenges and advantages this positionality could afford me in comparison to that at Fernville, as explored further within chapter three, I was cautious within this position. However, there is a distinct lack of practitioner research conducted from the position of trustees and governance, particularly within education. Including the board as participants in both cases provided a rich insight into the organisational workings within each case. It would be useful for research within the field to continue to include such actors as participants and to consider the benefits of practitioner research from this perspective. Whilst deeper exploration of this was beyond the scope of this study, conducting such research could provide useful insights into educational organisations from many different avenues.

8.3.4 Theoretical contributions

The findings from this study lend themselves to a conceptualisation of a trauma-informed approach to organisational learning and change. The findings suggest that employing a trauma-informed approach to organisational learning and change enhanced learning and change around trauma-informed approaches themselves, promoting learning and change in ways that are more sustainable over time. Trauma-informed approaches to learning and change, including transparency, fostering vulnerabilities, and relational approaches to leadership and learning began to build a culture promoting an open, generative learning environment. When participants felt safe, secure, heard, and a sense of belonging, this promoted a collective approach to learning; collaborative problem-solving that utilised different perspectives and experiences to generate learning at both individual and organisational levels. This trauma-informed, open, generative learning environment could equip organisations for more agile and effective responses to challenges and changes.

This study suggests that an organisational culture equipped to deal with challenges and changes through learning – i.e. through seeking and uncovering issues to see what needs to be addressed to move forward in a constructive way, may be more equipped to deal with the vulnerability required within this learning and change process. However, structures and systems need to be in place to move through this process in ways that not only mitigate the potential organisational trauma challenges and changes can cause, but to prevent additional trauma within the learning and change process, too. The findings suggest that employing a trauma-informed approach to learning and change itself

could assist this process in ways that are sustainable over time. The conceptualisation of this learning and change approach that draws on both existing research into trauma-informed approaches and existing theories of organisational learning and change provides a strong contribution to both theoretical fields.

Additionally, whilst beyond the scope of this study, the findings draw attention to the ways in which language and terminology around trauma and trauma-informed approaches within this context both enabled and constrained the learning and change agenda. Oftentimes, the findings depict the ways in which such terminology caused tensions, misunderstandings and resistance, with debates around ‘what it is’ and ‘what it isn’t’ spanning the length of fieldwork within both organisations. This suggests that whilst the findings from this study suggest that a trauma-informed approach to learning and change promotes learning and change at an organisational level, the use of terms like ‘trauma-informed approaches’ needs to be approached with caution. In this study, ‘trauma-informed approaches’ was used to describe approaches to learning based on aspects raised by existing literature exploring trauma impacts, however the findings suggest that a reconsideration of the use of such terminology may be supportive of successful implementation.

This study suggests that a deeper exploration of the use of categories and terminology around ‘trauma-informed approaches’ and the impacts that such choices have on practice need to be given further attention within research. Whilst beyond the scope of this study, this recommendation for future research emerging

from this study could have significant implications for both the theoretical field of trauma-informed approaches and its practical application within educational settings.

8.4 Enabling impact

When considering impact, it is easy to assume that this research had a direct impact on the two case organisations participating. After all, a year is a considerable time for engagement in such a process of learning and change. However, it is challenging to sit with the questions that remain. Did any of the changes observed remain after the research engagement ended? Has any of the learning observed reached the culture level of either organisation? If this is not the case, then has the research process had any impact on these organisations quest for embedding trauma-informed approaches into their culture?

The findings from the study lend themselves to significant potential implications for policy and practice alike and therefore hypothesising about how this research could impact beyond the boundaries of this study is not such a challenging task. However, whilst interesting to consider, these are of course hypothetical without actions to follow.

Incidentally, many months after completing fieldwork for this study, I was privileged with the opportunity to complete a knowledge exchange placement with a small community interest company at what transpired to be exactly the right time to test these hypotheses in actuality. The organisation bordered that of

educational and therapeutic, working with vulnerable young people through nature-based learning. The organisation sought to develop and embed trauma-informed approaches into practices at an organisational level. They too were at a crucial juncture point, with decisions around role changes and future directions under way. Whilst separate to this study, through the knowledge exchange I was able to assist with, participate in and observe a trauma-informed approach to their organisational learning and change processes, and thus experienced the application of key findings from this study in ways that had significant impact for this organisation.

Whilst mindful that this was outside of this study, it provided a unique insight into how the findings and implications from this study could be applied across different contexts to enable impact. I am therefore persuaded by the opportunity for the application of findings from this study to have real significant implications across a diverse array of contexts.

8.5 Strengths and Limitations

Research is arguably more a journey than a destination, and this study is no exception. Whilst the findings highlight aspects that could have significant implications for practice and policy and contribute to scholarly literature within the fields under study theoretically, the study is not without limitations. These limitations are now highlighted to better establish the scope, reliability and validity of this study.

Firstly, methodologically this study is not without limitations. Using a case study approach brings into question debates around validity and rigor. One could argue that a case study approach limits the generalisability and applicability of the findings. This is brought into question within this study, due to the unique contextual factors at the time of fieldwork across both cases. The Covid-19 pandemic alongside organisational changes at the time provided a unique backdrop to the study, which could have impacted the findings overall. However, organisational challenges and changes are not unique in nature. This study investigates organisational learning and change processes, and conducting fieldwork in times of additional challenge and change not only addresses this area but also adds nuance through providing a unique opportunity to explore additional impacts of further challenge on the learning and change trajectory. Organisations are unlikely to avoid unexpected challenge and change over their lifespans. The ethnographic approach to these cases provides an in-depth view into how additional challenge and change impacted the learning and change trajectory, and the resulting findings lend themselves to suggestions for organisations seeking to better equip themselves at individual, system and wider organisational level to meet future challenges and changes in ways that protect against and mitigate individual and organisational trauma. Consequently, learning from this study could be applied across diverse contexts, therefore strengthening the applicability of the findings.

Using two different cases strengthens this approach, too. The two cases were not intended as comparison but instead enhanced understanding of the research questions through depicting similar challenges and different approaches to

meeting these challenges. Each organisation began at different stages of learning about trauma-informed approaches and applied different strategies for learning and change towards embedding these into practices. However, when viewed in conjunction alongside two different scholarly fields, these case studies provide a richer understanding of the granular details of learning and change from an organisational perspective.

Knowledge drawn from these complimentary cases could be further tested by repeating similar methodological approaches across different organisations within different contexts. For example, how organisations approach and navigate the level of vulnerability exposed and heightened within learning and change could be explored. Whilst conclusions drawn from these cases may not be universally applicable, they offer significant insights into the demographics and conditions within which these cases existed within, and the findings from these cases lend themselves well to being applied and tested across diverse contexts.

Additionally important to acknowledge is that external contextual factors meant that approaches to fieldwork had to be adapted. The ongoing impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic meant that Fernville had to adapt all practices to remote, virtual spaces, in line with national restrictions. This resulted in all fieldwork with Fernville being conducted virtually. Whilst data was still collected through planned ethnographic methods, the nuances present in interactions within physical spaces such as background conversations and engagement with the senses were absent from these virtual spaces. Conducting fieldwork with Riverford a year later meant these restrictions were no longer in place; all fieldwork took place within the

physical site. Whilst every care was taken to ensure consistency and continuity of fieldwork approaches, conducting fieldwork in these different spaces may have impacted my perceptions and experiences as a researcher within each organisation.

Had the Covid-19 pandemic not initiated this shift, fieldwork may not have been conducted virtually with Fernville. Whilst beyond the scope of this study, this raises questions around the differences between conducting organisational ethnography investigating organisational learning and change across virtual and physical spaces. Exploring these questions further, particularly through the lens of the research questions underpinning this study, would be a useful avenue for future research, especially given the flexible, hybrid working models many organisations have adapted following the Covid-19 pandemic.

This study set out to investigate the processes and mechanisms involved in organisational learning and change towards embedding trauma-informed approaches into practices. Whilst the research questions explored captured aspects of this in situ, the findings from this study highlighted that a trauma-informed approach to learning and change itself proved to be fruitful for developing a generative learning environment supportive of effective change. This significant finding lends itself to a framework for better understanding and implementing effective sustainable organisational learning and change. However, the study was exploratory in nature, and this framework emerged through the process itself, rather than providing the initial conceptual framework through which the study was planned. Had the framework provided a lens through which to

investigate organisational learning and change from the start, this study may have looked rather different. Whilst beyond the scope of this study, additional exploration of this framework in action would have provided a useful complimentary aspect of this study, enabling this framework to be confirmed or challenged. This study therefore lends itself to a suggestion for future research to explore this further. Studies investigating the impacts of following a trauma-informed approach to organisational learning and change itself could corroborate or challenge this framework in real-world settings, and this additional research could provide significant implications for organisational learning and change.

Within this, the findings highlighted several significant aspects for consideration, for example the impacts of the use of language and terminology of ‘trauma’ within this framework. This raised questions around the application of such terminology within this context and suggests existing terminologies may need reconsideration. Whilst beyond the scope of this study, this finding suggests a useful avenue for future research to consider.

Finally, within any ethnographic research the role and positionality of the researcher, the inference and interpretative positions of the researcher, and the impacts the presence of the researcher within the field should be given reflexive attention. Within both cases, I took a reflexive approach to fieldwork throughout, employing acts of ‘watching, listening and understanding’ throughout both cases. However, across both cases, there was an oftentimes precarious balance between outsider and insider perspectives. A more outsider perspective enabled a birds-eye view, and under that lens I could observe nuances that may have

otherwise gone unnoticed by organisational members themselves: I could ‘see what you see in a different way’ (Edberg, 2018). However, there were instances across both cases where the line into insider perspective grew thinner, for example through leading staff training at Fernville, or within board meetings as an acting board member at Riverford. These provided a more nuanced view to additional observations, increasing insight into the wider findings.

However, in these instances I was no longer a by-standing observer, but my presence became a part of these organisational practices. This was highlighted within the findings that depicted the impact of the external perspective on accountability to learning and change. Whilst the same methodological and analytical approaches were deployed across both cases, it is important to consider that different participants may have interacted differently with me within different settings than with a more *outsider* researcher. Whilst beyond the scope of this study, it would be interesting to replicate this process through the lens of insider or outsider researcher as opposed to both, to better understand the impact this balance between the two roles had on the findings from this study.

I am also not naive to the ways in which my own positionality, perspectives and experiences impact the analytical methods used within this study, as discussed in more depth within chapter three. The challenge of replication here is frequently discussed in qualitative research methods. At first, I attempted to separate my own emotions in the analytical process, searching for themes and patterns within the data and cross-checking with my own narrative. However, I cannot claim these to be entirely separate from the analytical process, and much research debates

whether this separation is necessary, too. Kroll and Harper (2013) argue that to inform research and produce new knowledge, theory needs to resonate with emotions as well as intellect (p.181). Furthermore, to 'see what you see in a different way', 'we depend on the narrative imagination' (Edberg, 2018). Having given much consideration to debates around transparency, validity and rigor, I have included sections throughout that employ 'narrative imagination' to form extended vignettes. These vignettes, formed out of a combination of fieldnotes, transcripts and reflective and reflexive analysis, intended to capture the 'emotions as well as the intellect' within the narratives I was both witness to and experienced throughout both fieldworks.

Ethically, critical reflection can be related to power dynamics (Shannon et al., 2024). Through critical reflexive reflection, much research argues we are forced to reflect more deeply around power dynamics between the researcher and their participants. Bright et al. (2023) argue:

> *It is in the formation of Self as an ethical subject, in the relationship that one has with oneself, and through the practices employed to act upon, monitor, test, improve and transform oneself that ethics is actualised.*

Through employing a critically reflective and reflexive approach to every stage of this study, I developed a formation of 'Self' as an ethical subject and became ever critically aware of the relationship between myself, my participants and the findings of this study. Whilst it is not a straightforward path to transparency, validity and rigor within the methodological and analytical methods employed within this study, a critical awareness of myself within this, and the ways in which my positionality, perspectives and experiences impact overall findings drawn,

assists in the production of research that is transparent and rigorous in the ways that matter to the researcher, participants and wider communities alike. To this end, I see my positionality, perspectives and experiences within this research not as a limitation but as a strength of the study, enabling deeper insight and understanding of the nuances within the case studies; not just the *data* gathered, but through the *spaces in-between* the data too.

8.6 Future directions

The initial aim of this research was to explore how organisations could better support trauma-experienced young people in their educational development. This exploration was important given the context at the time, with widespread calls for organisations to better support vulnerable young people that was heightened during the Covid-19 pandemic. A significant finding of this study, alongside addressing the underpinning research questions, was the enabling impact of a trauma-informed approach to organisational learning and change itself. Given the increasing challenges and changes educational organisations face within the current climate, and the resulting necessity of organisational adaption, the findings from this study lend themselves to significant recommendations for policy and practice.

Considering the emergent nature of this conceptualisation of a trauma-informed approach to organisational learning and change, this research prompts the necessity of further research. A useful and impactful lens for research would be to take this emergent framework and apply the foundations within an organisation.

An organisational ethnography exploring the same overarching objective through the lens of testing this framework for learning and change in practice could provide useful evidence to either confirm, challenge or extend the emergent findings from this study.

Alongside this, this study has highlighted several further areas useful for future research to consider. Firstly, the impact of the use of terminology and language around 'trauma' and 'trauma-informed approaches' within this context needs further exploration, as the findings suggest this may not be the most appropriate terminology to best describe the phenomenon of learning and change within this context. Secondly, this research has highlighted the impact of employing the methodological praxis of *zooming out*. It would be fruitful to apply this lens to other phenomena related to learning and change within educational organisations. Furthermore, this study highlighted the benefits of involving acting board members as participants when exploring organisational level learning and change. As the board plays a key role in organisational level change, it seems imperative that this lens should be captured. It seems that practitioner research from the perspective of acting board members has not yet been actualised within educational organisations within this context. Research of this nature could provide a fruitful lens. Whilst these areas are all beyond the scope of this study, the findings suggest that research exploring these areas could provide useful insights into the overarching question of how educational organisations can embed trauma-informed approaches into their culture and practices, in ways that are sustainable over time, with resulting significant implications for policy and practice alike.

8.7 Closing remarks

> *Anita: I think we won't see the benefits for a while, but we will, over time. Because it's like a seed isn't it. It's like, by having you focus on this for a bit, even just in the background, it's planted that seed in people's minds.*
>
> *And maybe they won't pay attention to it now, but it's there.*
>
> *And at some point, it will start to sprout and grow.*

This study set out to better understand the processes and mechanisms required for an educational organisation to successfully embed trauma-informed approaches into practices in ways that are sustainable, to better support trauma-experienced young people in their educational development.

Through an in-depth ethnographic approach, this study has provided a detailed understanding of not only the processes involved in two different educational organisations undergoing a journey of learning and change but also captured the nuances in the spaces *in-between*. Working closely with participants across different organisational hierarchies throughout the challenges and changes each organisation encountered throughout the process contributed significantly to the knowledge and understanding gained through this study.

Understandings of the research questions under study were not only important to consider at the time of their conception, but wider contextual circumstances over the years following make wide-spread understanding of these processes not only an interesting scholarly exploration, but perhaps also a necessity. Calls for widespread systemic change within the education sector echo nationally within the

current climate. To better understand these processes at an individual, system and organisational level could have implications much broader than the organisation itself.

Through their involvement in the research process, and the individual and organisational level time and space for participation and reflection given to this study, each organisation has not only contributed to knowledge gained within this study but also contributed to understandings of these debates at a wider level, too.

The journey of organisational learning and change captured within this study for neither organisation was straightforward. Developing, embedding and sustaining an organisational culture based on trauma-informed approaches in practice was not a simple endeavor for either, with many challenges along the way. Whether either organisation continued this trajectory after fieldwork closed remains unanswered; the longevity of these approaches to learning and change beyond the scope of this study. However, the findings from this study do suggest that the 'seed' was 'planted', and it can be hoped that this 'seed' has been watered and 'at some point, it will start to sprout and grow'.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Table of participants for each case study

Fernville Academy Educational Trust

Pseudonym	Primary role	Additional roles
Jane	Director	Study coordinator
Pete	Assistant director	Study coordinator
Taylor	Senior leadership team	Programmes
Viktoria	Senior leadership team	Programmes
Elaine	Senior leadership team	Programmes
Jon	Senior leadership team	Communications
Sebastian	Senior leadership team	Finance
Gaby	Senior leadership team	Fundraising
Martin	Student coach	Programmes co-ordinator
Mo	Student coach	Programmes co-ordinator
Jean	Student coach	
Zadie	Student coach	
Paul	Student coach	
Penny	Student coach	
Nina	Trustee	

Riverford College:

Pseudonym	Primary role	Additional roles
Anita	Headteacher	Trustee; SLT link; study coordinator
George	Assistant headteacher	Trustee; safeguarding lead
William	Chair of trustees	External
Louisa	Deputy chair of trustees	Study coordinator
Toni	Clerk to trustees	External

Donna	HR manager	Trustee
Sarah	Business manager	Trustee
Mabel	Trustee	Class teacher
Ivan	Trustee	External
Connie	Trustee	External
Miguel	Trustee	External
Josie	Governance role	Practitioner researcher
Levi	Senior leadership team	Teaching and learning lead
Harry	Senior leadership team	Attendance lead
Gabriel	Senior leadership team	Behaviour lead
Nadine	Class teacher	Site leader
Beth	Class teacher	Site leader
Anton	Class teacher	Subject lead
Emma	Class teacher	Therapeutic mentoring
Sylvia	Class teacher	Therapeutic mentoring

Appendix B: Observation protocol

- To take place in two case study organisations
- Case study one: to take place online, via Microsoft Teams
- Case study two: to take place within the school site (meeting rooms; staffrooms; staff offices; teachers' classrooms)
- Two key staff within each organisation to act as key gatekeepers and 'supervise' research participation
- Use of observations to inform selection of interview, group interview participants
- Assure all staff that nothing will be identifiable; organisations and all actors within them to remain anonymous; pseudonyms used

Overt, observer-as-participant

- Staff will know that I am a researcher and the general topic of my research
- I will clarify my level of participation with key staff prior to each observation, keeping in mind that this will change

Level of structure

- Initially unstructured → gather rich descriptive data, get an overview of situation
- Move towards more focused, more structured observations to challenge and verify conclusions

Prior to observing consider (Simpson and Tuson, 2003)

- Focus of observation

- Purpose of observation
- Which RQ addressing
- Boundaries (including / excluding) • What is the unit of observation?
- What problems might be encountered?

Recording

- Handwritten field notes, based on level of participation in activity
- Taken as action occurs whenever possible
- Taken immediately after the event if participation limits writing ability

Analysis

- Field notes fleshed-out and transcribed electronically each day
- Transcribed notes uploaded to NVivo for collating, coding, and combining with interview data

VALIDITY

- Triangulate with interview responses, other observational data, documentations
- Participant review: Did I get it right?
- Self-review: What would disprove my conclusions and is it present?

RELIABILITY

- Records kept of all procedures of data collection and analysis, including how data is categorised, coded, included / excluded
- Have a colleague follow the procedures to see if data is analysed similar

Appendix C: Observations data collection table

Observation	
Session purpose	
Actors	
Activities	

Reflection	
Leadership	
Learning	

Reflection	
Relationships	
Trauma-informed	
Other	

Appendix D: Participant consent form

Initial form used; adapted throughout as necessary to meet the stage of the research at the time

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

Central University Research Ethics Committee (CUREC) Approval Reference:
Ref: CIA-21-236

"A study of the processes and mechanisms behind an organisational shift to embedding trauma-informed practices, in order to better support educational outcomes of vulnerable young people"

Purpose of Study: Educational outcomes for young people within the care system are, on average, significantly below their peers. Reasons for this are multidimensional, however one aspect is that traumatic experiences - such as abuse and neglect - can have a lasting impact on learning. This research will be part of a wider study researching the impact of trauma-informed interventions for young people who are care experienced.

Previous and current research suggests that staff learning around trauma-informed approaches can better support the outcomes of vulnerable young people. However, research on the processes and mechanisms required for an organisation to successfully embed this learning into their core practices and culture is currently lacking.

In order to better understand the current staff learning processes and practices within the organisation, as well as to identify learning needs and possible future directions for learning around trauma-informed practices, I would like to attend and observe all-staff online meetings, to initially include all staff briefings and learning lunch sessions. Some meetings I would like to observe and take-notes; some I will contribute to and lead discussions.

I am also seeking volunteers from the staff of [NAME] to participate in an online 1:1 discussion with myself, via Microsoft Teams, around current organisational learning practices and possible trauma-informed approaches. The discussion would take between 30-45 minutes of your time. You would be invited to answer a short series of questions around your understanding of trauma-informed approaches in

education, any previous experiences with such approaches, and your views and beliefs about an organisational shift to trauma-informed approaches moving forward.

Please initial each box

1	I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet version_____dated ________________ for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily.	
2	I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason, and without any adverse consequences or penalty.	
3	I understand that research data collected during the study may be looked at by authorised people outside the research team. I give permission for these individuals to access my data.	
4	I understand that this project has been reviewed by, and received ethics clearance through, the University of Oxford Central University Research Ethics Committee.	
5	I understand who will have access to personal data provided, how the data will be stored and what will happen to the data at the end of the project.	
6	I understand how this research will be written up and published.	
7	I understand how to raise a concern or make a complaint.	
8	I consent to being audio recorded (interviews)	
9	I understand how audio recordings will be used in research outputs	
10a	I agree to the use of direct quotes, attributed to my name, in research outputs **OR**	
10b	I agree to the use of pseudonymised quotes in research outputs **OR**	
10c	I agree to the use of anonymised quotes in research outputs **OR**	
10d	I do not wish to be directly quoted	

11 I agree to take part in the study[1]

Optional: I agree for research data collected in this study to be given to researchers, including those working outside of the UK and the EU, to be used in other research studies. I understand that any data that leave the research group will be anonymised so that I cannot be identified.

Optional: I agree that my personal contact details can be retained in a secure database so that the researchers can contact me about future studies.

Name of Participant	dd / mm / yyyy Date	Signature
Name of person taking consent	dd / mm / yyyy Date	Signature

Appendix E: CUREC application with amendments

CUREC Ref CIA-21-236

NOTE:

Previous amendments from 14/03/2022 highlighted in green

New amendments from 30/06/2022 highlighted in yellow

The University of Oxford places a high value on the knowledge, expertise, and integrity of its members and their ability to conduct research to high standards of scholarship and ethics. The research ethics clearance procedures have been established to ensure the University is meeting its obligations as a responsible institution. They start from the presumption that all members of the University take their responsibilities and obligations seriously and will ensure that their research involving human participants is conducted according to the established principles and good practice in their fields and in accordance, where appropriate, with legal requirements. Since the requirements of research ethics review will vary from field to field and from project to project, the University accepts that different guidelines and procedures will be appropriate.

Please refer to Where and how to apply for ethical review and the CUREC flowchart first to see if you need ethics approval.

Please complete this form using a word processor and email it, together with your supporting documents, to your Departmental Research Ethics Committee (DREC) (if applicable). If you don't have a DREC please email this form to ethics@socsci.ox.ac.uk using your official ox.ac.uk email address. Only typewritten, emailed applications will be accepted.

SECTION A: Filter for CUREC 2 application

This section determines whether your study raises more complex issues requiring the completion of a full application for ethical review, known as the CUREC 2 application. **(Please mark 'X' in the Yes/ No column.)**		
1. Are research participants classed as people whose ability to give free and informed consent is in question? (This may include under 18s (although see competent youths), prisoners, or adults at risk.) Your attention is drawn to the University's Safeguarding Code of Practice and its implications for researchers involving children or adults at risk. This includes the need for the work to be risk assessed and for researchers to undertake related training. (**Note**: If any of your participants are aged 16 or under, answer 'Yes' here **and** also answer question 5 below.)	Yes ☐	No X
2. By taking part in the research, will participants be at risk of criminal prosecution (e.g. by providing information on drug abuse or child abuse)?	Yes ☐	No X
3. Does the research involve the deception of participants?	Yes ☐	No X
4. Does your research raise issues relevant to the Counter-Terrorism and Security Act (the Prevent duty), which seeks to prevent people from being drawn into terrorism? Please see advice on this on our Best Practice Guidance web page.	Yes ☐	No X
If you answered 'No' to **all** the questions above, go to **Section B**. If you answered 'Yes' to **any** question above, continue to question 5 below.		

5. Is your project covered by a CUREC Approved Procedure?	Yes ☐	No ☐
If yes, list the number(s) of the Approved Procedures:		
If you answered '**Yes**' to **ANY** of questions **1-4**, **and** answered '**No**' to question **5**, **stop completing this checklist and do not submit it for ethical review**. Instead, complete the CUREC 2 application form from the CUREC website, then submit that for ethical review. If you answered '**Yes**' to ANY of questions 1-3, **and** answered '**Yes**' to question 5, go on to **Section B**.		

SECTION B: Contact details and project description	
Contact details:	
Principal Investigator **or** supervisor (if student research) (give title and full name)	Dr Ian Thompson Dr James Robsor
Name of student (if student research)	Josie May Scammell
Degree programme (if student research), e.g. BA, BSc, MSc, MPhil, DPhil	DPhil
Department or Institute name	Rees Centre, Department of Education
Address for correspondence (if different from above)	15 Norham Gardens, Oxford
University (not private) e-mail address and telephone number	josie.scammell@education.ox.ac.uk
Name and status of others taking part in the project (e.g. third year undergraduate; postdoctoral research assistant)	N/A

Project description:

Title of research project	Original title: Improving outcomes for vulnerable young people through trauma-informed interventions to support agency for learning *New title:* *"A study of the processes and mechanisms behind an organisational shift to embedding trauma-informed practices, in order to better support educational outcomes of vulnerable young people"*
List of location(s) where project will be conducted	Online using Microsoft Teams College Site
If your research involves overseas fieldwork or travel and your department requires a travel risk assessment, will you have completed and returned a risk assessment form beforehand? (This must be approved by your department before you travel. If you are travelling overseas, you are strongly advised to take out University travel insurance.) Please also address any physical or psychological risks for Oxford researchers and local fieldworkers in question 16 below and discuss with your Safety Officer.	Yes ☐ No ☐ Not required in this instance X
Anticipated duration of overall research project	months or years (maximum 5) 3 years
Anticipated start and end dates of the part of the research project involving human participants and/or personal data	From: 05/2021 07/2022 To: 07/2022 01/2023 Note: You will approval befo to your research. may take up **30 day** **cannot** spective rar

In the case of international or collaborative research, will you submit or have you submitted this project for ethical review or consideration elsewhere (e.g. collaborator's/ local ethics committee, or other local approval)?	Yes X No If 'Yes', please attach ethics or other approvals and give more details below. If 'No', please explain your reasons below. Please also refer to the Best Practice Guidance on Ethical Review of social-sciences based research conducted outside the UK (BPG 16), which includes an Ethics Issues Checklist for International Research (Appendix A)

Please supply further details in response to question 12b here.

Collaborative project working alongside [NAME]. Ethical review will be shared with relevant co-supervisory team from the organisation to be approved for ethical approval from them.

Practitioner research working alongside [NAME]. Ethical review will be shared with relevant co-supervisory team from the organisation to be approved for ethical approval from them.

External organisation funding the research (if applicable)	ESRC Grand Union DTP

Brief description of research (about 150 words) in lay language.

a. When describing the research, include your methodology, how you are applying professional guidelines, and the use to which results/ data will be put. Please also declare any conflicts of interest here.

The overall aim of the project is to explore the ways and impact of educational organisations working with vulnerable young people moving towards a trauma-informed approach. The project is collaborative, alongside [NAME]. The project was originally intended to be an action research project across two annual cycles, however the impact of Covid-19 has meant that plans have had to change to adapt to the organisation's needs and constraints. The organisation primarily supported vulnerable young people through residential courses and face to face group work, however currently are planning on adapting a hybrid model of continuing online learning combined with 1:1 mentoring sessions in schools. Originally, we had planned to co-design and co-evaluate a new educational enhancement programme using trauma-informed approaches. As the organisation is already going through a transitional period and working is different as a result of Covid restrictions, this isn't appropriate at this time. Instead, this CUREC application is for the first stage of data collection: a preliminary organisational ethnography, or scoping the field, as the organisation moves towards

incorporating trauma-informed approaches when working with trauma experienced young people. This stage of the research will involve interviewing a cross section of staff working within the organisation, in order to explore knowledge and understanding of trauma-informed approaches in education, any previous training in this area, how they currently work with trauma-experienced young people and their views on incorporating a more trauma-informed approach within their work. Semi-structured interviews will take place online via Microsoft Teams individually with consenting staff members; data collected will be used to inform an ethnographic study of perceptions and practices, and will be also used to inform the direction of the rest of the research project to follow at a later stage. After this initial data collection is completed, (expected dates May/June/July 2021), we will collaboratively reflect on how best to move the project towards the initial proposed plans, and a further CUREC application will follow then, to include working with the vulnerable young people. As we do not yet know the results of initial data collection or indeed the way in which the organisation will be working fully (expected more clarity by September 2021), it is not appropriate to submit a CUREC application for that stage of research now. Instead, this is an application for the first stage of the research project; a further CUREC application will follow.
14/03/2022
The overall aims and objectives of the project have shifted slightly in response to a) challenges facing the organisation due to the changes in practice following Covid-19, and b) as a response to emerging literature and current research. The project will reflect this through a focus on understanding and exploring the processes and mechanisms required for an educational organisation to successfully embed trauma-informed approaches into their practices, in order to best support trauma-experienced young people in their educational development. In order to better understand the current practices involved within the organisation to stimulate and develop staff and organisational learning, as well as to identify learning needs around trauma-informed practices within the organisation, I will be collecting observational data from staff meetings. These will include whole staff weekly briefings, staff weekly 'learning lunch' sessions, and any other whole-staff meeting identified as relevant for me to observe. All meetings are held online via Microsoft Teams. Some meeting observations will be non-participatory, and I will observe and take notes following an observational framework to be devised out of existing literature. For some meetings, I will be a participatory observer, contributing to discussions, and taking notes.

30/06/2022

Aims and objectives remain the same as above. Findings from working with the above-named organisation have proved interesting in observing and documenting the narrative of an organisation right at the start of their 'journey' of learning about trauma-informed approaches and thinking of ways to begin putting learning into practices.

Alongside my DPhil, since 28/03/2022, I have held a governance role at [NAME], a single school academy comprising of an alternative provisor provider/ pupil referral unit within the [PLACE] local authority. The school and trust are currently undergoing periods of change – including a new headteacher and SLT team and making key decisions on the future of the trust

that will impact finances and potentially day to day operations of the school. The trust – and school – have decided that they're 'unique selling point' is that they want to be committed to embedding trauma-informed approaches into both their day-to-day practices and their overall underlying culture, values and beliefs. They have also prioritised organisational learning around embedding trauma-informed approaches in their school development plans. For the upcoming academic year, from Sept 2022-Dec 2023 at least, this is their key priority. Within my governance role, given my experiences both professionally and academically, they have asked me to help guide them on this 'journey of learning'. They have asked me to observe upcoming inset days to all staff on trauma-informed practices, provide brief training to all trustees on trauma-informed organisations, conduct link meetings and observations with the SLT member that will be assigned to lead on this focus, and conduct focus groups with staff and trustees to ensure that their plans are being followed through and that their actions match their plans. They have also arranged for an acting governor who is a psychotherapist to hold reflective spaces for SLT to discuss the impacts of organisational traumas.

It has come to the attention of myself and my supervisors that this could make for a very interesting second case study within my DPhil. I would act as a practitioner researcher, within my governance role at the academy, and data would be collected through the following means: observations and field notes of inset days; observations and fieldnotes of reflective sessions; practitioner observations and fieldnotes of board meetings and SLT meetings; focus groups with SLT; focus groups with trustees; semi-structured interviews with lead practitioners. The anticipated data collection period would be from September 2022- January 2023. Exact dates of such data collection will be decided collaboratively with the organisation but would not be expected to exceed more than an equivalent of one working day per week over the period of one school term, in order to reduce any potential burden of time on the organisation and its members. Conflict of interest would be stated as I hold an active governance role within the organisation, however researcher would be insider, practitioner research, with myself as a practitioner participant. Data collected would be analysed through thematic analysis, in the same way as with the above organisation in case study one. The study would not be an evaluation in any way, or would it be a comparison with case study one. The qualitative data would instead, in the same way as with case study one, be presented as 'telling the story'; observing and documenting the processes and mechanisms required for embedding organisational learning around trauma-informed approaches into organisational culture, beliefs, values and practices at a time of organisational change. The narrative observed and documented would show an organisation at a different stage of learning to case study one. Whilst acting as a practitioner researcher, I would adhere to professional guidelines and codes of conduct of both the University and the organisation and ensure that I was meeting ethical guidelines for both parties under the premise of above all else, no harm will come to any participants (including myself).

The trust/ school would benefit from the additional input of research-informed practices, the additional time commitment from myself. The contribution to knowledge would both be practical in terms of recommendations for practice for other educational organisations seeking to embed trauma-informed approaches, but also theoretical in its contribution to theories around organisational learning

and change from a trauma-informed perspective. Furthermore, practitioner research on organisational change and a learning from a governance level perspective

would add a novel voice into the theoretical realm of such theories, and therefore would provide for an even more interesting and useful study.

b. Description of participants and how you will obtain informed consent to take part in the research.

I. Description of participants and your criteria for inclusion/ exclusion.

Staff currently employed by [NAME]: consenting adults over 18 years. Staff will likely be working within different roles throughout the organisation, including directors, senior management, and coaches.

30/06/2022 Staff currently employed by [NAME]: consenting adults over 18 years. Staff will be working within different roles throughout the organisation, including trustees, senior management, and teachers.

ii.Your method(s) of recruitment.

Recruitment will be via snowball effect: the organisations director and senior management will circulate information about the project and upcoming interviews to all staff who will then be recruited through voluntarily expressing their interest in taking part. I will also virtually join a whole staff briefing for [NAME] via Microsoft Teams and explain the project verbally to all staff then, and give staff relevant information for expressing an interest to me.

30/06/2022 Proposal for data collection to be presented to board of trustees and approval voted in. From there, the chair of trustees, headteacher and senior leadership team will circulate information about the project and upcoming data collection methods to all staff who will then be recruited through voluntarily expressing their interest in taking part.

iii.Your processes for obtaining informed consent from participants.

An invitation letter, written information about the research and interview process, and a written consent form will be shared via email with the staff who express interest in volunteering for the research.
Before the interview begins, when I virtually meet with the participants they will each be also verbally read all relevant information and asked to give verbal consent then. I will reiterate their right to pause or stop the interview at any stage, including their right to withdraw from the study at any stage in the research afterwards. No data will be included in the study that the participant does not wish to be.
14/03/2022
The director of the organisation will brief staff during an online all-staff meeting, and staff will be asked to sign a consent form for my observations of staff

meetings. If staff wish to opt out, I will not include their participation in meetings in my notes or reflections. 30/06/2022 As above	
Please attach separate supporting documents (in Word), if appropriate, for your research (English language versions only). Tick those you are submitting below. If appropriate supporting documents are not submitted, you will be asked to provide these separately, which may delay the ethical review process.	
Recruitment and advertisement material (e.g. a poster, social media recruitment text, or brief invitation letter/ email).	X

Information for participants to read (or hear) before they agree to take part (e.g. written information or, if applicable, an outline oral information script).	X
A document to record informed consent. Templates for written consent forms and/ or oral information scripts (in case of an oral consent process) are available from the CUREC website.	X
Questions to be asked of participants (e.g. interview questions, or a preliminary scope of questions, or a sample questionnaire).	X
(If applicable) debriefing document after participants have taken part.	☐
Please add any further details. If you feel the above approaches are not appropriate for your study, provide details on how you will obtain consent from participants Please answer question 15 if you cannot obtain informed consent.	
15. If you cannot obtain informed consent from participants according to CUREC guidelines and good practice in your discipline, please give a brief explanation and justification of this decision below.	

16. What are the ethical issues connected with your research and what steps have you taken to address them? Please do not answer 'none'. We need to see that you have identified potential ethical issues with respect to your research and have taken steps to address them. If applicable, please address:

a. Participant burdens and/or risks

Time commitment: the participants will be asked to volunteer their time for the interview. I will ensure these are kept between 30-45 minutes each, and at a time convenient to the participant.

Potentially sensitive content: the interviews are to explore perceptions and practices in trauma-informed education with trauma-experienced young people. The subject of trauma is potentially sensitive/triggering for participants depending on past experiences of personal trauma or working with trauma in a professional capacity. Participants will be briefed beforehand and will be able to withdraw or pause/end the interview at any time. Participants will not be asked to discuss personal experiences with trauma. Participants will only be asked about working with trauma-informed educational practices in a professional capacity.
14/03/2022
Any staff meetings observed will be part of staff's original/current workload: this will not be in the form of additional meetings so there will be no time commitment.
Staff may wish to withdraw observational data collected involving them: they will be advised of how to do so during the consent gaining stage. Staff may feel under pressure from being observed. The organisations director will make clear that this is not an evaluation of practice: staff will be advised on how to raise concerns during the data collection period and encouraged to do so: this is a collaborative partnership and staff and organisational interests are at the center of the work.

30/06/2022 As above

b.

c. Your own physical and psychological safety as a researcher or of fieldworkers you may employ (see the University's and Social Science Division's Safety in Fieldwork guidance)

Potential impact of vicarious/secondary trauma through discussing sensitive topics: I have read information provided through SSD safety and fieldwork guidance to support this. Risk is lower due to only discussing educational practices through a trauma-informed lens, and not traumatic experiences. If emotional impact did occur I can discuss this with my supervisors at any stage in order to monitor impact.

30/06/2022 As above

d. Data protection/ confidentiality (also see Section 18).

Interviews will take place via Microsoft Teams using my University Nexus account address and the participants will access this via their work email address, not personal. Participants' work email address will be my only form of contact information for participants. I will record the interviews conducted via Teams on a separate, pin-protected device (not using the Teams record function). Data will be stored on my University OneDrive accessible only by myself. Data will be stored anonymously/ using a randomised number / pseudonym depending on which option the participant consents to. Personal information will not be stored, other than participants' work email address. Participants will be briefed on all these details (see supporting documents r.e consent/ data protection / confidentiality). Participants will not be identifiable within any written data or analysis produced from interviews. I will complete a Data Protection Impact Assessment screening/ assessment form in order to cover the data security, protection etc. 14/03/2022 No identifiable data will be collected during observations. Direct quotes will not be used if they are identifiable; some data collected may be deliberately obscured (e.g. gender, role etc.,) to protect participants; the director of the organisation and staff themselves, as well as supervisors, will check for identifiable information once observations are collected or being written up. 30/06/2022 As above. Additionally, handwritten or typed notes from in-person fieldwork will be transferred and stored on my University OneDrive account, with physical copies destroyed. The rest is as above.		
Any other ethical issues. For more guidance on ethical issues, please see http://researchsupport.admin.ox.ac.uk/governance/ethics/resources		
 Ethical considerations and applications etc. will be shared with [NAME] key contact for approval from them. I will also be undertaking organisation provided training in safeguarding and safeguarding practices. 30/06/2022 As above. I have already received statutory safeguarding training from the trust, and have a valid up-to-date DBS check registered with the trust.		
17. Will your research involve discussing sensitive issues? This could be information relating to race or ethnic origin, political	Yes ☒	No ☐
opinions, religious beliefs, physical/ mental health, trade union membership, sexual life or criminal activities. If you answered 'Yes', make sure you include some supporting information (as directed in **section 14b** above, showing the range of		

questions covering these issues.		

Please provide further details:

Potentially sensitive content: the interviews are to explore perceptions and practices in trauma-informed education with trauma-experienced young people. The subject of trauma is potentially sensitive/triggering for participants depending on past experiences of personal trauma or working with trauma in a professional capacity. Participants will be briefed beforehand and will be able to withdraw or pause/end the interview at any time. Participants will not be asked to discuss personal experiences with trauma. Participants will only be asked about working with trauma-informed educational practices in a professional capacity.

30/06/2022 As above

Management and handling of personal and other research data

All information provided by participants is considered research data for the purpose of this form. Any research data from which participants can be identified is known as personal data; any personal data which is sensitive is considered special category data.

Management of personal data, either directly or via a third party, must comply with the requirements of the UK General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and the Data Protection Act 2018, as set out in the University's Guidance on Data Protection and Research. In answering the questions below, please also consider the points raised in the Data Protection Checklist and whether, for higher-risk data processing, a separate Data Protection Impact Assessment (DPIA) may also be required for the research. Advice on research data management and security is available from Research Data Oxford and your local IT department. Advice on data protection is available from information.compliance@admin.ox.ac.uk.

a. Please mark 'X' against the data you will collect for your research

Data	
Consent records (written consent forms, audio-recorded consent, assent forms (for research involving minors) including participant name)	X
Online consent (may be anonymous)	X

Opt-out forms	X

Contact details for research purposes only (destroyed when no longer needed for this research)	X
Contact details kept for future studies	☐
Audio recordings (preferably using PIN protected audio recorder and stored on device's hard drive)	X
Video recordings	☐
Transcript of audio/ video recordings	X
Photographs	☐
Task results (e.g. paper/ online tasks, diary completion)	☐
Questionnaire answers	☐
Field notes	X
Other (please specify below)	☐

b. For each of the types of data selected above, state how this will be physically transferred from where it is collected to a local secure storage site (and backed up as necessary). This includes paper records and data captured electronically.

All consent forms / written forms will be completed via the internet and immediately stored within my Nexus OneDrive University account and deleted from anywhere on my computer other than this location. If audio recordings or transcripts are consented to, I will record the interviews conducted via Teams on a separate, pin-protected device (not using the Teams record function). They will immediately after the interview be transferred into a word document to be stored only via my Nexus OneDrive account and immediately removed from other locations. Any paper records, including any field notes I may take or handwritten notes I may take with participants' consent will be photographed via my phone and uploaded to my Nexus OneDrive account. The photographs will be immediately deleted from my mobile phone and any written field notes kept within a safe personal folder and destroyed at the end of the project. File shredder will be used to destroy data once it is no longer needed.

c. How and where will each type of data be stored during the research (until the end of all participant involvement)? Describe the arrangements for ensuring confidentiality, i.e. location of storage (e.g. Nexus 365 OneDrive for Business, SharePoint), security arrangements and de-identification of such data. Do not store unencrypted data in freely available cloud services or unprotected USB drives.

See above: I will record the interviews conducted via Teams on a separate, pin protected device (not using the Teams record function). All data will be stored via my nexus OneDrive University account and de-identified through randomised number assignment or pseudonym depending on the participants consenting option. No data will be stored in any other online location or via an unprotected USB drive. Upon completion of thesis and after my OneDrive account ceases to exist, any identifiable data that must be kept for three years afterwards will be transferred to my supervisors Nexus OneDrive University account. I will complete

a Data Protection Impact Assessment screening/ assessment form in order to cover the data security, protection etc.
d. Will you use a unique participant number on research data instead of a participant name? If yes, state whether or not you will retain a list of participant names against numbers (i.e. pseudonymisation via a linkage list). Where will the list be stored, and when will it be destroyed?
A unique participant number will be used instead of participant name on data stored. I will retain a list of participant names against numbers (pseudonymisation) via a linkage list. This will be stored on my University Nexus OneDrive account. Upon thesis completion, this information will be kept for the required three years and transferred to my supervisors University Nexus OneDrive account until it is destroyed after the required time.
e. Who will have access to the research data?
I will have access to the research data via my Nexus OneDrive account, as the primary researcher. My supervisors will also have access to data when this is required to be shared with them, following appropriate consent and storage procedures as stated above.
f. If research data is to be shared with another organisation, how will it be transferred/ disclosed securely?
Anonymised research data may be required to be shared with [NAME] as and when appropriate and in relevant and appropriate formats. Data shared must be unidentifiable to protect anonymity of consenting participants. If this was required, it would be transferred securely through my University contact account to their professional work account, with the support and supervision of my supervisors.
g. When and how will identifiable data (including audio/ video recordings & photos) be destroyed or deleted? Note: Records of consent should be retained for a minimum of three years after publication or public release. Some funders may require longer periods. If you wish to retain contact details in order to re-approach participants about future studies, you must detail this in information provided to them and obtain specific consent for this.

Records of consent will be retained for the minimum requirement of three years, in line with the ESRC GUDTP requirement too. Contact details for participants will not be kept after this time. Participants will be provided with this information via consent forms / verbal consent (see supporting documents) in order to obtain specific consent for this. Any identifiable data listed above will be transferred securely to my supervisors Nexus OneDrive account and destroyed/deleted after the required timeframe. File shredder will be used to destroy data after it is no longer needed. I will complete a Data Protection Impact Assessment screening/ assessment form in order to cover the data security, protection etc.		
h. Please confirm that you will store other research data safely for at least 3 years after final publication or public release and adhere to any additional research funder policies. For more information about the	Yes X	No ☐
University policies, please see the University's web pages on research data management.		
If 'Yes', please give details of who will store the data and on storage format, location and security. Note that open science is encouraged. If 'No', please provide further details below.		
Stored via my supervisors University Nexus OneDrive account.		
i. Does your research involve the use of secondary (i.e. previously collected) data? Common sources of secondary data include censuses, information collected by government departments, organisational records and data that was originally collected for other research purposes. (If "No", please go to question 19.)	Yes	No X
j. Do you have data access agreements for the use of this secondary data? (If so, please attach these.)	Yes ☐	No ☐

k. Is your use of this secondary data compatible with what the data subjects/ participants agreed that their data should be used for?	Yes ☐	No ☐
l. Could this data be linked back to an individual or individuals? If yes, address how securely any personally identifiable data will be transferred to you, and where and for how long it will be stored during or after the research. Who will have access to it?	Yes ☐	No ☐

19. Publication and dissemination of research data and outputs. How will you disseminate and feedback project outcomes at the end of the research?
Data / project outcomes will be published in my final DPhil thesis at the end of the course.
Project outcomes will be disseminated through the organisation, [NAME] as and when required. 30/06/2022 As above; shared with [NAME]. Neither organisation will have access to data associated with each other.

SECTION C: Methods and procedures to be used	
1. Please indicate the methods to be used:	**Mark 'X'**
a. Analysis of existing records	☐
b. Snowball sampling (recruiting through contacts of existing participants)	X
c. Use of casual or local workers e.g. interpreters	☐
d. Participant observation	X
e. Covert observation	
f. Observation of specific organisational practices	X

g. Participant completes questionnaire in hard copy	☐
h. Participant completes online questionnaire or other online task	☐
i. Using social media	☐
j. Participant performs paper and pencil task	☐
k. Participant performs verbal or aural task (e.g. for linguistic study)	☐
l. Focus group	X
m. Interview	X
n. Audio recording of participant (you will generally need specific consent from participants for this)	X
o. Video recording of participant (you will generally need specific consent from participants for this)	☐
p. Photography of participant (you will generally need specific consent from participants for this)	☐
q. Others (please specify below)	☐
Please ensure you have addressed any potential ethical issues related to these methods in question B14 and in your Participant Information Sheet.	

SECTION D: Professional guidelines and training
In this section, please mark 'X' against at least one of the following professional guidelines you aim to adhere to. You should use the principles listed in your chosen guideline(s) in conducting your own research. This is not an exhaustive list.

Research specialism/ methodology	**Association and guidance document**	**Please mark 'X'**
Anthropology	Association of Social Anthropologists of the UK and Commonwealth	☐
Computer Sciences	ACM Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct	☐
Criminology	British Society of Criminology	☐

Education	British Educational Research Association Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research	X
Geography	Association of American Geographers Statement on Professional Ethics	☐
History	Oral History Society of the UK Ethical Guidelines	☐
Internet-based Research	British Psychological Society: Conducting Research on the Internet Association of Internet Researchers Ethics Guide ACM Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR) Also see CUREC's BPG 06 on internet-mediated research	☐
Law (Socio-Legal)	Socio-Legal Studies Association: Statement of Principles of Ethical Research	☐
Management	Academy of Management's Professional Code of Ethics	☐
Political Science	American Political Science Association (APSA) Guide to Professional Ethics in Political Science	☐
Politics	Political Studies Association. Guidelines for Good Professional Conduct	☐
Psychology	British Psychological Society Code of Ethics and	☐

	Conduct	
Social Research	Social Research Association: Ethical Guidelines	X
Sociology	The British Sociological Association: Statement of Ethical Practice	☐
Visual Research	ESRC National Centre for Research Methods Review Paper: Visual Ethics: Ethical Issues in Visual Research	☐
Other professional guidelines. Please specify the other guidelines used here:		☐

Please indicate what training in research ethics (or research methodology) the researchers involved with this study have received, e.g. the title of the course and date completed (online training available at http://researchsupport.admin.ox.ac.uk/support/training/ethics), or discussions between researchers and supervisors, if applicable. Note that the core module of the University's online research integrity course is compulsory for all researchers.
Taught research methodology modules taken during DPhil so far: Foundations of Educational research one - MT 2020 Foundations of educational research two - HT 2021 Philosophy of educational research - MT 2020 Introductory + intermediate Quantitative methods - MT 2020; HT 2021 Perspectives and debates in qualitative methods - HT 2021 Research training seminars - MT 2020; HT 2021; TT 2021 1:1 ethics drop-in session with department representative - Feb 2021 University's online research integrity course - April 2021 ESRC GUDTP training sessions: Research Methods Café – 03/12/2020 Doctoral research in challenging times - 10/12/2020 Collaboration within and beyond academia - 28/01/2021 SSD training - Fieldwork safety course - 02/2021 Vicarious trauma training sessions x2 - 02/2021

SECTION E: Signatures or email endorsements

The SSH IDREC Secretariat accepts either option below. If you have a DREC, check which option it prefers.

Option 1: Email confirmation from a University of Oxford email address can be accepted. Separate emails should come from each of the relevant signatories as outlined below, indicating acceptance of the relevant responsibilities. Pasted images of signatures cannot be accepted.

Option 2: Handwritten signatures. Please scan them and the rest of the checklist pages to create a single PDF document and email to us.

Please ensure this checklist is signed by:

For staff research:

1. Principal Investigator
2. Head of Department (or nominee)
3. Student researcher

For student research:

1. Principal Investigator (project supervisor)
2. Head of Department (or nominee)

Principal Investigator signature/ supervisor signature (if student research)

I understand my responsibilities as Principal Investigator as outlined in the CUREC glossary and guidance on the CUREC website. I declare that the answers above accurately describe the research as presently designed, and that a new checklist will be submitted should the research design change in a way which would alter any of the above responses so as to require completion of CUREC 2 (involving full scrutiny by an IDREC). I will inform the relevant IDREC if I cease to be the principal investigator on this project and supply the name and contact details of my successor if appropriate.

Signature (or email endorsement using the above declaration):
james.robson@education.ox.ac.uk

Print name: JAMES ROBSON **Date**: 30/06/2022

Departmental endorsement signature

I have read the research project application named above. On the basis of the information available to me, I:

- consider the PI and student researcher (if applicable) to be aware of their ethical responsibilities in regard to the ethical issues associated with this research;
- am satisfied that: the proposed project design and scientific methodology are sound; the project has been subject to appropriate peer review; and is likely to contribute to existing knowledge and/or to the education and training of the researcher(s) and that it is in the public interest.

Signed by Head of Department or nominee (example nominees for student research include the Director of Graduate Studies/ Director of Undergraduate Studies):

Signature (or email endorsement using the above declaration):
hamish.chalmers@education.ox.ac.uk

Print name: HAMISH CHALMERS **Date**: 18/05/2021

Student signature (if student research)

I understand the questions and answers that have been entered above describing the research, and I will ensure that my practice in this research complies with these answers, subject to any modifications made by the principal investigator properly authorised by the CUREC system.

Signature by student (or email endorsement using the above declaration):
lady5739@ox.ac.uk

Print name: JOSIE SCAMMELL **Date**: 18/05/2021 ; 30/06/2022