



Affective Responses to Literature: Removing Barriers to Literary Analysis Through Social and Emotional Learning in English Education

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MSc in Learning and Teaching, 2024

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**Affective Responses to Literature: Removing Barriers to Literary
Analysis Through Social and Emotional Learning in English
Education**

By

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Abstract

Literary analysis in English education often requires student engagement with emotionally challenging themes (Hébert, 2002; McTigue, Douglass, Wright, Hodges, and Franks, 2015). Students distressed by such content may disengage from learning, negatively impacting their analysis and attainment (Neal, 2021). For students with prior experience of the themes portrayed in texts, this is of particular concern (Moore and Begoray, 2017).

Therefore, this practitioner research project explored how students' emotional engagement with Shakespeare's (1597/2015) Romeo and Juliet impacted literary analysis. I collaborated with the school counsellor to develop an intervention that leveraged social and emotional learning strategies (SEL) to promote student engagement with the characters' emotions and motivations.

Data were collected via lesson observations and reviewing written work. These show that student empathetic and affective responses to the text increased throughout the intervention: written responses became increasingly nuanced; and students linked personal experiences to the text in class discussions, the civility of which increased. Consequently, students exhibited greater personal engagement with the text, indicative of enhanced analysis (Britzman, 1998; McLean Davie and Buzacott, 2022).

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1. Introduction

In recent years, childhood and adolescent emotional disorders have surged in England: in 2022, 18% of children aged between 7 and 16 experienced mental health conditions (NHS Digital, 2022). This has concerning implications for education as research indicates that students with emotional disorders are more likely to disengage from learning than their peers, leading to reduced academic outcomes (NHS Digital, 2022).

Emotional wellbeing and learning in English education are particularly interwoven. Literary analysis requires student engagement with characters' experiences and perspectives, which often portray emotionally challenging circumstances (Hébert, 2002; McTigue, Douglass, Wright, Hodges, and Franks, 2015). Students distressed by such content may disengage from learning (Neal, 2021).

The relative freedom of the Key Stage 3 (KS3) national curriculum enables schools to avoid certain texts, if appropriate for their students (Department for Education (DfE), 2013). By contrast, text choices are limited by exam boards in Key Stage 4 (KS4) and many GCSE texts explore emotionally challenging themes, such as suicide, racism and sexual violence (AQA, 2022a; Pearson Edexcel, 2019a). Whilst it is necessary to expose students to societal issues - even if these are distressing - in preparation for life after school (PSHE Association, 2023), GCSE English thus necessitates student engagement with emotionally challenging content in an academic, rather than pastoral, setting. Consequently, teachers must be equipped to navigate this content in a manner that actively promotes analysis (Moore, 2022).

Therefore, this investigation evaluated the impact of student affective responses on analysis of Shakespeare's (1597/2015) Romeo and Juliet. Adopting a social constructivist perspective, this investigation was underpinned by the theory that social interaction facilitates the development of learners' knowledge (Vygotsky, 1978; Daniels, 2001; Schreiber and Valle, 2013). Therefore, my intervention leveraged social and emotional learning (SEL) to encourage students' development of affective responses.

Although research reflects increasing interest in SEL in education, the majority considers SEL itself the end goal, even if this is achieved via literary analysis (Storey, 2019; Riesco, 2021; McLean Davies and Buzacott, 2022). By contrast, this project aimed to contribute to the field by investigating how SEL may support literary analysis, rather than the other way round. This perspective is unique: I have found no research that interrogates the impact of SEL strategies on students' academic output in English, with the goal of supporting future attainment. Therefore, to explore the gap between existing research and my aims, this investigation was informed by cross-subject research and the application of educational and literary theory to my context and findings.

1.1. Context

I conducted this investigation in a comprehensive free school in a diverse city catchment. There are approximately 900 students in KS3 and KS4. The school first opened in 2019. Consequently, the English curriculum is still under development, as the school does not yet have all year groups in attendance.

The English department adopts a progressive stance towards text selection: with the opportunity to create a full curriculum from scratch, texts that are seldomly taught in schools

- such as Adichie's (2017) Purple Hibiscus and Morrison's (2016) Beloved - were prioritised. These choices aimed to: explore diverse perspectives; foster discussion; challenge held ideas; and validate student experiences.

Reflecting many identities is of particular importance due to my school's diversity. Approximately 70% of students have minority ethnic backgrounds and there are high levels of socioeconomic disparity: 21% of students receive pupil premium funding yet the school catchment includes one of the nation's wealthiest postcodes (SchoolDash, 2023). Accordingly, the department aims for students to leave school having seen elements of their identity reflected in literature, regardless of background.

1.2. Research rationale and aims

Department needs informed this investigation. From 2025, Ishiguro's (2017) Never Let Me Go will not be offered by our GCSE exam board (AQA, 2022b). Consequently, the department requires a replacement that adequately resonates with and engages our students.

Following numerous discussions, a front-runner emerged: de Waal's (2016) My Name is Leon. The novel presents the experiences of a mixed-race child taken into foster care with his infant, white brother, who is quickly adopted. Complex themes of family, mental health and racial prejudice are explored through Leon's narrative. Therefore, the department believed that the text would engage students with relevant issues and diverse experiences.

However, concerns regarding the risks of such an emotionally challenging text were raised. Teachers were anxious that the text might distress students, particularly those with experience of care, parents/carers with mental health issues or racial prejudice. This might, they suggested, cause students to disengage from teaching, unintentionally rendering the GCSE curriculum exclusionary. Furthermore, the school has increasing numbers of students with social, emotional and mental health (SEMH) needs. Several students with SEMH have reported considering English emotionally difficult, triggering in-school truancy: therefore, teachers were concerned that My Name is Leon might prove too difficult for some students with SEMH needs.

Nevertheless, the department believed that the text could be the right choice for our context: they wished to explore whether the potential benefits they identified were supported by research. Moreover, to support teachers to navigate the complexity of the text in the classroom, guidance regarding the effective delivery of an emotionally challenging syllabus was required.

This focus aligned with my personal research interests: the inclusion and outcomes of students with adverse or traumatic experiences. Indeed, next year, I intend to undertake doctoral study in this area. I was thus eager to develop my understanding of trauma-informed teaching by conducting research that also supported my department.

My project aimed to develop and evaluate strategies to facilitate student analysis of emotionally challenging literature. Effective strategies will be implemented into the My Name is Leon syllabus, establishing inclusionary practices that promote students' emotional and academic success in English, no matter their emotional needs or previous experiences.

Based on these research aims, my literature review was guided by the following questions:

1. What are the potential benefits of studying emotionally challenging content in literature?
2. How might social and emotional learning impact student literary analysis of emotionally challenging literature in English education?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Definitions

2.1.1. Emotionally challenging literature

This project defined emotionally challenging literature as texts - or adaptations of texts - that may elicit strong emotional responses from readers due to exploration of complex psychological, social or moral themes. Emotion - one of the ‘fuzziest concepts’ in science - defies simple definition (Frijda and Schere, 2009, p.142). However, this project considered emotion a feeling that triggers a response, informed by Matsumoto (2009) and Adolphs (2018). Although literary theory ascribes the terms with different definitions, this project utilises ‘emotion’/‘emotional’ and ‘affect’/‘affective’ interchangeably. This reflects the prevalence of ‘emotional’ in the social sciences and ‘affective’ in literary theory, and my consideration of both fields.

Hereby, my definition of emotionally challenging literature diverged from that of trauma literature, a term with increasing currency in contemporary literary study (Moore and Begoray, 2017). Trauma literature’s defining characteristic is the presentation of extreme loss or fear, which triggers the re-imagining of the reader’s perception of self (Balaev, 2008; Luckhurst, 2013). Whilst this definition is not inherently at odds with the social constructivist perspective of this project, the focus on the transformation of self-perception does not mirror the totality of my research aims. Therefore, considering trauma literature exclusively was not appropriate.

Additionally, student knowledge is not developed in a vacuum (Daniels, 2001); it is therefore important to seek the full picture of student experiences of emotional challenge in school. Consequently, my definition was informed by educational research concerning ‘difficult pedagogies’ across several subjects (Pitt and Britzman, 2003, p.755). Subject literature concerning social studies, history, geography, religious and English education most commonly cited the following themes as sources of emotional challenge for students: violence - particularly that of sexual and racially motivated natures; war and political unrest; racism and gender-based prejudice; death; and terminal illness (Jarvie and Burke, 2015; Darragh and Petrie, 2019; McLean Davies and Buzacott, 2022; Moore, 2022; Falter and Bickmore, 2018).

Finally, this project’s social constructivist perspective emphasised the knowledge that students bring into the classroom from their own worlds: therefore, topics of which students had personal experience - or knowledge of others’ experience - were prioritised in my definition of emotional challenge. To inform my understanding, I collaborated with the

school counsellor (see Section 3.5.1). Consequently, the inclusion of forced marriage and honour-based abuse, and mental health issues and suicide ideation were central to my definition, alongside the topics listed above.

2.1.2. Social and emotional learning

Social and emotional learning (SEL) refers to the development of competencies needed for students to engage actively and positively with society (Storey, 2019; Riesco, 2021).

Research reveals little variation in the understanding of the constituent skills of SEL: Waters and Sroufe (1983) suggest that effective SEL is evidenced in flexibility and the willingness to maximise opportunity, whereas the majority of literature calls for effective SEL programmes to facilitate student development of interpersonal skills - for example, empathy, emotional literacy and communication - and intrapersonal skills, such as resilience, decision-making and self-regulation (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, and Schellinger, 2011; Elias, Zins, Weissberg, Frey, Greenberg and Haynes, 1997; Education Endowment Fund (EEF), 2021). Arguably, adaptability requires these skills, so Waters and Sroufe (1983) remain in alignment. Consequently, I defined SEL as the development of inter- and intrapersonal skills - as outlined above - for the purposes of this literature review. Reflecting my investigation's limited scope, I focused primarily on competencies of empathy, emotional literacy and communication during intervention sessions.

Secondly, most research discusses SEL as occurring independently of academic learning: though evidence exists for improvements in SEL leading to improved attainment (Durlak et al., 2011), this is viewed as a byproduct of SEL, rather than an intended outcome. The EEF (2021) states explicitly that SEL does not address cognitive or academic aspects of learning directly. However, this understanding was incompatible with my project's aims of utilising SEL to support student literary analysis: my SEL intervention took place in the classroom and directly engaged students with academic content. Therefore, I defined SEL in my intervention as holistic strategies to support student development of empathy, emotional literacy and communication, facilitated through the adaptation of curriculum content and intended to remove barriers to student analysis of emotionally challenging literature.

2.1.3. Literary analysis

With this project's aim of supporting KS4 teaching, the school's exam board's definition of analysis offered a logical springboard. According to AQA (2022c), the assessment objective (AO) concerning analysis (AO2) is met through consideration of 'language, form and structure' (p.6); the term is not used in assessment objectives governing student responses to wider textual concepts (AO1) or the relationship between text and context (AO3). Hereby, the term is defined in a manner akin with New Critical schools of thought, which consider the study of textual language a discrete artefact and reject the influence of historical or social context (McIntyre and Hickman, 2012). The social and emotional focus of this project rendered this definition unsuitable: my social constructivist perspective characterised learning as a profoundly social process. Thus, student outcomes could not be measured against a metric which rejects the relational.

In contrast to AQA, Hébert (2022) states that literary analysis is the systematic process by which readers assign characteristics to objects. Objects can comprise any aspect of a text, including character actions, motivations and relationships themselves, not just as they are expressed through language (Hébert, 2022). Consequently, this definition offered greater breadth, enabling analysis of a text's social aspects. Thus, it better aligned with the position of my project.

However, the definition of emotion as the trigger of responses underpinned this investigation (Adolphs, 2018; Matsumoto, 2009). Therefore, the potential irrationality of affective responses may have contradicted Hébert's emphasis on the systematic nature of analysis. Moreover, I encourage students to explore alternative interpretations and nuance in my teaching: multiple interpretations are valid if students carefully consider the evidence behind each. Accordingly, I defined literary analysis as a reader's thoughtful - rather than systematic - consideration of how they might characterise a textual object, whether or not final conclusions are drawn.

2.2. What are the potential benefits of studying emotionally challenging content in literature?

Exposure to emotionally challenging content inherently risks psychological distress: for students with adverse experiences, emotionally challenging literature may trigger post-traumatic incidents - such as flashbacks or panic attacks - or even retraumatisation (Carello and Butler, 2014; Moore and Begoray, 2017). Therefore, it is important to establish the value of teaching emotionally challenging literature: considering the risks and benefits is necessary to ensure that teaching supports students, rather than harms them.

2.2.1. Engaging with emotionally challenging experiences

A growing body of research suggests that engaging with emotionally challenging literature in the classroom may have profound benefits for students (Crawford, 2005; Andermahr and Pellicer-Ortin, 2013; Dutro, 2011). Learning is an inherently social process: interactions with peers and teachers enable students to construct knowledge within their zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978; Schreiber and Valle, 2013). Subject literature concerning the teaching of emotionally challenging content typically shares this social constructivist perspective. Accordingly, research primarily ascribes the positive impact on student outcomes to emotionally challenging literature's facilitation of personal and emotional growth by exposing students to identities that may differ from their own: through literature, students are supported to explore the gap between their own identities and those of presented characters (Jarvie and Burke, 2015; Engebretson and Weiss, 2015; McLean Davies and Buzacott, 2022).

Empathising with the emotions of victims - experiencing intense emotion for them - develops student understanding of events (Carello and Butler, 2014). In the field of history education, this concept is explored by Britzman (1998). Her research suggests that *learning about* emotionally challenging topics - superficial learning that involves absorbing and regurgitating facts and figures - commonly occurs when students do not personally engage with content. The process of *learning about* detaches students from the subject matter (Britzman, 1998). Hereby, the superficiality of learning is compounded, as student

detachment renders future engagement less likely (Britzman, 1998). By contrast, higher-order *learning from* occurs when students are able to gain insight into the subject matter through personal engagement: this takes place during considered, intimate analysis, or when students enter the classroom with intimate knowledge of the subject matter due to prior experiences. Therefore, empathy is central to *learning from* when students have no personal experience of subject matter: to engage personally, they must approach content in a manner which approximates those with experience of it. Similarly, Jarvie and Burke (2015) - whose research concerns religious and English education - suggest that deep learning is only possible when students situate themselves in the text, exhibiting empathy.

Although Britzman (1998) operates in a different subject area, her research is nevertheless relevant to this investigation: the preceding paragraph explores ideas from a chapter concerning the teaching of Anne Frank's (2019) diary, and therefore occupies space in both history and English education. The national curricula for KS3 and KS4 require students to study a range of fiction and non-fiction, including literary memoir (DfE, 2013; DfE, 2014). Thus, the relevance of Britzman's research (1998) is confirmed.

Furthermore, literary memoirs are inherently repositories of diverse identities: memoirs expose students to characters in alien contexts, enabling them to develop affective responses that 'bridge people estranged by time, space and circumstance' (Tarc, 2011, p.259). Research characterises these affective responses as a powerful tool for developing the empathy required for students to cope with difficult knowledge (Simon and Simon, 1999; Brozo, Walter and Placker, 2002). This is because memoirs prompt students to feel things beyond their own experience and realm (McLean Davies and Buzacott, 2022; Tarc 2011). Through this mechanism, McLean Davies and Buzacott (2022) posit that memoir enables students to process collective trauma. In their case study of an Australian school teaching Clarke's (2016) *The Hate Race* - a memoir presenting the author's experience of racism in 1980s Sydney - participant teachers identified student empathy towards Clarke's emotions and experiences of racism: students were able to view things 'through [Clarke's] eyes' (McLean Davies and Buzacott, 2022, p.373). From this, McLean Davies and Buzacott draw evidence for the effectiveness of literary memoirs at enabling students to process collective trauma: they suggest that affective responses, triggered by Clarke's experiences, reveal student engagement with racism within their cultural history. Thus, students may be seen as *learning from* the memoir (Britzman, 1998; McLean Davies and Buzacott, 2022).

However, the effectiveness of written testimony at generating affective response - and therefore in allowing students to *learn from* the texts - is contested by some scholars. Exploring issues of teaching in the lasting context of colonialism and Australia's settler history, Harrison, Burke and Clarke (2023) compare participants' affective responses - which they see as indicating empathy - following face-to-face engagement with survivors of Australia's Stolen Generation versus exposure to texts and films typically used to teach this content in schools. They report increases in both affective responses and empathy following the face-to-face interactions; this is mirrored in participants' perceptions of their own responses (Harrison et al., 2023). As face-to-face encounters with literature itself are inherently impossible, it may be inferred that literature does not offer an optimum conduit for students to develop the empathy needed to engage with emotionally challenging content. To meet with an author who has experienced trauma would be more beneficial than simply reading about their experience; however, this is then *learning from* a face-to-face encounter,

rather than literature. Similarly, Cooke and Frieze (2015) suggest that film is far more effective than literature at developing affective responses to historic trauma: they specifically cite the powerful influence of nonverbal communication - such as tone of voice and facial expression - as triggering intense affective responses amongst participants. Nonverbal communication is intrinsically not part of literature.

Although this research may inform our understanding of general teaching of emotionally challenging content, that it was conducted in different contexts may limit its applicability to this project. Firstly, Harrison et al.'s research (2023) concerns trainee teachers. As empathy typically does not fully emerge until after adolescence (Blakemore and Frith, 2005), it is perhaps unsurprising that participants felt more affected by face-to-face meetings with survivors than repeated exposure to material they first encountered as teenagers. Similarly, Cooke and Frieze (2015) consider the impact of film versus written testimony on university students. These participants are likely to have had greater interpersonal social competencies than my adolescent participants, who may therefore respond differently (Blakemore and Frith, 2005). For example, reduced emotional literacy may render it harder for children and adolescents to identify emotions from nonverbal cues, particularly in the case of negative emotions (Dickson and Burton, 2011). Therefore, students may not visually recognise these emotions to empathise with them, and the benefit of visual prompts (either in person or videos) may be lost.

Additionally, the research contexts of Cooke and Frieze (2015) and Harrison et al. (2023) differ from my own in terms of their subject: history education inherently deals with non-fiction. Both studies investigate the effects of testimony delivered by survivors: perhaps it is the very act of hearing the voice of the victim that served to affect participants. Cooke and Frieze (2015) make no consideration of reconstructed or dramatised audiovisual content. Furthermore, Harrison et al. (2023) categorise Noyce's (2002) film *Rabbit Proof Fence* - a loose retelling of girls from Australia's Stolen Generations walking 1500 miles to return to their families - alongside written literature, despite its obvious non-verbal communication: the actors themselves are not survivors and therefore, according to Harrison et al. (2023), the affective impact of the film is minimised.

However, this view of literature as inferior to non-fictional films or face-to-face meetings counters findings of cognitive criticism and neuroscience. These fields of study indicate that a reader's brain responds to fictional worlds as it would lived experiences (Nikolajeva, 2013; Stockwell, 2002). Therefore, readers respond to fictional characters as if they are genuine victims of emotionally challenging situations: as a result, students may *learn from* fictional literature. Supporting this, Moore and Begoray (2017) report students' personal engagement with a fictional narrative told from the perspective of a sexual assault survivor, detailing her attempts to heal from her experience whilst being confronted and harassed by her attacker at school. Moore - in her position as practitioner researcher - encouraged students to engage with the material through reflexive tasks and recreative writing: her findings depict strong reactions of anger on behalf of the survivor amongst participants from the start of the project. Moreover, as the study progressed, Moore identified increasing empathy amongst her students: students reframed knowledge developed in their analysis of the text - such as how to sensitively and intimately discuss mental health issues - in their own contexts. For example, having reflected on the protagonist's declining mental health, one student wrote an unsent letter to a friend, who they realised might be experiencing similar issues (Moore and

Begoray, 2017). Hereby, students *learnt from* the text, developing empathy, and transferred this skill into their own world.

Potentially, the fictionality of many of the texts in English education enables them to so effectively facilitate student *learning from* emotionally challenging content. Garrett (2011) codifies the practice of diverting difficult knowledge into safer, known channels as ‘rerouting’ (p.340). For example, his study reports that white teacher participants rerouted difficult conversations about how the events following Hurricane Katrina were impacted by racial prejudice through discussions about Kanye West’s statement that George Bush did not care about ethnic minorities. By focusing on popular media and public controversy, rather than the misery caused to African-Americans, Garrett posits that the white teachers managed and minimised their own feelings of discomfort. Jarvie and Burke (2015) apply this concept to literary analysis, suggesting that texts offer safe, non-threatening channels through which to explore difficult knowledge and emotionally challenging themes. Although they may reflect real life, the events of fiction act as a distancing step between students and the content because they do not actually portray genuine lived experiences (Jarvie and Burke, 2015). Here, fictionality acts as a psychologically protective measure (Jarvie and Burke, 2015). This is reminiscent of Riesco’s suggestion (2021) that emotionally challenging literature is beneficial to students as it enables them to discuss their lived experiences through the characters and events of a text: rather than having to present their own experiences openly, they can frame these as an analysis of literary characters without risk of exposing themselves.

However, an overreliance on fictionalised narratives of emotionally challenging themes may threaten the rigour of teaching (Engebretson and Weiss, 2015). Teachers may reroute difficult knowledge through the ‘superficial outcome of uplifting stories of hope and courage’ to protect students from psychological distress (Engebretson and Weiss, 2015, p.63). This may be termed an ambivalent pedagogy, which superficially intends to enact social justice but is rerouted to the point of ineffectiveness (Engebretson and Weiss, 2015). Despite their study concerning a non-fiction memoir - which presents true experiences rather than a sanitised, fictionalised version, McLean Davies and Buzacott (2022) report ambivalent pedagogy in their case study, although this term is not used; instead, they identify the negative impact of teachers’ desires to distance students from distress. In an effort to foster sensitivity and engagement amongst white students when teaching The Hate Race (Clarke, 2016) - thus, minimising the distress of black students encountering their peer’s uncomfortable views - a white teacher shared her own experiences of intense emotions when faced with prejudice (McLean Davies and Buzacott, 2022). The teacher acknowledged these emotions did not accurately mirror Clarke’s; however, she hoped to inspire white students to reflect and empathise with Clarke through her own narrative. The intention behind this strategy is clearly well-meaning; however, McLean Davies and Buzacott suggest that, in actuality, this sharing of emotions serves to dilute difficult knowledge. Therefore, this represents an ambivalent pedagogy: to achieve the ultimate goal of teaching The Hate Race (Clarke, 2016) - students *learning from* difficult knowledge - it is necessary to confront discomfort directly (McLean Davies and Buzacott, 2022; Britzman, 1998). By synthesising the findings of these studies, it is implied that non-fictional narratives may be impacted by the same pitfalls as fictional ones: for teaching to be effective, it must reflect the authentic nature of the emotionally challenging content. Whilst this may be challenging for students, to do

otherwise is to water down their experience and swerve away from true intent of engaging with emotionally challenging literature (Engebretson and Weiss, 2015).

This notwithstanding, human nature seeks to protect itself from psychological distress (Garrett, 2011). If the protective nature of fictionality when dealing with emotionally challenging literature is accepted - as research indicates - secondary analysis of McLean Davies and Buzacott's (2022) case study appears to reveal students using this to protect themselves. This offers a potential frame through which to interpret for an apparent tension in their findings. Although a teacher participant identified increased empathy amongst her students during the unit of work, she stated that they seemingly struggled to situate and consider Clarke's experiences within her context: 'they look at things through [her] eyes, but not through [her] context' (McLean Davies and Buzacott, 2022, p.373). Despite students' affective responses to Clarke's (2016) memoir, these responses were formed by divorcing the emotionally challenging content from its context and submerging it in their own. A literary memoir is inherently a product of its context (Tarc, 2011). Therefore, to separate the emotionally challenging content from its non-fictional context is impossible: students cannot be truly engaging with Clarke's experience if they do not consider the influence of her world. Subsequently, I suggest that students in McLean Davies and Buzacott's study (2022) actually treated her words like those of a fictional character, without specific time or place. If the psychological protection offered by fictional narratives is assumed, students may have (un)consciously ignored the memoir's context in order to reroute the experience through a less threatening, fictionalised channel (Garrett, 2011).

Suggestions made by Harrison et al. (2023) would characterise this as an ineffective way to process collective trauma. They state that historical trauma can only be processed in context: educators must ensure events remain contextualised throughout teaching (Harrison et al. 2023). Viewed through this lens, the students in McLean Davies and Buzacott's case study (2022) were not actually engaging with collective trauma through the memoir, but rather were exploring their affective responses on an individual level. On the other hand, students' de-contextualised interpretations of Clarke's (2016) memoir may evidence the lasting impact of historical trauma, and students' identification of a safe way to explore its ramifications on their own lives. If the pervasive nature of historical trauma - as stated by Harrison, et al. (2023) - is accepted, then students continue to feel its effects. Therefore, their transmutation of Clarke's experiences to their own world may be seen as an exploration of collective trauma as it manifests today in the lives of students.

2.2.2. Validating emotionally challenging experiences

Adverse experiences and trauma are sad facts of the classroom: Sitler (2009) states that trauma has 'always been part of teaching and learning' (p.119) and Britzman (1998) emphasises the importance of never assuming a text constitutes students' first interaction with emotionally challenging events. The frequency of adverse experiences confirms their position within the public sphere: people should be able to discuss common experiences freely (Engebretson and Weiss, 2015). Topics relegated to the personal sphere - not open for discussion in public - may be characterised as taboo (Evans, Avery and Pederson, 2000). Therefore, to omit emotionally challenging topics that occur in the public sphere from teaching is to consign them to the private sphere; hereby, they are rendered taboo and stigmatised (Engebretson and Weiss, 2015). From this perspective, teaching emotionally

challenging literature is more than beneficial: it is necessary as its exclusion may contribute to stigma and shame amongst students whose experiences are reflected in the texts. Teaching emotionally challenging content thus validates student experience (Bean, 2005). This is of particular importance as research links adverse childhood experiences with social isolation at school, both in terms of peer and staff relationships (Crosby, Day, Baroni and Somers, 2015). If traumatised students feel othered by their experiences being considered taboo, their isolation may be further compounded.

However, the positive impact of including emotionally challenging topics in classroom discussion is not universally accepted. Dutro (2011) suggests that teacher-dominated teaching of emotionally challenging literature may develop a deficit-perspective on characters with adverse experiences: teachers may ‘traffic’ in stories of misery, disseminating them without seeking feedback from those affected (Dutro, 2011, p.195). Furthermore, Engebretson and Weiss (2015) suggest that trauma-narratives may lead to students feeling pitied - and therefore othered - by their peers. Through this lens, it is the inclusion itself of emotionally challenging topics in lessons which serves to other and isolate students with adverse experiences.

Moreover, students have no control over lesson content; ergo, they have no control over whether they are expected to engage with emotionally challenging topics in lessons. Deer (2015) characterises sexual assault as the obverse of autonomy; as adverse childhood experiences are associated with powerlessness, Deer’s perspective may be applied to trauma more generally (Crosby, Howell and Thomas, 2018). Therefore, trauma-informed pedagogy must seek to facilitate student choice to restore autonomy (Jarvie and Burke, 2015; Moore, 2022; Neal, 2021). This directly opposes teacher-dominated teaching of emotionally challenging topics (Moore, 2022). Without opportunities for student control, lessons on emotionally challenging topics may further distress - or even retraumatise - students: the inclusion of emotionally challenging content itself does not constitute restoration or social justice, and may cause harm (Crosby et al., 2018). Consequently, the importance of reciprocity in teaching emotionally challenging literature is revealed: students with adverse experiences may benefit from teachers’ discussing similar experiences - emphasising the public nature of this discourse - yet teachers require student input to maintain the beneficial qualities of this discourse.

Additionally, knowledge of future exposure to emotionally challenging content may distress students with adverse experiences, negatively impacting their engagement with teaching. Wolfsdorf, Scott and Herzog’s (2019) case study depicts an accident survivor’s physical and emotional experiences arising from the foreknowledge that she must engage with a film that mirrored her accident in class: she experienced panic attacks, dizziness, and reduced cognition. This study concerns adult learners: as adolescents have not yet developed full emotional competencies - including resilience - this effect is likely to be further exacerbated in schools (Blakemore and Frith, 2005). Herewith, the importance of implementing provisions to support students with anxiety stemming from foreknowledge of future emotionally challenging teaching is established. To do this effectively, research suggests provisions must be accessible to all students: teachers are often unaware of students’ traumatic experiences (Falter and Bickmore, 2018; Moore, 2022; Neal, 2021) and must therefore navigate ‘unexploded emotions’ blindly (Darragh and Petrie, 2019, p.181).

In conclusion, research indicates the moral obligation to include emotionally challenging literature in curricula, to reflect and validate diverse experiences (Engebretson and Weiss, 2015); however, teaching strategies must be closely monitored to ensure they do not other or distress the students they seek to include (Darragh and Petrie, 2019; Wolfsdorf et al., 2019; Moore, 2022; Neal, 2021).

2.2.3. Impacts on student attainment and academic progress

The links between social and emotional learning programmes and attainment have been well-established: Durlak et al. (2011) reports US high school students' performance in standardised testing increased 11 percentage points following SEL interventions; Zins and Elias (2007) identifies increases in attainment in elementary schools; and Boyatzis and Saatchioglu (2008) correlate SEL with increased cognitive ability in university students. However, there is a distinct lack of research concerning the impact of emotionally challenging literature itself on academic outcomes. Research primarily frames emotionally challenging literature as contributing to SEL programmes - for example, the work of Jarvie and Burke (2015), Engebretson and Weiss, (2015) and McLean Davies and Buzacott (2022) - rather than investigating it in its own right. Even Moore and Begoray (2017), who investigate the impact of trauma-informed pedagogy on student writing - measure impact in terms of emotional literacy and empathy. To ascertain the value of teaching emotionally challenging content, further research is needed in this area; I aim to contribute to this field through this project.

However, some studies offer indirect comment on the impact of emotionally challenging literature on student engagement. Emotionally challenging literature appears to trigger increased student engagement, which may positively affect attainment. Moore and Begoray's (2017) findings identify immediate, intense student responses to the novel taught during their case study and increased student policing of the potentially disruptive behaviour of others during emotionally charged portions of lessons. These data indicate increased engagement triggered by the challenging nature of lesson content; Moore and Begoray suggest that students were interested by the difficult themes they encountered in lessons. Similar conclusions are drawn by Jarvie and Burke (2015), who suggest that engaging with emotionally challenging content might 'thrill' students, offering powerful means by which to ensure continued engagement (p.81). Although the scope of this project precludes an in-depth discussion of theories of student engagement and interest, and the links of these to attainment, research indicates that interest is positively correlated with engagement and future successful outcomes (Hidi and Harackiewicz, 2000; Renninger and Hidi, 2019). Accordingly, emotionally challenging content may support increased attainment by encouraging student interest in lesson content. Further research is required to adequately interrogate this hypothesis.

However, not all studies consider student interest in emotionally challenging literature as having positive origins. McLean Davies and Buzacott (2022) suggest that the extreme, racist language present in the studied memoir served to 'titillate' and 'distract' white students from *learning from* the text (p.373). Accordingly, teacher participants felt that black students were distressed by the reaction of their peers. Thus, emotionally challenging content may be seen as hindering learning on two fronts: white students were interested for the wrong reasons, leading to a distraction from their own learning and a disruption to that of black

students, who felt threatened by their behaviour (McLean Davies and Buzacott, 2022). Hereby, findings about the value of emotionally challenging content in interesting and engaging students are contradictory; this further reinforces the importance of future investigation.

2.3. How might social and emotional learning impact student literary analysis of emotionally challenging literature in English education?

The scope of this project precluded detailed examination of the general impact of SEL upon academic performance. Serving as preparatory material for my intervention, the following section considered how SEL may specifically support students to develop their analysis of emotionally challenging literature, rather than more generally build competencies for learning.

2.3.1. Developing student response

Literary analysis requires students to reflect on a range of textual aspects (Hébert, 2022); to access many textual aspects of emotionally challenging literature, students must engage with the emotional experiences and dilemmas of characters (McLean Davies and Buzacott, 2022; McTigue, et al. 2015). The skills required for this character-centred analysis are those used to identify and negotiate interactions with others in real life (Miall and Kuiken, 2002). Accordingly, SEL strategies that develop student competencies of emotional literacy and empathy may support students' literary analysis.

Whilst literature undeniably engenders emotions in readers (Hogan and Irish, 2022; Oatley, 1995; Miall and Kuiken, 2002), literary theory presents numerous understandings of the nature of reader's affective responses. Oatley (1995) posits that readers typically experience affective responses to narrative details - including characters, their actions and experiences - mimetically. If a character reacts positively, so too will the reader (Oatley, 1995). On the one hand, this may emphasise the role of emotional literacy in literary analysis: to mirror a character's affective response, readers must identify it. Indeed, research by Nikolajeva (2013) states that young people best learn from characters at the same developmental stage as them. This supports the centrality of emotional literacy to mimetic responses: characters at the same developmental stage are likely to express emotions in a similar range to adolescent readers. Therefore, adolescent readers are more likely to be able to use their SEL competencies to identify and engage with these characters' experiences than the more complex, mature emotions of more emotionally developed characters (Nikolajeva, 2013).

Conversely, mimetic affective responses may render reader's independent emotional competencies redundant. Responses may be dictated by the content they are consuming, rather than requiring personal affective engagement (Oatley, 1995). Moreover, imitation can occur without understanding the motivations of emotions being imitated, therefore requiring no emotional literacy. Oatley's research - conducted in a different discipline - considers adult readers. In the context of adolescents, the importance of imitation carries additional weight. Adolescents engage in observational learning (Bandura, 1994): their behaviour is influenced by the media they consume, as well as personal relationships (Bleakley, Ellithorpe, Hennessy, Khurana, Jamieson and Weitz, 2017). Social cognitive theory asserts that adolescents are more likely to imitate characters - fictional or non-fictional - they believe they are similar to,

whether in terms of experience, appearance or, notably for this investigation, emotional state (Hoffner and Buchanan, 2005). Although social cognitive theory largely concerns itself with the impact of audiovisual media on adolescent behaviour - excluding literature from consideration - the significant influence of characters in film/television suggests that students may also be susceptible to developing mimetic affective responses to literature. As teenagers are more likely than adults to imitate others, the relevance of Oatley's (1995) understanding of affective response to this investigation is seemingly supported.

By contrast, Miall and Kuiken (2002) emphasise the individuality of reader responses to the short story utilised in their study: although responses followed general patterns, differences between readers were marked. This rejects the characterisation of reader affective responses as mimetic: were readers simply imitating characters, arguably a greater degree of similarity would be found between reader responses.

However, the tenets of transactional reader-response theory dispute this supposition. According to transactional theorists, textual meaning is created through readers' interactions - influenced by their personal experiences and perspectives - with literary works (Rosenblatt, 1978; Ivey and Johnston, 2013). Therefore, even mimetic responses must vary between readers as each reader's world affects their understanding and interpretation of the text, creating context- and reader-specific meaning (Rosenblatt, 1978). If personal interactions with a text are key to a reader's creation of meaning, then the centrality of emotional literacy and empathy to literary analysis is established: the greater readers' capacity to identify, consider and empathise with the emotions of characters, the greater their capacity to interact with these textual aspects, generating analysis of increased nuance and depth. This is of particular importance, as Miall and Kuiken (2002) suggest that subtle, nuanced emotions are more likely to be encountered in literature than basic feelings, such as happiness, anger and sadness. Therefore, students need to leverage their emotional literacy and empathy towards characters to best access and analyse textual portrayals of complex emotions.

Moreover, fostering student affective responses may be beneficial to promoting GCSE attainment. Pearson Edexcel's 2019 examiner report states that 'many responses' in their English literature GCSE 'seemed like stock prepared answers' and did not convincingly evidence student understanding (2019b, p.14). Transactional reader-response theory suggests that this report indicates efferent teaching pedagogies (Rosenblatt, 1978): the answers offer evidence of regurgitation or fact-finding missions, rather than student personal response. This is further reiterated by cognitive linguistics theory, which characterises such responses as 'manufactured' (Giovanelli and Mason, 2018, p.3): they detail perspectives imposed on the student, rather than generated by them. Instead of promoting students' personal responses, therefore, the teaching that generated these exam responses appears to have propagated the personal responses of those responsible for curriculum design. Additionally, these manufactured responses may have originated from prepared revision resources: they would thus represent the personal responses of the team designing the resources. Regardless of the origin of the transmitted personal response, Pearson Edexcel's (2019b) report highlights a distance between students and the texts studied (Rosenblatt, 1978). Moreover, manufactured responses are not confined to assessments: Cushing (2018) cites frustration with regurgitated answers as the sole named motivation for participation in his study of transactional reader-response theory in the classroom. Therefore, pedagogies that foreground student affective responses may work to combat manufactured, efferent responses, as they necessarily require

students' personal engagement. Based on Pearson Edexcel's (2019b) report, this may have a subsequent impact on attainment because individualised response is identified as a desired outcome of teaching by the exam board.

2.3.2. Navigating interpersonal communication

If learning occurs through social interactions, any development of skills that facilitate communication and interaction must benefit learning (Daniels, 2001). Accordingly, literary analysis may be developed through classroom discussion, as it enables students to practise articulating responses and interacting with others' perspectives. In the context of emotionally challenging literature, learning interactions pose risks: participants must communicate things not usually shared in the group (Epstein and Peck, 2018; Jarvie and Burke, 2015; Darragh and Petrie, 2019). Therefore, students and teachers must possess the interpersonal skills to navigate complex interactions in emotionally charged atmospheres, if learning is to occur in these contexts (Epstein and Peck, 2018; Jarvie and Burke, 2015; Darragh and Petrie, 2019). Consequently, strategies that support students to navigate interpersonal interactions may be seen as beneficial to developing their literary analysis of emotionally challenging literature.

Effective discussion may be characterised by students' collaborative seeking of group consensus (Davidson and Edwards-Groves, 2018): this may be achieved by discussing differences and synthesising perspectives to generate understanding (Newman, 2016). However, research suggests that civil language is essential to the collaborative exploration of differing perspectives: if language devolves into incivility, connections between discussion participants may dissolve, along with their desire to further share experiences (Ferriss, 2002). Hereby, uncivil language may stymie students' development of literary analysis skills as it may halt productive discussion. Generally, social norms prompt speakers to mitigate the harshness of disagreement in their language through various linguistic markers (Davidson and Edwards-Grove, 2018); however, children employ these markers less frequently than adults (Hester and Hester, 2010; Davidson, 2012; Maynard, 1985). Research in this area primarily investigates young children or family dynamics, which are inherently different to those of the classroom; however, the heightened emotions of adolescence (Guyer, Silk and Nelson, 2016) and the tendency of adolescents to use overly harsh or aggressive language to communicate emotions - as discussed by Davidson (2012) - imply the relevance of this body of work to my investigation. I suggest that the emotionally charged atmosphere created by the study of emotionally challenging literature may render uncivil, potentially offensive outbursts more likely, as students seek to defend their perspective in the face of different - and thus, potentially challenging - views. Hereby, the quality of their learning interactions may be negatively impacted.

Therefore, SEL strategies that support students to manage conflict in discussions may be beneficial. Much research links emotional literacy and empathy with effective conflict resolution (Heydenberk and Heydenberk, 2007; Devoogd, Lane-Garon and Kralowec, 2016). This literature suggests that young people must recognise the emotions of themselves and others to identify the risk of impending conflict and de-escalate. Moreover, for effective conflict resolution, students must be able to decide the appropriate steps; emotional literacy and empathy support this decision-making (Heydenberk and Heydenberk, 2007). No research explores these notions in the context of curriculum discussion: the focus of work is largely pastoral, considering the implications of SEL programmes on wider school cultures.

However, due to the potential for emotionally challenging topics to engender intense, personal affective responses amongst students, I suggest that SEL may be implemented in a similar manner in English education (McLean Davies and Buzacott, 2022; Harrison et al., 2023). Due to the potentially threatening atmosphere that may arise from discussions of emotionally challenging literature, skills that facilitate students' identification of necessary modifications to their language may be beneficial in maintaining the positive, constructive tone of discussion, facilitating further learning. Considering research regarding the inclusion of students with prior adverse experiences - which highlights the need to prevent perceptions of being judged or ostracised - the importance of respectful discourse in developing students' analysis of emotionally challenging literature is further emphasised (Engebretson and Weiss, 2015). Any strategies that positively promote tolerant discourse and the inclusion of perspectives are likely to carry positive impacts (Crosby et al., 2018).

Furthermore, students must appreciate the classroom community's diverse experiences and consider how these affect literary analysis (Lewis and Tierney, 2011). Thein, Guise and Sloan (2015) advocate shifting away from individual-centred affective responses to texts, instead calling for sociocultural considerations of texts in the context of the emotional rules that govern classroom interactions. When participating in classroom discussions, the responses of a 16 year old participant in Thein et al.'s case study evidenced consideration of social norms: reflecting expectations of the interpretations typically shared in class, she utilised an elevated, scholarly register for whole class discussions. However, the participant shared analyses of a wider range of textual aspects using an informal, everyday register in small peer groups (Thein et al., 2015). Hereby, the knowledge generated in whole class and small group discussions was different, as the content was influenced by the rules governing these types of communication. In light of their findings, Thein et al. (2015) call for the establishment of classroom cultures that promote the sharing of literary analyses that would typically fall outside of expected classroom rules: students should feel able to express a full spectrum of emotions in whole class and small group discussions. By encouraging students to respectfully communicate knowledge usually reserved for peer-to-peer discourse with the class, the exploration of a wider range of emotional perspectives and experiences may be encouraged, transcending the typical bounds of expected classroom analyses (Thein et al., 2015; Lewis and Tierney, 2011).

Finally, students must have access to sufficient vocabulary to communicate their affective responses and analyses (DfE, 2013): as students encounter emotionally challenging texts with increasingly difficult themes, adequately communicating their analyses will demand increasing knowledge and control of emotional language (Riesco, 2021). Moreover, the relationship between vocabulary and emotional literacy is seemingly reciprocal: vocabulary aids students to not only express emotions - experienced by themselves or others - but also to conceptualise them (Schwering, Ghaffari-Nikou, Zhao, Niedenthal, and MacDonald, 2021). Nook, Stavish, Sasse, Lambert, Mair, McLaughlin and Somerville (2020) emphasise that the refining of emotional competencies continues well into adulthood. Therefore, the importance of emotional vocabulary instruction for adolescents is emphasised: as adolescence represents a watershed of emotional development (Guyer et al., 2016), students need greater vocabularies to express the new ideas they encounter as their emotional skills develop, but also to help them develop these skills in the first place (Sturrock and Freed, 2023). Therefore, strategies that aim to develop students' emotional vocabularies may

improve not only their communication skills, but also support them to develop increasingly nuanced understandings of emotions that may be applied to literary analysis (Storey, 2019; Riesco, 2021). Moreover, student attainment in English is ultimately dictated by their ability to communicate their analyses in written exams. Therefore, the impact of emotional vocabulary on student communication is threefold: vocabulary allows students to engage with emotional concepts; to contribute their ideas to verbal learning interactions; and to write down their ideas. Herewith, the importance of strategies to develop emotional vocabulary in English education are emphasised.

Following this literature review, I reframed the research questions for my investigation:

1. What are student perceptions of emotionally challenging topics in English literature education?
2. To what extent did students exhibit affective responses to literature prior to the intervention?
3. How did SEL classroom strategies that foreground the development of affective responses affect students' analysis?

3. Investigation Design

3.1. Research Approach

Baumfield, Wall and Hall (2013) highlight teachers' position to improve learner outcomes by adapting practice to specific contexts; action research cycles are well-suited to evaluate adaptations in situ (Baumfield et al., 2013; Bassey, 1998). However, my department's centralised curriculum precluded multiple action research cycles. As units must be completed in specific timeframes to align with centralised assessments, there are limited opportunities to collect data from the whole group. Moreover, I have no choice over the texts I teach: the investigation was thus confined to one unit, as the following was unlikely to pose emotional challenge. Therefore, I conducted this investigation as a single-cycle practitioner research project,

Reflecting the priorities of action research, I utilised pre-testing to develop my understanding of my context (Baumfield et al., 2013): how students respond affectively to emotionally challenging literature; whether their responses posed barriers to analysis; and where research indicates they might benefit from SEL. Pre-intervention questionnaire data then informed my intervention design. For a full investigation timeline, see Appendix One.

During the intervention, data was collected via two methods: observation forms and students' written work. This approach had two purposes. By reducing the risk of bias associated with single data collection methods, the findings of multimethod research are more likely to be valid and reliable (Denscombe, 2008). Secondly - and more importantly - multimethod design reduces the risk that participants might feel overburdened by research, a key research priority (Mills, 2001). In the context of my school's centralised curriculum and assessments, students were already at risk of feeling burdened by receiving different lessons from their peers. Therefore my data collection methods were designed to impose only on

students' time during the course of the pre-interview questionnaire. Further data was collected by observers and myself without additional student input.

Additionally, the potential burden for students led me to eschew interviews as a data collection method. Whilst research suggests that students are better able to express themselves verbally than in writing (Goldstein, 2017), interviews are necessarily time-intensive (Cohen et al., 2018). Moreover, I was cognizant of my research's sensitive nature: I was concerned that students might feel compelled - but not feel comfortable - to share information in an interview (Cohen et al., 2018). I discussed these concerns with the school counsellor; citing similar ethical concerns, she advised against interviews.

3.2. Participant selection

Several factors contributed to the selection of my Year 9 class for participation in my project.

From a practical perspective, the Year 9 curriculum required the teaching of Romeo and Juliet at a suitable time. The text's themes facilitate the discussion of emotionally challenging issues and the foregrounding of affective responses. Therefore, this group's participation enabled me to conduct my intervention without significantly deviating from the curriculum.

I conducted the investigation shortly after joining the school. Considerations about how student affective responses might be influenced by existing perceptions of their teacher were therefore not relevant. There was no advantage or disadvantage to selecting this group from this perspective.

All students in the class (27) participated in the investigation.

3.3. Intervention Design

Intervention activities were designed to support students' affective engagement with the text - primarily through encouraging empathy with characters - and encourage them to utilise affective responses to inform verbal and written analysis. Activities aimed at developing empathetic responses varied and were designed in collaboration with the school counsellor (see Section 3.5.1). Sessions involved: direct instruction of Shakespearean or modern context; the exploration of relevant contemporary newspaper articles; the use of film clips; and reflective discussion. Students were then asked to reflect on their learning and produce a written response. Intervention topics and activities are detailed in Appendix Two and resources in Appendix Three.

Whilst intervention activities deviated from the centralised unit plan, I strategically planned sessions to mitigate potential disadvantages. I did not alter any general lesson foci: instead, where sessions lent themselves to exploration of affective responses, I adapted the activities students completed. Where dictated lesson content did not lend itself to the exploration of emotions and motivations, I prioritised developing skills that students would explicitly be assessed on.

3.4. Methods

3.4.1. Data Collection

3.4.1.1. Questionnaire

Students completed the pre-intervention questionnaire using the school's Google Forms platform during an English lesson (Appendix Four). Ideally, students would have completed the questionnaire under the supervision of an unconnected member of staff, in order to distance me - as teacher-researcher - from the investigation. This may have reduced the risk of students feeling compelled to respond or trying to please me with their responses, rather than answering honestly (Brooks, Te Riele and Maguire, 2014; Cohen et al., 2018). However, this was impossible due to staffing constraints.

Research links online questionnaires with increased non-completion rates versus paper questionnaires: the lack of a visual indicator of the questionnaire's length may frustrate participants or they may consider an online questionnaire 'spam' and take it less seriously (Cohen et al., 2018, p.362). Nevertheless, my school's culture rendered Google Forms an appropriate data collection method: students' regular assessments involve online questionnaires administered in class; students are therefore used to completing questionnaires of significant length and assigning value to these.

The questionnaire consisted of two sections. The first section assessed students' affective responses to literature and film. Due to the nebulous and subjective nature of affective response, its measurement is challenging. Therefore, I adapted a validated questionnaire - Fischer and Fischer's (2006) Affective Response to Literature Survey (ARLS) - to promote construct validity. This tool was re-evaluated by Taylor, Fischer and Taylor (2009), confirming its suitability. The ARLS measures respondents' affective responses in four categories through Likert-scale questions: 'reflective synthesis', 'empathetic response', 'processing emotions' and 'acting with volition' (Fischer and Fischer, 2006, p.271).

As research suggests that closed questions reduce the burden on participants and facilitate completion, I replicated the ARLS' 5-point Likert-scale design (Cohen et al., 2018). Some adaptation of the question content was necessary to render the ARLS suitable for my context: it was originally designed for use with undergraduates.

Firstly, the ARLS' 'acting with volition' questions concern political and organisational affiliation: I removed this section from my questionnaire due to its irrelevance in my context.

Secondly, the ARLS only considers affective responses to literature. My literature review identified film as a potential vehicle to encourage students' affective response; consequently, I wished to investigate differences between students' responses to film and literature (Cooke and Frieze, 2015; Harrison et al., 2023). Therefore, I duplicated the ARLS questions, changing the focus to film.

Thirdly, the ARLS only generates quantitative responses. As responses to open-ended questions consist of data generated by participants, they work to reduce researcher bias and may indicate interpretations formerly unconsidered (Cohen et al., 2018). Therefore, I included supplementary open-ended questions in my questionnaire. These typically requested examples or justifications of responses to previous quantitative responses. However, as open-ended questions carry an increased cognitive burden for participants, the questionnaire did not require responses for progression (Cohen et al., 2018).

Finally, I evaluated the accessibility of the ARLS' vocabulary in collaboration with another teacher. Where necessary, simpler and less ambiguous vocabulary was adopted in my questionnaire. This is in line with Cohen et al.'s (2018) caution that complex language might confuse participants, leading to unreliable data.

My questionnaire's second section consisted of open-ended questions that required participants to comment on the emotions and motivations of characters in the opening scenes of Romeo and Juliet. An inherent limitation of questionnaires is that responses are self-reported; this may reduce the validity and reliability of responses (Cohen et al., 2018). This section intended to address this concern: students wrote about characters, inadvertently revealing their affective responses and understanding of their motivations and emotions. Hereby, student perceptions of their own responses did not colour the data as it might have in the self-reported ARLS-style questions. These qualitative responses were then compared with the quantitative ARLS-style data to identify any tensions.

3.4.1.2. Observations and student written work

In collaboration with another teacher, I developed a simple observation form to track students' affective responses in intervention sessions (Appendix Five). The simplicity of the form enabled even unfamiliar staff to collect quantitative and qualitative data with minimal training. Moreover, the form facilitated mid-session recording of my own observations with little disruption to my teaching. Hereby, it minimised data loss.

The form consisted of tally boxes - to record student behaviours associated with SEL and affective responses - and space for qualitative notes, such as comments or behaviour that could not be coded by the observer mid-session. Based on my initial observations, I updated the form once during the intervention to collect data on student exclamations.

The subjectivity of coding required by the form was a potential limitation. To mitigate this, I met with observers prior to their observations to train them in the use of the form and give examples of how behaviours and observations might be coded. Unfortunately, only Sessions 3 and 5 were observed by collaborators. However, their use of the form produced consistent data. As the majority of observation forms were completed by me, it is unlikely that this limitation has substantially impacted my data, although researcher bias may have influenced the behaviours and responses I recorded (Cohen et al., 2018).

Moreover, as I was teaching simultaneously, it is likely that some behaviours were overlooked or forgotten. Therefore, I chose to consider student written responses to generate further data. Following written tasks, I reviewed and coded each piece of work for analysis (see Section 3.4.2). Students' work was associated with their name in order to track trends throughout the intervention.

3.4.2. Data Analysis

Quantitative data generated both through the questionnaire and observation forms were exported to Google Sheets for analysis and visualisation.

Drawing on Elliott (2018), inductive coding was used to enable the analysis of qualitative data collected from questionnaires, observation forms and student work. Inductive coding reflected the variety of student responses, allowing analysis to explore my qualitative

data: a predetermined deductive frame may not have uncovered the breadth of perspectives expressed by participants (Cohen et al., 2018).

3.5. Collaboration

3.5.1. School Counsellor

British Educational Research Association (BERA) ethical guidelines (2018) stipulate it is researchers' responsibility to avoid causing harm to participants and to implement processes to manage inadvertent participant distress (BERA, 2018). I ensured the compliance of my project by collaborating with the school counsellor, Milica (pseudonym).

Firstly, Milica identified students at particular risk of finding elements of the text emotionally challenging. In accordance with school policy on sharing student information, Milica identified topics that had the potential to cause distress for students in the group and the number - but not identity - of students potentially affected (Figure One). As the play is taught to all Year 9 students, it was deemed 'necessary and proportionate' to only share specific information in certain cases (DfE, 2018, p.9). Where appropriate, Milica provided additional information, including potential triggers, reactions and personalised support strategies.

Secondly, Milica helped address my responsibility to create a safe environment for students: this includes protecting student wellbeing during discussions of emotionally challenging topics (DfE, 2021). Her professional judgement informed my intervention design so that tasks were appropriate and facilitated the involvement of all students, including those with adverse or traumatic experiences. Throughout my project, we met several times to discuss trauma-informed techniques and how these might be applied in the classroom. After I had designed intervention resources, Milica reviewed them for potentially triggering material and suggested any necessary adjustments.

Finally, Milica's support enabled me to comply with BERA (2018) ethical guidelines regarding the provision of systems to manage participant distress. As students may have been more comfortable discussing emotions prompted by my intervention with a third party - rather than me, due to the power imbalance inherent to our relationship - I reiterated their access to one-on-one counselling through Milica and a regular drop-in session was made available to students participating in the project throughout its duration.

3.5.2. Teachers

To enhance the reliability and validity of my data, I collaborated with several teachers.

Firstly, I collaborated to pilot the pre-intervention questionnaire. The teacher-collaborator evaluated the questionnaire's accessibility. Following the pilot, vocabulary adjustments were made to improve this, removing ambiguity.

Secondly, I collaborated with another teacher familiar with practitioner research to design and pilot my observation form (see Section 3.4.1.2). The teacher-collaborator identified areas where too much knowledge of SEL or individual students in the group was required for the uninitiated to complete the form: these sections were adapted.

Due to industrial action and collaborators' workloads, collaboration with other observers was restricted to two occasions: Sessions 3 and 5 (see Appendix Two). The observers were able to use the form effectively, despite minimal knowledge of the project. Moreover, the simplicity of the form enabled me to complete it partially whilst delivering sessions. Where necessary, I completed my notes directly afterwards. This promoted data acquisition and was therefore beneficial during all sessions of my intervention.

3.6. Further ethical considerations

Best practices for ethical research were central throughout my investigation. I followed BERA (2018) guidelines at all stages of planning and delivery. My investigation was approved by the university's ethics committee (Ethics Approval Reference: CIA-2223-067).

3.6.1. Informed consent

Prior to the project's start, I sought informed consent from all parties.

Firstly, I provided my headteacher and head of department with an outline of the project and sought their consent in writing (Appendix Six). This was granted without the need for further clarification.

By relying solely on parent/carer consent for students' participation, research risks undermining children's autonomy (Cavet and Sloper, 2004; Coyne, 2010). Therefore, I sought students' consent before approaching their parents/carers; this aimed to avoid unnecessary contact had students withdrawn themselves. As the investigation involved an adaptation of teaching practices, students in the class were necessarily participants in the intervention; however, allowing their data to be analysed and published was entirely voluntary. Using a script developed with the university's ethics committee, I informed students about the project, emphasised their right to withdraw at any point without consequence, and sought consent (Appendix Seven). No students withdrew their data from the project.

Finally, I informed parents/carers about the investigation and sought consent to process their child's data via email, in accordance with school policy (Appendix Eight). Due to participants' age, I was able to gather consent using an opt-out form: research associates opt-out forms with higher participation rates in school research, informing my choice (Totura, Kutash, Labouliere and Karver, 2017). No parents/carers returned this form.

3.6.2. Burden on participants

From a deontological perspective, research should *do no harm* (Cohen, et al., 2018). This was crucial to my investigation as my intervention involved deviation from established department practices: were the intervention non-beneficial, students might be disadvantaged in comparison to their peers through the loss of lesson time. Research indicates that concerns about covering content are a key source of student stress (Roome and Soan, 2019). In the context of my school's centralised assessment, I felt a particular obligation to ensure my students were not - and did not feel - disadvantaged by their participation in my project.

From a consequentialist perspective, however, the potential benefits of my investigation justified its pursuit (Cohen et al., 2018). Accordingly, I implemented steps to

mitigate any potential disruption to students' study. I limited the intervention to seven strategically timed sessions, where affective responses were most relevant: this enabled me to maintain the focus on close language analysis - the skill prioritised in centralised assessments - elsewhere in the unit, whilst gathering sufficient data. Moreover, I consistently linked intervention sessions to assessment criteria, ensuring that students felt able to use the knowledge from intervention sessions during assessments.

Additionally, participation in my investigation may have carried an emotional burden: the focus required student engagement with potentially distressing themes. To mitigate this, I collaborated with the school counsellor (see Section 3.5.1). Furthermore, I applied Cohen et al.'s (2018) guidelines for sensitive research: I handled responses sensitively and non-judgmentally; distanced myself - as the students' teacher - as much as possible from data collection to prevent compelling participation; and reiterated their ability to withdraw data from analysis without consequence.

3.6.3. Researcher positionality

My position as a practitioner-researcher demands consideration. Due to the inherent power imbalance in student-teacher relationships (Babione, 2015), ensuring voluntary participation was paramount (Cohen et al., 2018). I therefore sought to mitigate the risk of students feeling compelled to participate in the project.

Constraints in the school environment prevented a colleague from supervising students as they completed the questionnaire: this would have distanced me from the research. Rather, I emphasised that participation in the questionnaire was voluntary and there would be no consequences for non-completion or future withdrawal from the study. All students chose to complete the questionnaire.

Additionally, my position as teacher-researcher may have impacted the authenticity and honesty of students' responses: they may have sought to please me with their answers (Leeson, 2014; Hurworth, 2012). Moreover, students may have felt uncomfortable sharing personal information in the questionnaire knowing that I would analyse the data. Sudman and Bradburn (1982) suggest that the quasi-anonymity offered by questionnaires - where participants feel distanced from the research by the questionnaire - may encourage honesty; however, they also note that the threat posed by sensitive items cannot be entirely erased and honesty cannot be guaranteed. My professional relationship with participants may have exacerbated this effect and has implications for not only my findings, but also participant wellbeing (Cohen et al., 2018).

Moreover, I am obliged to report safeguarding information, an additional complexity in my positionality: teachers cannot promise confidentiality (DfE, 2023a). I reminded participants of this before they completed the questionnaire. However, I expressed that data would only be shared if necessary. This notwithstanding, students may have felt uncomfortable sharing information they knew might be passed on, even if this was in their best interests. However, it is worth noting that all researchers have the obligation to report safeguarding concerns, so this issue is not inherent to my investigation (DfE, 2023b).

3.6.4. Data protection

Participant privacy and confidentiality was upheld in my project, in line with the safeguarding policy of the school. Data was not anonymised at the point of collection to enable me to report concerns if necessary. However, this report utilises pseudonyms throughout to protect the privacy of participants and the school.

In accordance with school policy, all digital data were stored in the school's secure cloud: only I have access to these. Hard copy data were stored securely in my office: only I have access to this. Teacher-collaborators had access only to clean copies of the questionnaire and observation forms, as well as those they completed. I outlined the importance of participant privacy prior to observations.

4. Findings and Discussion

For the purpose of brevity and clarity, the following section outlines my findings and the discussion of these in light of subject literature. Figures visualising my data are located in Figures, page 76.

4.1. What are student perceptions of emotionally challenging topics in English literature education?

4.1.1. Do students consider topics discussed in English lessons emotionally challenging?

My data revealed no consensus amongst participants as to whether they found English lessons emotionally challenging: questionnaire responses were evenly distributed across all Likert-scale points (Figure Two). Nevertheless, 10 participants responded that certain topics discussed made them uncomfortable. Consequently, my findings confirmed my investigation's relevance to improving practice. If humans naturally seek to protect themselves from distress (Garrett, 2011), it is likely that students' engagement with lesson content is negatively impacted by their discomfort: research suggests that they may refrain from deep consideration of emotionally challenging topics as a protective measure (Jarvie and Burke, 2015). Subsequently, the quality of their analysis may be reduced as *learning from a text is impossible without developing insight through personal consideration* (Britzman, 1998). Therefore, my findings suggest that strategies to mitigate student discomfort may remove barriers to literary analysis in my context.

Supporting research by Sitler (2009) and Britzman (1998), a qualitative response revealed that a student perceived emotional challenge in literature due to an experience hitherto unknown to the school. The student wrote that Haddon's (2004) The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time 'was hard to read because it related closely to a bad part of [her] life': she reported being upset by the text's portrayal of autism, as her sister had been recently diagnosed. I reviewed this response with Milica and pastoral staff: all were unaware of the student's experiences. Therefore, my findings revealed a student's 'unexploded emotions' (Darragh and Petrie, 2019, p.181), thus aligning with research that emphasises the potential opacity surrounding students' adverse experiences (Britzman, 1998). My findings highlight that teachers must navigate emotionally challenging topics without full

pastoral information to ensure student emotional well-being (Britzman, 1998; Darragh and Petrie, 2019).

However, this was the only qualitative response that directly linked an adverse experience with emotional challenge when consuming literature. Identifying further examples of this pattern in my data was impossible. Firstly, the student's response highlighted that Milica's data did not provide a full picture of potentially adverse student experiences. Secondly, Milica's data was anonymised to comply with school safeguarding policy (Figure One). Therefore, students with multiple adverse experiences may have featured multiple times in her data, rendering it impossible to compare Milica's dataset with questionnaire responses. Consequently, my data did not confirm conclusively whether students with adverse experiences are more likely to find English emotionally challenging.

Moreover, my quantitative findings could not reliably suggest that more students have adverse experiences than the school is aware of, though this was present in the qualitative data: all students reporting discomfort in English in closed questions may have been accounted for in Milica's data. Further research in this area - transparently comparing student experiences of emotionally challenging content in English with their histories of adverse experiences - would help in ensuring that developed programmes adequately address the needs of students reporting discomfort: students with trauma are likely to require different pedagogy than their peers who find topics uncomfortable for other reasons (Neal, 2021). In my current context, however, this research is too ethically complex to conduct.

4.1.2. Which topics did students consider emotionally challenging?

Qualitative questionnaire responses identified that students perceived the following topics as emotionally challenging: sexual violence, prejudice, racism, suicide, and unspecified abuse and emotional content (Figure Three). Portrayals of sexual violence, including child and forced marriage, were sources of particular discomfort. Consequently, my findings largely aligned with subject literature, which frequently highlights the potential for the topics of suicide, racial prejudice and sexual violence to distress students (Moore, 2022; McLean Davies and Buzacott, 2022; Darragh and Petrie, 2019).

Despite the similarities between my findings and contemporary research, it is perhaps surprising how closely my data reflected themes explored in *Romeo and Juliet*. McLean Davies and Buzacott (2022) emphasise that texts presenting racial prejudice are particularly emotionally challenging for students of colour: it is thus notable that the diverse group of participants - 15 of 27 are not white, with numerous ethnicities represented - only referred to literary depictions of racism as a source of discomfort twice in the questionnaire. Furthermore, my school's Year 8 English curriculum focuses on identity, ethnicity and colonialism in literature: students have all been exposed to portrayals of racial prejudice in English lessons. Therefore, the extent to which my findings aligned with the research of McLean Davies and Buzacott is limited: adopting their perspective, one might expect higher numbers of references to racism in my findings, from a group where this theme may sadly resonate. Moreover, in the term before my project began, students studied First World War literature. Political conflict and the mistreatment of people during war are cited as potential sources of emotional challenge in subject literature (Darragh and Petrie, 2019); these themes were conspicuously absent from my findings, despite their discussion in our classroom.

On the one hand, the recency effect may explain the absence of references to conflict and limited references to racism in my data (Cohen et al., 2018): students may have been less inclined to recall their perceptions of topics studied in previous years and terms than the current. Due to timing constraints, students completed the questionnaire after one lesson on Romeo and Juliet. As Act 1 Scene 1 contains aggressive and misogynistic language - 'I will push Montague's men from the wall, and thrust his maids to the wall' (Shakespeare, 1597/2005, 1.1.15-17) - student perceptions of sexual violence in literature were much more recent than racism or war, potentially biasing questionnaire responses (Cohen et al., 2018).

Additional limitations in my investigation design may further illuminate the tension between subject literature and my findings. Students may have felt directed by me to include this content in their questionnaire responses: having just had a lesson discussing issues of sexual violence, it is possible they thought this would be a desired response. This interpretation is supported by Hurworth (2012) and Leeson (2014), who suggest that children are inclined to give answers they think researchers want rather than responding authentically. It is likely this effect is further exacerbated by my position as the students' teacher (Cohen et al., 2018). Herein lies a limitation of my research: although every attempt was made to encourage students to view the project as independent from my role as their teacher, this was difficult to achieve in reality and may have skewed findings.

However, I posit that the reputation of Romeo and Juliet may have played a role in the overemphasis of its themes in my data. Despite the fact that students had only one lesson on Romeo and Juliet prior to taking the questionnaire, it is unlikely that the students' first interaction with Romeo and Juliet was through my lessons. In the context of the play's omnipresence in modern and popular culture (Kern Paster, 2021), it is probable that students were aware of the plot and some of the key themes before studying it in school. This is rendered even more probable by the fact that the play has been taught to previous Year 9 cohorts, so students may have spoken to older peers about their experiences. On the one hand, this supports the previously noted interpretation that student responses were guided by a desire to please me, as teacher-researcher: they knew what they would be studying so had the foreknowledge needed to provide relevant, pleasing responses (Cohen et al., 2018). However, my findings may also be interpreted as emphasising the need for strategies that support students to manage anxiety that may precede studying a text with known emotionally challenging themes. This is in alignment with the conclusions of Wolfsdorf et al. (2019), who assert that even adults can be distressed by the thought of future discussions about triggering content. This is likely amplified amongst children, who typically have lower levels of emotional resilience (Blakemore and Frith, 2005). Therefore, my findings indicated that particular attention should be paid to texts that have themes of sexual or gendered violence, especially when students are likely to have some awareness of these in advance.

Further investigation is required to identify whether limitations in my investigation design contributed to participants' focus on sexual violence and omission or minimisation of other topics: this would be possible by replicating the questionnaire during a unit of work focussing on different emotionally challenging topics and comparing responses with my findings.

4.2. To what extent did students exhibit affective responses to literature prior to the intervention?

4.2.1. Affective responses to literature

Analysis of quantitative responses to questions modelled on Fischer and Fischer's (2006) ARLS indicated that students reported exhibiting affective responses to literature prior to my intervention (Figure Four). Interestingly, my findings closely mirrored those of Taylor et al.'s (2009) use of the ARLS with undergraduates, also included in Figure Four. Some variation notwithstanding, my participants' mean scores were commonly higher than those of Taylor et al.'s adult participants, indicating greater affective responses. Notably, my data reported greater responses than Taylor et al.'s among questions designed to identify empathetic responses and participants' processing of emotions through literature. Therefore, my findings seemingly contrast with research suggesting that adolescents do not possess fully developed competencies of empathy (Blakemore and Frith, 2005): my data indicate that participants respond affectively to literature in similar ways to adults. Therefore, my quantitative findings suggest that my students possess the requisite SEL skills to access and analyse emotionally challenging literature.

However, analysis of qualitative responses to open-ended questions designed to supplement the ARLS-style questions revealed tension between my qualitative and quantitative data. Despite the prompt 'When I read sad literature, it can make me feel upset' generating the lowest mean score in the empathetic responses category, qualitative responses regarding what triggered students' affective responses to literature most commonly cited loss and grief (Figure Five). By contrast, prompts regarding positive emotions and laughter had the highest mean scores, yet qualitative responses only referred to humour on three occasions (Figure Five). Therefore, qualitative responses did not reflect students' quantitative questionnaire scores.

Moreover, considering that my students' scores on the ARLS-styled questions in the empathetic responses category were higher than Taylor et al.'s (2009) participants', it is notable that responses to open-ended questions considering the motivations and emotions of characters in Act 1 Scene 1 of *Romeo and Juliet* indicated low levels of empathy (Figure Six). For example: 17 of 27 responses to a question regarding Gregory and Sampson's potential emotions during their altercation only expressed some variation of 'I don't know'. On the one hand, these responses might be manifestations of participants' tendency to avoid answering open-ended questions (Cohen et al., 2018). Although responses to open-ended questions were not required for participants to progress through the survey - informed by Cohen et al. - centralised assessments do require answers. Therefore, the context of my school appears to have compelled students to answer these open-ended questions: students may have felt they had to write something to progress through the questionnaire. On the other hand, a similar lack of engagement with characters' emotions was visible in other responses, suggesting that this cannot solely be attributed to questionnaire design. Of the responses relating to Gregory and Sampson's emotions, five referred to general 'excitement', without further elaboration. Secondly, when asked to consider how an audience might respond to the scene, only eight responses indicated that perceptions might be negative (Figure Seven). Findings from elsewhere in my questionnaire identify that themes of sexual violence were perceived by students to be particularly emotionally challenging (see Section 4.1.2, Figure

Three). Hereby, it seems incongruous that the majority of participants did not suggest that an audience might be troubled by Gregory and Samson's sexually violent language, especially as the class had discussed their exchange at length in the preceding lesson. Therefore, qualitative responses to questions regarding character motivations and emotions in my questionnaire concur with research that suggests that empathy develops fully first after adolescence, although the relevance of this research to my context is seemingly negated by my quantitative data (Blakemore and Frith, 2005)

Potentially, the tension in my findings might be explained by the self-reporting of responses. Cohen et al. (2018) emphasise that self-reported data may not be valid: participants may not be self-aware enough to answer questions accurately, or may be governed by ulterior motives. In my context, the desire to please me - as teacher-researcher - is likely to have had an effect (Cohen et al., 2018), as might question design: students may have found it easier to identify and give what they considered to be desired responses in questions that utilised a Likert-scale, whereas they had no prompts to guide their answers to open-ended questions.

Alternatively, the tension might emphasise my students' need for SEL strategies that support development of the communication skills necessary to write (and talk) about emotions. This interpretation is supported by Riesco's (2021) research, which states that students require increasingly complex emotional vocabulary as they develop greater emotional competencies. Particularly in the context of my questionnaire - which was completed in silence and without the word banks and sentence starters typically available to students during written tasks - students may have struggled to express fully their ideas.

Consequently, consideration of students' empathy and exploration of character motivations in the early stages of the intervention may be beneficial: students are often able to better express themselves verbally than in writing, so verbal comments may offer a more accurate picture of their empathy than written inputs (Goldstein, 2017). Observation notes from the beginning of the first intervention session identified a tendency for students to utilise uncivil language to communicate their reactions to the text. Several students expressed disgust towards practices of child marriage and the characters of Paris and Capulet: 'paedo', 'that's sick'; 'how can someone do that to their own kid?'; 'twisted'. The effect of intervention activities is further discussed in Section 4.3.2.1; however, it is notable that these exclamations persisted despite my reiterating that these practices were normal in the context of the text. My findings therefore mirrored those of McLean Davies and Buzacott's (2022) case study: they reported that the student-participants struggled to consider the author's experiences in the context of the text itself, rather translating these into their own worlds. As my findings suggest that students who made these exclamations struggled to consider the perspectives of characters from different cultures, they may be seen as indicating a lack of empathy (McLean Davies and Buzacott, 2022). In the context of my school community, this is particularly notable. The school counsellor's data shows that two students in the group have personal experience of forced marriage (Figure One). This information may not be known in the class; however, it is openly discussed that arranged marriage is an accepted practice in cultures some students belong to. For example, the personal, social and health (PSH) curriculum - delivered in tutor time to all students - explicitly covers the difference between forced and arranged marriages. As this scene portrays Capulet arranging a consensual marriage for Juliet - he states that '[his] will to [Juliet's] consent is but a part'

Shakespeare, 1597/2015, 1.2.17) - students should have been aware that negative language about arranged marriage - rather than child marriage - had the potential to offend their peers. Therefore, offensive exclamations may be seen as evidencing a lack of empathy towards not only characters in Shakespeare's context, but also students' peers.

Nevertheless, seven qualitative responses across the questionnaire did indicate empathy with characters in students' affective responses to literature. Analysis of these associated empathetic responses with student perceptions of the text as relating to their own context. For example, the afore-discussed 'sad[ness]' of a student arose from her relating a portrayal of autism to her sister. Another student wrote of his personal connection with a novel: 'it doesn't have a good ending which is telling the truth since [he is] Afghan and it is based in Afghanistan. Having good endings isn't really common there. [sic]'. Hereby, my findings further aligned with those of McLean Davies and Buzacott (2022): a teacher-participant in their case study stated that students could consider the author's experiences through their own cultural lens.

In McLean Davies and Buzacott's (2022) research, similar behaviour was deemed to evidence students' reduced analysis of the emotionally challenging text: by understanding the text from their perspectives, students were arguably not acknowledging the cultural trauma presented in the memoir (McLean Davies and Buzacott, 2022). However, that this case study investigated student responses to the teaching of a memoir reduces the relevance of this interpretation to my investigation. Arguably, analysis of fiction texts does not require readers to engage directly with the author's context: whilst this may illuminate aspects of the text, the text may be considered aesthetically in its own right (Hébert, 2022). Thus, students' use of their own frames of reference to develop affective responses to literature does not preclude engagement with key textual aspects, as it might with memoir, where authorial context might be central to communicate meaning. Indeed, my data evidenced the principles of transactional reader-response theory in students' analysis: their affective responses to relatable content show that meaning was created through the interaction of texts with students' experiences (Rosenblatt, 1978; Ivey and Johnston, 2013). Therefore, transactional reader-response theory suggests that my students' affective responses absolutely reflect effective literary analysis.

Nevertheless, by considering a wide range of textual aspects - including how the text operates beyond readers' contexts and experiences - students may develop their literary analysis, accessing additional interpretations and nuance (Hébert, 2022). Therefore, promoting the development of the SEL skills required to empathise with characters distanced from students' own experiences may be considered an appropriate goal for English literature education (McLean Davies and Buzacott, 2022; Engebretson and Weiss, 2015). Consequently, my findings and those of McLean Davies and Buzacott suggest that promoting affective responses to textual aspects the students can relate to may provide a valuable step towards achieving empathetic reactions to a text that function beyond the limits of the students' perspectives.

4.2.2. Differences between affective responses to film and literature

Quantitative questionnaire data reveal that students reported slightly greater affective responses to film/television than literature. Across questions adapted from Fischer and

Fischer's (2006) ARLS, mean responses for film/television were approximately 0.5 greater than literature following average five-point Likert-scale analysis (Figure Four). This pattern was consistent across each question group. Therefore, film appears more effective than literature at generating various forms of affective responses: consuming film/television encourages greater reflexivity, opportunities to process emotions and promotes empathy.

This consistent pattern in my findings reflects Cooke and Frieze's (2015) assertions that audio-visual media increases students' affective responses; accordingly, my data runs contrary to those of Harrison et al. (2023), who suggest that film and literature influence students' affective responses to the same extent. Therefore, research suggesting that adolescents lack literacy of non-linguistic cues is seemingly refuted by my findings (Dickson and Burton, 2011): the audio and visual qualities of film may have contributed to the reported increase in affective responses, supporting Cooke and Frieze.

That film triggers greater affective responses than literature was mirrored in respondent perceptions: 13 respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they experienced emotions when watching film/television, whereas only five respondents agreed or strongly agreed to the equivalent question concerning literature (Figure Four). However, my quantitative and qualitative questionnaire data did not align. Many more examples of literature that trigger emotional responses were given than films/television: the 23 responses providing examples of texts that caused the students to feel emotion cited 40 different texts or series of texts. By contrast, the 16 responses to the equivalent question regarding film/TV generated only 24 different films/television series. This suggests that students were more easily able to think of literature that had caused them to experience emotions than film.

This tension may be attributed to participants' desire to please me (Cohen et al., 2018): students may have believed that I valued responses referencing literature more than film. However, the tension might also indicate that the difference between film and literature's ability to prompt affective response is not as marked as students perceive: despite the lower scores for literature in the self-reported quantitative data, they were able to recall more literature that they felt triggered emotions. Moreover, numerous texts referenced were studied in previous cycles and years at school: therefore, this data is less likely to be affected by recency bias (Cohen et al., 2018). Therefore, my qualitative findings evidenced the lasting impact of affective responses to literature amongst participants.

4.3. How did strategies which foreground affective responses affect students' analysis?

4.3.1. Written Responses

Throughout the intervention, students produced written responses that considered character emotions and motivations. These responses represented an improvement in literary analysis: as discussed in Section 4.2.1, in the pre-intervention questionnaire the majority of responses to questions regarding character motivations in *Romeo and Juliet* were variations of 'I don't know' (Figure Six). Subsequently, all students - regardless of prior attainment level - responded to each writing prompt. No responses stated 'I don't know' without offering justifications that explored potential factors.

Analysis of written responses revealed that students' use of tentative language to explore character emotions and motivations increased throughout the project: modal verbs -

‘may’, ‘might’ or ‘could’ - and adverbs - ‘potentially’, ‘maybe’ or ‘on the other hand’ - occurred more frequently in responses written in later intervention sessions (Figure Eight). By contrast, students’ use of definite language - such as adverbs that imply certainty - ‘just’ and ‘obviously’ - decreased. For example, when questioned in the first intervention session about why Paris might want to marry Juliet, a student wrote that Paris ‘just wants money and a young wife’. When asked about the Capulets’ and Montagues’ decisions to reconcile following Romeo and Juliet’s suicides in the final intervention session, the same student wrote that ‘they might have [reconciled] because they felt shame, or maybe they need to talk to each other because they had the same experience’.

Students’ use of tentative language revealed consideration of alternative interpretations of characters’ motivation and emotions: by eschewing singular, definite conclusions, students acknowledged the complexity of motivations for behaviour, and the multitudinous factors that influence this. McLean Davies and Buzacott (2022) and McTigue et al. (2015) characterise engaging with characters’ dilemmas as central to successful analysis of emotionally challenging literature. My intervention may therefore be seen as successful in supporting students’ literary analysis, as written exploration of alternative interpretations clearly evidences engagement with the characters’ dilemmas.

Arguably, students’ consideration of alternative interpretations of character motivations suggests that Oatley’s (1995) theory of affective responses as mimetic in nature does not apply in my context: students presented different options to explain character behaviour and therefore cannot have been simply imitating affective responses portrayed in the text. Whether the apparent absence of mimetic affective responses constitutes enhanced literary analysis is complex. On the one hand, the development of affective responses without the imitation of characters’ emotions may require a greater degree of personal engagement: without mimesis, students must reflect on the content and draw their own conclusions as to an appropriate response. Were they to respond mimetically, the outcome of their consideration would be predetermined by the text, requiring no personal engagement (Oatley, 1995). Hereby, students who develop affective responses without imitating characters may be considered *learning from* the text, as this is achieved through detailed, personal reflection (Britzman, 1998).

By contrast, mimetic affective responses may be interpreted as evidencing empathy with the text’s characters: to imitate their emotions, a reader must focus on a character and their experiences to such an extent that the reader’s emotions are superseded by those of the text (Oatley, 1995). Arguably, this evidences the intimate, personal engagement with a text required for a reader to *learn from* it (Britzman, 1994). Moreover, Carello and Butler (2014) suggest that empathy with others enhances student understanding of events; applied to English education, this assertion suggests that mimetic - and therefore, empathetic - responses may lead to enhanced literary analysis. Before a conclusion as to whether mimesis reflects greater affective engagement with literature can be met, further research is required to understand the extent to which readers understand the emotions they exhibit in mimetic affective responses. For adolescents, who learn through imitation, additional research is yet more important (Bandura, 1994; Bleakley et al., 2019).

As discussed in Section, 4.2.1, my findings suggested that empathetic responses occur more frequently when my students are able to relate their own experiences to a text; therefore, a true character-centric mimetic response - based on an understanding of the

character's emotions - is likely to prove more challenging for my students. Research suggests that students do not possess the SEL skills to forego their own perspective, adopting and understanding the emotions of another (McLean Davies and Buzacott, 2022); where students do evidence mimesis, it may not be grounded in engagement with the character's emotions (Oatley, 1995). Thus, whilst the ability to respond mimetically may be beneficial to students' literary analysis, it cannot be deemed essential. Accordingly, this is an inappropriate measure to judge the effectiveness of my intervention. Nevertheless, my findings indicated increased engagement with the characters' dilemmas, emotions and motivations throughout the intervention. Consequently, strategies that offered students the opportunity to develop their own affective responses via reflection on character motivations and emotions may be considered effective at improving student literary analysis: they necessarily foreground personal engagement, whether the resultant response is mimetic or not.

Despite no evidence of mimetic affective responses in students' writing, my findings revealed a high degree of similarity between the written responses concerning characters' emotions and motivations. Analysis identified patterns of vocabulary use, where the same unusual word choices appeared across numerous students' work. For example: nine responses used the adjective 'irate' to describe Paris' potential reaction to meeting Romeo at the Capulets' tomb. When I reviewed students' books, I found only two students had previously used 'irate' in their writing before: the word was not common parlance in the group. Therefore, the repetition of 'irate' was notable. Similarly, I identified multiple uses of the 'bewildered', 'aghast' and 'disillusioned'.

Hereby, my data run contrary to those of Miall and Kuiken (2002), whose participants' responses were markedly individualised within general patterns. This is perhaps unsurprising: Miall and Kuiken analysed adult readers' responses to texts, whereas social cognitive theories assert adolescents' tendencies to imitate those around them (Bandura, 1994; Hoffner and Buchanan, 2005; Bleakley et al., 2017). Although use of commonly repeated words was not recorded in my observation data, the mimetic tendencies of adolescents suggests that it is likely that either I, or another student, used the adjective in our group discussion (Bandura, 1994; Bleakley et al., 2017). Therefore, I suggest that my students' written responses did not exhibit mimesis of characters' emotions, but rather of the perspective and ideas of members of our classroom community. Hereby, my findings highlight the social nature of learning, evidencing the importance of high-quality classroom discourse to developing students' written literary analysis (Daniels, 2001).

4.3.2. Classroom Discourse

Due to the social nature of learning, the impact of my intervention on classroom discourse warrants particular consideration: as students learn through interactions, the nature of these must be seen as having a substantial impact on learning outcomes (Daniels, 2001).

The following section discusses two elements of classroom discourse identified during lesson observations: student exclamations and student contributions to whole class discussion. Throughout the intervention, students had opportunities for pair discussion: however, collecting data from all pairs simultaneously was evidently impossible. Therefore, my analysis centres on discourse that took place in the whole group setting and could be accurately recorded in fieldnotes.

4.3.2.1. Student Exclamations

As discussed in Section 4.2.1, some students were initially prone to negative exclamations in lessons. Exclamatory language was often inappropriate to the setting: despite reprimands, ‘paedo’ was said on four occasions, prompting laughter. Initially, I understood these exclamations to evidence McLean Davies and Buzacott’s (2022) warning that extreme content can distract students from the intended goal of the lesson: although their research specifically considers the impact racist language on student engagement, I believed that students were similarly excited by the prospect of discussing the taboo theme of child marriage in my session, taking the opportunity to bend the rules of expected behaviour during classroom discourse.

However, this interpretation was negated by analysis of further observation data: as the activity developed to consider child marriage in contemporary UK and global societies, student exclamations ceased. At the time of this intervention session, the UK still permitted marriages of those under the age of 18 with parental or judicial consent; although students were visibly shocked by this information, no exclamations were made. Following the direct instruction, the class read and analysed the text: students refrained from expressing their disgust towards Juliet’s arranged marriage through negative exclamations, in complete contrast to the start of the session. Were students to have been ‘titillated’ by repeated references to child marriage (McLean Davies and Buzacott, 2022, p.373), I would expect persistent exclamations as they relished the opportunity to react. Intrigued by this observation, I tracked incidents of negative student exclamations throughout subsequent intervention sessions: where students called out without prompting to express a negative reaction - to lesson resources or someone else’s comments - this was recorded on the observation form (Figure Nine).

Analysis of student exclamations revealed a pattern: when presented with materials that linked emotionally challenging content in the text with modern UK or global contexts - such as contemporary articles, facts and statistics - students made no negative exclamations about characters or behaviours exhibited in the text. Notably, however, Moore and Begoray’s (2017) identification of increased peer-to-peer policing of disruptive or offensive language during the teaching of emotionally challenging literature was not replicated in my context: my data revealed that students refrained from exclamation in the first place. Hereby, the civility of classroom discourse was increased throughout my project (Ferriss, 2002): whilst negative reactions were expressed, turn-taking and moderate language - for example, ‘it is shocking and shouldn’t happen, but that’s what it was like then’ - was utilised. Research establishes the importance of civil language in ensuring discussion environments remain accessible to all, facilitating learning (Ferriss, 2002; Davidson and Edwards-Groves, 2018): if people feel attacked or othered, disengagement from the interaction - and any subsequent learning - likely follows (Ferriss, 2002). This is of particular relevance to my students due to the high numbers affected by emotionally challenging themes relevant to *Romeo and Juliet*, who are therefore at risk of feeling attacked or othered by their peers’ comments (see Figure One). Interpreting my data using Ferriss’ theory suggests that the SEL strategies that encouraged students to reflect on links between modern contexts and that of the text may therefore be doubly effective at removing barriers to literary analysis: not only did these intervention activities support the development of students’ personal responses - discussed in

Section 4.3.1 - but the resultant eradication of negative exclamations improved the civility of classroom discourse, fostering learning for students with multitudinous perspectives and experiences.

Interestingly, Luhrmann's (1996) adaptation of Romeo and Juliet had a similar impact upon student exclamations: during and after the film clips, no students shouted out (Figure Nine). By contrast, Zeffirelli's (1968) adaptation triggered the highest number of negative exclamations recorded. Examples of these, all in reference to Romeo and Juliet's suicides, included: 'what's that about?', 'idiot', and 'just open your damn eyes'. Therefore, my findings contradicted Cooke and Frieze (2015), who suggest that the opportunities for visual and auditory communication offered by film render it more effective than literature at engendering affective response. Were visual images, characters' body language or even tone of voice the features that enable film to prompt affective responses, students arguably would have responded similarly to Luhrmann and Zeffirelli's adaptations, as these are present in both films.

Qualitative data from observation field notes suggested that the variations in student responses may be attributed to the marked stylistic differences of the film adaptations: students responded to the period costume and production of Zeffirelli's (1968) adaptation with 'laugh[ter]', whereas several students 'sob[ed]' during the corresponding portion of Luhrmann's (1996) production. When considered alongside the other data in Figure Nine, my findings indicated that students were better able to empathise with the more modern adaptation due to the comparative familiarity of settings, actors and even costume: many students knew the names of the actors and some suggested they recognised Luhrmann's Verona as being modelled on Los Angeles. Therefore, the more modern adaptation may be seen as acting as an extension of direct instruction of modern statistics and facts; by contrast, period costumes and Zeffirelli's more faithful reproduction did not engender student empathy. As a result, my findings emphasised the effectiveness of utilising materials that easily enable students to draw links between the text and their context; my data implied that such resources encourage students to empathise, which leads to a moderation of their language and the maintaining of civil classroom discourse.

However, this conclusion arguably contrasts with research that highlights the protective function of textual fictionality when students interact with emotionally challenging literature. Jarvie and Burke (2015) suggest that literature's fictionality renders analysis more accessible because students are less likely to be threatened by content they see as fictional and disengage with teaching to protect themselves from distress. Consequently, consistent emphasis of the links between students' context and text may risk eroding the protective function of fictionality, rendering emotionally challenging topics inaccessible as students are confronted by brutal realities and how these might manifest in their own contexts (Jarvie and Burke, 2015). When applied to my findings, Jarvie and Burke's research may suggest that SEL strategies that encourage empathy by linking the text to modern contexts may actually reinforce barriers to student analysis of emotionally challenging literature. Indeed, it is notable that the afore-discussed data did not actually evidence improved student literary analysis, although research indicates this is likely to be an effect of the strategies (Ferriss, 2002; Davidson and Edwards-Groves, 2018). The lack of exclamations arguably may show reduced engagement: students may not have been moved to share their reactions, even if these would have been deemed inappropriate according to the rules of classroom discourse.

Therefore, further research is required to investigate the specific nature of student reactions to materials that link modern society to emotionally challenging literature: do reduced exclamations represent empathy and engagement, or protective disengagement?

My literature review identified that a greater volume of work - such as that by Engebretson and Weiss (2015), McLean Davies and Buzacott (2022) and Britzman (1998) - counters Jarvie and Burke's (2015) suggestion than supports it. The weight given to their research in this discussion thus warrants further comment. Numerous scholars emphasise that student autonomy is essential to the teaching of emotionally challenging topics for students with adverse or traumatic experiences: opportunities for student choice redress the powerlessness of trauma and reduce the risk of retraumatising students (Moore, 2022; Neal, 2021; Crosby, et al., 2018). Direct instruction and the use of film clips both inherently limit opportunities for student voice and autonomy: students must consume information before they are able to express their own opinions on the topics. The use of these strategies thus requires careful consideration to ensure they are not compounding the inaccessibility of emotionally challenging literature in light of Moore, Neal and Crosby et al.'s research. As such, it is notable that my findings showed that direct instruction and film clips had such a substantial and consistent effect on student exclamations. Synthesis of Jarvie and Burke's work (2015) and Moore (2022), Neal (2021) and Crosby et al.'s (2018) research suggests that these specific activities in my intervention may have negatively impacted students with adverse or traumatic experiences. Whilst the strategies may benefit students without these experiences, it is imperative that they do not inadvertently cause harm to those with these experiences. Therefore, to ensure that teaching supports the best interests of all students, additional research is required to further interrogate the impacts on students of direct instruction and films that link emotionally challenging literature to modern society.

4.3.2.2. Sharing personal experiences

Qualitative observation data revealed that, as the intervention progressed, an increasing number of students chose to share personal stories that linked to the session topics during whole class discussions: students spoke about 'knowing his pressure' and 'having to do what's expected' in response to Romeo and Juliet's elopement; Zahra (pseudonym) - a Syrian refugee - chose to share her experiences of being forced to leave home in response to Romeo's exile: 'maybe we can't ever go back [to Syria]. Leaving everything like that is very hard and Romeo's by himself'. Finally, responding to her peers' confusion about Lady Capulet's emotions after discovering Juliet's lifeless body considering her treatment of Juliet, Amber (pseudonym) said '[Lady Capulet] can't be thinking...I knew she was ill but it was still a shock when Mum [died]... [Lady Capulet] wasn't expecting it so she feels chaotic. You can't explain it'.

According to Britzman's (1998) research, these qualitative data evidenced students *learning from Romeo and Juliet*: they revealed pre-existing knowledge of the subject matter arising from their own experiences. By applying their experiences to the text, students created individualised meanings: this reflects Rosenblatt's (1978) transactional reader-response theory. Thus, my findings emphasised the relevance of reader-response theory to effective teaching of emotionally challenging literature: numerous students had experience of emotionally challenging themes and their analysis was shaped by this.

As a result, my findings appear to contrast with research that suggests that emotionally challenging literature may offer a useful teaching tool for students with adverse or traumatic experiences because it allows them to explore their experiences through the distancing step of fictionalised narratives (Jarvie and Burke, 2015; Riesco, 2021). Contributing students explicitly explored their own experiences in relation to the text, rather than disguising these through discussions of Romeo and Juliet. However, it is impossible to ascertain whether the class more generally responded in this way. Students who did not reveal personal experiences in their contributions, but rather focussed on the text itself, may well have been using characters' experiences to express their own without stating this; as such, they may have been behaving in line with Riesco's research. Although ethically highly complex - and deemed impossible in my context following discussion with the counsellor - further research into how students with adverse or traumatic experiences interact with texts to explore their experiences in group discussions would provide fascinating contributions to the field.

Therefore, my findings support research that establishes the importance of including emotionally challenging content in curricula (Engebretson and Weiss, 2015; Bean, 2005): emphasising these topics in intervention sessions gave students the opportunity to discuss their experiences and confirmed the appropriateness of such discussion for the public sphere (Evans et al., 2000). Research indicates that this validates student experiences, cementing their sense of belonging in the class community (Bean, 2005). The applicability of this theory to my context was made particularly apparent by developments in Zahra's behaviour. Prior to the intervention, our relationship had been turbulent. After she shared her experiences in the group discussion, however, I identified a shift in her demeanour towards me: Zahra would remain after class to talk to me about both Romeo and Juliet and her life. My findings therefore suggest that my intervention was successful in not only validating Zahra's experiences, but facilitating the development of a teacher-student relationship between us: I posit that sharing her experiences and being listened to in the classroom enabled her to view me - as authority figure in the classroom - as someone she could turn to for academic support and empathy. Hereby, my data indicated that the intervention was successful in counteracting the tendency for traumatised students to struggle to develop relationships with teachers, identified by Crosby et al. (2015).

Increased sharing of personal experience may be attributed to the improvement in civility of classroom discourse discussed in Section 4.3.2.1: Ferris' (2002) research suggests that hearing fewer negative comments from peers may have made students with adverse experiences feel safer to share without fear of ridicule or others' revulsion (Figure Nine). However, causation is necessarily difficult to establish. Firstly, my findings offered no comment as to whether students considered their personal experiences taboo prior to the intervention: evidently, this question would have been unethical to pose directly to students and no students independently proffered this information (Cohen et al., 2018). It is consequently possible that students would have felt comfortable sharing their experiences regardless of my actions. Furthermore, quantitative data from the pre-intervention questionnaire revealed that the majority of students reported feeling comfortable with contributing in English lessons (Figure 10). This supports the previous supposition as the data suggest that the classroom culture prior to my intervention was perceived as a safe space to share ideas. Therefore, my SEL intervention may be seen as making little contribution to

student choices to share their experiences: they may not have needed to perceive a reduction in negative exclamations to make them feel comfortable.

However, coding of responses to supplementary questions about the reasons students felt comfortable (or not) contributing in English lessons identified no references to positive peer-to-peer relationships as facilitating student contributions: other factors - such as interest in the topics, a desire to learn, and feeling comfortable with me as their teacher - were listed (Figure 11). Accordingly, my findings offered no evidence for a positive classroom culture between peers prior to my intervention, and data regarding negative exclamations rather implied the opposite. On balance, therefore, I believe my findings show that SEL interventions that increased empathy improved student literary analysis by virtue of promoting a civil environment that empowered students to link their personal experiences with emotionally challenging themes and share this with their peers.

5. Conclusions

My literature review established potential benefits of studying emotionally challenging literature: students may be supported to develop their personal responses to literature by developing empathy and understanding of perspectives distanced from their own (Jarvie and Burke, 2015; Engebretson and Weiss, 2015; McLean Davies and Buzacott, 2022). Moreover, making space for emotionally challenging topics in the classroom cements their position in the public sphere, validating students with adverse experiences (Crosby et al., 2018; Bean, 2005; Engebretson and Weiss, 2015).

However, my investigation highlighted the necessity of removing barriers to literary analysis in my context. Over a third of participants reported discomfort with topics discussed in English; supporting contemporary research, students perceived sexual violence, prejudice, suicide and abuse to be emotionally challenging (Moore, 2022; McLean Davies and Buzacott, 2022; Darragh and Petrie, 2019). As research suggests students who are uncomfortable may disengage from lessons to protect against psychological distress (Garrett, 2011; Jarvie and Burke, 2015), there is a particular need to support student engagement with these topics in lessons.

Throughout the intervention, students' written responses exhibited increased consideration of alternative interpretations of characters' emotions and motivations. This contrasted with low levels of empathetic response identified in pre-intervention questionnaires. As engagement with characters' dilemmas might indicate empathetic and personal engagement with the text - suggesting students were *learning from* it (Britzman, 1998; Mclean Davies and Buzacott, 2022) - my findings therefore suggest that SEL strategies promote student engagement with and analysis of emotionally challenging literature.

Furthermore, my findings implied that SEL strategies substantially benefit classroom discourse. Strategies linking Romeo and Juliet and modern societies led to improved civility in classroom discourse. I believe this contributed to increased sharing of personal experiences, as students felt safe (Ferriss, 2002). Consequently, strategies that improve discourse civility facilitated positive learning interactions (Daniels, 2001) and so contributed to students' learning.

5.1. Implications

5.1.1. English education

My investigation has several implications for future practice.

Based on my findings, the My Name is Leon (de Waal, 2016) unit will deliberately engage students with the text's emotional aspects: affective response will play a central role due to its beneficial impact on analysis and will be promoted through reflective discussion and writing. Additionally, the text will be linked to modern contexts throughout. For example, depictions of riots against racially-motivated police brutality will be taught alongside recent examples of protest, and film adaptations will be used to supplement students' reading.

However, my investigation raised questions as to how students with adverse experiences might respond to direct instruction and film clips. Therefore, before these strategies are implemented, I will discuss their appropriateness for use with the cohort with Milica. Furthermore, we will collaboratively audit the unit to ensure it promotes students' wellbeing and academic progress. I hope to extend this collaboration across other units, resources permitting.

Moreover, My Name is Leon presents mental health crises and the emotional challenges facing looked-after children: the department is aware of students with experience of these topics. My findings emphasise that civil classroom discourse is crucial to ensure these students' inclusion in discussion (Ferriss, 2002). Accordingly, I will design resources for use at the start of the unit to revise the expectations of classroom discourse, aiming to prevent negative exclamations and encourage the use of moderate language.

Regarding implications for my personal practice, this investigation has led me to re-evaluate my approach towards literary analysis. Potentially due to AQA's (2022c) definition, my teaching arguably overemphasised forensic examination of language. My findings revealed that reader-centred discussions - in this investigation facilitated through affective response - may generate a criticality in students' analysis I have hitherto found lacking. Although this investigation sought to remove barriers to analysis of emotionally challenging literature, I posit that affective response may similarly enhance student analysis of texts without obvious emotional challenge. Therefore, I intend to interrogate this by incorporating opportunities for personal and reflective engagement with literature across our curriculum. By shifting my primary focus from close language analysis to more holistic discussions, I hope to foster greater student engagement, in turn leading to more nuanced analysis.

5.1.2. Wider school

This project centres around English education; however, the findings may be used to develop wider practice. For some subjects, parallels with English are clear: students might be distressed by content in - amongst others - history, geography, PSH and religious education. Therefore, encouraging empathetic affective responses may similarly support students' engagement and attainment in these subjects. Many of my intervention strategies - such as explicitly linking lesson content to relatable modern contexts, film and reflective writing - can be adapted for subject-specific teaching. Consequently, I will deliver a staff training

session to disseminate my findings and encourage the incorporation of affective response into curriculum design.

5.1.3. Further Research

Further research is required to investigate questions arising from my findings and provide a more complete picture of this research area.

Firstly, the short-term nature of this investigation precluded meaningful consideration of student attainment data: consequently, I relied on written and verbal responses to assess students' literary analysis. However, longitudinal research might ascertain whether SEL strategies and affective response have a measurable impact on English attainment data. In our culture of high-pressure public exams and external auditing, this research might be useful in supporting schools' decision to incorporate SEL strategies in KS4 teaching (Roome and Soan, 2019).

Secondly, research is required to explore the nature of mimetic affective responses to literature. This investigation was unable to draw conclusions as to whether mimetic responses represent greater engagement with the text than thoughtful, considered responses regarding characters' emotions. Understanding how students develop affective responses - and whether they truly reflect on characters' experiences and contexts before responding - would enable teachers to support students to better engage with emotional aspects: if mimesis is beneficial, this might be encouraged and if not, teachers can support students to consider aspects more deliberately.

Finally, and most importantly, my investigation emphasises the need to research the specific experiences of students with adverse experiences in English, though this is not ethically feasible in my context. However, establishing whether students with adverse experience perceive English as more emotionally challenging than their peers would further illuminate my findings and enable schools to audit curricula to ensure its accessibility. Moreover, this research might help identify students with adverse experiences not known to the school through their responses to English lessons, allowing these students to access necessary support.

Additionally, further research is needed to explore the nature of students with adverse experiences' engagement with texts in group discussions. My findings ran contrary to Riesco (2021), who suggests that literature offers a proxy to discuss emotionally challenging issues. Further research into how students with adverse experiences interact with texts to explore their experiences - and what contributes to these interactions - might enable the development of strategies that specifically support students with adverse experiences' analysis.

5.2. Evaluation of collaboration

5.2.1. Teachers

My collaboration with other teachers had two purposes: to develop and pilot data collection methods; and to collect data during intervention observations.

Piloting the questionnaire was successful: my teacher-collaborator assessed the accessibility of my adaptation of Fischer and Fischer's (2006) ARLS, providing useful feedback. Consequently, students were able to complete the questionnaire without help. This

enabled me to distance myself somewhat from students completing my questionnaire, potentially reducing the impact on my findings of students' desire to please me, as teacher-researcher (Cohen et al., 2018).

Similarly, collaboration was essential to the development of my observation form: pre-collaboration iterations were overly complex and not accessible to those with limited experience of my investigation. When staff did observe me, they easily completed the form: their data closely resembled my own, with the addition of more verbatim student responses. Moreover, I was able to complete the observation form partially whilst teaching due to its simplicity, which supported data collection. Therefore, I deemed this area of collaborative development to have been successful.

However, collaborative data collection was less successful. Due to industrial action and collaborators' workload, sessions were only observed twice. My experience thus aligned with research that suggests the pressures of school environments are primary barriers to teachers' engagement with research (Cohen et al., 2018). Nevertheless, more collaborative observations would have benefitted my investigation as the collaborators recorded far more student quotations, which proved valuable to my analysis of classroom discourse. Future replications might involve more staff to maximise opportunities for collaborative observations; however, staff-related constraints are an inherent issue in school-based research (Cohen et al., 2018).

5.2.2. School counsellor

Collaboration with the school counsellor was foundational in ensuring the ethical integrity of my investigation and its operation in accordance with BERA (2018) guidelines.

Moreover, this investigation originated from teacher concerns about navigating emotionally challenging literature appropriately: Milica's guidance was crucial in giving me confidence to explore the content explicitly and deliberately, without causing undue student distress. Consequently, I deemed our collaboration effective and a basis for future work.

However, our collaboration was negatively impacted by elements of the school's safeguarding policy. The rationale behind sharing student information only when 'necessary and proportionate' is clear (DfE, 2018, p.9) Nevertheless, the inability to share specific student information rendered it difficult to anticipate which students were at risk of distress. Consequently, I was unable to observe for signs of emotional distress, which are unpredictable and may require close observation (Moore, 2022).

For my investigation to comply fully with school policy, observations could have been completed by Milica or pastoral staff, who typically have more information about students and could thus have monitored at-risk students and provided feedback on appropriate strategies for future sessions. However, this burdens already overstretched staff's time. Moreover, Milica and pastoral staff lack knowledge of literary analysis: therefore, this may have compromised the quality of data gathered. Further solutions are required to mitigate this limitation in future replications.

5.3. Further Limitations

5.3.1. Researcher Positionality

The potential impact of my role as teacher-researcher upon participant responses and behaviours has already been discussed: despite steps taken to mitigate this, it is nevertheless likely that students adapted their behaviour and responses to please me (Cohen et al., 2018) - an inherent limitation of practitioner research (Babione, 2015).

Secondly, my positionality may have affected my data collection and analysis. Best efforts notwithstanding, research bias may have impacted my recollection and analysis of student data. As some observation notes were completed post-sessions, my impressions of students may have impacted the responses I recorded (Cohen et al., 2018). This could have been mitigated by ensuring that all intervention sessions were observed by collaborators, as originally planned.

Moreover, my being a woman may have impacted the data. My findings indicate that students were keenly aware of sexism in Romeo and Juliet: I likely placed emphasis on this subject due to my own experiences. Therefore, this may have steered students towards finding portrayals of gendered violence particularly emotionally challenging. Arguably, this is not a limitation; it is simply a fact of our classroom and reflects the influence of cultural worlds on our interpretation of literature (Rosenblatt, 1978). However, the impact of my positionality on student responses and experiences warrants consideration. Replicating the investigation with a male teacher might allow further exploration of this.

5.3.2. Impossibility of consistency

Measuring affective responses is inherently subjective: therefore, reliability of data in this subject area is difficult to achieve. All datasets - pre-intervention questionnaire, my observation notes and those of observing collaborators - will have been impacted by individual understandings of the complex and often ambiguous language of emotions (Frijda and Scherer, 2009). Both observers were trained to complete the form and efforts were made to render the questionnaire language unambiguous; however, ensuring consistency across participants and observers is impossible.

Secondly, student emotions represent a limitation of this investigation, despite them being the focus. Student behaviour is influenced by multitudinous factors: tiredness, hunger, irritation (Guyer et al., 2016). In the heightened emotional context of adolescence, the variations of student emotions in my classroom may have caused variation in individual student responses. Therefore, this study could be replicated across several units of work to account for such fluctuations, as well as student absence throughout the project.

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Figures

Figure One - School counsellor’s data

Emotionally Challenging Topic	Number of students known to be affected
Domestic violence	4
Police involvement with the family	3
Self-harm and/or suicidal ideation	3
Refugees	3
Forced marriage	2
Honour-based abuse	2
Parents with mental health issues	2
Death of a parent	1
Death of a sibling	1

Figure Two - Student perceptions of emotional challenge in English

In response to the prompt: ‘There are topics that we discuss in English lessons that make me uncomfortable.’

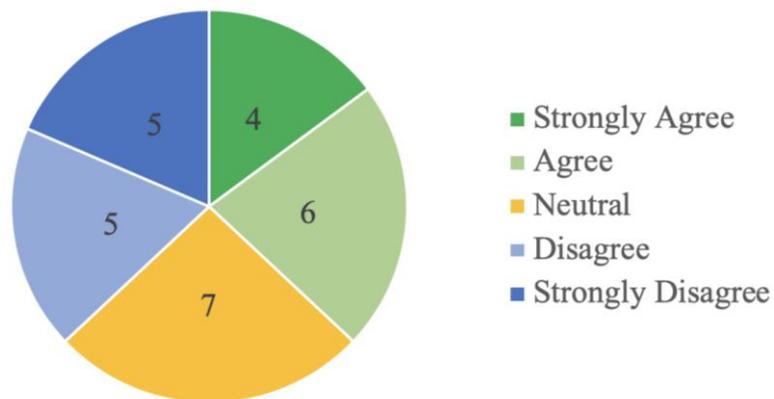


Figure Three - Student perceptions of emotionally challenging topics in English

In response to the prompt: ‘If you feel comfortable doing so, please share any topics in English that make you uncomfortable.’

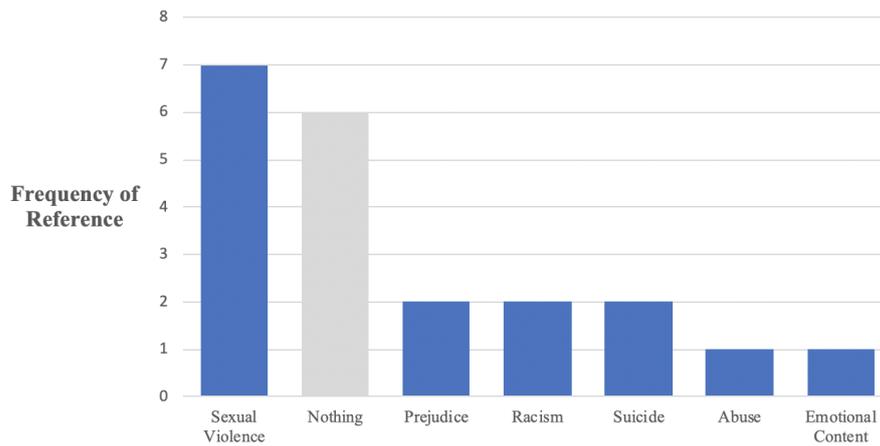


Figure Four - Student responses to ARLS-style questionnaire questions, including Taylor, Fischer and Taylor’s (2009) mean scores

Question	Media	Number of student responses					Mean score	Taylor, Fischer and Taylor’s (2009) mean score
		Strongly Agree (5)	Agree (4)	Neutral (3)	Disagree (2)	Strongly disagree (1)		
Empathetic Response								
If I consume funny media, it can make me laugh out loud.	Book	4	7	6	8	2	3.11	3.15
	Film/TV	10	12	4	0	1	4.11	
If I consume sad media, it can make me cry.	Book	3	5	4	10	5	2.67	1.95
	Film/TV	4	7	10	3	3	3.22	
If I consume happy media, it can put me in a good mood.	Book	5	6	12	2	2	3.37	
	Film/TV	4	9	11	2	1	3.48	
When I consume media with characters, I feel as if I know them.	Book	2	7	16	1	1	3.29	3.65
	Film/TV	0	9	12	3	3	3.00	
I have felt more connected to	Book	1	8	8	4	6	2.78	2.6

other people - real or fictional - when consuming media	Film/TV	1	5	14	3	4	2.85	
I have learnt about how people from other cultures express their feelings by consuming media	Book	5	11	9	2	0	3.70	3
	Film/TV	4	13	8	2	0	3.70	
Self-reflexive responses								
I feel like I understand my emotions better after reading literature.	Book	0	5	15	5	2	2.85	2.65
	Film/TV	1	5	15	3	3	2.93	
I ask myself why I feel the way I do after consuming media.	Book	0	3	4	10	10	2.00	2.7
	Film/TV	1	1	12	8	5	2.44	
I think about my own friendships and relationships after consuming media.	Book	1	5	6	11	4	2.56	2.7
	Film/TV	2	7	9	6	3	2.96	
I talk to someone else about my feelings after consuming media	Book	0	2	5	5	15	1.78	2.55
	Film/TV	3	2	6	6	10	2.33	
After consuming media about emotions in literature, I look for similar media because I enjoyed it.	Book	4	8	9	3	3	3.26	3.25
	Film/TV	2	14	10	0	1	3.59	
I experience emotions when reading literature (of any type)	Book	2	3	9	9	4	2.63	
	Film/TV	3	10	8	4	2	3.30	
Processing Emotions								
I read about characters in literature because how they solve problems intrigues me.	Book	4	11	7	3	2	3.44	2.75
	Film/TV	3	14	9	1	3	3.81	
The stronger the tension between characters in literature, the more I like it.	Book	2	14	10	1	0	3.63	3.35
	Film/TV	6	13	5	2	1	3.78	

I think about the relationships (friendships, families, romances etc.) between characters in literature even after I have finished consuming it.	Book	4	10	9	2	2	3.44	3.4
	Film/TV	4	10	11	0	2	3.52	
I enjoy consuming media about complicated relationships (friendships, families, romances etc.)	Book	5	11	8	1	2	3.59	3.1
	Film/TV	4	10	8	3	2	3.41	
I have changed the way I feel about people in my life after consuming media	Book	0	6	12	6	3	2.78	2.55
	Film/TV	2	5	15	1	4	3.00	

Figure Five - Student perceptions of affective response triggers in literature

In response to the question: ‘What do you think it was about these stories that made you feel emotions?’

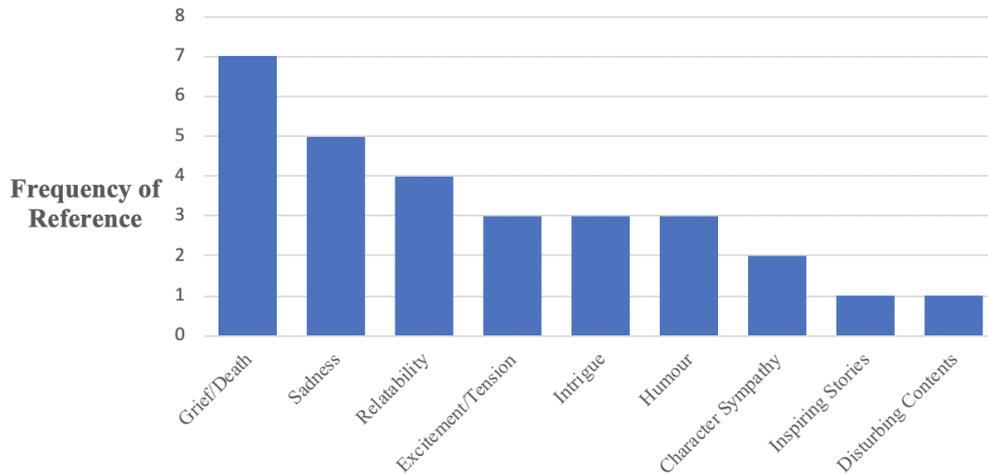


Figure Six - Student consideration of Gregory and Sampson's emotions in Romeo and Juliet Act 1 Scene 1 (Shakespeare, 1597/2015)

In response to the question: 'How do you think Gregory and Sampson feel during this scene?'

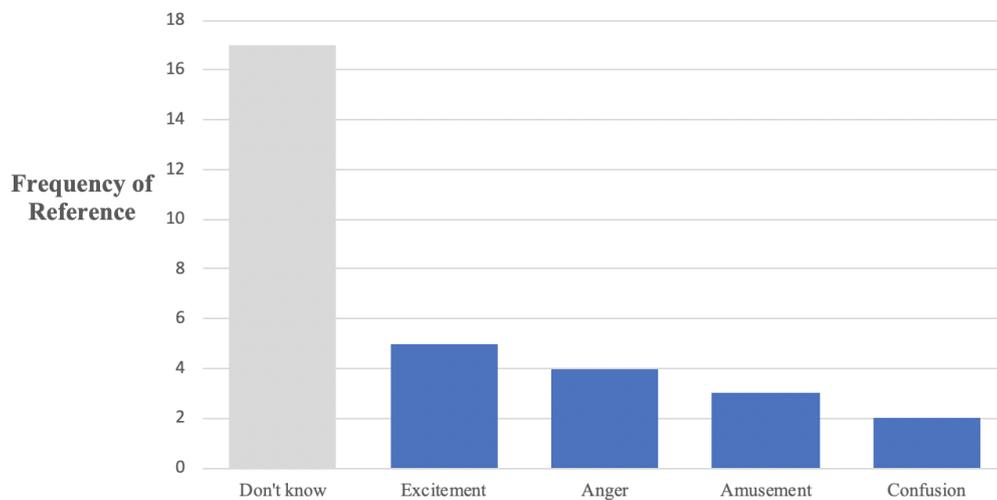


Figure Seven - Student considerations of potential audience emotions to Romeo and Juliet Act 1 Scene 1 (Shakespeare, 1597/2015)

In response to the question: 'How do you think members of an audience watching the play in a theatre might feel during this scene?'

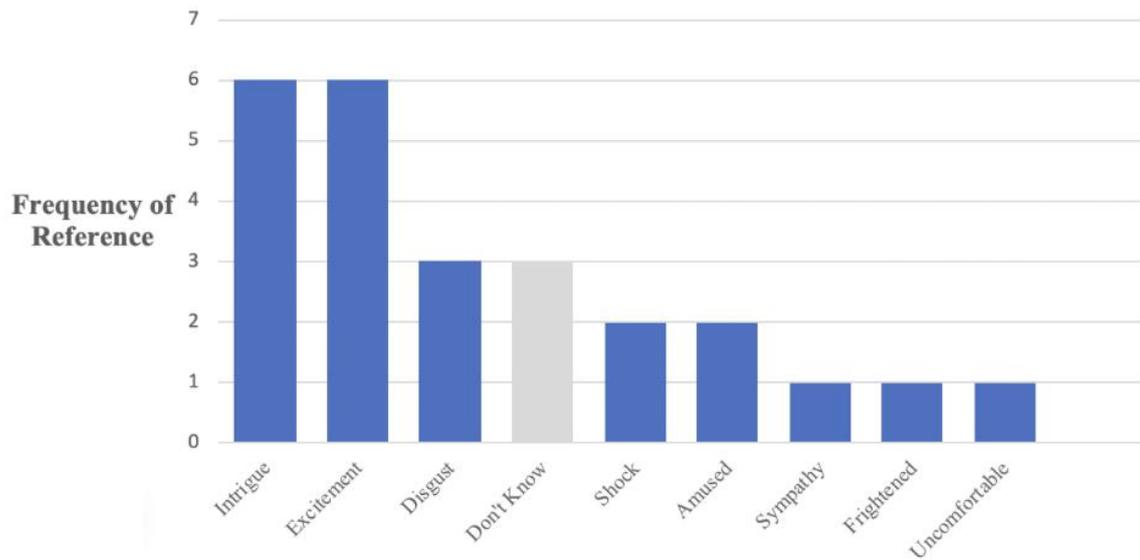


Figure Eight - Student use of tentative and definite language in written responses throughout the intervention

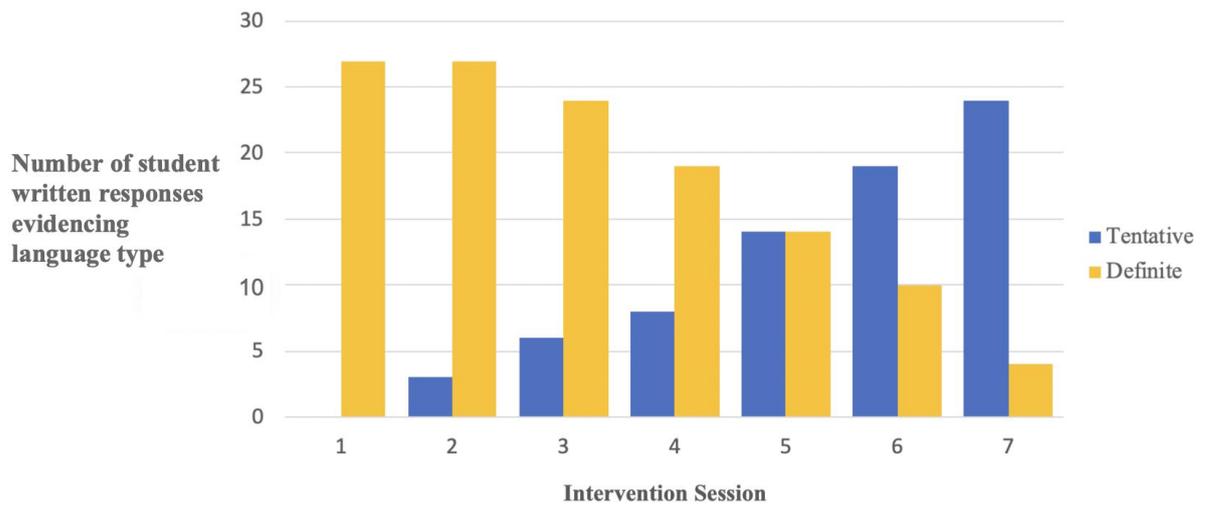


Figure Nine - Negative student exclamations during intervention sessions according to activity type

	Activity 1		Activity 2		Activity 3		Activity 4		Activity 5	
	Type	Exclamations	Type	Exclamations	Type	Exclamations	Type	Exclamations	Type	Exclamations
Session 2	Links with modern society (newspaper article + discussion)	0	Reading the text	0	Reflective writing	0				

Session 3	Shakespearean context (direct instruction)	3	Links with modern society (direct instruction)	0	Reading the text and language analysis	0	Reflective discussion	0	Reflective writing	0
Session 4	Film (Luhmann, 1996) and discussion	0	Reflective writing	0	Reading the text and language analysis	2	Reflective writing	0		
Session 5	Reading the text	2	Reflective discussion	0	Reflective writing	0				
Session 6	Film (Luhmann, 1996) and discussion	0	Reflective writing	0	Shakespearean context (direct instruction and worksheet)	3	Reflective writing	0		
Session 7	Film (Zeffirelli, 1968) and discussion	5	Reflective writing	2	Film (Luhmann, 1996) and discussion	0	Reflective discussion	0	Reflective writing	0

Figure Ten - Student comfort making verbal contributions in English lessons

In response to the prompt: 'I feel comfortable contributing in English lessons.'

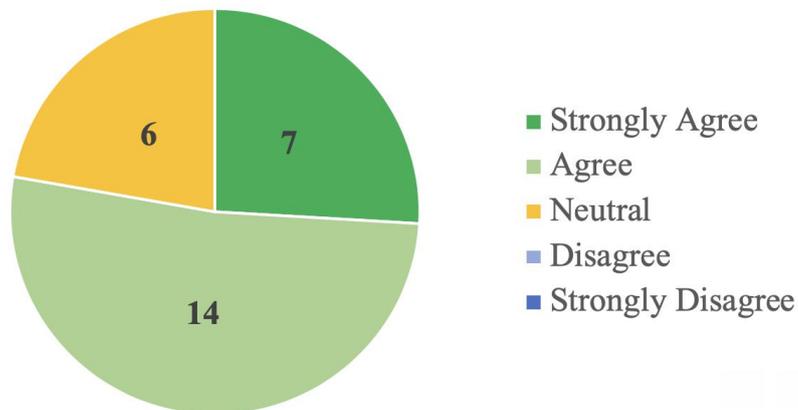


Figure Eleven - Factors influencing student comfort making verbal contributions in English lessons

In response to the question: 'Why do you feel this way? Please give your reasons.'

