Exploring the implementation of relational practice in a primary school to support school attendance

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School attendance difficulties are increasingly recognised as complex challenges, rooted in emotional, relational, and systemic influences. This study explores how relational practice can be implemented in a primary school to support attendance, using the term School Attendance Barriers to avoid deficit-based language and emphasise systemic drivers. The study examined school staff perceptions of the key factors influencing the implementation of relational practice. A qualitative action research design was used, underpinned by critical realism and conducted over one academic year in a primary school in Northwest England. Seven staff members, including senior leaders, teachers, and teaching assistants, formed a collaborative research group. Data were gathered from four recorded meetings, transcribed and analysed using inductive qualitative content analysis. Findings identified key facilitators, including strong leadership buy-in, a shared relational ethos, and psychological input to support reflective practice. The co-developed implementation of Emotion Coaching was particularly valued for offering a feasible, relational way of being. Barriers included curriculum pressures, staffing inconsistencies, limited training, and tensions between relational approaches and wider educational policies. The study highlights the value of participatory approaches, such as action research, in embedding sustainable, school-owned relational practice. It challenges prescriptive models of social and emotional learning, calling instead for flexible, context-sensitive implementation tailored to staff experience and school systems.

KEYWORDS

EBSA, implementation, relational practice, whole school approach, action research, whole school intervention, supporting school attendance, emotion coaching

Introduction

Difficulties in children attending school has been described using a range of terms, from truancy to persistent absenteeism (Heyne, 2019). The diversity and inconsistency in terminology have created barriers to accurately reporting prevalence, understanding the nature of the issue, and designing effective support strategies (Elliott and Place, 2019; Heyne, 2019). In recent years, the term Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA) has gained prominence, reflecting growing awareness of the emotional drivers of school attendance difficulties (Heyne, 2019).

This study adopts the term School Attendance Barriers (SAB), aligning with recent literature that challenges deficit-based language and calls for terminology that better reflects systemic influences rather than locating the problem within the child (Want and Gulliford, 2024; Ward and Kelly, 2024). Additionally, the phrase "supporting school attendance" is used to emphasise early, preventative strategies aimed at fostering school

belonging and addressing the complex, multi-layered factors that influence attendance (Callwood and Goodman, 2018; Bond et al., 2024a).

Indicators of SAB exist along a continuum ranging from early signs, such as occasional lateness or reluctance to attend, through to chronic and sustained absences (Kearney et al., 2019). Manifestations of SAB can vary significantly depending on the individual child's context and stage along this continuum (Havik and Ingul, 2021). Indicative behaviours include visible distress, anxiety during reluctant attendance, verbal or physical aggression, threats of self-harm, and escape attempts from distressing situations (Thambirajah et al., 2008).

Underlying causes of SAB are multifaceted and occur across ecological contexts, including personal, school-based, familial, and wider community factors (Malcolm et al., 2003; Kearney and Albano, 2004). Effective home-school communication and multi-agency professional support are among the key facilitators of positive SAB intervention (Corcoran et al., 2022), while an interactionist, functionalist approach to early intervention can support school attendance across eco-systemic levels (Nuttall and Woods, 2013). Anxiety and depressive symptoms commonly co-occur with SAB, exacerbating barriers to attendance (Ek and Eriksson, 2013). Key educational transitions, such as starting primary or secondary school, have also been identified as critical risk points (Pellegrini, 2007), particularly for children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) and those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (Bond et al., 2024b). SEND refers to learning difficulties or disabilities that make it harder for children and young people to learn than most others of the same age, and schools in England have a legal duty to identify and support these needs in line with the SEND Code of Practice (Department for Education and Department of Health, 2015).

Supporting school attendance requires comprehensive, ecologically-informed interventions (Thambirajah et al., 2008). Kearney (1996) outlined core functions behind SAB presenting behaviours, including avoidance of negative emotions, reducing separation anxiety, gaining attention, and pursuit of tangible reinforcers outside school. Effective strategies must, therefore, target both preventative and responsive approaches (Kearney and Graczyk, 2020). However, within the complex ecology of school attendance problems, no easy solution has been identified, with behavioural, academic and home-school partnership interventions showing modest or no effects (Eklund et al., 2022). Pupils themselves describe relationships with school staff and other pupils as key factors in school attendance and related to a sense of school belonging (Corcoran and Kelly, 2023). Indeed, interventions focussed on school bonding or engagement, aimed at strengthening the relationship between pupil and school, have been found to benefit pupils experiencing SABs (Keppens and Spruyt, 2020).

It has long been acknowledged that the quality of implementation of an approach is key to achieving its expected outcomes (Lendrum and Humphrey, 2012), and poor implementation of interventions to support school attendance has been suggested as a key challenge (Heyne et al., 2020). With respect to relational approaches, Keppens and Spruyt (2020) indicate that the likelihood of success seems to depend on the extent to which all stakeholders at the school share and support the same goals, i.e., when the tendency to invest in pupil-school relationships is shared among all school personnel. This study therefore explores how one primary school sought to implement a relational approach with the aim of reducing SABs.

The present research was conducted with a primary school in the Northwest of England, involving close collaboration with the headteacher and a dedicated action research group consisting of senior leaders, teaching and pastoral staff. From the outset, the headteacher and group members were eager to explore relational approaches, recognising their potential to proactively address attendance concerns before they escalated into persistent difficulties. By focusing on strengthening relationships across the school community, the group sought to embed a preventative SAB approach that would foster connectedness and school belonging, thus reducing the likelihood of SAB (Chian et al., 2024).

Relational practice acknowledges the critical role of secure adult-child relationships in children's mental health, emotional regulation, and academic engagement (Bergin and Bergin, 2009; Roorda et al., 2011), and is characterised by a commitment to fostering secure, empathetic, and responsive relationships within schools, supporting children to feel safe, connected, and understood (Babcock, 2020). Central to this approach is the understanding that behaviour communicates emotional and unmet needs, particularly among children who have experienced trauma, relational disruptions, or adverse life experiences (Siegel, 2012; Bomber and Hughes, 2013). By prioritising relationships as fundamental to learning, relational practice is considered to have the potential to shape whole-school systems, ethos, policies, and daily interactions, promoting inclusivity and a sense of belonging for all students, including those most vulnerable to social, emotional, and behavioural difficulties. Relational approaches can also provide school staff with the skills to empathetically respond to children's emotional needs, co-regulate during moments of distress, and restore relationships after conflict, thereby fostering an environment conducive to emotional well-being and academic success (Thorsborne and Blood, 2013; Babcock, 2020).

Emotion Coaching (EC), an accessible relational approach grounded in Gottman et al.'s (1996) meta-emotion philosophy, involves empathetic communication, validation of emotions, and guided problem-solving aimed at fostering emotional self-regulation and resilience. While there is a growing evidence base regarding outcomes (Gus et al., 2015), there is little literature on how EC is implemented in schools (Romney et al., 2022) and a dearth specifically in the context of supporting student attendance.

The effective implementation of new practices in real-world educational settings is increasingly recognised as critical to intervention outcomes (Durlak and DuPre, 2008; Bertram et al., 2015). Interventions need to be implemented with fidelity, sensitivity to context, and sufficient support from key stakeholders to achieve their intended outcomes (Lendrum and Humphrey, 2012). Implementation quality is particularly pertinent in complex interventions such as those targeting relational and emotional dimensions of school environments, given their dependence on consistent interactions, nuanced application, and whole-school commitment (Humphrey, 2013), understanding and addressing the practical realities of EC as relational practice within school contexts is a core consideration in this research, influencing both the design and evaluation of the intervention.

Existing frameworks for implementation in schools often concentrate on universal or targeted interventions that are clearly defined, structured, and typically delivered over fixed, time-limited periods (Humphrey, 2013; Bond et al., 2024a). For example, structured Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) programmes

commonly follow manualised procedures, making fidelity easier to define and measure (Durlak et al., 2011). Similarly, targeted interventions addressing specific student populations or needs typically come with prescribed timelines, delivery protocols, and measurable outcomes (Weare and Nind, 2011; Humphrey et al., 2018). However, relational practices aimed at supporting school attendance and engagement differ significantly due to their embeddedness within everyday interactions and ongoing, systemic changes within the school environment (Nuttall and Woods, 2013). These approaches require flexible, responsive implementation frameworks that account for dynamic, continuous, and complex whole school relational approaches rather than discrete or finite intervention periods, of which only one is currently known (Ward and Kelly, 2024).

This research, therefore, sought to explore how a relational approach can be put into practice to support student attendance, examining the factors influencing these processes. It aimed to understand school staff perceptions of the process associated with implementing a whole-school relational approach in order to generate insights to support educators in effectively embedding relational practices to achieve their intended outcomes. This research aimed to do this through answering the following research question:

> *What do school staff perceive as the key factors influencing the implementation of relational practice to support school attendance?*

Materials and methods

Epistemological position

The research design is shaped by its underlying critical realist epistemological position (Coolican, 2018). Traditional positivist and relativist epistemologies have been critiqued in relation to social research. Positivism faces challenges in replicating real-world complexities, while strict relativism is criticised for its focus on researchers co-constructing realities (Robson and McCartan, 2015). Critical realism sits between these positions, acknowledging an objective reality while recognising the role of interpretation in understanding social contexts. Critical realism aligns with research exploring lived experiences, making it particularly relevant to this study, as it considers how ecological factors shape school staff's perceptions and experiences of supporting children to attend school.

Action research approach

Aligned with this epistemology, the study employed a collaborative action research (AR) approach. AR is widely recognised for its collaborative and practice-focused nature (Cohen et al., 2017); aiming to bridge the gap between research and practice, enabling participants to reflect on and refine their approaches while fostering sustainable change (Morales, 2019). Its flexibility makes it well-suited to educational settings, where dynamic and context-specific solutions are often required (Dusty, 2024). Involving practitioners in the research process enhances both the relevance and longevity of the outcomes, as McNiff and Whitehead (2005) highlight the importance of building internal capacity rather than relying on external interventions.

The Research and Development in Organisations (RADIO) model (Timmins et al., 2003) was used to structure the AR process. This model aligns with existing frameworks in education, such as the assess, plan, do, review cycle (Department for Education and Department of Health, 2015), making it particularly relevant for school-based research. The RADIO model provides a systematic approach to organisational change, ensuring that research findings are actionable and embedded within school systems. Previous research has found the model effective for both individual reflective practice and wider organisational development (Ward and Kelly, 2024). However, its success depends on key factors such as participant motivation, their ability to implement change, and the extent to which the research aligns with the organisation's priorities (Ashton, 2009).

Ethical approval statement

This study received ethical approval from the host institution Research and Ethics committee (approval number: 2024-18329-32992).

The process

After the headteacher of the primary school expressed interest in the research, the researcher met with them and the research commissioner. The research commissioner was an Educational Psychologist (EP) within the local Educational Psychology Service (EPS) who had contributed to the development of SAB guidance. Initially, the school was seeking to understand the implementation of the guidance and sought the support of the researcher to enable this. The scope of the research was considered, and the headteacher facilitated the formation of a group of staff members with varying roles within the school who were interested in being part of the research (see Table 1). The researcher met with this group in school to discuss the aims of the research, exploring their experiences and school context, the invitation to act, and clarifying the stakeholders and areas of need (see Table 2). The 12 stages of the RADIO model, although presented sequentially, were fluid in practice, often overlapping or being revisited and refined as the research evolved (Timmins et al., 2003). This approach aimed to remain dynamic and responsive to the school's needs, incorporating diverse participant

TABLE 1 Participant characteristics.

Participant	Job role
Participant 1	Headteacher
Participant 2	Deputy headteacher
Participant 3	Class teacher
Participant 4	SENCo[1] and class teacher
Participant 5	Teaching assistant and pastoral support
Participant 6	Teaching assistant
Participant 7	Teaching assistant and pastoral support

[1]The Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCo) is a statutory role in all mainstream schools, responsible for overseeing the day-to-day operation of the school's SEND provision, ensuring early identification of needs, and coordinating support in accordance with the SEND Code of Practice (Department for Education and Department of Health, 2015).

TABLE 2 RADIO stages of the AR (Timmins et al., 2003).

RADIO stages (Timmins et al., 2003)		RADIO activities
Phase 1: Understanding the needs of the organisation and forming research relationships	1. Awareness of need	The EPS had developed SAB guidance in response to raising rates of school non-attendance, however, its implementation was in the early stages. The university commissioning process was initiated by the link EP within the service.
	2. Invitation to act	The research was initially negotiated between the EPS and researcher, a Trainee EP (TEP) on the Doctorate in Educational and Child Psychology course. School-based research was considered, owing to staff's use of the guidance being unknown. The headteacher of a primary school expressed interest to commissioner of the research and meeting was held between headteacher, commissioner and TEP in November 2023. At was at this point that a formal invitation to act was received and developed.
	3. Clarifying organisational change and cultural issues	The context of the primary school was carefully considered through ongoing discussions between headteacher and TEP. Further discussions were held with key school staff members to understand their priorities. Key considerations were: relative affluence of area; driving staff development; relationships; preventative SAB approach.
	4. Identifying stakeholders in area of need	The researcher met with the headteacher and staff members who were interested in the research through awareness being raised within the school. The range of staff roles within the group meant there was good representation of a primary school staff base. The TEP periodically updated EPs within the commissioning EPS as key stakeholders.
Phase 2: Establishing the research design and methods for information-gathering and evaluation	5. Agreeing focus of concern (research aims)	During the first AR meeting potential aims and a focus were considered linked to the needs of the EPS. Staff found the existing SAB guidance heavy-going, lengthy, and lacking preventative strategies. They valued its focus on relationships but were seeking clearer, practical applications. Exploring relational approaches to prevent SAB, improve staff consistency in restoring relationships, and enhancing parental engagement for student well-being and attendance were agreed as foci.
	6. Negotiating framework for information gathering	Information gathering was an adaptive process. It was agreed that the transcripts of the AR meetings were a primary information source. However, the group gathered further information, including: a survey of children's views of their relationships with staff; ongoing parental discussions; meeting whole school to develop and implement actions.
	7. Gathering information	Agreed methods used to gather information. A research diary was also kept.
	8. Processing information with research sponsors/ stakeholders	After each AR meeting, the researcher reflected on the transcripts and sent summaries via email to the headteacher to share with the wider staff base. These identified the implications or findings and the aims according to cycles of AR. The researcher also continued to meet with the commissioner.
Phase 3: Developing and implementing organisational change	9. Agreeing areas for future research	Guided by the findings, areas for future were agreed throughout each AR group meeting. These included: developing a whole-school relational approach; implementing EC; strengthening support for staff and children during break and lunch times.
	10. Action planning	Actions were coproduced and recorded in the AR meeting transcripts. This included: reviewing guidance materials to trial tools; school-audit of relational practice.
	11. Implementation/ action	The implementation of the agreed actions by school staff generated further development of relational practice and whole-school attendance support over the year.
	12. Evaluating action	Action was evaluated through reflective discussions within the AR group meetings. The group monitored the impact of their actions through their interactions with children and parents, along with progress made with individual children experiencing attendance difficulties or emotional dysregulation.

perspectives to enhance engagement and support the development and implementation of changes in policy and practice.

Participants

The staff members that agreed to be part of the research and form an AR group consented to their job roles being shared (see Table 1).

The researcher was aware of the power dynamics of having senior leaders, teachers and teaching assistants as part of one AR group. It was proposed to participants that a separate 'stakeholder' group of senior leaders could be formed, however, the teachers

and support staff expressed a strong desire to work as one cohesive group.

The headteacher raised awareness of the research within the school. Those interested in the research expressed interest to the head, before meeting with the researcher as a group to hear more about the scope of the research and decide whether they would like to participate. The AR group was limited to a maximum of eight participants to ensure effective discussion and manageability. Larger groups can be challenging to facilitate and may complicate the transcription process (Barbour, 2007). Research suggests that groups with three to five participants are optimal for smooth interactions, as larger groups can make it harder to capture individual contributions

(Peek and Fothergill, 2009). Keeping the group size manageable allowed for meaningful participation, ensuring that all voices were heard while maintaining the collaborative nature of the AR process. It should be noted that although there were seven participants in total, the AR group meetings were not always attended by all consenting participants every time, owing to the realities of primary school life, such as staff needing to cover classes. This meant that over the course of the research, attendance ranged from four to six participants.

Data gathering

Four AR meetings were recorded by the researcher and transcribed by the host institution's official transcription service provider. Three meetings took place in person in the primary school staff room, and one was held online. For the online meeting, Zoom's audio-only recording feature was used for data collection. While building rapport can be more challenging in an online setting, research suggests this does not necessarily impact the depth of participant responses (Richard et al., 2021). To encourage reflection, the researcher used verbal affirmations such as "mmhmm" (Galletta, 2013) along with paralinguistic strategies, such as nodding, smiling, and allowing pauses. These techniques helped maintain the flow of conversation and enabled participants to build on each other's reflections more naturally.

The meetings involved activities in accordance with the AR process. These involved planning future actions, problem solving together, and reflecting on actions implemented. Additional activities were incorporated into the meetings to deepen development. In the first meeting, staff critiqued the existing SAB guidance to identify aspects that were useful and areas where it could be developed further. In the second meeting, participants reflected on the findings from a survey of pupils they had conducted related to how they perceive relationships with staff. Across the first and second meeting, the researcher introduced frameworks, models and psychological approaches matched to the needs of the action group. These included Babcock's (2020) Guidance for Developing Relational Practice and Policy, the Authentic Warmth Interaction Style model (Cameron and Maginn, 2008), and EC approaches and resources (Gottman et al., 1996). The third meeting focused on the impact of implementing relational practice. The final meeting focused on evaluating the AR process, reflecting on its impact, and reviewing the implementation for future development.

Data analysis

This study employed qualitative content analysis to explore school staff perspectives on implementing relational practice to support school attendance. Content analysis provides a structured yet flexible approach for identifying recurring patterns within qualitative data (Silverman, 2018). Grounded in a critical realist epistemology, this method acknowledges the reality of social phenomena while recognising that participants' accounts and researcher interpretations are shaped by context and subjectivity (Robson and McCartan, 2015).

Step 1: immersion and initial coding

The first author, who also facilitated the AR meetings, engaged deeply with the data through repeated transcript readings. An inductive approach was applied, meaning themes were co-constructed with participants from the data itself rather than being guided by pre-existing frameworks (Bengtsson, 2016). Codes were captured using participants' exact phrasing (e.g., "singing from the same hymn sheet," "pressure to fix"). This approach aligns with the democratic and collaborative ethos of action research (Dusty, 2024) and helped foreground the voices of participants (see Table 2).

A codebook was iteratively developed from these initial codes, with frequency counts used to indicate salience and support the organisation of data. NVivo 12 software was used to manage the data and support code refinement, facilitating the identification of patterns across multiple transcripts (Leech and Onwuegbuzie, 2011).

Step 2: categorisation and refinement

The next stage involved categorising codes into subthemes by identifying recurring patterns, conceptual groupings, and interrelationships. This process involved weighting and merging codes that reflected similar ideas, while reviewing less frequent codes for conceptual relevance. For instance, "staff unity," "openness between staff," and "staff emotionally supporting each other" were grouped under the broader subtheme of *staff collaboration and emotional support*. This process allowed the analysis to remain sensitive to nuance while avoiding fragmentation. Initially, nine facilitator categories and five barrier categories were developed, which were then further refined through iterative abstraction into a smaller number of overarching themes and subthemes guided by both the frequency and richness of coded data (Elo and Kyngäs, 2008).

Step 3: development of themes and reflexive process

The final themes represent a distillation of the coding process. Subthemes were supported by multiple codes and cross-checked for internal coherence and external distinctiveness. Each stage of the analysis was discussed collaboratively with the second author, who provided oversight and critical challenge to the coding, interpretation, and theme development. This process of peer debriefing and reflexive dialogue helped ensure analytic rigour and reduce bias (Thomas and Harden, 2008).

Trustworthiness and transparency

Bengtsson (2016) outlined four ways to demonstrate trustworthiness within qualitative research:

- Credibility: Categories were agreed with the second author and member checking was conducted during AR sessions through group reflection and feedback on emergent findings. Themes were further validated through repeated data engagement and alignment with the research aims.
- Dependability: To support the consistency of coding over time, the researcher noted down the boundaries of each category and tracked decisions and changes during the process using a research diary and discussion with the second author.
- Transferability: A "thick description" relating to the research context and methods used to collect and analyse data are shared so that others can make judgements about potential transferability of the current research.

- Confirmability: Illustrative quotes were selected based on their clarity, representativeness, and relevance to subthemes and are presented in Table 3 and throughout the findings section, with each quote attributed by participant and AR session for transparency (e.g., Participant 2, AR 3).

Findings

What do school staff perceive as the key factors influencing the implementation of relational practice to support school attendance?

Facilitators

Theme one: supportive school culture and leadership

The data highlighted the importance of a supportive school culture and leadership 'buy-in' in implementing relational practice. A whole-school ethos and senior leadership commitment were crucial for ensuring consistency, while inter-staff collaboration and emotional support helped sustain the implementation.

Whole-school approach and leadership buy-in

Participants highlighted the importance of a whole-school approach and leadership buy-in in embedding relational practice. A unified ethos across all staff roles, including teachers, teaching assistants, and midday supervisors, was perceived as key to ensuring relational strategies were supportive. One participant highlighted that "we all need to be singing from the same hymn sheet" (Participant 6, AR 2). Whole-staff meetings were used to reflect on practice outside of the AR meetings, though it was noted that some groups, such as midday supervisors, were not always included. While whole-staff understanding of relational practice was initially varied, there was "no negativity" detected by senior leaders towards the approach, with staff recognising its value (Participant 1, AR 2). Leadership support and ongoing training were at the core of driving whole-school implementation.

Staff collaboration and emotional support

Participants highlighted staff collaboration and emotional support as key facilitators in embedding relational practice. A strong sense of unity and awareness of each other's well-being was described, with one participant noting, "we're good as a school that we're mindful of each other" (Participant 7, AR 3). Staff described a culture where they could rely on colleagues for emotional and practical support, particularly

TABLE 3 Thematic structure of facilitators and barriers, with associated codes and illustrative quotes.

Theme	Subtheme	Codes (with frequency)	Example quote
Facilitators			
Supportive School Culture and Leadership	Whole-School Approach and Leadership Buy-In	Whole school approach (3), Senior leader buy-in (2), Safe school culture (1), Shared understanding (2), Staff communication (1)	"We all need to be singing from the same hymn sheet." (P6, AR 2)
	Staff Collaboration and Emotional Support	Staff emotionally supporting each other (7), Staff humility (7), Staff unity (3), Self-care (2), Acknowledging progress (5)	"We're good as a school that we are mindful of each other." (P7, AR 3)
Co-developing Practical Strategies	Consistent Yet Flexible Staff Approaches	Soft start (5), Check-ins (1), Flexible approach from staff (1), Consistency and shared language (3), Scripts (1)	"What's worked really well here now is the soft start." (P3, AR 3)
	Psychological Input and Reflective Practice	Emotion Coaching (3), Push Pull (4), Reflective space (6), Sharing psychology (2), Authentic Warmth (1), Action research (4), Affirming good practice (2)	"If we did not have this time, we would not be able to have these conversations." (P6, AR 4)
Barriers			
Structural and Resource Pressures	Curriculum Pressures and Competing Demands	Curriculum (12), Time (6), Competing priorities (1), Unprotected time (1), Resource pressure (3)	"Because of curriculum demands… not having the time with staff to work on it because we have got to do some work on writing, I've got to do maths." (P3, AR 1)
	Staffing Constraints and Inconsistencies	Staffing (4), Staff absence (2), Support staff availability (1), Swapping adults (5), Unstructured times (9), Midday supervisors (9)	"Lunchtime is the most unstructured part of the day… it's the time when children are most crammed together." (P1, AR 2)
	Limited Training and Guidance	Lack of training (6), SEND training (1), Behaviour policy (1), Definitional ambiguity (5), Relying on instinct (1)	"Children have changed; behaviours have changed… I'm not quite sure how to deal with it myself." (P2, AR 1)
Systemic Challenges within Education	Staff Hierarchies	Role divisions and hierarchy (6), Midday supervisors (9), Coordinating staff (1)	"We want class teachers to take some more responsibility… but things still get passed on." (P2, AR 1)
	Wider Educational Policy	DfE constraints (4), Behaviour policy (3)	"The DfE at the moment is quite… I'd say punitive… there are parts of our policy that they'd probably hate." (P1, AR 2)
	Job Role Expectations	Role pressures (5), Pressure to 'fix' (3), Tiredness (4)	"You kind of can feel yourself bubbling… and you need that time to regulate yourself before you can support a child." (P4, AR 2)

when faced with challenging situations. Inter-staff emotional support was perceived as central to the implementation, owing to the inherent emotionality of working relationally with children: "we've got better at sharing… other staff can check in and say, 'Do you need to offload it?'" (Participant 7, AR 3).

Theme two: co-developing practical strategies

The data highlighted the importance of co-developing practical strategies to implement relational practice effectively. Consistent yet flexible staff approaches were viewed as facilitative to children experiencing predictable and supportive interactions with staff. Selective use of the existing SAB guidance was also facilitative of supporting school attendance relationally. A shared language across staff helped reinforce these strategies, promoting greater consistency. Psychological input and reflective practice through the AR process itself also played a crucial role, with staff valuing strategies that were accessible and feasible to implement within their capacities. EC was perceived as a step-by-step 'way of being' that made relational approaches accessible and less nebulous. Clarifying definitional ambiguity about relational practice through psychological input was key to ensuring staff had a common understanding and could implement strategies with confidence.

Consistent yet flexible staff approaches

Consistent yet flexible staff relational approaches, including soft starts, and check-ins with children, were seen as essential in helping children experience predictable and supportive interactions with staff. Soft starts were widely praised for reducing early-morning stress, allowing children to settle before engaging in learning. One participant noted, "I think what's worked really well here now is the soft start… because the amount of issues you do get at the start of a day…" (Participant 3, AR 3). Another described the shift in approach, stating, "normally, we'd be like, 'Right, five past nine…lesson…' Whereas now, it's so much more relaxing" (Participant 2, AR 3).

Flexibility in responding to children's needs was facilitative of relational practice, with staff recognising the importance of adjusting routines when necessary. One participant described how they built in time for children to process social difficulties before engaging in lessons: "I know the first 15 min, I write off every week… just let them talk, let them tell you what's happened, let's have a sort out and then we get into our topic" (Participant 2, AR 1).

A shared relational language among staff reinforced these strategies, ensuring greater consistency across different roles. One participant highlighted the importance of all staff being "on the same page" (Participant 6, AR 2).

Psychological input and reflective practice

Psychological input and structured reflection were perceived as essential in supporting staff to implement relational practice effectively. EC was particularly valued, as it provided staff with practical strategies to help children regulate their emotions. One participant described its impact, stating, "I've noticed a quick turnaround… when they're starting to go into meltdown but not quite there" (Participant 4, AR 2). Staff found it helpful in validating children's emotions and de-escalating situations. Having clear guidance and crib sheets was also beneficial, with one participant emphasising, "examples of what you can say and then what you do is really, really useful" (Participant 4, AR 2).

As part of this work, staff engaged with the Babcock's (2020) Relational Practice guidance and Cameron and Maginn's (2008) Authentic Warmth framework, which provided a structured model for relational interactions. Staff reflected on their strengths in developing relationships but identified repairing relationships after conflict as an area for further development. The Authentic Warmth framework (Cameron and Maginn, 2008) was particularly helpful in guiding relational responses, ensuring consistency in maintaining high expectations while offering emotional support.

The push and pull factors framework from the existing SAB guidance (exploring factors which push away from school and pull towards home) helped staff pinpoint factors influencing attendance. It was facilitative to them being relational because it encouraged them to see attendance difficulties through the lens of the child. One participant noted, "everyone having an understanding of what push and pulls children to school or home" was key (Participant 2, AR 1). One participant described using the push-pull model to analyse a child's engagement, explaining, "he's got a real pull to home and less of a pull to school… so we need to try and build those things in school to increase that pull" (Participant 1, AR 4). The model was perceived as useful because it helped staff identify and implement changes within the school environment to foster school belonging for individual children.

Dedicated time for reflection through the AR meetings was perceived as fundamental to embedding relational practice. One participant explained, "if we did not have this time, we would not be able to have these conversations," highlighting the need for structured opportunities to refine approaches (Participant 6, AR 4). Reflection also reduced pressure on staff, with one noting, "it's not necessarily fixing something being the answer… it's okay for it to take that bit of time" (Participant 4, AR 4). The process helped staff identify strengths and areas for development, as one participant explained, "it's helped us… identify what's going well, and then… think about, okay, well, we need to treat this" (Participant 1, AR 4). Reflection also affirmed good practice, reinforcing staff confidence, with another adding, "you've not sat there and gone, 'I can't believe you do that.' You've offered us other ways, but you've also affirmed us" (Participant 1, AR 4).

Barriers

Theme three: structural and resource pressures

School staff identified curriculum pressures as limiting opportunities for implementing relational practice, with academic demands and workload making it difficult to prioritise developing their relational practice. Staffing constraints and inconsistency were also highlighted, with shortages, absences, and unstructured times disrupting continuity in support. Additionally, staff noted a prior lack of training and guidance in being relational with children, expressing the need for more Continuing Professional Development (CPD), SEND training, and practical strategies to implement relational approaches effectively.

Curriculum pressures and competing demands

Staff identified curriculum pressures and competing demands as key barriers to implementing relational practice. The academic focus and workload often limited opportunities to embed relational practice, along with inflexibility in the timetable. As another participant

explained, "because of curriculum demands… not having the time with staff to work on it because we've got to do some work on writing, I've got to do maths" (Participant 3, AR 1).

Teachers also felt pressured by assessment and academic expectations, particularly for older pupils preparing to transition to the next year group. One participant described feeling this pressure being passed onto students, stating, "I'm thinking, 'Oh crikey! We've not done this; we've not done this.' That pressure is being put onto them" (Participant 2, AR 3). Others expressed frustration at the rigidity of the curriculum, with one noting, "If you were talking about something and the kids were really enthusiastic… well, we are supposed to be doing maths now, so you can't do that anymore" (Participant 6, AR 3).

Additionally, staff reported time constraints and lack of designated time for relational work, with one participant explaining, "at the minute, the timetable is horrendous… we're juggling so much… to do it properly, we need an allotted time rather than *ad hoc*" (Participant 4, AR 3). These pressures made it difficult to consistently implement relational strategies, with staff feeling stretched between academic priorities and connecting with children emotionally.

Staffing constraints and inconsistencies

Staff identified shortages, absences, and unstructured times as significant barriers to implementation. Others noted that relational approaches were harder to sustain without adequate cover, explaining, "if you give more time… that impacts on budget because that is cover for people" (Participant 2, AR 1).

Unstructured times, particularly lunchtimes and playtimes, were described as flashpoints for relational breakdowns. One participant noted, "lunchtime is the most unstructured part of the day… it's the time when children are most crammed together," leading to increased challenges in behaviour and staff response (Participant 1, AR 2). Staff also reported inconsistencies in training and relational responses, with one noting, "you might have one member of staff who's come in the top playground… and they're not trained the same way" (Participant 3, AR 2).

Additionally, variability in staff confidence and approach was seen as a challenge, with one participant explaining, "some staff take things and run with them… and some don't" (Participant 2, AR 1). These inconsistencies were barriers to implementation because they made it harder to ensure a shared, predictable experience for children.

Limited training and guidance

Staff identified a lack of prior training and guidance as a barrier to implementing relational practice effectively. Many felt uncertain about how to respond to changing behaviours, with one participant admitting, "children have changed; behaviours have changed… I'm not quite sure how to deal with it myself" (Participant 2, AR 1).

There was also a lack of shared understanding of restorative practice, with one participant explaining, "it was a general lack of understanding of what restorative practice is… we need to go right to the beginning of that" (Participant 4, AR 2).

Gaps in SEND training were also noted, particularly in understanding the needs of autistic children and those with Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). One participant highlighted how some staff without in-depth training tended to focus only on behaviour, stating, "some staff… will just jump on the behaviour and… not spend the time unpicking it" (Participant 1, AR 2).

Theme four: systemic challenges within education

Staff identified systemic challenges that impacted the implementation of relational practice. Hierarchical structures influenced how pastoral responsibilities were distributed, with expectations often conflicting with the reality of who had the strongest relationships with children. Wider educational policy was also seen as a constraint, as Department for Education (DfE) guidance on behaviour sometimes conflicted with a more relational approach. Additionally, role expectations placed emotional strain on staff, with the pressure to "fix" situations leaving little time for self-regulation.

Staff hierarchies

Staff hierarchies were viewed as a barrier to consistent relational practice, with differing roles affecting how expectations and relations with children were managed. Class teachers were expected to take on more pastoral responsibility, but in practice, support was often passed between staff. One participant noted, "we want class teachers to take some more responsibility… but things still get passed on" (Participant 2, AR 1). Others emphasised that relationships, not roles, should guide pastoral support, stating, "it's better that the person with the strongest relationship works with them" (Participant 1, AR 4).

Midday supervisors were perceived differently by children and often lacked training, leading to inconsistencies. One participant explained, "they're not part of all these staff meetings, all these discussions" (Participant 2, AR 3). While staff felt hierarchies were now less rigid, historical divisions were described, with one recalling, "I wasn't allowed in this room [the main staff room]" as a new staff member (Participant 7, AR 4).

Wider educational policy

Staff identified DfE guidance on behaviour as a barrier to fully embedding relational practice. While school had adapted their behaviour policies to be more relational, this sometimes conflicted with DfE expectations, which were perceived as more punitive. One participant explained, "the DfE at the moment is quite… I'd say punitive… there are parts of our policy that they'd probably hate because it is more on the relational and understanding side" (Participant 1, AR 2).

Engaging in AR also led staff to re-evaluate their own policies, recognising areas for further development. One participant reflected, "three months ago… I'd have said the behaviour policy is good. But now… perhaps it needs to be adapted" (Participant 3, AR 2). Participants perceived a balancing act between needing to comply with DfE requirements while shifting towards a more relational approach.

Job role expectations

Staff described educational roles as diverse and emotionally demanding and perceived an external expectation to "fix" situations. This pressure could be overwhelming, especially when balancing other classroom demands. This emotional burden was particularly heightened when staff felt unable to step back, even when a change of face was needed. One participant reflected, "it's then hard sometimes to get that adult to understand that they need to withdraw." (Participant 4, AR 2). Without time to regulate their own emotions, staff could become overwhelmed, "you kind of can feel yourself bubbling… and you need that time to regulate yourself before you can support a child" (Participant 4, AR 2).

Summary of findings

The current study aimed to understand what school staff perceive as the key factors influencing the implementation of relational practice to support school attendance within a primary school in the Northwest of England. Internal and external systems, along with the current context, significantly influenced the implementation process (Ward and Kelly, 2024). Key facilitating factors included a supportive school culture, strong leadership buy-in, and collaboration amongst staff, particularly in terms of emotional support and a unified relational ethos. Co-developed practical strategies, including consistent yet flexible approaches and the adoption of a shared relational language were, supported by accessible psychological input tailored to the developmental needs of the school. This was facilitated through structured reflective practices, which enhanced staff confidence and, therefore, their professional practice. Barriers identified encompassed structural and resource pressures, notably curriculum demands, staffing constraints, and prior inconsistent training. Systemic challenges such as hierarchical role expectations, external educational policies perceived as punitive, and emotional demands experienced by staff further constrained effective relational practice implementation.

Discussion

This discussion explores the experiences of a primary school seeking support to implement a more relational approach to address emerging attendance difficulties. Recognising the complexity of school attendance challenges, the school identified EC as an appropriate method to foster supportive relationships and enhance emotional responsiveness. The focus of this discussion is to explain how AR was used to support school in implementing their chosen relational approach. The discussion also examines how the research findings align with an existing implementation framework for whole-school approaches (Ward and Kelly, 2024, see Figure 1), identifying divergences and highlighting unique insights. This model is UK-based and derived from practical experiences of implementing SAB guidance within a secondary school context, making it particularly relevant to the present research. Although the current study explores a primary school setting, Ward and Kelly's (2024) framework provides a robust foundation for understanding the complex, interrelated elements required to implement relational practices effectively at a whole-school level.

The current study strongly supports Ward and Kelly's (2024) emphasis on leadership commitment as a pivotal facilitator, linking directly with the theme *Supportive School Culture and Leadership*, particularly the subtheme *whole-school approach and leadership buy-in*. Staff consistently emphasised the importance of a whole-school ethos and explicit leadership buy-in for embedding relational practices effectively. Findings indicated that when senior leaders explicitly endorsed relational approaches, this facilitated coherence across the school community, aligning closely with Admiraal et al.'s (2021) assertion that learning-oriented leadership significantly enhances professional development through shared visions. Participants stressed the necessity of unified messaging and cohesive actions, succinctly captured by one participant's perception that "we all need to be singing from the same hymn sheet" (Participant 6, AR 2). Leaders were crucial in endorsing relational values and explicitly

facilitating structures for collaborative professional learning, ongoing inquiry, and reflective practice (Kennedy, 2014; Admiraal et al., 2021).
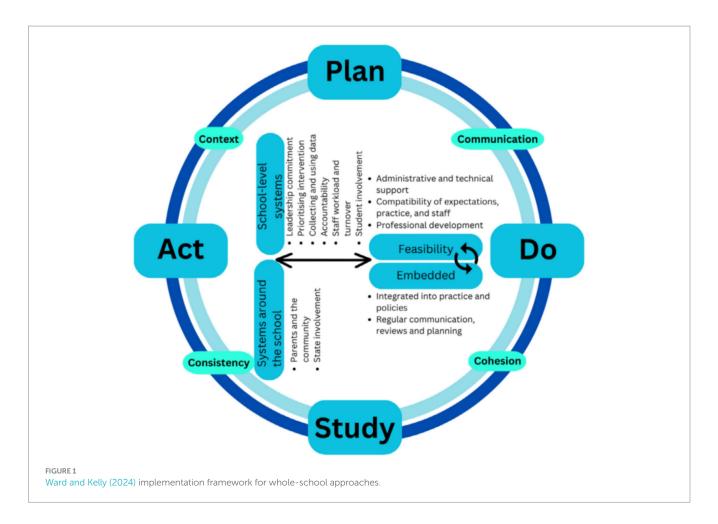
Collaboration among staff emerged as another essential facilitator within Ward and Kelly's (2024) "cohesion" component. This was mirrored in the subtheme *staff collaboration and emotional support*, which included codes such as "staff emotionally supporting each other," "staff humility" and "self-care." Participants valued collective reflection and mutual emotional support, enhancing their confidence and capacity to engage relationally with students. This aligns with Johannesson (2022) insights, highlighting how professional learning communities developed through AR contribute significantly to sustained professional development and emotional resilience. Staff in the present study perceived inter-staff emotional support as indispensable, fostering an environment where colleagues reliably sought emotional and practical support.

The accessible and practical development of EC through AR was crucial in embedding a relational approach to support attendance within everyday practice, indicated through the theme *Co-developing Practical Strategies*, specifically the subtheme *consistent yet flexible staff approaches*. Staff perceived a need to co-develop a step-by-step, 'way of being' when responding emotionally with children. This approach aligned closely transformative professional development being achieved through professional learning community approaches rather than traditional, didactic methods (Kennedy, 2014). It was a key implementation driver (Bertram et al., 2015) because school staff perceived EC as realistic and tailored to their professional practice and whole school needs, leading to high levels of feasibility, meaning it became embedded easily (Ward and Kelly, 2024). While this partially aligns with Romney et al.'s (2022) identification of high-quality, context-sensitive training as essential for effective implementation of EC, the *nature* of the training is divergent: the present study makes the argument that relational practice, such as EC, is best implemented iteratively and inductively alongside school staff, rather than delivered as a deductive, often one-time CPD session (Romney et al., 2022).

The subtheme *psychological input and reflective practice* further illustrates this point, as implementing EC through AR allowed staff to shape EC strategies collaboratively and contextually, further enhancing ecological validity and ownership. Consequently, EC became an accessible method for empathetically responding to children's emotional needs, facilitating confidence in their abilities to be relational by perceiving benefits in practice, such as strengthened child-staff relationships. This aligns with self-efficacy being fostered through performance accomplishments (Bandura, 1997); as the AR process progressed, there was a growing perception from staff that supporting pupil wellbeing was an integral part of their roles. These beliefs are known to significantly enhance school staff's confidence and capacity to offer emotional support (Mazzer and Rickwood, 2015).

Effective implementation of relational practice therefore necessitates transformative professional development that is collaborative, reflective, and deeply embedded within everyday school practice. These characteristics are optimally supported through ongoing coaching, sustained leadership engagement, and structured reflective processes (Kennedy, 2014; Admiraal et al., 2021).

Significant implementation barriers, however, were identified in implementing relational approaches, as identified in the overarching theme *Structural and Resource Pressures*. The subtheme *curriculum pressures and competing demands* was the most frequently coded,

FIGURE 1
Ward and Kelly (2024) implementation framework for whole-school approaches.

reflecting Romney et al.'s (2022) findings that curriculum constraints impede relational strategy adoption. *Staffing constraints and inconsistencies* were further barriers, consistent with prior research focused on whole-school SAB implementation (Ward and Kelly, 2024). Participants also identified prior targeted CPD gaps, particularly regarding SEND and restorative practices, echoing advocacy for theoretically informed CPD to enhance effectiveness (Kennedy, 2014).

Systemic challenges within education identified align closely with Ward and Kelly's (2024) "systems around the school" category, emphasising interactions with external educational structures and policies. Hierarchical staff structures created tensions that undermined consistent relational responses, particularly affecting midday supervisors, who often lacked integration into whole-staff initiatives, highlighting the challenges of truly inclusive, whole school development in practice (Admiraal et al., 2021). Similarly, *Wider educational policies*, particularly DfE guidance (Department for Education, 2024), emerged as significant barriers, with staff noting tensions between relational and more punitive behaviour management expectations.

While the majority of findings aligned closely with Ward and Kelly's (2024) model, some divergences emerged. The subtheme *job role expectations* highlighted the emotionality and relational fatigue experienced by school staff. While Ward and Kelly's (2024) model acknowledges the need for a "supportive staff environment," it does not explicitly account for the emotional labour of consistently relational work, particularly the pressure staff felt to 'fix'

emotionally complex situations without adequate space for self-regulation. The current findings suggest that emotional sustainability should be more explicitly integrated into implementation frameworks, particularly those supporting relational approaches, recognising relational fatigue as a distinct barrier to long-term practice change.

Furthermore, the subtheme *psychological input and reflective practice* revealed the critical role of embedded psychological support, delivered through AR and EP collaboration, in enabling real-time adaptation and contextual refinement of relational strategies. While Ward and Kelly (2024) include "professional development" as a school-level factor, the current study points towards a more iterative, collaborative model of psychological input that is co-constructive and fluid, blurring the boundary between learning and implementation.

These divergences may be explained by the fact that Ward and Kelly's (2024) framework was developed alongside a secondary school and places more emphasis on the early implementation stage being exploratory, involving clarification of purpose and planning. This situates it in the "exploration" and "installation" stages of the implementation process (Bertram et al., 2015). In contrast, this study found that the school, having already identified EC and committed to a relational ethos, moved more directly into "installation" and "initial implementation" (Bertram et al., 2015). This may reflect a greater degree of 'school readiness' to engage with relational practice, with prior exposure or attitudinal alignment accelerating progress through initial stages. It may also reflect the primary school context, where

smaller staff teams and more informal communication structures often allow for swifter adaptation (Earley and Porritt, 2014).

In conclusion, schools represent complex, dynamic systems requiring supportive rather than prescriptive approaches to supporting relational practice and school attendance. AR, characterised by its democratic, inductive nature (Dusty, 2024), offers an effective framework for sustainable school improvement particularly when compared to packaged, manualised SEL interventions that may lack contextual relevance (Demkowicz et al., 2023). By actively involving school staff in the development and refinement of interventions, AR fosters self-efficacy, ownership, and ecological validity; critical factors for embedding interventions into school-level systems (Humphrey et al., 2018). This inclusive, reflective process helps ensure that interventions are perceived as feasible and meaningful by staff, consequently increasing the likelihood of positively influencing both internal school systems and external systems around the school (Kennedy, 2014; Ward and Kelly, 2024). Consequently, the nuanced implementation of relational practices challenges traditional implementation frameworks, necessitating context-sensitive approaches that emphasise relational fidelity and ecological validity over procedural compliance.

Limitations

The primary focus of this research was to support and enhance school attendance through implementing relational practices. Changes in attendance behaviours typically require extended periods to become evident and measurable (Bond et al., 2024b) and therefore, attendance outcomes were not explicitly captured or quantified in this study, which is a limitation. However, this limitation was inevitable, given that effective measurement of outcomes such as attendance improvements presupposes robust and sustainable implementation of the relational approaches themselves. Recognising this, the research intentionally prioritised exploring the process of implementation, aligning closely with the overarching aim of capturing a detailed narrative of embedding relational practices. This focus facilitates greater replicability and provides insights into the practical complexities and elements required for successful implementation in similar school contexts.

The final stage of the AR process could have explicitly identified the key implementation drivers for the research site and agreed a plan for how these would be sustained in order to continue implementation without external supports.

Implications for practice and future research

Given the complexity and emotional labour of supporting school attendance, schools implementing relational approaches should prioritise providing protected time for reflection, collaborative problem-solving, and staff supervision. This study highlights the importance of these practices for ensuring the sustainability and effectiveness of relational practice. Specific attention should be given to relational consistency during unstructured periods such as breaks and lunchtimes, where relational practice is often challenging but most needed.

EPs are uniquely positioned to support schools in implementing relational approaches inductively, tailoring interventions to each school's distinct context. EPs should stand by school staff through methods such as AR, reflective practice, and ongoing coaching to facilitate sustainable change. The current study underscores the value of EPs as facilitators of professional learning and highlights the broader potential of collaborative EP-school partnerships beyond attendance and relational practices alone.

Future research would benefit from longitudinal studies examining the impact of sustained relational practices on attendance outcomes and pupil well-being over extended periods. Understanding the long-term effectiveness and identifying core components of successful relational interventions would strengthen stakeholder buy-in and guide effective resource allocation. Additionally, further exploration into the systemic integration of relational practices within wider educational policy contexts would enhance the ecological validity and practical relevance of future intervention.

Data availability statement

The datasets presented in this article are not readily available because participants did not consent for data to be shared. Requests to access the datasets should be directed to George Alaimo, george.alaimo@postgrad.manchester.ac.uk.

Ethics statement

The studies involving humans were approved by Research and Ethics committee, The University of Manchester. The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

Author contributions

GA: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft. CK: Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Writing – original draft.

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The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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The authors declare that no Gen AI was used in the creation of this manuscript.

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Supplementary material

The Supplementary material for this article can be found online at: https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/feduc.2025.1602057/full#supplementary-material

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