**Exploring Parental Experiences of Support from Professionals for their Child with School Non-Attendance and Developing Best Practice: An Appreciative Inquiry Approach.**

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# Abstract

For most children and young people, regular attendance at school is a positive experience which provides rich opportunities for social interaction, personal and academic development. However, some children have difficulties with attending or remaining in school for the day. School non-attendance has been linked with a range of negative outcomes for children, their families, schools, and the wider community. Within this area, there has been limited research that has sought the views of parents of children who experience school non-attendance, with much of the research base being situated within the medical model that operates from a within-child and within-family factors related to school non-attendance. This has implications of the support that is on offer for children and their families.

The current thesis explores what is currently known about school non-attendance through a systematic literature review process. Following this, a substantive part of it focuses on the primary study undertaken, which aimed to answer the research questions of:

1. *What are the perceptions of parents of children who experience school non-attendance regarding the support that is on offer from both school staff and external agencies?*
    a. *What do parents feel are the facilitators and barriers to support?*
2. *What changes do parents feel could be implemented to support both the child and their family to help increase their child's attendance?*

The study utilised a qualitative methodology, using semi-structured interviews to explore the experiences of eleven parents whose child experienced school non-attendance. The data generated from the semi-structured interviews was analysed inductively utilising Thematic Analysis (TA). Key themes that were constructed through the analysis included The Search for Power; The Effects on Parents; The Parents Journey to Understanding; Parents Feeling Victimised; The Effects of Significant Changes in the Learning Environment; The Best of Support from Services; The Systems Aren't Working and The Future of Support. This was followed by a focus group which employed an Appreciative Inquiry approach with three of the parents to explore the changes that they felt could be implemented to support their child and their families. The findings of the primary research broadly mirror the existing literature, however parents actively looking for evidence to justify their perspectives and a fear of contagion appear to be novel findings.

Insights and implications for professional practice were framed utilising the co-constructed provocative propositions, highlighting the importance of relationships, increasing professional understanding and valuing children and their families' perspectives.

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**List of Abbreviations**

| | |
|---|---|
| **AI** | Appreciative Inquiry |
| **BPS** | British Psychological Society |
| **CASP** | Critical Appraisal Skills Programme |
| **CYP** | Children and Young People |
| **DfE** | Department for Education |
| **EBSA** | Emotionally Based School Avoidance |
| **EHCP** | Education, Health, and Care Plan |
| **EHCNA** | Education, Health and Care Needs Assessment |
| **EOTAS** | Educated Otherwise Than At School |
| **EP** | Educational Psychologist |
| **EPS** | Educational Psychology Service |
| **EWO** | Education Welfare Officer |
| **IPA** | Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis |
| **LA** | Local Authority |
| **RQ** | Research Question |
| **SEN** | Special Educational Needs |
| **SEND CoP** | Special Educational Needs and Disability Code of Practice |
| **SENCO** | Special Educational Needs Co-Ordinator |
| **SNA** | School Non-attendance |
| **PMFT** | Power Threat Meaning Framework |
| **TA** | Thematic Analysis |
| **TEP** | Trainee Educational Psychologist |
| **UEL** | University of East London |
| **UK** | United Kingdom |

# Chapter 1: Introduction

## 1.1 Chapter Overview

This introductory chapter focuses on School Non-attendance (SNA) and the different terminologies used to describe this phenomenon. The definitions and conceptualisations of this subject is explored, followed by the consideration of the national and local contexts regarding SNA. The researcher then considers the rationale for the research and states their own position within the research.

## 1.2 School Attendance

Attending school regularly for most children is a positive experience, which provides them with rich opportunities for their personal, social, and academic development (Pellegrini, 2007; Kearney & Graczyk, 2014). The occasional absence from school may be construed as common or normal behaviour (Evans, 2000), as it is not unusual for pupils to not want to attend school at some point during their schooling. Most pupils who experience this can resume regular attendance (Elliot & Place, 2012) yet a small minority of children and young people (CYP) cease to attend school for a prolonged period. It is this group of individuals who tend to encounter the helping agencies (Elliot & Place, 2022) and who are the focus for this research.

## 1.3 Conceptualising school non-attendance and terminology

Conceptualising SNA has been extensively debated within the literature base (Finning et al., 2019), mirroring the wide ranging and complex behaviours it encompasses. Some researchers make the distinction between occasional 'absenteeism' and problematic 'absenteeism', whereby they argue that occasional absence is seen as non-problematic and is often short lived as it may be caused by illness or holidays (Heyne et al., 2018). Problematic 'absenteeism', however, requires targeted and bespoke assessments and interventions (Kearney, 2008).

School non-attendance has also been conceptualised as a spectrum which ranges from occasional reluctance to attend school to complete refusal (Thambirajah, 2008) to encompass the variety of patterns of SNA. Historically, distinctions have been made between individuals who are categorised as truants and individuals who have an emotional component to their SNA (Thambirajah et all., 2008). Truants are typically perceived to be absent from school without their parents' knowledge or consent and the basis of their SNA is often associated with anti-social behaviours, being academically disengaged, and having an unwillingness to conform to school expectations. Research has also found that pupils tend to show a combination of truancy and school refusal behaviours (Egger et al., 2003), thus suggesting this distinction between a conscious behaviour choice and those seen as not able to attend can be considered unhelpful. By distinguishing between the two, the support these groups can access is impacted upon, with individuals considered to be truants more likely to receive punitive measures rather than therapeutic (Lyon & Cotler, 2007).

There are numerous terms utilised across the literature to define CYP who experience difficulties with school attendance, which has been further complicated by different categories of non-attendance emerging (Heyne et al., 2018), thus reflecting the lack of a shared consensus on terminology to describe each group (Shivlock, 2010) and fostering confusion (Heyne et al., 2019). Researchers and professionals have employed terms such as 'school refusal' (Berg, 1969; Kearney & Silverman 1990), 'school phobia' (Johnson et al., 1941), 'persistent abseentism' (DfE, 2019a), 'emotionally based school avoidance' (West Sussex EPS, 2022) and 'extended school non-attendance' (Pellegrini., 2007). Various authors have used terms interchangeably and terms vary in definition according to the authors professional identity, orientation and aims (Pellegrini., 2007; Kearney & Graczyk, 2014). Due to the vast differences in the way terms are used to define pupils with school attendance difficulties, caution and a critical lens is needed when consulting the literature base. The following section will consider the different terms utilised within the literature.

### 1.3.1 School Refusal

The term school refusal has been used as an umbrella term, referring to all *"child-motivated refusal to attend school and/or difficulties remaining in classes for an entire day"* (Kearney & Silverman 1996, p. 147), thus encompassing truancy, school refusal and school

phobia (Kearney, 2003). Although this is a prevalent term within the literature, no clear definition has been agreed (Thambirajah, 2008) and has thus become unhelpful. This term to describe school attendance difficulties appears to operate on a within child model, implying 'wilful' behaviour, framing the child as making a conscious decision to not attend school (Dalrymple, 2022). Baker and Bishop's (2014) research into the experiences of children experiencing SNA highlight how the term 'school refuser' led to the children feeling blamed and that it was an active choice, suggesting that this term creates barriers for CYP experiencing school attendance difficulties to feeling understood and can lead to more punitive responses.

*1.3.2 School Phobia*

Historically, the literature concerning pupils who experienced difficulties attending school frequently used the term school phobia (Last & Strauss, 1990) to refer to individuals who appear to have a specific phobia within the school environment, which resulted in avoidance strategies such as non-attendance. The use of this term within the literature has since reduced which may be a result of it utilising a 'within-child' model as Pellegrini (2007) argues that it implies psychopathology.

*1.3.3 Persistent Absenteeism*

Persistent absenteeism is utilised by the UK Department for Education (DfE), to describe pupils who have 'missed' 10% or more of school sessions. However, the definition of persistent absenteeism has changed over the last ten years, with the DfE changing the threshold for the amount of time missed from 20% or more before 2011, to 15% or more before 2015 and currently, 10%. To account for these changes, the government argued that the percentages were not capturing enough CYP experiencing attendance difficulties and the numbers were likely to be much higher.

*1.3.4 Emotionally based school avoidance*

West Sussex Educational Psychology service have used the term 'Emotionally Based School Avoidance' within their guidance since 2004, with the following definition; EBSA *"is a*

*broad umbrella term used to describe a group of CYP who have severe difficulty in attending school due to emotional factors, often resulting in prolonged absences from school"* (West Sussex EPS, 2022 p. 4). It is argued that this term reflects the emotional basis that can underpin SNA, which does not require an individual to have a diagnosed mental health condition (Pellegrini, 2007). However, it can be argued that this term assumes that there is an emotional basis such as anxiety yet difficulties with attendance could be due to an unmet need such as sensory processing difficulties and thus the emotional component is a secondary factor.

### 1.3.5 Extended school non-attendance

Pelligrini (2007) devised the broad term 'extended school non-attendance' to include 'school refusal' and 'truancy' behaviours as an alternative to the term 'school refusal'. This was to move away from 'within-child' explanations to promote a systemic view of non-attendance that considers school-based factors, asserting that goal of language should be to provide description rather than offering judgement upon the CYP's difficulties. However, the term does not provide minimum criteria point for the amount of time that a child or young person will be absent for.

### 1.3.6 School non-attendance

SNA is often used as a broad umbrella term to encompass all individuals who experience difficulties with attendance (Thambirajah, 2008). The researcher acknowledges the shift in discourses around SNA, seeing it as a spectrum and for a diversity of reasons. Thus, the term SNA was chosen for the research as it can be argued to embrace the non-judgemental and objective stance as advocated for by Pelligrini (2007). It is the researchers view that language which implies causation or judgement appears to have implications upon adults' understandings and responses to attendance difficulties. It is acknowledged that although this term is not time specific, it is thought that the term SNA will allow for a broad range of school attendance difficulties to be incorporated to develop a wider understanding of parental experiences of support. Additionally, the researcher hopes to promote a neutral stance on this topic.

## 1.4 Relevant Psychological Theory to understand School Non-Attendance

There are a wide range of psychological theories proposed to increase the understanding of school non-attendance. As previously mentioned, historically the psychological literature has proposed within-child models to explain a child's non-attendance (Baker & Bishop, 2015), suggesting that school non-attendance is often underpinned by underlying mental health conditions such as depression and anxiety (Kearney, 2008; Finning et al., 2019). For example, Lawrence et al. (2019) explored the relationship between mental health conditions and school attendance in Australia and their survey revealed a positive correlation between increased absence rates from school and children with a diagnosed mental health condition compared to those children without a diagnosis. Thambirajah et al., (2008) highlight the spiral effect of anxiety, which may precipitate and/or perpetuate school difficulties (West Sussex EPS, 2022), in which a child gets into a cycle of feeling anxious, having negative thoughts about the school and their ability to cope, avoiding the situation that evokes the anxiety, which brings about temporary relief from the uncomfortable emotions (West Sussex EPS, 2022). Some researchers have argued that school non-attendance should be considered a normal avoidance reaction to an unpleasant or even hostile environment (Elliott, 1999; Lees, 2014). However, Heyne and Rollings (2002) suggest that it is of high importance to consider the child's perceptions of their ability to cope, including their social and academic competence. If the child has a negative perception of their ability to manage, this can lead to further anxiety and if left unaddressed, may prevent attempts to improve attendance.

In an attempt to move away from the psychopathologising perspective, Kearney and Silverman (1993) proposed a behaviourist model that considers the functions that maintain a child's school non-attendance over time. The four functions are as follows:

1. To avoid the experience of severe anxiety or fearfulness related school situations (negative reinforcer).
2. To escape adverse social situations and/or evaluative situations (e.g., tests, presentations, conversations with peers, bullying) (negative reinforcer).
3. To gain or pursue attention from others significant others outside of school (e.g., parents or carers) (positive reinforcer).

4. To obtain or pursue tangible rewards or reinforcement outside of school (positive reinforcer).

The model suggests that these functions serve as either negative or positive reinforcers, with SNA being motivated by either seeking to increase time spent at home (also known as 'pull' factors) or seeking to spend a reduced amount of time at school ('push' factors). This has been a useful model to inform appropriate intervention by adopting an individualised approach to support, with researchers such as Lauchlan (2003) arguing that the functional approach has prompted more recognition that schools need to take some responsibility for children who are fearful of attending. However, this model has received criticism as research has indicated that some children may score very low on all four functions despite experiencing attendance difficulties and that there can be 'overlapping functions', thus highlighting that the model does not fully account for all factors involved (Heyne et al., 2019), such as social context, family dynamics, school environment and parental factors which may exist (Thambirajah et al., 2008; Pellegrini, 2007; Kearney, 2019) due to it following largely behaviourist principles.

There has been a welcomed shift within the literature, recognising that attendance difficulties are underpinned by a complex interaction of interlinked factors related to the CYP, their families and the school environment (Thambirajah, 2008). As such, there is more recognition of school-based factors which contribute to SNA. Filippello et al. (2019) suggested that poor teacher-student relationships and unsupportive school environments lower school satisfaction levels in pupils, leading to SNA. Additionally, Want (2020)'s research suggest that poor relationships with teachers result in CYP's needs for relatedness not being met, which negatively impacts upon their motivation to attend school. For these studies, Self Determination Theory (SDT) has been viewed as a useful conceptual framework to understand SNA (Want, 2020; Tamlyn, 2022) arguing that there is a need to take into account individual and contextual factors and SDT provides a framework for analysing the interaction between these factors (Filippello et al., 2019). SDT is a theory of human motivation, development, and personality (Deci & Ryan, 2000) which proposes that there is an innate human tendency to move towards growth which is marked by three key psychological needs, autonomy, competence, and relatedness.

The psychological need of autonomy relates to the need for individuals to feel a sense of control *and "governance over their lives, knowing that their opinions matter and are*

*valued"* (Fisher, 2023 p. 30). Competence relates the psychological need individuals have to experience a sense of mastery, that is, seeing that they can become better at doing something (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Finally, relatedness is the psychological need of connection, to have meaningful relationships and interactions with others and experience a sense of belonging (Deci & Ryan, 2000). When these psychological needs are applied to SNA, the school environment can be seen to have either a positive or a negative influence on a CYP's attendance by fulfilling or thwarting these basic psychological needs. If the CYP's experiences satisfy these needs (e.g., positive relationships with peers and members of staff to meet their need of relatedness), they will be motivated to attend, whereas individuals tend to be avoidant of experiences that thwart these psychological needs (Wehmeyer & Shrogen, 2017). Thus, SDT can provide useful in exploring and understanding a CYP motivation to attend or avoid the school environment.

## 1.5 The National and LA Context

### 1.5.1 The National Context

In the United Kingdom (UK), children have a right to an education which is enshrined by the United Convention of the Rights of the Child (1989) and nationally in the Human Rights Act (1999). The Education Act (1996) states that parents must ensure their child has access to a suitable full-time education during the compulsory ages of five to sixteen years old in which it should be suitable to their age, ability, and any special educational needs (SEN) they may have. Most parents fulfil this duty by registering their child at a school and this may represent a longstanding and entrenched idea that it is a legal and moral duty to send children to school (Dalrymple, 2022). When their child is registered at a school, parents are then legally responsible for ensuring their child's regular attendance while they are of compulsory school ages. Following the introduction of the Education Skills Act (2008), the compulsory age to remain in education, apprenticeship or training was increased to 18 years old whereby young people should stay in full-time education, undertake an apprenticeship or work whilst accessing part-time education or training.

In the academic year 2018/19, one in ten children or young people (10.9%) who were enrolled in a mainstream primary and secondary school in England, were 'persistently absent'

from school (DfE, 2019). This proportion has since increased to 12.1% in the academic year 2020/21, which roughly equates to 870,000 CYP. The prevalence of SNA is difficult to establish due to differences with the conceptualisation of attendance difficulties, as previously aforementioned, and inconsistencies in the tracking and recording measures utilised by the LAs and schools. For pupils who experience SNA, school staff are required to make a subjective decision between authorised and unauthorised absences (Malcolm et al., 2003). Research has previously suggested that the prevalence of SNA is around 1-5% (Katz et al, 2015), however, the way school records attendance differs, and the lack of official measures and statistics (Kawsar et al., 2021) suggests this percent is likely to be an underestimate. Upon further examination, Tobais (2019) proposes that the evidence suggests that pupils with 5% overall absence were more likely to have SEN or be eligible for free school meals, thus suggesting low-economic status and SEN are notable contributing factors.

The changing socio-political context and the introduction of the School Funding Reform (DfE, 2011) meant the support for CYP who experience attendance difficulties within LAs had changed. The previously held funding by LAs (LAs), was redistributed to schools which placed greater responsibility on schools for encouraging attendance and led to a reduction in support from LAs (i.e., reduced numbers of Education Welfare Officers (EWOs), resulting in a statutory only offer). The DfE (2015a) provided legal actions that LAs and schools could use to 'encourage attendance' such as Parenting Orders, School Attendance Order, Penalty Notices, and prosecutions. In cases of SNA, parents are held accountable as it is assumed that they have the capacity to enforce their child's attendance. Under section 443 of the Education Act, LAs hold the legal power to prosecute parents who do not comply with a school attendance order or do not ensure their child's regular attendance at school. The legal interventions utilised by the government appear to highlight the dominant discourse which identifies parents as the locus of the problem (Pellegrini, 2007) and there is limited evidence to suggest that utilising such punitive approaches has a positive effect on attendance (BPS, 2017; Zhang, 2004; Sheppard, 2011).

Due to the coronavirus pandemic, most pupils in England experienced disruption to their school attendance between 2020-2022. It has been hypothesised that CYP may display reoccurring or new avoidant behaviours returning to school after school closures. Schools have been encouraged to identify reluctant or anxious pupils and develop plans for their re-engagement with school (DfE, 2020). Additionally, since 2020, there has been a recent and

welcomed shift in government guidance regarding attendance. The DfE (2022) guidance policy '*Working together to improve attendance*' shifts the focus from punitive measures and administrative procedures (DfE, 2018) to building positive relationships between home and school, treating pupils and parents with dignity and utilising relationships to listen to and understand the barriers to attendance (DfE, 2022). Although this guidance highlights the importance of relationships and understanding barriers to attendance, it does not provide specifics upon what support should be available. Within this context, it seems important to understand parent's experiences of support and the support they feel should be in place to inform best practice.

*1.5.2 Local Authority Context*

As this section considers the researcher's own experiences, this section utilises the first person. During my professional practice placement, the LA I am based in recognises 'Emotionally Based School Avoidance' (EBSA) as a priority area by the Educational Psychology Service (EPS), particularly following the Coronavirus Pandemic. The LA has seen an increasingly high number of referrals for Education, Health Care Needs Assessments (EHCNA) for CYP displaying emotionally based school avoidance. The EPS has engaged in Continued Professional Development sessions on this topic area to increase Educational Psychologists (EPs) knowledge and understanding. Within the EPS, there has been a rise in the number of Special Educational Needs Co-ordinators (SENCOs) bringing the topic of EBSA to consultation sessions with their link EP. This gained my interest, and I became curious about the support and provision that is available for pupils and their families due to school staff reporting that they did not know how to best support these students. As a response to the increasing number of referrals, the Senior EP within the LA set up a working group and is currently leading a project on EBSA with the intention of developing guidance for school staff and other professionals and creating a tiered pathway of support.

## 1.6 Rationale for the current research

In the Western society, accessing formal education is frequently seen as being beneficial to the rounded development of CYP, supporting their social, emotional and

academic development (Finning et al., 2019). School provides CYP with formal qualifications, important life skills, enhances their social and economic participation in society by preparing them for adulthood (Allensworth et al., 2019; Fredricks et al., 2019; Zaff et al., 2017). SNA has been linked statistically with underachievement in UK. The DfE (2019b) found that pupils in Key Stage 2, who were not meeting the expected standard in maths, reading and writing had an overall absent rate of 4.7% compared to 3.5% among their peers meeting the expected standard. For Key Stage 4, pupils who achieved grade 9 to 5 had an overall absence rate of 3.7% whereas those who had an absence rate of 8.8% did not achieve grade 9 to 4 (DfE, 2019b). CYP who experience SNA can become socially isolated as they withdraw contact with other children (Kearney et al., 2001). In the longer term, consequences of low attendance include not engaging in Education, Employment, or Training after secondary school (Taylor, 2012), being at risk of exploitation and radicalisation (DfE, 2016), increased risk of mental health difficulties (Thambirajah, 2008) and unemployment (Attwood & Croll, 2015).

Many CYP face challenges such as poverty, SEN or medical needs or victimisation that may enhance their risk for school absenteeism and mental health problems (Heyne et al., 2022).   In 2017-18, the DfE found that pupils from the most economically deprived backgrounds had a three times higher rate of persistent absence when compared to pupils who are least economically deprived (DfE, 2019). Consideration of the challenges CYP face that place them at risk of SNA, coupled with the short- and long-term consequences, highlights the importance of early intervention to support those who experience attendance difficulties. This suggests that those who experience SNA, both pupils and their families are a vulnerable group, who are marginalised within society.

The current understanding of SNA is shaped by professional discourses, with the power residing in academics and professionals to name things and design interventions and support for SNA, without asking for the perspectives of those who have lived experience of it (O'Tooley & Deveney, 2020). There appears to be limited research on parent's voice within the SNA literature and this is considered significant due to the current legislative framework which places a duty on parents to resolve attendance difficulties, yet their voices are rarely heard. Parental voice is central to supporting CYP with SEND due to the advocacy role they assume on behalf of their children and the expertise they have of their child's needs (Dalrymple, 2021). The importance of parental voice is reflected in educational policy and legislation as the SEND Code of Practice (SEND CoP) (DfE, 2015) sought to empower parents,

providing them with more control and choice in decisions made about their child's education. Although the child's voice is protected by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), emphasised within the SEND CoP (DfE, 2015) and seen as key within the literature, the present study focuses on parents as they are often those who request and engage with professionals. The researcher spent some time wondering whether to listen to the voices of young people or parents and ended up settling on parents. This was partly because parents are often those who seek professional involvement, attend meetings with professionals and are legally responsible for their child's attendance (DfE, 2014).

It is viewed that parents can provide essential insight regarding the types of support that should be available and accessible and thus, if we as researchers, policy makers and educators are to understand the phenomenon of SNA, we need to understand the perspectives of those who have lived experience of it (Prunty et al, 2012).

### 1.6.1 Researchers Position

Due to the reflective nature of this section, the researcher will utilise the use of first person. Prior to training, I was a Learning and Behaviour Mentor in a therapeutic centre attached to a mainstream secondary school. As part of my role, I would often work with young people and their families to support their reintegration back into school following exclusions and prolonged periods of absence. During meetings, I was always struck by the limited understanding and empathy senior members of staff would have about the child's difficulties, often attributing it to the child's active choice because they were disinterested in school or poor parenting, in which they spoke of a lack of boundaries, too many rewards at home or the parents not caring enough about their child's education. Throughout my role, I had frequent contact with parents who would share their frustrations regarding their discussions with other members of staff and the emotional distress they had experienced trying to get their young person in the car to come to school. After these conversations, I often felt powerless and that I never was able to do enough. Within my role, there was little supervision or training available within the LA on how to support the family and encourage the child's attendance. I was often met with frustrations from colleagues that the young person had not made it into school and felt pressure from more senior members wanting a 'quick fix'.

Since gaining a place on the doctorate, my interest in and passion for supporting social, emotional, and mental health (SEMH) needs has increased which has been shaped by my experiences on placement and university lectures. I am frequently involved in consultation sessions where SENCOs often raise concerns regarding parental anxiety and behaviours that appear to be barriers when supporting a young person return to school after a period of absence. I have found it pertinent to support SENCo's and teaching staff's understanding of SEMH difficulties, remaining curious to the behaviours they see, reframe difficulties and challenge terms such as 'refusal' that perpetuate unhelpful dominant discourses to increase compassion and understanding.

## 1.7 Chapter Summary

This chapter provided an overview of the wider context in which this research is situated. The differences in terminology and conceptualisation were considered, emphasising the impact they may have on the approaches and interventions for support. The national and local contexts highlighted the importance of SNA, which is the focus of the current research.

# Chapter 2: Systematic Literature Review

## 2.1 Chapter Overview

This chapter addresses the available literature on parental views, perceptions, and experiences of support for their child who experiences SNA.

The researcher conducted a systematic literature review (Booth et al., 2009) of the available international literature to systematically search for, appraise and synthesise the evidence base related to the literature review question. This chapter first outlines the systematic review process and the methodology used for identifying and analysing the available papers. This is followed by a critique and synthesis of the available literature, with emerging themes summarised. Last, the chapter presents the overall conclusions drawn from the review and identifies gaps within the literature.

## 2.2 Purpose and literature review question

An initial scoping review was conducted in November 2021, as part of the researcher's research proposal for the present thesis, which was part of their doctoral university assignment. The initial scoping review aimed to explore interventions and support available for parents of children who experiences SNA. The purpose of the initial scoping review was to map the literature on an emerging topic and to support the development of this thesis. The scoping review was conducted in October 2021. The databases used to conduct the search consisted of: Education Research Complete, APA Psych Info, British Education Index and ERIC and the following search terms were used:

SU Subject term: *school avoidance OR school refus\* OR school non-attendance*

AND TI Title: *school avoidance OR school refus\* OR school non-attendance*

AND TX All Text '*Parent\*'* OR '*Famil\*'*

AND TX All Text '*support\* OR intervention OR strategies*'.

The scoping review was limited to academic journals and was further limited by texts available in English due to the researcher being unable to access content of studies in another language. The search identified 36 papers which were yielded for review. Following the reading of titles and abstracts, 27 papers were excluded due to no full text availability and

identified as not being relevant to the topic area. The remaining 18 articles were read, and the findings synthesised (see Appendix A for a table of references).

The synthesis of findings from this initial scoping review revealed that approaches to supporting CYP and their families can be categorised as within-child, within-family and systemic/school approaches. A brief description of these categories follows.

Papers that appeared to have a within-child focus, considered anxiety, including separation anxiety, and mental health to be a key feature of the child's SNA (Pina et al., 2009; Oner et al., 2014; McShane et al., 2001; Reissner et al., 2015; Kearney & Bates, 2005; Heyne et al., 2014; King et al., 2001; Knollmann et al., 2010). This further contributed to the discourse of SNA as an individual clinical problem which requires treatment and change within the CYP. Individual forms of interventions, such as cognitive behavioural therapy (Pina et al., 2009; Heyne et al., 2014; Reissner et al., 2015) which aim to challenge a child's perceptions and anxiety-provoking thoughts and using cognitive restructuring techniques, in-patient treatment (Oner et al., 2014), graded exposure/ desensitisation (King et al., 2001) and medication interventions (Oner et al., 2014), were valued.

Research that appeared to operate from a within-family perspective, perceived family dynamics and functioning (Kearney & Silverman, 1995; Coulter, 1995; Carlson et al., 2021; Christogiorgos & Giannakopoulos, 2014; Tobias, 2019), including family conflict (McShane et al., 2001; Heyne et al., 2014; Knollmann et al., 2010), parenting styles (Knollmann et al., 2010) and parental mental health, control and their ability to cope (Carless et al., 2015; King et al., 2001; McShane et al., 2001; Coulter, 1995; Tobias, 2019; Knollmann et al., 2010) as explanations and factors to be addressed for interventions to support CYP's SNA, further pathologising the family. Within Carless et al., (2015) study, parental self-efficacy, family psychopathology and family functioning were examined using questionnaires, with their findings suggesting that parents of school refusing CYP had significantly lower scores of parental self-efficacy when compared to parents of CYP who attend school regularly. Carless et al., (2015) suggest that parents perceive themselves as not having the skills or knowledge to support their child and their perceived failures in managing their child's distress influenced upon their perseverance and levels of anxiety and depression, further suggesting that parents were not able to engage with the task required to support their child's SNA. Similarly, Kearney and Silverman (1995) suggest five familial relationship subtypes which are linked to a CYP's school refusal behaviour: enmeshed families, characterised by dependency and

overprotective parenting; conflictive families, characterised by unclear parent-child boundaries; detached families, characterised by withdrawn behaviours which are not attentive to one another's thoughts and needs; isolated families, characterised by little extrafamilial contact and healthy families. Kearney and Silverman (1995) suggest that school refusal can be found in all identified subtypes but is not so common in 'healthy families'. With this view, Kearney and Silverman (1995) and Carlson et al., (2021) advocate for interventions which address family dynamics and functioning and parenting skills (Kearney & Bates, 2005). Richardson (2016), although predominantly focused on family therapy as a form of intervention, highlights the importance of systemic approaches as they highlight how there is a complex interplay that is present within the relationship between home and school which can contribute to the development and maintenance of difficulties as the interactions can replicate the dynamics of the family. Overall, the findings in relation to within-family subsection further contributed to the narrative that poor family functioning, including overprotecting parenting, and parental mental health can lead to SNA, locating the problem within the parent and the family, ignoring the influence of systemic and school-based factors on SNA (Pellegrini, 2007; Nuttall & Woods, 2013; Havik et al., 2014).

Within the category of systemic approaches, a more holistic view of a CYP's SNA is favoured. For example, Pellegrini (2007) stresses the importance of considering factors within the school environment which increases a child's risk of SNA and cautions against clinical constructions and discourses in relation to SNA. Within Havik et al., (2014)'s study, parental perceptions of factors influencing their child's SNA involved teacher and pupil relationships, limited experiences of support and reasonable adjustments, limited resources and communication and teacher attitudes which negatively impacted upon their child's ability to attend, thus suggested there is a need for improved home-school communication, relationships and adjustments to the school environment. Further, Kearney and Bates (2005) recommend a multi-disciplinary approach which focuses on removing barriers to SNA as well as supporting CYP to develop coping skills for anxiety. Additionally, Nuttall and Woods (2013) highlight the importance of developing a holistic approach to supporting the reintegration of school non-attenders, with relationships, support for psychological factors, supporting the family and the role of professionals and systems being seen as key to facilitate CYP's development and re-engagement with school.

The initial scoping review revealed that the support on offer for CYP experiencing SNA is based on a within-child or within-family models, focusing on 'treatments' with only a few studies exploring the parents' or child's experiences and systemic factors. The differing constructs of SNA and how it is conceptualised has implications on the approaches to intervention and support, with many of the studies involved in the initial scoping review consisting of quantitative research designs or case studies involving professional commentaries. It is acknowledged that within the initial scoping review, the lack of parental perspective and voice was evident and thus, the purpose of the systematic literature review was to systematically search and synthesise the research base regarding parents' experiences of support for their child with SNA. Following this initial scoping review, the literature review question utilised for the present thesis was decided to be:

***'What does the available literature tell us about parents' experiences of their child's school non-attendance and the support that is on offer?'***

## 2.3 Literature review process

To gain a better understanding of parents' experiences of support with SNA, the literature was systematically investigated which utilised the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) (Page et al., 2021).

Guided by Booth et al. (2016), the researcher employed a three-phase process which included:

1. Systematically searching the literature, using a clear inclusion and exclusion criteria.
2. Critically evaluating the literature using the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP, 2018).
3. Synthesising the information from the selected studies to answer the literature review question, thematically analysing what is already known and identifying gaps in the literature.

### *2.3.1 Systematically searching the literature.*

After the researcher had conducted a preliminary scoping review and had carried out some initial searches to explore key words, the databases within EBSCO Host were searched systematically on 06.10.2022 and reviewed in September 2023. The databases consisted of:

Academic Search Ultimate, Child Development and Adolescent Studies, Education Research Complete, ERIC, APA PsycArticles and APA PsycInfo. The search terms used were chosen to ensure that all elements of SNA were included, and that parents' views of support were encompassed in which the researcher utilised Boolean logic (Booth et al., 2016). As outlined in Chapter 1 of this thesis, there are a range of terms used to describe CYP who experience difficulties attending schools which are often used inconsistently and without precision (Elliot, 1999). Therefore, this led to variants of SNA such as 'school refus*' and 'school phobia' (Please see Appendix B for full details of the search process). The inclusion and exclusion criteria for the systematic literature review can be found in Table 1.

**Table 1**

*A table outlining the inclusion and exclusion criteria.*

| Included | Excluded | Rationale |
|---|---|---|
| Study focus is on school non-attendance | Study is not focused on school non-attendance | The question for this review and topic of this thesis concerns school non-attendance. |
| Empirical study | Literature review only | Access primary data and extract a level of detail required for the critique. |
| Studies published in English | Studies not published in English | As an English speaker, it is not possible for the researcher to access the content of studies in another language. Additionally, the researcher did not have access to any funding that could have been used for transcription purposes. |
| Qualitative data | Only quantitative data reported | To provide greater insight into parents' experiences which is in line with the aims of this research. |
| Includes parents/carers experiences | Includes experiences of other stakeholders only | The current literature review concerns parents/carers experiences and thus views of other groups may detract from this. |
| Studies that are published in peer-reviewed journals | Studies that are not peer reviewed | To increase the trustworthiness of the review |
| Studies published between 2000-present | Studies published before 2000. | To obtain an up to date understanding of the phenomenon of school non-attendance |

The inclusion criteria applied involved articles published in peer-reviewed journals since 2000 to ensure its relevance to current discussions. Publications of opinion papers and editorials which do not include any form of primary research had not been included within the literature review. Studies which were available in English were included in the review due to the accessibility and time requirements of the researcher as they were not able to access the content of studies in another language. The researcher had initially planned to limit the parameters to studies based in UK due to the political context, however, there appears to be a lack of primary research on parents' experiences in the UK. As such, the researcher made the decision to include countries of comparable education systems to the UK. Of the EBSCO search, 477 articles were yielded for review of which 215 remained after duplicates were

removed. The total of 215 records were screened for review, in which the titles and abstracts were scanned for relevance, with articles unrelated to the research area and the literature search criteria being excluded. The full texts of the remaining articles were then read and further filtered based on the inclusion and exclusion criteria as outlined above. The remaining articles were then scrutinised to ensure all inclusion criteria were met before deciding to include the findings in the review. A visual representation of this process is provided below via a diagram of PRISMA (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1**

*PRISMA diagram, illustrating the literature review process.*
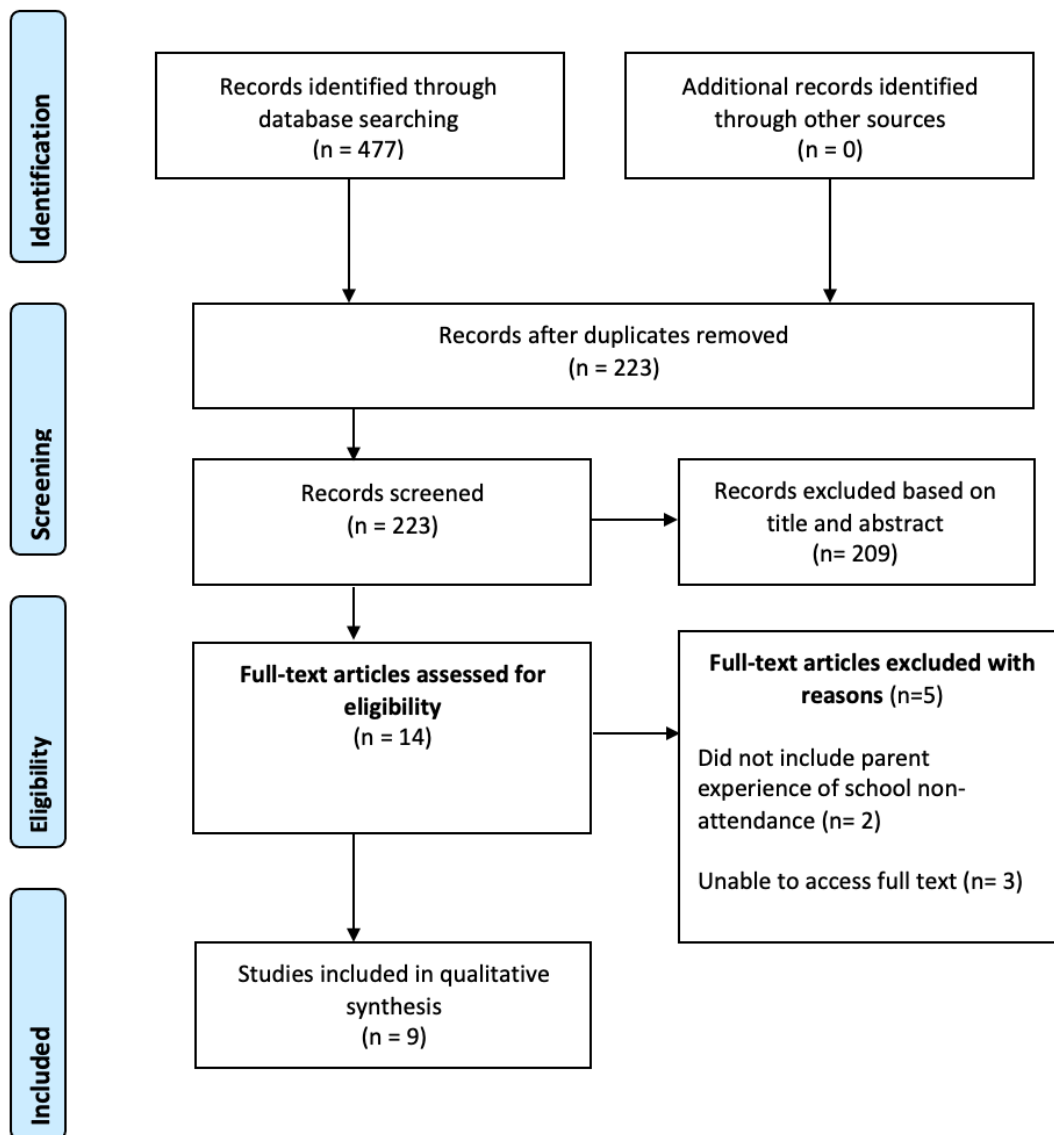


**2.3.2 Critical evaluation of literature**

All the remaining papers were considered to be of sufficient quality and were included in the critical analysis. The nine identified papers were read multiple times and systematically appraised using the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP, 2018) for qualitative research which allows the systematic assessment of the trustworthiness, results, and relevance of research papers (Parkes et al., 2001). As the quality assessment could be argued to be a subjective process (Booth et al., 2016), the research supervisor took on the role of the second reviewer who checked a sample of quality assessments. It was found that the primary and

second reviewers agreed. Full details of each study's critical appraisal utilising the CASP framework can be viewed in Appendix C. The final nine papers that were robust enough to include in the final literature synthesis are outlined in Table 2. It should be noted that, although the search dates were 2000-present, only papers from 2013 were identified in this review.

**Table 2**
*The studies included in the literature review.*

| Number | Paper title | Author(s) and year of publication |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | An approach to supporting young people with autism spectrum disorder and high anxiety to re-engage with formal education - the impact on young people and their families | Preece, D., & Howley, M. (2018). |
| 2 | The Experience of Psychiatric Care of Adolescents with Anxiety-based School Refusal and of their Parents: A Qualitative Study. | Sibeoni, J., Orri, M., Podlipski, M.-A., Labey, M., Campredon, S., Gerardin, P., & Revah-Levy, A. (2018). |
| 3 | The perceptions of anxiety-related school absenteeism in youth: A qualitative study involving youth, mother, and father. | Dannow, M. C., Esbjørn, B. H., & Risom, S. W. (2020). |
| 4 | Migrant parents of adolescents with school refusal: A qualitative study of parental distress and cultural barriers in access to care. | Rosenthal, L., Moro, M. R., & Benoit, L. (2020). |
| 5 | Parental perspectives of the role of school factors in school refusal. | Havik, T., Bru, E., & Ertesvåg, S. K. (2014). |
| 6 | Emotionally based school non-attendance: Two successful returns to school following lockdown. | Corcoran, S., Bond, C., & Knox, L. (2022). |
| 7 | Extended school non-attenders' views: Developing best practice. | Gregory, I. R., & Purcell, A. (2014). |
| 8 | Effective intervention for school refusal behaviour. | Nuttall, C., & Woods, K. (2013). |
| 9 | Investigating the function of social capital: a case study on self-help groups that have non-attendance school children. | Yamada, T. (2015) |

## 2.3.4 The analysis of the identified literature in relation to the literature review question

A thematic synthesis of the literature was carried out on the identified studies. This is similar to the analysis of primary qualitative data which involves systematically coding the

data (the findings section of the identified studies) and generating themes. This thematic synthesis process of the literature review involved the researcher reading the articles numerous times, summarising the findings within the presented papers in a dedicated table, coding and then grouping the codes to create themes based on significant or prevalent findings. This was deemed an appropriate way to synthesis the research findings as there appeared to be an overlap in the number of key themes across the studies. An example of the checking generated themes within the thematic synthesis process of one paper's original findings is presented in Appendix D. The findings of this review in response to the literature review question, '*What does the available literature tell us about parents' experiences of their child's school non-attendance and the support that is on offer?*' were summarised in the following four themes:

- Relationships, Communication and Collaboration
- Emotional Impact on Parents
- Parents Attempts to Understand
- Features of the Learning Environment

### 2.3.4.1. Relationships, Communication and Collaboration

In the majority of the studies included in this review, relationships, communication and collaboration was central to parental experiences of their child's SNA, with communication being the building block to relationships and collaboration. The relationships identified in the studies within this literature review incorporated the relationship between parents and school staff, as well as the relationship between teachers and children, and outlined the professional characteristics which supported the relationship development.

The consistency of staff members, their attributes and their approaches were highlighted in multiple studies as either having a positive or negative effect on parental perspectives of their child's attendance difficulties (Nuttall & Woods, 2013; Preece & Howley, 2018; Corcoran et al., 2022; Havik et al., 2014; Dannow et al., 2020). The nurturing approaches and the emotional support teachers provided appeared to be supportive of the child's school attendance as they increased child's feelings of safety and predictability.

Several studies highlighted the importance of teachers placing value on building a relationship with the child to providing emotional support. This encompassed staff being attentive to the problem as well as adopting a calm, positive and nurturing approach (Corcoran et al., 2022; Nuttall & Woods, 2013; Preece & Howley, 2018; Havik et al., 2014; Dannow et al., 2020). However, Havik et al. (2014)'s study, which explored parental perspectives on the role of school factors in school refusal, highlights how the teacher's behaviour of harsh reprimands or aggressive reactions lead to children feeling unsafe, insecure, and anxious which negatively impacted upon attendance.

Havik et al. (2014)'s findings also suggest that parents felt reassured and supported when they knew that a teacher or another person appreciated and cared for their child as they would support them.  Through developing positive relationships with the child, Corcoran et al. (2022) and Preece and Howley (2018) suggest that a more tailored approach can be developed as the child's views and their involvement in decision making processes are seen as central to the development of a shared understanding and support. However, it is important to note that both of these studies incorporated views of professionals, parents and children which meant that parental perspectives were often overshadowed by the professionals.

The three studies that focused on students' successful reintegration frequently cited the home-school relationship and communication as being a facilitating factor of support for children's attendance (Corcoran et al., 2022; Preece & Howley, 2018; Nuttall & Woods, 2018). Within Corcoran et al. (2022)'s study, the importance on building positive rapport with parents and communicating regularly enabled parents to openly share their views as they felt their perspective was valued and taken seriously. Similarly, for parents in Preece and Howley (2018)'s study whose child attended a new provision of the Centre, open and honest communication, through phone calls and face to face interactions was perceived as helpful and effective as parents reported feeling able to communicate their child and their family's needs which enabled action to be taken by staff members to address these. Interestingly, parents involved in Yamada (2015)'s study exploring the function of social capital in self-help groups for Futoko (school refusal), parents valued professionals who were involved in the support group telling a personal story which was seen to rebalance perceived power differentials between the professional being the expert and the parent as being a lay person, which suggests the potential imbalances of power may impact upon parental perspectives of

the support received. In Sibeoni et al. (2018), parents who participated viewed the personal and emotional aspects of their relationships with hospital staff as important, seeing the teaching staff as *"kind, patient and altruistic"* (p. 47)*,* highlighting the importance of the therapeutic relationship*.* Additionally, parents highlighted the need to speak and be heard which was considered supportive in developing trusting relationships. It is important to note that the researchers in Sibeoni et al. (2018) did not provide reflexive accounts and thus it is unclear whether the researchers were involved in the participants treatments, which could have impacted upon the findings.

The development of effective communication pathways and relationships appeared to provide parents with the opportunities to raise concerns early before their child's difficulties worsened, as parents were often first to notice the signs of anxiety before this was seen in school (Corcoran et al., 2022).  However, teachers and professionals who lacked the understanding of school refusal or emotionally vulnerable children appear to impede the development of effective communication and collaboration, as misunderstandings can lead to inappropriate or slow responses (Havik et al., 2014; Dannow et al., 2020). For parents in Nuttall & Woods (2013), the professional availability and regular communication provided families with a key person who they could trust and contact if they had concerns. This increased parental confidence to seek advice as well as providing support tailored to the family's needs. Communication and relationships appear to be central in facilitating effective collaboration as parents and professionals alike viewed this as supporting the development of shared goals and focus (Preece & Howley, 2018), as well as developing a shared understanding of the child's difficulties, their triggers, and the function of their anxiety (Corcoran et al., 2022). It appears that developing positive relationships, and effective communication whereby parents feel involved in meetings and the decision-making process enables tailored and child centred strategies to be implemented (Corcoran et al., 2022; Preece & Howley, 2018), which can have a positive impact upon attendance.

However, it appears that there are several barriers to effective communication, relationships and collaboration experienced by parents. In Havik et al. (2014)'s study interviewing 17 parents, parents report that although the prevention of school refusal relies on home-school communication and co-operation to facilitate adapted support, parents reported that cooperation was only taken seriously once the school refusal had started, with one parent expressing *"we never felt these parent-school meetings were constructive…they*

*are schematic…not personal"* (p. 141). Additionally, in Corcoran et al. (2022), one parent suggested that perseverance is required due to the need to make contact with the school multiple times, before making successful contact. This idea of perseverance was also echoed by parental perspectives shared in Dannow et al. (2020)'s study expressing the need to 'fight' to get teachers to understand their child's needs, which highlights several potential barriers to effective support for SNA. For the 11 migrant parents interviewed in Rosenthal et al. (2020)'s research which aimed to explore their experience of their child's school refusal, communication with the school and other professionals was viewed as difficult due to the culturally coded nature of the organisations, suggesting that migrant parents lacked the cultural capital needed to identify key personnel, challenge the system, and access resources. For one parent in Rosenthal et al. (2020)'s study, they reported feeling 'completely shunted aside by the school' when reflecting upon their sudden and shocking experience of being informed of their child's difficulties by a school psychologist utilising an interpreter by telephone. This suggests that there is a need for school staff and professionals to consider the communication needs of their parents and adapt their approaches to ensure parents are able to access and develop positive and collaborative working relationships when supporting their child with SNA.

Overall, this theme is complex in nature and at times contradictory in what it reveals, as it highlights two polar perspectives on each aspect, with relationships and support experiences juxtaposed with the lack of relationships and lack of support experienced by parents.

### 2.3.4.2. Features of the Learning Environment

The physical environment appeared prominent to parental perceptions of either their child's difficulties with attendance or their improved attendance (Preece & Howley, 2018; Havik et al., 2014; Nuttall & Woods, 2013; Sibeoni et al., 2018; Dannow et al., 2020). For parents in Dannow et al. (2020), the structural organisation of the school was perceived as challenging for the child, with large schools, the number of students in a classroom and large gatherings being seen as linked to school absenteeism. The sensory aspects of the physical learning environment also appeared to impact upon children's attendance as Havik et al., (2014) and Dannow et al. (2020)'s findings highlight that noisy and disorganised classrooms and the various changes throughout the school day were viewed as challenging for children

with attendance difficulties as it appeared to increase children's feelings of unpredictability, feelings of being unsafe and invisible in the classroom. However, Preece and Howley (2018) identified that developing an appropriate learning environment in the Centre, where the small size of the building, the small group sizes and the availability of clearly defined spaces, was viewed as important by the child, their parents, and professionals. The smaller physical learning environment appeared to have a positive impact on their child's attendance and their ability to cope as it reduced the sensory demand of loud noise and crowds that the child had previously experienced in mainstream schools, thus enhancing their sense of predictability and safety. For parents of children hospitalised for their mental health difficulties in relation to school refusal, the environment was reported to be a therapeutic lever in their child's treatment as parents viewed the physical space as more welcoming, more open to the outside world and benevolent (Sibeoni et al., 2018). Additionally, Nuttall and Woods (2013)'s findings suggest that having a small welcoming space, particularly during lunch times enhanced the child's feelings of safety, security and belonging as it reduced the social demands on the child and appeared to provide opportunities for the child to experience positive peer interactions, which enhanced their confidence.

The view of the school environment evoking feelings of being unsafe and unpredictability appeared prominent in two of the studies (Dannow et al., 2020; Havik et al., 2014), with the noise levels, social demands with peer relationships, anxiety and pressure related to academic success and different teacher relationships presenting as barriers to the child's needs of predictability, stability and continuity (Havik et al., 2014; Dannow et al., 2020; Gregory & Purcell, 2014). The teacher's behaviour and characteristics were also frequently cited, with studies that explored successful reintegration viewing positive and calm approaches by staff (Corcoran et al., 2022) and the availability of the key adult (Nuttall & Woods, 2013) as important to supporting a child's SNA. Conversely, for studies that explored parental perspective more generally, the school system was viewed as placing too much pressure on the child and as failing to understand the child's situation (Sibeoni et al., 2018). Parents viewed teachers as having negative, strict or boring teaching styles, pushing their child too far, or their ability to manage classroom behaviour as negatively impacting upon a child's attendance, as it appeared to evoke feelings of fear and unpredictability for the child (Gregory & Purcell, 2014; Havik et al., 2014; Sibeoni et al., 2018).

The communication between staff and their understanding of the situation also seemed to impact upon a child's SNA, with staff who shared their learning with other members of staff enabling a whole school approach to support to be developed (Corcoran et al., 2022).  For parents in Havik et al. (2014)'s study, parents viewed support for SNA only arising after attendance difficulties began and viewed not receiving timely support or adaptation of schoolwork as contributing factors to their child's SNA. This perspective appeared to attribute the lack of early or appropriate support to staff not having an understanding of their child's difficulties, thus reducing their ability to appropriately adapt practices to their child's needs.

Adaptations of the learning environment which were responsive to the child's individual needs was viewed as key for parents and professionals (Corcoran et al., 2022; Preece & Howley, 2018; Nuttall & Woods 2013). This involved adapting practices and expectations such as implementing different arrival times, offering the child choices in regards to strategies (Corcoran et al., 2022), introducing a flexible and reduced timetable which allowed for sufficient time for the child to reintegrate into school (Nuttall & Woods, 2013), reducing academic pressures through changing instructional support so that the child did not have to read aloud or stand in front of the class (Havik et al., 2014), allowing the child to leave school if they needed to (Dannow et al., 2020), accessing safe spaces (Corcoran et al., 2022) as well as utilising a *"toolbox of strategies"* (p. 476) related to the child's strengths and needs (Preece & Howley, 2018).  Although adaptations and flexibility were seen as key to supporting a child's SNA, parents in Havik et al. (2014)'s study illustrated a tension between the need for adaptations to support the child's needs and the child desire to be normal and not stand out from their classmates. This appears to highlight the importance of flexibility and working collaboratively with the child, to develop support strategies that are tailored to the child's goals and needs (Nutall & Woods, 2013; Corcoran et al., 2022; Preece & Howley, 2018).

Overall, this theme holds links with the previous theme of relationships, suggesting that staff beliefs and understanding of SNA as well as their responses to the child are central to their ability to flexibly adapt the learning environment to the child's individual needs which is viewed by parents as important for their child's SNA.

*2.3.4.3. Emotional Impact on Parents*

The parental experience of SNA appeared to encompass a range of emotions, with parents reporting to feel frustrated with trying to navigate their situations (Corcoran et al., 2022; Dannow et al., 2020), as well as feeling lost and helpless (Dannow et al., 2020; Yamada, 2015; Rosenthal et al., 2020). For some parents, frustration was a result of their attempts to communicate their concerns, which had not been acted upon until their child's anxiety had worsened (Corcoran et al., 2022). Parents in Dannow et al. (2020)'s study expressed feelings of frustration and helplessness which appeared to be in response to all aspects of their child's school absenteeism, highlighting factors such as the time implications, the effort needed to get the school to adjust to their child's needs, the impact on their work life and the exhausting nature of attempting to manage the situation whilst feeling disempowered. Gregory and Purcell (2014)'s findings share similarities with Dannow et al. (2020) as parents reported to be unable to work due to being responsible for their child's education and expressed feeling though the choice to home educate was forced by professionals rather than an elective choice by the parent, highlighting an experience of restricted autonomy and power imbalance. It appears that parents view themselves as holding the responsibility for supporting their child's SNA, with the parents in Corcoran et al. (2022)'s study viewing themselves as having a key advocacy role, in which they felt a sense of responsibility to ensure that their child's views were shared with and listened to by staff.

Parental experiences also involved high levels of anxiety about their SNA as they expressed concerns regarding the potential school and academic consequences for their child (Sibeoni et al., 2018) and the potential barrier it poses to the child's social elevation (Rosenthal et al., 2020), whilst they tried to find the answer to guide their 'way out' of their difficulties (Yamada, 2015). Within Dannow et al. (2020), parents expressed that seeing their child's difficulties often evoked negative emotional responses in themselves. The reported anxiety in some studies appeared to stem from parents' experiences of being treated unfairly by professionals, in which they had been blamed for their child's difficulties and felt that the school held them responsible (Gregory & Purcell, 2014). This also appeared to stem from parental experiences of stigma due to their cultural differences (Rosenthal et al., 2020) as well as their own fears of being perceived and labelled as a 'helicopter parent' (Yamada, 2015). It appears that school refusal can impact upon parents' perception of their own competency, as migrant parents expressed feelings of being paralysed in their role, unable to advise their

child and expressed feelings of the child's difficulties being failures on their behalf (Rosenthal et al., 2020).

Experiences of isolation was also prevalent in two of the studies, with parents reporting to feel alone as though no other person understood their experience (Gregory & Purcell, 2014; Rosenthal et al., 2020). Parents in Rosenthal et al. (2020)'s study expressed how their families viewed the problem of school refusal as completely incomprehensible and thus were not a source of further support. As a result of these difficulties in understanding and to protect themselves from the risk of their parenting skills being brought into question, parents in Rosenthal et al. (2020) reported that they would say nothing or lie to friends and family members about their child with attendance difficulties. For these migrant parents, not having the cultural or social capital to navigate their child's difficulties in another country appeared to increase their fear of making a mistake or being judged as a bad parent when accessing mental health support, as they expressed how their cultural difference may be perceived by professionals as a possible flaw in parenting (Rosenthal et al., 2020).

In exploring successful reintegration, Nuttall and Woods (2013) highlighted the importance of *"meeting the needs of the family"* (p. 356) in which an attendance officer adopted a positive and nurturing approach to facilitate the development of a professional supportive relationship with the parent. This relationship appeared to be a mitigating factor as it provided the parent with an available person to contact if they had concerns, allowing the parent to feel heard, a person who they could trust and a person to attend meetings with the parent to increase their confidence and seek further advice. The increased attendance in alternative settings, such as a hospital school (Sibeoni et al., 2018) and a small education centre (Preece & Howley, 2018) appeared to be an additional mitigating factor of the emotional impact SNA has on the family, with both studies reporting to provide parents with 'time' that had a positive impact on family life, as parents were able to do things without their child that they would not usually be able to do (Preece & Howley, 2018) and provided the family with a *'normal life'* (p. 44) routine (Sibeoni et al., 2018).

The importance of supporting the family is echoed in Preece and Howley (2018)'s research, in which staff in the Centre acknowledged parental stress and the impact it can have and thus parents were provided with access to support and information, training and opportunities to meet with other families in similar situations. By providing opportunities to meet others in a similar situation, parents reported to feel this was supportive, which could

potentially be due to the reduced feelings of isolation and an increased feeling of being understood. Similarly, parents involved in the self-help support group for Futoko, appeared to experience an increase in social capital as they felt a sense of empathy, security, and connectedness with parents in similar situations through story telling practices (Yamada, 2015). The experience of connecting with others appeared to also provide parents with a constant companion during their suffering as well as a sense of hope as longstanding members share the uniqueness and their journey of their experiences (Yamada, 2015).

This theme suggests that parents experience a wide range of difficult emotions in response to their child's SNA which can be exacerbated by professionals' responses to their situations, their own resources and can lead parents to question their own competence. To mitigate this, the research literature suggests that positive and nurturing relationships with professionals and access to parents in similar situations can provide parents with experiences of being understood, supported, and reduce feelings of isolation.

### 2.3.4.4. Parents Attempts to Understand

This theme encapsulates the different ways parents attempted to search for answers to increase their understanding of their child's SNA and find ways to alleviate their difficulties. Parents reported having limited knowledge of their child's difficulties and of effective interventions, which lead to them searching for random solutions (Dannow et al., 2020; Rosenthal et al., 2020). Within Dannow et al. (2020), parents appeared to engage in an ongoing process of hypothesis generation regarding their child's difficulties yet were unable to find meaningful explanations which further contributed to their limited understanding of their child's school absenteeism. The search for solutions was also evident in Rosenthal et al. (2020)'s study in which parents utilised their cultural practices in an attempt to resolve their child's SNA. Such practices involved going to see a traditional priest, engaging in traditional rituals to protect their child, and refuting the evil eye hypothesis. Parents within Rosenthal et al. (2020)'s study also attempted to make sense of their child's SNA through attributing it to somatic causes or as a difficulty in adjusting to the temperature differences in France compared to India.

These findings suggest a need for professional guidance and support to increase parental understanding and develop ways of managing the child's SNA. However, for some

parents, their understanding of SNA came as a result of hindsight and in response to the psychiatric discourse, viewing the child's difficulties as internal distress (Sibeoni et al., 2018). Although the psychiatric discourse increased parental understanding, for parents in Sibeoni et al. (2018)'s research, they appeared to view psychiatric care as holding all the solutions and were reported to view their child's return to school and their mental health recovery as essentially being the same. This suggests that there is a need for professionals to be mindful of their expert positions and discourses, as they could potentially result in parents feeling disempowered and helpless in their role of supporting their child's SNA.

Whilst trying to understand their child's SNA, some parents reported to hold responsibility for their child's SNA as they initiated and drove attempts of support, establishing cooperation with the school and effective interventions (Dannow et al., 2020). However, for parents in Rosenthal et al. (2020)'s study, having limited knowledge of SNA and systems, having limited cultural capital and a lack of support network appeared to present as barriers to parental understanding, their access to support and their ability to challenge systems, which resulted in long delays in receiving support for their child's SNA. Additionally, migrant parents reported feeling stuck as their birth country's solutions to school refusal were inapplicable within their current country of residence, because of the differences in laws and practices (Rosenthal et al., 2020).

Parents also appeared to have a sense of urgency regarding the need for change (Sibeoni et al., 2018), with hopes that the problem would be temporary (Rosenthal et al., 2018). Without effective and faster solutions, parents reported concerns that they had not found the right professional and felt as though time was being wasted (Sibeoni et al., 2018). In Yamada (2015)'s research, parental distress resulted in an eager response to find solutions to their problems, which they hoped the support group would provide. Through the practice of storytelling, parents were able to draw upon others' experiences, gain advice from school staff involved in the self-help group, with insider knowledge and find trustable mental health professionals. It appears that access to the support self-help group provided parents with the opportunity to gain necessary information to comprehend their situation of their child's Fukoto and solve their problems (Yamada, 2015). Interestingly, parents in Yamada (2015)'s study also appeared to shift from a problem-solving schema to understanding and accepting their child through the self-help support group, coming to understand that there are *"no correct answers"* (p. 13) to solving their difficulties.

These findings suggest that parental experiences of trying to understand their child's SNA is influenced upon their cultural capital which involves their skills of navigating interactions with professionals, accessing social networks which provide opportunities, information, and support as well as their ability to challenge practices of school. It appears parents often feel responsible for their child's SNA and thus feel the need to take the primary initiative to drive support. However, without the knowledge and guidance of professionals and access to others in similar situations, parents often search for random answers without finding meaningful explanations which limits effective support being implemented.

## 2.4 Chapter Summary

This chapter has outlined the systematic review process and the methodology used for identifying and analysing the available papers. This involved a thematic synthesis of the nine papers which were deemed of high or medium quality, illuminating parental experiences of SNA. Four themes arose from the literature in response to the literature review question concerning parental experiences of SNA and the support on offer. The summary of the four themes is outlined below:

- **Relationships, Communication and Collaboration:** This theme encapsulated how communication was perceived to be the building blocks to relationships and collaborative working between parents of children with SNA and school staff, as well as the barriers to the development of these. Parents highlighted the importance of positive and nurturing approaches of school staff, feeling as though staff were invested in their child and the importance of regular home-school communication. Parents viewed effective communication pathways as providing them with the opportunities to raise concerns early and increase parental confidence in seeking support.

- **Features of the Learning Environment:** This theme encompassed parental perspectives on the physical environment as well as teaching styles and teachers' understandings which was seen to contribute to their child's SNA, and highlighted children with SNA needs for predictability, safety, and consistency. The importance of adaptations of the learning environment which were flexible and tailored to the child's needs was also raised.

- **The Emotional Impact on Parents:** This theme explored the wide range of emotions that parents reported to feel when trying to navigate their child's SNA. This involved feelings of frustration, isolation, and helplessness, with parents reporting to feel blamed for their child's difficulties and experienced stigma as a result. Mitigating factors involved access to support groups, information, gaining time and routine and positive relationships with professionals who were available which increased parental confidence.

- **Parents Attempts to Understand:** This theme captured parental experiences of searching for answers for their child's SNA. This involved random searching without the guidance of professionals, parents utilising cultural practices and knowledge in their attempts to support their child as well as accessing self-help support groups which increased the information pathway and shaped their understanding. This theme suggests that parent's ability to understand and support their child's SNA is impacted upon the amount of cultural capital they have.

Although the available literature provides useful insight into parental experiences of SNA, it is important to acknowledge some of the limitations of this review. Four out of the nine studies involved in this review were conducted within the UK and thus findings from the remaining five studies may have limited transferability due to the differences in the educational systems and legislative frameworks. Additionally, many of the studies from the UK involved a range of key stakeholders when interviewing such as professionals, school staff, parents and CYP (Corcoran et al., 2022; Nuttall & Woods, 2013; Preece & Howley, 2018) and it could be argued that professional and school staff's perspectives overshadowed the voices of parents. This illustrates some of the difficulties when collecting multiple perspectives in research, as it was not always clear whether the themes identified in some of the studies related to the perspectives of the parents, the CYP or the professionals (Gregory & Purcell, 2014; Corcoran et al., 2022; Nuttall & Woods, 2013; Preece & Howley, 2018). Finally, of the studies included in this review, many parents appeared to be at different points in their child's SNA journey, with studies which explicitly mentioned participant characteristics as looking at primary school reintegration (Corcoran et al., 2022), secondary reintegration (Nuttall & Woods, 2013), home education (Gregory & Purcell, 2014), alternative education (Preece &

Howley, 2018; Sibeoni et al., 2018) and secondary school (Dannow et al., 2020; Havik et al., 2014).

Braun and Clarke (2022) suggest that there are different approaches to literature reviews which are described as *"building up an evidence case for a gap in what we know"* or *"making an argument"* (p. 120). The former, aligns with and reinforces a positivist position, that there a gap in knowledge due to flawed research designs or a lack of research which does not align with the position of this research, as outlined in the following sections of 3.4 and 3.5 in this thesis. In line with Braun and Clarke (2022)'s view of making an argument within qualitative literature reviews, the researcher views that further exploratory studies of parental experiences, based in the UK and within mainstream provision would be relevant to contribute the developing understanding of the experiences of SNA. The researcher has provided a contextualised account of the topic of SNA to further contribute to the *"rich tapestry of understanding that we and others [as researchers] are collectively working on, in different places, spaces and time"* (Braun & Clarke, 2022 p. 120), providing a located rationale for the research as they do not wish to seek triangulation of views which may overshadow parental perspective.

In the following chapter, the research position and research questions (RQs) will be introduced, and the methodology utilised to answer the RQs will be discussed.

# Chapter 3: Methodology

## 3.1 Chapter Overview

The chapter sets out the research position, paradigm and methodology used in the current research to answer the RQs. The ontological and epistemological stances are outlined. The research design, including the data generation method and the participants is then explored. This is followed by the data analysis method outlined, with the chapter concluding on key considerations on ethics.

## 3.2 Research Position

The academic literature which has explored the experiences of parents who have a child who experiences SNA is scant. Therefore, this research is primarily exploratory, examining the lived experiences of parents whose child experiences SNA. As the responsibility of school attendance is held with the parents or legal guardian, it is believed that the knowledge of the subjective experiences of parents is crucial to expanding the professional awareness and knowledge for EPs, LAs, school staff and other professionals who work with these families. This research also aims to provide a platform for parents' voices to be amplified, as it is believed that SNA is better understood if we enhance it with the perspective of parents of children who experience SNA. By collaboratively and actively involving parents in the process, the research aims to be transformative as it hopes to inform the practice of school staff, EPs and other professionals when implementing support for CYP and their families experience SNA, through an Appreciative Inquiry (AI) Approach in which parents are involved in the shaping of future practice.

## 3.3 The Research Questions

As the current research attempted to explore parents' experiences of support and actively engage the parents as key stakeholders, to contribute to thinking about how services and support can be better tailored to meet the needs of their child and their families, this study aimed to answer the following RQs:

1. What are the perceptions of parents of children who experience school non-attendance regarding the support that is on offer from both school staff and external agencies?

2. What do parents feel are the facilitators and barriers to support?

3. What changes do parents feel could be implemented to support both the child and their family to help increase their child's attendance?

## 3.4 Research Paradigm

A paradigm can be defined as the beliefs, assumptions and values about the social world which is shared by a research community (Kuhn, 1962 in Braun & Clarke, 2013), that encompasses the ontological, epistemological, methodological assumptions and ethics. Guba and Lincoln (2005) identify four basic belief systems characterised by the following questions that help define a paradigm:

- The axiological question asks, 'what is the nature of ethics?' or 'how will I be as a moral person in the world?'

- The ontological question asks, 'what is the nature of reality?'

- The epistemological question asks, 'what is the nature of knowledge and the relationship between the knower and the would be known?'

- The methodological question asks, 'how can the knower go about obtaining the desired knowledge and understandings?'

As the position and aims of this research is to seek to explore and understand the parents' experience through the participants' lenses, hence capturing the participants' reality, the research paradigm is constructivist. This assumes that reality is socially constructed which means the research is not directed towards finding a universal truth, the researcher aligns with the view that there are multiple realities which are co-constructed through interactions and through the research process. Therefore, the research is directed towards identifying patterns in the experiences and perceptions of participants with regards to the support from professionals for their child who experiences SNA. When conducting qualitative research, Creswell (2012) argues that the researcher must understand, engage with, and make clear the underlying philosophical assumptions which strongly influence the interpretation of data.

In line with Creswell (2012), the following section will outline the philosophical assumptions of this research.

## 3.5 Ontological and Epistemological Considerations

Ontology has been defined as the way in which reality is viewed (Matthews, 2003). At the heart of the ontological debate is the question "does reality exist independently of human consciousness and experience, or is the world something constructed from our thoughts?" (Levers, 2013). Ontological positions can be seen to be on a continuum, ranging from realism to relativism, with critical realism sitting along the middle of the continuum (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Realism assumes that there is a knowable world, that the truth is out there, which can be access through research. The ontological position of critical realism assumes that a reality exists, but we can only ever partially know it. Relativism, however, argues that there are multiple constructed realities rather than a single truth which differs across time and contexts and researchers cannot get beyond these constructions.

In line with the constructivist paradigm, the ontological position of this research is relativism, which is associated with the belief that there are many constructed realities which change across context and time and differ from person to person. Thus, the researcher attempts to understand the complex world of lived experience from the point of view of those that live it (Schwandt, 2000). The researcher therefore accepts the ontological position that there are multiple psychological realities which are based on social interactions and experiences with others. Thus, the reality of each participant and their experience will differ regarding experiences and perceptions of support for SNA.

Epistemological positions reflect assumptions about what constitutes meaningful and valid knowledge and how such knowledge can be generated (Braun & Clarke, 2021). The epistemological assumptions range from the view that knowledge is completely objective to the view that knowledge is subjective. The epistemological assumption of this research is based on the social constructivist paradigm and views knowledge as subjective. The social constructivist paradigm suggests knowledge is constructed through the social interactions with others and thus different versions of knowledge exist rather than an objective reality (Burr, 2003). The researcher therefore holds the assumption that each participant and indeed the researcher themselves, have their own version of reality and thus they are co-constructing

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reality together during the research process (Robson, 2011). The understanding of SNA in this research is thus constructed through parents' subjective perceptions of their experience, as social constructivism assumes that individual's worldviews are shaped by the contexts in which they live in. This reflects the view that the researcher will interpret phenomena through their own experiences and values and so, constructivist researchers are more likely to utilise qualitative methodologies which allows them to acknowledge multiple perspectives (Robson, 2011).

The epistemological position of the researcher determines the methodology and data collection used (Willig, 2013). Within the literature, methodology and method are two terms which are often used interchangeably when talking about research (Mertens, 2010). However, methodology refers to the framework within which the research is conducted, consisting of theories and practices for the ways we go about conducting research, whereas the term method refers to a technique for collecting or analysing data. The constructivist paradigm sees the researcher and participants as being interlocked in an interactive process which they influence one another. As this is an interactive process, interactive and more personal methods for data collection are utilised (Mertens, 2010). In line with the constructivist paradigm, and subsequent ontological and epistemological assumptions outlined above, the methodology employed in this research is qualitative.

## 3.6 Research Design

Creswell and Creswell (2018) define research designs as types of inquiry which provide particular directions for procedures in research. Quantitative research designs typically tend to focus on factors or relationships which can be generalised to a wider group and are largely suited to causal relationships and hypothesis testing. However, qualitative studies are often concerned with meaning, sense making and subjective experiences of the individuals who are involved in the study (Yardley, 2000), often generating in-depth, rich, and detailed data for interpretation (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Thus, qualitative methods appear to be most suited to research, which seeks to understand a particular research topic through participants perspectives (Elliott et al, 1999). In line with the research purpose, RQs and paradigm outlined above, a qualitative and exploratory research design was employed.

The focus of this qualitative research is the experiences, and the views of parents of secondary school children who experience SNA, on the support they have received. Following a qualitative design, as the research seeks to enhance understanding about parental experiences, the present study utilises a two-phase design which includes semi-structured interviews to gain insight into parental experiences, and a focus group, utilising an AI method to explore parental perceptions of what improvements can be made.

## 3.7 Researchers Values

Within qualitative research, it is important for transparency that the researcher makes their values explicit. As this section addresses this, this section will utilise the first person.

My values of collaboration and empowerment and interest in co-production led to my desire to select a strengths-based approach to work with parents which led to the selection of an AI approach for the focus group. However, I recognise from my learning and practice of solution focused approaches, the important image of having *"one foot in the pain, one foot in the possibility"* (Rees, 2008, p. 172) as individuals can have difficulties inquiring into visions of a possible future, without considering the negative present and past (Bushe, 2011). I feel it is important to provide a platform for parents to voice their experiences of support for SNA, with opportunities to consider the negative past and present to acknowledge their difficulties which led to the decision to utilise semi-structured interviews which were not solution orientated. It is hoped that by doing so, this would allow parents to shift to a solution finding position, producing a set of recommendations, designed by them on what support they feel should be in place.

This research sits within the key values of autonomy, beneficence, and social justice as I believe parents have the right to make choices about their own lives, their wellbeing and their interests should be at the centre. Therefore, the research aims to advocate for parents who may be less represented. I believe to readdress potential power imbalances and move beyond 'tokenism' it is important to provide parents with an opportunity to voice their perspectives on the design of services that best meets the needs of their child and family. It is hoped in doing so, this will bring about positive change by considering the systems the child exists within.

## 3.8 Theoretical Perspective Underpinning the Research

From the available literature, it is recognised that there are a number of entwining factors that contribute to SNA, including the CYP, the family context and the school environment. The current research utilises the overarching theoretical framework of Bronfenbrenner's 'Ecological Systems Theory' (1992) which captures the individual and contextual factors associated with SNA to guide the support that can be implemented.

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1992) suggests that individuals are embedded in, and their development is shaped by social and environmental systems which interact and influence upon one another. Bronfenbrenner (1979) suggests that this ecological environment consist of nested structures which is illustrated in Figure 2.

Figure 2*. Diagram of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979) in context of School Non-Attendance*
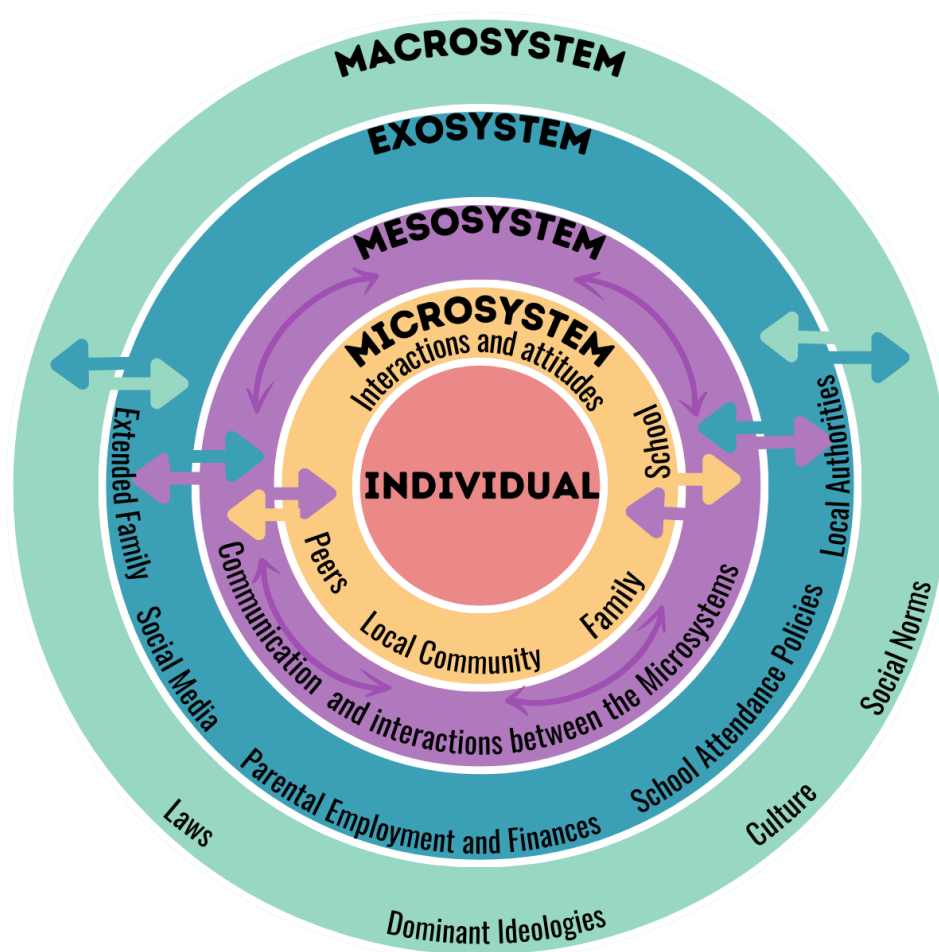
This theory suggests that SNA is not just a result of within-child factors, as SNA is impacted by the systems and people surrounding the child. Within the 'Microsystem', the child's immediate environment directly has an impact upon their development, and in the context of SNA, the interactions and experiences the child has located within the home and school setting, may play a role in the development or maintenance of SNA due to the attitudes of school staff potentially shaping the interactions with the child.

At the level of the 'Mesosystem', the interactions or communication between the various elements of the 'Microsystems' are seen to be influential on an individual's development. Within the context of SNA, the communication and interactions between school and the home can also impact SNA depending on how well people within these different microsystems are working together. The 'Exosystem' encompasses the broader social systems which are influential yet indirectly impact the child. In SNA, this may include the school's policies on attendance and parent's work situations and finances as parent's employment can impact upon their availability for their child. At the level of the 'Macrosystem', the beliefs or cultural views held by CYP, their family and society as well as government legislation and policy can contribute to SNA and the subsequent support that is on offer.

It is the researcher's view that by listening to the experiences of parents of children who experience SNA, an understanding of these systems and how they interact can be gained and key areas of improvement can be highlighted. It is important to note that this theoretical framework will be used more generally, and the researcher will understand their findings in relation to relevant psychological theory and literature.

## 3.9 Data Generation Techniques

According to Brinkmann and Kvale (2015, p. 6), semi-structured interviews are defined as "an interview with the purpose of obtaining descriptions of the life world of the interviewee in order to interpret the meaning of the described phenomena". Through semi-structured interviews, it is recognised that rich and in-depth data can be collected, which can offer insight into how people attribute meaning to their worlds within social interactions (Grindsted, 2005). Thus, semi-structured interviews were chosen as the method of data collection for this research, which is also in keeping with the qualitative methodology and

exploratory purpose of the research. This was considered to be a suitable method, as the interviewer was closely involved in the research process (Braun & Clarke, 2013) and the interview explored perceptions, understandings and constructions that participants had personal stake in (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

A flexible interview schedule was developed (see Appendix E) utilising open-ended questions and avoided any leading questions. The interview schedule was developed to access information related to the research questions, provide space for the participants to share relevant wider experiences and to support the interview process. This was informed by Robson and McCartan's (2015) proposed sequence of questions:

1. *Introduction:* The interviewer introduces themself, explains the purpose of the interview, ensures confidentiality, and asks permission to record.
2. *Warm-up:* Easy, non-threatening questions at the beginning to settle both the interviewee and interviewer
3. *Main body:* Open questions aimed at gathering information to answer research questions in a logical progression.
4. *Cool off:* Winding down the conversation, sharing the debrief sheet with participants, explain the next steps and asking for feedback.
5. *Closure*: Thank you and goodbye.

The order of questions and the wording within the interview schedule was used flexibly during the interview process, in response to the participants developing account, and to support the conversational flow (Robson & McCartan, 2015; Braun & Clarke, 2013). The interview schedule provided a structure for asking questions in relation to the research aims, whilst providing flexibility to probe areas of further interest as they emerged in the interviews (Robson, 2002). Although there was flexibility during the interviews, to ensure consistency, all predefined questions were covered in each interview. The interview schedule also included a 'clean up' question towards the end of the interview, which allowed the participant to raise issues that were felt to be of importance to them and of which were not covered during the interview thus far (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

As the topic of this research is emotive, the researcher believed it was important that the participants felt empathy from the researcher and there was a level of trust present in

the dynamic. Thus, the researcher felt to be important that she maintained a high level of sensitivity to the participants facial expressions and body language, in case they showed any signs of distress and required support. Participants were informed that if they did not want to answer any questions or felt uncomfortable at any point, they could inform the researcher verbally. The researcher therefore utilised their experience and training of being a TEP to build rapport quickly, and at times paraphrased what the participants had said to help clarify the meaning of what they had shared. Through utilising active listening skills, the researcher supported participants to feel valued and heard which was felt to be important for them to feel comfortable expressing their experiences and perceptions. Prompts and probes were used to facilitate the interview process, where it was felt appropriate to do so, which provided the participants with opportunities to clarify or expand their answers.

The interviews were held online which provided parents with a neutral space as they were interviewed in their own homes. Remote interviewing allowed the researcher to access parent participants on a national scale, in a cost and time efficient way. Before each interview, and being mindful of a virtual environment, the researcher supported the participant to feel relaxed by spending 5-10 minutes talking informally with the participant. The interviews were planned to last for approximately 60 minutes, although each interview lasted between 60-100 minutes. The interviews were recorded using Microsoft Teams and the researcher asked participants whether they would like to keep their camera on or off during the recording of the interview. Following the interviews, reflections of the researcher's emotional responses and thoughts were made which were recorded in the researcher's reflective diary. The researcher transcribed the interviews verbatim, and all identifying data was removed.

In line with Robson's (2011) recommendations, it was hoped and felt desirable that a pilot interview would be carried out prior to interviews with participants. The researcher felt that this would have allowed for the refinement of questions, however due to difficulties recruiting participants (see the following section on Recruitment of participants) and time restrictions, the pilot interview was not conducted. This was decided during a discussion between the researcher and their Director of Studies, in which it was agreed that the draft interview questions were considered of sufficient quality and thus the pilot interview was eliminated. Following the interviews with participants, the researcher sought feedback on the questions and the modality of how the questions were asked in which all participants expressed feelings of contentment.

## 3.10 Participants

Participants selected to take part were parents of children who were in Years 8-11 as it has been suggested that SNA peaks during the transition to secondary school (Toplis, 2004) and is more prevalent in secondary schools (DfE, 2018). For this reason, parents of children were in Years 8-11 were chosen as the focus of the current research. The researcher decided not to include parents of Year 7 pupils as it was felt that participants children would have only recently transitioned to secondary school and support systems may not have been set up yet. Additionally, CYP in Years 12-13 were also not included within this research due to current educational set up in the UK, in which CYP in Years 12-13, have several options for continuing their education, which includes Sixth Forms, Colleges and Apprenticeships that they can select.

### 3.10.1 Inclusion criteria

The inclusion criteria were utilised for participant recruitment which was as follows:

The participant should be a parent of a child who is:
- In Years 8-11
- On roll in a mainstream secondary school
- Their attendance has been less than 90% over the last two terms (which is in line with government guidance on 'persistent abseentism').
- Considered by adults to experience difficulties with attending school.

### 3.10.2 Recruitment of Participants

Initially, the researcher approached the EPS and EPs in their LA Training Placement about recruiting participants and discussed potential opportunities to contact parents who had recently undergone an EHCNA. However, the service and researcher felt this was not feasible due to the difficulties of identifying individuals that meet this study's criteria from

the LA list; additionally, the morality and ethics of identifying from a list that parents had not consent to their data being shared in that way also prevailed.

The researcher therefore emailed 10 Secondary Schools within the researcher's LA Training Placement. However, only one school responded to the researcher, commenting that they would not be able to support the researcher at that time. The researcher contacted schools again after two weeks with a follow up email, however no schools responded to this. Therefore, due to the ongoing recruitment difficulties, the researcher amended their ethics to include social media recruitment, to access participants on a national scale.

Participants were recruited through volunteer and purposive sampling, through posting the recruitment poster on the 'Not Fine in School - Public Page – School Attendance Difficulties' Facebook Page (see Appendix F), following approval from the Facebook Page admin team. The 'Not Fine in School - Public Page – School Attendance Difficulties' Facebook Page has approximately 37,000 members including parents, carers and other family members within the UK. The post received a considerable amount of interest, with 173 shares to other pages, and 98 comments. Participants were directed to contact the researcher with their email for the participant information sheet and consent form to be shared. Fifty two participants emailed the researcher. The researcher introduced a queueing system, in which participants who met the inclusion criteria were emailed the information sheet on a first come, first serve basis (please see Appendix G for further details regarding the recruitment process). 8 potential participants were excluded from the research due to their children being below Year 8 or due to the child not being on roll at a mainstream secondary school but being home educated. One of the eight potential participants was excluded from the research due to the family being located in Scotland. The researcher discussed this decision with their Director of Studies, and it was felt that the school system in Scotland will have different policies on SNA when compared to the school system in England. However, upon reflection, the researcher acknowledges that the research was advertised on a Facebook Page that is based within the UK and the research poster did not contain the inclusion criteria of being a resident in England, and thus, this participant should not have been excluded from this research.

The participant information sheet was sent to those who expressed an interest in participating in the project (see Appendix H) which clarified that the involvement in the research consisted of participating in an individual interview. In total, 40 participants were

emailed with the information sheet and 20 of the 40 participants expressed continued interest following the shared information sheet. The researcher sent follow up emails to participants. However, a total of 11 participants returned the consent forms, and arranged a date for interview. No compensation was offered for participation.

Considering feasibility, the decision of the number of participants to be involved in the research was informed by the literature which suggests recruiting 10 to 20 participants for a medium project (e.g., Professional doctoral thesis) and research designs involving similar research methods as those utilised in this research project (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Due to the time limited nature of the project, a total of eleven parent participants were recruited nationally.

### 3.10.3 Profile of the participants

As captured in Table 3, the research involved 11 parents, 10 of whom identified as mothers and one as father. At the time of data collection, the participants were located in different geographical locations across England. Although social and professional status was not requested, most participants shared during the interviews that they are in professional or semi-skilled roles. Although, the child's diagnoses were not requested, and within the inclusion criteria, participants' children should be on role in a mainstream secondary school, participants shared the status of diagnoses for their child who experiences SNA.

**Table 3.**

*A table illustrating key information on the participants involved in the present research.*

| PARENT PSEUDONYM | PARENT ROLE | CHILD PSEUDONYM | CHILD AGE | DIAGNOSES OF THE CHILD |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| ANNA | Carer and Exam Invigilator | Grace | 13 years old | Autism |
| PURNELL | Process Engineer | Vivian | Year 9 | Under assessment for autism |
| CHARLOTTE | Head of Operations for testing in adult social care | Callum | 12 years old | Potential Autism and ADHD |
| DARRELL | Office/Business Role | Rosie | 15 years old | Sleep disorder, Ehlers's Danlos and Irlen's Syndrome |
| ZOE | Pastoral Lead and Assistant Vice Principle in a Primary School | Ollie | 15 years old | Under assessment for ADHD, diagnosed with generalised anxiety disorder |
| OLIVIA | HR Manager | Willow | 14 years old | Autism |
| ATHENA | Nurse | Isla | Year 9 | Autism |
| KATIE | Not disclosed | Arlo | 14 years old | ADHD, Anxiety and Possibly Autism |
| ROSA | Learning Support Assistant | Theo | 12 years old | Autism |
| EMILY | Freelance writer | Florence | 14 years old | Autism |
| FREYA | Early Years Teacher | Hugo | 15 years old | Autism (unclear if diagnosed – suspected) |

Following the interviews, the participants who had taken part in the interviews were invited to take part in a focus group following the data analysis process. Those of which expressed an interest were sent the consent form (see Appendix I for details) and the researcher emailed the participants with a choice of two days. Six participants responded with their consent. Only four participants joined the focus group, however one participant dropped out due to a family emergency, leaving a total of three participants who took part in the focus group phase of this research.

## 3.11 Data analysis

The data generated through semi-interviews was analysed using Braun and Clarke's 'Six Stage Thematic Analysis' (2022) which is *"a method for systematically identifying, organising and offering insight into patterns of meaning (themes) across a data set"* (Braun &

Clarke, 2012 p. 57). Yardley (2000) argues that consistency between theory, methodology and analysis is key to ensuring quality in qualitative research. Thus, TA was chosen for the research as it was considered to be a suitable form of analysis due to its strengths which aligned well with the current research aims and with the ontological and epistemological underpinnings. This method allowed the researcher to make sense of shared meanings and experiences through focusing on meaning across a data set (Braun & Clarke, 2012) as well as allowing the researcher to both describe and interpret different aspects of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). TA has also been described as useful for producing qualitative analyses which are suitable to informing policy development (Braun & Clarke, 2006) which are suitable for the research aims and hoped impact of the present research.

As the researcher had limited experience of using qualitative research methods with previous methods of quantitative approaches, it was felt that TA was accessible to the researcher (Braun & Clarke, 2013). A strength of TA is that it can be flexibly applied within most ontological, epistemological, and theoretical framework and thus it is not linked to a particular method of data collection (Braun & Clarke, 2013) which allowed the data collection and analysis to be suited to the exploratory nature of this research. TA is also compatible with a constructionist perspective which this research adopts as TA as a constructionist method examines "the ways in which events, realities, meanings, experiences and so on are the effects of a range of discourses operating in society" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.81).

There are two variations of TA when it comes to the coding process and identifying themes and patterns in the data which are inductive and deductive approaches. An inductive approach to coding and analysis is a 'bottom-up' approach which is driven by what is in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2012). Thus, codes and themes are derived from the content of the data rather than fitting them into a pre-existing frame of coding. A deductive approach however, is 'top-down' which is researcher or theory-driven whereby the researcher brings information about what is already known about a topic, such as concepts, ideas or topics to the data which they use to code and interpret (Braun & Clarke, 2012). An inductive approach was adopted throughout the analysis to align with the researcher's epistemological position and aims of gaining the views of participants, although it is acknowledged that 'pure induction' is not possible (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Inductive approaches allow the themes to be generated through intense and thorough analysis of the data (Patton, 1990). Through an inductive approach, the theoretical ideas stemmed from the participants accounts and the codes were

informed by the data content and then refined through the researcher engaging in a process reflexivity and critical reflection. The researcher is of the view that it is important to reflect upon the impact of their belief system and theoretical background by making their assumptions explicit throughout the data analysis process. As recognised by Braun & Clarke (2006; 2012; 2022), the researcher acknowledges that their epistemological position and theoretical knowledge would influence the data analysis process as this requires interpretation of the data.

The TA process was guided by Braun & Clarke's (2022) six phases, which are summarised in Table 4. It is important to note that the six phases have been created as a guide to analysis to enhance its trustworthiness and it is acknowledged that the six phases are a progressive yet recursive process (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

**Table 4.**
*A table of the phases of Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022)*

|   | Phase | Description |
|---|---|---|
| **1** | Familiarising yourself with the dataset | Through the process of immersion, by reading and re-reading the data you become familiar with the dataset. Making notes about analytic ideas or insights you may have. |
| **2** | Coding | Identifying segments of data that appear potentially interesting, relevant, or meaningful for the research questions and applying code labels. |
| **3** | Generating initial themes | Start identifying shared patterned meaning across the data set. Combining clusters of codes to form potential overarching themes and subthemes and gathering all coded data relevant to each theme. |
| **4** | Developing and reviewing themes | Refinement of the identified themes. Themes are checked at the level of the coded data extracts and at the level of the entire data set. |
| **5** | Refining, defining and naming themes | Further refinement, considering each theme separately in relation to others. Generation of clear names and definitions for each theme. |
| **6** | Writing up | Selection of meaningful extracts linked to the main themes, which illustrate the broader story of the data collected. Relation of the analysis back to the research questions and relevant literature. |

### 3.11.1 Phase 1: Familiarisation with the data

The online platform on which the interviews took place had a transcription service which captured the conversation in real-time. However, the transcription required a significant amount of 'cleaning up' which involved the researcher correcting inaccuracies whilst listening again to the recording, to ensure they were transcribed verbatim (see Appendix J for an example). The recordings were listened to, and the transcripts were read multiple times. This stage facilitated the researcher's familiarisation with the content and ability to make initial notes on meanings or patterns which may be interesting and relevant in answering the research questions. During the familiarisation process, the researcher also began reflecting upon the questions posed by Braun and Clarke (2022), to begin to critically

engage with the data and start reflexively engaging with the data throughout the process. Examples of these questions were as follows:

- *How does this person make sense of whatever it is they are discussing?*
- *What kind of world is revealed through their account?*
- *Why might I be reacting to the data in this way?*
- *What different ways could I make sense of the data?*

### 3.11.2 Phase 2: Generating initial codes

Due to the active role of the researcher, they decided to manually generate codes and identify themes. This phase was undertaken separately for each transcript (see Appendix K for an example). Coding involves the researcher identifying features of the data that appear interesting to them (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Thus, the coding involved systematically working through the data, line by line, to describe what the participant was discussing, identifying interesting features, and therefore organising the data into meaningful groups (Tuckett, 2005). In this process, the researcher created a coding table for each interview, which included the original transcript in one column, and the identified codes in another column. As the research was inductive in nature, the researcher coded the entire dataset, applying specific and detailed codes to capture meaning or concepts. The initial codes that were generated by a single interview transcript were checked with the researcher's Director of Studies. Throughout the process, the researcher continued to make notes on interesting patterns or themes emerging in a separate notepad which could be used in the following analytical stage.

### 8.11.3 Phase 3: Generating initial themes

Following the initial coding of the data and the refinement of codes which was spot checked for rigour by the researcher's Director of Studies, a table was created to collate the codes with a second column for subthemes and a third for themes. The researcher then colour coded the codes electronically which were considered to share the same core ideas as the potential subtheme into the second column. The electronic nature of this allowed for flexibility and refinement over time (see Appendix L for an example). The aim at this stage is

to construct themes that portray shared meanings. During this phase, the researcher also collated all colour coded subthemes into a separate table and begun to group subthemes by overarching concepts which is seen in the following table. A miscellaneous pile was created to house potential subthemes that did not fit into the themes being created.

### 3.11.4 Phase 4: Developing and reviewing the themes

The researcher reviewed and refined the initial themes, checking them at the level of coding and at the level of the data set. In some cases, codes were matched to subthemes and themes with the researcher checking at the level of the codes to ensure they conveyed the same messages. Some of the initial themes were developed into candidate themes while others were discarded or groups together to generate new patterns of meanings. Table 5 provides examples of some of the changes which took place during this phase.

**Table 5**
*Examples of some changes to themes during Phase 4*

| Original Theme / Subtheme | Change which took place |
|---|---|
| The effects of national lockdown | Merged into a subtheme and combined with the '*Transitions*' subtheme to create new theme of '*The effects of significant changes to the learning environment*'. |
| Parents difficult emotions through the situation | Merged into a subtheme of '*Parental Mental Health*' within the theme of '*The effects on parents*'. |
| Support for Parents | The subtheme was split when looking at the codes related to this subtheme as it conveyed different messages. Support for parents' codes related to having professional representatives was merged with '*The quest for allies*' subtheme and a new theme was developed '*The best of support from services*' after examining the remaining codes. |
| Future support ideas | The subtheme was promoted to a master theme and renamed '*The future of support*' following the researcher revisiting the data at the level of the codes. |

### 3.11.5 Phase 5: Re-defining, defining and naming themes

The themes were defined and refined through "identifying the essence of what each theme is about and determining what aspect of the data each theme captures" (Braun & Clarke, 2006 p. 57). The themes were then organised into master themes and subthemes through the creation of the thematic map. This involved several discussions with the

researchers' Director of Studies which resulted in changing some of the initial theme and subtheme names (i.e., *'Random Luck or Fortune'* to *'Random Luck'* and *'Systemic Issues'* to *'The systems aren't working'*). The collated data extracts were organised with each theme and accompanying narrative, to ensure that each theme was not too diverse or complex. The accompanying narrative encompassed the story of that theme and how the theme fitted into the overall narrative of the whole data in relation to the RQs. This phase ended when the researcher was able to "describe the scope and content of each theme in a couple of sentences" (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

### *3.11.6 Phase 6: Writing up*

The final phase of TA involves the presentation of findings in a 'concise, coherent, logical, non-repetitive and interesting account of the story the data tells' (Braun & Clarke, 2006) which is addressed in the following chapter. This phase should provide sufficient evidence to justify the links between the data and the researcher's interpretation of it. Thus, in the subsequent chapter, the researcher included direct quotes and qualitative extracts from a range of participant's accounts which are embedded within an analytic narrative (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

## 3.12 Questions to inform Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006)

TA does not only summarise what a participant has expressed to the researcher, it also attempts to understand what they have said and why they have said it. During the analysis interpretation, in line with Braun & Clarke (2006)'s suggestion, the researcher utilised the following questions to aid their analysis interpretation:

- What does this theme mean?
- What are the assumptions underpinning it?
- What are the implications of this theme?
- What conditions are likely to have given rise to it?
- Why do people talk about this thing in this particular way as opposed to other ways?
- What is the overall story the different themes reveal about the topic?

## 3.13 Focus Group

A focus group is a group interview or discussion which typically consists of 6-10 participants, who meet together and express their views on a particular topic, defined by the researcher (Cronin, 2008). Focus groups "capture content in the form of understandings, perspectives, stories, discourses and experiences" (Millward, 2012 p.489) which aligns with the researcher's epistemological position. The focus group phase of the research was utilised to explore what changes could be made and to develop action steps which was in line with the aim of the research to facilitate change.

The focus group aimed to create a collaborative space in which the parent participants felt empowered to work together and identify suggestions for how support and practices could be improved upon. The 6 participants who had agreed to take part in the focus group were sent an information sheet which outlined the focus group purpose, the role of the researcher and the ground rules and a consent form. However, 4 participants attended the focus group and 3 completed this exercise, as previously discussed in section 3.10.3. The researcher was mindful of the fact that the interaction is the hallmark of the focus group (Morgan, 1997) and thus, the researcher adopted the role of the facilitator, who introduced the topics, encouraged participation and addressed any comfort and safety issues (Lyons & Coyle, 2015). The focus group took place online due to how geographically dispersed the participants were and followed the structure of:

- *Welcome and Introductions:* Consent was checked, participants were reminded of the research questions and the researcher introduced the focus group main questions. The ground rules were covered to ensure participants felt safe, willing to partake and were aware of the time-limited space.

- *Feedback of main findings:* Participants were invited to share their thoughts on the themes and findings.

- *Introduction of AI:* Overview of AI, and how it provides the opportunity to think around and discover new solutions in a different way. (For full details on AI, please see the following section).

- *Ending of the session:* The researcher summarised the main points and invited the participants to reflect on the main ideas shared. The participants were then invited to

share their thoughts on how they wanted the recommendations to be shared and the researcher thanked the group for participating.

The researcher was mindful of the need to manage group dynamics, building cohesiveness, facilitating rich exploration and ensuring that all participants had a chance to speak and collaborate.

## 3.14 The use of Appreciative Inquiry

AI is "a group process that inquires into, identifies and further develops the best of 'what is' in organisations in order to create a better future" (Preskill & Catsambas, 2006 p.1). AI can be seen to be 'second person' action research which aims to investigate a shared concern and how it can be addressed in a collaborative and consultative way (McNiff, 2013). It was chosen as a strengths-based tool in the focus group to facilitate the exploration of positive steps as it focuses on what works and attempts to build on that. This method was felt to be appropriate as it seeks to create positive change through collaboration with the parent participants. Secondly, AI can be identified with a constructionist paradigm which is in line with the ontological and epistemological position of this research as a central premise of AI is that the process of knowing is socially constructed, taking place through the interaction with and within a social system (Cooperrider et al., 2008). Due to the difficult and emotive experiences of the participants shared during the semi-structured interviews, the researcher felt an empowering and positive approach during the focus group was most appropriate. The two phases to the research were developed in line with the researcher's alignment with the view of 'one foot in the pain, one foot in the possibility'.

The chosen AI is a four-step process which involves Discover, Dream, Design and Destiny. The first phase involved appreciating and discovering the best of what is and within the context of this research, this was what is working in terms of the support for SNA. This involved the parent participants engaging in a dialogue and mean making in which a shared vision was developed. The next phase involved the 'dream' which involved thinking about 'what might be' by creating a positive image of the desired and preferred future of support and practices. This then led to the third phase of co-constructing the design of positive and possible steps forward which were grounded in the realities of what has worked in the past combined with new ideas envisioned in the future. The final phase of destiny involved the

participants creating recommendations and deciding upon how they wished to share the developed recommendations. It is noted that the fourth phase involves creating and committing to what will be and as the participants are not based in one LA, the researcher hopes to disseminate the research findings with LA partners nationally, through conferences via publication and in line with how the participants wish the recommendations to be shared.

**Figure 3: Appreciative Inquiry 4-D Cycle.**
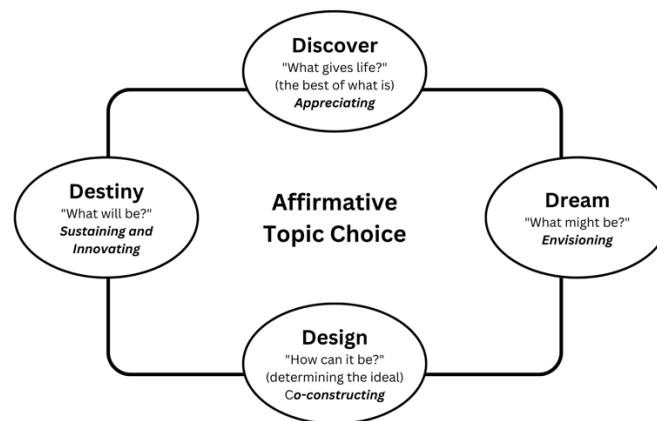


*Adapted from Cooperrider, Whitney & Stavros, 2008, p.34.*

AI has been criticised for not acknowledging the problem as it focuses too much on the positives (Mertens, 2010) and it has been argued that it restricts idea generating and problem solving which may arise through discussing difficult experiences (Fitzgerald et al, 2010). The researcher utilised a two-stage approach to the research with the use of semi-structured interviews, which due to the negative nature of some personal experience, provided the participants with the space to share their difficult experiences and issues. Before the start of the AI within the focus group, which shifts to focusing on the positives and what works, the researcher shared the findings from the TA, in order acknowledge personal experiences which facilitated the recognition of shared experience within the group. Throughout the process, the researcher felt AI introduced a hopeful move forward which may have not been achieved via a traditional problem-solving approach.

## 3.15 Other methodological approaches considered

Although TA was considered to be the most suitable approach for the research, Silverman (1993) is critical of research which does not acknowledge the different methodologies which could have been utilised. As such, the researcher considered alternative methodologies such as Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) for this research. IPA is concerned with experiences and meanings and how individuals make sense of these (Reid, Flowers & Larkin, 2005). Although IPA may have been appropriate in answering the first RQ, IPA often utilises a small sample size that are reasonably homogenous. Initially, parents of children who experience SNA could be considered as a homogenous group. However, the researcher acknowledges that absences from school may be due to a variety of reasons which leads to the parents of children experiencing SNA to be a more heterogenous group. Also, due to the geographical spread of the participants within this research, there are likely to be different policies, guidance, and practices within the different LAs and thus, TA was considered a more neutral approach to data analysis.

## 3.16 Ethical considerations

Ethical issues and considerations are involved throughout the research process. The following section considers the different potential ethical issues in research and how they were addressed throughout this research.

This research was granted ethical approval from the University of East London's School of Psychology Ethics Committee (see Appendix M). The ethical approval for this research was granted on 28/04/2022, and the amended ethical approval, which included the amendment of recruiting participants through a research poster advertisement on social media, which was granted on 02/03/2023 (see Appendix N). In applying for ethical approval and throughout the research process, the researcher adhered to the BPS Code of Human Research Ethics (2021a). The ethical principles of Autonomy, Privacy, Scientific Integrity, Social Responsibility and maximising benefit and minimising harm were upheld.

As the research was carried out online, the BPS Ethics Guidelines for Internet-Mediated Research (2021b) was followed to throughout the research. In line with UEL's guidance on online working, Microsoft Teams was selected as a secure method of gathering data.

### 3.16.1 Respect for autonomy, privacy and dignity of individuals, groups and communities

Psychologists and researchers have a responsibility to protect and promote individual's rights in research activities by developing and following procedures for valid consent, confidentiality, anonymity and fair treatment (BPS, 2021a). The researcher upheld these principles by avoiding deception and seeking participants informed consent prior to data collection. Throughout their communications, the researcher respected the participants experiences, knowledge and insight. The participants were obtained through volunteer and purposive sampling, in which participants chose to express their interest in taking part in the research interviews and were able to partake if they met the inclusion criteria. Following the expression of interest, participants were emailed the information sheet, asked if they had any questions and were given time to process and consider their involvement before agreeing to take part. Participants that continued to express an interest following the information sheet were sent the consent form and once that had been completed with no further questions, participants were asked about their preference for date and time of the interviews.

At the beginning of interview, participants were reminded of their rights to withdraw as well as the research purpose and aims and additional verbal consent was sought prior to recording the interview. Participants chose whether to have their interview audio or video recorded prior to recording in line with what they felt would make them feel more at ease. The information sheet, consent form and debrief letter included the statement that participants had a right to withdraw three weeks after the interview date. Data could no longer be withdrawn after the period of three weeks as data transcription and analysis would have begun. Participants were informed of how their data would be confidential and protected in the information sheet, debrief discussion following the interview and debrief letter.

Following the interviews, all audio and written materials were safely stored using encryption and password access online in line with UEL's Data Management Policy. At the point of transcription, all identifying data were either replaced with pseudonyms or were omitted completely from the transcripts. Participants were offered the option to select their own pseudonyms at the end of the interview which only three participants chose to do so.

During the second phase of the research, participants volunteered to take part in the focus group. Participants were provided with an information sheet that explained the purpose

of the focus group and were sent the consent form. Participants were given opportunities to ask questions before the focus group. Following the focus group, participants were informed of how the data would be used and the next steps within the research.

### 3.16.2 Scientific Integrity

The researcher, as part of the ethics application, conducted a risk assessment to consider potential issues around the participants and the researchers' safety and wellbeing. The researcher aimed to make all the information that was shared with participants clear and transparent about what the aims and nature of the research was about and how the participants would be involved. This research avoided using deception. Participants were invited to ask questions throughout the process, both prior to and following the interviews and during the focus group. At the end of each interview, participants were debriefed, in which the researcher checked in with them emotionally, expressed gratitude for taking part, explained the next steps of the research process and provided participants with the opportunity to express any potential concerns or ask questions. Following this, participants received a debrief letter (see Appendix O) which reminded them of their rights with regards to how the researcher would uphold confidentiality, their right to withdraw from the research as well as providing them with contact details for the researcher, their Director of Studies and other relevant organisations in case the participant wanted to discuss any concerns arising after the interviews.

### 3.16.3 Social Responsibility

According to the BPS Code of Human Ethics (2021a), the aim of generating psychological knowledge should be to support beneficial outcomes for not only the people involved in the research, but also have the potential to contribute to the common good. The researcher hopes that the findings from the research will inform the professional practice of EPs, School Staff, and other LAs workers, which will have an influence on the improvement of their practices. Through this research, the researcher has attempted to empower participants to have their voices heard and taken into account through the use of a focus group, in which participants have contributed to the recommendations for action in this area. The researcher

hopes that the dissemination of findings will take place at the LA level as well as the national level, by presenting the research findings at a national conference and publishing the findings.

Careful consideration and reflection were given to the researcher's role within the context of this research, particularly as their dual role as a TEP in a LA and a researcher at the university could impact upon the power dynamics. The researcher attempted to address this by explicitly and clearly explaining their capacity within their position as a researcher prior to interviews with all participants. Also, participants were encouraged to seek support from local or national organisations if they felt this to be necessary.

### 3.16.4 Maximising benefit and minimising harm

There was perceived to be minimal risk of harm to the participants in the research. However, the researcher was mindful that due to the nature of SNA, there may have been sensitive topics discussed during the interview which may cause potential upset or the recall of uncomfortable memories. During the interview, the researcher utilised their interpersonal skills of attuned interactions (Kennedy, 2011) and remained sensitive to the participant's facial expressions, tone, and body language to monitor their wellbeing and whether they showed any signs of distress. When two participants became emotionally upset during the interview when they addressed personally sensitive issues, the researcher responded empathetically and sensitively (Lyons & Coyle, 2015), and to minimise any potential further discomfort, participants were reminded of their right to withdraw and their ability to pause or stop the interview at any given time by informing the researcher verbally.

In the current research, issues of power have been addressed considering the potential for a power imbalance between the researcher and participants. The researcher remained reflective and reflexive about power imbalances and equality issues that may be present in the relationships with participants. Thus, the researcher adopted an open, facilitative and non-judgemental stance which allowed the participants time and flexibility to express their thoughts. The researcher spent time building rapport with the participants before the interview; by doing this, the researcher hoped they would allow the participants to select and share what they perceived as the most important aspects of their experience.

## 3.17 Chapter Summary

This chapter outlined the research paradigm, design and methods employed in the present research. Following the discussion of the relativist ontology and constructionist epistemology which underpins the research, the chapter described the procedure used in the data generation process. The section describing the procedure involved the use of semi-structured interviews, information on the recruitment process of the participants and the profile of participants. This was followed by a section addressing the data analysis process which utilised TA (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2012; 2013). The chapter concluded with consideration of ethical issues.

The next chapter will present the findings of the research related to the RQs from the semi-structured interview data which is followed by the presentation of action steps from the focus group.

# Chapter 4: Findings

## 4.1 Chapter Overview:

In this chapter, the researcher will present the key themes and subthemes identified through the thematic analysis of eleven interviews with parents, followed by a focus group with three parents which are presented in a thematic map and organised around the three RQs.

A thematic map was created to illustrate the relationships between each of the eight themes and subthemes (see Figure 4), which were identified from an inductive approach to the data analysis, meaning that the theoretical ideas stemmed from the participants accounts and the data content informed the codes. The codes were then refined through the researcher engaging in a process reflexivity and critical reflection. Although the researcher utilised an inductive approach to the data analysis, it is acknowledged that 'pure induction' is not possible.

The themes identified capture "multi-faceted manifestations of a single, central concept from the dataset" (Braun and Clarke, 2022 p. 87). The subthemes sit under these, focusing on a particular part of the central organising theme. In the context of the theme 'The Search for Power', the concept of power refers to "a complex set of processes, abstract and concrete, more and less visible…[which] often operates below our awareness and without our conscious intention" (Boyle & Johnston, 2020 p. 41) in which it has been argued that there is no one definition of power. Thus, power involves being able to gain security and advantages for yourself and others, the ability to influence your environment to meet your own needs and interests, and controlling resources that others want, need or fear (Boyle & Johnston, 2020). In the following Discussion chapter, these findings are understood within the context of the Power Threat Meaning Framework which is outlined in section 5.3.1.

Within this chapter, the identified themes for each RQ will be presented. Each theme will be described to provide an idea of what it represents, and the subthemes will be explored using direct quotes from the participants' interviews to illustrate specific points. Pseudonyms were selected by participants or chosen by the researcher to protect participant anonymity. The findings from the focus group in response to the third RQ will also be shared. The chapter will end on a summary of the key findings.

Figure 4. *The Overall Thematic Map*



**The search for power**
- Taking the Lead
- Information as Power
- The Need for Evidence
- The Quest for Allies
- Random Luck

**The effects on parents**
- Being a Working Parent
- Parental Mental Health and Wellbeing
- Impact on the Whole Family

**The parents' journey to understanding**
- Identifying the difficulties
- The emotional aspect
- The not knowing
- Understanding the child's difficulties
- Looking for answers

**Parents feeling victimised**
- Not being believed
- Us vs Them
- Being blamed and judged
- Threats of fines and prosecutions
- Black and white thinking of others

**The effects of significant changes in learning enviroment**
- The national lockdown
- School transitions

**The best of support from services**
- Feeling heard and valued
- Going above and beyond
- Tailored support for the child
- Seeing the family as a whole
- An entrusted professional with responsibility

**The systems aren't working!**
- Limited understandings
- Fighting to navigate systems
- The balancing act
- Rigidity of services
- Time
- Limited resources
- School as the barrier

**The future of support**
- Accessible support
- Increasing understanding and changing the narrative
- Early identification and intervention
- Meeting child's needs

The next subsections will explore the specific findings in relation to the RQs.

## 4.2 Findings from Research Question 1

**RQ1: What are the perceptions of parents of children who experience school non-attendance regarding the support that is on offer from both school staff and external agencies?**

Five themes were identified in the data which were considered to relate to RQ 1. These are displayed in Figure 5 in a thematic map.

*Figure 5. Thematic Map in relation to RQ 1*
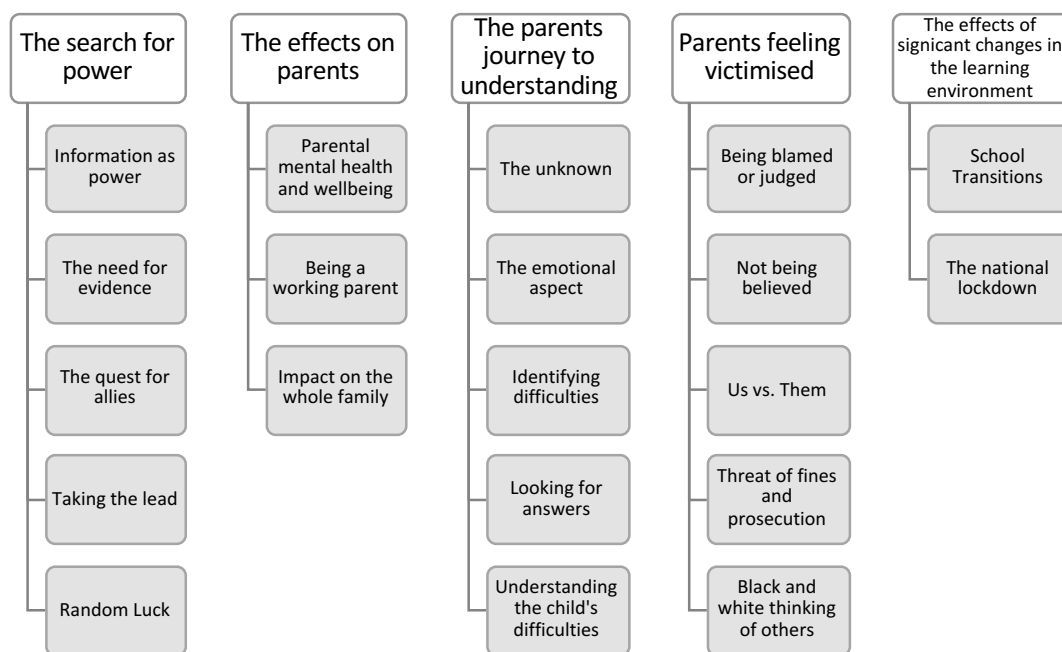


### 4.2.1 Theme 1: The Search for Power

This master theme captures the participants attempts to search for resources and their attempts to gain some power in situations where they perceive themselves as powerless when trying to support their child's needs.

### 4.2.1.1 Subtheme: Information as Power

Participants reflected upon the importance of having or finding the knowledge and information from different sources as Darrell exemplifies in his interview; *"getting information that people can leach on and I mean that in the nicest possible way because when*

*you find something you, you're stuck to it, and you can guide yourself through it."* This search for information appeared to provide the parents with the power and resources necessary to navigate systems, challenge professionals and practices and make their case when trying to support their child. Whilst Katie identified the journey for acquiring knowledge as being research led, i.e. *"I've done so much research on why children struggle with going to school, what the school need to be looking into, what the school need to be doing... I've literally looked at all up and I've emailed the school and said this is what we want to discuss",* Rosa opted for the safety of a legal representative when challenge practices:

> *We've had to because the solicitors actually seemed to wield a bit more power than we do. And they've pulled the Council on all sorts of things that they haven't been doing properly, that they should have been, which I wouldn't even have known.*

### 4.2.1.2 Subtheme: The Need for Evidence

Some parents indicated that they found it necessary to try and evidence the child's difficulties and their attempts of support, through emailing regularly, seeking a diagnosis or using financial resources. For Freya, emailing regularly about her child's difficulties is seen to provide evidence in order to protect herself and her family against threats as she expresses:

> *Every day I'm basically writing very long emails about what's happened at home so they can see that there's a mental health… or an undiagnosed special need that they can take into consideration because we were in a position where he hasn't got a diagnosed SEN, so we are a target basically and that's sort of how you feel.*

For other parents, they often felt as though they were not believed which in some cases, had prevented the schools understanding of the child's needs and access to support services. These parents expressed feeling like they had no choice but to force their child into school to prove their difficulties as Charlotte shared *"it was only after those two incidences where I sort of, made them see quite how bad it was that they backed off a bit and sort of understood".* This suggests that both the parent and child are placed in uncomfortable positions to prove their experiences of reality so that they can try and gain understanding and support from professionals.

The necessity of evidence was also viewed by participants as a form of protection against the potential legal repercussion parents face of attendance. Olivia expressed that to protect herself against these legal threats, regular email contact provided her with a paper

trail of her engagement as in her words, she was *"emailing every week or so...because...I wanted a record partly because of the fine thing... if anyone ever came back to us, to say I have sent this and sent this, and nobody's come back to me".* For other parents, financial resources were utilised to access private assessments to provide the evidence they felt necessary as Darrell commented *"They are now starting to support because I spent the best part of the 1000 pounds on this Occupational Therapist report, and now they've got things that they can't argue with."* It appears that for the majority of parents, the need for evidence comes at a cost, either financially or emotionally, or both, and suggests that parents go to extreme lengths to prove their child's difficulties. Interestingly, for two of the parents, they shared feelings of a shock and a sense of relief where they didn't need to evidence the child's difficulties as Anna comments *"what surprised me, I didn't need to show her any proof or anything".*

### 4.2.1.3 Subtheme: The Quest for Allies

For many of the parents, they reflected upon their difficulties trying to navigate the systems of support and expressed the need for an ally within formal professional meetings who held knowledge of the systems, appeared to wield power and was on the parent's side as Darrell illustrates:

> *When you've got somebody who knows and understands these things, they can just go straight for the jugular... they can say... well, what about your budget...surely you haven't spent anything on Rosie because you know she's not got anything other than this...*

The need to actively look for and use financial means to gain allies were present in some interviews as parents attempted to readdress the perceived power imbalance in meetings. The allies' parents sought appeared to provide a type of mediation, supporting parents in meetings to get their point of what they want and what is important to them as Emily expresses:

> *You're battling with these people that are gaslighting you and telling you... that this is your fault ...it's terrifying. If you can pay for somebody to be the person that interfaces with them for you... I'm so grateful that I haven't had to face that without that sort of support.*

These parents perceived allies as helping to equalise the power differential experienced, providing parents with an increase in perceived power which added weight to the parents' perspectives. For Parnell, the ally appeared to provide emotional support as she comments *"I very often try and bring [Charity Family Support Service] and my SENDIAS rep because I want someone representing me because I find them so adversarial to sit in"*. It appears that for the majority of the parents, an ally prevented the parents from feeling dominated and mistrusted within these meetings.

Interestingly, some parents saw the parenting training courses that they had attended and Facebook support groups as also providing them with allies and emotional support as Rosa comments *"the parents from that group… we had a WhatsApp group for a while. We were all kind of supporting each other".* The parenting training also appeared to provide parents with a sense of reassurance as Darrell exemplifies in his interview:

> *What I got from that training course was there were people with similar situations and it was good to know that you're not alone…and the situation with your schooling is very similar. You know people not responding, people not doing things etcetera. So, it gives you the reassurance that you're not alone and that's key to it.*

### 4.2.1.4 Subtheme: Taking the Lead

For a number of parents, the lack of collaborative working, investment and communication with professionals led to parents feeling the need to take the lead in order to move support forward for their child. Zoe expressed that for her, it *"doesn't feel like there's somebody kind of being the lead professional, so as mum I'm also having to be a lead professional and like push and do this stuff and it is takes, it's huge amounts of time".*  For those parents who felt they took on the role of the lead, it appeared to come at a significant energetic cost for themselves as Anna shared that:

> *This is I think the most difficult thing in the journey… I have to constantly thinking, I have to tell these people about this and these people about this and inform this... I am the central point of this which it should be maybe professionals together.*

### 4.2.1.5 Subtheme: Random Luck

The majority of the parents appeared to acknowledge the circumstantial parts of theirs and their child's lives which enabled the parents to gain a more powerful position. For

some, this involved the acknowledgement of having the financial resources which enabled the parent to navigate the systems and access support, as Athena exemplifies in her interview *"she's not gonna get a look in at CAMHs, so we were happy, we're lucky we're in the position we can pay privately"*. For some parents, the power obtained appeared to enable effective support with the parent being believed, feeling empowered and with some parents acknowledging their financial and professional role that enabled them to gain evidence and navigate the systems. However, Parnell expresses:

> *it's probably advantageous that I sit in a sort of senior management position, and I'm used to very difficult meetings. However, when a difficult meeting is about you and about your kids and has emotion involved, that is quite different to a work meeting… that you can definitely step back and go ohh I'm not doing this, you can disengage from if you want to... You can't do that with the kids.*

This suggests that despite holding a senior position which affords Parnell with certain power, she still experiences the meetings as emotionally difficult to navigate and as having limited choice.

Other parents suggested that gaining support from schools and professionals was contingent on timing and the area they live within, as Anna expressed that *"We are really lucky, I'm absolutely lucky. But…in the same school, different year group…she may, if she'd be a younger or year older, she may not have the same support"*. Similarly, Emily suggests that support is down to chance as she shares *"it's very much a luck of the draw what kind of support you get from school and whether it's support or whether it's the opposite."*

### 4.2.2 Theme 2: The Effects on Parents

Across all of the interviews with parents, participants highlighted the impact of the child's SNA on the different aspects of their lives. This theme captures the varied experiences of parents and the effect the difficulties have on their own mental health, their working life and on the family as a whole.

### 4.2.2.1 Subtheme: Parental mental health and wellbeing

Within all the interviews, the parents reflected upon the emotional impact of their child's attendance difficulties and the responses from professionals which appear to negatively impact their mental health and wellbeing. For Charlotte, she expresses that:

*I just felt completely overwhelmed and didn't really know what to do…this time last year was probably the worst…it was the worst that I felt about everything… it was hard to feel like you were failing your children you know, to feel as though you're not… as good a parent as they need you to be. And then to have other people throwing those accusations at you as well.*

Throughout the interviews, all participants expressed a variety of different emotions throughout their journey such as blame, shame, pressure, guilt, jealousy, and apprehension for the future suggesting that parents feel victimised as a result of SNA. These feelings appeared to impact upon the parents' relationship with their child and often led parents to question their own competencies as a parent as Zoe exemplifies in her interview:

*Massive, huge anxiety. Really stressed me and then of course, that kind of ping pongs between the two of you anyway, erm but also feeling, feeling guilt, feeling jealous of other parents whose children who were just happy going into school and feeling like a bad mum. What have I done to make this… what have I done wrong?*

Two of the participants also shared how having their own mental health difficulties affected their work with professionals, leading them to feel negatively judged by professionals as Rosa expressed:

*I feel like I get judged because they know I struggle with my mental health and you know, one of the one of the tick boxes for … risk factors for your kids not in school is parental mental health…but I'm doing all I can to be there for the kids, do everything that they need. You just don't help when you make me feel rubbish and you make me feel like the worst parent in the world because my kids are not in school.*

The majority of parents also expressed feelings of loneliness and isolation due to the lack of understanding from friends and family about their situation and the child's difficulties. The limited understanding from others appeared to negatively affect their wellbeing as Rosa shared *"even my best friend doesn't get what life is like for me…because she's never had the experience".*

*4.2.2.2 Subtheme: Being a working parent*

For many parents, the child's SNA and their experiences of support appeared to place restrictions and pressure on the parents' ability to work. Some parents shared that needing to work later in the evenings to make up for time spent in meetings during the day as Darrell comments on the difficulties attending meetings, questioning *"where do I find the time when I'm working five days a week, working normal office hours to spend an hour and a half, two hours talking to an individual… when the reality of it is that's gonna eat into my work time?".* For some parents, being a working parent appeared to place additional pressure on the parent as Parnell expresses *"it was just that the stress was enormous and work didn't understand, couldn't understand why I was late or why, you know, I had to leave or anything and they didn't want to understand."*

As a result of feeling constrained by the need to be available, and parents perceived levels of stress increasing, some parents were unable to continue working as they attempt to reduce the feelings of pressure as Emily illustrates, *"I just said to them… I can't keep doing this every day because… it was incredibly stressful for her… for me. It was making it almost impossible for me to do any work … and I just couldn't focus on anything… just really impossible."*

Many of the parents also highlighted how managing their child's whole school experience felt like a full-time job, placing restrictions upon their ability to work as Anna highlights *"It's almost full time job, not gonna lie. That's another issue like I can't go for a full time job because I have to be available".* This suggests that being a working parent appeared to have implications on the previously mentioned subtheme of *parental mental health and wellbeing*.

### 4.2.2.3 Subtheme: The impact on the whole family

The difficulties some parents experienced with getting their child to school and the stress as a result, appeared to create a sense of unhappiness and stress within the family home as Emily shares *"the amount of time I was spending trying to get her into school was… just causing a lot of stress and unhappiness for everybody in the home".* These difficulties also for one parent appeared to place additional pressure on siblings as a form of support for the parent, as Zoe illustrates *"my eldest child would be here and trying to encourage him and then feeling…would then be getting anxious and … me feeling bad that she was in that situation*

*and shouldn't be having to deal with that".* Interestingly, for some parents, they almost appeared to have a fear of contagion, sharing their worries that the child's difficulties with attendance would influence their siblings as Olivia expresses *"her sisters very different. She sometimes says I don't wanna go to school today …and what we've always been very conscious of is … we didn't want Lexi to think ohh, that's how you've behave before you go to school".*

### 4.2.3 Theme 3: The Parent's Journey to Understanding

This master theme reflects the parents' own progression from not understanding their child's needs to having insight upon their past experiences which reveals their increased understanding. This also encompasses the variety of emotions parents experienced throughout their developmental progression to understanding.

### 4.2.3.1 Subtheme: Identifying their difficulties

For some parents, they initially noticed the child was experiencing difficulties in primary school and had approached school staff with their concerns in an attempt to make sense of the difficulties as Anna reported *"you don't know what's happening, really, because… I had through all the primary… I mean, since she was Year 2, when I was highlighting to SENCO, to everyone, that something is not right, that she's too worrying about stuff".* Similarly, Freya when Hugo was in Secondary school, identified that he was experiencing difficulties which approached the school, *"sent a lot of emails trying to work out if he had social anxiety. I said I was very concerned about him, his executive functioning skills. I mean, I work in a school so I could recognise that he was struggling in some way."* For other parents, early difficulties were identified retrospectively, when the parent had developed an understanding of the situation and were often related to the child's sleep difficulties, the journey to school and the distress of their child upon returning from school.

### 4.2.3.2 Subtheme: The not knowing

Many of the parents tried to make sense of the situation they were experiencing and appeared to feel lost or helpless when their child's difficulties presented at the start of their journey. Katie shared that she felt she had a lack of clarity on how to deal with the situation

and where to go for support, *"it was just sort of me and not knowing where to go… I felt like I was at my ends whip because I didn't know what to do. I didn't know who to turn to, who I was meant to contact."* Whereas Freya expresses that her limited understanding of the situation led to misconceptions of the child's difficulties being a result of behaviour resulting in a constant battle with their child as she illustrates:

> *There were just battles the first time it happened; we were just battling him constantly. We were saying he couldn't go on the computer because he wasn't going in… it felt like we were at war with him at that point, so we just didn't know what was going on.*

### 4.2.3.3 Subtheme: Looking for answers

The majority of parents explained how they attempted to make sense of the child's difficulties through researching through google to make sense of the situation as Anna shares, *"she was hitting herself and that was for me, it was really weird. So obviously I started searching the Internet… What's happening? What am I doing wrong? You know, how can I help her? And then yeah, I found my answers".* For Emily, attending webinars was highly valued for increasing her own understanding of the situation, as she explains *"I also did a lot of webinars and things erm, like Sunshine Support's webinars which you have to pay for, erm Naomi Fisher... I've done her things, brilliant."*

### 4.2.3.4 Subtheme: Understanding their difficulties

Some parents gave an account of how they appeared to have a lightbulb moment after looking for answers. For these parents, they have begun to put all the pieces together and have come to understand the child's difficulties as a whole which Emily illustrates:

> *It's been a real sort of journey of understanding for me…because I started off when she stopped going to school, I was like, you know, I was very much in the refusal mindset… seeing it as defiance in a way… I have gone through a process of learning and understanding and understanding that this is not something that she hasn't… any control over in a way…she couldn't go.*

As a result of parents increased understanding, they have changed their approach to supporting the child's needs as Anna shares *"so what I was doing at last year… I was sort of forcing her to go to school… Now I see differently, so we approach slowly to it."* Although this increased understanding was supportive for some parents, Freya expressed that being able

to *"recognise what it is... it doesn't make it a lot easier to deal with"* suggesting that increasing understanding is only a piece of the puzzle in supporting a child with SNA.

### 4.2.3.5 Subtheme: The emotional aspect

This subtheme encapsulates the range emotions such as guilt and regret that parents appeared to feel when looking back at their progression to understanding their child's difficulties and the impact it has had as Emily describes:

> *I think it was my lack of understanding. I didn't know what I was dealing with and... I wasn't approaching it in a right way, and I was making it worse because I was making her more stressed and I was also damaging our relationship because she needed me to advocate for her and you know, just be what she needed to help her through it. And I was there yelling at her to get into school.*

Many parents appeared to feel as though they had placed more pressure and caused the child more distress by the approaches they had taken to try and get the child to school from their lack of understanding as Olivia explains *"I literally, which I kick myself for now, and I wish I'd never done, and I say to people with younger children all the time, don't do it, literally I would drag her down the road crying and drag her in school"* . As a result of the parents increased understanding, the hindsight influenced how they perceive their actions as wrong, shifting roles from enforcer to an advocate.

### 4.2.4 Theme 4: Parents feeling victimised

This theme represents how parents felt the cost of support was that they were often viewed in a negative light from professionals which had implications on their access to support, holding links with Theme One and Two.

### 4.2.4.1 Subtheme: Being blamed or judged

Most parents reported feeling blamed or judged for their child's difficulties with school attendance, with poor parenting viewed as the cause, as Parnell shares her experience of a Team Around the Family meeting:

> *You're not doing enough...You're bad. You're not sending your children to bed on time. You're not doing this, that and the other which has been quite tough to deal with*

*because you spend a lot of the time in this process really being sort of told you're the bad parent, you're awful at parenting.*

Likewise, some parents felt as though their competency as a parent being brought into question as Athena shared *"you feel judged as a parent, I suppose, and it is that you feel judged on your skills"* which appeared to have implications on the parents' emotional wellbeing. Parents also shared that professionals seemed to hold an assumption of the parent being the problem rather than looking at the situation holistically as Charlotte recalled her previous interactions with the school where she had been told:

*It's your problem. You're the one with the legal responsibility to make him be here. You're not doing, you know, you're not fulfilling your role. This is nothing to do with us. It's your fault and your problem, and you've got to make it better. And that was the attitude.*

It appears that some of the parents had been positioned as holding responsibility, and professionals seemed to hold the assumption that poor parenting was the cause of the child's difficulties. This appeared to impact upon the parents' interactions with professionals, and the parents' wellbeing, with appropriate and collaborative support being hindered.

### 4.2.4.2 Subtheme: Not being believed

Parents reported feeling as though the child's difficulties were not believed by professionals and that their concerns were often dismissed as Anna comments *"they called it just a worried child … and so, they were saying, you know, girls are like this and they have hormones and they're growing up and all of this things"*. When the child's difficulties were not believed, parents were asked to provide evidence of the child's behaviour and emotional distress as Rosa expresses *"they just would not believe me, they asked me to video him having meltdowns one time when he wouldn't go to school"* suggesting that there is a sense of mistrust of parents' perspectives which impedes the child's access to support. As a result of not being believed, Rosa illustrates the detrimental impact it had on her mental health as *"it got to the stage where my mental health was suffering so badly because I was being attacked almost on a daily basis by my own child and no one was believing me"*. For Charlotte, it felt like a relentless task to get professionals to acknowledge her perspective and feels that the

lengths she has had to go to prove her child's difficulties is wrong as she shares, *"it's not right that kids have to be put through that for a system to bend a little"*.

For several parents, having a diagnosis or explaining the child's difficulties through a potential diagnostic label such as Autism, enabled professionals and school trust in the parents account as Athena describes, *"I went back to the school and said we think she's autistic, it was almost like a switch had flicked and they were like, right, okay …they were on it, so they then took me seriously"*. This suggests that the extent parents are believed is contingent on professionals understanding of the difficulties and having the child's difficulties cooperated by another who held power. However, for one parent, despite having a diagnosis, the child's difficulties were still not believed by their primary school as Emily expresses *"she's fine in school we [the school] don't see a problem…so when we turned up with, when we showed them the diagnosis, they didn't really believe it 'cause they had that sort of history of knowing her"*, which highlights the potential biases held by school staff.

### 4.2.4.3 Subtheme: Threats of fines and prosecution are unfair

The practice of the school and LAs applying the legal guidelines were viewed by parents as overt threats which impacted how the parent responded to the child's difficulties, as outlined by Zoe:

> *There's been times where I've just tried like, just get up, you need to get up… I know that's not necessarily the right way to manage it, but there's all the external pressures that… the school tried to prosecute me cause his attendances is like way below 40%*

Parents also shared that they felt the overt threats from both EWOs and school were ineffective as they were seen to complicate and worsen the situation rather than helping as Rosa exemplifies in her interview:

> *the way they use the EWO's I feel is very, very wrong and the way they threaten parents is very, very wrong, because it just doesn't help… and it just makes the parents more and more stressed, and which is really unfair because they're so stressed already.*

The perceived threats appeared to create tensions between home and school and between the parent and professional which impacted upon their communication and relationships. The view that the threats of fines and prosecution as being unfair and disproportionate to their situation was echoed by many parents as Parnell questions their use:

*what is the point of going after a parent that attends every single meeting, does every single intervention, talks to the schools, talks to everybody, fills in all the paperwork? That clearly isn't a parent that is ignoring the education of their child… the fines and prosecutions are meant for parents that don't give a sh\*t and couldn't give it a damn about sending their child to school.*

The overt threats appeared to further lower parents' feelings of competence, adding to the parent's feelings of pressure, guilt, and a sense of helplessness. Frequently, parents conveyed this feeling of helplessness, as they feel they are trying their best and questioning *"what else I can do?"* (Anna).

### 4.2.4.4 Subtheme: Black and White Thinking of Others

Parents shared that their perceptions of other people were seen to be linear in thinking, who of which simplify the complexities of the situation. From this, parents perceived others as dismissive of their experiences as Athena comments *"you then feel like people are almost rolling their eyes at you, that kind of like oh for christ… just get that get that child, ohh well, what do you mean they can't come in?"*. The black and white thinking of others and the biases they hold appeared to lead to parents feeling misunderstood and judged by others as well as feeling defensive as Rosa expresses:

*that somehow, by a miracle, I can just go right off you go, go to school and that is gonna work … they're just like well why didn't you just take him in? And why don't you just do it? And why don't you do this? And I'm like, you clearly have like, no understanding whatsoever of how fragile my child's mental state is.*

### 4.2.4.5 Subtheme: Us vs. Them

Parents viewed professionals and school staff as assuming the parent is the problem when trying to access support. Often parents felt as though they were viewed negatively with professionals who would shift the responsibility solely onto the parent rather than working collaboratively together as Charlotte expressed *"it was all my problem as far as they were concerned... I had the legal responsibility to get him into school and that is what I had to do. There was no partnership about it. There was no acknowledgement of issues"*. Whilst Parnell viewed her interactions with the school staff and professionals as adversarial and as a covert battle whereby the school attempted to locate the problem away from themselves, *"it's all*

*trying to make the school look good and the parent look bad. The school is doing great and everything they can and it's the parents' fault",* Rosa felt directly under attack from the school when other professionals were present, *"I kind of felt like when they, they felt like they got back up from other people. It then kind of egged them on to kind of lay into me a little bit more."* which highlights the potential power dynamic and the imbalance of power between the parent and school which may be a result of school staff and professionals holding a within-family perspective of the difficulties. Some parents appeared to convey how the assumption of parents being the problem impacted upon the support the parent received themselves, often feeling overlooked as Parnell shares *"when there's problem children, they never see that you know there's a struggling adult sat in the middle of it as well, you've just got to cope with it all and do it".*

### *4.2.5 Theme 5: The Effects of Significant Changes to the environment*

Whilst this master theme is not directly related to RQ 1, it was nonetheless identified as a theme and hence it is felt important to acknowledge. The parents identified few but significant effects of changes in their child's learning environment which influenced their child's presentation. The parents perceived the national lockdown and transitions as offering a more general educational offer with the associated support that accompanied it.

### *4.2.5.1 Subtheme: The national lockdown*

The national lockdown was perceived by parents as supportive as it appeared to reduce the pressure of attendance on the child thus relieving their discomfort and anxiety and improving the child's wellbeing as Zoe expressed *"we went into lockdown and his anxiety levels massively decreased. You could see it in him, he was really relaxed, he was really happy with it being in lockdown"*. For some parents, the national lockdown was also perceived as providing the child with a different learning environment, with the opportunity to learn at home whilst not feeling different from the peers as Olivia exemplifies *"lockdown for her was really good…she often says I wish we had locked down again because … she could do her learning at home and she didn't feel like she was missing out because no one was at school."* Whereas for other parents, the national lockdown appeared to provide the child with a different perspective of how to access education and changed how education was delivered

without attending school as they had to "stay at home" as Anna shared, *"during COVID, she realised she doesn't have to go to school Its school without school, so she really had an awesome time"*. Interestingly, Parnell shared that the national lockdown also positively impacted her emotional wellbeing as it reduced her own feelings of pressure, commenting *"the pandemic …was a blessing. Because I didn't have to deal with school, I didn't have to deal with going to work. It was great. I didn't have to get the kids up and do that battle every morning."* Although the national lockdown appeared to positively reduce the child's experiences of pressure and anxiety, upon returning to school, the lockdown for Theo exacerbated his anxiety as Rosa shared:

> *He quite liked it up into a point, but then the anxiety of the virus just kind of took over… he was then scared to go out…in his head the only… outcome that he could see was that he was gonna go out, he was gonna get the virus, he was gonna give it to Granddad, and Granddad was gonna die.*

### 4.2.5.2 Subtheme: School transitions

Although school transitions were not regarding support per say, parents felt the school transition and the new educational setting had a significant and negative impact on the child's difficulties. The transition to secondary school appeared to exacerbate and highlight the difficulties as Anna illustrates *"then year seven it completely, absolutely shattered her. So that was when the first like proper refusals, proper anxiety started with hitting herself, with panic attacks…beginning of the years was absolutely awful for her."* Similarly, Freya suggests that it *"was a very difficult time because transitioning of him to a new school, he really struggled and he was trying very hard not to go in… things got very tense at that time"*. The increased difficulties experienced by the child suggest that there is a need for more transition support for CYP from primary to secondary school. However, Olivia expressed a conflicting view of the transition to secondary whereby things *"kind of got worse and kind of got better. So it got worse from her point of view because, she struggled a lot more to go to school. However, it got better in that the school were much more supportive"* suggesting that the secondary school was more responsive to the child's needs, yet the transition negatively impacted on her child.

## 4.3 Findings from Research Question 2

**RQ2: What do parents feel are the facilitators and barriers to support?**

Two themes were identified in the data which were considered to relate to RQ 2. These are displayed in Figure 6 in a thematic map.

*Figure 6. Thematic Map in relation to RQ 2*
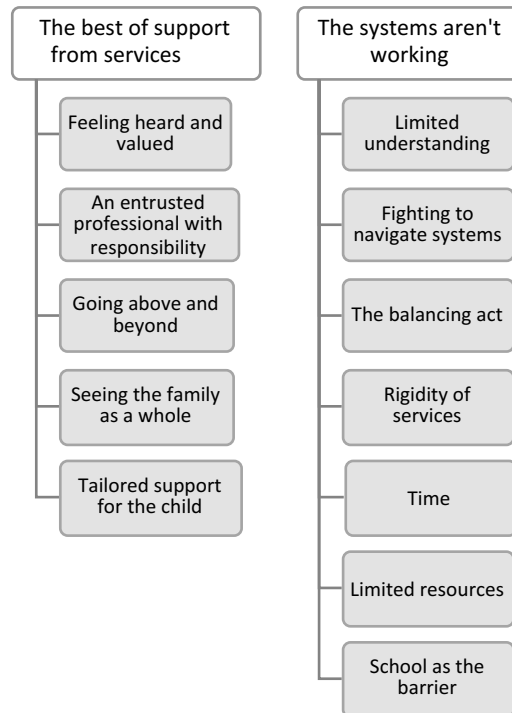


### 4.3.1 Theme 6: The best of support from services

This theme represents the various aspects from services and schools' which parents had found supportive when dealing with their child's attendance difficulties.

### 4.3.1.1 Subtheme: Feeling heard and valued

Some parents felt the support they had appreciated the most was when they felt the professional was listening and understanding their perspective as Zoe illustrates when talking about her experience with an EP, "*that was probably the most positive. It felt like…I was heard that my opinions were valued and recognised and yeah, it felt very supportive*". Other parents felt that their difficulties had been acknowledged as Rosa expressed appreciation of the professional valuing her emotional wellbeing and providing check ins:

> *She kept in touch with me… she would check in with me… just to make sure that I was okay really because she obviously knew that we were in a bit of a situation… it was really good to talk to her.*

For Charlotte, the professional had provided a sense of reassurance for her by validating her experiences and confirming her view of their reality that appears to be often questioned by professionals and schools as she comments *"she has been super supportive and, you know, in terms of, no, you're not going mad. You're not barking up the wrong tree"*. This is in direct contrast with the previous subtheme of *'not being believed'.* Parents also seemed to value the support that was separate from the school and the attendance pressures which was focused on the parent's experience as Parnell shared *"it's just sort of almost talking therapy, you get to talk to someone that's neutral, that's not involved, hasn't got their own agenda, is just there to listen to you."*

*Information as accessible*

Although only one participant shared that they found having information accessible as a supportive factor, it was felt important to mention despite being minimal in regard to practices. Katie felt that professionals signposting and sharing information was supportive as it directed her to further avenues of information and support as she comments *"I would probably say from SENDIAS purely for the fact that it gave me the information that I needed to know where else to look."* For Katie, the short conversation *"probably not even 10 minutes"* and *"an email over with loads of places that I could look for support"* was felt enough to help Katie feel validated and heard, thus suggesting brief involvements can be beneficial if the support is tailored and responsive to the parent's needs. This will be discussed further in the theme *the future of support* when answering RQ 3.

*4.3.1.2 Subtheme: An entrusted professional with responsibility*

Parents expressed appreciation for having a single point of contact that takes over the responsibility initially held by the parents. The majority of parents spoke of only one person who reduced the pressure felt by taking up the advocacy role and provided the child with support, as Anna expressed:

> *my daughter explain how she feels… and then she [pastoral lead], you know, she issued her not only headphones but timeout pass, the five minutes early, all the standard ones erm which are needed. So yeah, so from now on, that person became my like… I need this. I need this. I need this at school.*

For Freya, this entrusted professional provided her with a sense of being seen and validated, whereby the difficulties were acknowledged, and the professional attempted to provide access to further support services as she comments:

> *So having someone at the end of that e-mail…having that friendly voice at the end saying, you know, I can see you. I can see where you are. I can see that he's struggling. I'm going to reach out to these other places and try and get them to help you.*

Parents also felt that the entrusted professional taking over the responsibility for running the meetings with other professionals as positively impacting their emotional wellbeing as Darrell illustrates *"they're talking, and your stress levels go down because somebody else who knows their stuff is able to move forward"*. Interestingly, throughout the interviews, parents initially seemed to convey mistrust of professionals which shifted when talking about support they had appreciated the most. For these parents, this one entrusted professional had earned their trust and the parent had felt sufficiently safe enough to hand over the role they had been holding to the professional.

### 4.3.1.3 Subtheme: Going above and beyond

Three parents appreciated the efforts of school staff to provide support, feeling that they go above and beyond what schools typically offer. Olivia reported feeling as though the form tutor's communication, availability and flexibility was above expected as she comments:

> *[she] goes above and beyond…she always says ohh if you're struggling Willow, you can come and do your lessons in my classroom. You know, this is where I'll be at this time, this is where we at this time. She just goes out of her way, she doesn't have to do that.*

Similarly, Anna felt as though the member of staff was invested in her child's wellbeing and safety, which she shared:

> *I said listen this is happening, can you keep her safe? She said yes, I will keep her safe... So that person literally stood outside the classroom for the whole first hour and the second she sat with my child…I'm convinced she's my daughter's guardian angel.*

For Emily, having a professional who was invested in the situation, trying their best to gain access to support for the family was viewed as going above and beyond to support as she illustrates:

*Mrs. Smith at the secondary school has you know, she's ranted at social services and at Family Services and at CAMHS and at anybody that will listen, she's gone to Senior Educational Psychologist… she's just trying to get some support in place trying to prevent the agencies from discharging over and again.*

It appears these professional shared similar frustrations with the parent, making multiple attempts to gain support and taking over the role of battling services which contributed to parents feelings of being supported. Similarly, for other parents, the school staff or professionals trying to support the family's access to support services, generating solutions and demonstrating care and compassion was viewed as them going above and beyond their roles.

### 4.3.1.4 Subtheme: Seeing the family as a whole

Parents discussed the importance of professionals and schools understanding the effects of the child's difficulties on the family as Parnell illustrates *"the families are holistic thing, isn't it? You can't just support one bit and ignore the other because it all has to rub along together and work."*. Whilst Olivia appreciated the professionals who showed an understanding of the situation and who held a particular perspective which positively impacted upon the rest of the family as she expresses:

> *They have never said to us, oh, do you know you think you need to try and get her in a bit more? Never, ever, ever, which is amazing... I can't praise them enough for having that kind of sensible attitude...it makes such a difference. It absolutely changes my attitude, Willow's attitude, the stress levels in the house, everything. It's amazing.*

Darrell appreciated the support that had taken place in the family home and as a secondary factor, he felt supported due to the reduction in pressure as he expresses:

> *The good thing for me was all of these things were happening whilst I was working… They got 100% focus by these two ladies. Rather than the flitting in and out Dad who's trying to work, who's trying to do everything… All of a sudden, one of these jobs was taken off my hands.*

For Parnell, the recognition of the child's difficulties on the family from professionals was evident when support was provided for her as a parent in which she shares:

*Charity service was suggested for support for me as well… I think for quite while everybody forgot that there was a mum in here, who was probably struggling with all the paperwork and all the children stress. So, I've had that for a year… what can I refer you to? What paperwork can I help with? Have you looked at this? Have you looked at that?*

This appears to highlight parents appreciating the shift in perspective from professionals as seeing the problem as a whole rather than having a within-child or within-family perspective. The support on offer from this perspective subsequently had a positive impact on the parents and the child which shifts away from other parents' experiences of being blamed.

### 4.3.1.5 Subtheme: Tailored support for the child

Professionals who appeared to understand the child's needs, were flexible and responsive to those were appreciated by parents as Olivia exemplifies in her interview *"they just seemed to know, A know Willow and B just be quite sensitive and enlightened to Willow and what she needs and autism and all that stuff."* For other parents, the use of personal touches, flexibility and a bespoke approach from services were valued as they appeared to demonstrate an understanding of the child's needs and the importance of relationships as Darrell shares:

*my daughter is going to receive a letter addressed to her in the post… it's personalised. It's a real nice soft thing. Hey, this is me. This is my photo. You know, these are the things that we're gonna have a chat about. This is a little bit about me, looking forward to seeing you and all of a sudden, it's it's a nice soft entry rather than turning up and sitting there feeling like you're being interrogated by the fact that all of these different people are sitting in a room trying to talk at you, not to you.*

This suggests that professionals and school staff who demonstrate an understanding of the child's needs can tailor support which enables the child to engage with the support.

### 4.3.2 Theme 7: The systems aren't working.

This theme is reflective of the numerous systemic barriers parents have encountered when trying to access support for their child. This includes how services are set up, the limitations in funding and resources as well as parents' feelings of systems working against them.

### 4.3.2.1 Subtheme: Limited Understandings

Parents detailed how their child's difficulties were not understood by professionals and school staff, commenting on how the school system views the child's difficulties as behaviour rather than communicating their emotional state as Rosa shares *"they just put everything down to behaviour"*. Similarly, Zoe views the school not having the knowledge or curiosity about her child's difficulties reflecting an underlying need, and feels that the school see the problem as being located within the child, commenting *"[the school] don't seem to be particularly trauma informed or kind of able to think about why things are happening, just behaviours…he apparently, he goes to the same toilet cubicle every day…and spends about 20 minutes there…but it's an issue apparently"*. The enforcement of the school's behaviour system was viewed as inappropriate and demonstrating the schools limited understanding of child as Charlotte comments *"he got a detention once for having the wrong colour socks on, and it's like really, are you serious? You've got a child here who you're lucky to even get to step through the door and you're picking him up on that"*

Although the parents discussed their own uncertainty and limited understanding throughout their journey, Charlotte raised concerns regarding the knowledge and understanding held by professionals as she comments *"I just feel like we're stuck in the middle of this whirlwind of people who, no one knows what's going on"*. Rosa reflected upon the different terminology used and suggests how it shapes or places restrictions on understanding:

> *it's very, very frustrating…calling it school avoidance… I'm glad that they've now started calling it emotional related school avoidance because it is related to his state of mind and how he's feeling it… people make it sound like it's a choice that he's getting up every morning and he's just going no, I'm not going… it's so much more than that.*

Similarly, other parents shared that at a more systemic level, there appears to be a misconception of the child's difficulties which hinders their access to appropriate support as Olivia expresses *"there's not a recognition…for some children it's not that they don't want to, it's that they can't go to school"*.

The limited understandings of professionals were not restricted to the child's difficulties. Parents shared that professionals' limited understanding also applied to the parents experienced difficulties. The professional's knowledge appeared to impact upon how

parents were perceived, ignoring the difficulties they encountered when trying to get their child to school as Athena shared *"there's a lack of understanding of what it actually takes either to get your child to school on time or sometimes to get them into school, particularly when you've got other children to see to as well"*. This holds links to the previously described subtheme of '*The black and white thinking of others'*.

### 4.3.2.2 Subtheme: Fighting to navigate systems

For some parents, they expressed feelings of having to relentlessly fight against child related systems that they feel are set up against them in order to access support as Darrell exemplifies:

> *you're constantly fighting, and you feel that you're fighting the system because nobody wants to give you anything. Nobody wants to give you the information that you need to be able to make decisions, and nobody's telling you who you need to talk to*

These parents discussed having to constantly fight with professionals who are not doing what they should be, including the LA as Emily expresses:

> *You have to fight all the way. Every stage. You're fighting people that don't want to do what they are supposed to do. And you don't even know how to do that or what it is… You have to find out what it is they should be doing and then make them do it.*

Parents also shared how the EHCP process involved a battle, filled with emotions as parents attended mediation when their application was rejected as Parnell illustrates *"it's tough…we had the EHCP rejected, so I had to go to…mediation… and I had to again put my case across. And it's very emotional because it's like if you refuse me, where do I go? My child needs an education."* For Emily, services were viewed as inaccessible and lacking transparency, creating a sense of frustration as she expresses difficulties trying to navigate them: *"you don't know what you're supposed to do. I sometimes just feel like screaming. Somebody just tells me what it is I need to do to move this forward. I will do it but I can't find out what that is."*

For some parents, they acknowledge the personal emotional and energetic cost it takes when trying to battle against support services for access, as Olivia highlights *"not everyone's got the headspace, especially if you're dealing with a child who is struggling every day and you're anxious about and you don't know what to do about. Not everyone would feel able to have that battle"*. Similarly, Charlotte shared that *"they would support us again if I felt*

*as though I got the energy to fight... I just felt as though I didn't have the energy for it, to be honest"* which suggests that trying to overcome obstacles to gain support comes at a personal cost for parents. Parents felt this battle to be heard and be assertive was necessary to gain access to support, and if a parent felt they could not, Olivia shared *"your child would get nothing, which is a sad state of affairs…it shouldn't be dependent on having a annoying mum"*

### 4.3.2.3 Subtheme: The balancing act

Parents appeared to question themselves, when balancing their understanding of the importance of education, with its associated legal and financial implications, with their child's mental health as Emily questions *"What the hell do you do? You know, do you keep pushing your child into a situation that is destroying them? Or do you face financial ruin and or potentially… get taken to court"*. Other parents, although they viewed the priorities of attendance being *"more to do with higher powers"* (Athena)*,* they felt almost stuck as they attempted to weigh up and make a difficult decision which involved witnessing the deterioration of their child's mental health as the consequence of school which Athena shares *"it's that balance. I'll send my child in and harm them some more as well, so they won't get an education and they'll be completely brained fried"*.

Parents also appeared to struggle with the idea of professionals suggesting consequences to be put in place at home for SNA as Charlotte comments *"I'm not gonna put consequences in his safe place when he has felt so overwhelmed"*. For these parents, it was felt important to protect their home as a happy place for their child yet grappled with the idea of finding the balance of encouraging attendance from external pressures as Freya illustrates:

> *It's been knowing how far to go, when to push and when not to push? …you'll find people say well, make it boring from him at home, don't give them things to play with or to do. You do that to a child who's not happy in school and they go home and they're not happy it all goes very wrong.*

### 4.3.2.4 Subtheme: Rigidity of Services

This subtheme represents the perceived inflexible and sometimes inaccessible nature of services. Parents spoke of how the services criteria can impede a child's access to support by creating an additional barrier as Olivia illustrates:

*we got a letter that said something like you've been referred, but we've turned it down because she's got ASD and we can't, they didn't say this, but I read from it we can't work with children with ASD and sent me a list of websites.*

Parents also felt services were rigid in the sense of if their child was having difficulties with engaging in the support on offer, services were threatened to or were often withdrawn as Freya recalls an encounter with an EWO who commented *"children like this don't engage with help, and if they don't engage with help, they don't get help. Your child sounds like one of these children who, if he goes to CAMHs, he won't go and then… he'll be discharged"*. Likewise, Katie shared that **"***they [CAMHS] have now said that if he won't speak up or he won't join in, then they'll have to withdraw the service… and then it's going to take us years to get back to where we are now"*. As a result of the child's difficulties and the rigidity of services, families felt they were left without the offer of alternative support, potentially setting the family back years and left on their own as they were put to the back of the waiting list.

### 4.3.2.5 Subtheme: Time

For the majority of parents, time appeared to be a key barrier to accessing support, with Zoe expressing that professionals and school staff only listening when they have run out of options:

> *I've been pushing and pushing and pushing and even though I've been doing that, I still feel frustrated...I feel like it takes a really long time for them to actually listen and it's only when there is no other way to go that they're actually then taking on board what I'm saying.*

Other parents discussed how a diagnosis may support understanding however, the waiting lists of up to two years are seen as a barrier as Katie views the length of time spent waiting as being too late, *"this assessment could actually help the school give him some better support with it. But yet he might not get it until he's finished school, which just seems a bit pointless."* Parents also shared that the length of time it has taken to access support has been detrimental to the child as Freya shares *"I think if we'd had that support three years ago, it would have been a very different story, but yeah, he's had time to erm get burned out without that support, which is a shame."* The barrier of time was considered significant by parents, conveying feelings of being stuck and helpless as Anna shares *"the biggest barrier in general*

*is time… You think that waiting half a year for anxiety management course  you are still quick. But it wasn't because that is half a year when my kid is anxious and it's not getting better".*

For some of the parents, despite waiting a long period of time, they considered the time element to also be related to the time limited nature of the support on offer, often questioning the impact it has as Anna shares *"she had an anxiety course, discharge next day. That's done. And I'm like, why is it? I don't even know if it's helping".* Parnell also questions the time limited nature of support and highlights the lack of continuity in support when block interventions are suggested:

> *It's taken a long time to get it and then we do get it it's really short. And so everything we've had has been well, this is 4 weeks and this is 6 weeks and that's 10 weeks. And then that's it, that drops off a cliff and it's not replaced with anything...So you sort of get into a routine and you start to get some help and then it all stops. And that there's no continuity.*

### 4.3.2.6 Subtheme: Limited Resources

Services were viewed by some parents as not having enough funding and resources to meet CYP's needs and for Parnell, this restricted and negatively impacted the support she had receive:

> *You don't know how long it's gonna take to get better, especially with mental health, because everybody's different than everybody's mental health is different. You have to just do it until something clicks and gets better, but with kids, it's no, no we've got enough funding for this, and you can have that and that's it. Which is rubbish, doesn't work.*

Many parents shared thoughts about services being oversubscribed and thus making the support ineffective as Charlotte shares *"I do think that we have, perhaps suffered because there are other people worse off than us and there is only a finite amount of help to go round".* For Katie, there was a need for more resources in the mental health sector as the limited resources reduce the services ability to provide timely support as she comments *"something else needs to be done because it just doesn't work and there's, there is so many people out there that are really struggling, and I just don't think there's that immediate support there for him."* For other parents, the limited resources available were viewed as a result of government policy restricting resources and changing school priorities as Emily shares*:*

> *I think that's government policy over the last, you know, decade or more…turning them into exam factories or whatever. But they've made them into places that a lot of children can't survive in, let alone thrive in, you know, and that's pushing people into the send system, which is nowhere near able to cope with the quantity of children that can't cope in school because the schools aren't appropriate for a lot of children.*

*4.3.2.7 Subtheme: School as the barrier*

For many parents, school was viewed as one of the biggest barriers as Anna illustrates *"the school is the main point, school is the place where she spends so much time and she needs their support the most"*. Schools were seen by parents to be impeding their access to timely and proactive support as Charlotte comments:

> *He didn't go to school at all for five whole weeks, nobody made contact with me in that time to see what we could do to get him back into school… I was extremely disappointed that five weeks with no contact, what did they think he was gonna do, just miraculously, one day decide he wanted to walk back through the door? I had attempted to be in contact with them three times to try and arrange something. No one had got back to me.*

The perception of school as gatekeeper to support was also prominent where parents would approach the school for support and for some, it was met with resistance as Katie illustrates, *"you say something that you want to happen and it it's almost like you're constantly chasing and they're saying yeah we'll get back to you…and it's not happened... They're dangling it, but not actually following through with it."* Despite having access to external agencies, Parnell felt the school prevented the support from being effective as they had not utilised or implemented the recommendations as she comments *"[the] EP's been great, but they're there to analyse the kids and then they put recommendations into the school and then school ignore it and off it goes into a black hole."* Other parents viewed mainstream schools as a systemic barrier, lacking the structure and flexibility needed to meet their child's needs, as Zoe explains *"there's no change to the system is there? So … he's struggling to go into school… into a large class like, we need smaller classes and that there's no flexibility of doing that even within the mainstream school"*.

## 4.4. Findings from Research Question 3

**RQ3: What changes do parents feel could be implemented to support both the child and their family to help increase their child's attendance?**

During the semi-structured interviews, participants had already begun to share their views about how practices and processes could be improved, thus one theme of 'the future of support' was identified. The findings of the interviews were shared with participants during the focus group which enabled the participants to revisit and share their reflections during the discovery stage of the AI process. In the discovery stage, parents collaboratively explored what they felt was working with regards to the support and during the 'Dream' phase, the discovery phase was used to positively imagine what the practices could become. The final stage of Design involved parents co-constructing provocative propositions. It is worth noting that similar themes were identified by participants during the focus group which enhanced the findings from the interviews and thus, the findings for the interviews and focus group are combined under the theme of *'The Future of Support'*.

### 4.4.1 Theme 8: The Future of Support

This master theme provides the context of what changes parents feel could be implemented that may have a positive effect on their child's attendance, and incorporates the parents' views on what they feel could have prevented their situation from escalating. The master theme and subthemes are depicted graphically below in Figure 7

*Figure 7. Thematic Map in relation to RQ 3*
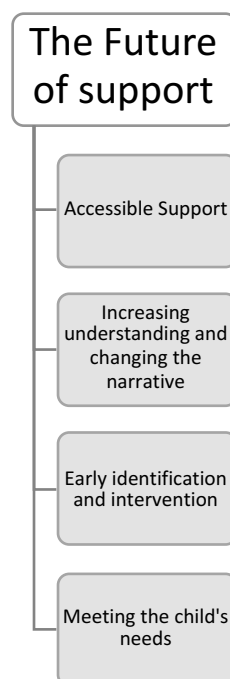
*4.4.1.1 Subtheme: Accessible Support*

Some participants discussed about how having information shared and *"signposted to that sort of stuff a lot earlier" (Parnell)* would be beneficial for parents to navigate themselves through their child's difficulties and increase their own understanding. Darrell shared that by having physical and clear resources which signpost the parent and provide information would have been helpful for the parent to gain appropriate support as he exemplifies:

> *There's no piece of paper that's a leaflet, ohh if you're child's having trouble, have a read of this and if they've got this and such what. It's like a decision tree document, something online…Hey, look at this website. You know, consider OT assessments. Consider this, that can then lead to EHCP's … And if you need support for the family this is who you speak to.*

For Olivia, having school sharing previous good practice and their experiences was felt to be potentially supportive, *"it would be nice…ohh, some children that have struggled to attend in the past, this is what's helped, so let's put this in place for Willow"*, suggesting the need for collaboration and good communication. Other parents shared about being able to access support easier and services being more flexible as Freya comments *"it would definitely have helped to have to the ed psych meet us from home"*.

In the focus group, Parnell reflected upon the need for sustained support, commenting *"until your child is happy, settled, in an appropriate school environment that's supportive for the whole family, you haven't finished with that support",* suggesting services should continue involvement until the goals of the family have been reached. Parents also reflected upon the support during the discovery phase, acknowledging that support is *"out there"* yet the challenges of support are due to *"it's multi agency multi people and you end up going to too many meetings to too many different support agencies… And you, you almost can't cope"*.

The parents' dream related to this subtheme involved parents having a single point of contact who supports them in navigating and negotiating services as they ensure collaborative working. Parents viewed this point of contact as providing an emotional support as it would reduce the parent's stress levels and reduce the emotion of the situation when communicating with other professionals. Parents also dreamed for a reduction or *"no wait*

*for any of the agencies"* (Zoe) which specifically related to EPs and Community Paediatricians. Additionally, participants agreed with the dream of services being *"quicker, just easier access but also much quicker because you've got these children just waiting in limbo" (Zoe)*. Parents also dreamt of the EHC process becoming more streamlined and supportive, with it being *"it's simpler for everybody, you're supported writing it, going through it, etc. and it's not rejected first time" (Parnell)*

As a result, the provocative propositions co-created with the participants during the design phase *(Phase Three of AI)* were as follows:

- The EHCP process is streamlined and parents have support when writing an application.
- Children and families have access to one professional that streamlines support.

### 4.4.1.2 Subtheme: Early Identification and Intervention

Parents, during the interviews, raised the importance of the early identification of needs and subsequent interventions as a factor which would allow their child to be supported much earlier. Parents described their limited experiences of support for their child and, in hindsight, felt that intervening earlier would have made a difference, although they felt it was too late in their current situations. For many parents, an earlier diagnosis was seen to hold the potential for this with the right support to be put in place, with the diagnostic label increasing school staff and professional's understanding as Freya shares *"if we had that diagnosis all those years ago, there might have been the right support at the point he was willing to be helped"*. Although Zoe views early intervention *"as soon as there is… these kinds of difficulties were arising"* as important, she acknowledges that it might not have prevented things yet feels it would have had a positive impact upon her as *"it would have also been a support for me… I wouldn't have felt so isolated and lonely doing it"*. For Olivia, it was important that the underlying assumptions of early intervention were challenged, removing the *"automatic assumption if the child's not at school it's because they're lazy or their parents are lazy or…mollycoddling them"*.

In the Discovery stage of the focus group, the need for parents to feel heard and validated was seen as being linked to the early identification of needs as Zoe expressed that a non-judgemental and validating approach *"then allows you…for myself and for my son… to be more open and to communicate more about actually what was really happening"*,

suggesting that feeling heard and valued would promote collaborative and honest working relationships between home and school or home and professionals. Parents also felt that they have valued open communication whereby professionals and parents have sat down to discuss what the difficulties are collaboratively.  This subtheme was not further discussed in the second and third phases of AI.

### 4.4.1.3 Subtheme: Meeting the child's needs

This subtheme represents the parents raising the point that children's needs should be met, which incorporated parents' suggestions of changes at an individual level to a systemic level, including wider government changes. Interestingly, this was possibly the most saturated subtheme within the data set.

The school being responsive to a child's needs and providing support that is tailored to those needs was considered by parents to be an important change that could support a child who experiences difficulties with attendance as Zoe shares:

> *If schools were able to respond to individual child's needs, like I'm really struggling to come into school, so having somebody who maybe could come out and do home visits … I'm struggling to be in class because I feel like I'm really behind, so then having small groups working with children who are all feeling the same.*

Likewise, Katie views school as an important factor needing to change to support her child's needs, as she comments *"in an ideal world, it would be the school who need to reduce that anxiety, meet his needs, and then maybe he'd go to school correctly"*. For other parents, they viewed support from school as key to the child's success, highlighting strategies that would promote a child's feelings of safety as Freya shares *"if he had somebody to support him, so if there was somebody who could support him to check he was okay…. A quiet area"*. Similarly, Anna feels that a consistent approach would enhance feelings of predictability and safety for her child and subsequently reduce her child's anxiety as she comments:

> *She don't know what to expect from the teacher because one day they may be nice and supportive and the other day they may tell her 'ohh, no, you exaggerate… You can't leave.' So this is what gives her anxiety. If she would know that whatever is written in her plan, it has to be followed.*

Parents also considered a different school environment to be potentially supportive with Athena proposing *"schools are busy places, aren't they? But I do think maybe, you know smaller schools that would help that whole smaller schools and better relationships with fewer teachers".* This suggests that responsive relationships and a calmer environment are important to a child's ability to attend school.

During the focus group, the predominant topic of discussion appeared to be centred on *meeting the child's needs.* Parents dream of support involved when a child receives a diagnosis, they are supported to understand their own needs and what the diagnosis means for them as Parnell shared, *"it should be a wrapped up support. You're right. I've got this diagnosis of life changing thing cause it is always a massive and they just left to it because all it is is a piece of paper to hand on to someone else".*

This dream also encompassed professionals working collaboratively and streamlining support, so children have access to and work with one key professional rather than multiple professionals at any one time. Zoe illustrates this as being responsive to her child's needs and recognises it would require a big change:

> *I don't know, maybe 5 different agencies and different people from different agencies that want to work with them… he's got really high anxiety that's just been diagnosed by community paediatrician and there is no way on Earth that he can manage all those different people. And again, that needs to be streamlined… if there was a system where there could be or it take a whole change of all the different agencies, but there was one person that could be that key professional for them.*

When dreaming, parents wished for a change in the school and SEND system, where the government provides an increase in funding and resources, in regard to personnel and specialist settings which would meet their child's needs, as Parnell comments:

> *if we've got kids with special needs, but [they are] still trying to put our square peg kids into round, into their round holes, can we have, you know, square peg kids into square holes in, into settings and get these special settings that are better funded and more places so that we don't have to fight for them every two bloody seconds.*

Similarly, parents reflected upon the national lockdown during the discovery phase, and dreamed of *"proper online learning that on the days when they're struggling, they can access" (Olivia)* which were *"interactive" (Parnell)* and their child would be *"doing the learning that the rest of the class are doing at the same time as them doing it"*(Zoe) so that their

children do not feel like they are missing out. Parents also reflected upon the government changes to funding and policy as *"there used to be more vocational, didn't there used to be a wider range of subjects and again government resources a lot of the subjects are being cut. There isn't the access to as many choices"* which subsequently led to the dream that their children would having access to a package similar to EOTAS (Educated Otherwise Than At/in School). Zoe expresses having more freedom, choice and flexibility in making decisions about their child's education was considered important *"the whole school curriculum doesn't necessarily meet their needs, but it's almost like picking which of the parts do suit them, which of the ones they can access and then adding in others to tailor their own curriculum for them"*.

At a systemic level, during his interview, Darrell considers a pathway to support for children with SNA in which the school understands the child's difficulties and hold an awareness of the pathway as an important change as he comments:

> *if the school had actually listened and understood, and knew that there was a pathway and that pathway would be, you know, Occupational Therapists assessment. It would be Speech and Language Assessment. It would be vision, it would be, you know sensory or all of these different bits and pieces, then we wouldn't be in this situation.*

This idea of a support pathway was further enhanced by the focus group's provocative proposition of *"Every child and family that needs support is listened to and dealt with, by accessing support, in a timely manner".* Parents provided some specific details of this support pathway, suggesting a similar to the EHC process, *"there should be within three months, you should be able to realistically, from going and raising… There's a group of people … you should be able to go from the process of starting that, seeing different professionals and having come up with a plan for that child"*.

The provocative propositions co-created with the participants in the focus group were:

- Everyone has access to the means of education that suits their needs.
- Professionals working collaboratively and streamlined so children have access to and work with one key professional rather than multiple professionals at any one time.
- Every child and family that needs support is listened to and dealt with, by accessing support, in a timely manner.

*4.4.1.4 Subtheme: Increasing understanding and changing the narrative*

Parents felt that ensuring teachers have an understanding of the child's needs and difficulties would be beneficial as Olivia expresses *"if she was taught all day by the people that really understand her and know her, it'd be a lot easier"* suggesting that adults in the school environment who are responsive and empathetic would be beneficial in supporting the child's attendance, as it provides the child with feelings of connection. For Anna, providing teachers with training about SNA and the associated difficulties is considered vital to their approach for support as she comments "trainings for teachers, this is so important. Why they don't know, why some people are supportive and some not?*"*

For many parents, they welcomed a shift in the narrative from the child's choice and own reluctance to they cannot go as Katie shares *"the people need more of a better understanding. These children aren't doing the not going to school to not go to school. There is clearly an underlining issue, and they're not doing it on purpose".* This lack of understanding of the child's difficulties is argued by parents to influence the expectations adults hold, highlighting the systemic issue of SNA and the impact it has on children's mental health as Olivia illustrates *"the numbers of children who can't go to school and are having serious mental health issues because of what they're going through at school, we wouldn't put adults through that."*

During the discovery phase, Olivia highlighted the importance of professionals and school staff as being understanding as she shares *"the thing that I appreciate more than anything is just kindness…in all the interactions…just kindness goes a long way"*. Within the dream phase in the focus group, parents reflected their wish for professionals to view the parent and child as experts of their own lives as Zoe exemplifies:

> *I absolutely, really believe that the parents and the child have to be seen as experts in the situation. Nobody else can know as much as what's happening for that family and for the child in particular … I really feel like sometimes professionals for whatever reason, think that they know better and just because of their experience. But they're not in that particular situation and everybody's situation is going to be totally unique.*

This dream also included professionals having trust that *"the parent holds the child's best interest at heart" (Olivia)* and trusting that *"the parent is doing the best for their child".* For these parents, the idea that the professionals involved are informed and have an

understanding of the child's difficulties also featured as a dream. This holds links with early identification and intervention subtheme, as parents shared they have felt heard and validated when the professional has an understanding of the situation.

Within the focus group, parents also reflected upon how the governments' current priorities are wrong as Parnell comments:

> *With massive concentration of attendance and we're not concentrating on the right things, the governments and academies are not concentrating on the right things. We should be concentrating on the on the welfare and happiness and education of our children.*

Parents felt that the policies and attitudes towards school attendance difficulties required shifting at the government level which Parnell highlights *"if the government would instil that into the agencies to say, 'no parents will be believed' and then that that comes from the top down. It's like any organisation, it's all about the management"*. Parents also discussed the financial and legal repercussions of non-attendance as being ineffective as Olivia illustrates:

> *I think it is exactly the government need to realise it's not, we're not doing it because it's fun and the children aren't doing it cause it's fun. And when they talk about like fines and stuff, I'm like, you could fine me £1000, it wouldn't mean I could get her in school. You could tell her you have a trip to Disneyland if she goes to school, it wouldn't get her into school. It's pointless.*

During the design phase of AI, the provocative propositions co-constructed with parent participants were:

- Every child and their family are valued and understood by school staff and professionals and are supported holistically.

- All supporting adults engage in training that supports their understanding of the children's needs.

- All professionals and school staff hold the attitude that the parent and child are experts in their own lives.

- The government understands that some children have difficulties attending school due to their needs and the fining of parents is pointless and ineffective.

## 4.5 Chapter Summary

This chapter presented the master themes and subthemes that emerged from this research's participant interviews and focus group. Overall, the findings suggest that parents perceived the support for SNA as limited, with SNA having a wide impact on parents, children and their families. Parents described their emotional journey of gaining knowledge and understanding of their child's difficulties. From the perceived limited support parents experienced, they often felt targetted as a result of their child's difficulties and support systems limited understanding which came at the detriment of their own mental health. This resulted in parents searching for resources to navigate the challenges of systems that they encountered.

The parents have had a variety of both positive and negative experiences of support which were linked to professionals characteristics and features of the systems they interacted with. The cumulation of these experiences resulted in parents identifying what is needed for children and their families when experiencing SNA in the future. This included a pathway for support, increased awareness of SNA, appropriate and tailored education and services which are more accesible.

# Chapter 5: Discussion

## 5.1 Chapter Overview

This chapter will offer a critical discussion of the findings presented in Chapter 4, utilising existing literature and relevant theoretical perspectives. A consideration of the current research distinctive contribution and its limitations will then follow. Before concluding the research, the implications for professional practice and future research will be considered and reflexivity will be addressed.

## 5.2 Aims of the Current Research

The aims of the current research were to explore the perceptions of parents of children who experience SNA on the support that is currently on offer, exploring the facilitators and barriers to support. This research aimed to give voice to parents by actively involving them in shaping future practice by exploring their perceptions on how support can be improved. A TA was conducted to identify key themes within the interviews. Through the analysis process, a total of eight themes were constructed with five themes relating to RQ 1, two themes relating to RQ 2 and one theme relating to RQ 3.

## 5.3 Interpretation of the Findings in Light of Relevant Literature

The participants provided a rich and deep insight into their views of support for SNA and the subsequent changes they feel could be made to improve the existing support. The findings are critically discussed and organised around the RQs in the following sections.  The PTMF was viewed as a useful framework in understanding the different sources of power exercised by systems and the parents involved in this research responses to the operation of power within their lives. The following section provides an overview of the PTMF, before the interpretation of the findings is presented.

### 5.3.1   The Power Threat Meaning Framework

The Power Threat Meaning Framework (PTMF; Johnstone et al., 2018) provides a conceptual alternative to the diagnostic model of psychological and emotional distress (Read

& Harper, 2022), in which it draws upon the expertise of mental health service users and carers (Johnstone & Boyle, 2018). The PTMF shifts the perspective from the medical model to highlighting how individuals' responses are influenced by the social context and socio-economic policies. This shift is seen by instead of asking 'what is wrong with you?', the question becomes, 'what happened to you?' (Johnstone & Boyle, 2018), representing a shift from diagnostic approaches to narrative based understandings which are based on strength and survival. This framework provides an alternative lens to view a person's (generally rational) psychological and emotional responses to often adverse environments and experiences by viewing the operation of power within people's lives as a fundamental part of the framework (Boyle, 2022). The framework poses key overlapping questions:

1. What has happened to you? (How is ***power*** operating in your life?)
2. How did it affect you? (What kind of ***threats*** does this pose?)
3. What sense did you make of it? (What is the ***meaning*** of these situations and experiences to you?)
4. What are your strengths? (What access to ***power resources*** *do you have?)*

The framework suggests that there are several core needs and anything that prevents these needs from being met may be experiences as a threat to an individual's physical, emotional, relational and/or social safety and survival (Johnstone & Boyle, 2018). The PTMF outlines multiple sources of power, which can operate positively (e.g., having access to money, knowledge and information that helps you manage or change your situation and protection in the form of supportive relationships) or negatively (e.g., invalidating your perspectives or threating through use of fines) which are outlined in Table 6.

**Table 6**
Types of power as outlined within the PTMF (adapted from Johnstone et al., 2018, p.206).

| Types of Power | PTMF Definition |
|---|---|
| **Biological or embodied** | Operates positively and negatively through the possession of socially valued embodied attributes (e.g., physical appearance, fertility, strength, embodied talents and abilities, physical health. |
| **Coercive or power by force** | Involves any use of violence, aggression, or threats to frighten, intimidate or ensure compliance. |

| | |
|---|---|
| **Legal** | May also involve coercion, such as power of arrest, imprisonment, or hospitalisation. It also refers to a wide range of rules and sanctions that regulate and control many aspects of our lives and behaviour, it supports or limits other aspects of power, offers or restricts choices, etc. |
| **Economic and material** | Involves having the means to obtain valued possessions and services, to control others' access to them and pursue valued activities (e.g., housing, employment, transport, education, medical treatment, legal help, safety and security, privacy). |
| **Interpersonal** | All forms of power can operate through relationships, this refers specifically to the power to protect someone, to leave them, to help or abandon, to give/withhold love and care, undermine or support others in the development of their beliefs and identities, and so on. |
| **Social/cultural capital** | A form of power characterised by a mix of valued qualifications, social identities, knowledge, and social connections which can be passed indirectly to the next generation. |
| **Ideological** | Involves any capacity to influence language, meaning and perspectives. It also includes the power to create theories that are accepted as 'true'; to create beliefs or stereotypes about particular groups, to interpret your own and others' behaviour and feelings and have these meanings validated by others, it also involves the power to silence or undermine. |

The negative operation of power pose risks to the individual or groups which are viewed as 'power threats' within the PTMF. The power threats within the PTMF are outlined in Table 7 and these were considered useful when considering the impact of power for parents of children who experience SNA.

**Table 7**
Power Threats as outlined within the PTMF (Johnstone et al., 2018, p. 207)

| Threat | PTMF Description |
|---|---|
| **Relational** | e.g., disrupted attachments, abandonment, betrayal, isolation, shaming, humiliation, rejection, hostility, autonomy/control, self-concept and identity formation, invalidation |
| **Emotional** | Feeling emotionally overwhelmed and unsafe |
| **Social/community** | e.g., isolation, exclusion, hostility, social defeat injustice/unfairness, loss of social or work role. |
| **Economic/material** | e.g., poverty, inability to meet basic physical needs or access basic services for oneself and/or dependants |
| **Environmental** | e.g., lack of safety, physical threat, entrapment, loss of connection with homeland or the natural world. |

| Bodily | e.g., ill-health, chronic pain, body disability, injury, loss of function, physical danger, starvation, exhaustion, bodily invasion. |
|---|---|
| Knowledge and meaning construction | Lack of opportunity, support, or social resources to access and use important sources of information and make sense of one's experiences; devaluing of one's own knowledges, understandings, and experiences due to unequal power relations; imposition of meanings by social discourses and by more powerful others. |
| Identity | Lack of support to develop one's own identity, loss of social, cultural, or spiritual identity; the adoption or imposition of devalued, subordinate, or shameful identities relating to oneself or one's social group. |
| Value base | Loss of purpose, values, beliefs, and meanings; loss of community rituals, belief systems and practices. |

The PTMF considers how individuals experience and interpret power and threats, which are referred to as 'meaning' within the framework. Within the PTMF, meaning is established via social, relational, and personal factors, through belief and feelings, and bodily reactions. The meanings of experiences and situations may include feeling helpless and powerless, controlled, emotionally overwhelmed, defeated, trapped, bad and unworthy, lonely and/or excluded.

Within the PTMF, threat responses are viewed on a spectrum, to "*ensure emotional, physical, relational and social survival in the face of the negative impact of power*" (Johnstone et al., 2018, p. 209). Threat responses include preparing to 'fight' or attack, giving up or learned helplessness, anxiety, anger, distrust, and self-blame and the need for an individual to engage in threat responses can be exacerbated by feelings of limited support, betrayal by individuals or institutions and a lack of control. Additionally, the threat responses are seen to be ameliorated by feeling a sense of control and having support from others.

The PTMF is proposed to have relevance to all individuals, not just those with a psychiatric diagnosis (Johnstone & Boyle, 2018). It is also important to note that power, threat, meaning and threat responses are inseparable experientially as they impact and are impacted by one another (Johnstone & Boyle, 2018). Thus, this framework was considered supportive in understanding the current research findings as SNA is dominated by the medical model, mental health discourses and is embedded within legislation which has previously encouraged the use of legal powers (DfE, 2015) and is further explored in relation to parents' accounts in the following section.

*5.3.2. Research Question 1: What are the perceptions of parents of children who experience SNA regarding the support that is on offer from both school staff and external agencies?*

*5.3.2.1 The Search for Power*

The parents in this research attempted to regain power in their situations where they had felt powerless as power imbalances in favour of the school, the LA and other professionals were apparent. Consequently, some parents appeared to assume the role of advocator, acting on behalf of their child to form a bridge between the child and the components of the system. In assuming this position, parents advocated for their child in negotiations with education, health, and political systems. Interestingly, this theme is also present in Harden (2005)'s research in which they explored the experience of 25 parents of young people with mental health needs. Harden (2005) describes how due to a deskilling process from the systems parents interacted with, parents often felt a lack of trust in professionals and were critical of the systems they were involved with. This process led onto reskilling process of empowerment in which parents attempted to readdress the perceived power imbalance.

From a theoretical perspective, a possible explanation can be related to the Power, Threat Meaning Framework (PTMF, Boyle & Johnston., 2020). Although this framework originally was designed to support clinical psychologists' formulations which encompasses compassionate and holistic understanding of emotional distress, it appears useful in understanding the different sources of power exercised by systems and the parents involved in this research responses to the disempowerment they perceived, as well as their attempts to readdress this which is apparent within the theme of 'The Search for Power'.

Within the PTMF, the subtheme 'The Need for Evidence' can be seen as a strategy against the ideological form of power in which professionals and schools can be seen to have the power to validate or undermine the perspective of the parents. In Sawyer (2022) and Browne's (2018) theses, they each found that parents perceived an uneven power balance between themselves and professionals, with parents reporting to feel that their knowledge and experience was not valued and held less weight than professionals which led for the need for evidence in 'black and white' (Sawyer, 2022). However, in both of their research, the action of readdressing the perceived power imbalance was not evidence. Whereas the parents involved in this research appeared to take this a step forward, actively looking for

evidence which would justify their points and enhance their power which appears to be a novel finding.

Another area parents attempted to readdress the perceived power imbalance can be seen within the subtheme 'Quest for Allies'. Parents appeared to use the power resource of using or finding additional relationships for emotional support. Protection appeared to come from third sector professionals attending meetings and appearing to be on the parent's side, and parents found validation in allies who held knowledge of the systems or who had experience of attendance difficulties. Similarly, within the literature, parents utilised a similar strategy, which involved peer support groups. These groups appeared to provide the parents with exchanging advice and information, with practical and solution orientated strategies (McDonald, 2022) and the knowledge to navigate systems (Bodycote, 2022). Additionally, peer support also provided parents with emotional support including validation, which reduced their sense of being socially isolated and increased their feelings of being understood (Preece & Howley, 2018; Elsherbiny, 2017; Nuttall & Woods, 2013; Hasson et al., 2022; McDonald, 2022).

Within the subtheme 'Information as Power', participants appeared to increase their power resources through improving their knowledge and access to information. In Sawyer's research (2022), the parents of children who experienced SNA expressed the view that schools appeared to take knowledge of the system for granted and accessing information regarding SEND was difficult, yet they did not express actions to address this difficulty. Harden (2005) found that acquiring knowledge and parents actively educating themselves was a process of empowerment, with the parents 'reskilling' themselves. With this sense of empowerment, the parents attempted to reposition themselves as experts in their role as caregivers when interacting with medical professionals (Harden, 2005). This is echoed in Bodycote's thesis (2022) which explored 40 parents experiences of attempting to address their child's SNA. Bodycote (2022) suggests that a significant aspect of empowerment process for parents was learning about relevant legislation and understanding professional roles and capacities. It appears that by gaining knowledge about the relevant systems and their child's difficulties, parents attempt to increase their power resources to improve access to support for their child's difficulties.

When attempting to gain support for their child's SNA, parents in this study expressed the need to take control of the situation, often assuming the role of the 'lead professional' as

they felt responsible for moving the support forward, nonetheless this came at a substantial energetic cost for them. This finding mirrors that of Sawyer's (2022) and Dannow et al. (2020) 's, in which parents often took the primary initiative in attempting to initiate interventions and access support for their child despite being unsure of professional roles and services which was due to a view that school was not intervening sufficiently (Dannow et al., 2020). Similarly, for parents of Autistic children, Hasson et al., (2022) findings suggest that parents described this as a lone journey in which they felt it necessary to take sole charge. It appears that parents bear the main responsibility for attempting to solve the child's attendance difficulties, which may be due to a lack of co-operation between the school and family. This potentially highlights a gap within services, suggesting the need for clear and accessible support pathways with guidance for parents and schools.

The subtheme of Random Luck has partially been identified in the literature, with Sawyer (2022) finding that parents' perception of luck is related to very specific and positive professional involvement. However, the findings of this present research extend upon this, with participants in this research viewing their specific circumstances to be lucky or fortunate which in the context of the PTMF (Boyle & Johnston, 2020), can be seen as having the material power resources to pay for access to support.

### 5.3.2.2 The Effects on Parents

SNA appeared to have a wide-ranging impact on the lives of parents, including upon their mental health, ability to work and on their other children. Parents viewed their child's SNA and the difficulties with accessing appropriate support as having a negative impact upon their mental health and wellbeing. These parents expressed a wide variety of emotions such as blame, shame, guilt and jealousy, reporting that they had often questioned their own competencies as a parent. Although parental mental health has been associated with school refusal (Carless et al., 2015), in line with the current research, Browne (2018) found that parents attributed their experiences of anxiety and depression as a response to the child's SNA experience as they often feel trapped by constant and persistent feelings of stress, alongside a desire to escape their situation (Browne, 2018). The difficult and complex situation involving the child's difficulties has also been reported to evoke feelings of frustration and helplessness for parents due to the time consuming and exhausting nature of

the difficulties (Dannow, 2020). Similarly, Hayes and Watson (2013)'s meta-analysis suggest that the presence of autism in the family can lead to heightened levels of stress in parents, which are further increased when a child is out of school or when home-school relationships are strained (Preece & Howley, 2018). Additionally, within the present study, parents' mental health and wellbeing appeared to be influenced by professionals and school staff's responses to the parents' expressed concerns regarding their child's difficulties. Hardon (2005) suggest that the deskilling process involves the way in which parents felt their parenting skills were challenged by the child's mental health difficulties and by the medical profession, which often resulting in feelings of helplessness and powerlessness. It appears from the literature that a lack of support from professionals and school staff negatively impact upon parent's mental and physical health as well as their quality of life (Hasson et al., 2022; Stapley et al., 2016), which highlights the need for a holistic approach to supporting the families of children who experience SNA.

The parents in this study also reported on their child's SNA difficulties as having an impact upon their ability to work as seen in the subtheme '*Being a working parent'*. This is due to the need to be available for their child and the implications engaging in meetings have to their working pattern. Previous literature has highlighted the impact on work when parenting a child with additional needs, with parents reporting that they needed to give up their jobs or reduce their working hours which was seen as a source of frustration and stress (Browne 2018; Bodycote 2022). Similarly, parents felt they were more able to manage the situation when they adapted their work-life to the child's situation (Dannow et al., 2020), which some parents in this study felt they were lucky to have flexible and understanding jobs. The difficulties parents experience with their ability to work has also been highlighted in Sheldon and Epstein (2002), in which suggests that the child's difficulties appear to impact upon the family functioning, and because of leaving their jobs, parents experienced financial and relational pressures.

Parents reported the various impacts that SNA had on the family and home environment, with stress and unhappiness when attempting to encourage attendance and the roles of siblings assuming more responsibility to help these attempts. Interestingly, some parents in this research also appeared to have a fear of contagion, that their child's attendance difficulties would influence upon their siblings. This fear appears to be a novel finding which has not previously been identified in the literature and thus it is unclear whether

this poses a real threat for parents, suggesting fears of parents with a child who experiences SNA requires further exploration. Although there are several studies within the literature which highlight risk factors within the family, such as enmeshed child-parent relationships, parental anxiety and mental health and conflict (Pellegrini, 2007), the literature appears to operate from the clinical construction of SNA locating the problem within the child or within the family (Pelligrini, 2007). The research literature therefore appears to be scant regarding the experiences and impact on the family and siblings regarding SNA from their own perspectives. The current available literature suggests school distress impacts upon the whole family due to the reorganisation of daily life (Blandin et al., 2018) and Connolly et al. (2023)'s findings suggest that parents viewed 'their other children' were the second highest rated aspect of their lives which was negative impacted upon by school distress.

Considering the transferability of qualitative research, drawing upon findings from family experiences of autism diagnoses, research has suggested that family functioning is often affected as there is a greater strain on the family system (Higgins et al., 2005). Hoogsten and Woodgate (2013) suggests that family life comes to centre on the needs of an autistic child. It is thought that the findings from the autistic literature can be used to interpret the present study's findings due to the high levels of reported diagnoses of autism in the participant group. However, it should be noted that there is a potential epistemological conflict between diagnoses of Autism, operating from the medical model, and the PTMF which has been utilised to interpret this studies' findings. Although the PTMF is an alternative to diagnoses, it acknowledges that Autism in its most severe form is likely to have a neurodevelopmental component and acknowledges that the debates around this diagnosis are complex (Johnstone & Boyle, 2018 p. 70) due to the diagnostic assessment relying on those in position of power to make diagnostic decisions and clinical guidelines varying across regions (see the Exeter University 'Exploring Diagnosis' project for further details http://blogs.exeter.ac.uk/exploringdiagnosis). It is of the researchers view, that both Autism and the PTMF can operate in tandem, with the PTMF providing a more in-depth understanding of the situation following a diagnostic label.

While not directly related to support, parents reported different ways the child's difficulties with attendance were expressed at home, with children reportedly having significant emotional reactions before school or masking at school which resulted in significant emotional distress afterwards. Therefore, the emotional distress of the child is

thought to potentially impact upon the relational and family dynamics as siblings may be affected due to their siblings' difficulties or as a result of the parent's predominant focus being on the sibling with the highest level of need. These points appear to warrant further exploration. It is thought that professionals and school staff should acknowledge the complexity of the child's SNA, being mindful of parent's fears, difficulties, and anxieties in which a community response which incorporates working with and supporting the family and the young person would be beneficial.

### 5.3.2.3 Parents Journey to Understanding

One of the findings is parents' own process of understanding the needs of their child, from noting initial concerns to trying to find answers, which appeared to be a confusing and ongoing process without the direction and support from school staff and other professionals. This theme reflects a parental need to understand what is happening for their child and to identify ways in which the child can best be supported, which aligns with Burrow's (2020) narrative theme of 'Seeking an understanding' when exploring the experiences of four mothers whose child experiences SNA.

The subtheme of *'The not knowing'* represents the parents' feelings of being lost or helpless when they first encountered their child's difficulties. Parents in this research reported that they did not know how to deal with the situation, where to go for support and reported the misconceptions they held as a result. Similarly, Harden (2005) findings suggest that parents felt that they lacked the knowledge and experience to understand and deal with their child's difficulties and reported that expert advice was not forthcoming which led to parents feeling unsure where to go for support. Without knowing where to go or what to do, Armitage et al. (2020) found that mothers of children with mental health difficulties reported to feel a sense of uncertainty which left them with feelings of helplessness and frustration, which holds links with the subtheme '*the emotional aspect'* within the present study.

The learning that parents undertake after encountering a child's difficulties and throughout their journey appears to lead to feelings of guilt and regret for some parents and as a result of the learning, parents view their actions as wrong. The parents in this study appeared to shift roles through their journey of understanding, initially adopting the role of enforcer which appeared to evoke regret for the parent as they felt they had placed additional

pressure and caused more distress for their child when attempting to encourage their attendance. There was a sense that parents felt they had limited options due to the paucity of support, leading them to force their child to school. The emotional aspect of parents coming to understand their child's difficulties is also reflected in Bodycote (2022)'s thesis in which parents experiences were dominated with powerful emotions of shame, guilt, frustration as anger when reflecting upon their actions of forcing their child to school. As a result of developing their understanding, parents in this research appeared to shift roles from enforcer to advocator, demonstrating their recognition of their child's emotion related difficulties, communicating this with professionals and subsequently adapting their responses to the child.

The subtheme '*Identifying their difficulties*' encompasses how some parents initially noticed the child's difficulties in primary school and had taken steps to address these whereas other parents identified early difficulties retrospectively. The notion of parents identifying the child's needs in hindsight has been recognised in Browne's (2018) theme of *Retrospective Clarity* in which parents looked back on the past for clues which would help them make sense of their child's difficulties. This shares links with the subtheme '*Looking for Answers*' as parents attempted to make sense of their child's difficulties through self-directed research following the identification of their child's needs. Using the theoretical lens of the PTMF (Boyle & Johnston, 2020), without appropriate support and guidance, parents appear to lack the social or cultural capital needed to find helpful information to deal with their difficult situation. Parents attempted to take a proactive approach to learn more about their child's difficulties by searching for useful information and support (Bodycote, 2022), as an attempt to increase their power resources of knowledge. Yet as previously mentioned, parents report having difficulties in accessing information around SEND with professionals not being forthcoming with their knowledge of the systems (Sawyer, 2022). Due to parents limited experiences of collaboration and their limited knowledge of effective solutions, parents often search for random solutions (Dannow et al., 2020) which highlights the need for appropriate signposting and guidance for parents so that they can navigate these difficulties.

### 5.3.2.4 Parents Feeling Victimised

This theme captures parents' feelings towards their experiences of support, in which they reported being viewed by school staff and professionals in a negative light and as untrustworthy. In keeping with the theoretical lens of the PTMF (Boyle & Johnston, 2020), parents experiences can be understood from the exercise of various forms of power including ideological and legislative with several core threats posed such as economic, identity and within relationships between parents and professionals.

A common experience shared by parents was the feelings of being blamed and judged for their child's attendance difficulties, with professionals often viewing the parent as the problem and poor parenting as the cause for the child's difficulties. The perception of being blamed is present in other studies of SNA (Gregory & Purcell, 2014; Browne, 2018; Burrows 2020) and of mental health difficulties (Hardon, 2005). In Hasson et al. (2022), parents of autistic children reported of times when they were communicating with professionals who did not understand, they felt unheard and judged across organisations and situations. It appears that research on SNA holds a bias towards the medical model in which the clinical discourse directs attention to the child, and their family as loci of the problem (Pelligrini, 2007). It appears that the professionals and school staff are more likely to attribute attendance difficulties to family factors (Malcom et al., 2003), with perceptions of parents having a limited interest in education (Finning et al., 2020) and parental anxiety and overprotection as playing a key role in the child's difficulties (Cunningham, 2017). As a result, parents are implicated as causally responsible for their child's needs by professionals, and Harden (2005) suggests this deskills parents by challenging their parenting skills in a direct manner. When utilising the theoretical lens of the PTMF, being blamed, or judged can be argued to represent a core threat within relationships, to parents' self-identity and be a result of expressed ideological power in which the social and systemic issue of SNA is viewed as an individual dysfunction. That is, parents are seen to be the cause of a child's difficulties which is promoted by clinical discourse and by institutions with power (i.e., schools and LAs). Additionally, the expression of ideological power through invalidation is reflected in the parent's experience being ignored or dismissed, which may serve to protect the school and LA as being placed under further scrutiny (Boyle & Johnston, 2020).

Within the subtheme 'Black and White Thinking of Others', parents perceived others such as professionals, family members and colleagues as simplifying the complexity of the situation, thus leading to feelings of being misunderstood and judged, as well as feeling

defensive in response to the stigma of the situation. The impact of parent's experience of external 'bad parent' stigma has been reported in previous literature which suggests this external stigma can become internalised by the parents when they have a child with mental health needs (Eaton et al., 2016). This stigma often evokes emotional distress in parents as it can induce a sense of inadequacy and failure in their parenting role, often resulting in self-blame (Moses, 2010) and leading to parents questioning their parenting competency (Eaton et al., 2016). This suggests the need for professionals to increase their understanding and challenge these assumptions to adopt a non-judgemental and compassionate approach when supporting families.

Parents in the present study felt that the use of fines and prosecutions were overt threats which were ineffective, unfair, and appeared to further complicate the situation due to their child's mental health needs. The use of these methods was perceived to create tensions in relationships between the home and school as well as negatively impacting upon parents' sense of competence and their wellbeing. This is reflected in current literature (Nutall & Woods, 2013; Sawyer, 2022), which sees these threats as ineffective and unhelpful in supporting reintegration, 'rigid, insensitive and hasty' (McDonald, 2022), contributing to distrust (Sawyer, 2022), inappropriate considering the child's mental health difficulties and preventing positive and meaningful connections being formed with school staff and professionals (Lissack & Boyle, 2022). In the context of the PTMF, fines and prosecution can be seen as a form of legislative power as government guidance and legal guidelines emphases parents' responsibility to ensure their child attends school and failure to do so leads to fines and prosecution which can be seen as coercive or power by force. The use of fines and prosecution appear to pose economic and relational threats to parents, which contributes to their sense of powerlessness and helplessness, as the guidelines appears to influence on how schools and LAs respond to non-school attendance, thus underpinning parents' feelings of persecution rather than feeling supported. This suggests that there is a need for policy makers, LAs, and schools to reconsider the implementation of their attendance policies and adapt their policies, systems, and attitudes in order to take into account the complex and individualised nature of SNA. The implementation of threats and fines appears to be ineffective and negatively impacting upon support for these children, young people, and their families, reflecting the need for a less punitive system (Mortimer, 2018).

The parents reported feelings of *'Not being believed'* by school staff and professionals, with their concerns being dismissed or professionals asking for proof, conveying a sense of mistrust. In Bodycote (2022)'s email interviews of 40 parents, over fifteen parents acted upon the concerns of their child's behaviours yet encountered denial from teachers leading them to feel dismissed. Similarly, in a survey of 1121 parents, involving 738 parents of children currently experiencing school distress, Connolly and Mullally (2023) found that 75% of parents whose child experiences school distress reported feeling as they were not believed when raising concerns about their child. It has also been reported that parents perceive their views and observations as less valuable than professionals (Hansen et al., 2021), leaving parents feeling as their expertise in knowing their child was undermined by the lack of attention to the problems they raised by professionals. In the context of the PTMF, the dismissal of parent's experiences can be seen as professionals and school staff exerting a form of ideological power, in which they have the power to validate or undermine the perspective of the parents. The misconceptions of parents as the problem are apparent in the literature regarding the underlying causes of SNA and the experiences of dismissal and threats reported by parents appears to be a significant barrier to early identification of school attendance difficulties. This highlights the need for positive and trusting working relationships where mutual respect and understanding is fostered.

As a result of parents perceiving professionals to view them as the problem in the context of their child's attendance difficulties, parents reported their interactions to be adversarial and evoking feelings of being under attack, reflected in the subtheme *'Us vs Them'*. It appears that the way in which SNA has been conceptualised in the literature, and in the legal discourse as locating parents as the problem (Gregory & Purcell, 2014; Pelligrini, 2007) contributes to the lack of communication and meaningful understanding in interactions with professionals. As a result, it appears that relationships between parents and school and professionals have become hostile and rigid, impacting upon their collaboration within this research. There has been a welcomed shift from the DfE in May 2020, in their guidance for improving school attendance which illustrates the need for schools and LAs to 'work collaboratively with, not against families' (DfE, 2022). However, the experience of many parents involved in this research did not reflect positive experiences of collaboration. Therefore, there is a need to increase school staff and professionals understanding of the

complexity of SNA and for them to adopt a curious and open stance when work with families to facilitate a shared understanding and positive and collaborative working relationship.

### 5.3.2.5 The Effects of Significant Changes in the Learning Environment

As previously described in Chapter 4, although this theme was not directly related to RQ1, it provided some additional findings which may provide further insight into supporting SNA.

Within this study, parents described the national lockdown as having a positive impact upon their child's emotional distress due to it providing relief from their discomfort and anxiety. Additionally, the parents in the present research suggested that the national lockdown appeared to provide the child with the opportunity to learn in a different environment. This mirrors that of Sawyer (2022)'s finding in which COVID-19 appeared to reduce the pressure and anxiety the child typically experiences which allowed them to engage in remote learning. However, McDonald (2022), in their qualitative research of 29 parents and 19 professionals, found that parents viewed the pandemic as worsening the child's attendance difficulties due to the changes evoking unpredictability and anxieties related to spreading the virus. Interestingly, despite some parents in this research acknowledging their child's difficulties returning to school after the restrictions had been lifted, for some other parents, lockdown appeared to provide the child with a different perspective on how to access education which enhanced their engagement with learning. The national lockdown also appeared to provide the parents with the same feelings of reduction in pressure which is contrast to McDonald (2022)'s findings of professionals attributing parental anxiety of the virus to the child's difficulties with attendance. Thus, the researcher views this as a learning opportunity for professionals to reflect upon the ways education can be delivered as well as exploring the factors that have contributed to the reduction in pressure for the child and family which can be implemented within practice.

Parents additionally identified 'school transitions', particularly the primary to secondary transition, as having a negative impact on their child's difficulties, often exacerbating their difficulties. Transitions have been highlighted within the literature, suggesting that these can negatively affect the psychological and emotional adjustment of pupils (Rice et al., 2011) and can evoke feelings of unsafety in the secondary school environment (Ingul et al., 2019). Previous research also suggests that SNA peaks at specific

transition points in school aged children's lives such as the transition from primary to secondary school (Malcolm et al., 2003; Finnings et al., 2019). This appears to indicate the need for schools and professionals to develop a more tailored and individualised approach to transition support for children experiencing attendance difficulties.

### 5.3.3. Research Question 2: What do parents feel are the facilitators and barriers to support?

#### 5.3.3.1 The Best of Support from Services

This theme encompasses the various aspects of schools, services and third sector organisations which parent felt were supportive when attempting to manage their child's SNA. From a theoretical perspective, Bronfenbrenner (1979)'s Ecological Systems theory can be useful in understanding the different interconnected systems influence on child's non-attendance.

Interestingly, in contrast to parents' experiences of power imbalances as shared in the previous RQ, many parents reported that the support they had appreciated the most was when they felt professionals listened and attempted to understand their perspective. These professionals appeared to provide parents with reassurance, validation whilst also valuing the parents' wellbeing as they were sources of emotional support. The readdressed power imbalance in one key relationship for each participant appeared to facilitate the development of positive and trusting relationships, with professionals demonstrating empathy, commitment and the sharing of information which formed the foundation to trusting relationships (Widmark et al., 2013). The importance of positive and trusting relationships has been highlighted within previous literature, with parents valuing kind, patient, and altruistic teachers (Sibeoni et al. 2018), genuine professionals (Mortimer, 2018) who provided professional validation which facilitated a shared recognition and understanding of the problem (Bodycote, 2022). Additionally, parents who felt heard and professionals who valued their perspective have been suggested as facilitators to successful school reintegration (Corcoran et al., 2022), as parents felt better able to engage with school staff and manage their child's needs (Myhill, 2017). This suggests that individualised and compassionate approaches by professionals, which positions the parent as an equal contributor whilst valuing their perspective is likely to facilitate effective problem solving and shared

understanding. In the context of Bronfenbrenner (1979), this support can be seen as operating at the level of the Mesosytem, which through the development of shared understanding and collaborative working relationships as well as increasing parents' capacity to manage, the child's needs are addressed in a tailored and supportive manner.

In the subtheme '*An entrusted professional with responsibility',* Parents reported appreciation for having a single point of contact who for some assumed the role of advocator and lead professional, which reduced the feelings of pressure and positively impacted upon their wellbeing. This idea of a named person has been identified within previous research, with parents reporting having a designated person who was available and supportive (Aucott 2014), to talk about their worries and concerns as positively affecting school attendance (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002) as staff took action to address the family's needs (Preece & Howley, 2018). Similarly, Nuttall and Woods (2013) in their theme '*meeting the needs of the family'* suggest that an attendance officer who accompanied a parent to meetings, was available and who adopted a positive and nurturing approach as a supportive factor in a child's reintegration. Additionally, Milosevic et al. (2022) in their interview of 30 parents and carers of children with autism and sensory processing difficulties, found that parents reported a need for a key ongoing point of contact, who could signpost parents to additional services or help them deal with new issues arising.

Few participants expressed an appreciation in professionals who were appeared to be invested in the situation and go beyond their typical offer in order to try and access support for the family which has not previously been identified in the literature. Consequently, it is thought that having access to a professional with which parents can trust, provides emotional support, and has knowledge of the systems allows parents to access further support resources with greater ease. It appears that this professional acts similarly to the parent as described in section 5.3.1.1, forming a bridge between the child and their family with different components of the system thus supporting the interactions within the mesosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

The subtheme '*Seeing the family as a whole'* captures parents views that having professionals and school staff who acknowledged and understood the difficulties experienced by parents and who adopted their responses considering this as facilitating support for the family. Parents reported the professionals and school staff as seeing the problem as a whole rather than a within-child or within-family perspective which provided the family with a

reduction in pressure and access to emotional support. Previous research has highlighted the importance of professionals providing an increased level of support including emotional support and reassurance to parents (Corcoran et al., 2022) as a result of gaining a clear understanding of the parents needs as a key factor in providing effective and holistic support (Sawyer, 2022).

School staff and professionals who held an understanding of the child's needs and were flexible and responsive were appreciated by parents as they were seen to tailor support to their child's needs. This can be understood as operating at the level of the microsystem between the child and the school (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The importance of staff and professionals holding an understanding of a child's needs and supporting the child emotionally has been documented in the literature (Havik et al., 2014; Gase et al., 2016; Nuttall & Woods, 2013), with staff being able to identify their needs, strengths, and interests to support the development of effective strategies in which the child finds most helpful (Preece & Howley, 2018). This understanding of the child allows for an eclectic approach (Preece & Howley, 2018) which is flexible and suited to individual needs. With this understanding, the school is able to adopt a person-centred approach (Sawyer, 2022) and flexibly adapt their practices and expectations to support the child (Corcoran et al., 2022).

### 5.3.3.2 The Systems Aren't Working

This theme encapsulated the numerous systemic factors that parents perceived as impeding their access to appropriate and timely support.

The '*limited understandings*' subtheme encompassed parents' views of professionals and school staff understanding of the situation as a barrier due to their restricted view of the child's difficulties as behaviour. This also included professionals having limited knowledge and awareness of SNA difficulties which prevented the development of appropriate strategies and responses. This is reflected in the literature in which professional's lack of awareness of the complexity of the situation led to parents feeling situations were poorly managed or unhelpful advice was offered (Browne, 2018), often resulting in punitive responses (Hasson et al., 2022) which presented as a considerable barrier to early intervention as professionals did not have an understanding of how best to support SNA (Sawyer, 2022). This highlights the need for more training within schools and professionals to improve approaches to support. It appears

that the different conceptualisations of SNA as outlined in section 1.3 within research, legal guidelines and practice appear to have contributed to the varied understanding from professionals which presents a considerable barrier to effective identification and intervention.

Another significant barrier reported by parents was the need to relentlessly fight to against child related systems in order to access support. Parents have reported that systems are difficult and disjointed, hindering early intervention (Lissack & Boyle, 2022) as they involve complicated referral processes and complex pathways in which parents are moved between services which results in delays to professional involvement (Myhill, 2017; Sawyer, 2022). This is echoed in Hasson et al (2022)'s theme *'a constant battle with, and within, the system'*, highlighting the draining process for parents, which involves pushing for resources whilst being pushed around. In a recent report by Ofsted, considering the experiences of SEND for children and their families, in the context of the SEND reforms, suggests that many parents felt there was not enough support and parents continue to have to "fight for the rights of their children" (Ofsted, 2021, p.33).

The subtheme *'the balancing act'* highlights how parents juggle the importance of attendance and education, with its legal implications, with their child's mental health. Parents reported the importance of both education and their child's wellbeing, yet they were in conflict with whether attendance or their child's wellbeing should take precedence over the other when school was a source of distress. This mirrors Bodycote (2022)'s finding in which parents reported the turmoil and inner conflict of balancing the legal requirements, social expectations, and value of education with their child's wellbeing. Similarly, Lissack and Boyle (2022) suggest that schools need to re-evaluate their priorities of attendance, as there is a need to prioritise children's wellbeing over data driven approaches. The perspective schools appear to hold, of the importance of attendance can be seen as a result of the Macrosystem and Ofsted, which is a regulating body for schools, in which schools are judged on their attendance data for absence and persistent absence rates when grading the areas of 'Behaviour and attitudes' and 'Leadership and management'. It is likely this increasing pressure on attendance schools are placed under due to Ofsted may filter through the school system onto the CYP and their families as the priority becomes attendance thus potentially meaning the CYP needs become lost.

The subthemes *'rigidity of services'*, *'time'* and *'limited resources'* are reflective the barriers to support that exist as a result of the Exosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) such as government and economic policies. Parents reported services as inflexible and inaccessible, with services often threatening to withdraw their offer of support when the child had difficulties with engagement. When services were withdrawn as a result of the child not engaging, there was no offer of alternatives to support, leaving the family on their own. This may reflect a misconception in professionals understanding of the child's difficulties, with professionals holding an assumption that the child is actively choosing not to engage rather than they may have difficulties with expressing their experiences. This suggests the need for an increased understanding of SNA and for services to be responsive and flexible to the needs of their service users.

These subthemes also encompassed barriers such as long waiting times for services or insufficiently funded services, which led parents to feel that the situation was too far gone for change and the waiting times as having a detrimental effect on the child's mental health. The of systemic barriers were overwhelmingly related to Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services. In the current UK context, the House of Commons Health, and Social Care Committee (2021) found that mental health providers are currently under significant pressure due to the sharp increase in demand. As a result of this demand for CAMHS, CYP experience barriers and rigidity in services in the form of high access thresholds, rejected referrals or long waiting times (up to two years) if a child is accepted into services (House of Commons, 2021). These apparent systemic barriers, operating within the Macrosystem as result of austerity and government policy, appear to prevent timely access to support, with parents often feeling lost and unsure of where to go next which subsequently impacts upon their child's mental health as they wait with no additional support offered. These findings align with Gregory and Purcell (2014), in which parents often reported a lack of support and feelings of isolation as a result.

For many parents, school presented as one of the biggest barriers as they were viewed as the first-place parents sought support, as well as the gatekeepers to further support services, often impeding their access to timely and proactive support. This subtheme links with the previously described theme *'Parents feeling Victimised'* as schools who blamed or dismissed parents' concerns impeded early identification and intervention as concerns were not taken seriously. Within the literature, and this present study, parents can be seen to play

a key role in the early identification and communication of the child's needs to school staff (Corcoran et al., 2022; Sawyer, 2022). It is therefore important that school staff and professionals gain the parents perspective (Elliott & Place, 2019), and concerns are acted upon in a timely manner as parents' involvement in the planning and monitoring of interventions is key to success (Corcoran et al., 2022). Without early identification and intervention, Heyne et al. (2019) argue that schools are likely to face significant challenges in supporting a child back to full attendance when non-attendance is persistent and severe.

### 5.3.4 Research Question 3: What changes do parents feel could be implemented to support both the child and their family to help increase their child's attendance?

#### 5.3.4.1 The Future of Support

In considering how support can be improved, parents identified the need to increase the accessibility of support. This encompassed the signposting of information at an earlier stage, the sharing of good practice within schools and sustained support which continued until the shared goal of children, their families and professionals had been met. This aligns with previous findings of the need for continuity of services, with regular follow ups that involved collaborative conversations about how support could be improved and the sharing of top tips from professionals with understanding (Hasson et al., 2022). Additionally, Preece and Howley (2018) found that parent's access to support and information, training and meeting other families were seen to have positive impacts upon the family. The parents also reflected upon the previously mentioned subtheme of *'an entrusted professional with responsibility'* within the focus group which they viewed as acting as a keyworker for the family, streamlining support and providing emotional support. Additionally, parents commented on the need for simpler referral processes, with professionals supporting the application process for EHCNA, and a reduction in waiting times.

The suggestion of the need for streamlined support by a key professional also appeared in the focus groups discussion of meeting the child's needs. Although previous findings have called for an increasingly person centred and nurturing approach (Nuttall & Woods, 2013; Lissack & Boyle, 2022), parents specified this approach through their dream of their child to access and work with one key professional rather than needing to engage with

multiple at any one time. Additionally, the need for a pathway to support for SNA was evident in one interview which was enhanced in the focus group, with parents suggesting in a three-month period, they could raise their concerns to a multi-agency panel and a plan of support is developed for their child. This is in line with Sawyer (2022), who argues that there is need for a consistent pathway for parents to access information, advice, and support to be developed.

In line with this suggestion of a pathway of support, the need for parents to be heard and validated was linked to the early identification of needs, with parents highlighting how this would promote collaborative and supportive working relationships and how intervening earlier would have evoked feelings of being supported for the child and their families. The importance of early identification and intervention has been highlighted within the literature (Pelligrini, 2007; Lissack & Boyle) with it being seen as key to addressing patterns of attendance and successful reintegration (DfE, 2016; Nuttall & Woods, 2013; Lyons, 2016). However, Heyne et al. (2019) argue that the recognition of difficulties of school staff is key to early intervention, yet this is not currently done well, and schools appear to be failing to intervene early. In addition, Myhill (2017) suggests that parents felt better able to engage when they had been listened to, understood, and were involved in the decision-making process. It is therefore believed that challenging the existing conceptualisations of school staff and professionals regarding SNA, and the promotion of positive working relationship appear to be key factors to early intervention which would enhance feelings of being supported and access to support for parents.

Parents within the focus group reflected upon the national lockdown as offering a different perspective on how children who are experiencing SNA can access education. This involved the use of online and interactive learning methods and tailored curriculum that incorporated vocational subjects in which the parent and child had the ability to develop their own EOTAS package. This echoes findings of Sawyer (2022) in which the provision implemented during the national lockdown demonstrated how provision can be tailored through reasonable adjustments.

The parents shared that school staff and professionals as having an understanding of their child's difficulties would be beneficial, with parents' suggestion of training about SNA and the associated difficulties. The suggested increased understanding was reported to provide enhanced feelings of connection for the child and the parent and a shift in the

expectations adults hold, as Olivia shared *"just kindness goes a long way"*. This was reflected to be a result of shifting the narrative of parent blame and a child's active choice to a holistic and ecological perspective, that recognises the mental health difficulties their child is experiencing, and the view of parents and the child are experts by experience. Parents felt that this shift needed to happen at the government level, with the removal of fines and prosecution for SNA as well as policies and attitudes towards these difficulties as coming from a place of prioritising wellbeing. These findings echo that of previous research which highlights the need for an increased awareness of SNA (Havik et al., 2014), which involves less parental blaming and more accountability of schools (Lissack & Boyle, 2022) and the importance of schools having a good understanding of mental health needs (Corcoran et al., 2022). Through school staff and professionals having an increased understanding of the complexity and individualised nature of SNA, a shift in perspective would support the development of collaborative working relationships as they would recognise the value of the parents' views. It is thought that the weight given to parents' perspectives as a result would facilitate early identification and intervention of SNA difficulties as it is likely that support would be better tailored to the child's needs.

## 5.4. Implications for Practice

Overall, the present research suggests that parents often hold much of the initial responsibility to identify SNA. The research also highlights how the needs of CYP, and their families should be at the centre of support, with professionals and school staff giving weight to the parents' concerns and providing experiences of unconditional positive regard (Rogers, 1967) to ensure parents and CYP feel heard and valued. Additionally, there is a need for support to be consistent and ongoing as a CYP's SNA is multi-faceted, which requires a collaborative and sensitive approach, as there seems to be no 'quick fix' when supporting CYP's return to school.

The central part of this research recognises that professional practices is improved when professionals listen carefully and try to understand the experiences of CYP and their families they are positioned to support. Therefore, the researcher encourages schools, LAs, EPs and other professionals to reflect upon the provocative propositions outlined in Table 8 when considering their offers of support for SNA.

**Table 8.**

*A table of parent participants' co-constructed provocative propositions from Cycle 3 of Appreciative Inquiry.*

| Provocative Propositions |
|---|
| *Children and families have access to one professional that streamlines support.* |
| *The EHCP process is streamlined, and parents have support when writing an application.* |
| *Everyone has access to the means of education that suits their needs.* |
| *Professionals working collaboratively and streamlined so children have access to and work with one key professional rather than multiple professionals at any one time.* |
| *Every child and family that needs support is listened to and dealt with, by accessing support, in a timely manner.* |
| *Every child and their family are valued and understood by school staff and professionals and are supported holistically.* |
| *All supporting adults engage in training that supports their understanding of the children's needs.* |
| *All professionals and school staff hold the attitude that the parent and child are experts in their own lives.* |
| *The government understands that some children have difficulties attending school due to their needs and the fining of parents is pointless and ineffective.* |

Nonetheless, the following section will consider each provocative proposition and their implications for practice in turn.

### 5.4.1. Every child and their family that needs support is listened to and dealt with, by accessing support in a timely manner.

This provocative proposition is considered salient with the potential to bring about positive change as parents shared that support was best when they felt heard and valued,

and professionals took time to understand their perspective. Additionally, parents shared how distinctively emotionally demanding their journeys were and how this was exacerbated by professionals and school staff dismissing their experiences. This highlights the importance of interpersonal skills and the need for school staff, LAs and EPs to engage in the act of actively listening, that is truly and openly listening without judgement, which creates stronger connections. As *"being listening to and feeling heard is incredibly powerful and is an undervalued tool in relationship building"* (Costello & Gillum, 2023 p. 91) which facilitates early identification of SNA. It is important that school staff in particular, actively listen and approach conversations with parents regarding their child's SNA sensitively and without judgement to facilitate the development of the working relationship. Additionally, school staff should keep in regular contact with parents and CYP who experience SNA as parents shared that they had not received any contact from the school for a significant amount of time.

When considering the emotional impact of SNA for parents and families, there is a key need to acknowledge heightened emotional states that are experienced by parents and take steps to support parents. As such, school staff and other LA professionals may benefit from training in communication skills such as attuned interactions (Kennedy & Landor, 2015) which include demonstrations of being attentive (e.g., demonstrating interest with a friendly posture), encouraging parents to speak (e.g., through emotional warmth within their intonation) and guiding them within discussions to support the communication between parents and the school and provide experiences of emotional containment.

EPs are well placed to develop and offer training on Active Listening and Attuned Interactions practice for school staff and other professionals, with the potential to provide Video Enhanced Reflective Practice opportunities to support the development of these skills. Through attunement, professionals and school staff can ensure their responsiveness to the parent and CYP's emotional states and perspectives, which will allow for honest, regular, and open communication and enhance positive working relationships. For EPs becoming involved in entrenched cases, where parents have had negative experiences of working with professionals, it is key that EPs provide parents with the opportunity to build trusting relationships, providing validation and empathetic responses, and accepting their experiences. This will provide parents with experiences of emotional containment and to feel emotionally safe to share their experiences. Additionally, as EPs often work at the individual and family level, they can implement techniques of conflict resolution to address tensions in

views that may exist (Aucott, 2014), mediate, and support the rebuilding of relationships between the family and the school (Pellegrini, 2007).

Moreover, EPs are skilled in person-centred techniques, solution-focused practices and gaining the voice of the child, and thus EPs can elicit the CYP's views, identify their strengths and difficulties to support the development of a tailored package of support which includes environmental adaptations.

Within this research, parents felt that the barrier of time was significant, often reporting that support had been received at such a late stage, when the situation had become entrenched and for some, when their child was a year away from finishing secondary school. As such, this highlights a key need for early identification and intervention, suggesting an increased level of accountability for schools in identifying and supporting SNA as the current findings suggest that school is often seen as a significant barrier to accessing timely support. Thus, it is viewed that EPs and LA professionals should work collaboratively with schools to develop a tool or framework for early identification before a child's SNA becomes entrenched akin to Boaler et al. (2024) who developed a tool through participatory action research which aimed to be part of an earlier multi-agency response. It is acknowledged by the researcher, given the current financial and political climate, accessing professionals such as EPs, CAMHS professionals and Community Paediatricians is proven difficult due to reduced capacities and long waiting lists which impedes early intervention. Therefore, there is a need for LAs to improve the knowledge of education support services at a systemic level, to support schools' capacity to effectively identify, signpost, and refer to professionals when needed. In this respect, EPs are well placed to support the development of guidance documents and deliver training to school staff and other LA professionals which will be further discussed in section 5.4.7.

### 5.4.2 All professionals and school staff hold the attitude that the parent and child are experts in their own lives.

Parental experiences of professionals and school staff reflected experiences of being dismissed and not being believed about their accounts of their CYP's difficulties. Thus, some parents often sought external professionals to provide evidence of their experiences of reality which is evident in the theme 'The need for evidence'. In light of parents' perceptions of

power imbalances within interactions, and experiences of being dismissed, professionals and school staff should reflect upon their positioning in relation to the parent as they often are seen to take adopt the 'Expert Model' (Cunningham and Davies, 1985) in which professionals rely on their own opinions to make decisions. Through challenging the stigmatising beliefs and adopting a 'Partnership Model' (Hornby, 2011), professionals can be seen to be experts in their area of expertise and parents are positions as experts on their child, which leads to a more equitable partnership, fostering collaboration in which parents and schools can work together to create better outcomes for the CYP and the development of appropriate and tailored support plans. EPs are in a position to advocate for the use of evidence-based collaboration models to schools and local authorities to increase collaborative working, such as Griffiths et al. (2021).

In their systematic literature review of studies which examined collaboration within education, community and health care settings, Griffiths et al. (2021) developed the 'building blocks of collaboration' model which consists of four levels. The model is displayed as a set of building blocks to emphasise the need for the initial building blocks to be developed and nurtured before additional ones can be added and highlights how collaboration is a process which takes place over an extended period of time. At the foundations sits 'relationship building' which is underpinned by communication, trust, and mutual respect between individuals. Establishing effective communication requires open, honest, and clear communication in which each member can share their ideas and any unnecessary conflict is avoided. When trust is established, families are more likely to engage in higher levels of vulnerability (Tschannen-Moran, 2001) which is important for the development of effective support plans. In Griffiths et al., (2021) trust is maintained when there is a belief that everyone is working together, towards a common goal and when members are predictable, reliable, and consistent which is in line with this research's findings within the theme 'the best of support'. This highlights the importance of school staff should establishing effective working relationships with families, in which communication is open and regular and staff members are consistent. Within relationships that have broken down between home and school, EPs can use their facilitation and consultation skills to develop a shared understanding which will allow for better partnership working. Mutual respect happens when school staff and families value each other's skills, knowledge, and competence and when ideas and knowledge are

valued (Griffiths et al., 2021) which highlights the importance of positioning within interactions, and the need to adopt a 'Partnership Model'.

As parents reported experiences of stigma, either directly or indirectly, through consultations, EPs can sensitively challenge any misconceptions or stigmatising attitudes and advocate for families' voices to be heard and included. Additionally, EPs are well placed within child related systems (e.g., schools and LAs) to offer staff supervisory spaces in which to reflect upon their actions and assumptions, and positioning in relation to the 'Expert Model' as well as policies and procedures surrounding SNA which impact on the development of effective working relationships. Through challenging assumptions and stigmatising attitudes, through consultation or supervisory spaces, EPs can facilitate professionals' holistic understanding of SNA, support professionals to adopt a 'Partnership model' to support the collaboration between home and school which ensures parents and CYP are supported, and their ideas are respected. Additionally, there needs to be an increased sense of shared responsibilities between the family and the school for children's SNA which sits at the third level of 'active engagement' in the 'building blocks of collaboration' model (Griffiths et al., 2021). In this sense, schools, and LAs hold some responsibility to work with families to supportively address SNA, with regards to early identification and intervention, and tailoring support as some parents in this research shared experiences of school staff shifting responsibility solely onto the parent.

### 5.4.3. Every child and their family are valued and understood by school staff and professionals and are supported holistically.

It is acknowledged that the implications for practice in relation to this provocative proposition is also addressed in section 5.4.1 and 5.4.2 in relation to early identification, collaborative working, relationships, challenging stigmatising beliefs and the advocated use of the 'Partnership Model'. However, in addition to these, it is recognised that experiences of parenting a child who is experiencing SNA may create additional and negative pressure on the emotional wellbeing of parents, with parents in this research highlighting feelings of powerlessness to make a difference to their situation, increased feelings of isolation and feeling forgotten about when their child is struggling. However, many parents shared experiences of connecting with others in similar situations as having a positive impact upon

them, alleviating feelings of isolation. Thus, EPs can advocate for and facilitate support groups for parents of children with SNA, working in partnership with schools or their LAs to provide a safe space for parents to meet which could positively increase parents support networks, emotional wellbeing and provide parents with practical advice. Furthermore, LAs should consider their 'local offer' and signpost parents to charity organisations and services which can provide regular emotional support to parents, similar to the experiences of Parnell and Rosa.

### 5.4.4 Children and families have access to one professional that streamlines support.

Parents felt support was at its best when they had an entrusted professional with responsibility. Thus, it is believed that provision of a named key person should be provided for each child who experiences SNA, who has regular opportunities with the CYP and their families to build rapport and oversees support. This person may be situated within school to ensure the CYP receive appropriate support or may be appropriately placed within the LA. This person may be part of the multi-agency pathway of support parents dreamed of, which is discussed further in section 5.4.5. Through this named key person, multi-agency professionals can use and support this person to carry out person-centred techniques to gather the CYPs views to identify their needs as well as supporting the CYP and their families to facilitate engagement and increase families' understandings so that they are better able to make decisions which affect them. This individual can alleviate the pressure and experience of overwhelm parents reported themselves and their CYP felt when engaging and co-ordinating with multiple professionals at any one time and facilitate multi-agency working.

### 5.4.5 Professionals working collaboratively and streamlined so children have access to and work with one key professional rather than multiple at any one time.

The idea of a SNA support pathway was highlighted by some parent participants as having the potential to allow for multi-agency collaboration and early intervention as well as providing them with guidance on how to seek support. This pathway would involve a key worker who would support the family, be a point of contact for professionals and support referrals to appropriate services as outlined in section 5.4.4. This keyworker could be assigned following a referral by school staff or parents and triage process when concerns have

increased, despite evidenced implementation of Ordinarily Available Provision. Although many LAs have produced guidance for SNA, parents dreamt of a pathway in which within three months they could raise a concern and refer to a panel consisting of professionals, which would assess the CYP and collaboratively develop a support plan which was reviewed regularly. Thus, this suggests that LAs should consider their services and existing pathways which have been designed to support CYP who experience difficulties with attendance. The researcher has advocated for a sensitive and collaborative approach to supporting SNA, and thus recommends that LAs consider the development of a support pathway which could be created, collaboratively with parents and professionals, which allows the assessment of CYP's needs and access to multiagency professionals who co-produce a support plan with parents, school staff and professionals. This service could involve panel professionals consisting of EPs, CAMHs colleagues, LA SEND Colleagues such as Inclusion Officers and SEN Support Workers, Occupational Therapists and Speech and Language Therapists, who engage in consultation and case discussions to understand and formulate the CYP's needs, and tailor support plans with schools and parents. Following the formation of a support plan, progress should be reviewed with the key worker after 6-8 weeks, with adjustments made if sufficient progress had not been made.

### 5.4.6 All supporting adults engage in training that supports their understanding of the child's needs.

Parents highlighted how professionals and school staff often held misconceptions regarding the CYP's difficulties with attending school, often attributing it to parenting competencies and being 'black and white' in their thinking which reduces the complexity of the situation. It appears that it would be beneficial for all school staff and LA professionals to have an increased understanding of SNA and CYP's mental health needs, including SEN and ways of adapting teaching and the environment to increase their understanding of individual CYP's needs. Thus, EPs can use their knowledge of child development and SEMH needs to facilitate training on psychoeducation, anxiety, masking, and the barriers these present to attendance and learning to schools and Children's Services professionals to support their understanding of the complex nature of SNA. Furthermore, schools should adopt, with support from EPs, whole-school approaches to SNA which involve relational and attachment aware approaches, that prioritise the wellbeing of CYP over data-driven and punitive

behavioural approaches. Previous research has suggested that EPs are well positioned to support schools to develop wider approaches that address CYP's mental health and emotional wellbeing (Greig et al., 2019). This in turn should support early identification as Lyons (2016) highlights that being able to identify SNA and ensuring appropriate interventions are put in place will increase the likelihood that a CYP attendance improves.

Additionally, as the present research highlights the complex nature of SNA, which is a complex and emotive topic, EPs could facilitate drop-in sessions or work discussion groups to offer supervisory spaces to collaboratively problem solve with school staff and other LA professionals (Gregory & Purcell, 2014), reflecting on the impact of school and LA systems and support staff to adapt the school environment and policies to meet the child's needs as well as challenging unhelpful narratives and discourses that hinder collaborative working with parents and early intervention. This could include supporting schools to adapt their behaviour policies to take a relational or attachment aware approach.

### 5.4.7 The Government understands that some children have difficulties attending school due to their needs and the fining of parents is pointless and ineffective.

Parents within this research reflected upon the negative impact the threats of fines and prosecutions for their child's non-attendance had on their mental health and wellbeing, mirroring previous research (Epstein et al., 2019; Jones, 2014). As such, a key implication of this research is the need for LAs and wider government attendance policies to be adapted so that is considers the underlying factors contributing to SNA rather than automatically adopting a punitive approach which has been argued to only worsen the situation as *"all it succeeds in doing is criminalising large numbers of struggling parents"* (Rosenburg, 2023 p.149). From this research, parents often encounter difficulties when trying to access the appropriate support due to school staff and professionals' attitudes and understanding, and systemic barriers which mirrors that of research completed by 'Not Fine in School' (2020) which highlighted the ineffectiveness of legal measures, feelings of being blamed, being denied support and the ineffectiveness of forcing attendance. Therefore, the researcher advocates for an alternative approach, with the use of fines and prosecution being questioned. It is the researchers' belief that the enforcement of legal expectations is inappropriate and ineffective in supporting CYP and their families to improve attendance, presenting as a barrier to developing collaborative and trusting relationships between the

CYP, their families and the school. Educational Psychologists are well placed within Children's Service Directorates within LAs to collaborate with policymakers to support the development of appropriate and supportive evidence-based practices and policies which promote positive outcomes for CYP. Additionally, Educational Psychologists can use their skills of Organisational Change and Action Research at a systemic level to increase involvement from key stakeholders in the design of policies and services and to facilitate effective change. In this respect, LAs should encourage and promote systemic working opportunities for training and organisational change.

*5.4.8 Everyone has access to the means of education that suits their needs.*

Within this research, some parents highlighted the experience of education during the COVID-19 school closures, which offered the opportunity of CYP accessing education remotely which alleviated some of their discomfort and increased their engagement with learning. Parents dreamed pf *"proper online learning that on the days when they're struggling, they can access" (Olivia)* which were *"interactive" (Parnell)* and their child would be *"doing the learning that the rest of the class are doing at the same time as them doing it"* (Zoe). This suggests that SNA provision could be developed using the adjustments and principles from the school closure period and although this may present logistical challenges to school staff, the use of AV1 telepresence robots is one initiative which has received funding from the Department for Education (2021) and is currently trialled within different LAs, as part of CYP's re-integration packages to increase their engagement and maintain relationships with peers and teachers (DfE, 2021). Additionally, schools and LAs should consider the use of Alternative Provisions and access to subject-specific interests to support re-engagement with learning and reintegration, using the CYP's interests and motivations to support SNA as Sheppard (2011) highlights how schools offering vocational and alternative education appears supportive with regards to CYP engagement in education.

*5.4.9 The EHCP process is streamlined, and parents have support when writing an application.*

Parents in this research also raised difficulties with the EHC Needs Assessment process itself. Some parents felt that trying to gain an assessment for their child was a battle in itself

which the application required a high level of skill to complete. Therefore, a key implication for LAs is to ensure that parents are signposted to charities and organisations which can support the parent in their applications. Additionally, it is important that LAs consider their existing guidance and application forms or developing guidance to support parents with making applications, reflecting upon the accessibility of language and forms, and ensuring information is accessible.

## 5.5. Implications for Future Research

The focus of the current research was to explore parental experiences of support, identifying the facilitators and barriers as well as parents' perception of changes that can be implemented to improve the existing support. As this is an under-researched area, the experience of conducting this research has suggested that it would also be beneficial to explore parental experiences of support, following a similar design, with parents from a variety of backgrounds. It is acknowledged that this research, like existing research in SNA, reflects ethnically white participants which have been a dominant voice in parent involvement research (Lyon & Cotler, 2007; Hornby & Lafaele, 2011). Additionally, much of the SNA literature has involved mothers' perspectives, with the present research only consisting of one father. Therefore, future research should focus on diversity of participants, particularly from underrepresented groups as it is possible that different participant groups could bring very different perspectives.

From the parent's accounts, future research could explore parental perceptions regarding their support experiences in LA's that have an existing pathway of support for SNA compared to LA's that do not, to develop best practice models of support. It is also noted that the CYP's voice is missing from this research and thus it is thought that involving them in a similar design may provide valuable information on future changes to practice.

## 5.6 Distinctive Contribution

The topic of SNA has grown in popularity within the research community, with reports suggesting that cases of SNA are rising (Children's Commissioner, 2022), which is also anecdotally reported in EP practice. The parent's voice therefore appears to be pertinent at this time to provide support attuned to the current political and social context. This research

contributes to evidence base in the context of SNA by giving voice to the experiences of eleven parents in England which empowers the parents to share their views on subsequent changes that can be made. The recent SEND Review (2022) illustrates the government's focus on improving attendance which can only be achieved through increased understanding and appropriate intervention. The government reviews and subsequent legislation continue to overlook the need for increased understanding and intervention which highlights the importance of professionals seeking guidance and support when addressing this difficulty on the front line.

Elliott and Place (2019) argue that there has been limited advances made in the understanding and the support of 'school refusal', with a dearth of findings that guide professional practice. As such, Elliott and Place (2019) suggest professional roles in supporting SNA require greater clarity for effective collaboration, with future research focusing on 'treatment' rather than contributing factors alone. The current research addresses these concerns, providing insights from the perspectives of parents into the roles professionals play in SNA, best practice experiences and ways of collaboratively working with parents.

This research can arguably be seen to contribute to Nuttall and Woods' (2013) appeal for increased 'practice-based evidence', with this being the first study based in the UK which actively involves parents in the design of recommendations of support. Thus, findings from this research can provide relevant insight and contribute to the increased awareness of systems strengths, challenges, and the future directions of support for professionals when working with parents and their children who experience SNA. The use of AI, involving parents may provide a beneficial tool for LAs to ensure collaboration and co-production when designing support services. This could have an empowering impact on the parents and subsequently positively impacting upon their child. This can be seen to extend to professionals, increasing their understanding of the parents' experiences, subsequently impacting upon the design of support and the accessibility of services.

## 5.7 Limitations

The main limitation of this research concerns the generalisability of the findings to the wider population of children and their families who experience SNA. Generalisability refers to whether the findings of a particular study can be applied to wider or different populations

(Braun & Clarke, 2013). This research does not aim to identify measurable truths which can be generalised and instead, in line with its ontological and epistemological position, it aimed to explore parents' experiences of support and co-construct recommendations of changes that could be implemented with parent participants. As such, it is felt that the concept of transferability is more suited to the research in which Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest that the term refers to which aspects of qualitative results can be transferred to other groups and contexts. Braun and Clarke, (2013) suggest that the onus of transferability is placed on the reader yet argue that it is crucial for the researcher to describe the specific contexts, participants, and context of the research to enable the reader to evaluate whether the findings can be applied to other contexts or participants. Therefore, it is hoped that sufficient detail has been provided for the reader to identify whether the findings of this research are transferable or relevant to their own contexts.

Despite reaching out to all secondary schools in the researchers' LA, the researcher had difficulties locating schools willing to support the researcher in gaining participants. Therefore, a limitation can be seen in the method utilised to recruit the participants as purposive sampling through a social media support group might mean those who were highly motivated might have volunteered to participate in the research. These participants may have provided a 'skewed perspective' as they were actively involved in their child's SNA. Additionally, although the researcher sought to recruit parents with any experience of SNA, the sampling method inevitably excluded families who do not use social media, who were not aware of the support group, or who experience digital poverty. The researcher had hoped to gain more diverse voices; however, this had not been achieved to the level they had originally hoped for. Interestingly, although it was not part of the research criteria, the parents who participated shared that they are either in skilled or semi-skilled professions. Many parents who took part were of a White British ethnicity and identified as female, with the exception of one father and one mother who identified as having English as an Additional Language. Thus, the research findings may not fully capture the diverse experiences and challenges faced by parents of different socioeconomic backgrounds, ethnicities and of those who are fathers which impacts upon the transferability of the research.

Additionally, although the researcher had included the criteria of a child having difficulties with attendance for the past two academic terms, during the interview process, it was evident that parent participants appeared to be at different points in their child's SNA

journey and thus their experiences of SNA and subsequent support varied. For example, one parent appeared to be at the initial stage of identifying their child's difficulties and thus accessed the school and SENDIAS, and another parent expressed how their child's attendance level was sporadic, with the occasional absence and thus had not reached a point where they were no longer able to attend and engage in education. However, several other parents' situations appeared to reflect 'entrenched' SNA in which their child had not been accessing education for at least a year and thus, their accounts reflected a wider range of support avenues that they had attempted to access. It is important to note that the differences in their child's attendance levels, combined with the family make up, in terms of being a single-parent household and having other children, appeared to reflect variety of support experiences and challenges and thus, reflecting the view that children and their families who experience SNA are not a homogeneous group. For some parents, there appeared to be an increased feeling of pressure, and an increased anxiety in cases where the co-parent was not present and when the parent had concerns regarding a younger sibling of the child who experiences SNA. These concerns parents reflected upon involved the challenges of the different parenting styles used for each child, the display of similar SNA behaviours which appeared to elicit a fear response and the worries about increasing pressure on the sibling for support.

The researcher originally planned for the research to be emancipatory in nature which increases the participation of participants as co-researchers. However, during the debrief of the interview phase, when the researcher shared the opportunity of participants becoming co-researchers within the data analysis process, all parent participants expressed that they did not feel that they had the time or the capacity to take on this role. This may be a result of the parent's emotionally challenging experiences with their child's SNA, which influenced their perceived capacity (both emotional and mental). As the findings of this research indicate, many parents' experiences felt all-encompassing as the situation impacted upon the different aspects of their lives, including family and work. Additionally, the findings highlight how their child's SNA involved the parents taking on an additional role, feeling pressurised and the situation negatively impacting upon their mental health.

Another limitation can be seen in the focus group stage of this research due to the number of participants involved. Initially, most of the participants expressed an interest in the focus group, however, only four participants engaged in the online focus group discussion.

During the session, one parent had to leave during the discussion due to a family emergency. Thus, the small number of participants involved during this phase may have implications on the depth and diversity of insights and suggestions gathered within the discussion and thus it may not be fully representative of parent perspectives on support for children experiencing SNA due to experiences of SNA and support being heterogeneous in nature. Despite this implication, the use of AI and this research still offer valuable insights into parents' perspectives of improvements for the support available.

## 5.8 Dissemination

The dissemination of research findings which expand the professional knowledge base is seen to be crucial to EP Practice (BPS, 2019). In addition, the researcher recognises their need to uphold the ethical duty of social responsibility (BPS, 2021a). As such, the researcher is committed to the dissemination of the findings through multiple means. Firstly, the researcher intends to share the findings with the participants through the form of an executive summary, following the completion of the thesis examination. Within the focus group, participants shared their wish for an information sheet regarding the research that could be shared with their schools and friends and families to highlight the impact of SNA on their lives which will also be created following the thesis examination.

At a local and national context, the researcher intends to disseminate their findings by present their research to her EPS during the CPD segment of the team meeting. Through utilising a seminar format, it is hoped to offer a meaningful opportunity for EPs to reflect on their role with regards to SNA and upon the pathway that is currently under development in her LA. During the focus group, participants also expressed a desire for the research to be shared with attendance teams within LAs and other child and attendance related systems as they felt that parents have had limited opportunities for their voices to be heard. It is felt that the insights gained from the parent participants' experiences can be utilised to inform and facilitate meaningful change in the area of SNA and thus the researcher will aim to disseminate her findings in different LAs.

Finally, considering the relevance of the research findings for EP Practice at the wider level, if this research is deemed of a high enough quality, the researcher is committed to

disseminating the findings in relevant professional forums via conferences and through academic and professional publications.

## 5.9 Reflexivity

Reflexivity refers to the role of the researcher in the research process and involves turning the lens of the researcher onto themselves to "recognise and take responsibility for one's own situatedness with the research and the effect that it may have on the...people being studied, questions being asked, data being collected and its interpretation" (Berger, 2015, p.220). In qualitative research, it is essential for the researcher to 'own their perspectives' (Elliott et al., 1999) and engage in reflexivity to acknowledge how their own beliefs, values, and past experiences will inform and shape their research.

It is vital to acknowledge potential issues of power and how the researcher may have influenced the study in qualitative research. The researcher was aware of her power, particularly as a TEP and as a researcher and attempted to address this potential imbalance by focusing on empowering participants and avoided assuming the role of the expert.

The researcher engaged in reflexive practice throughout the research journey, engaging in regular tutorials with their Director of Studies, peer supervision, in discussions with a placement supervisor, and maintaining a research journal. In the following sections, the researcher will provide thoughts on her engagement with reflexivity considering the impact the research journey has had on herself. As such, the following section will use the first person.

### 5.9.1 Impact of the Research Journey on the Researcher

The process of undertaking this research has been invaluable yet at times, a steep learning curve. I have felt privileged to have had the opportunity to undertake this piece of research and to have been trusted with the open and at times, emotional experiences of 11 parents on their life experiences of having a child with SNA and their experiences of support.

The journey of this thesis has not been straightforward and has involved a variety of emotions. As such, following the introduction of Fisher's (2012) Process of Transition during my doctoral training, I feel that it is a beneficial tool to reflect upon this journey. Interestingly, although the process of transition (Fisher, 2012) is presented in a linear fashion, throughout

this journey I have found myself circling back to stages of anxiety, fear, threat, hostility and finally a sense of accomplishment during each phase and chapter of this thesis. At the point of data analysis, I felt overwhelmed by the amount and richness of the data, which often led to feelings of anxiety and questioning whether I was being too literal in my interpretations and whether I was answering the RQs. I found supervision with my Director of Studies to be invaluable to reflect upon my decisions and develop my ideas.

Overall, the professional support from my Director of Studies and emotional support from my colleagues and family members have enabled me to transition to gradual acceptance and moving forward (Fisher, 2012).

This thesis has also been a journey of academic and professional growth. The process of undertaking this has not only facilitated my developing identity as a researcher, but it has also impacted upon my identity as a TEP and future EP. It has encouraged critical and independent thinking which are crucial to my future practice of an EP, allowing me to further develop my understanding of my own thinking processes, how they are shaped and influenced whilst being able to justify my own decisions. The parents' perspectives have considerably enhanced my understanding of the complex and interacting systems that impact and influence on a child. Engaging with parent participants in this participatory orientated research has enabled a holistic understanding of what parents may be experiencing as they attempt to navigate their child's difficulties and gain support. This has facilitated an understanding of the formal systems, that as EPs we are often part of, may be perceived and experienced as hostile by parents. I hope to continue to reflect upon when designing support packages and pathways in my practice as a LA EP.

Whilst I am aware of the importance of evidence based and robust support plans, the process of this research and the findings further give weight to and reinforce the importance of core 'soft skills' of attuned interactions which ensure parents and children with whom I encounter, feel heard and valued, and are actively involved in decision-making processes. This further strengthened values of collaboration, mutual respect, relationships, developing shared understandings and the importance of challenging unhelpful narratives to bring about positive change.

## 5.10 Conclusion

The research aimed to increase understanding of SNA through exploring how parents and their families can be better supported by professionals. By focusing on the parent's voice, this research has increased the understanding of parents' experiences of SNA with the support that is on offer. From the present research, it appears that there are multiple systemic barriers with experiences of powerlessness often present within parents' accounts. This research has created a platform to represent these parents' views, in an attempt to empower parents to co-construct recommendations of changes to support which will inform professional practice. The research findings highlight the challenging and emotive experience of having a child with SNA and suggests the importance of professionals and school staff adopting a holistic and systemic perspective when supporting children and their families, whilst being mindful of potential power imbalances in interactions. Parents' positive experience of support appear to represent compassionate and non-judgemental approaches, which actively involve parents in the decision-making process. The recommendations for future practice by parents appear to represent a holistic approach in which CYP and their families are placed at the centre and their voices are taken into account. This research therefore advocates that the key to supporting children who experience SNA and their families, is to gain and give weight to their voices and collaboratively involve them in decision-making processes. This is in line with a central tenant of the SEND CoP (2015) which places value on collaborative and trusting relationships. By adopting a holistic and ecological perspective in which relationships are prioritised, we can increase our understanding of SNA, guiding the way to better support children and families through a challenging situation and bring about positive change.

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# Appendices

## Appendix A
*Table of Papers Identified from the Initial Scoping Review*

| Number | Paper title | Author(s) and year of publication |
|---|---|---|
| **1** | The role of parental self-efficacy in adolescent school-refusal. | Carless, B., Melvin, G. A., Tonge, B. J., & Newman, L. K. (2015). |
| **2** | Case study illustrating family systems interventions in a school setting to address anxiety and school avoidance. | Carlson, M., Browning, S., Goodman, L., & Carlson, K. (2021). |
| **3** | School refusal and the parent-child relationship: A psychodynamic perspective. | Christogiorgos, S., & Giannakopoulos, G. (2014). |
| **4** | Parental perspectives of the role of school factors in school refusal. | Havik, T., Bru, E., & Ertesvåg, S. K. (2014). |
| **5** | Developmentally sensitive cognitive behavioral therapy for adolescent school refusal: Rationale and case illustration. | Heyne, D., Sauter, F. M., Ollendick, T. H., Van Widenfelt, B. M., & Westenberg, P. M. (2014). |
| **6** | Addressing School Refusal Behavior: Suggestions for Frontline Professionals. | Kearney, C. A., & Bates, M. (2005). |
| **7** | Family environment of youngsters with school refusal behavior: A synopsis with implications for assessment and treatment. | Kearney, C. A., & Silverman, W. K. (1995). |
| **8** | School refusal: Categorical diagnoses, functional analysis and treatment planning. | King, N. J., Heyne, D., Tonge, B., Gullone, E., & Ollendick, T. H. (2001). |
| **9** | Characteristics of adolescents with school refusal. | McShane, G., Walter, G., & Rey,. J.M. (2001) |
| **10** | Effective intervention for school refusal behaviour. | Nuttall, C., & Woods, K. (2013). |
| **11** | The inpatient treatment process for severe school refusal. | Oner, O., Yurtbasi, P., Er, A., & Basoglu, N. (2014). |
| **12** | School non-attendance: Definitions, meanings, responses, interventions. | Pellegrini, D. W. (2007). |
| **13** | Psychosocial interventions for school refusal behavior in children and adolescents. | Pina, A. A., Zerr, A. A., Gonzales, N. A., & Ortiz, C. D. (2009). |
| **14** | The treatment of school avoidance in children and adolescents with psychiatric | Reissner, V., Jost, D., Krahn, U., Knollmann, M., Weschenfelder, A.-K., Neumann, A., Wasem, J., & Hebebrand, J. (2015). |

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|---|---|---|
| | illness: A randomized controlled trial. | |
| **15** | Family therapy for child and adolescent school refusal. | Richardson, K. (2016). |
| **16** | A grounded theory study of family coach intervention with persistent school non-attenders. | Tobias, A. (2019). |
| **17** | School avoidance from the point of view of child and adolescent psychiatry: Symptomatology, development, course, and treatment. | Knollmann, M., Knoll, S., Reissner, V., Metzelaars, J., & Hebebrand, J. (2010). |
| **18** | School refusal, parental control and wider systems: Lessons from the management of two cases. | Coulter, S. (1995). |

## Appendix B
*A summary of the literature review process*

| | |
|---|---|
| ***Search date*** | *06.10.2022;* |
| ***Databases searched*** | Academic Search Ultimate, Child development and Adolescent Studies, Education Research Complete, The Education Resource Information Center (ERIC), PsycArtices, PsycInfo |
| ***Search terms*** | Using Boolean operators and a combination of search terms:<br>▪ School refusal/school non-attendance/persistent abseentism/extended non-attendance/school phobia/school anxiety/school avoidance/ school absenteeism<br>▪ Parent/family/caregiver/mother/father<br>▪ Engagement/support/help/intervention/experience/reintegration/ attitudes/perspectives/view/perception |
| ***Additional parameters*** | Peer reviewed<br>Full text articles<br>Published after 2000<br>English text |
| ***Number of articles*** | 477 |
| ***Inclusion criteria*** | Qualitative or mixed methods research<br>Parents of children and young people that are school age.<br>Study focus is on school non-attendance.<br>Incorporates the views of parents (can also be alongside others) |
| ***Exclusion criteria*** | Duplicates<br>Quantitative Research or Secondary Research<br>Focus on absence related to medical reasons or truancy.<br>Voice of parent not stated or included. |
| ***Articles selected*** | 9 |

# Appendix C

*Critical Appraisal of the Literature Review.*

| *Study* | Country | Clear statement of the research aim? | Appropriate qualitative methodology | Research design appropriate to meeting the aims of research | Appropriate recruitment strategy | Data collected in a way that addressed research issue | Relationship between researcher and participants considered? | Ethical issues been taken into consideration | Data analysis sufficiently rigorous | Clear statement of findings | How valuable is the research? |
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| *Preece, D., & Howley, M. (2018).* | UK | Yes. Research aim is… the impact of alternative provision on wellbeing, the impact, indicators and practice | Yes. Evaluative case study method, mixed methods snapshot approach, thematic analysis | Partially. Researcher does not discuss why one methodology is more appropriate over others – however methodology is in line with research question | Yes. R explained how participants were selected and discussed why some chose not to take part, relevant to RQs | Partially. R made clear how the data was collected (focus group, semi-structured interviews), however, no explanation of data saturation and no interview guide provided | No. Researcher has not critically examined their role or stated their interests. No implications of changes included and no reflection on events during the study | Yes. R discussed informed consent and right to withdraw, and ethical approval was sought | Partially. R has not provided an in-depth description of analysis. R comments use of software to derive themes. There is sufficient data is presented, however no contradictory information is discussed | Yes. Researcher discusses triangulation of findings in relation to original research questions | Partially. R discusses supportive factors to re-engagement, yet does not consider it in relation to policy, The use of ecological model and autism good practice is valuable. It is based on one centre with one cohort of students. |

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| *Sibeoni, J., Orri, M., Podlipski, M.-A., Labey, M., Campredon, S., Gerardin, P., & Revah-Levy, A. (2018).* | Canada | Yes - seeks to explore parent and adolescent experiences of psychiatric care - clear about why it is important | Yes- seeks to explore the lived experience of the psychiatric care provided to parents and adolescents so qualitative methodology is appropriate | Yes - semi structured interviews, seeing participants as experts over their own lives, researcher makes clear to seek experience not effectiveness of treatment, in line with the research aim. | Yes - researcher explains how the participants were selected (purposive) through gatekeepers (clinicians), outlines inclusion criteria, no discussion about why some chose not to take part | Yes - researcher justified why qualitative data was collected, discussed interview was 'interactive and conversational', the length of time it took to conduct, clear how many interviews were undertaken, no indication of whether a topic guide was used nor explained whether anything was modified during the study. Data is clear (recorded, transcribed verbatim) and | No - researcher has not highlighted or critically examined their roles and the impact this may have had on data collection, formulation of research questions or how they responded in any events during the study. Interviews were conducted by 'two experienced researchers' - adolescent psychiatrist and clinical psychologist | Yes - ethical approval was sought from a university, sought written consent from adolescents and parents. 'Deemed clinically well enough to participate'. No discussion of debriefing etc. Provided participants with information sheets | Yes - description of the analysis process, three researchers' software used, research group to debate results until consensus was reached, sufficient data is provided with table of quotes, has not examined their role nor have they discussed contradictory information. | Partially - findings are explicit with quotes provided, the researcher has not discussed credibility, but 3 researchers analysed the data, findings related back to the research aim (not explicit), some discussion about the findings from parent and adolescent and what this may mean | Partially - discusses other avenues of future research in relation to their findings- where there are gaps (psychiatrists and mental health professionals' views), discussed the limitations of the research (how it was in France and how psychiatry is based on medical system), in a particular specialised care setting), considers findings in relation to practice and policy. |

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| Dannow, M. C., Esbjørn, B. H., & Risom, S. W. (2020). | Denmark | Yes - explores experience from the families' perspectives - individual, relational, and school related factors to extended school absenteeism | Yes - seeks to explore families experiences which is in line with research design (qualitative, through interviews) but does not state positioning of research. | Partially - researcher explains why qualitative methodology is appropriate in general (seeking experience), semi-structured interviews | Yes - explained how participants were selected, how many were identified (tried convenience sampling, provided a potential reason why some chose not to take part. Three families. Provided inclusion criteria (15% or more absence) | Partially - clear about how setting justified (based on family preference) and how data was collected (in homes, interviews), makes it clear how interviews were conducted (no guide provided but info on topics is), no modification on method, no discussion about data saturation but the form of data is clear. | No - researcher has not critically examined their role or stated their interested (no reflexivity). No implications of changes included no reflection on events during the study. | Partially - ethical approval was sought from a university board/panel, consent from parents and children gave 'assent'? No further ethical considerations are discussed (debrief) | Yes - In-depth description of analysis process (using software to derive themes), member checked data and themes with families, does not explain how data presented was selected, no contradictory information provided, no reflexivity. | Partially - Findings are explicit, used respondent validation but no families made a comment, findings are discussed in relation to the aims of their experience, no discussion of evidence for and against researcher arguments | Valuable - discusses the contribution to existing knowledge and how this might relate to practice, identifies new areas of research, discusses limitation to findings (only 3 families, ASD profile etc.) and the impact on transferring findings. |

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| *Rosenthal, L., Moro, M. R., & Benoit, L. (2020).* | France | Yes - experiences of migrant parents of school refusal - common aspects of experiences, meanings attributed and pathway to care - improve understanding and provide equal and early access to care. | Yes - explore subjective experiences of parents in all their diversity. Confusion - paper mentions IPA and Thematic analysis? | No - limited clarity on methodology (IPA and thematic), researcher does not discuss why one methodology is more appropriate over others | Yes - explained how participants were recruited (purposive), parents secondarily recruited - inclusion criteria (diagnosed with school refusal, one parent from a different culture), not explained explicitly why most appropriate - but explained in rationale for study. No discussion about why some people chose not | Yes - clear about how data was collected (semi structured interviews), explained different settings where interviews took place but not why, four different people interviews (psychiatrist and three residents). The form of data is clear - audio recorded, verbatim, interview guide provided. | No - researcher has not critically examined their role, no reflexivity mentioned even though they use IPA? | Partially - ethical approval from board, audio, and informed consent, deidentified data | No - no clear description of analysis process nor how themes were derived, confusion between IPA or thematic methodology, comments data selected was, sufficient data is presented but does not examine own role during selection of data or analysis. | Partially - findings are presented, with researcher's argument creating a coherent narrative yet no discussion of validity or credibility of their findings. The findings are related to research aim, highlighting parental experiences and linking it to barriers to care/support. | Moderate - discusses the contribution to knowledge to existing literature, discusses how there are implications for school practice regarding cultural barriers yet does not identify further areas for research - adds a new lens to school non-attendance (through culture) |

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| *Havik, T., Bru, E., & Ertesvåg, S. K. (2014).* | Norway | Partially - 'explore how parents with children suffering or having suffered school refusal problems have experienced the child's situation in school' as research-based knowledge is sparse | Yes - gain insight and understanding into school refusal by exploring parents' experiences of the situation | Yes - methodology is in line with research aim yet not justified why a particular method was chosen. | Yes - uses convenience sampling, 'parents of children who are displaying or have displayed school refusal' (not defined/ no criteria discussed), explains why parents were selected as they can provide information based on their child experiences and home-school collaboration, no discussion of recruitment issues. | Yes - semi-structured interviews, discusses how interview guide was developed based on research findings previously and how there was flexibility in the interviews. Does not discuss any recruitment issues, | No - researcher has not critically examined their role or stated their interested (no reflexivity). No implications of changes included no reflection on events during the study. | Partially - ethical approval from 'Social Science Data Services', comment on anonymity and informed about the right to withdraw and voluntary participation. No further discussion of ethics, no discussion about study details being explained | Yes - Analysis utilising software, use of member checking for parents - ensuring their quotations represented the information they had provided during interviews (mailed the results to the participants). Contradictory information not presented, sufficient data is presented to support the findings, not examined their role during analysis (could this be because | Yes - the findings are explicit, although not explicitly discussed, the researcher member checked with participants by sending the results to them. Findings are discussed in relation to the overall aim | Valuable - discusses the contribution of findings to the literature base (school related factors in SR), identify relatively small group, which is heterogeneous, discuss findings in relation to teacher practice. |

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| *Corcoran, S., Bond, C., & Knox, L. (2022).* | UK | Yes - explore two individual cases of successful intervention for EBSNA, first hand experiences of school staff, parents and EPs to provide an ecologically-situated account of the facilitators to successful school returns | Yes - case study methodology/ qual approach to explore successful returns of two individuals | Yes - methodology is in line with the research aim - perceived facilitators to school return - multiple perspectives so slight justification | Yes - explained how participants were selected and why, although no discussion of recruitment difficulties. Discusses appropriateness of parents during the COVID pandemic | Yes, the setting for data was justified (remote due to pandemic), clear how data was collected - not clear on form of data or saturation of data), no interview guide provided. | Partially - reflexivity is mentioned as a caveat but not in relation to researchers positioning | Yes - discussed informed consent and right to withdraw, ethical approval sought, no discussion about what the study entailed | Yes - data analysis clearly outlined, clear how the researcher derived themes - commentary on themes developing, only one contradictory point made, sufficient data is provided although researcher hasn't examined their role | Yes - findings are explicit, not discussion for researchers' arguments, credibility of findings is increased (member checking) and the findings are discussed in relation to the research aim | Valuable - discusses contribution made to existing knowledge and practice, identifies further research areas and how the research may be used. |

| Gregory, I. R., & Purcell, A. (2014). | UK | Yes - clearly laid out aims of research with RQs following (identify key concerns and experiences - use findings to inform service delivery) | 97 | Partially - researcher explains why IPA (diversity and variability of human experience) but not how they decided which method to use. | Yes - explains how participants were selected (EWO and Home Tuition), limited voice within researcher, researcher discusses recruitment (low response rate), provides potential reasons why and the implications this may have on the study. | Partially - clear about how data was collected (semi-structured interviews), comments interview guide was derived from literature base, form of data is unclear but is 'illustrated with verbatim quotes, no comment on saturation) | No - researcher has not examined their own role/biases in RQs, sample recruitment etc. Nor comments on events during the study. The need for criticality/ examining researcher bias is implied in methods section but not position is not made clear. | Yes - ethical approval obtained, consent sought and checked before interview, interviewed parents and CYP separately, confidentiality and refusal to answer questions. | Partially - researcher does not provide in-depth analysis process only light touch description 'establishing connections of predominant themes within and across cases', provides sufficient verbatim quotes within body of text and table, presents contradictory information regarding two parents views, researcher isn't made visible. | Partially - the findings are presented clearly, minimal discussion about evidence for and against researchers' arguments, no discussion of credibility although could be implied during analysis that there were more than one researcher analysing the data. Identified key concerns (relating back to RQs/ aims) | Valuable - researcher discusses the implications of the findings for EP practice and services, identify further areas to enrich the picture (child's voice and other professionals), discuss limitations of small sample and comment further research is needed, provide a list of recommendations for practice. |

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| *Nuttall, C., & Woods, K. (2013).* | UK | Yes, clear statement of research aim, with rationale - explore individual cases of interventions for SRB, utilising data from perceptions of parents, CYP, practitioners and school staff to provide… view about factors which promoted successful involvement. | Yes - qualitative methodology is appropriate. | Yes - 'explanatory' case study design, to explore critical success factors, what were effective and why, what may have increased success retrospectively (causal links) | Yes - clear inclusion criteria, participants were 'selected' by researcher based on being 'successful cases in the LA' - researcher explained priority for their own LA | Yes - semi-structured interviews with each perspective (CYP, parent, school, professionals), data is clear- audio recorded, transcribed verbatim, interview guide provided) no methods modified, no discussion of saturation | No - researcher has not critically examined their role, no reflexivity mentioned apart from their prior knowledge that isn't made clear - implied that they are an EP in a LA, not discussed whether they were previously known to two cases. | Yes - ethical approval, adhering to ethical guidelines, considerations not to cause distress, successful factors, ascertained sensitive areas/questions with school and families. | Yes - description of analysis process, inductive approach, recognition that their active role may be influenced by prior knowledge and professional expertise but not examined the impact upon selection of data, not clear how data was selected, independently coded by another EP/ themes reviewed by another person, sufficient data is presented. | Yes - clear findings mapped onto Bronfenbrenner Eco systems, findings discussed in relation to RQs/aims, no discussion of credibility apart from checking themes with another professional, | Valuable - discusses the findings in relation to eco systems, at multiple levels, provides commentary on implications for practice and research - further research to use exploratory case study. Importance of early intervention. |

| Tetsuya., Y (2015) | Japan | Partially - explore how the APF (support organisation) form a support network, what resources do they create and accumulate? How do members use the support network? | Yes - qual is appropriate to explore support. | Partially - ethnographic field study | Partially - unclear about how participants were recruited apart from being part of APFs and researcher attending? Sociological study | Partially - participant observation data and interviews on core members of APFs? | No - researcher has not critically examined their role, | No comment on ethical issues provided - no statement of ethical approval, consent | No - no clear description of analysis process, or even method of analysis. | Partially - findings are provided with some quotes. Researcher does not discuss credibility, findings are not explicitly linked back to RQ but implicitly linked | Low - Discussion of findings in relation to support mechanisms (social capital/story telling). Discusses further research in terms of their own further research plan (questionnaire/quantitative/clarifying the homogeneity) |

*Example of checking initial themes generated through the Thematic Synthesis process for one of the papers within the Literature Review.*

| Dannow et al. (2020) | Themes |
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| School-Related Factors<br><br>Within this domain, three themes were derived from descriptions concerning factors in school that influence the children's school absenteeism. Each theme further consists of additional underlying subthemes.<br><br>School at the organisational level<br><br>This main theme includes three subthemes regarding the structural and organisational aspects of the school and the learning environment.<br><br>Structural organisation of school. This subtheme concerns the structural organisation of the school. Each family described how large gatherings of pupils are a challenge for the child (i.e., big schools, size of classes, and gatherings with large numbers of students) and thus associated with school absenteeism. Further, long school days are for one family described as associated with school absenteeism.<br><br>Well I simply think, I wish that there were smaller schools (…) so they [children with attendance problems] wouldn't have to relate to so many [people]. (Anton's mom)<br><br>Unpredictability in learning environment. This subtheme revolves around descriptions of a need for predictability and security during school days. Families describe how possible changes in the usual school day setting or structure (e.g., going on field trips, mixed class sport-days, etc.) cause worry of the unexpected and make it difficult for the children to attend. Further, disorganised class- rooms and too much noise are described as resulting in unpredictability:<br><br>Two families also described that it has been difficult to get teachers to understand the child's special needs:<br><br>But well, he's [Bjørn] been very sensitive towards how the teachers have been towards him. (…) They aren't attentive to how sensitive he is at all. (Bjørn's dad)<br><br>And of course it has been a fight to get the teachers to understand that we have a boy who has difficulties with these things [unpredictability during activity weeks], when the average pupil just thinks: this is fantastic, new kids to relate to, new challenges. (Anton's mom)<br><br>Emotional support from teachers. This subtheme entails parents' descriptions of how a positive student-teacher relation affects their child's school absenteeism. Emotional support from the teacher is described as important. Statements involve descriptions of teachers who are attentive towards the child's problem, appreciate the child's attendance, and evoke a trusting relationship with the student.<br><br>Teachers' Adjustment to Special Needs. Another subtheme is the teachers' adjustment to the child's special needs. This entails special arrangements for the individual child that facilitate the child's attendance. Some of these include | Relationships, Communication and Collaboration<br><br><br>The Learning Environment<br><br><br>Emotional Impact on Parents<br><br><br>Parents Attempts to Understand |

that the child may leave the school if needed, or only attend a few hours weekly.

School at the student-peer level

This theme consists of four subthemes concerning the child's challenges with social interaction and relationships with peers. :

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Parental responsibility

This main theme depicts parents' descriptions of their role including their numerous attempts to initiate interventions aimed at ameliorating the child's attendance problems. Parents experienced that they had to take the primary initiative in the establishment of the cooperation with the school, and in driving the ongoing effort.

Parental effort and establishment of cooperation with school. All parents described that a large part of their effort was concerned with getting the school to adjust to their child's needs. They experienced that they have to initiate the cooperation with the school in this regard. They also described experi- ences of feeling responsible for establishing an effective intervention and managing the problem (i.e., being responsible for contacting teachers to inform them how they should manage their child):

I think that it's been us who have had to reach out to them [the school]. And it's been us who've had to suggest some things that we could do. (...) And I of course approached the school psychologist and said: "we need to have a chat about this." (Anton's mom)

So he [Bjørn] also had a gym teacher that pushed them (...) and then I offered [Bjørn] to go and talk to them and to write notes about him getting excused from physical education. Because then I thought that the strategy would be to, well, then he could go to the other classes. (Bjørn's dad)

Well, we informed the class teacher that he [Carl] was having a really, really difficult time. (Carl's mom)

Families described how they have sought help elsewhere than from the schools as a result of the parental experience that the school was not intervening sufficiently. One family described that they did not expect the school to be responsible for the intervention due to lack of resources. Two families have obtained psychotherapy outside the school system, whereas the third family expressed regret that they did not seek psychotherapy when the problem first arose:

(...) I just don't think there's the time or resources to please or nurse around the individual child in the schools in that account, however you would like to. I simply just don't think that there are enough resources. (Carl's mom)

(...) Well, we have to seek psychological help [private] and see how they can help. Because I don't think it's coming from the school. (Anton's mom)

Two families further described how they have had the strength to manage the problem because they could adapt their work-life to the child's situation. However, one parent called attention to the fact that families with poor

| resources may be at a disadvantage in relation to helping children with school absenteeism as they themselves must solve the problem | |
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# Appendix E
## *Interview Prompt Sheet*

Thank you for taking the time to meet with me today. We're going to have a chat about your experiences of support for your child's school attendance. We'll talk about your experiences of your child's attendance and what support you have received.

Go through participant information sheet together – answer any questions.

Please don't feel that you must answer all the questions I ask. It might be that you feel you can't think of anything else. If you feel uncomfortable with a question, please let me know and we can move onto another question. If you feel like you need a break and want to pause or stop the interview all together, just let me know and we will stop. Are you happy to go ahead? If so, shall we sign the consent form?

**Begin recording…**

Can you start off by telling me a bit about yourself and your family.

Can you tell me about the time when x wasn't going to school regularly? When did it start?
*Prompts:*
- What was happening when they first started not attending?
- What was your experience?
- How were you feeling during that time?
- Was there anyone who supported you during this time?

When seeking support for your family and yourself, what external support was available?
*Prompts:*
- Can you tell me about your experience of support with x?
- How do you feel about the support you have received?
- How were these interactions? Communication, availability of professionals?

What support have you appreciated the most?
*Prompts:*
- What made this supportive?
- Can you give me an example?

What do you think have been the main challenges you have faced when trying to support your child's attendance?
*Prompts:*
- What do you think were the characteristics that made this support unsuccessful?
- What barriers have you experienced?

What do you think would help them attend school successfully?
*Prompts:*
- Anything else?

Is there anything else you think is important to talk about before we finish?

**Debrief after the interview recording:**
- How did you find that?
- Do you have any questions for me?
- Is there anything that we've spoken about which you do not want me to include?
- Is there anything you are feeling worried about?

Over the next couple of weeks I will be listening back to the audio recording of our interview and writing about it. If. You feel like you do not want me to write about our interview, you can tell me now or over the next three weeks, please do not hesitate to contact me. If you do not want it included, I can delete it. Once I have typed up our interview, I will send you the transcript for you to read so you can tell me if there is anything you want to remove or if you think that it is accurate. I'll be interviewing other parents too and once I have completed the interviews and analysed the data, I will send you through some findings that I have found.

Is there anything you think I should change or include for my next interview? This could be the way I have asked something.

There is an opportunity, if you are interested, to become a co-researcher. This involves reading through the transcripts and we can analyse the data together. I will provide training on how to do this. If this is something you would be interested in, please let me know.

The next part of my research is a focus group. I am gathering a group of parents to further discuss the support they have received. We will be thinking about what could be even better about the support that is on offer and as a group, we will develop some best practice recommendations for the Local Authority. As a group, we will also decide how we want to share this information to hopefully improve what is on offer currently. If you would like to be a part of that, please let me know. We can sign the consent forms now or you can have a think about this and I can call in two weeks to see if you are interested.

The flowchart above represents the process of recruiting participants following the advertisement on the social media 'Facebook' and the 'Not Fine in School' Facebook Page. This flow chart represents the first 20 parent participants which were contacted.

The researcher sent a follow up email to parent participants who had not responded, at both the information sheet and consent form stages, providing them with a deadline of 1 week to respond. If the participant had not responded after the week deadline, the researcher begun the process of looking at the excel spreadsheet in date order, to then email the next parent participant with the information sheet.

This process was followed until the researcher had received consent and arranged 11 interviews with participants, which was due to time restrictions as this process had taken a considerable amount of time.

**PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET**

Exploring parental experiences of support from professionals for their child with school non-attendance and developing best practice.
**Contact person: Amy Rodriguez**
**Email: u2064595@uel.ac.uk**

You are being invited to participate in a research study. Before you decide whether to take part or not, please carefully read through the following information which outlines what your participation would involve. Feel free to talk with others about the study (e.g., friends, family, etc.) before making your decision. If anything is unclear or you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me on the above email.

**Who am I?**
My name is Amy Rodriguez, I am a postgraduate student in the School of Psychology at the University of East London (UEL), and I am studying for a Professional Doctorate in Educational and Child Psychology. As part of my studies, I am conducting the research that you are being invited to participate in.

**What is the purpose of the research?**
I am conducting research into parents' experiences of support for their child with difficulties with attending school. Many children find it difficult to attend school, which can lead to extended periods of absence from school or patterns of sporadic attendance. Research suggests that regular school attendance supports children's academic and social success. This research will focus on the positive and helpful support you have previously received and what could be even better in the future to provide recommendations and guidance of best practice for professionals when supporting children and young people and their families.

**Why have I been invited to take part?**
To address the study aims, I am inviting parents of children who have difficulties in attending school to take part in my research. If your child meets all the bullet points below, you are eligible to take part in the study:

- In Years 8 – 11

- On role in a mainstream secondary school

- Their attendance has been less than 90% over the last two terms

- Considered by adults to experience difficulties with attending school

It is entirely up to you whether you take part or not, participation is voluntary.

**What will I be asked to do if I agree to take part?**
If you agree to take part, you will be asked to take part in an interview. The interview could happen at your home, at my office in Aylesbury or over Microsoft Teams. The interview will be like having an informal chat about your past and present experiences of the support you have received for your child's attendance and what you thought was helpful and what you feel needs to improve which will be recorded by an audio recording device or using Microsoft Teams recording feature. The interview will take approximately an hour and you would not need to prepare anything for the interview.  Once our interview is finished, only I will listen to the audio recordings to transcribe the information. You will have the opportunity to read over your interview transcript and will be able to change anything you deem necessary.

After the interview, you will be asked if you would like to become a co-researcher to help analyse the data. If you do, before the focus group we will meet to discuss the different themes we have found and what is the best label to group the information together.

You will also be given the opportunity to participate in a focus group which we will hope to create a list of recommendations for the Local Authority about supporting children and young people with difficulties with attending school.

**Can I change my mind?**
Yes, you can change your mind at any time and withdraw without explanation, disadvantage or consequence. If you would like to withdraw from interview, you can do so by notifying the researcher via email. If you withdraw, your data will not be used as part of the research.

Separately, you can also request to withdraw your data from being used even after you have taken part in the study, provided that this request is made within 3 weeks of the data being collected (after which point the data analysis will begin, and withdrawal will not be possible).

**Are there any disadvantages to taking part?**
- Understandably, talking about your child's school non-attendance can potentially be a difficult or emotive topic. You should only share what you feel comfortable with, and after the interview is finished and once transcription is complete, you can explain what you do not want to be kept.
- If this topic is difficult for you, further support agencies will be signposted that you can contact to receive further support.

**How will the information I provide be kept secure and confidential?**

Any personal information I collect will be kept confidentially and anonymously throughout this project. You will not be identified by the data collected or in any of the write-up of the research. Your name and the names of other people you may mention during the interview will be changed to another name. Your

information will be stored on a password protected computer and will be stored securely on the university OneDrive for business in a separate folder and file to the anonymised data. Your signed consent forms will be scanned and saved onto the OneDrive and once scanned, they will be destroyed through confidential waste. Once the transcription process and the write-up is complete, the audio recordings of our interview and your contact details will be deleted on 1st July 2023. As I have a duty of care as a researcher, if you say something which makes me worried about your safety or the safety of your child, we will need to share this information with the relevant professionals.

When the transcripts are being shared for analysis with co-researchers and the research supervisor, these will be sent via the university's email via secure link. The co-researchers, university supervisors and anyone who reads the thesis will have access to the anonymised transcripts which will include extracts and/or the whole transcript. With your consent, your transcripts and contact details will be stored in the University's repository for future studies to use and contact you to take part in. This information will be kept safely for 5 years.

For the purposes of data protection, the University of East London is the Data Controller for the personal information processed as part of this research project. The University processes this information under the 'public task' condition contained in the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). Where the University processes particularly sensitive data (known as 'special category data' in the GDPR), it does so because the processing is necessary for archiving purposes in the public interest, or scientific and historical research purposes or statistical purposes. The University will ensure that the personal data it processes is held securely and processed in accordance with the GDPR and the Data Protection Act 2018. For more information about how the University processes personal data please see www.uel.ac.uk/about/about-uel/governance/information-assurance/data-protection

**What will happen to the results of the research?**
The research will be written up as a thesis and submitted for assessment. The thesis will be publically available on UEL's online Repository and the British Library EThOS. Findings will also be disseminated to a range of audiences (e.g., academics, clinicians, public, etc.) through journal articles, conference presentations, talks, magazine articles, blogs. In all material produced, your identity will remain anonymous, in that, it will not be possible to identify you personally. All information related to your identity will be replaced with different names or if you refer to any places such as the school or area you live in, these will be replaced with generic terms such as 'school' or 'local authority'.

You will be given the option to receive a summary of the research findings once the study has been completed for which relevant contact details will need to be provided.

Anonymised research data will be securely stored by the University of East London for a maximum of 3 years, following which all data will be deleted. I will write a short summary of the research to be shared with you and Educational Psychologists at Buckinghamshire Council, in the hope that support for other young people and their families can be improved. After I have finished my qualification, it is possible that a shorter version of my research paper might be published in an online journal. You will not be identifiable in any of my written work and the name of any schools or the county will not be included.

**Who has reviewed the research?**

My research has been approved by the School of Psychology Research Ethics Committee. This means that the Committee's evaluation of this ethics application has been guided by the standards of research ethics set by the British Psychological Society.

**Who can I contact if I have any questions/concerns?**
If you would like further information about my research or have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Amy Rodriguez
U2064595@uel.ac.uk

If you have any questions or concerns about how the research has been conducted, please contact my research supervisor Helena Bunn, School of Psychology, University of East London, Water Lane, London E15 4LZ,
Email: h.bunn@uel.ac.uk

**or**

Chair of School Research Ethics Committee: Dr Trishna Patel, School of Psychology, University of East London, Water Lane, London E15 4LZ.
(Email: t.patel@uel.ac.uk)

**Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet**

## Appendix I
*Participant Consent Form*



### CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH STUDY

Exploring parental experiences of support from professionals for their child with school non-attendance and developing best practice.

**Contact person: Amy Rodriguez**
**Email: u2064595@uel.ac.uk**

|  | Please initial |
|---|---|
| I confirm that I have read the participant information sheet dated 12/02/2022 (version 1) for the above study and that I have been given a copy to keep. |  |
| I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily. |  |
| I understand that my participation in the study is voluntary and that I may withdraw at any time, without explanation or disadvantage. |  |
| I understand that if I withdraw during the study, my data will not be used. |  |
| I understand that I have 3 weeks from the date of the interview to withdraw my data from the study. |  |
| I understand that the interview will be recorded using an audio recording device or Microsoft Teams |  |
| I understand that my personal information and data, including audio/video recordings from the research will be securely stored and remain confidential. Only the research team will have access to this information, to which I give my permission. |  |
| It has been explained to me what will happen to the data once the research has been completed. |  |
| I understand that short, anonymised quotes from my interview/group level data may be used in material such as conference presentations, reports, articles in academic journals resulting from the study and that these will not personally identify me. |  |
| I would like to receive a summary of the research findings once the study has been completed and am willing to provide contact details for this to be sent to. |  |
| I agree to take part in the above study. |  |

Participant's Name (BLOCK CAPITALS)

…………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………

Participant's Signature

…………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………

Researcher's Name (BLOCK CAPITALS)

**AMY RODRIGUEZ**

Researcher's Signature

…………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………

Date

…………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………

**Researcher:**
Can you tell me about the time when she wasn't going to school regularly, like when did it start?
**Emily:**
Uh when, when, you mean when she sort of stopped going in regularly? Yeah.
**Researcher:**
Yeah or the period before.
**Emily:**
So she erm, she, she was, she was at high school. She had a brilliant year there in year seven, so she, she absolutely loved it. Erm, it, with hindsight, it's a bit, it was a bit manic how, how much she loved it and how desperate she was not to miss a minute of it and all the rest of it. But at the time it just seemed great. She was struggling in year seven in the sense that she was always complaining of being exhausted erm and we had lots of issues with like her getting to and from school because I was trying to get her to do it independently, either by bus or by bike, it's only, it's like a mile up the road. It's it's, you know, it's not far at all. And we had lots of issues with that and I I ended up basically sort of you know taking her and picking her up everyday, uh, which was problematic for my work point of view. But anyway, that's what we were doing. But aside from that, she was she seemed to be OK she was having, she, I mean, she had had sort of anxiety which we'd, you know, I been in touch with CAMHs with her for quite a few years. She was diagnosed by CAMHS in 2019 and you know, prior to that, the, the major symptom was anxiety, but she was also sort of having meltdowns and things after school in primary. But erm yeah, so year seven seemed okay, she, you know, she was doing well there academically. She had friends. She had two good friends there, which was new because she'd really struggled with friendships at primary school. Erm, so that was great. You know, it seemed like she was going really well. And then the first term of year 8, she seemed again, it seemed to be okay. And then over the half term, she turned 13. You hear about people becoming teenagers and it changing, but it was like an overnight thing. She just sort of after that half term, she just started saying I can't get up, I can't go. Just refusing to get out of bed in the morning, refusing to go in. Erm and you know, I had no experience of this, and I was just, you know, telling her she had to get up, had to get in, you know, shouting, you know, it was just like a really stressful situation. I was talking to the school about it and the school, I don't know if you know high, but their SEND department is really fabulous and very supportive. Erm and they've already been helping her because, you know, she had an autism diagnosis and that kind of thing and she was attending, special erm, what they call fact club and things, she was getting support from the team there. Umm, so I was in touch with them every day and they kept saying, you know, keep trying, you know, okay, if she can't make it in for first lesson, get her in for later. And so, I'd be in there and it would be, you know, I'd be trying for like 3 to 5 hours every day trying to get her up to get her in and I'd be like pulling the duvet off her and, you know, bringing her hot chocolates and breakfast in bed. And I just tried everything, and she would just get stressed she'd get angry. Sometimes she would erm, you know, sort of hit me or she would be telling me to go away all the time erm and she just wouldn't, she wouldn't get up, and there was nothing I could do to get her up. And this sort of just went on for, I don't know, probably, certainly the rest of that term. Occasionally we would gather

in, you know I'd managed to get her in for a little bit, but it just trailed off erm until she just wasn't really going at all. And by the end of that term, I just said to them, look, you know, I can't keep doing this every day because it was, it was incredibly stressful for her. It was incredibly stressful for me. It was making it almost impossible for me to do any work because, you know, I, I was literally sort of going into her room every 10-15 minutes. Umm and I just couldn't, you know, focus on anything. And it was just really impossible, really. It was impacting everybody. Erm, so we sort of gradually kind of came to the realisation that, you know, we couldn't get her there. The school tried all kinds of things. Uh, you know, we had a reduce timetable. we had lots of meetings, we got family services were involved, became involved, and then that at one point it escalated to social services at the school's suggestion. Erm but they just did an assessment and then didn't do anything and discharged us, CAMHS discharged her erm, after we waited six months for it for anything from CAMHs. And then it was erm eight sessions of CBT, but erm, she only managed to attend five of those. The, the therapist that CAMHS made things worse because when she didn't attend a session one time, she sort of erm, she, she kind of berated her, she like told her off for not engaging. And then she told, took me aside into it was all online, but in another room. She, she told me that, you know, I was, it was my parenting failure, and I needed to be more stringent, and I'd let things slide and all that kind of crap. Erm, so, you know, that didn't help. And we had meetings at the school with that CAMHs therapist told her off and made her cry in front of everybody, all the other adults. Erm, so the fact that she managed to attend five out of eight sessions I thought was actually pretty good on her part. And then at the end of that, they discharged her and said you know we're discharging you cause you're not engaging and basically didn't really have anything to offer. So yeah, so she just kind of trailed away. There was a school trip in January of 2022. I guess it would be that she really wanted to go on, which was a residential.

**Researcher:**

Yeah

**Emily:**

Erm, like a, a walking thing in Wales, you know she'd been really excited about this and she'd missed, she'd missed the last one of her, she was, she'd been excited about one of her primary school in year six and then had missed that because of the pandemic. So she was really excited about doing this. So even though she wasn't attending school, she wanted to go on that trip. So, we all thought that was, you know, a good thing, and it could maybe turn everything around. And she went on the, she went on the trip but erm, she, I think, it it was too much for her and she came back, she was very stressed. She was sort of like had a meltdown when I picked her up, she'd had, she hadn't, really coped with it. She, there had been some incidences of other students, erm, who had been unpleasant to her. But I think she was being pretty difficult and unpleasant, probably herself, she was being very, you know, stressed and anxious. So, she was probably quite difficult to be around.

**Researcher:**

Yeah

**Emily:**

And I think it just, it sort of made things worse in a way and after that she, you know, she just didn't go in at all. So yeah, it's sort of, that, that, that trip, because it was a full week erm made her attendance appear higher than it was, if you see what I mean in terms of the percentages. But overall it was, you know, we were down to like single figures of attendance and then nothing and the school tried getting her to come in, just, you know, for 15

minutes, erm come in at break time just to meet her friends. Come in completely on her terms. You know, she didn't have to wear the school uniform, which was an issue for her. She could come in and her PE kit or whatever, whichever was more comfortable erm and then when that became too much, they were just getting her to come and pick up a present from reception and things like that. Erm, sending a little bit of work home, but not much, and she wasn't really doing it anyway. Erm and then you know that sort of, she couldn't do that either, and we just sort of stopped and removed all demands really. At the beginning of year nine, what year is she now? Yeah, she would be in year nine, I lose track because I don't have any kids in school, but erm, she would, she would have been in year 9 this year. She wanted to to start, so she, we had meetings with the school.

**Researcher:**

Yeah

**Emily:**

Erm and we planned a sort of a re-entry into year nine and in her head, she had to do, it was all or nothing, you know, we were trying to do a gradual kind of well, you know, let's do really part time, ramp up sort of thing. And she was like, no, no, no, I have to be there full, full time from day one or I'm not doing it. So she tried to do that and she, she managed one day which was great, she managed. Did a whole day in school and then she, she hasn't been back since the first day of Year 9.

**Researcher:**

Yeah

**Emily:**

Erm and yeah, but that was all sort of like done on her terms. Nobody was pushing her to do that. She wanted to do it. She's still sort of loves that school, but I think she realises that she can't cope with it. So, she still feels conflicted about it, and although now we are trying to get her a specialist placement, which is why we're going to tribunal because she now has an EHCP. Erm, it's it's currently still stating that school, so that's why we're going to tribunal. I I think she, you know, she understands now that she's going to go to another school, hopefully, tribunal permitting, and she's she wants to maybe go back to there for sixth form or something like that or you know, probably that would be realistic because you know, she's missed most of Year 9 now, so we're into GCSE's and that,  so I don't think she'd be moving before then. But we'll see, obviously we don't know, erm and we're looking at a specialist residential school for her because she needs sort of erm, what the, the Educational Psychologist, who you might know, Katie, who's lovely. She, she said, erm can't remember the exact phrase with some like 360 degree.

**Researcher:**

Right

**Emily:**

Umm, therapeutic curriculum. I think that was the phrase she used. So that sort of implies residential setting or if not residential, then something that involves erm therapeutic support outside, outside of the school day, which could be in the home. But there isn't anything like that.

**Researcher:**

Yeah

**Emily:**

So we're looking at, we're looking at a residential school which, you know, erm **Florence** is quite keen on as well. And I think given the difficulty that she has with transitions and she's

also, the other issue she's had, which has been a major issue and a major barrier for her is being nocturnal and sleep disorder things so.

**Researcher:**

Yeah

**Emily:**

You know, given how hard it is for me to get her up to get to school, which is, you know, a mile up the road. And if she she has been offered, UM, she's been offered 2 specialist school placements and we're we're waiting to hear on a third. One of them is XXX in XXXX, but it's like over an hour away in the morning rush hour. It's just doesn't seem feasible for her to be able to get there and do a full school day. You know, she'd have to get up at half six every day.

**Researcher:**

Yeah

**Emily:**

Just doesn't seem possible. And also, you know, she needs this sort of 360, we have lots of issues with personal hygiene. So she, she very rarely washes, cleans her teeth or anything like that. So you know she, you know,  I can't remember the last time she bathed but it was probably at least a month ago and she can go three or four months without.

**Researcher:**

Yeah

**Emily:**

Washing and that kind of thing and sensory issues around that. And so, you know, this is the sort of thing that they can help with.

**Researcher:**

Yeah

**Emily:**

It erm, yeah, that kind of stuff. We need sort of like help, help with beyond what is just an an educational curriculum can provide. So yeah, that's where we're at now.

**Researcher:**

That sounds like it's kind of been a tricky journey that she's pl- placed so much pressure on herself to succeed as well. Like with that, I need to go in full time.

**Emily:**

Yeah

**Researcher:**

And I guess how were you feeling throughout that time?

**Emily:**

It's been like, it's been a real sort of journey of understanding for me, you know, because I started off when she stopped going to school, I was like, you know, I was very much in the refusal mindset, you know, like, well, you have to just get up and go in, you can't do this, you know, gonna get. This is illegal. We're gonna get, I'm gonna be, you know, prosecuted. You have to go to school and you know, that kind of thing and seeing it as defiance in a way. And then, you know, I have gone through a process of learning and understanding and understanding that this is not something that she she's, that she, she had any control over in a way. You know, she was she couldn't go and she.

**Researcher:**

Yeah

**Emily:**

Erm, and it wasn't, and it wasn't that she was, you know, being badly behaved or anything like that, or it wasn't anything deliberate about it because she is a very law-abiding person. It's part of, you know, part of her sort of autism is that she, she, she doesn't like to break rules and things like that. It makes her stressed. So, as it does me, so I found it very stressful that she was breaking these rules, you know, erm and also that it, you didn't know on any day what you were going to be dealing with and whether or not you know she was gonna be going in or so. It's very difficult to know what the timetable's gonna be and to plan work and plan what I was doing with her other sister, I was trying to home educate her, trying to get her to groups and things like that and it was really impacting that because I couldn't take **Layla** to the places that we wanted to go and do the things we wanted to do because I needed to be trying to get **Florence** up and into school because that's what the school was telling me I needed to be doing. So yeah, it was a, it was a sort of a long journey and then also Mrs. Smith the SENDCo at the school mentioned to me that she thought **Florence** was PDA, which I hadn't heard of, and then I was speaking to like an advocacy support team and they, somebody there also said I'll do you think she might be PDA? So, I looked into that and and found out about that. Erm and then I I started sort of understanding about the, the issue of demands and things like that so just like removing demands and that seems to have been what has enabled her to sort of begin to heal. So, I think what we, what she, what happened was she went into autistic burnout and erm it's taken 18 months for that to heal. And the only thing really that has enabled that to heal and it's not that she's out of the woods yet but she's a lot better now currently the last sort of two months or so we've seen quite big improvements and I, I, I think it's only been time and removing demands. So, if you know I just hav- I just haven't sort of, I don't, I don't ask her to do anything really. I don't ask her to wash. I don't ask her to, I mean, occasionally I'll ask her if I can take her dirty washing if she's got literally no clean clothes. And I try and sort of mention you know do you want to try and have a have a a bath before you go back to school next term sort of thing because she's now doing, she's now at the P R U.

*Example extract of coding in relation to Phase 2 of TA*

| Researcher | |
|---|---|
| Okay, so can you tell me a bit about the time when you're 13 year old wasn't going to school regularly, when did it kind of start? | |

| Anna | |
|---|---|
| So, it's started erm, I mean, she was always an anxious kid, erm but they called it just a worried child and that's how they called, because for some reasons schools don't don't like using the word anxiety, especially primary schools. And so, they were saying, you know, girls are like this and they have hormones and they're growing up and all of this things and err. I think because COVID happened when she was in year five and then she went back to year six in the beginning. Erm, it was a little bit difficult for her. Erm, because mainly because she likes to follow rules, she has to follow, so she always had hundred percent attendance and freaking out whenever she had to go to the doctor. And so on. And then during COVID, she realised she doesn't have to go to school. | Always an anxious kid<br><br>School just said she's a worried child<br><br>Schools don't like the word anxiety<br><br><br>Being a girl with hormones, growing up<br><br><br><br><br>Likes to follow rules<br><br><br><br>COVID offered a different perspective |

| Researcher | |
|---|---|
| Yeah | |

| Anna | |
|---|---|
| Its school without school, so she really had an awesome time. So then when it started and and she started asking me more and more for days off. Last of year 6 and last year of primary, so we sort of, you know, went through this. But then year seven it completely, absolutely shattered her. So that was when the first like proper refusals, proper anxiety started with, you know, hitting herself, with panic attacks, and so beginning of the years was absolutely awful for her. That's when it started. | Enjoyed being at home during covid<br><br><br><br>'Shattered' Transition to secondary school<br><br><br>Panic attacks and hurting herself |

| | |
|---|---|
| **Researcher** | |
| So mostly started around, it bubbled for a little bit of time and then started around year 7? | |
| **Anna** | |
| Yeah | |
| **Researcher** | |
| And, what was happening when they first started not attending? So, you mentioned COVID and that anxiety and worry. Was there anything else going on? | |
| **Anna** | |
| I mean, erm, we, no, I think it was just the transition which kinda, kind of highlighted everything, you know it is obviously combination with hormones and but I think the huge change into school environment was absolutely, I think, the most triggering things for her, thing for her. | Transition<br><br>Hormones<br><br>Transition: huge change in school environment |
| **Researcher** | |
| And what was, how were you feeling during that time? | |
| **Anna** | |
| Wow, that was, wild, a wild ride. Erm, you know you have this… You don't know what's happening, really, because you had, I had through all the primary… I mean, since she was Year 2, when I was highlighting to SENCO, to everyone, that something is not right, that she's too worrying about stuff. And and you had your, she'll be fine. She'll outgrow it. You know, girls are like this. But I'm a girl, I was not like this and I have an older daughter who was, yes, sometimes a bit anxious, but not to this level. So when it happens or when she started having a proper panic attacks and you know, when I was taking her to school and on the way to school, we have like 15 minutes walk… She was hitting herself and that was for me, it was really weird. So obviously I started searching the | Wild ride<br><br>Confusion about what is happening<br><br>Telling school staff something isn't right<br><br>Parents concerns dismissed<br><br><br><br>Not understanding what was going on – 'weird'<br>Parent led research |

| | |
|---|---|
| Internet… What's happening? What am I doing wrong? You know, how can I help her? And then yeah, I found my answers. | Blaming self<br>Looking for answers |
| **Researcher** | |
| And if you were to name that emotion, what would you say it was? | |
| **Anna** | |
| Erm, well, can I name this emotion? Definitely a huge, huge worry. And. You know, it's a worry, it's a guilt because you think, what have I done? You know, why didn't I raise my child right. My child's supposed to like school. Erm, but mostly it's huge worry, because you really don't know what's happening and your child is spiralling and you hear from your child that, you know, I don't wanna be here anymore and all of these things and... Yeah, it's a massive, massive worry on the head. | Huge Worry<br><br>Guilt thinking they haven't raised child right<br><br>The social norm<br><br>Confusion about what is happening<br><br>Child is spiralling (things getting worse?)<br><br>Mental health deteriorating<br><br>'massive' worry for the parent |
| **Researcher** | |
| I can imagine, it sounds like it was a really difficult time. | |
| **Anna** | |
| Yeah. | |
| **Researcher** | |
| Is there, was there anyone who kind of supported you during that time? | |
| **Anna** | |
| Erm so yes, and weirdly saying it's school. And because I'm I'm pretty sure if you're doing these interviews, you know how erm awful schools can be. And I need to give you a back story to this. So, this is the same school my oldest daughter went to. So, when I was putting the application for schools, I included all schools in the borough except this one. | School supported<br><br>School not wanted by the parent |
| **Researcher** | |
| Right. | |

| Anna | |
|---|---|
| And that's the school I got. Because for my oldest daughter, it was five years through hell. It was awful. My oldest one, she was on the other hand. She's super talented, very smart, very bright girl. And this is like, you know, mainstream catch up-, catchment area school. So there were really bad with her and. So I cried for three days straight when I got this one, I tried to appeal to different school. It didn't happen so obviously I'm now taking all this back. Because erm, when, erm, what actually happened was at the end of the year 6, I begged SENCO because my daughter is, also has noise sensitivity. So she was allowed sort of to wear headphones in year 6. Erm, so I was thinking like, oh my goodness, how am I going to do this in secondary school when there is plenty teachers? And I was super involved with primary. I was, you know, for three years... erm, chair of PTA and what's, I knew the school, I knew the teachers, knew everyone. The secondary school, obviously is a minefield. And so I begged SENDCO to actually give me a referral to GP for my daughter, which she did. And that was really handy because by the time the referral went through, we had already saw many other issues… then headphones, but that was the reason I was contacting the school at the beginning, like the first week, my daughter was fine at school. But I was trying just about the headphones. Like can she… I know she's got problems and I know. Bless you. | Unhappy about school placement – parent cried for three days

Noise sensitivity – reasonable adjustments

Parent worry about secondary school transition
Parent super involved in primary

Relationships with primary school

SENCo referral to GP 'handy' |

*Example extract of grouping codes through colour coding in relation to Phase 3 of TA*

| Codes | Subthemes | Themes |
|---|---|---|
| Work didn't and couldn't understand, and didn't want to understand the difficulties parent was experiencing | Working parents | |
| Very difficult | Emotional impact on parent | |
| Male dominated work environment which meant limited understanding | Working parents | |
| Only one responsible for children in work | Working parents | |
| Parent getting vestibular migraines | Impact on parent – health | |
| Impact on physical health | Impact on parent – health | |
| Refusal started and work was awful | Parental mental health | |
| 'Definitely a stress' for parent | Parental mental health | |
| Pandemic seen as a blessing due to reduced demands for parent | Covid as providing respite/relief/reducing pressure | COVID/national lockdown |
| Didn't have to deal with difficulties of school and work | Covid as providing respite/relief/reducing pressure | |
| Pandemic reduced the battle in the morning | | |
| Child completely refused to engage with online learning | child's difficulties with engagement | |
| School struggled to find 'mitigations' | School and services not knowing | |
| School had difficulties identifying issues | School/Professionals not understanding/ meeting needs | |
| Took time to get counselling | Time | |
| Parent followed child around to try to get them to access counselling | Parent as trying their best | |
| Covid as a barrier to support | Covid | |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Services gave up as they didn't know what to do – professionals not knowing what to do | School and services not knowing | |
| Didn't get offered any support | Barriers to support/support not available | |
| Nothing useful or tangible offered | Barriers to support/support not available | |
| Found crowds and noises so stressful | Child's difficulties and behaviours | |
| Choice to home educate | Home education as alternative | |
| Support and advice from friends for Home Ed | Home education as alternative | |
| Online lessons through oak academy | Home education as alternative | |
| Parent quit job | Working parents | |
| Three months without work – parent had time to offer education | Working parents | |
| Home Ed meant no help offered from external | Home education as alternative | |
| Child and parent not coping with home education | Home education as alternative | |
| Meetings with SENCO | Services/ school as supportive | |
| Modified timetable | Services/ school as supportive | |
| Slow start then building up | Services/ school as supportive | |
| Managed two days in first term | Child's difficulties and behaviours | |
| SENCo applied for EHCP | Services/ school as supportive | |
| SEND assessment for autism | Services/ school as supportive | |
| **Parental increasing understanding of autism** | **Parent's understanding** | |
| **Parent quite shocked by autism diagnosis** | **Parent limited understanding?** | |
| SENCO took parent through process | Services/ school as supportive | |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Educational psychology involvement | Professionals involved/referred to | |
| Art therapy from school | Types of support | |
| CBT but didn't qualify | Barriers to support/support not available | |
| Difficulties accessing CAMHs – four failed referrals | Barriers to support/support not available | |
| Counselling helped a lot | Services/ school as supportive | |
| Youth worker programme | Professionals involved/referred to | |
| Youth worker took child out, built confidence | Services/ school as supportive | |
| Promise worker is a two year commitment | Services/ school as supportive | |
| Promise worker every week to talk to and give child confidence | Services/ school as supportive | |
| **Charity family support services for the parent** | **Support for parent** | |
| Everybody forgets that there's a parent struggling with paperwork and children's stress | Parental mental health | |
| **Parent support every week to signpost, support with paperwork and make referrals** | **Support for parent** | |
| **Quite a few bodies – lots of professionals** | **Systemic organisation?** | |
| CAMHs signpost and defer | Barriers to support/support not available | |
| Directed to buy a book about anxiety which made child anxious | Barriers to support/support not available | |
| **CAMHs threshold too high** | **Services criteria/ rigidity in services** | |
| **CAMHs not involved for anxiety, EBSA, autism and mental health** | **Services criteria** | |
| Child spent almost three years in depression | Child's mental health | |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Child as socially isolated | Child's mental health | |
| Parent feels absolute trauma getting her there, absolutely awful | Emotional impact on parent | |
| Child's strengths - she's an amazing artist | Child strengths ignored | |
| Child's youth shouldn't be like that | Implications for child's future | |
| **All to do with autism and ebsa** | **Parent understanding** | |
| You don't get a lot of help | Barriers to support/support not available | |
| Time of activities when parents still working | Working parents | |
| Parent tried to pencil it in and then couldn't cope with the meetings | Working parents | |
| **CFSS comes to the meetings with the parent** | **Support for parent** | |
| Team around the family meetings at school quite uncomfortable | Emotional impact on parent | |
| Bad experiences at Team around the family | Emotional impact on parent | |
| Parent told not doing enough, their bad and they're not doing enough | Parent as blamed or at fault/parents as the problem | |
| TAF have been quite tough to deal with | Emotional impact on parent | |
| Parents spend a lot of time in the process being told that they are bad parents and awful at parenting | Parent as blamed or at fault/parents as the problem | |
| School have tried to send parent on parenting course | Parent as blamed or at fault/parents as the problem | |
| There's a lot of blame towards parent in TAF | Parent as blamed or at fault/parents as the problem | |
| TAF 'professional's' telling parent they're not doing something and they're not in control | Parent as blamed or at fault/parents as the problem | |
| **'Quite nice' to have someone there on the parents side** | **Support for parent** | |
| **Talking therapy as supportive - someone that's neutral** | **Support for parent** | |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Services not involved in the situation and doesn't have their own agenda | Support for parent | |
| Services as just there to listen to the parent | Support for parent | |
| Services as directed to how can we support the family and support the parent | Support for parent<br>Holistic support? | |
| Parents get completely forgotten when there's a problem children, "they never see that there's a struggling adult in the middle of it" | Support focused on child<br>Parental mental health | |
| Parent seen to just have to cope with it all and do it | Parental mental health | |
| Processes as tough | Difficulties navigating services/<br>Systemic processes | |
| Mainstream doesn't have the resources or time to deal with child's needs | School as the barrier | |
| Autism, masking and coping breaking down | Parent understanding | |
| Mainstream doesn't have time to cope with the break down | School as the barrier | |
| Kids just end up being off school | School as the barrier | |
| Educational safeguarding threatening to prosecute | Threat of fines and prosecution | |
| Team around the family as a quite traumatic experience | Parental mental health | |
| Parent hated team around the family, didn't find it supportive | Parental mental health | |
| Found professionals in TAF accusatory | Parent as blamed or at fault/parents as the problem | |
| Parent misquoted in meeting minutes | Communication | |
| Meetings are about making the school look good and the parent look bad | Parent as blamed or at fault<br>Us vs Them | |
| Meetings are about the school being great and doing everything they can | Us vs Them | |
| Parent's fault | Parent as blamed or at fault/parents as the problem | |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 'going after' parents who attend and engage | Parent as blamed or at fault/parents as the problem | |
| Parent isn't ignoring the education of their child | Parent valuing education | |
| Prosecutions and fines shouldn't be used for parent's who try their best to engage | Threat of fines and prosecution as unfair | |
| Prosecutions and fines to be used for parents not interested in sending child to school | Threat of fines and prosecution as unfair | |
| Persecution of autism and ebsa parents when trying their best is wrong | Threat of fines and prosecution as unfair<br>Parents as trying their best | |
| Attendance triggers educational safeguarding | Systemic processes | |
| Government guidance is 'rubbish' | Systemic - government | |
| Mental health – must not deteriorate child's mental health | Balancing Act | |

This was followed by grouping candidate subthemes into potential themes

| Theme | Subthemes |
|---|---|
| **Parents search for power** | Paying privately to access support<br>Need for evidence<br>Parent as lead professional<br>Power/need for resources<br>The need to advocate for child/battle or fight for support<br>Random Luck or fortune<br>Quest for allies (professionals and support groups)<br>**Parent characteristics** |
| **The effects on parents** | Parents difficult emotions through the situation – |

| | |
|---|---|
| | • Parental guilt<br>• Parent blaming self<br>Worry/ Anxiety<br>perceptions<br>• Shame/stigma/ Discourse<br>• Parental mental health<br>• Feeling alone/isolated/on own<br>Feeling stuck<br>Working parents<br>Pressure<br>    • Reducing pressure on child<br>    • Reducing pressure on parent<br>    • Parent as under pressure from others |
| **The journey to understanding** | • **Identifying difficulties**<br>• **Looking for answers**<br>• **Parent led research**<br>• **Parent not understanding what was going on**<br>• **Confusion/Feeling lost/helpless**<br>• **The unknown**<br>• **Parent not knowing**<br>• **School not knowing** |
| **Parents feeling victimised** | Parent as blamed or at fault/feeling judged<br>'doing the best they can'<br>Parent/child's difficulties not being believed<br>Threat of fines and prosecution<br>Us vs Them |

| The effects of national lockdown | • Covid as a barrier<br>• Covid as offering a different perspective<br>• Covid as providing respite/relief/reducing pressure<br>• COVID as making attendance difficulties worse |
|---|---|
| Miscellaneous Group | Black and white thinking of others (service rigidity/ rigidity )<br>The balancing act<br>Child's needs<br>child's difficulties with engagement removal of service<br>Support for parent<br>Transitions<br>communication<br>Choice<br>Impact on family<br>Parent valuing education<br>School not understanding/identifying/ meeting needs/or others not understanding (friends/other professionals)<br>Impact on child's future/childhood<br>Children put in situations adults wouldn't be in<br>Barriers to support<br>School as the barrier<br>Systemic – rigidity in services<br>Wasted/lost time<br>Services/ school as supportive<br>Home education<br>Professionals involved/referred to/support accessed<br>Interactions<br>Future support ideas<br>Hope |

|  |  |
|--|--|
|  |  |

## School of Psychology Ethics Committee

## NOTICE OF ETHICS REVIEW DECISION LETTER

**For research involving human participants**
BSc/MSc/MA/Professional Doctorates in Clinical, Counselling and Educational Psychology

**Reviewer:** Please complete sections in blue **|** **Student:** Please complete/read sections in orange

| Details | |
|---|---|
| **Reviewer:** | **Ali Lara** |
| **Supervisor:** | **Helena Bunn** |
| **Student:** | **Amy Rodriguez** |
| **Course:** | **Prof Doc in Child and Educational Psychology** |
| **Title of proposed study:** | Exploring parental experiences of support from professionals for their child with school non-attendance and developing best practice: An appreciative inquiry approach. |

| Checklist (Optional) | YES | NO | N/A |
|---|---|---|---|
| Concerns regarding study aims (e.g., ethically/morally questionable, unsuitable topic area for level of study, etc.) | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| Detailed account of participants, including inclusion and exclusion criteria | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| Concerns regarding participants/target sample | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| Detailed account of recruitment strategy | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| Concerns regarding recruitment strategy | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| All relevant study materials attached (e.g., freely available questionnaires, interview schedules, tests, etc.) | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| Study materials (e.g., questionnaires, tests, etc.) are appropriate for target sample | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| Clear and detailed outline of data collection | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| Data collection appropriate for target sample | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| If deception being used, rationale provided, and appropriate steps followed to communicate study aims at a later point | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| If data collection is not anonymous, appropriate steps taken at later stages to ensure participant anonymity (e.g., data analysis, dissemination, etc.) – anonymisation, pseudonymisation | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| Concerns regarding data storage (e.g., location, type of data, etc.) | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| Concerns regarding data sharing (e.g., who will have access and how) | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| Concerns regarding data retention (e.g., unspecified length of time, unclear why data will be retained/who will have access/where stored) | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| If required, General Risk Assessment form attached | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| Any physical/psychological risks/burdens to participants have been sufficiently considered and appropriate attempts will be made to minimise | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| Any physical/psychological risks to the researcher have been sufficiently considered and appropriate attempts will be made to minimise | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| If required, Country-Specific Risk Assessment form attached | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| If required, a DBS or equivalent certificate number/information provided | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| If required, permissions from recruiting organisations attached (e.g., school, charity organisation, etc.) | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| All relevant information included in the participant information sheet (PIS) | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| Information in the PIS is study specific | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| Language used in the PIS is appropriate for the target audience | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| All issues specific to the study are covered in the consent form | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| Language used in the consent form is appropriate for the target audience | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| All necessary information included in the participant debrief sheet | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| Language used in the debrief sheet is appropriate for the target audience | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| Study advertisement included | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |
| Content of study advertisement is appropriate (e.g., researcher's personal contact details are not shared, appropriate language/visual material used, etc.) | ☐ | ☐ | ☐ |

| Decision options | |
|---|---|
| **APPROVED** | Ethics approval for the above-named research study has been granted from the date of approval (see end of this notice), to the date it is submitted for assessment. |
| **APPROVED - BUT MINOR AMENDMENTS ARE** | In this circumstance, the student must confirm with their supervisor that all minor amendments have been made **before** the research commences. |

| REQUIRED BEFORE THE RESEARCH COMMENCES | Students are to do this by filling in the confirmation box at the end of this form once all amendments have been attended to and emailing a copy of this decision notice to the supervisor. The supervisor will then forward the student's confirmation to the School for its records.<br><br>**Minor amendments guidance:** typically involve clarifying/amending information presented to participants (e.g., in the PIS, instructions), further detailing of how data will be securely handled/stored, and/or ensuring consistency in information presented across materials. |
|---|---|
| **NOT APPROVED - MAJOR AMENDMENTS AND RE-SUBMISSION REQUIRED** | In this circumstance, a revised ethics application **must** be submitted and approved **before** any research takes place. The revised application will be reviewed by the same reviewer. If in doubt, students should ask their supervisor for support in revising their ethics application.<br><br>**Major amendments guidance:** typically insufficient information has been provided, insufficient consideration given to several key aspects, there are serious concerns regarding any aspect of the project, and/or serious concerns in the candidate's ability to ethically, safely and sensitively execute the study. |

## Decision on the above-named proposed research study

| Please indicate the decision: | **APPROVED** |
|---|---|

## Minor amendments

Please clearly detail the amendments the student is required to make

|  |
|---|
|  |

## Major amendments

Please clearly detail the amendments the student is required to make

<table>
<tr><td colspan="3" style="text-align:center"><b>Assessment of risk to researcher</b></td></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="2"><b>Has an adequate risk assessment been offered in the application form?</b></td><td style="text-align:center"><b>YES</b><br>☐</td><td style="text-align:center"><b>NO</b><br>☐</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="2">If no, please request resubmission with an <b><u>adequate risk assessment.</u></b></td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="3"><b>If the proposed research could expose the <u>researcher</u> to any kind of emotional, physical or health and safety hazard, please rate the degree of risk:</b></td></tr>
<tr><td style="text-align:center"><b>HIGH</b></td><td>Please <b>do not approve a high-risk</b> application. Travel to countries/provinces/areas deemed to be high risk should not be permitted and an application not be approved on this basis. If unsure, please refer to the Chair of Ethics.</td><td style="text-align:center">☐</td></tr>
<tr><td style="text-align:center"><b>MEDIUM</b></td><td>Approve but include appropriate recommendations in the below box.</td><td style="text-align:center">☐</td></tr>
<tr><td style="text-align:center"><b>LOW</b></td><td>Approve and if necessary, include any recommendations in the below box.</td><td style="text-align:center">☒</td></tr>
<tr><td><b>Reviewer recommendations in relation to risk (if any):</b></td><td colspan="2">Please insert any recommendations</td></tr>
</table>

<table>
<tr><td colspan="2" style="text-align:center"><b>Reviewer's signature</b></td></tr>
<tr><td><b>Reviewer:</b><br>(Typed name to act as signature)</td><td><b>Ali Lara</b></td></tr>
</table>

| Date: | 28/04/2022 |
|---|---|

*This reviewer has assessed the ethics application for the named research study on behalf of the School of Psychology Ethics Committee*

**RESEARCHER PLEASE NOTE**

For the researcher and participants involved in the above-named study to be covered by UEL's Insurance, prior ethics approval from the School of Psychology (acting on behalf of the UEL Ethics Committee), and confirmation from students where minor amendments were required, must be obtained before any research takes place.

For a copy of UEL's Personal Accident & Travel Insurance Policy, please see the Ethics Folder in the Psychology Noticeboard.

# Confirmation of minor amendments
(Student to complete)

| I have noted and made all the required minor amendments, as stated above, before starting my research and collecting data | |
|---|---|
| **Student name:**<br>(Typed name to act as signature) | Amy Rodriguez |
| **Student number:** | U2064595 |
| **Date:** | 13/05/2022 |

*Please submit a copy of this decision letter to your supervisor with this box completed if minor amendments to your ethics application are required*

University of
East London

## School of Psychology Ethics Committee

## REQUEST FOR AMENDMENT TO AN ETHICS APPLICATION

For BSc, MSc/MA and taught Professional Doctorate students

**Please complete this form if you are requesting approval for proposed amendment(s) to an ethics application that has been approved by the School of Psychology**

Note that approval must be given for significant change to research procedure that impact on ethical protocol. If you are not sure as to whether your proposed amendment warrants approval, consult your supervisor or contact Dr Trishna Patel (Chair of School Ethics Committee).

## How to complete and submit the request

| | |
|---|---|
| 1 | Complete the request form electronically. |
| 2 | Type your name in the 'student's signature' section (page 2). |
| 3 | When submitting this request form, ensure that all necessary documents are attached (see below). |
| 4 | Using your UEL email address, email the completed request form along with associated documents to Dr Trishna Patel: t.patel@uel.ac.uk |
| 5 | Your request form will be returned to you via your UEL email address with the reviewer's decision box completed. Keep a copy of the approval to submit with your dissertation. |
| 6 | Recruitment and data collection are **not** to commence until your proposed amendment has been approved. |

## Required documents

| | |
|---|---|
| A copy of your previously approved ethics application with proposed amendment(s) added with track changes. | **YES** ☒ |
| Copies of updated documents that may relate to your proposed amendment(s). For example, an updated recruitment notice, updated participant information sheet, updated consent form, etc. | **YES** ☒ |

| A copy of the approval of your initial ethics application. | YES ☒ |
|---|---|

## Details

| Name of applicant: | **Amy Rodriguez** |
|---|---|
| Programme of study: | **Professional Doctorate in Educational and Child Psychology** |
| Title of research: | Exploring parental experiences of support from professionals for their child with school non-attendance and developing best practice: An appreciative inquiry approach. |
| Name of supervisor: | **Helena Bunn** |

## Proposed amendment(s)

Briefly outline the nature of your proposed amendment(s) and associated rationale(s) in the boxes below

| Proposed amendment | Rationale |
|---|---|
| The participant recruitment strategy will be amended to include recruiting participants nationally through social media and will include the use of a flyer to initially gain participant interest. | The researcher is currently experiencing difficulties with recruitment of participants in the Local Authority they are on placement within |
| Proposed amendment | Rationale for proposed amendment |
| Proposed amendment | Rationale for proposed amendment |
| Proposed amendment | Rationale for proposed amendment |

## Confirmation

| Is your supervisor aware of your proposed amendment(s) and have they agreed to these changes? | YES ☒ | NO ☐ |
|---|---|---|

## Student's signature

| Student: (Typed name to act as signature) | **Amy Rodriguez** |
|---|---|
| Date: | **16/02/2023** |

| Reviewer's decision | | |
|---|---|---|
| Amendment(s) approved: | YES<br>☒ | NO<br>☐ |
| Comments: | Please ensure permission is sought from social media platforms where needed. The researcher should create an account specifically for this study (i.e., avoid use of personal accounts). | |
| Reviewer:<br>(Typed name to act as signature) | Trishna Patel | |
| Date: | 02/03/2023 | |

**PARTICIPANT DEBRIEF SHEET**

**Exploring parental experiences of support from professionals for their child with school non-attendance and developing best practice.**

Thank you for participating in my research study on parent's experiences of support for their child with school non-attendance. This document offers information that may be relevant in light of you having now taken part.

**How will my data be managed?**

The University of East London is the Data Controller for the personal information processed as part of this research project. The University will ensure that the personal data it processes is held securely and processed in accordance with the GDPR and the Data Protection Act 2018.  More detailed information is available in the Participant Information Sheet, which you received when you agreed to take part in the research.

**What will happen to the results of the research?**

The research will be written up as a thesis and submitted for assessment. The thesis will be publically available on UEL's online Repository. Findings will also be disseminated to a range of audiences (e.g., academics, clinicians, public, etc.) through journal articles, conference presentations, talks, magazine articles, blogs and will be shared with the Local Authority's Educational Psychology Service. In all material produced, your identity will remain anonymous, in that, it will not be possible to identify you personally as all personal details will be removed and/or replaced with a different name or general terms such as 'school' or 'local authority'

You will be given the option to receive a summary of the research findings once the study has been completed for which relevant contact details will need to be provided.

Anonymised research data will be securely stored by Helena Bunn for a maximum of 3 years, following which all data will be deleted.

**What if I been adversely affected by taking part?**

It is not anticipated that you will have been adversely affected by taking part in the research, and all reasonable steps have been taken to minimise distress or harm of any kind. Nevertheless, it is possible that your participation – or its after-effects – may have been challenging, distressing or uncomfortable in

some way. If you have been affected in any of those ways, you may find the following resources/services helpful in relation to obtaining information and support:

**Young Minds – A UK Charity for Children and Young People's mental health**
Website: https://www.youngminds.org.uk/parent/
Contact Number: 0808 802 5544 from 9:30am - 4pm, Monday - Friday.
They have website chat function to contact them via email address.

**Mind – Provide advice and support to anyone experiencing a mental health problem**
Website: www.mind.org.uk
Contact Number: 0300 123 3393
Email Address: info@mind.org.uk

**Bucks Family Network – Therapeutic Support for Children, Young People and families within the Buckinghamshire Area**
*Contact: Sue Barr*
07948 247958
hello@bucksfamilynetwork.com

**SEND IAS**
Contact Number**:** 01296 383 754
Email: sendias@buckinghamshire.gov.uk.

**Who can I contact if I have any questions/concerns?**
If you would like further information about my research or have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Amy Rodriguez
U2064595@uel.ac.uk

If you have any questions or concerns about how the research has been conducted, please contact my research supervisor Helena Bunn, School of Psychology, University of East London, Water Lane, London E15 4LZ,
Email: H.Bunn@uel.ac.uk

**or**

Chair of School Research Ethics Committee: Dr Trishna Patel, School of Psychology, University of East London, Water Lane, London E15 4LZ.
(Email: t.patel@uel.ac.uk)

**Thank you for taking part in my study**