An exploration of the narratives of young people who have experienced Emotional Based School Avoidance

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Abstract

Emotional Based School Avoidance (EBSA) has been linked with negative outcomes for the young person, family, school and the wider community. EBSA is presented in the literature as a difficulty that can impact on an individual's academic progress, social relationships and emotional wellbeing. There is limited research that has sought the views of young people with experience of EBSA, meaning the way that EBSA is understood, and the support put into place is often shaped by adult views. Previous research has tended to use structured interviews which may place limits on the voice of the young person and their description of the phenomenon.

The current study used a narrative approach to hear the stories of two secondary school girls of Bengali heritage who had experience of EBSA. Guided interviews took place online and life story grids were used to support the data collection. Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) Three-Dimensional Space framework was used to re-story the narratives, which provided insight into the multifaceted nature of EBSA and those involved. Member checks with each young person took place to check for accuracy, whilst also appearing to offer therapeutic benefit. The narratives were analysed inductively and deductively using narrative thematic analysis and themes and subthemes relating to individual, school, home and professional factors were identified.

Key themes interpreted within the narratives included risk and protective factors of relationships with staff and peers in school; impact of cultural views; dealing with loss and separation at home; challenges associated with the learning environment; managing negative emotions and mental health; impact of home-learning on participants' wellbeing and resilience; the importance of individual coping mechanisms; positive, yet minimal, professional engagement.

Implications for professional practice were framed using Ecological Systems Theory, highlighting how EBSA is experienced and shaped by individuals in multiple systems around the young person. Suggestions for future research are outlined.

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Abbreviations and Key Terminology

CBT- Cognitive behavioural therapy

DfE – Department of Education

EBSA – Emotional Based School Avoidance

EP – Educational Psychologist

EPS – Educational Psychology Service

RQ – Research Question

SDT – Self Determination Theory

SEN – Special Educational Needs

SENCO - Special Needs Co-ordinator

TEP – Trainee Educational Psychologist

1. Introduction

1.1 Chapter overview

This chapter provides an introduction to the research, which investigates young people's experiences of emotional based school avoidance (EBSA). The chapter begins with an overview of the key terminology and some of the challenges associated in defining non-attendance. Information regarding the national and local context is discussed, as well as theoretical assumptions underlying the research. The position of the researcher is shared and details on the impact of Covid19 are highlighted.

1.2 School avoidance terminology and legislation

In the UK, parents are legally responsible for ensuring their child receives a full-time education from the age of 5 until 16 years old, either at school or through home-education (Education Act, 1996). Guidance from the Department for Education (2020) states that schools and local authorities are expected to promote good attendance, ensure pupils access full-time education and act early to address patterns of absence. As highlighted by Mortimer (2019), changes in funding streams for schools as well as shifts in the socio-political climate has led to reduced support from the Local Authority around school attendance issues (Mortimer, 2019). Consequently, schools hold greater responsibility in promoting good attendance and research which builds on the current understanding of school avoidance may be helpful in developing best practice.

There are a number of reasons why children may be absent from school and there is ongoing debate in the way non-attendance behaviour is conceptualised and defined by professionals and schools (Thambirajah et al., 2008). Terms such as 'school refusal', 'school phobia' and 'truancy' are widely used, sometimes interchangeably and inaccurately, and these have significant implications for responses and interventions recommended by those involved (Pellegrini, 2007). As argued by Rae (2020), terms such as 'school refusal' implies that the behaviour is deliberate and suggests the young person has control over their school non-attendance, potentially leading to a more punitive response. The term 'school refusal' was first coined by Berg and colleagues (1969) and its use is widespread in non-attendance literature, despite now being outdated in terms of a cultural shift away from within-child explanations of behaviour. Berg and colleagues (1969) proposed a

set of four explicit criteria by which 'school refusal' could be categorised, as highlighted in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Berg, Nichols and Pritchard's (1969) operational definition of school refusal

1. Severe difficulty in attending school, often leading to prolonged absence
2. Severe emotional upset; symptoms may include excessive fearfulness, undue tempers, misery or complaints of feeling ill without obvious organic cause
3. Staying at home with the knowledge of the parents when they should be at school
4. Absence of significant antisocial disorders such as stealing, lying, wandering, disruptiveness and sexual misbehaviour

The criteria were deemed useful in being able to make a distinction between students who are absent due to truancy and those whose absence is underpinned by emotional distress (Thambirajah et al., 2008).

Kearney and Silverman (1993) constructed a functional taxonomy of 'school refusal' to outline the motivating or reinforcing factors that may contribute to the behaviour:

- Avoid fear or anxiety that relate to attending school
- Avoid social situations that give rise to fear or anxiety
- Gain attention or positive experiences from others, or reduce negative feelings (e.g. as a result of 'separation anxiety')
- Provide positive experiences from missing school (e.g. comfort, autonomy). This might also be labelled as a truancy-type behaviour

Whilst the simplicity of the model may be deemed useful for its accessibility, in practice there are often overlaps and interactions in the functions of school avoidance and it is unlikely for these to be mutually exclusive (Nuttall & Woods, 2013). The model also focuses largely around 'within-child' explanations, thus disregarding systemic factors which may be contributing to school avoidance.

'School phobia' is now a more historical term and is problematic in locating the problem as being within the young person, or solely within the context of the school, thus downplaying wider systemic or contextual factors (Rae, 2020). Pellegrini (2007) refers to 'extended non-attendance', taking a more impartial view of the phenomenon, aiming to move away from the 'within child' explanation that is upheld in past research. However, the term fails to provide a way to distinguish between

school-avoidance and truancy-type behaviours which potentially means behaviour could be misunderstood or incorrectly labelled.

More recently, the term 'Emotionally Based School Avoidance' (EBSA) was proposed by West Sussex Educational Psychology Service (n.d.). EBSA is defined as a '*broad umbrella term*' to describe children and young people who have "*severe difficulty in attending school due to emotional factors, often resulting in prolonged absences from school*". The guidance, aimed at supporting schools, agencies and families, emphasises the need for a flexible approach according to the need and function of non-attendance.

It was felt that the way in which EBSA captures the emotional basis for school non-attendance in a holistic way aligned with the values of the researcher, as described in section 1.5. It was hoped that the term would be familiar with school settings, or otherwise would otherwise raise awareness of the language that might help to promote best practice. EBSA may be viewed as a term that addresses the emotional needs of the young person and is sufficiently broad in exploring various possible causes to the behaviour. For these reasons, the term has been chosen in the current research study. The language used in prior research will be captured using the original terminology.

1.3 School avoidance prevalence

The exact prevalence of school non-attendance is difficult to determine due to inconsistencies in the way that the behaviour is described, interpreted, reported and understood by schools and professionals (Baker & Bishop, 2015; Elliot, 1999). This is further complicated by the recent Covid19 pandemic, which has significantly impacted on the attendance rates of all children and young people and the way in which schools recorded attendance. DfE (2020) provided absence codes for non-attendance due to coronavirus, such as pupils testing positive for the virus or vulnerable pupils who were required to shield at home. Non-attendance due to covid-related anxiety was not recorded using the same absence codes although it is acknowledged there may be overlap in the reasons for absence which makes it difficult for schools to categorise and monitor.

School avoidance behaviour appears to be equal in both genders (Kearney, 2008) and there is minimal evidence suggesting a link to socioeconomic status (Gee, 2018; King & Bernstein, 2001). However, with the vast majority of research being based on white population samples, little is known about the role of individual factors

such as racial or ethnic identity and culture on school avoidance behaviour (Lyon & Cotler, 2007).

The onset of school avoidance behaviour can be immediate or gradual (Gulliford and Miller, 2015). Research indicates that this behaviour tends to peak around the age of transition between school phases at the start of primary school or following the move to secondary school (Pellegrini, 2007), and it is more common in secondary age pupils (Gregory & Purcell, 2014; Gulliford and Miller, 2015).

1.3.1 National Context

There are no official figures on school avoidance within the United Kingdom. Whilst the Department for Education publishes annual statistics on attendance rates, this does not include a category for school avoidance, instead classifying pupil absence as either 'authorised', 'unauthorised' or 'persistent absentee' (DfE, 2019). The way that this is categorised means schools may be encouraged to follow a more 'medicalised' model in defining their criteria for school absence, arguably disregarding the systemic factors that may also play a role in the young person's behaviour (Want, 2020).

Prevalence rates for school avoidance vary significantly. Gulliford and Miller (2015) suggest that between 1 - 2% of the school population are absent from school due to emotional reasons. Katz and colleagues (2016) report the prevalence rate for 'school refusal' as between 1% and 5% (Katz et al., 2016) whilst Elliot and Place (2019) estimate that emotional based non-attendance affects up to 5% of pupils of school-age. When 'truancy' is factored in, school avoidance is thought to affect between 5% and 28% of all school children at some stage of their school life (Kearney, 2001). Statistics released by the Department for Education report that approximately 10% of young people in primary and secondary schools were 'persistently absent' from school in 2017 (DfE, 2018). Attendance data relating to Covid19 is less clear, as described in this chapter, sections 1.3 and 1.3.3.

1.3.2 Local Context

The current research will take place in an inner-city borough identified as being one of the most diverse and densely populated local authorities in the country, with high levels of poverty and significant shortages in housing availability (reference available on request[1]). The population of the local authority falls within the top five

[I] Name of Local Authority is not disclosed to preserve anonymity and confidentiality of participants

most 'linguistically diverse' areas in the country with over a third of adults identified as having English as an additional language. There are no official statistics for the local authority regarding attendance or absence rates. The findings of the current research are therefore of interest to the Local Authority where possible links between EBSA and the local cultural context can be explored.

1.3.3 Covid19

The Covid19 pandemic has had a global impact on the educational lives of all children and has caused significant disruption since its outbreak in the UK in early 2020. School closures have been one striking consequence of Covid19 and concerns have been raised regarding the long-lasting impact of this on children and young people's learning and wellbeing (Blanden et al., 2021). Most children in England missed around 3 months of school in the first lockdown and around 8 weeks in the second lockdown. This period of school closure and social distancing inevitably resulted in reduced learning opportunities and social interactions, loss of routine and lessened support for mental health needs (Blanden et al., 2021; Kwong et al., 2021). School 'bubbles' were introduced at school to limit mixing between students. Attendance rates are considerably lower than in the years preceding the pandemic (Cresswell et al., 2021) although the challenges in monitoring attendance and non-attendance throughout the pandemic are rife.

The approach to sanctions around non-attendance has also been affected by Covid19 with many local authorities acting in different ways. Figures released by the Department for Education (2022) indicated that some local authorities issued no fines for school non-attendance in 2020-2021 whilst others issued in excess of 1500 fines for parents. This practice has been criticised by many who see fines as ineffective, unjust and the source of further anxiety for the family (Epstein, Brown & O'Flynn, 2019). The current research contributes to the evidence base in understanding school avoidance and this seems especially pertinent in light of the Covid19 pandemic and return to school. As highlighted by Rae (2020), it may be helpful to view EBSA in the context of Covid19 and consider the challenges associated with this, such as heightened social anxiety, health anxiety or separation anxiety that may contribute to school avoidance.

1.4 Impact of School Absence

School avoidance has been associated with a number of negative consequences, both short term and long term (Pellegrini, 2007). School avoidance,

when left unaddressed, has been linked to poor academic performance and reduced attainment (King & Bernstein, 2001), reduced opportunities to socialise and form friendships, and later mental health difficulties (Kearney, 2001; Thambirajah et al., 2008). Long-term consequences of extended school avoidance may include employment difficulties leading to possible economic hardship (Kearney, 2001). School avoidance impacts on the family and consequences may include conflict within the family home, legal issues, potential sanctions and financial difficulties in having to remain home and provide childcare instead of working (Kearney, 2001).

1.5 Theoretical Perspectives Underpinning the Research

It is recognised that there are a number of interlinking factors that contribute to EBSA (Thambirajah et al, 2008) which include the individual, the family context and the school environment. The current research highlights psychological theory that captures the individual and contextual factors associated with EBSA to better understand the causes of behaviour as well as guiding the support that can be put in place.

1.5.1 Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory suggests that a child's development is influenced by the social and environmental systems in which they live, and these systems interact and influence one another (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Bronfenbrenner (1979) described how the ecological environment is made up of nested structures, as illustrated in Figure 2.

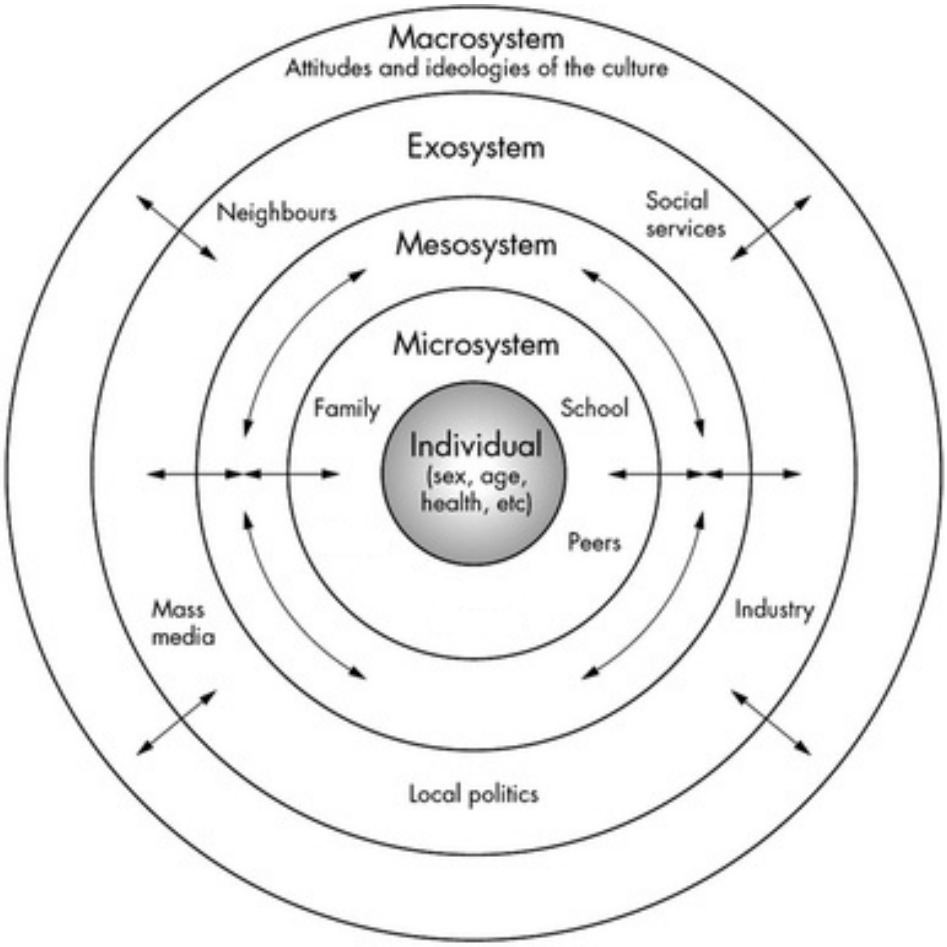


Figure 2

Diagram of Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory

For the young person, the theory postulates that school avoidance behaviour is not just brought about by within-child factors but is impacted by the people and systems around them.

The theory depicts how a child's interactions within the 'Microsystem', their immediate environment, has a direct impact on their development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). In the context of EBSA, this includes interactions and experiences with people located within the school and home setting, and these people may play a part in the development or maintenance of school avoidance behaviour. This might include positive or negative attitudes of school staff or adults around the child and how this may shape interactions with the young person (Nuttall & Woods, 2013). At the 'Mesosytemic' level, interactions or communication between home and school or between the child and the local community may also be influential in a child's development and wellbeing. The 'Exosystem' includes broader social systems which

impact the child more indirectly but nonetheless are influential. This may include, for example, school ethos or vision, policies around school attendance, parents' work experiences and finances and the neighbourhood (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Frederickson & Cline, 2002). Cultural views or beliefs held by the young person, the family and society may contribute to EBSA at the level of 'Macrosystem'. This might also capture government legislation or changes in policy (Frederickson & Cline, 2002).

The Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) indicates how a child's development can be shaped by processes interacting between systems. It can also be used as a framework from which to better understand EBSA, acknowledging the systems influencing school non-attendance but in the context of the child's experience. By listening to the experiences of young people who have experienced EBSA, it may be possible to gain insight and understanding of these systems and how these interact.

1.5.2 Self Determination Theory

Self-Determination Theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 2000) is a theory of human motivation, development and personality. The theory proposes that there is an inherent human tendency to move towards growth, underpinned by three key basic psychological needs; the need for autonomy, competence and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 2000):

- Autonomy: the need to feel a sense of control over one's own behaviours and goals
- Competence: the need to experience one's behaviours as effectively enacted; a sense of mastery
- Relatedness: the need to experience a sense of belonging and have meaningful relationships and interactions with others

SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2000) suggests that an individual's interpersonal context can be controlling or supportive depending on the extent to which these needs are met (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Individuals tend to be motivated by experiences that satisfy these needs and avoidant of experiences that thwart these needs (Wehmeyer & Shrogen, 2017). For example, contact with peers or teaching staff is important to meet the need of relatedness, whereas time outside of school may threaten this need. Promoting an individual's sense of autonomy may lead to feelings of

confidence and agency (Osterman, 2000) and in facing challenges associated with school avoidance. SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2000) can be used as one way of exploring how a child may understand their EBSA, or alternatively may help guide strategies to support the return to school for a young person who has experienced time away from school. SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2000) can be applied to the school setting to understand students' motivation to attend or avoid school and therefore may be important in understanding EBSA. Understanding the motivation for the behaviour may be useful in predicting engagement at school and in examining the interaction between individual and contextual factors.

1.5.3 Belonging

A sense of belonging has been theorised as both a basic human need (Maslow, 1968) and feeling (Goodenow, 1993). Bowlby (1988) believed that belonging is one of the greatest motivational needs and other theorists have argued that a sense of belongingness is as "compelling a need as food" (Baumeister & Leary, 2005), illustrating the human drive to belong to groups and connect with others.

Maslow (1968) developed a theory of motivation that organised human needs into a hierarchy. Maslow (1968) identified five areas of need; physiological, safety and security, love and belonging, self-esteem, and self-actualization. The hierarchy ranged from physical needs such as hunger, to more abstract needs such as self-actualisation. The theory suggests that an individual can only move on to addressing higher-level needs once lower needs have been fulfilled (Maslow, 1968). The hierarchy of needs was later adapted as it was felt that the hierarchical structure lacked flexibility in being able to address contextual influences on behaviour (Maslow, 1987) and failed to adequately recognise the impact of cultural differences on motivation (Cianci & Gambrel, 2003). In reference to the current research focus, the theory suggests that a need for belonging is a key motivating factor in human behaviour, and that this takes precedence over higher-level needs such as the need for knowledge and accomplishment which make up the top end of the hierarchy (Goodenow, 1993). This illustrates the need for meaningful connections within the school setting and may go some way of explaining why school attendance may become more challenging when a sense of belonging is not established.

Within the school context, belonging has been associated with a sense of acceptance and being valued by others (Goodenow, 1993). Allen and colleagues

(2018) suggested that school belonging includes peer-relationships, student-teacher relationships and may include the student's broader views and experiences of school. This systemic view of school belonging identifies key relationships that may be important for a young person at risk of school avoidance; differentiating between peer and staff interactions as well as highlighting the importance of the learning context may be useful in knowing how best to foster a sense of connectedness for young people. Nuttall and Woods (2013) describe how a sense of belonging at school is crucial for young people struggling to attend, and this seems intuitive in light of this.

1.6 Position of the Researcher

The topic and focus of this research are shaped by the personal and professional experiences and values of the researcher. It is underpinned by the core values and beliefs relating to respect, autonomy, beneficence, and social justice, as promoted by the British Psychological Society (2018). These are values which have been central to the researcher's training experience and have developed through work in schools and in working with young people and their families.

Prior to training as an Educational Psychologist, a family member of the researcher experienced school avoidance following their transition to secondary school, which lasted for a significant period of time. From conversations with family members, it became apparent that the interplay between home, school and other outside factors was complex and likely shaped the young person's views of school, as well as their understanding of the systems in which they were part of. Hearing the frustrations of family members and having personal insight into the challenges of school avoidance highlighted the importance of research into this area to help inform strategies and create positive change for young people in similar situations.

During the first year as a Trainee Educational Psychologist, the researcher was involved in a case supporting a young person who had been referred to the Educational Psychology Service as they were experiencing Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA). The researcher noticed the efforts placed by school staff and parents in trying to improve the situation and encourage a return to school. However, the voice of the young person appeared to be missing from the plans, and the way these had been gathered seemed ineffectual. This led the researcher to wonder what the experiences of the young person looked like, and what would be supportive for the young person in their return to school.

The researcher has a constructionist epistemological stance which places value on the views of others. It acknowledges that there are multiple realities that are shaped by individual experience as well as cultural and societal influences, and the meaning attributed to EBSA is unique to the individual. It is the researcher's belief that the autonomy of young people should be upheld, and it is hoped that listening to the stories of young people will promote this core value and help to create better outcomes for young people and their families. Further detail on the researcher's ontological and epistemological position is found in the Methodology Chapter section 3.3.

1.7 Chapter Summary

This chapter has provided an overview of school avoidance in the UK highlighting the challenges in defining the phenomenon, the impact of school absence and links to the current context and legislation. It outlines key theory around EBSA including links to school, home and other environmental factors. The following chapter will introduce the findings of a systematic literature review of the research on school avoidance and will identify any gaps in the literature.

Chapter 2. Literature Review

2.1 Chapter overview

This chapter aims to present a critical review of the literature on Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA), examining previous research which captures the views and experiences of young people. The literature review also aims to provide the context and justification for the current research, including clarification on relevant terminology around school avoidance. In keeping with the relativist ontological positioning of the researcher, the literature review only focuses on studies that have used a qualitative approach to data collection.

2.2 Defining a systematic literature review

A systematic literature review is the process of identifying, evaluating and synthesising the existing literature on a certain topic (Fink, 2005). Through the individual appraisal of articles, documents can be critically evaluated in relation to the research being undertaken. Aspects of the research, such as the quality, relevance and clarity are all carefully considered as part of the systematic literature review. By evaluating the extent to which studies contribute to an overall understanding of the topic, any gaps in the literature can be identified, helping direct the area for further research (Booth et al., 2016).

2.2.1 Aims of the systematic literature review

The literature review aimed to identify research which gathered the views of children and young people in relation to their school non-attendance. The review aimed to address the following questions:

1. To what degree has research explored the experiences of young people who have experienced Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA)?
2. What are the views and experiences of young people who have experienced EBSA?

2.2.2 Identifying search terms for the systematic review

A systematic search of the existing literature on Emotionally Based School Avoidance was conducted to identify any gaps in the literature. A variety of search terms and key words were identified via Google Scholar, terminology from a resource on understanding school avoidance (Rae, 2020) and research by Pellegrini (2007). An online search for the terms "emotionally based school avoidance" and

"school refusal" took place and similar terminology was recorded. A combination of these terms was used for the systematic search of the literature.

2.2.3 Details of the systematic literature review

A systematic literature search was conducted on 26th July 2021 to critically evaluate the research and identify existing gaps in the literature. The search terms included a combination of key words, the details of which are found in appendix A, page 120. Search terms were used in combination with Boolean operators to produce more relevant results. Only full-text and peer-reviewed articles were included in the search. Articles relevant to the research topic were selected for review and consequently inclusion and exclusion criterion were defined according to the relevance of the papers. Additional papers were found via a hand-search and the British Library online thesis collection, provided these met the inclusion criteria. The abstracts and article titles were screened manually by the researcher to evaluate their relevance to the area of research.

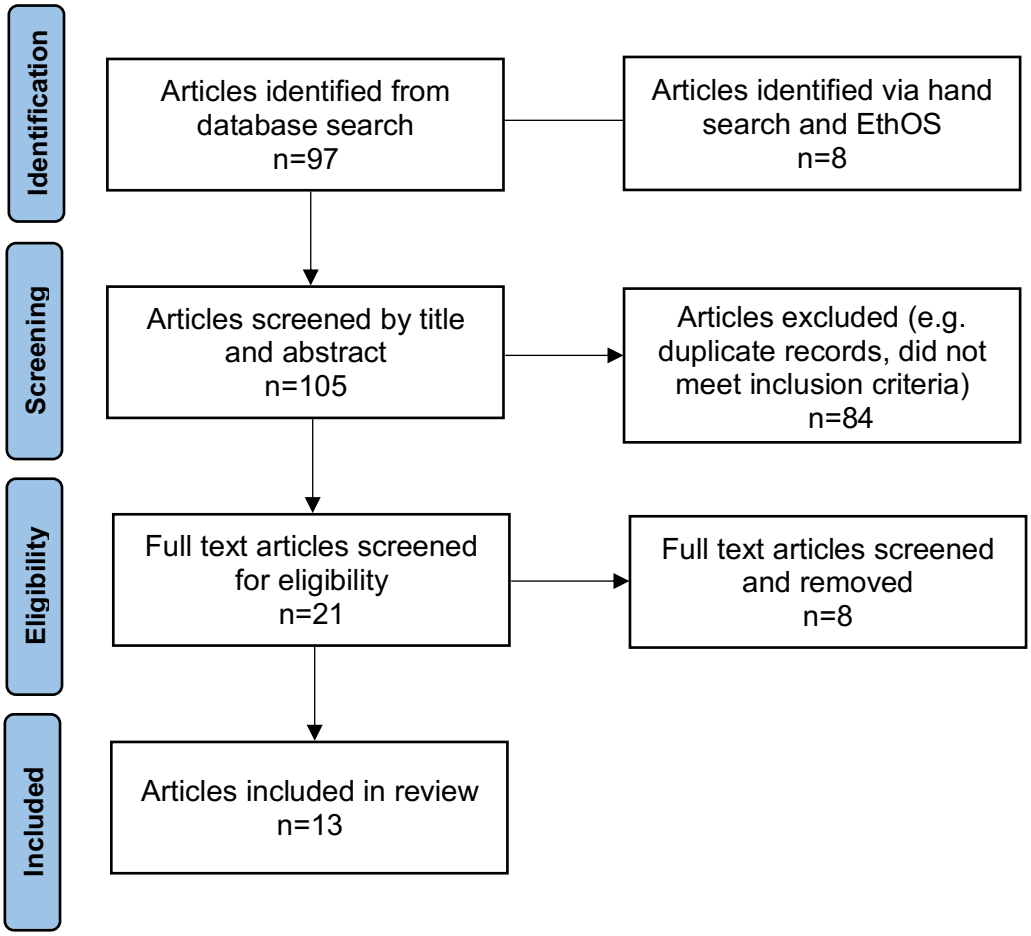
A decision was made to include doctoral theses. Whilst these are not peer reviewed, it was felt that thesis research involves extensive engagement in the topic as well as a high level of scrutiny as part of the supervisory and viva process which upholds the validity and quality of the research.

The literature identified from the systematic search is primarily based upon research conducted in the United Kingdom. However, a decision was made to broaden this out to include research from other Western countries which were seen to have education systems which are comparable to the UK and would remain relevant to the current research, particularly as non-attendance is seen to be an issue that is prevalent in a number of countries (Baker & Bishop, 2015). Despite this, all the research identified in the literature search was conducted within the UK. A summary of the literature search method and search terms are found in appendix A.

A second systematic literature review was conducted on 7 April 2022 following the above steps and no new papers were identified. One additional peer-reviewed paper was identified via a hand-search (Corcoran, Bond & Knox, 2022). There appears to be limited published research on young people's experiences of EBSA during Covid19; whilst the study by Corcoran et al. (2022) did not explicitly capture the voice of the young person, the focus, timeliness and context of the research during Covid19 was deemed relevant to the current research questions.

Figure 3

PRISMA diagram, illustrating the literature review process



2.3 Critical review of previous research

The process of critical appraisal aims to assess the research evidence by examining the validity, results and relevance of a study (Booth et al., 2016). Whilst the importance of using tools or frameworks to critically evaluate research is well acknowledged, there is not yet a shared consensus on how best to assess qualitative and scientific research, nor is there a tool which can be used effectively across all study types (Katrak et al., 2004).

Hollway (2007) describes how the dominance of quantitative research in psychology has meant that evaluative measures for research quality is often based on standards set for quantitative research. However, since there are often significant differences in the research paradigms and ontological and epistemological assumptions underpinning quantitative and qualitative research, the approach to critically appraising different types of research should also reflect this. Qualitative researchers would argue that reality is shaped by cultural and contextual factors rather than reflecting an absolute truth (Yardley, 2000) and therefore advocate for the use of alternative principles to assess research quality. The current literature review will be critiqued using Yardley's (2000) core principles for evaluating qualitative research as found in Table 1. The criteria are seen to provide the researcher with means to interpret and critique research findings in a flexible way, arguably offering more selectivity than using standardised measures.

Table 1

Core principles for evaluating good qualitative research

Sensitivity to context	Theoretical; relevant literature; sociocultural aspects; ethical issues highlighted
Commitment and rigour	Engagement with topic; methodological competence; sufficient depth of analysis
Transparency and coherence	Clarity of argument; transparent methodology and findings; fit between theory and method; reflexivity
Impact and importance	Theoretical (enriching understanding); socio-cultural; practical implications

Note. Adapted from *Dilemmas in Qualitative Health Research* by L.Yardley, 2000, *Psychology and Health, 15,* 215-228.

2.4 Systematic Literature Review Search Outcome

A total of 13 studies were identified in the literature review. The table in appendix B provides a breakdown and summary of each study, including information

on the participant sample, the type of analysis used and the key findings. The researcher used the most relevant aspects of Yardley's (2000) principles to evaluate the current literature review and to ascertain which papers belonged in the final corpus. The details of the critical appraisal of the literature are found in appendix C, page 126.

A decision was made to include studies from other Western countries although the final selection of studies were all based in the UK. Each of the studies used a qualitative research design, the majority of which used semi-structured interviews to gather data. All but two of the studies recruited participants who were of secondary school age. This is in line with research which suggests that school non-attendance often peaks at transition points (Pellegrini, 2007), such as following the move to secondary school. Aucott (2014) and Orme-Stapleton (2017) also included views of primary aged pupils as the studies were deemed appropriate and relevant to the current research.

2.5 Thematic synthesis of the previous research

A thematic synthesis of the literature was conducted. The researcher read the articles a number of times and grouped themes according to prevalent or significant findings. This was deemed an appropriate way to synthesise the research findings as there appeared to be overlap in a number of key themes. Six categories were established:

1. Relationships with others and a sense of belonging
2. Young people's insight and understanding
3. Learning and class environment
4. Support and professional involvement
5. Emotions and mental health
6. Family and home-life

2.5.1 Relationships with others and a sense of belonging

The majority of the studies identified in the literature review reported on the significance of relationships to young people who have experienced a period of non-attendance. This included friendships, challenges associated with peer relationships, relationships with school staff and reference to a sense of belonging.

Beckles (2014) collected the views of 12 secondary age pupils with reported low attendance, as well as the views of school staff. Staff participated in semi-structured interviews whilst the researcher engaged with young people using some participatory methods including drawing activities to help structure their responses. The findings indicated that young people highly valued friendships with peers, viewing friendships as an important support network. Friends offered support by acting in an empathic way and sharing positive advice when aspects of school felt challenging or stressful. One participant acknowledged that the need to socialise with friends had been a motivating factor to attend school and furthermore how friends would sometimes offer more encouragement than family members in promoting school attendance. However, another participant disclosed that whilst friendships were an important support network, they felt they were burdening their friends by sharing personal concerns thus putting the friendship at risk. This highlights the need for sufficient support mechanisms within school for young people who struggle to attend, perhaps also including those who are offering emotional support.

The researcher spent 4 days at the school prior to carrying out research to become familiar with the school setting and systems. Whilst the researcher argued that this prolonged engagement enhanced the credibility of the research findings, it may too have shaped participants' responses, particularly if they were aware of the purpose of the research. The self-selecting sample may have further shaped the findings as young people with less confidence or less positive experiences may have been less willing to engage in the research.

How (2015) reported similar findings in her research where she spoke with five low-attending young people of secondary school age using semi-structured interviews. How (2015) found that young people with low attendance viewed friendships as offering a protective element to aspects of school that were perceived more negatively. It should be noted, however, that some participants were

interviewed with their parents present which may have shaped or placed limits on the information that was shared with the researcher.

The functional view of friendships as a buffer to the stressors of school is one that is raised in doctoral research by Shilvock (2010). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with three secondary school girls currently experiencing emotionally-based non-attendance. Friendships and contact with peers were identified by all participants as being protective factors to lesser positive aspects of school life and consequently highly valued. All three participants were also identified as being young carers to parents with emotional and physical difficulties, which may suggest that friends were providing the type of emotional support that was perhaps less available at home. This illustrates the complex situations that some young people find themselves in and the importance of peer support at school.

In another study, Baker and Bishop (2015) investigated the views of four secondary age pupils who had experienced non-attendance. Friendships were highlighted as important but also an area of difficulty for some young people. Participants included both non-attenders and those who were registered for home education following non-attendance. Since some of the participants were home-schooled rather than having made a return to mainstream school then questions may be raised in how representative these views are compared to the views of young people who struggle to attend more generally.

Whilst the positive aspects of peer relationships are prevalent across most of the studies, the reverse trend was also highlighted, whereby difficulties in peer relationships were perceived negatively by young people. Participants in How's (2015) study reflected on issues of bullying and difficulties maintaining friendships, both of which contributed to low attendance. The experience of being bullied, followed by the expectant fear of further bullying made school a threatening place for participants. How (2015) commented on a lack of friends leading to the young people feeling less resilient. Similarly, bullying was noted by participants in research by Baker and Bishop (2015) and Clissold (2018) as one of the underlying causes to non-attendance. Online bullying via social media was emphasised by participants in Clissold's (2018) research, the only study to acknowledge the impact of technology on interactions with peers. This finding holds interest considering changes brought about by Covid-19 resulting in periods of online learning and social distancing.

Gregory and Purcell (2014) reported findings from semi-structured interviews with secondary age pupils and their parents and data was analysed using an IPA method.

Parents and young people agreed that bullying contributed to young people feeling unsettled at school. In three of the families, the views of parent and child were gathered, however in the other two families, the young person did not contribute their views. One of the aims of the research was to elicit the voice of the young person and whilst this was achieved, perhaps more emphasis was placed on adult views or interpretations of participants' behaviour. Furthermore, it was not always clear whether themes arose from interviews with the young person or adult. This demonstrates one of the challenges of collecting and triangulating perspectives where adult contributions can sometimes overshadow those of the young person.

Relationships with school staff were mentioned by young people in a number of studies. Want (2020) carried out narrative-style interviews with two secondary age pupils and their parents. Both young people had been diagnosed with autism. The pupils appreciated teachers having a 'humanistic' teaching style, such as a nurturing and compassionate approach, something which helped the young people feel valued. Contrary to this, noisier teachers were perceived as adding to difficulties at school. The researcher drew attention to Ryan & Deci's (2000) Self-Determination Theory and the need for relatedness with others. Want (2020) suggested that positive relationships with teachers helped fulfil the need for relatedness, crucially impacting on motivation to attend school. Having nurturing and supportive teachers were appreciated by young people in other studies (Nuttall and Woods, 2013; Smith, 2020). Arguably, these findings correlate with research that shows that EBSA is more prevalent in secondary school age pupils (Gulliford & Miller, 2015), given that primary schools tend to be more nurturing and the smaller setting might help foster positive pupil-teacher relationships.

Billington (2018) used an active-listening approach with three secondary age boys who had been identified as persistent non-attenders. Negative teacher-pupil relationships were raised by young people in Billington's (2018) research, particularly if teachers were unlikely to provide praise or were perceived as not liking the participants. These findings are perhaps unsurprising, given some of the theoretical assumptions that are seen to contribute to EBSA, such as a sense of belonging.

2.5.1.1 Theoretical Perspectives on Relationships

Theories of child development and human motivation highlight the importance of relationship and the need to belong, themes which are present throughout the findings of the literature review. Views on relationships may be underpinned by theories such as Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) and Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs. Both theories emphasise the role of relationships in meeting one's psychological needs, which is further believed to have a positive impact on wellbeing. Young people's responses that negative relationships with peers and staff indicates the need to belong and the issues that arise when this is threatened. Friendships and relationships with others also highlight influences from the microsystem (families, peers) within Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory.

2.5.2 Young people's insight and understanding of non-attendance

Several studies discussed the challenges participants faced in understanding and making sense of their school avoidance. Aucott (2014) reported on findings from a case study investigation where the views of children, parents and teachers were gathered, specifically in reference to their perceptions of the causes of non-attendance. In total, 11 participants took part in the research and three of these were children. Pupils interviewed were between 6 and 10 years old. Aucott (2014) drew attention to the ways in which adults were able to attribute reasons to a child's non-attendance and behaviour, whilst children found it a lot more difficult to recognise their behaviour and identify reasons for it. The findings suggest that children might benefit from support in achieving this. However, the difficulties participants faced in identifying the reasons for their behaviour may be linked to their age and stage of development, where older children may be better able to engage in reflective or higher order thinking. Furthermore, it is acknowledged that EBSA peaks at secondary school age (Gulliford and Miller, 2015; Pellegrini, 2007) and it may have been more relevant to have worked with an older participant sample, bearing in mind the aims of the research. Aucott (2014) drew upon research by Kearney & Silverman (1993), who suggested that a distinction can be drawn between the behaviour displayed by children who struggle to attend and the underlying function of the behaviour. For example, young people might remain home in order to avoid uncomfortable situations at school, or alternatively, might benefit from attention by remaining home in the company of family. Establishing the functions of behaviour

may help guide the interventions put into place; if young people find it difficult to make sense of their own experiences, it might therefore be difficult to share these with others in order to develop targeted interventions.

Beckles (2014) also reported on young people's understanding of their behaviour. Participants were able to provide ways in which they could improve school attendance, despite still finding it difficult to attend school. The findings align with Aucott's (2014) study, with the suggestion that not all young people may have a full understanding of the cause of their non-attendance, nor necessarily the need to seek adult support. Beckles (2014) suggests that young people might benefit from support in developing their meta-cognitive awareness, such as support in being able to understand their thoughts, feelings and behaviours. Strategies put forward by the researcher included CBT-type approaches or motivational interviewing, not only to bring some of these feelings to conscious awareness, but to also help reframe negative perceptions of school.

These findings can be viewed in reference to Self-Determination Theory (Ryan and Deci, 2000) which proposes that humans are driven by a need for autonomy, competency and relatedness. The need for autonomy requires an individual to have 'input in determining their own behaviour', which might be achieved through reflection, evaluating one's options or considering one's interests. Arguably when this need is unmet, it may lead to a lack of motivation and wellbeing, thus further complicating school avoidance behaviour. Support in gaining insight into one's actions and thinking more reflectively may help meet the need for intrapersonal autonomy.

2.5.2.1 Methodology and voice of the young person

The combination of semi-structured interviews and solution-focused tools in Beckles' (2014) research provided an appropriate method of data collection in enabling young people to reflect on their views of school. Interestingly, this encouraged participants to share some of the positive aspects of school, which does not often feature in the literature. However, a narrative-type approach which includes feedback for participants might provide opportunities for participants to reflect on their behaviour and experiences (Hiles & Cermák, 2008), which semi-structured interviews might not.

An alternative methodology was used by Billington (2018) to explore participants' experiences of non-attendance. Using an active-listening approach and

conducting unstructured interviews with three secondary age pupils. One significant finding related to the process of data collection, as participants felt that sharing and hearing their own narrative encouraged them to consider their experiences in a new light. Billington (2018) argued that the approach supported participants to think in a more reflective way, which enabled them to learn and move on from their experiences of school avoidance. Billington (2018) describes the research in reference to legislation and the role of the Educational Psychologist in gathering the views of young people in order to contribute to the understanding of those who offer support. This type of methodology seems an appropriate way to work with a vulnerable population, offering direct benefits in participants witnessing their own narratives to help make sense of their experiences.

Finally, Nuttall and Woods (2013) reported findings on what supported young people to reintegrate into school following a period of school avoidance. Two young people and the adults around them took part in semi-structured interviews in a case-study design. The authors developed an ecological model, based on Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory, acknowledging the personal, social and environmental factors that contribute to an individual's experience of school avoidance. The model includes recommendations for young people to be supported in developing a better understanding of their thoughts, feelings and behaviour. The researchers argued that being able to do so would be useful in helping a successful return to school.

2.5.3 Learning and class environment

Six of the studies reported on findings relating to young people's views of, and engagement with, learning (Beckles, 2014; Clissold, 2018; Gregory and Purcell, 2014; How, 2015; Shilvock, 2010; Smith, 2020).

Beckles (2014) described how young people reflected on feeling a sense of 'boredom', with one participant explaining "they [the lessons] are always like not fun, we just sit there and write". Other young people described how lessons that were unenjoyable or hard to understand led to a lack of motivation and were rated as being the 'main reason' for non-attendance. Strategies such as misbehaving or faking illness were used to avoid being in particular subjects. Likewise, participants in research by Shilvock (2010) described boring and irrelevant lessons making it more difficult to focus and feel motivated.

Education and learning were viewed as being 'unimportant' by participants in research by Gregory and Purcell (2014). However, transcripts were not available and consequently whether young people felt this way prior to avoiding school, or perhaps as a result of missing school and becoming less engaged is unclear. Participants shared how the need to catch up on missed work following school absence felt stressful, a finding that is supported by previous studies (Thambirajah et al., 2008).

Feelings of pressure to complete academic work was raised by participants in Clissold's (2018) research which was linked to anxiety in school. Clissold interviewed participants, including three secondary-age pupils, staff and parents, and used unstructured interviews to gather their views. Allowing participants to guide the content of the interviews could be seen to be an effective way of capturing experiences in an authentic way which offers a greater degree of freedom than a more structured interview schedule. Pressure experienced by young people was described as being 'self-imposed'. Whilst this may be the case, this view appears to have been contributed by adults working with the young people within the school setting and therefore may reflect an adult's interpretation. Other young people in Clissold's (2018) research spoke of a lack of motivation associated with the relevance of the curriculum. However, as explained by Clissold (2018), the participant was experiencing low mood and consequently causality should not be assumed from the views shared.

How (2015) explored participants' motivations, values and beliefs in relation to aspects of school life including learning. The findings indicated that participants perceived the school systems as not aligning with their own personal motivations to work (How, 2015), making learning less engaging.

The majority of participants' views were focused on the more negative aspects of academic life, although two papers presented findings which related to some of the positive experiences of learning. Participants in Beckles' (2014) study looked forward to participating in lessons they enjoyed and expressed how they missed attending school if this included their favourite lessons. Preference for particular teaching styles was seen to play a key part in this, where interactive and engaging lessons helped support young people's understanding and concentration. Participants agreed that their behaviour was likely to be worse in lessons which were less interactive and therefore perceived as less engaging. Young people also appreciated group work and choosing who to work with.

Smith (2020) spoke with 7 young people using an appreciative inquiry approach and included the use of visual tools, such as drawing activities, to structure participants responses. Smith (2020) found that teachers seen to be 'engaging' were perceived by young people to meet their needs which contributed to a more positive learning experience. Participants named interesting and enjoyable classes as boosting their motivation to attend school, particularly classes which aligned with their own interests. As in Beckles' (2014) research, interactive classes were valued and creative teaching methods were seen as ways that could support less academic students to contribute. Group work was named as something young people valued, which may align with the need for relatedness as in Ryan and Deci's (2000) Self-Determination Theory.

Smith (2020) reported how teaching style was also influential in participants' engagement with lessons with a mixture of views. Teachers with a laid-back style helped participants to learn without the need for prompting and reminders, whilst teachers with clear boundaries on classroom behaviour helped make the class environment more predictable. Smith (2020) used an appreciative inquiry into school avoidance which emphasised the positive aspects of school life. Whilst useful, the nature of appreciative inquiry has been critiqued by some as having too narrow a focus, whereby participants may feel it difficult to raise concerns or perceive these as being unvalidated (Egan & Lancaster, 2005).

2.5.4 Support and professional involvement

Another theme that arose from the literature review related to support offered to young people. This included individualised support, engagement with professionals and timeliness of the support that was delivered.

Individualised support was seen to contribute to a more positive learning experience in research by Smith (2020). Tailored support from teaching assistants to help catch up on missed work, or support from an adult in transitioning into the classroom from the school entrance were perceived positively by participants. Smith (2020) suggested that individualised support helped the young person to feel safe at school. Alternative interpretations of findings could also be considered. For example, a supported transition into the classroom might mean avoiding a busy and noisy school environment at the start of the school day. It could also be argued that access to a key adult during the transition to the classroom is less about feelings of safety and more about feeling valued.

Baker and Bishop (2015) provided interesting findings that showed that young people shared comparable views on the causes of their school absence, yet described similar experiences regarding the support they received. A shared consensus was reported by participants on the pressure to return to school without adequate support and an expectation that things would suddenly improve. The researchers argued that school responses were generalised and perhaps more focused on behaviour management than addressing emotional needs, which might reflect a 'within-child' perspective of school avoidance.

One notable finding illustrated that when the views of young people are acted upon and incorporated into the support provided, attendance is seen to improve (Aucott, 2014). However as previously highlighted, based on the views of primary school pupils may be somewhat problematic considering the differences in the ways primary and secondary schools are set up and function. Compared to secondary school settings, primary schools are often smaller which may mean communication within and between school systems is more achievable (Rae, 2020). Consequently, it may be easier to act on the views of pupils in a primary setting.

Some literature included information on engagement with professional services. Nuttall and Woods' (2013) model of intervention for school avoidance described professional support, early identification and assessment as being beneficial in developing a holistic understanding of a young person's behaviour. Professionals working pro-actively, including both the family and school, was seen as beneficial. Collaboration between professionals was highlighted as being impactful, a finding also noted by Want (2020) who described how a lack of collaboration between professionals was a barrier to a return to school. Regular monitoring and reviewing the situation with the young person helped contribute to a young person returning to school. Both participants recognised and named attributes in professionals offering support including specific knowledge, skills and experience which was seen as beneficial.

Mortimer (2019) explored the area of support in more detail, focusing on what had worked well for participants who had returned to school following a period of absence. The research used an appreciative inquiry, incorporating the views of two young people and three parents using semi-structured interviews. A gradual, flexible return was deemed most supportive and felt manageable to young people, with external agencies playing a part in this. Families who were referred to external

agencies, such as support from the Local Authority, felt positively whilst other participants expressed a desire for more help. The support from professionals was mentioned in the research on a number of occasions, however this does not appear to have come from the young people, but rather their parents. Mortimer (2019) commented that one young person found a 'direct approach' to support more challenging to engage with, which may explain why family members contributed more detail on professional support.

A final sub-theme relating to support was around the timeliness of help. Young people in Billington's (2018) study described receiving support but emphasised that this meant not only the right type of support but also being able to access it at the right time. Clissold (2018) reported similar findings where the availability and timing of support was seen to be both a perpetuating and precipitating cause to non-attendance. Delays in accessing support were named by young people as aggravating factors, making their anxiety worse. This aligns with previous findings that early intervention is often more effective (Thambirajah et al., 2008). Similarly, participants in a study by Baker and Bishop (2015) felt the process of accessing support was "long-winded", leading participants to perceive it as holding limited use. The researchers argued that school systems often request non-attenders back at school imminently, yet if this does not happen then support is slow to be put into place, which is not in the young people's best interests.

2.5.5 Emotions and mental health

Another theme central to the literature review findings was young people's emotions and mental health. Anxiety was named in nine out of 13 papers (Baker & Bishop, 2015; Billington, 2018; Clissold, 2018; Gregory & Purcell, 2014; How, 2015; Orme-Stapleton, 2017; Shilvock, 2010; Smith, 2015; Want, 2020). Anxiety was largely seen to be a cause of school avoidance, although there appeared to be differences as to whether anxiety was perceived to be a cause or result of school anxiety.

Young people in Clissold's (2018) study reported anxiety both prior to and following a period of school absence. Clissold (2018) saw school factors as contributing to feelings of anxiety, thus reducing a young person's ability to manage and cope at school, implying that anxiety was perceived as a 'predisposing factor'. One participant described 'constant' anxiety, linking this to their diagnosis of autism. Clissold (2018) embeds these findings within Bronfenbrenner's model and the way in

which systems within the microlevel interact, contributing to avoidant behaviour. Anxiety relating to the school environment featured in findings by How (2015) and Gregory and Purcell (2014). However, it should be noted that Gregory and Purcell (2014) explicitly referred to anxiety as part of the interview schedule, specifically asking about anxiety in returning to school and social anxiety, which is likely to have shaped participants' responses, arguably casting some doubts about the credibility of the findings.

Whilst anxiety is named in a number of papers as a factor in school avoidance, it is important to consider the inclusion criteria for participant recruitment and the outcomes that are reached. Findings from Beckles' (2014) research did not specifically name anxiety as a factor in school avoidance, however participants were drawn from a 'non-clinical' sample who had no known 'clinical or psychological difficulties''. This raises a question in relation to diagnostic labelling and the way in which this can limit discussions about anxiety and mental health to only those with a diagnosis.

A discrepancy in the views of anxiety-type feelings and behaviour was reported in research by Want (2020). Young people's feelings of 'anger' and 'stress' was interpreted and labelled as 'anxiety' by parents, indicating a difference in perceptions. This perhaps aligns with findings by Nuttall and Woods (2013) suggesting young people would benefit from support in identifying their own feelings. Alternatively, this could highlight the importance of upholding the child's voice and acknowledging their views, rather than promoting the views of the supporting adult.

It is clear that the epistemological position of the researcher can also shape the interpretation of data. As summarised by Smith (2015), focusing on anxiety can sometimes lead to a more 'within-child' perspective of school avoidance. This might lead to environmental factors going unaddressed and staff feeling disengaged and disempowered to bring about change, rather than systemic and environmental factors being examined more closely.

Mental health needs were named by participants in some studies. Young people in Beckles' (2014) study described feelings of depression when absent from school. Other participants described conflicting emotions, such as positive feelings when spending time at home in contrast to the feelings associated with negative parental reactions. A participant in Clissold's (2018) study constructed anxiety as a result of their depression, rather than being a causal factor of school avoidance.

However, another participant viewed anxiety as being more of a precipitating factor and contributing to non-attendance. These differences in interpretation and reasoning illustrate the personal and individual nature of young people's experiences of school avoidance.

Mental health needs were discussed by young people in research by Orme-Stapleton (2017) but framed differently by adults. Orme-Stapleton (2017) used semi-structured interviews with two young people and conducted a thematic analysis. Young people described symptoms of illness which was interpreted by parents as being a result of anxiety. Parents voiced their concerns in finding it difficult to establish times when their child was ill or instead experiencing anxiety. However, due to issues with participant recruitment there were gaps in the data and consequently at times it was difficult to distinguish the source of views raised in the research.

Other emotions raised by participants in the research included feelings of ambivalence (Shilvock, 2010) and finding it difficult to discuss school experiences comfortably (Gregory & Purcell, 2014). This illustrates the need to carefully consider the type of methodology when working with young people with EBSA and the measures that need to be taken to ensure participants feel safe throughout the research process.

2.5.6 Family and home life

Factors relating to the family and home life have been associated with school non-attendance and this was partly supported by the outcomes of the literature review. Family stress, separation anxiety, parental mental health and transitions such as parental separation have all been linked to school non-attendance (Thambirajah et al., 2008). However, this is often from a professional perspective and findings may be shaped by the relationships that form between school staff and families, rather than from the perspectives of young people.

In addition to the value of relationships as previously discussed, a number of studies discussed the role of the family in young people's non-attendance and the impact of school absence. School absence was described as having a significant impact on the family, such as affecting the mental health of family members or their availability and capacity to work (Orme-Stapleton, 2017; Want, 2020). Orme-Stapleton (2017) considered the implications of this on the family, suggesting that interventions are likely to be more effective if viewed from a systemic perspective

and planned with the whole family in mind. Likewise, Nuttall and Woods (2013) recommended that support for the family should aim to meet the individual needs of family members which in turn could lead to more positive relationships between home and school.

Effective communication between school and home allowed information and advice to be shared (Nuttall and Woods, 2013), such as the ways that parents can manage behaviour, understand their child's needs and have clear expectations on the return to school (Aucott, 2014). Poor communication between home and school was seen to contribute to delays in support which was acknowledged as being detrimental to the young person's wellbeing (Clissold, 2018).

Experiences of families being blamed for their child's school absence was widely reported (Aucott, 2014; Beckles, 2014; Clissold, 2018; Gregory & Purcell, 2014; Want, 2020). Gregory and Purcell (2014) explained that the way in which parents are blamed for school absence often led to parental anxiety. The authors emphasised the negative consequences of a 'within family' perspective which ignores systemic and environmental influences on behaviour. Bronfenbrenner's ecological model (2005) places the school and family unit within the microsystem, representing the young person's immediate environment. Disregarding influences on the young person from the other systems depicted within the model is arguably a limiting view and does not appear to align with previous research findings which take a more holistic approach (Kearney, 2008; Nuttall & Woods, 2013).

School staff in Beckles' (2014) research described the difficulties associated with children living in a 'dysfunctional' home environment. Beckles (2014) critiqued these findings, noting the subjective perspectives of school staff and the ethnocentric views held by individuals on what constitutes a healthy or functional family life. Details on what contributed to a 'dysfunctional' life at home was not made clear and therefore the reasons underpinning school absence was not made explicit, which casts some doubt on the reliability of findings.

Teachers in Aucott's (2014) study named difficulties in parenting abilities as one of the sustaining factors in school avoidance behaviour. Similar findings were reported in Clissold's (2018) research where staff described how parents' inability to enforce rules and consequences of non-attendance at home were contributing to the young person's difficulties. These findings also reveal the ways that schools can perceive EBSA as requiring punitive action, in the form of behavioural type

'consequences', which is perhaps not always the most effective or ethical intervention (Pellegrini, 2007).

Some young people themselves acknowledged the impact of their school absence on the family including some of the difficulties parents faced at home. A young person in Clissold's (2018) study described how his parents were less able to persuade him to attend secondary school than when he was younger. In another study by Aucott (2014), a young person recognised some of the consequences that his family faced following school absence including legal reprimands. The participant described these as a motivation for him to return to school. These findings illustrate young people's insights into the impact of absence on the family, viewed by one young person as a motivating factor in returning to school.

2.6 Synthesis of findings and contribution to the field

The purpose of the literature review was to establish the degree to which research has captured the experiences of young people who have experienced school avoidance. Furthermore, the literature review aimed to identify the views of young people who have experienced emotionally based school avoidance and synthesised the results according to themes in the literature.

The literature review identified a number of papers that focus on school avoidance behaviour, the majority of which relate to the experiences of secondary age pupils. This is in line with research that reports EBSA as 'peaking' following transition points such as the start of school or the move to secondary school (Pellegrini, 2007). Some of the research gathered the perspectives of parents and school staff (Aucott, 2014; Beckles, 2014; Clissold, 2018; Gregory & Purcell, 2014; Mortimer, 2019; Nuttall & Woods, 2013; Orme-Stapleton, 2017; Want, 2020) whilst others focused primarily on the views of young people (Baker & Bishop, 2015; Billington, 2018; How, 2015; Shilvock, 2010; Smith, 2020). Two of the papers included views of primary age pupils (Aucott, 2014; Orme-Stapleton, 2017).

The importance of relationships for the young person was a prevalent theme, including the value placed on friendships which were seen to be a source of emotional support (Beckles, 2014) as well as a buffer to negative school experiences (How, 2015; Shilvock, 2010). Issues regarding relationships with others such as bullying was also acknowledged as contributing to school avoidance (Baker & Bishop, 2015; Clissold, 2018; Gregory & Purcell, 2014) both in terms of the experience of being bullied as well as the fear of future incidents of bullying (How,

2015). Positive relationships with a member of school staff were named by young people as being an importance source of support (Nuttall & Woods, 2013; Smith, 2020; Want, 2020).

The wellbeing of young people and the emotional impact of school absence was a prominent finding, as might be expected for young people who experience difficulties in relation to their school attendance. Feelings of anxiety was noted amongst many young people, as both a precipitating cause and result of school absence (for example Clissold, 2018). The experience of school avoidance was associated with feelings of depression for some young people (Clissold, 2018), feelings of ambivalence (Shilvock, 2010) and conflicting, fluctuating emotions (Beckles, 2014), illustrating the highly individual nature of EBSA. Some young people appeared to find it difficult to name the feelings and behaviours that were thought to contribute to their school avoidance (Aucott, 2014; Beckles, 2014), with some researchers emphasising the value of supporting young people to develop a clearer understanding of their underlying thoughts, feelings and behaviour (Nuttall & Woods, 2013).

School-related factors were discussed by a number of young people, including feeling bored by lessons (Beckles, 2014; Shilvock, 2010) which contributed to feeling unmotivated to attend. Young people viewed lessons which were more engaging or interactive more positively (Beckles, 2014; Smith, 2020). Teaching style, group work and classroom expectations were all discussed by young people in relation to their learning. Individualised support from school staff was described in some of the findings as being valuable to young people (Aucott, 2014; Smith, 2020; Want, 2020). Support was mostly provided by school staff but help from professionals was also mentioned (Mortimer, 2019; Nuttall & Woods, 2013; Want, 2020). Professional support was deemed most effective when delivered at an appropriate time (Billington, 2018), whereas a lack of collaboration between professionals or delays hindered the return to school (Baker & Bishop, 2015; Want, 2020).

The role of the family emerged from the research findings, such as the impact of school absence on the mental health of family members and capacity to continue work (Gregory & Purcell, 2014; Orme-Stapleton, 2017; Want, 2020). Parents spoke of feeling blamed for their child's absence (Aucott, 2014; Beckles, 2014; Clissold, 2018; Gregory & Purcell, 2014; Want, 2020), a finding that was also reflected by

comments made by some young people who acknowledged the difficulties their families faced (Aucott, 2014). School staff described aspects of the home environment as factors underpinning school absence (Beckles, 2014). However, it is notable that young people spoke less about family-related factors than adults, or in comparison to school factors. This may suggest that either school has been of greater interest to researchers and consequently has been the focus of the research, or alternatively that there is scope to explore home-related factors in more detail.

Whilst the previous studies provided some interesting insights into school avoidance behaviour, there are a number of methodological and practical limitations which potentially impact on the reliability and generalisability of the findings, as follows.

It is apparent that the voices of some young people were overshadowed by the adults who also contributed their views to the research (Aucott, 2014; Gregory & Purcell, 2014; Nuttall & Woods, 2013; Orme-Stapleton, 2017; Want, 2020) with some researchers also acknowledging the 'pressing need' to further capture young people's experiences of school attendance difficulties (Baker & Bishop, 2015). Adults sat alongside young people during some interviews (Clissold, 2018; How, 2015) and whilst this may have put the young people at ease, it may have also shaped the findings, casting some doubt on the validity of the findings. Furthermore, it was not always clear whether the themes identified in the research pertained to the views of the young person or the adult (Aucott, 2014; Gregory & Purcell, 2014; Nuttall & Woods, 2013; Orme-Stapleton, 2017), illustrating some of the issues in collecting multiple perspectives and arguably the value of working solely/directly with the young person.

It is also worth highlighting that some of the research was carried out prior to the implementation of the Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) Code of Practice (2015). This statutory guidance was put into place to ensure that young people are actively involved in decision-making relating to their care and education (DfE, 2015). Research conducted before these legal requirements were enforced may in turn reflect outdated educational practice in schools (Aucott, 2014; Beckles, 2014; Gregory & Purcell, 2014; Nuttall & Woods, 2013; Shilvock, 2010). Furthermore, the impact of Covid19 on young people who have experienced emotionally-based school avoidance did not feature in the research and therefore remains of interest to the current research.

Most of the literature collected data using semi-structured interviews or a case study design. Whilst this was deemed fairly effective in capturing the views of the young people and those around them, the approach might also be viewed as quite limiting as participants are asked to respond to specific questions as set by the researcher. This assumes that the questions or areas of interest align with the participant's experiences of school avoidance. The current research seeks to use a narrative approach to listen to the stories of young people who have experienced emotional based school avoidance. Narrative-style research can offer participants a degree of freedom and flexibility in sharing their story without imposing a rigid structure, as is the case with semi-structured interviews. This follows a more inductive approach to data collection in order to gain a more thorough understanding of experiences of EBSA.

Furthermore, it is hoped that the process of sharing a story and hearing it back can offer participants opportunities to reflect on their experiences, in a way that previous research has not. Want (2020) used a narrative style approach to exploring non-attendance but member checks to validate the research findings were not carried out. The current research aims to share the young person's re-storied narratives with them, thus introducing a more participatory element to data collection which may bolster the validity of the findings. As highlighted by Nuttall and Woods (2013), young people who have experienced attendance difficulties appreciated support in naming the thoughts and feelings that contributed to school avoidance and it is hoped that the process of sharing a narrative will provide this opportunity.

The current research is using a novel approach to data collection by conducting interviews online. As highlighted by Ofsted earlier this year, there appear to be some benefits of working remotely with "anxious or excluded students" (Ofsted, 2021). It is hoped that the chosen methodology of an online narrative approach is an appropriate and meaningful way to work with young people who have experienced EBSA. Furthermore, the findings may illustrate the ways in which technology can be used for the purposes of research and data collection, widening access to certain vulnerable populations.

The key themes relating to relationships, individual factors (emotions and understanding of behaviour), learning, support and home-life can also be viewed through the lens of Bronfenbrenner's (1977) ecological model. The theory draws attention to the environmental and societal influences which shape an individual's

development, organised as a hierarchy of systems. The microsystem encompasses individual characteristics, relationships and other interactions including those with the family or other key people. Interactions with teachers, peers or professionals are located within the mesosystem, whilst other environmental, societal and cultural elements are found in the broadest levels of the model. Bronfenbrenner (1977) argued that human development is driven by interactions between an individual and their environment and shaped by the social context over time.

2.7 Implications for current research

The current research seeks to use a narrative approach to explore the individual, interpersonal, cultural and societal influences of emotional based school avoidance that are found in the narratives shared by young people.

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1 Chapter overview

Following on from the literature review, this chapter describes the aims of the research and provides further detail on the purpose of the study. The epistemological and ontological views of the researcher are outlined and details on the research design, data collection and data analysis are provided. Ethical considerations accounted for in the research study are highlighted.

3.2 Research aims

The rationale for the current study derives from a finding of limited research into EBSA and recent changes to the social climate (Blanden et al., 2021; Cresswell et al., 2021), as highlighted in the previous chapter. The current study aims to address some of the gaps in previous literature, including an overall lack of research into the narratives of individuals who have experienced EBSA, as perceived and shared by the young people themselves. The research seeks to capture these narratives using a novel online-approach to data collection, providing a safe space for participants to share their story and experiences. It is hoped that this research method may provide an original interpretation of existing findings into EBSA.

3.2.1 Purpose of the Research

Creswell & Creswell (2018) define several types of research purpose including descriptive, explanatory and exploratory designs. The purpose of the current research is exploratory in nature. Exploratory research is often used to understand more about a topic or phenomenon when the theory base is not fully known or understood. As highlighted in the previous chapter, EBSA is an under-researched area, in particular the views of young people. The purpose of the exploratory research is to also contribute to improving the support available to children who may find it difficult to attend school. It is hoped that the research can help develop strategies and guidance which may benefit children, families, teachers and other professionals.

3.3 Position of the researcher

A qualitative approach to exploring school avoidance behaviour was deemed necessary in order to provide insight into the meaning individuals ascribed to the experience of the phenomenon. Qualitative research is underpinned by certain assumptions about the nature of knowledge and philosophical perspectives of reality

which help guide decisions around the research methodology and data interpretation.

The role of the researcher and their interactions with participants introduces a number of 'strategic, ethical and personal issues' (Locke et al., 2013) which in turn shape part of the research process. It is important for the researcher to clarify their ontological and epistemological position, as well as sharing any personal experiences and beliefs that may shape the research process in some way. A research journal was kept throughout the research process to capture the researcher's views, decisions and any issues faced. It is hoped that this documentation has helped identify any biases held by the researcher that may have shaped the data interpretation.

3.3.1 Ontology

The ontological positioning of research describes how 'reality' is understood or perceived by the researcher. There are a wide range of ontological positions, from a view that a single reality exists (positivism) to a view that there are multiple, fluid realities and knowledge is socially constructed (interpretivism).

The ontological perspective of the current research sits between these two views. The current research is underpinned by a critical realist ontology, which acknowledges that individuals' realities are constructed in individual and unique ways and may significantly differ from one another. A critical realist perspective acknowledges the social, historic and cultural influences on one's perception of reality.

A critical realist perspective would view EBSA as a concept that exists yet the meanings attributed to the phenomenon are seen to be unique and socially constructed, dependent on the context in which it is observed.

3.3.2 Epistemology

Whilst ontology refers to what there is to know about the world or a phenomenon, epistemology asks 'how do we know whatever we know?' (Webster & Mertova, 2007) . Epistemological positions differ on whether reality is believed to be discovered through the process of research or, alternatively, is *created* through the process of research (Braun & Clarke, 2013). A researcher holding a positivist stance is likely to take the role of an observer; other researchers analysing the same dataset are likely to reach the same conclusions. Results may be generalisable and extraneous variables can be identified and removed from the data (Braun & Clarke,

2013). However, positivist research fails to address the importance of cultural factors that play a central role in research involving people.

The current research is underpinned by a social constructionist epistemology, the idea that knowledge is created between people and this is embedded within the historical, political and cultural context in which the research is set. Contrary to a more positivist epistemology, the research is not seeking an absolute truth in regard to EBSA. Instead, it acknowledges that knowledge of what individuals consider to be the cause of school avoidance, and what can help a return to school is unique and can be explored through discourse. Only through talking to others can these insights be explored and understood.

Language plays a central role in social constructionism and the way in which knowledge is constructed through social interactions. The social constructionist paradigm acknowledges the impact of the researcher-participant relationship in a way that could potentially increase the validity of the data (Mertens, 2020). By establishing rapport and forming a trusting relationship, participants may feel more comfortable and thus more open to sharing personal and important insights that may otherwise be difficult to capture. It is clear that the researcher plays a critical role in the co-construction of knowledge in the data collection stage.

3.4 Research Questions

The literature review helped identify a gap in the current research base for an in-depth exploration of emotional-based school avoidance from the perspectives of the young people. Much of the research has used semi-structured interview questions to help direct participant responses or has sought the views of adults around the young person, sometimes at the expense of the views of the young people themselves. Therefore the current research is using a narrative approach to provide participants with opportunities to share their experiences through the stories they tell.

The main research question is 'What are the narratives of young people who have experienced emotional-based school avoidance?'. This will be answered by addressing the four subsidiary research questions, which are:

1. What do the narratives tell us about psychological (individual) based factors?
2. What do the narratives tell us about family-based factors?
3. What do the narratives tell us about school-based factors?
4. What do the narratives tell us about systemic or professional factors?

3.5 Research Design

The research used a qualitative research design, consisting of a data collection phase using a narrative approach and a narrative data analysis phase. Qualitative research seeks to investigate aspects of the social or psychological world (Braun & Clarke, 2013) and allows for a richer understanding of a phenomenon than using a quantitative approach. Quantitative research methods are less able to capture the complexity of human-centred issues or phenomenon (Webster & Mertova, 2007) and are less aligned with the researcher's epistemological perspective, so were not deemed appropriate. Quantitative methods might also overlook aspects of a participant's life that they themselves deem to be significant.

Alternative research methodologies were considered whilst planning the research, such as a case-study design or a phenomenological approach.
A case-study design would involve conducting in-depth research on one or two participants over a longer period of time, using a variety of sources of data such as interviews and observations and other relevant documents (Robson & McCartan, 2016). A case-study approach would have provided rich data on EBSA. However, it is arguably a shift away from the stories as told by the young people, instead providing a description of a particular situation. The current research focuses on the narratives of young people, rather than multiple sources of information as is often the case with a case-study design.

Phenomenological research aims to capture the lived experience of a phenomenon (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The researcher often generates themes across a sample of participants to see how humans make sense of their experience. One example of this is Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) which is concerned with what has been experienced and how this is perceived by participants (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Whilst this approach might yield meaningful insights into EBSA, the focus on both individual cases and themes across cases might mean that IPA would not provide an adequate opportunity to explore participants' stories in sufficient depth. Furthermore, IPA can lack clarity around the social-cultural context (Braun & Clarke, 2013), which is acknowledged in a narrative approach.

As the current research is keen to explore the stories of young people in relation to school avoidance, the chosen methodology was narrative inquiry, a form of narrative research.

3.6 Narrative Research

Narrative is a term that has a number of meanings and is often defined differently across disciplines (Lewis, 2017). Whilst there is no one single definition, narrative is understood to be the practice of storytelling; a way in which a teller uses the structure of a story to both organise and share experiences. The content of these narratives is prioritised according to what is deemed to be important or significant, to both the teller as well as the audience. As explained by Lewis (2017), stories are a fundamental method of understanding one's own lived experience as well as the experiences of others. Narratives, or storytelling, tend to serve different purposes for each individual. Riessman (2008) explains how narratives may be used to remember, argue, entertain, persuade, engage or even mislead an audience. The story itself is interpreted in unique ways depending on the recipient.

Narrative may be viewed as a *process* and *product* of the process (Creswell, 2007). The process of telling or sharing a narrative is often a unique and individual one, depending on a number of factors. Narrative research may involve participants being interviewed to share their story, or alternatively, a more participatory approach can allow the researcher to facilitate the 'unfolding' of a life (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

In the current research, the narrative approach encourages participants to recall their experiences and reflect on memories that may have felt chaotic or fragmented before the process of re-telling them. The process of recalling past memories allows participants to constitute past experiences, whilst at the same time, provides a way in which individuals make sense of these (Riessman, 2008). The 'human centredness' feature of narrative research (Webster & Mertova, 2007), in upholding the real life experiences of participants is one that felt highly important to the researcher, in helping raise awareness of what it may be like to experience EBSA. Opportunities for participants to recall and reflect on past experiences through sharing their narratives is often perceived as holding therapeutic value (Riessman, 2008) and was another feature of the research design that appealed to the researcher. In line with the researcher's epistemological position, stories are perceived as 'social artifacts', set within institutional and cultural contexts (Riessman, 2008); they can shed light on society and culture as well as the individual or group being researched.

3.6.1 Limitations to narrative research

As is the case of any other research design, the narrative approach has its limitations. Atkinson (1997) shared concerns about the relationship between the researcher and the participant and the potential impact this has on blurring the 'interpretative boundaries' between the two individuals. He argues that there is a risk that the researcher can dominate the interpretative role, if sufficient links back to the data are not made clear. Alternatively, the researcher can underplay the interpretative role, failing to fully address the influence of the social context and interactions, which might also impact on the accuracy of participants' stories.

A narrative inquiry encourages the researcher to acknowledge what is *not* said as much as what is shared by the participant. An example of this might be an alternative viewpoint or the absence of a particular individual in a participant's story. It is further acknowledged that attributing meaning to 'untold' narratives can be extremely difficult.

In both cases, the importance of researcher reflexivity is vital in ensuring integrity of the data. Justification for decisions should be made explicit throughout the research process to ensure that data remains valid and researcher bias is minimal. Engaging in a 'conversational style' interview and allowing the participant to take the lead can also help mitigate power imbalances (Riesman, 2008). It was hoped that the initial meeting between the researcher and the participants would help address and lessen any potential power imbalances. The potential impact of this is nonetheless taken into consideration and further information on reflexivity is found later in chapter five, section 5.9.

3.6.2 Narrative therapy

Narrative is also an approach to therapy, a type of therapeutic counselling developed by White and Epston (1990) and was originally used within family therapy sessions. The approach explains how narratives are tied closely to an individual's identity, shaped by the social context in which they exist. The process of sharing a narrative, or even witnessing a narrative, can help shape one's identity and consequent actions and daily practices. Narrative therapy acknowledges that an individual can have many possible ways of describing oneself yet some of these become dominant in defining a sense of self, which might place limits on the actions one takes. This can be particularly threatening when 'problem' stories about an

individual are heard and reinforced by those around them who are in positions of power, such as a teacher in a school setting.

Narrative therapy, commonly referred to as a 'therapy of acknowledgment' (Walther & Fox, 2012), provides the means by which the interaction between the therapist and client can help illuminate the ways that the client would prefer to see themselves, or would prefer to be seen by others. This is seen to be an empowering process where a dominant narrative (of oneself) might be challenged and an alternative narrative can be strengthened, in order for individuals to re-story their lives.

The current study differs from narrative therapy since meetings with participants are for the purpose of research and additionally take place over a shorter period of time. However, it is clear that aspects of narrative therapy such as narrative questions, active listening and sharing a participant's narratives with them may also bring a sense of clarity and meaning to the lives of participants, which clearly offers therapeutic value.

3.6.3 Narrative inquiry

Narrative inquiry is a form of narrative research that is used to explore the way that humans experience their world over time (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Clandinin and Connelly (2000) argue that narrative inquiry goes beyond merely listening to stories in its attempts to try to understand participants' experiences through the interpretation of the story being shared. In doing so, the narrative is seen to be both the method and the phenomenon of study where the stories constitute the data itself.

The analysis of stories is often considered to be a complex and challenging task for the researcher in seeking to accurately capture the stories that have been shared without 'othering' participants in the process (Lewis, 2017). The overall goal of narrative analysis is to identify common themes or plots within the data (Polkinghorne, 1995), by looking at what is said and how this is expressed. Narrative analysis therefore looks at both descriptions of the story and the themes within it (Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002). There are a number of ways to conduct a narrative analysis, each of these potentially leading to new or different insights into a phenomenon. Approaches to narrative analysis can vary significantly, from categorising whole stories by genre, through to micro-analysis of text, where stories are broken down and the finer details are examined as part of a sense-making process (Willig, 2008).

3.6.4 Forms of narrative analysis

Riessman (2008) outlines four main approaches to narrative inquiry, namely thematic, structural, dialogic and visual. In each of these approaches, themes are identified by interpreting the overall account, exploring aspects of the narrative such as the type of story told and the characters and setting. Riessman (2008) comments on the flexibility offered by narrative approaches, explaining how methods can be combined and adapted according to the research focus.

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) constructed a framework for narrative inquiry. The framework provides a structure for participants' stories to be structured by a three-dimensional space; temporality, sociality and space. Each dimension is carefully considered by the researcher when analysing the data, which provides a way in which the story can be organised and better understood. Lewis (2017) further highlights the importance of absent narratives in considering what is *not* in the data as well as what does feature.

Once the narratives have been gathered and analysed, the stories are retold or 're-storied' by the researcher. This results in the creation of 'second-order narratives', an account of events as constructed by the researcher to make sense of participants' experiences. This is in contrast to first-order narratives which are the original stories as told by participants (Elliott, 2005). The collaborative aspect of narrative data collection and the relationship between the researcher and the participants also means the final re-storied narrative might reflect the views of both parties (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) as well as opportunities for personal reflections (Riessman, 2008). In keeping with Polkinghorne's (1995) analysis of narratives approach, the re-storied narratives serve as the primary data.

3.6.5 Narrative interview structure

Narrative research often follows a conversational-style to interviews (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008), whereby the researcher and the participant take turns in talking, allowing the story to develop. Prompt questions allow for a more conversational approach, and it is important that the researcher is sensitive to the responses of the participants, to know when to prompt further or when to ask a more direct question, whilst also providing sufficient thinking time. In doing so, detailed accounts of a phenomenon can be captured, creating a rich narrative, rather than brief answers. Allen (2017) emphasised the role of the researcher in facilitating, rather than controlling the conversation and the sense of unease associated with 'giving up

control' of the interview. It is acknowledged that this approach to interviewing can encourage participants to speak more freely and helps flatten power dynamics between the researcher and participants. A more structured interview process may have placed restrictions on participants from sharing their stories more openly in their own way. Furthermore, a structured interview schedule would not necessarily allow for the use of clarifying questions which can also help deepen discussion.

With this approach to interviewing, there is a fine balance between allowing the participant to take the lead whilst also guiding the conversation to focus on certain topics so sufficient information can be gathered to answer the research questions. In the current study, the subsidiary research questions refer to the individual, the family, the school and professional involvement. To be able to explore these topics in sufficient depth, probing questions relating to these topics were used during the interviews and participants were encouraged to think about these areas whilst completing the life grid. Questions such as 'can you tell me more about…' were deemed appropriate if it was felt that answers could be further expanded. A list of the prompt and probe questions are found in appendix K.

3.7 Recruitment process

A purposive sample was gathered for the research. A purposive sampling strategy requires that participants are recruited using a specific list of characteristics, connected to the phenomenon being researched and in order to best answer the research question (Robson & McCartan, 2016).

Participant criteria was based on previous research investigating emotional based school avoidance, or comparable behaviour. The following criteria were taken from research undertaken by Nuttall & Woods (2013), Mortimer (2018) and Baker & Bishop (2015):

- Secondary-school age as school avoidance behaviour is more prevalent in this age group (DfE, 2020)
- Currently on roll at a secondary school at the point of recruitment
- Participants' previous non-attendance from school is identified by school SENCo as being EBSA. As defined by West Sussex EPS (n.d.), these children are absent due to emotional distress in attending school, and not for medical reasons or following exclusion

- Parents were aware of their child's school avoidance behaviour (in comparison to school truancy, where parents may not be aware)
- Participants will need access to a device with internet access to use Microsoft Teams

The findings from the literature review highlights the lack of consensus in the way that school avoidance behaviour is defined by schools. Definitions were often imprecise and varied from setting to setting. Therefore, the definition as provided by West Sussex Educational Psychology Service (n.d.) was used as a general guide for participant recruitment. Schools provided technology so interviews could be taken online.

Qualitative research often uses smaller participant samples than quantitative research data collection (Patton, 2015). Lewis (2017) notes that there is no required sample size in narrative research but the approach typically draws from a small sample of participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A small sample size allows for rich information to be gathered, providing a unique and detailed account of a phenomenon. Working with a smaller sample enables the researcher to establish rapport with relationships which can enhance the validity of the research findings (Crouch & McKenzie, 2006). In line with the epistemological and ontological perspective held by the researcher, there is no goal to reach an absolute 'truth' regarding school avoidance behaviour, nor do these findings need to be generalisable. Instead, the focus is on the unique, individual stories told by young people and therefore there is no need to gather data from a large number of participants. The research had two female participants attending a secondary school within an inner-city local authority. Both participants attended the same school and were in different year groups. Details on the participants are found in table 2.

Table 2

Key demographic information on participants

Pseudonym	Gender	Age at point of recruitment	School Year	Ethnicity
A	Female	14y 10m	10	British Bengali
H	Female	15y 8m	11	British Bengali

Table 3

Attendance figures for both participants for each school year

Attendance rate / year	A	H
2017-2018	-	91%
2018-2019	92%	82%
2019-2020	94%	86%
2020-2021	90%	87%
2021-2022*	96%	93%

* Attendance rate at point of recruitment

Information letters were posted to several headteachers in the Local Authority in which the researcher was placed as a Trainee Educational Psychologist. In keeping with the participant criteria, these were mainstream secondary schools. Letters provided an outline of the research aims and request for involvement. Once permission had been granted by the headteacher, the researcher contacted the Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator (SENCo) in each school to identify potential participants. The SENCo passed letters and information sheets to the parents of potential participants to gain consent. Information sheets were passed to the young people to see if they were interested in participating in the study. Finally, an online meeting took place with the young person and the researcher to discuss the research project. Participants were provided with information on the interview structure and questions were addressed. The researcher and participants engaged in 'problem free' talk to start building rapport, such as holiday plans or favourite subjects at school. Dates for the online interviews were decided upon.

3.8 Life story grids

Life story grids were used to support participants to share their narratives. The visual structure of a life story grid is seen to be a rigorous method for capturing detail on an individual's life or around a particular event. It was hoped that the structure of the life grid would be an appropriate fit for the conversational-style interactions that are central to the narrative interview approach.

The life-story grid can be used in the initial meetings with respondents to start building rapport, thus helping to create a trusted relationship between the researcher and respondents. Parry and colleagues (1999) suggested that the use of a life grid can offer participants an element of control within the interview process, particularly around sharing sensitive or confidential information. Elliot (2005) emphasised the

effectiveness of life story grids, explaining how it is often easier for respondents to discuss specific times or places rather than much more general timeframes.

The life story grids were created in Microsoft Word and presented on screen. Participants were introduced to the life-story grid during the first online meeting and were invited to personalise the grids at the start of the interview, on the second meeting. The grid served as a conversational tool where the researcher could specify a specific time or event for the participant to talk about, for example by saying "please can you tell me about Year 8".

3.9 Data collection

Narrative interviews took place online via Microsoft Teams. Interviews took place within the school day and the school SENCo helped organise a comfortable, confidential space and provided a computer with access to Microsoft Teams. Participants were given the option of using their camera or not and all the interviews were recorded using the built-in feature on Microsoft Teams. A back up audio recording was made using a Dictaphone. Both participants opted to turn off their camera during the interview stage.

As highlighted by Lewis (2017), it is important that the data collection methods do not negatively impact on the relationship between the researcher and the participant. It was hoped that giving participants some autonomy in deciding whether to be present on screen or not would help build and sustain a trusting and authentic relationship. It was hoped that this would allow the story to remain the focus of the session and the data collection methods would be less of a distraction.

Prior to the interviews commencing, the researcher sought verbal consent from each participant, provided information on how long the interviews were likely to take and reminded participants that there would be a short break during the interviews (or if requested by the participant). Participants' right to withdraw was reiterated by the researcher and any questions were answered by the researcher. The researcher recapped the research process including what would happen next. The researcher and the participant engaged in conversation prior to the interview commencing in order to help put the participant at ease.

A life-story grid was presented on screen to help guide the interview process, a copy of which is found in appendix L. The researcher described the purpose of the life-story grid as a way of helping the participant to remember events in their life and explained that they would first be completing the grid before starting the interview.

Both participants decided to complete the life story grid with a box for each school year, starting from Year 5. The researcher invited the participant to share their story, starting wherever they felt comfortable to begin. Probe and prompt questions were used to encourage the participant to tell their narrative and to help deepen discussion. Following the interviews, the researcher manually transcribed the interviews in Microsoft Word and the recordings were subsequently deleted.

3.10 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for the research was obtained from the University of East London Ethics Committee as well as the Local Authority in which the research was conducted. Evidence of ethical approval is found in the appendices C and D. Participant recruitment and data collection only took place once ethical clearance had been granted.

The research followed ethical guidance published by the British Psychological Society (BPS; 2018). The BPS prioritises four key areas for ethical practice; principles of respect, competence, responsibility and integrity. In the context of the current research, this meant respecting the rights of participants, ensuring information was communicated clearly and honestly and participants were aware of the research purposes and their involvement. Personal information was carefully managed to ensure participant confidentiality and data was stored securely.

A copy of information sheets for the headteacher, parents and the young person are found in the appendices G and H. Information regarding participants' right to withdraw was clearly stated in the information sheet and participants were reminded of their rights prior to, and on completion of, data collection. The information sheet provided clear information on the research aims and on data confidentiality and anonymity.

The research adhered to the standards of conduct and ethical guidance provided by the Health and Care Professionals Council (HCPC; 2016) including the need to provide information in a way that others can understand, acknowledging and acting on concerns if necessary and working within the limits of knowledge and skills. This meant adapting the language and content on information sheets and consent forms for young people, being familiar with the safeguarding procedures within the school and being aware of professional agencies should further support be deemed necessary. A research journal was updated regularly to promote clarity and integrity in all aspects of the research.

School avoidance is a potentially emotive subject to discuss and therefore efforts were made to ensure that reflecting on these experiences would not result in participants facing any distress beyond what is encountered in day-to-day life. To minimise this risk, an online pre-meeting took place between the researcher and participant to answer any questions and to help build a trusted relationship. A member of school staff was identified as a source of support should any concerns have lasted beyond the data collection phase.

School safeguarding procedures were followed throughout the interview process. The researcher made themselves familiar with the safeguarding procedure and the steps to follow if any information was shared during the interviews that put the participant, or others, at risk of harm.

Conducting interviews online introduced some additional ethical concerns. Working remotely meant the researcher had less control over the participant's environment to ensure confidentiality of information and participant privacy. Discussions took place between the researcher and the school SENCo in preparation for the interviews, emphasising the need for a confidential and comfortable space in school for this purpose. Participants were not required to use the camera during the interviews and therefore visual cues that might signal upset or distress were less apparent. To address this, the researcher checked in verbally with participants during the interview. Issues around data storage in conducting interviews online were acknowledged by the researcher. Interviews were conducted via Microsoft Teams which adheres to General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) guidelines. Data was stored securely via the UEL Cloud service and backed up on a password-protected, encrypted device. Any information that could potentially identify a person or setting was anonymised by the researcher and participants chose a pseudonym to protect their identity.

3.11 Transcribing participants' narratives

Interviews were manually transcribed which allowed the researcher to gain a rich understanding and feel for the data. The current research is underpinned by a social-constructionist viewpoint which acknowledges the social context in which data is collected and in which the stories are set. The current research asks *what* stories are told by participants, rather than how these are shared. Since the focus of the research is on the content of the interviews, it was decided that it would not be necessary to transcribe and analyse linguistic features on a more micro-level, such

as intonation, as might be the case in Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Data was initially transcribed verbatim, including contributions from both the researcher and participant. The transcripts were tidied up at the next stage of data analysis.

3.12 Re-storying narratives

Each transcript was re-written or 're-storied' into a prose narrative, in order to construct a storied version of events. The process of re-storying is central to the narrative approach, whereby events are linked to each other by the researcher to create a coherent 'whole' (Polkinghorne, 1995). As described by Ollerenshaw and Creswell (2002), re-storying involves closely examining the raw data, identifying and sequencing the key elements of the story and rewriting the story to describe the individual's experiences. The key elements refer to the time, place, plot, and scene and these are sequenced chronologically. By sequencing the elements in the story into a logical order, the researcher can provide a link between the ideas that are shared (Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002).

Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) three-dimensional space framework was used to re-story participants' narratives. The framework highlights the importance of an individual's interactions with others as well as personal experiences (Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002). The three-dimensional space framework has three aspects to transcribing and analysing data, as found in table 4.

Table 4

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) Three-Dimensional Space Framework

Interaction		**Continuity**			**Situation**
Personal	***Social***	***Past***	***Present***	***Future***	***Context***
Look inward to internal conditions; feelings, hopes, aesthetic reactions, moral dispositions	Look outward to existential conditions in the environment with other people and their intentions, purposes, assumptions and points of view	Look backward to remembered experiences, feelings, and stories from earlier times	Look at current experiences, feelings, and stories relating to actions of an event	Look forward to implied and possible experiences and plot lines	Look at context, time, and place situated in a physical landscape or setting with topological and spatial boundaries with characters' intentions, purposes, and different points of view

The framework was deemed an appropriate fit considering the social constructionist underpinnings of the research. It was hoped that the framework would provide a structure by which the subsidiary questions could be addressed, particularly in thinking about context and interactions with others. The way that the life grid allows information to be gathered over a period of time maps on to the temporality aspect of the framework.

3.13 First stage of data analysis

Initially, the researcher underwent a process of reading each transcript a number of times to get an initial sense of the data. Crossley (2007) recommends six readings to familiarise oneself with the data and overall themes. Next, Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) three-dimensional framework was used to organise the data as previously noted. Information that related to one of the three components (temporality, sociality, place) was colour-coded using an electronic highlighter tool. Once each of the transcripts had been colour coded in this way, the highlighted text was copied and pasted into a table with the same headings as the three-dimensional framework. An example of this is found in appendix N.

The researcher underwent a process of re-organising the transcripts into units consisting of lines and stanzas. Riessman (2008) describes lines as being a single 'idea unit' and stanzas as being groups of units or separate statements. Transcribed text can be assigned a title to capture the meaning (Reissman, 2008).

Once the transcripts had been re-organised, the narratives were further developed using three techniques; broadening, burrowing and storying and re-storying (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Broadening might include descriptions of the participant and the social environment, burrowing refers to details experienced first-hand by participants, such as feelings, and re-storying means capturing the information in a way that brings the lived experience to the forefront of the story. Where possible, direct quotes, words or expressions featured in the final narratives.

The researcher decided to re-story participants' narratives from a third person point of view. As argued by Coulter and Smith (2009), trying to write from a first-person perspective can be problematic in seeking to capture the complex views, perspectives, thoughts and words of a participant in an accurate and credible way. Within narrative research, there is often a temptation for the researcher's voice to be elevated above that of the participant (Coulter & Smith, 2009), particularly in deciding what is re-storied and how. It was hoped that a third-person perspective might better

address this issue in helping capture participants' experiences in an authentic way, whilst not fully disregarding the co-constructive process of data collection.

A third meeting took place between the researcher and the participant where the re-storied version was shared with the participants. The rationale behind this follow-up meeting was to check that each story was an accurate portrayal of participant's experiences and participants were invited to share feedback on the research process. The process of checking the accuracy and authenticity of participant's accounts in turn helped participants take some ownership of their narratives. These conversations were not recorded although the research took notes of their own reflections following the meeting to help inform the discussion and promote reflexivity.

3.14 Identifying themes and addressing research questions

A second stage of data analysis took place to identify themes in each of the narratives and across the dataset, using both inductive and deductive means to answer the research questions. A narrative thematic analysis was conducted to identify themes in the research. Polkinghorne (1995) describes how the stories become the data and these are analysed to identify common themes across participants' stories. In order to identify themes, the researcher engaged in a coding process.

A deductive approach to data analysis was conducted to address the subsidiary research questions, whereby the text was coded into themes that were generated from the literature review and from previous theory. A code is a word or phrase that describes or summarises the data, aiming to either align closely with participants' meanings, or alternatively to explore the meaning behind the narrative. Sections of text that were seen to be similar in focus or meaning and these were coded and grouped into narrative themes (Braun & Clark, 2012). Narrative themes were therefore made up of sections of text that captured a similar experience.

The researcher read through the narratives and colour-coded excerpts that referred to individual, family, school or professional and systemic factors. A short description for each code was created which formed sub-themes. A second check of the data took place to ensure that the coded extracts aligned with the entire data set. Finally, the researcher returned to the research questions to ensure that these had been answered.

3.15 Reflexivity

Validity indicates how 'truthful' or accurate a piece of research is in what it claims to show (Goodman, 2008) and is seen to be one of the strengths of qualitative research (Creswell & Miller, 2000). However, the term has also been challenged by other researchers who acknowledge the existence of multiple perspectives or realities which hold equal value, and the term *trustworthiness* is often used as an alternative (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

Considering the social constructionist underpinnings of the current research, the researcher is influential in both the construction of knowledge during the data collection as well as the data analysis (Booth et al., 2016). A research journal was kept, capturing key decisions made as well as thoughts, questions or issues raised by the researcher. This provided a structure for critical reflection as well as clear justification for decisions made.

In narrative research, validity can be viewed on multiple levels, such as the validity of the story as told by the participant and also the validity of the story as captured and re-told by the researcher (Riessman, 2008). Validity issues were addressed by the researcher using member checks. Member checks are findings or a sample of the data is presented to participants to ensure its authenticity (Braun & Clarke, 2013). The re-storied narratives were shared with participants who were invited to comment on its accuracy and trustworthiness. Both participants indicated that the stories accurately described their experiences and did not feel it necessary to change any aspect of their story. Participants appeared to find the process of hearing their story a positive and therapeutic one.

Kim (2016) highlighted the dilemma in acknowledging that a 'good' story might not be faithful to the story shared by the participant, or alternatively, what is 'faithful' might not be a 'good' story to share. This can sometimes lead the researcher to interpret stories in a subjective way, by omitting, emphasising or providing information to help embellish or strengthen the narrative. It was hoped that keeping to the original narratives as closely as possible by using participants' words and phrases, as well as checking the re-storied version with participants would help address this.

Other less formalised actions were carried out by the researcher to uphold the validity of the data. The researcher paid close attention to the transcript and language used to ensure an accurate portrayal of concepts or social constructs.

Clarifying questions were also used in the interviews. The interviews were recorded to increase the accuracy of the transcriptions and validity of findings. Potential power issues between the researcher and the participants were considered; use of the life grid and initial rapport building provided opportunities for the participant to gain a sense of control in the research process.

An audit trail was maintained throughout the research project, including records of paperwork, e-mails, ethical documents and other relevant records.

Chapter 4: Findings

4.1 Chapter overview

In this chapter, the findings from the research will be shared. The storied narratives were included in full as these were deemed to be central to the research and will provide the reader with insight into the experiences of emotionally based school avoidance in detail. The following sub-section of the chapter will explore the ways in which the narratives are connected through their experiences, as well as highlighting key differences between them. A thematic map for each narrative is included alongside an overall thematic map.

4.2 Narrative stories

4.2.1 *H's story*

Year 6

H's story starts in Year 6, at primary school. H felt that primary school was quite nice, although Year 6 was seen to be a challenging time. At home, things started to change a bit too.

Experience of bullying

H had a big friendship group at primary school. However, in the middle of Year 6, H experienced some bullying from the group of friends, who turned against her and acted in a fake way, seemingly for no reason at all. H acknowledged she found it difficult to speak up for herself in primary school, sometimes feeling that she didn't have a voice. It was often easier for H to avoid tricky situations that she faced. Initially, H felt quite alone in managing the situation at school. H spoke to her mum about what was happening at school, who in turn spoke to H's teacher. Once H's mum had opened up to the teacher, H felt like she could open up to her too.

School avoidance

Earlier in primary school, H would occasionally miss a couple of days here and there, but in Year 6, H started to miss school more often, asking herself: '*what's the point in going in? Especially if I allow my friends to just ignore me*.' H felt better staying home. At home, H's mum was angry and upset at what was happening at school and what H was going through. H's mum supported her at home, and by speaking to her teacher, she was trying hard to improve the situation for H at school. H's teacher spoke to the group at school who told the group that what they were doing was wrong. H felt this made things slightly easier and they started speaking to H again, however it wasn't the same. H felt angry and annoyed as she'd done nothing wrong and was just trying to be a good friend.

Changes at home

Things changed at home in Year 6 and this affected H's mood too. H lives at home with her mum, whilst her dad has been in and out of her life for many years. There was a significant change in Year 6 where H didn't see her dad for almost a year. H felt feelings of anger during this time. H spoke to family members, including her nan, grandad and uncles. They told H they were there for her and how she could speak to them if she ever wanted to and not to worry about what her dad had done as it wasn't her fault. H noticed how stressful this was for her mum which in turn made her feel angry.

Towards the end of Year 6, some of H's friendship group admitted that they had turned against her with no clear reason and the friendship group became smaller. However, as a result, H grew closer to two of them and the friendship lasted until the end of primary school. As H grew closer to the two friends, she started to feel less angry at school and started to enjoy school again. H spoke to her friends about secondary school, and they all shared feelings of being scared about leaving primary school and starting a bigger secondary school.

The start of secondary school and tricky friendships

H started secondary school in Year 7 and things felt very new. H had a friend from primary school and whilst they hadn't really spoken much before, they became quite close having joined the same secondary school. However, this friend turned out to be quite a bad influence, often getting in trouble, which meant H started getting in trouble too. At home, H's dad came and went from her life and her feelings of anger started to increase.

Things started to get worse and H ended her friendship with the girl from her primary school and consequently spent more time with her newer friend. Her friend's true colours came out after a while and whilst H did not realise this at the time, she turned out to be more of a bad influence. It took a couple of months for H to realise the impact of what was happening at school. H felt like she'd lost herself. Her attendance was really bad and her mum was noticing the impact this was having on H. A lot of people in Year 7 went against H, calling her names and making rumours about her, asking her if what they'd heard was true. H explained the rumours were false but they continued. Even now some echoes of the false rumours circulate at school.

Supportive staff and professional help

As was the case in Year 6, H's mum helped her again. The teachers in inclusion also found out some of the things that were happening and started supporting H which was helpful. The staff in inclusion reassured H that she could come down to inclusion when she needed someone to talk to. H met with a lady from the NSPCC a couple of times at school to talk about everything. They spoke about school and home and how it was difficult for H when her dad wasn't always around. The NSPCC helped H to understand how to manage things which H found helpful.

Time out in inclusion

In Year 7, H was at home a lot, coming into school once or twice a week. When H came into school, she sometimes found herself getting caught up in trouble. One girl in particular made up comments about H which were offensive. Understandably, this made H feel angry. Eventually, all the anger built up inside of H and she reacted. But, perhaps for the first time, she had also stood up for herself. As a result, H spent 2 weeks in inclusion where she worked in a room with students from other year groups. H partly saw this as a punishment but also partly supportive; she had time to reflect on what happened and had learnt a lesson. In some ways, it was actually a lot better than regular school, as the woman in inclusion was nice, supportive and helped H feel better. The other students in inclusion didn't speak about H which felt better. Other staff in inclusion were nice too; they knew what was going on and supported H.

A fresh start

At school, each year group is divided into two halves and following H's time in inclusion, her head of Year 7 suggested that H move to a new tutor group in the other half of the year for a new start. The head of year is quite strict but also understanding, demonstrated in the way she offered support. For example, the head of year encouraged H to come into school and explained that she could learn in the inclusion room if she didn't feel like coming in or going to her class. At first, H didn't agree to changing halves as she didn't know anyone. However, H agreed. When H first arrived in the new form, she was quiet and didn't say a lot. One girl approached her, asking: '*why did you move?*' and asking other questions. H spoke to her and they soon became friends. In fact, it soon felt like they'd been friends for a long time. The friendship was more genuine than before and H started speaking to 2 other girls as well. Her new friends guided her, motivating her to complete her homework, and she knew they were there for her. H expressed how moving to the other half of the year was actually a good idea.

Looking back, Year 7 was one of the worst years of H's life and there were times where she felt lost and confused about everything. Crucially, however, she overcame the challenges she faced and met new friends.

Feelings of frustration

Year 8 was a better year for H. At school, H's friendships were getting better and she wasn't getting into trouble as much as in Year 7. However, rumours about H continued to circulate and H still felt some people were against her with no clear reason. It seemed that the whole year were aware of the rumours. H spoke with her head of year and staff in inclusion about this; it didn't really make things better or worse although H felt better for letting it out.

Outside of school, H continued to have some feelings of confusion and occasionally anger, possibly relating to the situation at home with her dad. H

felt confused about her dad, and started to ask herself questions: *why was he not in my life? why did he do what he did?*
H turned to her mum who answered her questions, although then she would want to ask more and more. H was mindful that she didn't want to give her mum any additional stress, but at the same time she felt like her head was going to explode.

H missed some school in Year 8, preferring to stay home with her mum where it felt safe. At the time, H didn't feel safe at school unless she was with her friends. H felt hated by some other students. Eventually, H wanted to change school so she and her mum decided to apply for another school. H had the letter in front of her but her gut feeling was telling her not to sign it, and to wait and see how things go. H told herself: '*I've come all this way, what's the point in moving now?'*

Later, H spoke of how she was glad she didn't change schools. H managed many challenging situations at school and at home by reminding herself of the people that really cared about her, including her family and her friendship group. H saw how Year 8 was a lot better than Year 7 and that's what kept her going.

Covid and home learning

Due to Covid, H didn't have an entire Year 9 at school. School closed in March and everyone had 6 months at home due to the Covid19. Initially, H enjoyed home learning but acknowledges it was boring at the same time. The school sent a learning pack home for H to do. At first, she didn't do it but then realised she should. Towards the end of the holiday, H started completing it, bit by bit.
Having spent a long time at home, H got used to being at home and didn't want to return to school. H was aware that this had an impact on her emotionally; having six months at home made her feel better and worse at the same time. There was lots of time to think about everything that was going on and she was overthinking.

A turning point

In many ways, Year 9 appeared to be a turning point for H and in her attitude towards things. In Year 9, H's Head of Year arranged for her to meet with a school coach from a local charity. They tend to meet on a one-to-one basis to discuss how things are going and talk about forthcoming plans, such as what college to apply to or what H would like to study. H has started to look forward to the future which feels helpful.

H felt that Year 9 was when things were starting to turn around. Whilst H still experienced feelings of confusion and anger, she started to realise the need to look forward and move on.

H started back in Year 10 in September. H was quite nervous about returning. On her return to school, H spoke to staff in inclusion and her coach. A new

member of staff joined school as a mentor who H started talking to. H felt the new staff member was helpful and nice. In Year 10, H sometimes spent a lesson in the inclusion area, particularly if she was feeling off or a bit down.

There were some lessons at school where there were certain girls who H didn't want to be around, as they gave her dirt[2] or made up rumours. Despite that, H began to realise that there will always be certain people that you don't get along with and that's okay. H had come to accept that it wasn't worth getting into trouble for people like that and learnt to try and ignore the comments, so it affected her less. In time, H's attendance got better. Whilst H would miss the occasional day, this mostly came down to certain lessons where she had to be in class with the girls.

School supported H with her anxiety and times when she felt sick. At first, H wouldn't push herself to come in when she felt sick. However, school, the lady from the NSPCC and H's mum shared some techniques to manage her anxiety, such as listening to music at home, writing things down or talking to someone. This seemed to have a positive impact on H's learning as she started to pay attention in lessons. H had found it hard to concentrate in the past as she'd been prone to overthinking. However, in Year 10, H started to focus and participate more. H enjoyed RE and English and Geography and completed her RE GCSE in Year 10.

Year 11: support network and a positive attitude

H is currently in Year 11, which has been the best year at school so far. She has been trying her best and hope this continues. H admits there are times where she doesn't feel like going to school but pushes herself to come in. H manages these situations by speaking to someone in inclusion, such as her mentor, who is understanding and cheers her up.
H hasn't missed a day off school this year and has come to realise that if she misses school, she may be affecting her education as well as putting stress on her mum.
H has 3 close friends at school and she supports and appreciates all of them. This past year, H has grown particularly close to one friend who has been the most supportive out of all of them. She really understands H, even without H having to say anything at all. H is really grateful for this, it's made school better and gives her another reason to come into school. H is glad to be in her final year at school and wants to make the most of it and to have a good year.

Thinking back over her time at school, H is aware that she is calmer now and can speak up for herself in a more positive way, without reacting in a bad way. What's more, H is proud to see that things have improved, year on year. Sometimes H reminds herself of this, to give herself more hope and motivation.

Outside of school, things have changed too. From Year 7 to Year 10, H's dad was not always around but in Year 11 he's come back to H's life and she can

[2] 'Dirt' is an informal term; to spread malicious gossip

see him. H feels happy knowing where he is but also scared that he might leave again. H feels that she'd like to forgive him although this feels hard. H has spoken to her dad but knows that he does not always answer her questions properly. Still, H feels hopeful that there is an opportunity to slowly rebuild their relationship.

Looking forward

Looking forward, H has decided that she'd like to go to a college to study Health and Social Care. H would like to be able to work with young people who are similar to her, to use her past experiences to help them and make them feel happy too. H has had some conversations with her coach about it. H recognises that this will be different from starting at secondary school. She is looking forward to having some more freedom, to be able to do her own thing and focus on herself. H feels slightly nervous about the change having spent 5 years at school, but she knows she doesn't give up; she didn't give up at secondary school and it was worth it in the end.

4.2.2. *A's story*

Year 5

A's story begins in Year 5 at primary school. *A* had friends at school and she had a really nice teacher whose name was R. *A* didn't always listen in class as she mostly wanted to have fun. *A* was really good at Maths, especially Algebra. *A*'s mum worked at her primary school so R would often talk to her mum and tell her the things that were going well. *A* felt good about this.

Scary teachers

A had a different teacher for Maths called Mr M who was scary. He was very strict and *A* wasn't a big fan of him. *A* felt like Mr M picked on her when she didn't get the work right and whenever she got an answer wrong, he'd look at her as if she was dumb. *A*'s sister had warned *A* that Mr M was scary and that she shouldn't be naughty in his class. *A* was so scared that sometimes she wouldn't come in if she knew she had maths with him. Other kids were scared of him too and the class would sit quietly in class, apart from the clever kids who got on with the work. *A* was scared to ask for help from Mr M and had no idea what she was doing. In class, Mr M would just repeat the question instead of showing the class how to do it.

A attended school regularly but sometimes stayed home if she didn't feel comfortable coming in, telling her mum she didn't feel well. *A* would also become quite tearful. *A*'s mum was understanding and would stay home with her, besides a few hours when her mum was working at school. *A* felt better at home. She felt safe.

Moving into different sets

In Primary school, *A* had one class teacher but in Year 6, the class were put in sets for English, Maths and Science with different teachers to prepare for secondary school. Everyone was placed in sets in assembly and thought they would be separated from their friends. *A*'s name was called, along with her friend, and they were placed in a class with all the clever kids who were smart and good at maths. *A* was surprised that her name had been called. *A* was scared that if she went into the higher set, people were going to look at her work.
A few days later, *A*'s teacher realised a mistake had been made and moved her down a set. At that point, *A* got help from her actual teacher. She had friends around and wasn't scared of making mistakes. She felt comfortable and started participating, whereas she hadn't before.

World Book Day took place in Year 6 and everyone dressed up. *A* dressed up as Katniss Everdeen from Hunger Games and won a prize, despite the fact that not many people knew who she was. It was a memorable day as *A* grew more comfortable in talking to her teachers, including Mr M. He seemed impressed that she started conversation with him.

The start of secondary school and tricky friendships

A started secondary school in Year 7 which was a big change. *A* had a friend at secondary school who she'd known since Year 5 as they'd attended the same primary school. However, *A*'s friend completely changed. She was very rude and started talking behind *A*'s back and *A* didn't stand for it. *A* tried to end the friendship in Year 7 but it was difficult. Even now, there are some issues with her as she sometimes tries to bring up rumours from the past or talks to other people about *A* or tells the teachers she's misbehaving.

Scary teachers

In Year 7, *A* had a strict teacher for Maths called Mr Smith. He reminded *A* of her maths teacher from primary school as he was strict and sometimes told her off. *A* sat next to a boy in class who would look at *A*'s work and make comments about it which made her worry. At home, *A* spoke to her sister and told her that she wasn't enjoying maths and that she found Mr Smith scary. Mr Smith expected *A* to know things that she didn't know and that felt scary for *A*. On one occasion, *A* was sitting in maths class and drawing on a piece of paper when suddenly the teacher asked her a question. *A* had no idea and the class started laughing. Since then, *A* doesn't like talking in front of other people.

Making friends

In Year 7, *A* found it hard to talk to new people and this made it hard at the beginning. However, *A* realised there was a girl she knew as her brother and *A*'s sister were in the same year so they became friends and now they're

besties. *A* also made friends with twins from primary school who went on the same school trips as *A*. They're still friends now.
A made another friend in maths class called S. Whilst they both joked around at times, they also helped each other if they didn't understand the work.

Academic struggles in Year 7

In Year 7 science class, *A* sat next to a girl who she felt scared of, in case she looked at *A*'s work and made her feel dumb. The science teacher would sometimes question *A*, asking her things she didn't know. *A* couldn't remember doing her Science SATs at primary school and so it felt like she was learning Science for the first time. It was a blur.
After a while, *A* was moved down a set. She felt upset because she was worried everyone would think she was dumb. *A* knew that set 3 often had cover teachers and didn't like this. When there was a cover teacher, no-one really learned anything and *A* cared less about the lesson. However, when A went to set 3, everyone welcomed her by calling her name and they gassed her up. A knew that she would need to work hard and get herself a good grade to move back to set 2 and in the end she did really well, moving back up to set 2 in Year 8.

Year 8: a good start

The beginning of Year 8 was a good time for *A* as she had good friends and the seating plan was the best. *A* really liked her timetable and since most teachers organised the seating plan in register order, *A* sat with her friends. When *A* sat with her friends, she could be more honest and seek their help with work which helped her feel more comfortable.

Outside of school, *A* was supposed to get braces fitted. *A* missed some school going to the dentist and orthodontist who would refer *A* to one other and it went on and on. *A* missed a lot of school when this was happening.

Covid and home learning

When Covid hit, *A* had to isolate earlier than the rest of her year as her mum had a low immune system and was asked to isolate as was at high risk of getting covid. *A* also came into contact with someone at school who had covid so had to remain home.

At first, A loved the time off school. She loved going to bed late and waking up late and not having to worry about homework. It was a relaxing time and it felt like the best summer holiday. *A* had lots of free time to rest or use TikTok[3]. However, school introduced Google Classroom after a while and *A*'s classes were taken online. Suddenly *A* realised she had to wake up early, join lessons and work. *A* always made sure she was online and attended the online lessons but it was a nightmare and *A* found it difficult to learn.

[3] Tik-Tok is an online video-sharing social networking app

Returning to school

A returned to school in Year 9 which was a good and bad year for her. On her return to school, *A* noticed that everyone was opening up and talking to each other, more than before. *A* saw her friends after a long time and they hugged each other, even though they weren't allowed to. *A* was looking around, thinking how everyone had changed.

Science continued to be a hard lesson for *A*. The class were placed in bubbles. The science classroom was freezing and there weren't any heaters. *A's* science teacher, the head of science, had high expectations for the class and her teaching style made it hard to understand and difficult to enjoy. Her teacher expected the class to know certain scientific terms, such as mitochondria, without explaining it fully. This started to annoy her. When *A* felt annoyed and didn't feel able to attend science class, she'd go to the inclusion area instead. She would complete her work in inclusion. It was helpful being apart from her science teacher.

Experiencing loss

Later in Year 9, *A* faced a stressful and emotional time outside of school as her nan became ill. This happened during the lead up to the holiday time where A's nan was in the hospital a lot. A would often go straight to her nan's house in her school uniform and stay there until her mum returned from the hospital, sometimes returning home at 1 in the morning. *A* would be uncomfortable in her school uniform and wasn't able to stay home and revise. A brought her books to her nan's house to revise but it wasn't possible with lots of people around. *A*'s mum reassured her that she didn't need to revise to help her feel less stressed.

A's grandma passed away and this was a really hard time for *A* as they were very close. *A* felt unable to attend school around this time and wanted to stay with her family. She didn't want to tell anyone because it wasn't a subject that she liked to talk about. However, *A* did talk to her best friend who lived nearby about how it was and she came to visit *A*'s house and saw her family. A really appreciated that her friend was able to do that with her. Other people from outside school helped too, including neighbours and family friends; they visited and said a special prayer together and gave their respects. This was really nice for *A.*

Importance of trusted staff

At school, *A* had a teacher that she could talk to about anything. He was like a cousin-brother type figure for *A* and someone she could actually speak to. *A* told him what was going on at home and he suggested that she prayed and recommended other things for A to do at home to make sure her grandma was at peace.

Impact of stress

At the end of Year 9, *A* had her mock exams which took place in the summer when it was really hot. *A's* science mock exam took place in the science lab which was really hot, like a garden. A found herself falling asleep in the middle of it. When she woke up, she hadn't answered many of the questions and hadn't been able to revise as she was going through stuff at home.

A missed a lot of school in Year 9. A didn't really care about Year 9 because she wasn't in the right mindset to do any work. If she didn't feel able to come to school, A would tell her mum that she would rather work at home which *A's* mum agreed to. *A* felt better being at home because she felt like she was really struggling with science and other aspects of school.

Learning outside the classroom

A's mum spoke to *A*'s head of year who communicated with her form tutor that she was finding things difficult. By the time *A* spoke to her science teacher, things were going a bit better as she was learning about human biology, which *A* knew more about. Consequently, *A*'s science teacher reassured her that she shouldn't worry, although she didn't understand that *A* was finding Chemistry and Physics hard too. This was somewhat helpful for *A*; it helped to talk to people and it reminded her that she shouldn't stress out…but at the same time, it didn't make science any easier. To this day, *A* finds science hard.

A and her form tutor reached an agreement. Her form tutor explained: 'you don't have to miss school; you can come to school and if you don't feel ready to go to lesson, you can come to the inclusion room and we can get you Google classroom and you can do the work down here'. *A* agreed, saying 'I'm down with that'.

A continues to find Science hard in Year 10. *A* has a different teacher, who has told her that her behaviour in class is really good but she needs to keep up at home and start revising. This is difficult for *A* who doesn't understand science and has no idea what to revise. Her teacher has his own way of teaching and shouts at the class. *A* doesn't really like going to his class but has been keeping it up. *A* feels she isn't getting the help she needs. *A* and her mum have considered getting a Science tutor so *A* can get some extra help. *A*'s mum suggested getting a Bengali tutor although *A* felt otherwise as she thinks he might have some expectations about her. *A* would prefer a female tutor who isn't Bengali.

Difficult class environment

This year, *A* often watches other students mess around in Maths class because her teacher is new and *A* feels she doesn't know how to manage the class. Some kids throw things around the class; *A* doesn't like this as she wants to do her work. Sometimes the teacher just stands still, waiting for the class to behave, whilst *A* watches it happen and wants to know what's going

on. More recently, the teacher is becoming rude to some students who are misbehaving and she's started screaming at them, giving out detentions or putting them on report. *A* sits at the back of the class and sometimes raises her hand to ask the teacher to write a bit bigger although people think she's joking. *A* just wants to learn.
A has been stressing over her mock exams in Year 10 because she finds it hard to know what to revise. *A* also knows that these are going to be her GCSE's if there is more disruption over the next couple of years.
Despite these challenges, this year, *A*'s attendance has been really good. She's only missed one day which was before the holiday and that was for the dentist.

The future

Looking forward, *A* sometimes thinks about who she'll marry or what she'll do and what kind of job she'll have. *A* thinks she might be studying business and working in Lovisa, a jewellery shop as she likes jewellery.

Looking back

Looking back, A doesn't think she missed too much school. A feels she missed a lot of school in Years 7 to 9 but that was due to lockdown. Reflecting on Year 9, A can see how much she was stressing out and how much she went through.

4.3 Identification of shared storylines and themes

In order to answer the main research question, 'What are the stories told by young people who have experienced emotional based school avoidance?', participants' re-storied narratives were analysed, following the method as described in Chapter Three. This followed an inductive and deductive thematic analysis process; the narratives were initially coded according to individual, home, school and professional factors. An inductive approach to analysis then helped identify common features which formed themes and sub-themes. Some of these sub-themes were more common or more pertinent in individual narratives, whilst others were common in both stories.

4.4 Introduction to Thematic Maps

A thematic map was constructed for each individual narrative as well as an overall thematic map. The overall thematic map was structured in a way that aimed to capture the interactions between factors that contribute to EBSA, as highlighted in participants' narratives.

Figure 4

Thematic map for participant 1 (H)

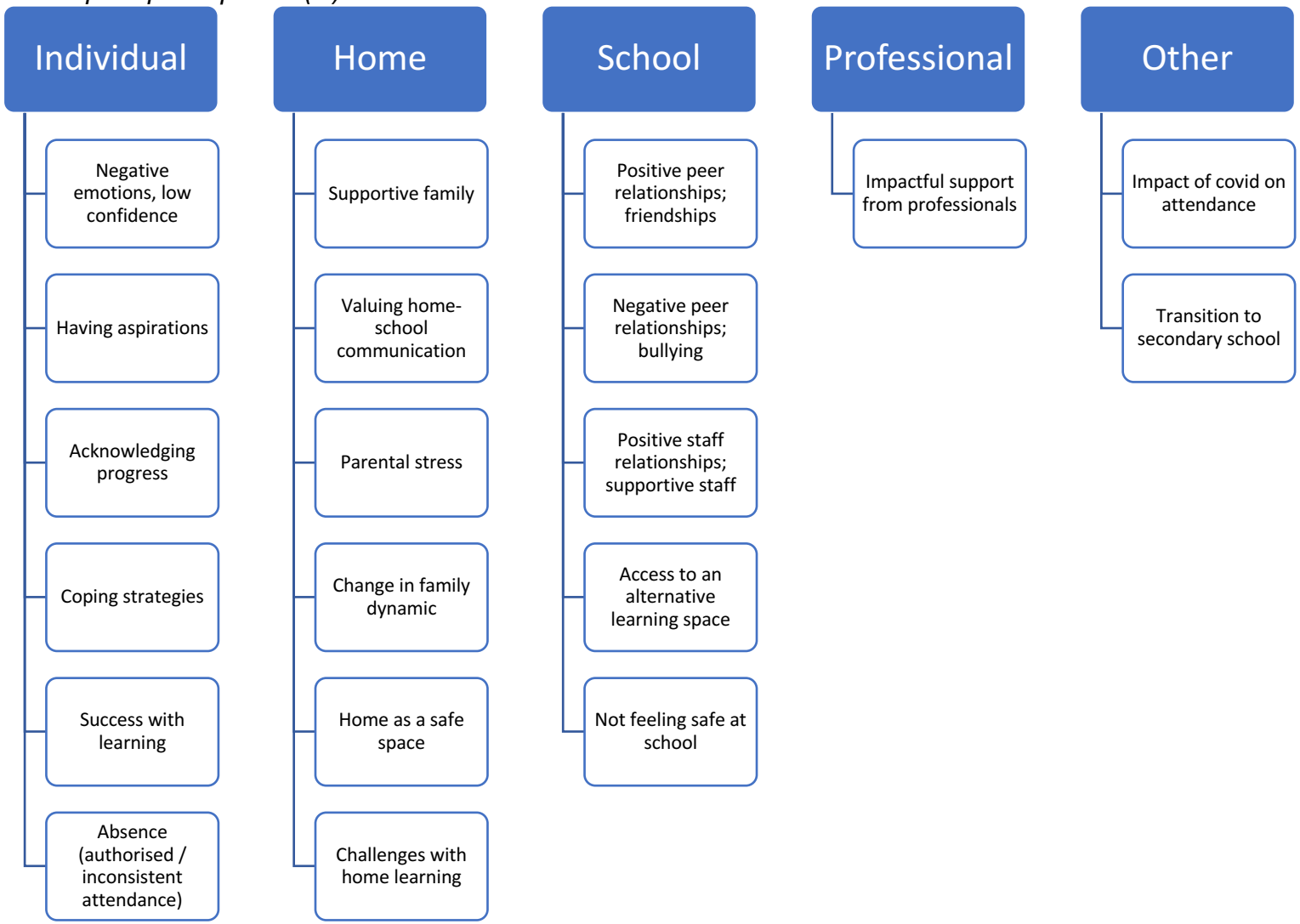


Figure 5

Thematic map for participant 2 (A)

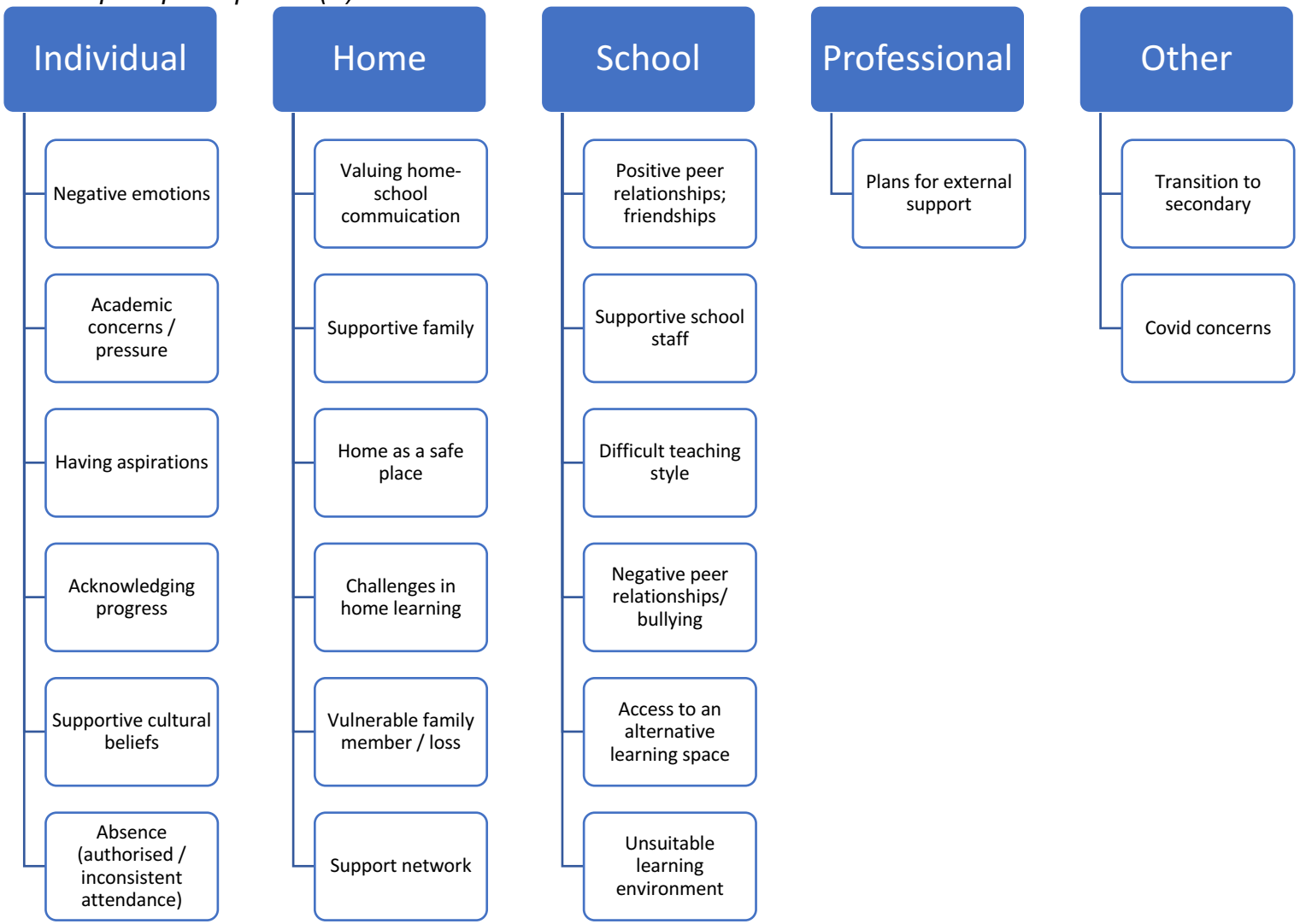
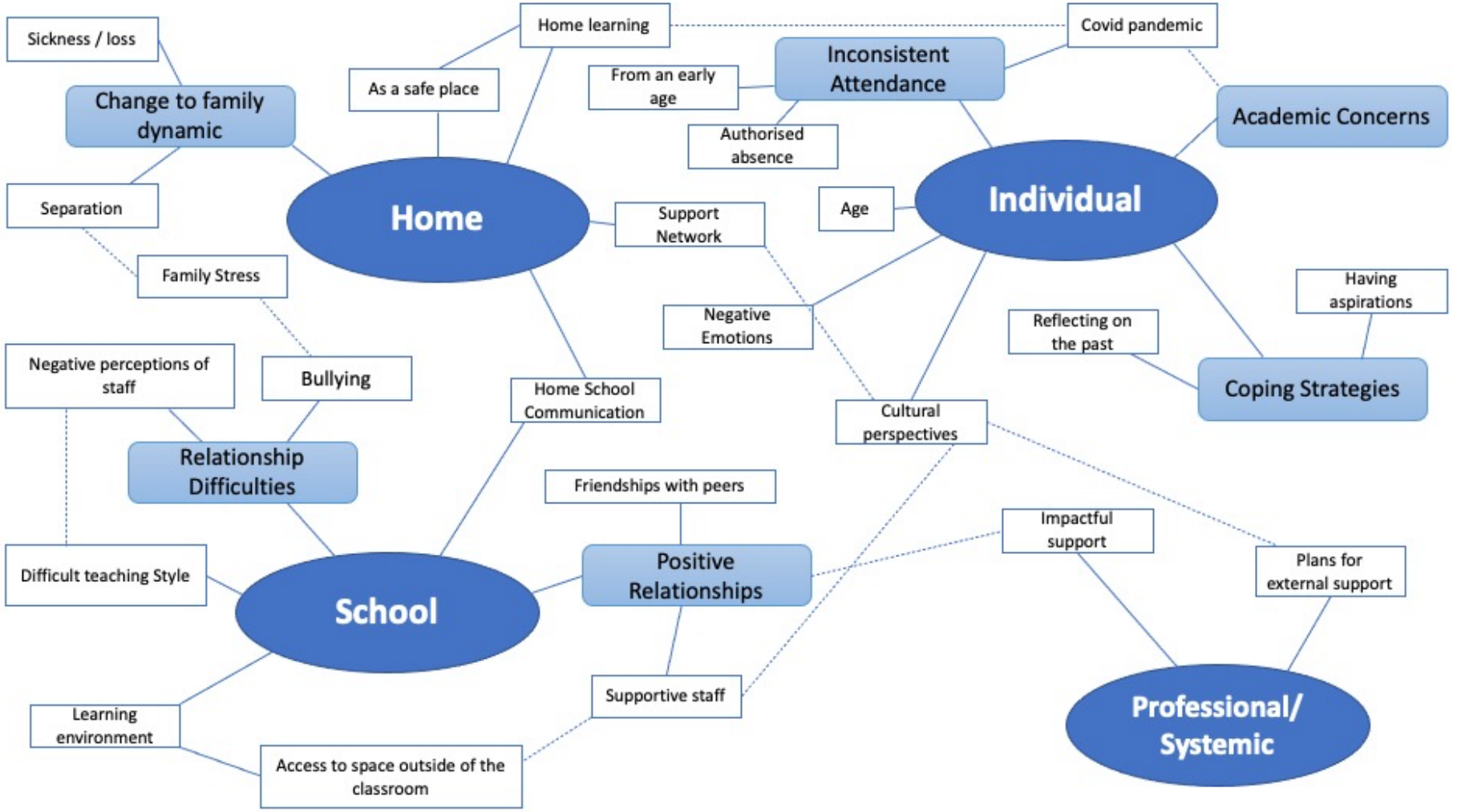


Figure 6
Overall thematic map



Note. Solid lines signify direct connections between themes, dashed lines represent indirect connections between themes.

Subsidiary research question 1: What do the narratives tell us about individual-based factors?

4.5 Narrative Theme: Negative Emotions

Both narratives illustrate how A and H's journeys through school were often emotional ones. Instances of emotional times were often associated with events leading up to school avoidance but were not limited to this. For H, feelings of anger permeate her narrative, starting in primary school, where she feels a sense of injustice for being singled out and bullied by her peers:

*"H felt angry and annoyed as she'd done nothing wrong" (*Participant H, page 54*)*

H's narrative illustrates that these emotions became hard to manage at times, as illustrated by H's response to further bullying at secondary school:

"*One girl in particular made up comments about H which were offensive. Understandably, this made H feel angry. Eventually, all the anger built up inside of H and she reacted*." *(*Participant H, page 56*)*

H's feeling of anger appear to be eased through more positive interactions with her peers:

*"As H grew closer to the two friends, she started to feel less angry" (*Participant H, page 55*)*

In a similar way, *A* also shared an example of anger in response to frustration with her teacher. The feeling of anger is something that became hard to manage within the classroom setting:

*"This started to annoy her. When A felt annoyed and didn't feel able to attend science class" (*Participant A, page 62*)*

A's narrative makes a number of references to her feeling scared, mostly in relation to teachers or not managing her work, as is explored in a later theme around academic concerns. This appears to have an accumulative effect on *A:*

*"A was so scared that sometimes she wouldn't come in" (*Participant A, page 59*)*

A and H both describe feelings of low mood. For *A,* this is associated with her disengagement from learning:

*"A missed a lot of school in Year 9. A didn't really care about Year 9 because she wasn't in the right mindset to do any work." (*Participant A, page 63*)*

H also names times she feels less positive and less able to remain in her regular classroom:

*"In Year 10, H sometimes spent a lesson in the inclusion area, particularly if she was feeling off or a bit down." (*Participant H, page 58)

4.6 Narrative Theme: Coping strategies

A and H's narratives illustrate the coping strategies they have used during their school journeys. Their narratives suggest some strategies that the young people have acquired for themselves as well as strategies that have been recommended by others. For H, nearing the end of her time at secondary school, recognising her support network, both at home and at school, helps her to succeed:

"H managed many challenging situations at school and at home by reminding herself of the people that really cared about her, including her family and her friendship group" (Participant H, page 57)

H's narrative also illustrates more formal strategies that H has implemented, which were introduced to her by the individuals previously mentioned:

"However, school, the lady from the NSPCC and H's mum shared some techniques to manage her anxiety, such as listening to music at home, writing things down or talking to someone. This seemed to have a positive impact on H's learning…" (Participant H, page 58)

During primary school, H's initial response to negative comments was quite passive, with H feeling like she "*didn't have a voice*", suggesting a lack of agency. H's narrative suggests a slightly different response in secondary school, where she is more accepting of the situation and able to ignore comments in order to protect herself:

"*H began to realise that there will always be certain people that you don't get along with and that's okay. H had come to accept that it wasn't worth getting into trouble for people like that and learnt to try and ignore the comments"* (Participant H, page 58)

For *A*, talking to people around her also helped her to cope, such as reminders "*that she shouldn't stress out*". Comparable to H's narrative, *A* also developed coping strategies from talking to staff at school, following the loss of her grandmother. Having a trusted adult at school with insight into A's cultural beliefs appeared to be supportive:

"*he suggested that she prayed and recommended other things for A to do at home to make sure her grandma was at peace*." (Participant A, page 62*)*

4.6.1 Narrative Subtheme: Having Aspirations

Both narratives made reference to the future which included short-term and long-term aspirations. Being in her final year of secondary school, H was clear on her future plans, having already had "*conversations with her coach about it*" (Participant H, page 59). For H, her aspirations included specific career plans in which she could support other young people who had similar life experiences as herself:

"Looking forward, H has decided that she'd like to go to a college to study Health and Social Care. H would like to be able to work with young people who are similar to her, to use her past experiences to help them and make them feel happy too" (Participant H, page 59).

A shared her aspirations in a more general sense, including plans to continue studying and future employment, but also expressing some curiosity about what the future held for her personal life and relationships:

"*Looking forward, A sometimes thinks about who she'll marry or what she'll do and what kind of job she'll have. A thinks she might be studying business and working in Lovisa, a jewellery shop as she likes jewellery*" (Participant A, page 64*)*

H's narrative indicates the value of being aspirational and having a sense of hopefulness about the future, as illustrated:

*"H has started to look forward to the future which feels helpful" (*Participant H, page 57)

4.6.2 Narrative Subtheme: Reflecting on the past

Reflecting on their past was a theme in both narratives. For H, reflecting on the past and acknowledging her progress served as momentum to keep going, which sometimes took place on a year-on-year basis:

"H saw how Year 8 was a lot better than Year 7 and that's what kept her going." (Participant H, page 57)

At other times, H looks back on the past at crisis points, which helps her reach decisions such as whether to change schools:

"H told herself: I've come all this way, what's the point in moving now?" (Participant H, page 57)

H's narrative suggests that looking back on the past was a positive experience and offered her a chance to notice how things have improved:

"*Thinking back over her time at school, H is aware that she is calmer now and can speak up for herself in a more positive way, without reacting in a bad way."* *(*Participant H, page 58)

For *A*, reflecting on the past was emotional but appears less insightful, arguably due to the way in which *A* attributes some of the causes of her school avoidance to external factors, such as school lockdown:

"Looking back, A doesn't think she missed too much school. A feels she missed a lot of school in Years 7 to 9 but that was due to lockdown. Reflecting on Year 9, A can see how much she was stressing out and how much she went through." (Participant A, page 64)

4.7 Narrative Theme: Academic Concerns

Both girls describe academic concerns relating to schoolwork, although this is more pertinent in *A*'s narrative. This appears to begin in primary school where *A* reflects how she had "*no idea what she was doing*" in Maths class and later reflects on her learning at primary school as being a "*blur*". *A* also appears to compare herself to her peers in terms of their academic ability, illustrated by her description of "*clever kids who got on with the work" (*Participant A, page 59).

A's academic concerns appear to influence her perception of her peers as she is often worried that she will be judged for her lack of understanding:

"A sat next to a girl who she felt scared of, in case she looked at A's work and made her feel dumb." (Participant A, page 61).

A's narrative often refers to times where she is "*stressing*" with her work as she "*finds it hard to know what to revise*" or what to do. *A*'s narrative depicts how she feels unsupported with her learning and it is an ongoing challenge:

*"A feels she isn't getting the help she needs" (*Participant A, page 63)

H shares concerns regarding her academic performance and is more reflective, noting how her tendency to overthink has made it difficult to engage fully with her learning. H's narrative further illustrates how improvements in her mental wellbeing helped her to be more successful with her learning:

"H had found it hard to concentrate in the past as she'd been prone to overthinking. However, in Year 10, H started to focus and participate more. H enjoyed RE and English and Geography and completed her RE GCSE in Year 10." (Participant H, page 58)

4.8 Narrative Theme: Inconsistent attendance

Both A and H reflected on their school journey, from primary school to secondary school and their patterns of attendance. Both young people spoke about times where they missed school from time to time. H's narrative describes her attendance at primary school:

"Earlier in primary school, H would occasionally miss a couple of days here and there" (Participant H, page 54)

A's narrative illustrated one way in which she would feign illness to stay home:

"*A attended school regularly but sometimes stayed home if she didn't feel comfortable coming in, telling her mum she didn't feel well."* (Participant A, page 59)

4.9 Narrative Theme: Culture

A's ethnicity appears to shape her perception and expectations of support from adults, and whilst she displays willingness for additional help with her learning, she upholds the importance of having support from someone outside of her culture:

> *"A's mum suggested getting a Bengali tutor although A felt otherwise as she thinks he might have some expectations about her. A would prefer a female tutor who isn't Bengali." (*Participant A, page 63*)*

A speaks positively about staff at school who show an understanding of her religion, making reference to her religion as a way of managing an emotional time out of school:

> *"A told him what was going on at home and he suggested that she prayed and recommended other things for A to do at home to make sure her grandma was at peace."* (Participant A, page 62)

The importance of *A*'s faith at a difficult time is clear, not only on a personal basis but also in bringing together a religious community who provide additional support:

> *"Other people from outside school helped too, including neighbours and family friends; they visited and said a special prayer together and gave their respects. This was really nice for A."* (Participant A, page 62)

Subsidiary research question 2: What do the narratives tell us about family-based factors?

4.10 Narrative Theme: Change to the family dynamic

Changes within the family unit were prominent in the narratives of both young people, and these were seen to contribute to the pattern of school avoidance. For H, the change in family dynamic was present alongside issues at school, and this was highlighted from the outset, towards the end of primary school:

> *"At home, things started to change a bit too."* (Participant H, page 54)

The change in family dynamic was underpinned by loss of a family member for *A* and time apart from a family member for H.

4.10.1 Subtheme: Sickness and Loss

In *A*'s narrative, she describes a significant event which is associated with a period of time out of school as well as changes to her regular routine after school. *A*'s grandmother became ill, and this was viewed as being a "*stressful and emotional time"* for *A.* This period of illness disrupts the family routine, for both *A* and her mum:

> *"A would often go straight to her nan's house in her school uniform and stay there until her mum returned from the hospital, sometimes returning home at 1 in the morning."* (Participant A, page 62)

A reflected on how this made it particularly difficult to study at home and prepare for upcoming exams:

> *"A would be uncomfortable in her school uniform wasn't able to stay home and revise. A brought her books to her nan's house to revise but it wasn't possible with lots of people around"* (Participant A, page 62)

A later comments on the loss of her grandmother, which was seen to be "*a really hard time for A as they were very close."* For *A*, this loss appeared to make it difficult for her to return to school and she instead preferred to remain at home in the company of her family:

> *"A felt unable to attend school around this time and wanted to stay with her family."* (Participant A, page 62)

A further refers to the challenges she faced in feeling comfortable to communicate or discuss the loss of her grandmother with people from outside of her family, initially dealing with this alone:

> "*She didn't want to tell anyone because it wasn't a subject that she liked to talk about*" (Participant A, page 62)

4.10.2 Subtheme: Separation

Experiencing a change in family dynamic was a recurrent theme in H's story, as she was separated from her dad for extended periods of time, often resulting in complex emotions and feelings of uncertainty. For H, the situation began to become more problematic at the end of primary school:

"… her dad has been in and out of her life for many years. There was a significant change in Year 6 where H didn't see her dad for almost a year." (Participant H, page 55)

H's narrative depicts the emotional impact of being apart from her dad for an unknown period of time:

"H continued to have some feelings of confusion and occasionally anger, possibly relating to the situation at home with her dad." (Participant H, page 56)

H further shows how the uncertainty and unpredictability around her dad's presence at home directly led to heightened feelings of frustration:

"At home, H's dad came and went from her life and her feelings of anger started to increase" (Participant H, page 55)

Later, H reflects on her relationship with her dad once he has returned to her life. H's narrative indicates how the earlier separation from her dad has had a lasting impact on her perception of their relationship, despite her best efforts to improve the situation:

"H feels scared that he might leave again. H feels that she'd like to forgive him although this feels hard." (Participant H, pages 58-59)

4.11 Narrative Theme: Family Stress

In H's narrative, H's mum is aware of the issues faced by H at school which manifests in feelings of frustration and sadness:

"H's mum was angry and upset at what was happening at school and what H was going through." (Participant H, page 54)

The absence of H's dad at home is stressful for her mum and H's narrative illustrates how H is also affected by her mum's response, leading to feelings of frustration:

"H noticed how stressful this was for her mum which in turn made her feel angry." (Participant H, page 55)

H is aware of the impact her dad's absence is having on her mum and her decision to lessen the number of questions she decides to ask her mum suggests she is acting in a protective way, despite this impacting on her own wellbeing:

"H was mindful that she didn't want to give her mum any additional stress but at the same time she felt like her head was going to explode." (Participant H, page 57)

Later, there appears to be a shift in H's conceptualisation of her mum's stress, and rather than interpreting this negatively, she instead views it as being a motivating factor in her return to school:

> "*H hasn't missed a day off school this year and has come to realise that if she misses school, she may be affecting her education as well as putting stress on her mum."* (Participant H, page 58).

4.12 Narrative Theme: Home as a safe place

In both narratives, young people describe home as being a place of safety for them. In H's narrative, she sought the safety of home when things at school felt more threatening after experiencing issues with her peers:

"*Year 6, H started to miss school more often, asking herself 'what's the point in going in'? Especially if I allow my friends to just ignore me.' H felt better staying home"* (Participant H, page 54)

This pattern of behaviour was observed a number of times in H's narrative. In secondary school, H again remained home where she felt safe, which is in stark contrast to how she felt at school:

"H missed some school in Year 8, preferring to stay home with her mum where it felt safe. At the time, H didn't feel safe at school unless she was with her friends" (Participant H, page 57)

Similarly, *A* expressed feelings of safety and reassurance when she remained home with her mum, rather than remaining in school:

"A's mum was understanding and would stay home with her, besides a few hours when her mum was working at school. A felt better at home. She felt safe." (Participant A, page 59).

H's experience of remaining home for an extended period of time during the Covid19 pandemic initially appeared to be a positive one, with H noting it "*made her feel better*". However, this did appear to eventually impact on H's willingness to return to school, which is explored further in the following narrative theme.

4.13 Narrative Theme: Home Learning in Lockdown

Home learning featured in both narratives, with both young people commenting initially on the positive aspect of spending time at home but later expressing concerns about having to work remotely. *A* spoke about having more flexibility at home during lockdown, prior to the introduction of online lessons:

> *"At first, A loved the time off school. She loved going to bed late and waking up late and not having to worry about homework. It was a relaxing time and it felt like the best summer holiday"* (Participant A, page 61)

Later, A's perceptions of home learning changed as the structure of the school day was imposed on her life at home, and consequently she found this challenging:

> "*Suddenly A realised she had to wake up early, join lessons and work. A always made sure she was online and attended the online lessons but it was a nightmare and A found it difficult to learn."* (Participant A, page 61)

H's views of online learning were mixed, where she "*enjoyed home learning but acknowledges it was boring at the same time*". H described how spending time at home made her feel "*better and worse at the same time*", as she had lots of time for "*overthinking*" (*page 57).*

H's narrative illustrated how a longer period of time away from the school setting also impacted on her willingness to return to school:

> *"Having spent a long time at home, H got used to being at home and didn't want to return"* (Participant H, page 57)

4.14 Narrative Theme: Support network

A's narrative illustrates the support network she had outside of school who provided help when things at school were difficult. *A*'s narrative highlighted the positive relationship she had with her mum:

"A's mum was understanding and would stay home with her" (Participant A, page 59)

A's support network extended beyond family to people living nearby who offered support during her time of need, which she appreciated:

"*Other people from outside school helped too, including neighbours and family friends…this was really nice for A."* (Participant A, page 62)

H's narrative described meaningful relationships with family members who tried to comfort her:

"H spoke to family members, including her nan, grandad and uncles. They told H they were there for her and how she could speak to them if she ever wanted to" (Participant H, page 55)

For H, being able to reflect on her support network appeared to be a coping mechanism for her when faced with challenging times:

"H managed many challenging situations at school and at home by reminding herself of the people that really cared about her, including her family" (Participant H, page 57)

4.15 Narrative Theme: Home-school communication

Communication between home and school was mentioned in both narratives, particularly where parents contacted school staff on their child's behalf to highlight a tricky situation:

"A's mum spoke to A's head of year who communicated with her form tutor to that she was finding things difficult." (Participant A, page 63)

For H, her mum played a supportive role in speaking to her teacher which not only made staff aware of the situation at school but provided an opportunity for H to develop a trusting relationship with her teacher:

"H spoke to her mum about what was happening at school, who in turn spoke to H's teacher. Once H's mum had opened up to the teacher, H felt like she could open up to her too." (Participant H, page 54)

A's narrative illustrates the positive impact of *A*'s successes being shared between home and school. This was perhaps more achievable given that *A*'s mum worked at the same school:

"A's mum worked at her primary school so R would often talk to her mum and tell her the things that were going well. A felt good about this." (Participant A, page 59)

Subsidiary research question 3: What do the narratives tell us about school-based factors?

4.16 Narrative Theme: Positive relationships

Positive relationships with teachers, school staff and friends were a common theme in both narratives, although the extent to which these were helpful differed slightly. H's narrative illustrated the importance of supportive members of staff, more so than compared with *A*'s, whose narrative indicated a more stable situation at home alongside less experience of bullying from her peers.

4.16.1 Subtheme: Friendships with peers

A was clear in sharing what she valued from her friendships at school and that is having a source of support and in being able to honestly voice her concerns about work. Having friends appeared to provide *A* with a sense of comfort:

"A sat with her friends. When A sat with her friends, she could be more honest and seek their help with work which helped her feel more comfortable." (Participant A, page 61)

A similar theme is revealed in H's narrative where friends are seen to support her both socially and academically, encouraging her with work outside of school:

"Her new friends guided her, motivating her to complete her homework, and she knew they were there for her." (Participant H, page 56)

H explicitly names the extent to which she values her friendships and how having trusted friends at school has been a motivating factor in wanting to attend school:

"H has 3 close friends at school and she supports and appreciates all of them…it's made school better and gives her another reason to come into school." (Participant H, page 58)

4.16.2 Subtheme: Supportive Staff

Both young people shared their views on staff at school, naming positive experiences with key adults during their school life, although these were more prevalent in H's narrative than for *A*. *A* recalls a positive relationship with her teacher at primary school who was described as being "*really nice*" and later recalled a positive experience with a member of staff who *A* compares to a family-like figure:

> "*At school, A had a teacher that she could talk to about anything. He was like a cousin-brother type figure for A and someone she could actually speak to. A told him what was going on at home"* (Participant A, page 62)

H talked fondly of a variety of school staff who supported her over a number of years at secondary school. These tended to be staff from outside of the classroom, particularly members of staff within the inclusion unit, who made their availability clear to H:

> *"The teachers in inclusion also found out some of the things that were happening and started supporting H which was helpful. The staff in inclusion reassured H that she could come down to inclusion when she needed someone to talk to"* (Participant H, page 55)

H's narrative illustrates the key adults she was supported by at school, in particular a mentor who is portrayed in a positive light. This approach appears to be beneficial for H, who reflects on them being an important individual following her return to school:

> *"H was quite nervous about returning. On her return to school, H spoke to staff in inclusion and her coach. A new member of staff joined school as a mentor who H started talking to. H felt the new staff member was helpful and nice"* (Participant H, page 57)

4.17 Narrative Theme: Relationship difficulties

Relationship difficulties was a dominant theme in the narratives of A and H although there are differences in their experiences. For *A*, relationship difficulties are largely driven by negative interactions and perceptions of her class teachers, whereas issues with peers were more prevalent for H.

4.17.1 Subtheme: Bullying and inter-relational difficulties

For both *A* and H, incidents of bullying were noted although this was longer-lasting and more problematic for H. *A* describes her concerns when sitting with peers who make comments about her work or her abilities to complete her work:

"A sat next to a boy in class who would look at A's work and make comments about it which made her worry" (Participant A, page 60)

A's narrative illustrates how this also happened at whole-class level and this experience had an impact on her confidence in sharing her ideas publicly on subsequent occasions:

"A had no idea and the class started laughing. Since then, A doesn't like talking in front of other people." (Participant A, page 60)

A's experience of bullying happened at the start of secondary school, and despite *A*'s efforts, the issue appears to continue to impact on her to some extent:

"A's friend completely changed. She was very rude and started talking behind A's back and A didn't stand for it. A tried to end the friendship in Year 7 but it was difficult. Even now, there are some issues with her as she sometimes tries to bring up rumours from the past or talks to other people about A or tells the teachers she's misbehaving.." (Participant A, page 60)

Bullying was a common theme in H's narrative, at both primary and secondary school, which was a major factor in her school avoidance. In primary school, H reflects on being bullied by a group of peers, the cause of which she finds difficult to comprehend:

"H experienced some bullying from the group of friends, who turned against her and acted in a fake way, seemingly for no reason at all." (Participant H, page 54)

H continues to experience bullying throughout secondary school, which resulted in H feeling "*hated*" by some other students:

"A lot of people in Year 7 went against H, calling her names and making rumours about her…it seemed that the whole year were aware of the rumours." Participant H, page 55)

For H, her experience of bullying makes school especially difficult, in particular lessons where she is in closer proximity to peers causing issues. H's pattern of lesson or school avoidance is directly influenced by her experience of bullying:

"*There were some lessons at school where there were certain girls who H didn't want to be around, as they gave her dirt or made up rumours. Whilst H would miss the occasional day, this mostly came down to certain lessons where she had to be in class with the girls."* (Participant H, page 58)

4.17.2 Subtheme: Negative Perceptions of Staff

Negative perceptions of staff featured throughout A's narrative, although this was not something that was mentioned by H. *A*'s narrative illustrated a sense that some teachers were particularly strict, which means she feels less inclined to want to attend the lesson:

"Her teacher has his own way of teaching and shouts at the class. A doesn't really like going to his class but has been keeping it up." (Participant A, page 63)

A recalls other instances where she feels she has been singled out by a member of staff and consequently she becomes concerned with her own academic abilities:

"*A felt like Mr M picked on her when she didn't get the work right and whenever she got an answer wrong, he'd look at her as if she was dumb.*" (Participant A, page 59)

Changes in staffing feature several times in A's narrative as something she dislikes, leading her to feel less invested in the lesson:

*"A knew that set 3 often had cover teachers and didn't like this. When there was a cover teacher, no-one really learned anything and A cared less about the lesson" (*Participant A, page 61)

4.18 Narrative Theme: Learning environment

Negative aspects of the classroom environment were a narrative theme in *A*'s story. This appeared to be more of an issue in subjects that *A* was finding difficult and associated with a negative experience:

"Science continued to be a hard lesson for A. The class were placed in bubbles. The science classroom was freezing and there weren't any heaters." (Participant A, page 62)

The learning environment again features in a later part of *A*'s narrative with negative consequences:

"A's science mock exam took place in the science lab which was really hot…A found herself falling asleep in the middle of it. When she woke up, she hadn't answered many of the questions" (Participant A, page 62)

4.18.1 Subtheme: Access to an alternative space in school

Both young people reflected on the importance of having time to learn outside of the classroom, notably this was within an inclusion unit at school. This experience was linked to positive interactions with staff and peers as well as time apart from aspects of the classroom which may have been triggering.

H reflected on a two-week period in the inclusion area which she saw as being "*a lot better than regular school*" in offering "*time to reflect*" (*page 56)* as well as time with staff and students who she felt comfortable being around:

> *"the woman in inclusion was nice, supportive and helped H feel better. The other students in inclusion didn't speak about H which felt better. Other staff in inclusion were nice too; they knew what was going on and supported H"* (Participant H, page 56)

Similar feedback was shared in *A*'s narrative, where the inclusion area was a preferred space when *A* "*felt annoyed*" (*page 62*) and sought time apart from teaching staff who *A* found frustrating:

"When A felt annoyed and didn't feel able to attend science class, she'd go to the inclusion area instead. She would complete her work it in inclusion. It was helpful being apart from her science teacher." (Participant A, page 62)

For H, time in the inclusion room was beneficial at times where she was feeling emotional and not ready to go to class:

"In Year 10, H sometimes spent a lesson in the inclusion area, particularly if she was feeling off or a bit down." (Participant H, page 58)

A's narrative illustrates how the school used an inclusion area as a stepping-stone between home and the classroom, for times when she feels less ready to return to the classroom. Offering *A* access to an area outside of the classroom provides her with some autonomy in her return to school, as she can use the room on her own terms:

"Her form tutor explained: 'you don't have to miss school; you can come to school and if you don't feel ready to go to lesson, you can come to the inclusion room…. A agreed, saying 'I'm down with that'" (Participant A, page 63)

4.19 Narrative Theme: Difficult teaching style

A pertinent theme in *A*'s narrative relates to differences in teaching style. This connects to earlier themes around negative perceptions of staff and academic concerns and it appears to contribute to A's enjoyment and participation in class. *A* mentions the challenges she faces when teachers have high expectations and she feels things are not explained in a way that she is able to understand, leading to feelings of frustration and eventually lesson avoidance:

"A's science teacher, the head of science, had high expectations for the class and her teaching style made it hard to understand and difficult to enjoy. Her teacher expected the class to know certain scientific terms, such as mitochondria, without explaining it fully. This started to annoy her. When A felt annoyed and didn't feel able to attend science class" (Participant A, page 62)

A's narrative illustrates how the way in which the behaviour of the class is managed is perceived negatively, and she feels a passive bystander in a chaotic scene:

"her teacher is new and A feels she doesn't know how to manage the class. Some kids throw things around the class; A doesn't like this as she wants to do her work. Sometimes the teacher just stands still, waiting for the class to behave, whilst A watches it happen and wants to know what's going on" (Participant A, page 63)

Subsidiary research question 4: What do the narratives tell us about professional/systemic-based factors?

For both *A* and H, issues tended to be dealt with mostly within the school and only H shared experiences of support from outside the school setting.

4.20 Narrative Theme: Impactful support

H shared positive views following her engagement with an external agency, which was organised by the school. Having support from a professional service allowed H

to discuss aspects of school life confidentially, whilst also providing H with strategies to better manage situations which were causing her to feel angry or upset:

> *"H met with a lady from the NSPCC a couple of times at school to talk about everything. They spoke about school and home and how it was difficult for H when her dad wasn't always around. The NSPCC helped H to understand how to manage things which H found helpful."* (Participant H, page 55)

H's engagement with a school coach from an external charity provided ways for H to think positively about the future and instil a sense of hope:

> *"In Year 9, H's Head of Year arranged for her to meet with a school coach from a local charity. They tend to meet on a one-to-one basis to discuss how things are going and talk about forthcoming plans, such as what college to apply to or what H would like to study. H has started to look forward to the future which feels helpful."* (Participant H, page 57)

4.21 Narrative theme: Plans for external support

A's narrative indicates no professional involvement from outside the school, although *A* has discussed the possibility of *A* accessing tuition to support her in Science, a subject she names as being particularly difficult for her. *A*'s lack of confidence in her own abilities is clear and this appears to be further complicated by thoughts around her ethnicity:

> *"A feels she isn't getting the help she needs. A and her mum have considered getting a Science tutor so A can get some extra help" (*Participant A, page 63)

4.22 Summary of Findings

This chapter presents the narratives of the two young people alongside the narrative themes and subthemes that are relevant to the research questions. The findings suggest that there are some common experiences and feelings in stories told by young people who have had a period of emotionally based school avoidance. Relational factors are prominent features of both narratives; this includes both positive relationships with adults and peers that are seen to offer a protective quality, alongside relationship difficulties that made school less of a welcoming place, or otherwise generated uncertainty and worry. Both young people saw home as a safe place, although this appears to have been threatened when learning was moved into the safety of the home. Access to an alternative space outside of the classroom was

viewed by both young people as being helpful, in having time apart from aspects of the learning environment that were viewed less positively. Professional involvement was more dominant in one story than the other, with beneficial outcomes. In both narratives, the young people had reflections on the challenges they faced and aspirations for the future.

The findings and interpretations of the research will now be explored in further detail, linking to the literature and theory presented in Chapters 1 and 2.

Chapter 5: Discussion

5.1 Chapter overview

This chapter will discuss the research findings in reference to the research aims and subsidiary questions. The chapter will first explore the current findings in relation to past research and psychological theory. Implications for professional practice are framed using Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). A critical commentary on the research will be provided alongside suggestions for future research and dissemination of the findings.

5.1.1 Aims of the Current Research

The aim of the current research was to explore the narratives told by young people who have experienced Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA), examining factors at the individual, home, school and systemic or professional level. Narrative thematic analysis was conducted to identify key themes in the stories. The analysis revealed a number of overlapping themes in both narratives as well as unique features. Whilst the analysis looked at the factors at each individual level, some themes were seen to interconnect and link to more than one research question, illustrating the multifaceted nature of EBSA. It should also be noted that due to constraints of the thesis, a full exploration of all aspects of the narratives was not possible. Instead, themes which the researcher deemed most relevant to the research questions and to highlighted psychological theory are discussed in reference to previous literature.

5.2 *RQ1: What do the narratives tell us about psychological (individual) based factors?*

The narratives indicate the emotional impact that may contribute to, and result from EBSA. Individual-based factors that contribute to EBSA will be discussed, linking to past research and implications for practice will be noted, when appropriate. Coping strategies acquired by the young people were identified in the narratives, including reflecting on challenges or successes in the past and having a sense of hope for the future. Unique features of the narratives included concerns around academic performance and the impact of cultural views.

5.2.1 Negative emotions. Compared to the diverse experiences of others' EBSA, both participants shared similar feelings on the emotional impact of this, notably feelings of anger. This often appears to be in response to a lack of agency in situations where they feel they aren't heard or aren't receiving the support they

require. A sense of autonomy has been linked to an individual's sense of agency, or lack thereof (Osterman, 2000) and this appears to lead to feelings of frustration and anger for the young people in the current study. Participants in research by Baker and Bishop (2015) also expressed feeling angry, often around the way their behaviour is wrongly interpreted by others, sometimes leading to participants themselves starting to accept others' explanations.

Anxiety is often cited as a contributory factor in school avoidance (Kearney & Silverman, 1993) and whilst H refers to experiences of anxiety, additional references to feelings of anger and fear highlight the wider range of emotions that may underpin EBSA. This appears to be consistent with participant views in research by Want (2020), who notes that emotive responses were seen to escalate following the transition to secondary school. This is comparable to young peoples' experiences in the current research.

5.2.2 Coping strategies. H's narrative highlights coping strategies she has acquired, both formally and informally, which help her to manage her time in school. Professional input and discussions with staff provide H with ways of managing her anxiety which appears to be helpful. H's awareness of her support network also helps her to feel less isolated during challenging times. It should be noted, however, that H experienced EBSA over a longer period of time and missed more school than *A*. This pattern of behaviour may have been more alarming to school staff who prioritised her for professional involvement, which in turn helped H to develop coping strategies.

5.2.3 Having aspirations. Both young people shared plans for the future and outlined a positive trajectory for themselves. H's aspirations were arguably more detailed, perhaps due to her being in her final year of secondary school, but also as an outcome of meetings with a life coach. Want (2020) discusses the importance of young people being able to act in a way that is consistent with their individual values and experiences. This seems relevant to H, who links her future plans to her past experiences and this appears to promote her autonomy and provides a way in which H is able to make sense of her experiences. Previous research has shown that young people who have struggled to attend school often appreciate making future plans (Baker & Bishop, 2015) including pursuing further education (Gregory & Purcell, 2017) and future aspirations are seen to encourage young people to attend

school (Shilvock, 2010). These findings suggest that supporting young people to set future plans or pursue further education may be a protective factor.

5.2.4 Reflecting on the past. Both participants reflected on the past which appeared to help them to acknowledge their progress and, to some extent, make sense of their experiences. Beckles (2014) commented on the challenges that arise in planning targeted interventions for young people who might lack a clear understanding of their own experiences. This further indicates the need for young people to have support in reflecting on and understanding past experiences in a constructive way.

According to Ryan and Deci's (2000) Self-Determination Theory, the need for competence can be achieved through acknowledging success and improvements which can lead to psychological growth. This aligns with H's narrative, where reflecting on obstacles she'd overcome appeared to be empowering for her and served as momentum for her to continue to attend school.

5.2.5 Academic concerns. Concerns about academic work feature in both narratives. *A* makes reference to finding work difficult on a number of occasions which leads her to avoid lessons that she finds hard to understand. For *A,* this is linked to unsuitable teaching approaches or negative perceptions of staff. Previous research into non-attendance has shown that difficulties with schoolwork contributes to school avoidance (Shilvock, 2010). Absence from school can lead to the young person falling behind with schoolwork which can make the return to school more difficult, thus reinforcing the fear of failure with work (Thambirajah et al., 2008). Opportunities for young people to catch up with schoolwork was seen to be an important part of a successful return to school (Nuttall & Woods, 2013), suggesting that learning interventions or bespoke support would be beneficial for young people with EBSA.

H comments on the impact of her anxiety on school performance and she is more successful with her learning once she has acquired strategies to support her concentration in class. Young people in research by Beckles (2019) named a lack of enjoyment or understanding of schoolwork as the main reason for their non-attendance. These findings are parallel to H's experiences, who appears more willing to attend when experiencing more success with her learning.

Beckles (2019) further notes participants' low academic self-concept, leading to school avoidance. The fourth level of Maslow's (1968) hierarchy of needs refers to

self-esteem, linked to individual accomplishment and respect for self and from others. It seems likely that opportunities for academic success, through appropriate support and a nurturing environment may help address these needs.

5.2.6 Inconsistent attendance. Both narratives illustrate a pattern of inconsistent attendance stretching back to primary school and continuing at secondary school. Regular absence for minor illnesses or absence with no indication of anti-social behaviour are known as possible indicators of EBSA (West Sussex County Council, n.d.) and this is observed in the stories shared by the young people in the current research.

A reflects on her periods of absence, feeling that she has not missed much school which may suggest she lacks insight into her EBSA and may benefit from support in challenging negative thoughts about school. Nuttall and Woods (2013) illustrated the need for young people to have support around identifying thoughts, feelings and behaviours that may contribute to their patterns of school avoidance.

5.2.7 Cultural views. *A*'s cultural identity influences her views on school and the support available to her. *A*'s narrative demonstrates her *a*ppreciation of staff who show an understanding of her culture and religious practices. This person-centred approach aligns with findings by Nuttall and Woods (2013), where participants spoke positively about adults showing a genuine interest in them, demonstrated through personalised contact or rewards. Staff who remembered past conversations or asked questions were described in positive terms.

A's cultural views also shape her identity and confidence as a learner, and she expresses concerns that a professional of the same ethnicity may judge her abilities. Young people in Billington's (2018) study placed importance on being treated as individuals, which participants felt was a mature approach and helped to guide the support being put into place. It seems that *A* would also appreciate future support being tailored in a way that acknowledges her cultural beliefs or views.

Nuttall and Woods (2013) emphasise the need for a "flexible and individualised approach" in preparing a young person for their return to school. In the current context, this would mean showing an understanding and respect of a young person's cultural views and values. Demonstrating care and interest in the young person is also likely to facilitate relationships between the young person and the supporting member of staff, helping address the need for relatedness in Ryan and Deci's (2000) SDT.

5.3 *RQ2: What do the narratives tell us about family-based factors?*

The narratives suggest that at times, family-based factors contributed to the young people's EBSA, and at other times offered a protective element. The narratives illustrated how the family served as a support network yet time off school sometimes led to additional stress within the family which consequently had a negative impact on the young person and their readiness to return to school. Both participants shared comparable views on the impact of home learning during Covid19.

5.3.1 Family support network and changes to the family dynamic. As found in previous research, a support network based around the family unit was deemed helpful by participants, particularly at challenging times. In line with the narratives shared by participants, Beckles (2014) noted how participants viewed the family as a positive influence in acknowledging the young person's difficulties and supporting the return to school.

A's narrative reveals a rich support network, including family, friends, neighbours and this extends to a religious community. Findings by Mortimer (2019) suggested that young people appreciate having access to family or key adults who are viewed as being genuine and nice, as is shared by *A.* This is not the case for H, who appears to have a more limited support network and inconsistent contact with her dad. This is likely to contribute to higher levels of EBSA reported by H. According to Maslow's (1968) theory, a need for safety and belonging are prioritised ahead of higher-level needs, relating to achievement or learning, which is illustrated in the young people's challenges in attending school at times when their support network is threatened.

Both participants highlighted how changes within the family dynamic caused a negative impact on their school experience. For *A*, the loss of her grandmother is not only an emotional event, but it also brings about a change in home-based routines and she struggles to keep up with her work, resulting in additional stress. *A* appears to be supported through difficult times by her family and even comments on the benefits of her religious community in helping her grieve the loss of her grandmother. *A* notes support from her sister at challenging times, although H is not able to turn to siblings for support and describes feeling overcome in trying to address her own concerns at home. Previous research has discussed the negative impact that an individual's EBSA can have on siblings (Want, 2020). Siblings of young people with

attendance difficulties in Beckles' (2014) research were also reported as having poor attendance, although this is not reported in the current study.

H experiences ongoing changes to her support network and is faced with uncertainty over an extended period of time, which leads to her feeling angry and unsettled until she accesses professional support. Previous research has commented on the impact of parental separation (Thambirajah et al., 2008), which may threaten the young person's sense of security and impact on availability of emotional support.

5.3.2 Family stress. H's narrative indicates parental stress in the family which is exacerbated by changes to the family unit and from noticing H's difficulties at school. Thambirahah and colleagues (2008) report the secondary complications that often occur from school absence, which can further contribute to non-attendance. Whilst parent views were not gathered in the current research, H notes a reluctancy to talk to her mum for fear of this bringing about additional stress for her, despite this adding to H's own concerns.

Previous research by Want (2020) explored the impact of EBSA on parents, which had a negative effect on their mental health and, arguably, capacity to effectively manage their child's needs and support their return to school. This aligns with findings by Gregory and Purcell (2014) who found that incidents of stress were associated with their child's EBSA, although whether parents experienced stress prior to their child's school avoidance is less clear. Either way, the research findings indicate the need for adequate support for the family as well as the young person.

5.3.3 Home as a safe place and home learning. Home was described by both participants as being a safe place, which contrasts with school, which did not always appear to offer the same sense of safety. Orme-Stapleton (2017) noted similar findings where participants 'retreated' to a place of safety at home after being taken to school.

The introduction of home-learning during Covid19 was initially described in positive terms in both narratives. In the context of Ryan and Deci's (2000) model, home-learning may have offered the participants an increased level of autonomy with their learning than what was experienced at school, as well as time away from threatening situations. However, both participants shared a negative view of home-learning as online lessons were introduced more routinely, thus threatening their safe space. For H, time alone appears to exacerbate her pre-existing anxieties, a

finding that has been shared by other young people with 'school attendance problems' during the Covid-19 pandemic (Rae, 2020). *A*'s realisation that having to work at home was not as enjoyable as first perceived is comparable to findings by Gregory and Purcell (2017) where participants viewed home as a 'boring place', although this was not in the context of Covid19 where home-learning became mandatory.

H also noted how extended time at home made the return to school harder. Rae (2020) highlights how sustained time for young people at home can lead to 'separation anxiety' from their parents which may impact on the return to school. These findings suggest that time at home reduced young people's resilience in returning to school which is somewhat comparable to H's experience.

5.3.4 Home-school communication. Communication between home and school was mentioned in both narratives which, in general, led to positive outcomes for the young people once information had been shared effectively. *A* appreciated home and school communicating positive aspects of her learning; this is less prevalent in previous research which is mostly deficit focussed, rather than sharing successes. Recent research has suggested that regular, positive contact between home and school can help parents to share a positive picture of school with their children to help ease anxiety (Corcoran, Bond & Knox, 2022).

Parents contacting school on their child's behalf appeared to promote the autonomy of the young person, in helping their voice or concerns be heard by staff. This was crucial at times when the young people expressed frustrations in lacking a sense of agency, such as academic concerns or inter-relational difficulties. Corcoran and colleagues (2022) note the advocacy role held by parents although this required the parent to persevere and be proactive with contact in order for this to be successful.

Communication between home and school appeared to help facilitate a shared understanding of the young person's needs and EBSA. Aucott (2014) illustrated how a shared understanding helped improve attendance, perhaps in helping to personalise the return to school. Researchers have also advocated for communication between home and school, arguing that the family must be involved in order for an intervention to be successful (King & Bernstein, 2001).

The narratives illustrated how contact between home and school might also be validating for the parents, who raised concerns about their children. Research by

Mortimer (2019) captured the views of parents of children who had avoided school, and found that contact with school helped parents reach a better understanding of their child's needs. This was deemed supportive as parents sometimes felt unsure of how to manage the situation and felt judged by others in regard to their child's non-attendance. Home-school communication may address some of this stress and make the experience less isolating for parents.

The current research sought to gather the views of young people and therefore the views of parents around home-school communication are only viewed indirectly, although these suggest that dialogue between the two systems is beneficial. Gregory and Purcell (2014) emphasised the need for a systemic approach to school avoidance, arguing that there may be home or family-based factors that influence the young person's school avoidance that they may be unaware of.

5.4 *RQ3: What do the narratives tell us about school-based factors?*

A sense of belonging is essential to young people within the school setting (Orme-Stapleton, 2017) and it is perhaps unsurprising that relationships play a key part in the school experiences of both participants in the current research. Relationships within the school setting were central to both narratives and can be viewed as both a risk and protective factor in the young people's EBSA.

5.4.1 Positive Relationships. Both young people reported positive interactions with peers and shared the importance of having trusted friends at school. For *A,* being able to confide in friends and having a source of peer support appears to act as a buffer against her work-based anxieties. A similar finding is shared by H who appreciates having social and academic support from her friends and notes how this is a motivating factor for her to attend school. The importance of positive peer relationships is prevalent in much of the research (Baker & Bishop, 2015; Gregory & Purcell, 2014; Smith, 2020), including support from friends to address academic difficulties (Shilvock, 2010) which is consistent with the current research.

The young people's narratives suggest that trusting relationships with staff were important to them. *A* makes numerous references to positive relationships she has at school, particularly staff who listen to her. These findings support those of Mortimer (2019), whose participants suggested that trusting relationships provide opportunities for young people to discuss their concerns openly, perhaps creating a sense of safety. Research by Nuttall and Woods (2013) illustrated that a nurturing

approach from staff is particularly important for young people who have a stressful home environment. This appears to be the case for H who turns to key adults at school when dealing with unpredictability at home, and these interactions help her feel reassured. H's narrative illustrates the importance of staff showing an understanding of her needs and the reasons for her difficulties in attending school. Similar findings are reported by Aucott (2014) who notes that staff who recognise and understand a young person's non-attendance helps facilitate a more successful return to school. Research has upheld the significance of positive pupil-teacher relationships in developing a strong sense of school belonging (Beckles, 2014) and the current research aligns closely with this. In the context of Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000), having positive relationships with staff who demonstrate an understanding of an individual's needs helps promote the need for autonomy and relatedness which may mitigate the more negative aspects of school life.

5.4.2 Relationship difficulties. Inter-relational difficulties with others within the school setting also featured in the narratives of both young people and *A* and H experience bullying to differing degrees. H experiences bullying in primary and secondary school and is subject to negative interactions directly from peers as well as persistent rumours that spread within the wider year group. H feels victimised by this, leading to anger and ultimately school avoidance. Like H, participants in How's (2015) research shared the emotional impact of being bullied, particularly in feeling a lack of control and a sense of passivity in the situation. *A* also experiences negative interactions with peers, although these incidents seem more isolated and often in relation to her lack of confidence with her learning, which may be less threatening than bullying of an ongoing nature.

Previous research has named bullying as being a contributing factor to school avoidance (Baker & Bishop, 2015; Beckles, 2014; Clissold, 2018; How, 2015), which the family often become aware of (Gregory & Purcell, 2014). Some research has claimed bullying to be the most common school factor underpinning school avoidance (Thambirajah et al., 2008) and is damaging in harming the young person's sense of self. A sense of safety and belonging are highlighted as fundamental psychological needs according to Maslow's (1968) hierarchy of needs, and in this context it could be argued that bullying explicitly threatens these needs.

Negative peer relations may be a cause or consequence of school avoidance and this has been debated in the literature. As highlighted by Thambirajah and colleagues (2008), poor peer relationships may lead to EBSA yet EBSA might also result in reduced opportunities to build positive peer relationships. Insight into the direction of causality may be useful in knowing how to intervene and support a more successful return to school for young people.

Negative interactions with staff are mentioned by *A*, who feels she is picked on or has her work judged by staff which causes her worry. *A* also shares a negative perception of cover teachers and that she feels less invested in lessons where there is inconsistent staffing. It may be the case that regular changes in teaching staff might also make it difficult to form lasting relationships, thus threatening the need for relatedness in Ryan and Deci's (2000) model of motivation.

5.4.3 Teaching style. *A*'s narrative suggested that she feels less motivated to engage in learning or attend class when she has a negative perception of the staff's approach to teaching. *A* describes feeling scared of staff who shout at the class. This is consistent with previous research where pupils have commented on a fear of teachers (Beckles, 2014; Gregory & Purcell, 2014; How, 2015) and it seems that a more nurturing approach would be beneficial for children who find it challenging to attend. Staff in research by Corcoran, Bond and Knox (2022) describe the importance of communicating in a way that is emotionally containing for young people to lower anxiety levels. It seems intuitive that being shouted at threatens the need for safety, a core component of Maslow's (1968) model, and engaging with school or work becomes more challenging when this need is at risk.

Young people in research by Smith (2020) valued teachers who have a more 'boundaried' teaching style, and this is in contrast to *A*'s experiences, where she discusses the challenges of being in a class where the teacher fails to adequately manage the behaviour of the class. Participants in a study by Gregory and Purcell (2014) also highlight a lack of discipline in adding to the challenges of attending school. When applying Ryan and Deci's (2000) SDT theory, this teaching style might also jeopardise A's need for autonomy, as she seeks a greater sense of control over her learning environment.

5.4.4 Learning environment. Aspects of the classroom environment are discussed by *A*, such as the temperature of the room, which she sees as having a negative impact on her learning and make school less inviting. Orme-Stapleton

(2017) describes how adaptations to the school environment can support young people to feel more comfortable and indirectly make the learning environment feel a less threatening place. This illustrates that a learning environment which is perceived to be physically safe and containing may in turn support young people to feel psychologically safe and contained.

A's experience of being laughed at by the class affects her confidence in sharing her ideas. Prior research indicates that some pupils with school attendance difficulties report feeling embarrassed talking in front of others (Gregory & Purcell, 2014), and this appears to align with *A*'s experience, illustrating the importance of having a safe and supportive learning environment for all students.

5.4.5 Access to an alternative space. Acknowledging participants' negative interactions with others in addition to comments made about negative aspects of the learning environment, it is unsurprising that access to an alternative space at school was highly valued by both participants. This aligns with research by Orme-Stapleton (2017) who emphasised that access to a suitable learning space is essential if the reason for school avoidance is to avoid the environment, people or situations that generate anxiety. Nuttall and Woods (2013) highlighted the value of having a 'flexible and individualised approach' to learning, and it seems that access to an alternative space offers some degree of flexibility to both young people.

Both *A* and H spend time in the inclusion unit at school, a space where interactions with peers and staff were perceived as being more positive, or at least less negative, than the classroom, which helped the young people feel better. Previous research suggests that access to a separate space at school can help ease social pressure and creates a sense of safety (Nuttall & Woods, 2013). Quieter classroom space was valued by non-attenders in research by Gregory and Purcell (2017). This is particularly pertinent to H's narrative, where even time in isolation is viewed positively due to fewer issues with other young people. Staff within the inclusion unit are described by both participants in positive terms which, according to SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2000) may help address their need for relatedness within the school setting.

It is notable that staff support *A*'s return to school by offering her time out of class if it feels difficult to attend, thus promoting her sense of autonomy in being able to act decisively to manage situations she finds challenging. Mortimer (2019) emphasised the importance of young people having a sense of agency in their lives

and this feels applicable to the current research, where the participants appreciated being able to take themselves to an alternative space on their own terms when necessary.

5.5 *RQ4: What do the narratives tell us about systemic or professional factors?*

Participants' narratives revealed positive yet limited engagement with professionals. Specific support and expertise provided by professionals was valued as well as opportunities to build positive relationships with an adult.

5.5.1 Impactful professional support. Whilst both participants were supported by staff at school, only H accessed professional support from outside agencies which she deemed helpful. This included immediate support from the NSPCC at a time of crisis, and more long-term support from a coach in supporting H to work towards goals thus creating a sense of hope about life beyond school. Beckles (2019) found that pupils with challenging home-lives perceived support from professionals to be helpful in supporting their wellbeing, which aligns with H's own experiences in engaging with the NSPCC at her time of need.

Support from a coach over an extended period provides an opportunity for H to build a relationship with a professional, something that she treasures. For H, this ongoing engagement may indicate that she is valued and held in mind by key adults. Feeling valued by others within the academic setting contributes to a sense of belonging (Goodenow, 1993) which is important in supporting young people to feel safe and secure at school.

Nuttall and Woods (2013) emphasise the value of professional input in offering "knowledge, skills and experience" arguably beyond what is readily available at school. The benefit of collaborative working between professionals can help to facilitate a common understanding of the young person's needs (Nuttall & Woods, 2013). This appears to be the case for H, where school and professionals provide strategies to manage her anxiety, some of which are implemented at home in anticipation of her return to school.

5.5.2 Plans for professional support. Although *A* did not explicitly share experiences of professional support, plans to access academic support had been discussed with her mum in response to *A*'s concerns about feeling unsupported with her learning. Previous research has highlighted the importance of pupils' views being acted on (Aucott, 2014; Billington, 2018), and this contributed to improvements in school attendance. Comments about a lack of support with learning are prevalent in

A's story and therefore plans to access professional support may go somehow of addressing this. Self-determination theory (SDT; Ryan & Deci, 2000) might also be applied. SDT highlights autonomy as a psychological need, to feel a sense of control over one's goals or actions. In this situation, *A*'s request for additional professional support are listened to, thus promoting her sense of autonomy, which may impact on her motivation to continue learning and attending school.

5.5.3 Lack of professional engagement. The narratives shared by participants in the current study illustrate somewhat limited engagement with professionals in addressing their school avoidance, a finding that is consistent with the majority of past literature. This may suggest that schools feel equipped at supporting young people with emotional based school avoidance. Alternatively, schools may be more likely to seek professional involvement for young people who are out of school on a more long-term basis, or those who attend but present with additional needs, such as autism. It may be the case that the needs of the participants in the current research did not meet the threshold for external involvement. Past research revealed the challenges in accessing support which was sometimes seen to be a long-winded process (Baker & Bishop, 2015) and may discourage referrals to professional agencies.

5.6 Implications for professional practice

The current research explored some of the contributing factors of young people's experiences of EBSA. The ways that these factors interact and influence one another suggests that viewing these collectively may be appropriate. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979) can be used as a lens to understand the complex and unique nature of EBSA, not only to address factors within the school and home setting, but also in acknowledging wider contextual factors that are likely to impact on the individual's experience. The implications for professional practice will be framed by Bronfenbrenner's (1979) theory, particularly focusing on Educational Psychology involvement.

The focus of the current research has provided insight into young people's experiences of EBSA. As the narratives did not always align with each level of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1979), the researcher's own views and interpretations have helped guide suggestions for professional practice.

5.6.1 The Individual

Individual and psychological factors may include confidence, self-esteem, motivation and a sense of belonging (Nuttall & Woods, 2013). Findings from the current research highlighted individual coping mechanisms such as reflecting on past experiences and being aspirational. EPs can support young people to develop an understanding of their own needs by reflecting on past experiences and their own behaviour. Motivational interviewing may be one way of encouraging young people to reflect on patterns of EBSA to develop an awareness of their individual motivations and values to change, which may be particularly relevant if there is reluctance to re-engage at school. Use of solution-focused or narrative approaches may support young people to build a sense of hope for the future; EPs can offer this work directly or can otherwise train staff in using this approach.

The current research highlights the therapeutic benefits of using a narrative approach with young people experiencing EBSA. The research suggests that narrative therapy can be an appropriate therapeutic intervention for children and young people at risk of, or currently experiencing EBSA, a finding that can be explored further in future psychological research and practice. The current research further demonstrates how narrative therapy can be delivered effectively online.

The current research suggests that acting on the views of the young person is likely to promote their autonomy. EPs are well placed to advocate on behalf of the young person to ensure their views are heard, and the importance of the young person's voice is upheld in guidance by the British Psychological Society (2018). It seems likely that a young person will engage in a support plan if they feel they have contributed to the process. Bespoke learning support framed around the young person's views and needs would also address individual concerns with learning.

The need for early intervention is illustrated in both participants' narratives, where issues arose at primary school and continued to secondary school. This demonstrates the ways in which family and school hold responsibility in identifying the early development of EBSA and should be supported appropriately.

5.6.2 Microsystem

The microsystem includes the interactions between the young person and those around them in their immediate settings (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) such as parents, siblings, teachers, peers and members of staff. The current research highlighted the relational aspect of EBSA, where positive relationships served as a

protective mechanism, and relational difficulties were a barrier to regular school attendance.

Supportive members of staff were valued by both participants in understanding their needs and listening to them. It would be beneficial for all school staff to have a better understanding of EBSA and young people's mental health needs, possibly through whole-school training from the EP service. This might include developing staff understanding of SEN or ways to adapting teaching style that can offer containment. Opportunities for staff to reflect, evaluate and share best practice with one another might be an effective way of developing skills, which could be achieved through peer supervision facilitated by an EP.

A appreciated staff showing an understanding of her cultural views and religious practices. Promoting the use of the 'Social Graces' tool (Burnham, 2012) can help staff to develop an awareness of their own cultural values and relative positioning in relation to the cultural values and positioning of young people experiencing EBSA.

Peers were a source of support for the young people in this study. It seems important that students experiencing EBSA have opportunities to form relationships with peers and for school staff to consider how these can be scaffolded and maintained if the young person is out of school. Additional support for peers in understanding a young person's EBSA or mental health needs might also be beneficial.

Bullying was a concern to both young people in the current study and the impacts were long lasting. Bullying is often a contributing factor in EBSA (Thambirajah et al., 2008) and an effective bullying policy is important for all pupils. EPs can be invited to collaborate on organisational change work to improve policies, offering psychological knowledge and insight.

5.6.3 Mesosystem

The mesosystem is defined as the context and relationships between microsystems in which the individual interacts (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). This covers communication between home and school, parental attitudes and support, and school procedures.

Communication between home and school enabled issues relating to participants' EBSA to be addressed such as H's issues with peers or *A*'s academic concerns. EP's use of a consultation approach can help facilitate discussions

between home and school and help reach a shared understanding. This approach helps build a trusted relationship between the two systems who can contribute to the development of a collaborative support plan for the young person, addressing the individual needs of the young person as well as shared concerns. School staff should be aware of significant changes to the family dynamic, such as loss and separation in the current research, which had a negative impact on the young person and the family.

A preferred communication between home and school being positively framed and it seems that a strengths-based approach may be beneficial when EPs are communicating with parents and staff. Students in research by Beckles (2014) responded to scaling questions that derived from a solution-focused approach which provided insights into pupils' thoughts on school attendance and aspects of school which could be improved. Solution-focused approaches are familiar to EPs and these can be used to help identify and develop students' strengths and talents to support their re-engagement with learning and personalise future goals. Likewise, the use of tools or frameworks that are underpinned by positive psychology (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000) are likely to be beneficial.

Kearney (2001) suggests that a lack of trust in school staff or professionals can reduce parental motivation in the child's return to school which may be problematic. Issues with relationships at home can also impact on performance and behaviour at school. H's behaviour began to escalate when dealing with issues at home, and this appeared to impact on parental wellbeing and stress. It seems important that staff and professionals recognise the impact that EBSA can have on the family and what this means for the young person.

EPs can play a role in working with families who are supporting young people with EBSA. Parent workshops are one suggestion where information about EBSA and mental health needs can be shared, as well as practical strategies to support a return to school. Parental stress can contribute to a young person's EBSA, meaning emotional support for parents is likely to be beneficial. Parent groups set up by school could be a supportive network or parents can be signposted to external services who can offer support around parent wellbeing.

Both young people in the current research appreciated access to an alternative space at school, which helped promote their autonomy in the return to school. Identifying a space, ideally a more nurturing environment, for young people

to access at times of need may offer them some control over their learning environment which may help ease anxiety.

The current research also indicated the ways that technology can be used effectively, both in supporting young people to complete work if absent from school, and in building relationships remotely. This may be particularly useful for young people with EBSA and social-communication needs who may find face-to-face meetings challenging. If possible, schools should ensure that young people identified as having EBSA have access to appropriate technology at home to enable them to maintain contact with school and complete academic work.

5.6.4 Exosystem

The exosystem is described as settings that do not directly involve the young person yet remain influential (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), such as parental employment, local community facilities or values, and other social networks.

Parental employment and working patterns impact on the family and shape the life of the young person. For *A*'s mum, working at her daughter's school appeared to offer some flexibility in working hours at times when *A* remained at home, although this is unlikely to be the case for many other parents who have less control over their working circumstances. As previously discussed, support for parents is of paramount importance and it may be beneficial for home and school to have an agreed expectation around frequency and type of contact, taking work commitments into consideration.

Developing links between the young person and the local community may be a supportive measure, particularly in their approach to adulthood. H's engagement with coaching appeared to help her develop skills needed for further education and in building aspirations for the future. Other opportunities for young people to access coaching or extracurricular activities could be identified by school. An understanding of an individual's cultural and religious views might also help identify cultural or faith-based networks that can provide extracurricular activities and opportunities to build friendships.

5.6.5 Macrosystem

The macrosystem acknowledges factors such as social and cultural norms, the political landscape and government policy and legislation (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Theorists have argued that culture is an ever-changing system that plays a central role in daily routines and activities which provide the context for individual

development (Velez-Agosto et al., 2017), and its importance is perhaps understated in Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems model.

Ethnically diverse groups are underrepresented in research into school non-attendance and the current research suggests that cultural views may shape relationships with staff. Kearney (2008) emphasises the need to recognise cultural diversity in students, explaining that 'inattention' to diversity can create a poor school climate that contributes to school absence. Differences between the cultural context of the school or individual and plans for additional support may be a barrier in a successful return to school. This highlights the importance of gathering the young person's views and cultural perspectives and ensuring they are involved in decisions about their education.

There are challenges in defining and identifying EBSA which makes it difficult to monitor and track. The terminology was not discussed by participants in the current research and therefore the way this the behaviour was described by home and school is not known. Establishing a common language between home, school and other professionals may provide some consistency in the way the young person is supported. It seems important for teams and systems within the Local Authority, such as the EPS and Education Welfare Team, to consistently use the same terminology in order to identify and support children and young people with attendance difficulties. However, it is also understood that placing too much emphasis on labels may create friction between home and school. EPs may be well placed to manage these situations to support those involved to reach a shared understanding.

The Covid19 pandemic resulted in heightened levels of anxiety amongst many young people and school attendance may trigger further anxiety or upset (Rae, 2020). With this in mind, it is important to consider the specific challenges that are associated with Covid19 and EBSA, such as dealing with loss or managing health concerns. It remains important for key adults to develop an understanding of the young person's anxiety and to establish opportunities for a therapeutic relationship to be built. Identifying a key adult in school with which to build a trusting relationship can provide some containment for the young person.

5.7 Critique of current research

5.7.1 Narrative research

There is limited research into EBSA using a narrative approach. Narrative research can support young people to attribute meaning to challenging experiences which felt appropriate for young people with EBSA.

Narrative research involves subjective interpretation which shapes participants' stories (Kim, 2016). This interpretive element is found at every stage of the research, including the focus of the research, the process of data collection and analysis and the dissemination of findings. Polkinghorne (1995) explains that the co-construction of narratives means findings cannot be said to reflect the 'truth', but instead capture themes or plots which provide insight into a phenomenon or lived experience. Consequently, it felt important that member checks took place with the participants to check the accuracy of the co-constructed narratives. Polkinghorne (2007) suggests that sufficient evidence should be provided so readers can reach their own decision around the validity of the claims being made and therefore the stories were reported in their entirety in the Findings chapter. Where possible, the narratives captured the words or phrases used by participants although this felt uncomfortable at times, particularly when upsetting details were shared such as H commenting on how she was 'hated' by others. Whilst this was uncomfortable to document and share back with H, it was felt that changing the language might also make this less meaningful for her.

As highlighted by Allen (2017), the unstructured format of narrative interviews means the researcher gives up some control of the conversation by following participants' lead. At times this felt uncomfortable, particularly when the information being shared seemed less relevant to the research questions. However, rather than being overly concerned with the quality of the responses, the researcher accepted that the final narratives would capture the views of the young people in a way that was meaningful for them.

Both young people appeared moved on listening back to their own stories and acknowledging their progress. Both participants expressed a desire for their stories to be shared with other young people dealing with EBSA, to promote a sense of hope and camaraderie. It is apparent that the therapeutic aspect of narrative psychology can be an effective way of supporting young people with attendance difficulties.

5.7.2 Life Story Grid

The use of a life story grid was deemed effective in several ways. The visual provided a structure for participants to reflect on their experiences of EBSA. Billington (2018) found that a narrative approach encouraged reflective thinking which participants saw as beneficial in understanding their experiences. This felt the case in the current research. The life story grid also helped lessen the intensity of a face-to-face discussion, provided an opportunity to build rapport and appeared to support participants' focus.

Participants were invited to personalise the grid according to aspects of the story they wanted to share, which may have fostered a sense of safety. The use of a life story grid may also help address power dynamics by shifting the position of the researcher to more of a co-constructor than an interviewer or psychologist.

Both participants opted to tell their story in a linear way, year by year, which may have been a natural outcome of being asked to complete a timeline of events. This approach was quick for participants to complete and this may have felt a comprehensive way of sharing information, although at times conversation moved off topic. A more freeform grid may have encouraged participants to approach their story in a different way, perhaps organised by theme rather than date. This may have taken longer to complete and would arguably require more reflective thinking from the young people, or perhaps additional time would be needed in advance of the interview. Arranging the grid by theme may have provided additional information on events associated with EBSA, although this could be exposing for participants in having to name challenging experiences in explicit terms.

Being able to present a life grid on screen was useful but using a similar tool in-person may have allowed for a more interactive process where participants could be invited to annotate, draw or move around parts of the grid, arguably adding to the richness of their stories.

5.7.3 Recruitment and participant sample

In line with the epistemological and ontological position of the researcher, the current research did not seek to generalise the findings. However, it is acknowledged that the recruitment process resulted in a homogeneous participant sample. Both participants were recruited from the same secondary school setting and are likely to have been supported by school in comparable ways. A broader participant sample

may have shed light on different experiences of EBSA at the individual, family, school, and systemic level.

Despite this, the current study gathered the views of a more diverse participant sample than in previous research, the majority of which has featured White-British participants (Want, 2020). The current research provided insight into this underrepresented sample which captured unique cultural views on school non-attendance.

Potential participants were identified by school staff based on EBSA criteria. However, staff acknowledged that particular young people were also selected based on their willingness to participate and their ability to express themselves verbally. Staff expressed positive views regarding the young people's resilience in overcoming EBSA. The narratives shared by participants therefore may have been quite different from young people who had found the return to school more challenging, or from young people who find it more difficult to articulate their views. Consequently, the implications of the current research may be more relevant to young people who may be at risk of school avoidance, or present with a similar level of need, than compared with young people whose EBSA is more entrenched.

The current research used terminology provided by West Sussex Educational Psychology Service (n.d.), as noted in section 1.2. Referring to 'Emotional Based School Avoidance' may have supported the recruitment process, particularly in school settings familiar with the term. The Local Authority in which the researcher is based use the same terminology in policy documentation and it was hoped that using this language to describe the phenomenon would help raise awareness and model best practice when contacting school settings. It is, however, acknowledged that the terminology may have presented as a barrier to some settings who were less familiar with the term. This indicates the need for school settings to be aware of the correct terminology as well as early indicators for EBSA in order to be able to identify young people at risk of EBSA and provide appropriate support. Furthermore, an over-reliance on labelling can potentially negatively impact on the relationship between home, school and other professionals if there is a disagreement in the way the behaviour is described, leading to possible missed opportunities to intervene effectively.

The process of seeking parental consent before initiating contact with the young people was a challenge and may have generated feelings of uncertainty or

anxiety in the young person if they became aware of the research at this early stage. On reflection, perhaps a session at school with potential participants may have been a more person-centred process and would have provided an opportunity for rapport building.

The current research aimed to uphold the voice of the young person as much as possible as it was felt that previous research combining child and adult views was often dominated by the adult voice. However, gathering the views of key people around the young person may have helped authenticate some of the information that was shared.

5.7.4 Impact of Covid 19 and remote research

The Covid-19 pandemic brought about changes to the way data was collected and raised ethical issues relating to remote research. The coronavirus pandemic has had a negative impact on the mental health of all children and young people (Blanden et al., 2021) such as heightened levels of anxiety (Kwong et al., 2021). It felt important to keep this in mind throughout the research journey to manage participants' wellbeing.

Online meetings took place remotely and staff identified a quiet, comfortable location at school, which was located within the inclusion unit. It was hoped that meeting remotely may feel less daunting for participants and having control of the laptop camera would give participants some power in the interview process. Online interactions are sometimes known to bring about a 'disinhibition effect' where individuals may self-disclose more information than in person (Suler, 2004). Both young people opted to turn the camera off during the interview phase but kept the cameras on for the other meetings. It was difficult to gauge whether participants were comfortable to continue without being able to rely on visual cues such as body language. Consequently, there were regular check-ins with participants during the interviews which may have shaped participant responses.

There was a fine balance between managing participant wellbeing and striving to collect useful data. There were times in the interview where it would have been useful to probe further for more detail, such as references to rumours that were circulating at school. However, it was important that participants' safety and wellbeing was upheld. It was also challenging to listen to participants' concerns about school or home and not be able to offer support, as might ordinarily be the case when working as a trainee EP. In order to manage this, a member of staff was

available to talk to participants following the interview if concerns were raised. The interview process was a learning experience for the researcher and their own professional practice, highlighting the need to communicate sensitively when discussing emotive topics and the importance of principles of attuned interactions to support clients to feel safe and comfortable.

The social constructionist epistemology acknowledges the interview context will impact on the interview process and shape the information that is shared. Interviews took place within the inclusion area, a space that was later identified in the narratives as being a place of safety for both students where they had positive interactions with staff and peers. Reflecting on this, it would be interesting to note whether home-based interviews would shape the narratives and yield more detail or insight into the family context.

Overall, the current study provides an example of how narrative research can be taken online and the ways in which professionals can engage with young people in meaningful ways.

5.8 Dissemination of research

The findings from the research will be shared with key stakeholders, including the participants, the school SENCo and the EP service.

Participants were offered a copy of their own story following the final online meeting and they will receive a letter and a short summary of the research findings. The school SENCo expressed an interest in the research and played a key role in the recruitment process and data collection phase. A summary of the findings will be verbally shared with the school SENCo once amendments are made and the thesis has been approved. Findings will be generalised to protect participants' anonymity and examples of good practice will be highlighted.

The researcher will be presenting the research findings at an EPS team meeting in the summer term. The researcher will be presenting feedback on the narrative approach at the EPS narrative working group.

Finally, the researcher plans to use some of the research findings to further develop EBSA policy at Local Authority level, by working with the lead EP on this project. The researcher plans to share the key findings with a national working group for EBSA. The findings will also be shared with the university tutor team and TEPs at a university research day.

5.9 Reflexivity

Reflexivity refers to the role of the researcher in the research process and in the interpretation of the data, acknowledging one's own values and interests (Braun & Clarke, 2013). The researcher engaged in reflexive practice throughout the research journey. This included regular tutorials with an academic tutor, participation in a narrative working group within the EPS to discuss the narrative approach, discussions with a placement supervisor and peers, and maintaining a research journal. Key decisions, dates and personal commentary were documented throughout the process which felt particularly important in light of the social constructionist underpinnings of the narrative research.

5.10 Future Research

The current research gathered the views of two young people who are identified as coming from diverse ethnic communities. The research findings shed light on cultural factors such as religious practices and support from the religious community during a period of school avoidance. Future research using a narrative approach could gather the views of young people, parents, staff and other key individuals from diverse backgrounds.

The recruitment criteria for the current study sought young people with experience of EBSA who had since returned to school. The current research explored what worked for young people with EBSA, but may be less effective for young people whose EBSA is more entrenched. For these young people, school-based interventions may be difficult to implement or may have been less successful. Future research could explore the impact of community-based interventions, such as involvement in youth groups, charities or coaching. These may offer young people opportunities to build relationships or develop skills to manage situations that are anxiety provoking which could support a return to school. Community-based interventions might also be more appropriate for young people who have more long-term EBSA.

The current study offered some insight into participants' experiences of Covid19, where home-learning led to positive and negative outcomes for the young people. The number of young people with attendance issues remains higher than before the pandemic (DfE, 2022) and therefore future research could focus on young people who appear to have developed EBSA during, or in response to, the Covid19

pandemic. This research would allow for an understanding of EBSA in relation to Covid19, and how strategies to support the return to school may need to be adapted.

5.11 Conclusion

The aim of the research was to use a narrative approach to hear the stories of young people who had experienced Emotional Based School Avoidance (EBSA). The perspectives of young people were gathered online using a life story grid which provided insight into EBSA and the individual, home, school, and professional factors that play a part in this.

The research illustrated that issues relating to school attendance were first identified in primary school and became more challenging following the transition to secondary school. Individual aspects of EBSA included academic concerns, awareness or knowledge of coping strategies and negative emotions which were often in response to environmental factors. The research offered unique insight into cultural views and school avoidance. The importance of religion, support from the religious community and cultural expectations in relation to learning were all shared by one young person.

Relationships emerged as a key theme in the narratives and their experiences of EBSA. Positive relationships with family, peers and key members of staff were seen to be a protective factor for the young people; these provided emotional support, helped motivate a return to school and appeared to promote a sense of belonging within the school setting. Relationship difficulties, particularly linked to issues with bullying or negative perceptions of staff, appeared to lead to a deterioration in the wellbeing of the young people, as observed by changes in their behaviour at school, disengagement with learning or seeking refuge at home. The breakdown or loss of familial relationships were problematic and threatened the young peoples' sense of relatedness, often leading to feelings of sadness, confusion or frustration.

The importance of the school environment was identified as being another key aspect in young peoples' experiences of EBSA. Young people appreciated access to an additional learning space; being able to spend time in a more nurturing setting minimised the perceived threats of the regular classroom and accessing this space on their own terms appeared to promote the young peoples' sense of autonomy. Professional engagement, whilst only a feature of one narrative, was deemed

valuable in providing the young person with strategies for coping with challenging situations, managing feelings of anxiety and in developing aspirations for the future.

Young people shared similar experiences of Covid19 in relation to EBSA. Extended time away from school was initially perceived positively, where young people stayed at home which was seen as a place of safety. The introduction of home-learning, where the structure of the school day was imposed on the home environment, was associated with feelings of frustration and heightened stress, and time away from school made the eventual return to school more difficult for one young person.

The findings indicate the personal and often complex experiences of EBSA, underpinned by personal and emotional challenges over several years. Yet, the findings also highlight the resilience of both young people who shared a positive trajectory despite previous challenges. The research illustrates the ways in which a narrative approach can be used to support young people to reflect on experiences of EBSA in an empowering way and how young people, when given the opportunity to share their views, are able to articulate detailed and thoughtful accounts of their experiences. The findings from the research offer insight into EBSA during the context of the Covid19 pandemic and the implications for professional practice are presented.

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Appendix A

Summary of the literature review method

Search date	26.7.2021
Databases searched	Academic Search Complete, British Education Index, PsycInfo, PsychArticles, The Education Resource Information Center (ERIC), Education Research Complete Grey literature (doctoral theses) identified by hand and via the British Library EThOS database
Search terms	Combination of search terms using Boolean operators: • school avoidance / school refusal / school absenteeism / school absence / school non-attendance • experiences / views / voice / attitudes / perceptions • return / reintegration/ support / intervention / recommendation
Additional parameters	Full text articles Peer reviewed English text Published in/after 2010 Doctoral theses
Number of articles	N = 97
Inclusion criteria	Qualitative (or mixed methods) research Research in Europe, USA, Canada, New Zealand, Australia Young people are school age Young people returning to a mainstream provision Incorporates views of young people (also alongside others)
Exclusion criteria	Duplicate articles Quantitative or secondary research School absence due to: medical reasons, truancy Young people returning to a specialist provision Focus of the research is exclusively on adult views (rather than of the young person) Voice of young person not stated
Articles selected	N = 5 (from systematic literature review) Additional papers: 8 identified via hand-search and EThOS Total number of articles: 13

Appendix B

A summary of the literature review findings

Author	Date	Title	Participants	Study design and analysis	Themes and Key Findings
Aucott, C.	2014	An exploration of pupils', parents' and teachers' perceptions of the causes of pupil non-attendance and the reasons for improvements in attendance	3 case studies in 2 schools, 11 participants (parent, teacher, child) 3 CYP (10, 6, 8 years old, 2 male)	Case study, multi-method approach: semi structured interviews, document analysis, admin records Thematic analysis	- Within child, parent and school related factors highlighted - Shared understanding (esp. teacher and parent) of causes of non-attendance resulted in greatest improvement in attendance -Inconsistency in views of causes for non-attendance, mostly adult view - Success in staff recognising/ understanding reasons for non-attendance, pupils' views being acted upon, interventions matched the causes identified -Participants couldn't always explains causes of non-attendance (from functional perspective)
Baker, M. & Bishop, F.	2015	Out of school: a phenomenological exploration of extended non-attendance	4 CYP (secondary age) South of England	Semi structured interviews, IPA	- Participant's perceptions of non-attendance significantly different (depression, bullying, fatigue) but a lot of overlap in the support available (i.e. support wasn't personalised- were CYP views even acted on?) - Friendship/belonging central -Support from CAMHS, Home Education service, therapy, counselling - Pressure to return to school too quickly - Issues of blame, punishment and control **-** IPA- author suggests despite gathering CYP voice, gets impression they were ignored or had meaning (of school avoidance) reframed by adults

					-Impact of nonattendance leading to feelings of anger, fear…hiding emotions and sought personal meaning -Support from outside agencies felt fragmented
Beckles, C.	2014	An exploration of the perceptions and experiences of non-attenders and school staff within a secondary school context	12 secondary age CYP, early stages of non-attendance Staff views	Semi structured interviews, IPA Visual tools including SFBT, PCP resources	- Belonging, relationships within school setting (with peers and staff) - Impact of close friends/family - Positive aspects of school also shared - Understanding work and enjoying/fulfilment from lessons - Importance of CYP views being acknowledged and acted on (otherwise sense of helplessness) - Thoughts and feelings about school attendance/avoidance - Need for open communication at school -CYP can find it hard to make sense of their experience- making it difficult to plan targeted interventions
Billington, K.	2018	Using an active listening approach to consider the views of three young people on the topic of missing education	3 secondary age boys (15-17 years old)	Voice-Centred Relational Method Active listening approach	-Sense of belonging and connection was crucial; being treated as an individual and getting support at right time - School systems commented on, particularly teacher attitudes and feedback - CYP views on absence differed significantly -Narrative approach perceived in a positive way; helped develop reflective thinking and encouraged CYP to learn and move on from past experiences - Model developed from findings
Clissold, K.	2018	A Qualitative Exploration of Pupil, Parent and Staff	10 participants; 3 CYP, 3	Unstructured interviews	-CYP constructions of school refusal, main themes:

		Discourses of Extended School Non-Attendance	teachers, 4 parents Secondary school age White British	Discourse analysis Use of timeline/ Grid elaboration	- negative school experiences (academic pressure, tricky transition, friendship and peer issues) -mental health (anxiety, depression, self harm) - lack of understanding (mental health needs, ASC, readiness to reintegrate) -support and provision (lack of support, unsuitable support, delays and inconsistent) -Staff and parents; overlap in some themes, some blaming of other systems -Model of support developed
Gregory, I. & Purcell, A.	2014	Extended school non-attenders' views: developing best practice	5 families (3 families - parent and CYP; 2 families with no CYP input) Secondary school age	Semi-structured interviews IPA	- Highlighted individuality of each case and therefore should be viewed from systemic (rather than within child) model - Themes included: - Medical needs / Social (interactions with peers), school experiences (lack of discipline, fear of teachers, moving schools) Systems theory (circularity involving child, mental health and school environment) - Lack of CYP voice (not sought) - Identified triggers to non-attendance (eg bullying) -Feelings of blame -Impact of labelling; preventing a shared understanding of behaviour
How, K.	2015	Exploring the experiences and perceptions of Key Stage 4 students whose school	5 secondary age pupils, low attendance	Semi structured interviews, IPA	-Relationships with staff and peers (positive and negative; feeling different, bullying etc) -Impact on different systems inc. parents, CYP and family -Lack of control and feeling passive (also impact on personal values and beliefs)

		attendance is persistently low			-Influence of school systems
Mortimer, E.	2019	Going back to school following a period of extended school non-attendance	2 CYP (secondary school age) 3 parents	Semi structured interviews Thematic analysis	- Trusting relationships (peers, parents, staff) - Sense of control (sense of agency; being listened to, making sense of non-attendance) - Practical support (gradual return, external agencies, individualised support) - Home school communication -Perceptions of non-attendance (being easily 'fixed', ongoing difficulties)
Nuttall,C. & Woods, K.	2013	Effective intervention for school refusal behaviour	Two CYP (13/14 year-old girls) Parent, school staff, family support worker, health professional views	Case study design Semi structured interviews Thematic analysis	Developed an ecological model of successful reintegration with 4 levels: - Psychological factors -Support for psychological factors -Factors supporting family -Roles of professionals - Importance of safety, security, belonging, nurturing approach, being valued at school and at home - Support in developing confidence and in identifying thoughts, feelings and behaviour useful
Orme Stapleton, C.	2017	A Qualitative Exploration of Persistent Non-Attendance in a South-West Local Authority Area	4 families (primary and secondary); 2 CYP views Staff 6 schools (age not clear)	Semi structured interviews Thematic analysis	-Impact of non-attendance on family (parents, child…) - Relationships with peers and staff seen as key - Aspects of learning environment highlighted - Parents mentioning mental health needs, ASC, unmet needs
Shilvock, G.	2010	Investigating the factors associated	3 students (female;	Semi structured interviews	-Being young carers seen as contributing factor to attendance difficulties

		with emotionally-based non-attendance from young people's perspective	secondary age) Young carers	Thematic analysis PCP tools PCP used as a 'lens' throughout thesis (data collection, analysis, interpretation)	- Ambivalence in staying home (to support family) or attending school - Risk and protective school factors identified: (valued friendships, social support, extra curricular activities / problematic aspects included boredom, irrelevant lessons, finding work hard) -PCP useful lens and framework for intervention
Smith, J.	2020	An Appreciative Inquiry into the school-related factors which help pupils experiencing Persistent School Non-Attendance to attend secondary school	7 secondary school age pupils	Semi structured SF / PCP tools Thematic analysis	-Positive relationships (peers, staff) -Positive learning experiences (engaging, boundaried teaching style, meeting individual needs) - feeling valued and comfortable in school (physiological needs, feeling safe) - Development of a model which promotes attendance and an audit tool
Want, H.	2020	A Narrative Oriented Inquiry into emotionally based school avoidance: hearing the voices of young people and their parents	5 participants from 2 families; 2 CYP (secondary age)	Narrative Oriented Inquiry Holistic-form / Categorical-content analysis	-EBSA as gradual process -Environment influenced CYP mental health - CYP and parents perceived CYP emotions slightly differently (fear, stress Vs. anxiety) - School environment and policies significant (contributing pressure and lack of connectedness) - Staff relationships and characteristics highlighted as important -Impact of EBSA on the family unit - Feelings of blame or being unheard (parents and CYP) - Links made to self-determination theory

Appendix C

Critical appraisal of the literature review using Yardley's (2000) core principles for evaluating qualitative research

Author	Title / journal	Sensitivity to context	Commitment and rigour	Transparency and coherence	Impact and Importance
Aucott, C.	An exploration of pupils', parents' and teachers' perceptions of the causes of pupil non-attendance and the reasons for improvements in attendance Thesis paper	Detailed and coherent background information, reference to historical and cultural aspects to non-attendance CYP young (6-10 years old), despite EBSA often peaking at later stage Little mention of reflexivity	Thesis project; great level of detail in each case study Rigorous research methods May have been useful to gather voice of family support worker	Lack of clarity of voices of CYP and parents; not always clear who provided which view Adult voices appear to dominate Participants included CYP with health diagnosis and another included time off school for a holiday; is this reflective of EBSA? One pupil already had 95% attendance; is this problematic?	Useful suggestions for EP practice, including need to gather pupil voice to help guide interventions (does not appear to be happening) Idea of EP's helping deliver a Joint Systems Approach seems appropriate and valuable (considering research aims and conclusions around benefits of a shared understanding of non-attendance)
Baker, M. & Bishop, F.	Out of school: a phenomenological exploration of extended non-attendance	Very clear rationale for study and choice of methodology (past research lacking CYP views and often focusing on truancy)	IPA; appropriate method for exploring lived experience (but at expense of language and	Participants approached by staff known to them (biased sample) i.e. may be those who are keener to	Comprehensive list of suggestions for best practice, for schools and EPs

	Educational Psychology in Practice	Clarity around key terminology Main theories highlighted, as well as risk factors and common interventions	discourse around non-attendance that might be attainable through a more discursive methodology) Demographic detail not clear/known	engage, more articulate, deemed more suitable Some CYP were home-schooled, rather than returning to mainstream; suggests different education experience / ongoing problems with attendance (vs. what's worked) Researcher acknowledging need to further capture CYP voice	
Beckles, C.	An exploration of the perceptions and experiences of non-attenders and school staff within a secondary school context Thesis paper	Comprehensive awareness of relevant literature linked to current research aims. Clear rationale for research, well justified Research set within 1 school in LA; detailed information shared on both systems	Prolonged engagement with topic; researcher spent 4 days at school prior to interviews – enhances credibility (how does this influence judgements?) Substantial sample size	Shared detail on process of data collection and coding Strong reflexivity; acknowledgment of impacts of own beliefs and expectations Perhaps heavy focus on things which aren't working rather than more positive	Suggestions shared for school, staff and EP work; these felt relevant, practical and linked closely to the data findings (also supported by previous research) Novel perspective offered in pupils also sharing positive elements of school, not often identified in the

			Good fit between epistemology and methodology	aspects of school – does this limit participant responses?	research. Research objectives clearly met
Billington, K.	Using an active listening approach to consider the views of three young people on the topic of missing education Educational Psychology in Practice	Acknowledgement of previous research Summary of thesis paper; therefore less detail on sociocultural elements/ power issues etc	Methodological awareness and choice was well justified and appropriate; focus on CYP voice and flexibility in gathering views Process of gathering views and sharing back to CYP highly valued Multiple meetings with CYP helped build rapport and credibility of data	One CYP previously excluded and other reasons for missing school not entirely clear – is it EBSA? Transcript extracts useful in capturing authentic views of CYP	Researcher developed a model to guide best practice (for EPs and school) when working with non-attenders. Useful model but requires a lot of time and commitment (e.g. regular reviews with all systems); is this realistic or achievable given systemic constraints?
Clissold, K.	A Qualitative Exploration of Pupil, Parent and Staff Discourses of Extended School Non-Attendance Thesis paper	Exploring constructs of school non-attendance, perhaps more so than experiences. Well justified rationale and supported by theory and research	Recruitment and methodology defined, although some finer details around data collection weren't entirely clear	Extracts and transcripts provided; supported argument well One parent present for CYP interview; may have benefited CYP but this may	A model of support was developed with implications for professional practice; seems useful and achievable

		Context fairly clear		limit information shared	
Gregory, I. & Purcell, A.	Extended school non-attenders' views: developing best practice Educational Psychology in Practice	Generally good paper in gathering CYP views and highlighting need to understand each case in a systemic way Good links to legislation, need to gather voice of CYP, functions of school refusal and EP role More adult participants than CYP; does this overshadow the voice of the child?	Methodology appropriately chosen; focusing on subjective experiences. Acknowledging phenomenological and interpretative aspects of data collection/analysis Researcher views/biases unknown	Participant sample not representative; participants self-identified and responded to request CYP included ASC/medical diagnoses (anxiety, depression)- likely common but is it representative? All CYP currently home schooled so not a return to school Themes (pertaining to CYP or parents) unclear Links made to previous research regarding anxiety and school avoidance and CYP explicitly asked about this in interviews; does this shape the findings?	Main aim of research was to try and elicit CYP voice; this was achieved but less focus on what helped; perhaps slightly limited on how to best inform professional practice Nevertheless some good recommendations for EPS delivery (concise and practical)

How, K.	Exploring the experiences and perceptions of Key Stage 4 students whose school attendance is persistently low Thesis paper	Generally very good Clear information regarding context and background. Critical review of literature, clear grounding in theory and clarification of terminology and position Sufficient depth of analysis, individually and collectively Ethical issues highlighted	Consistent Statement of positionality completed and included, written prior to commencing research. Own biases and values identified and addressed Potential issue; parents present during interviews with CYP, therefore placing limits on what is shared/ shaping views	Transcripts provided, clarity and power of argument (supported by evidence and backed by literature) Good fit between theory and method Several participants highlighted as having diagnosis (anxiety, depression, ADHD)- in light of research aims and perspective, not hugely problematic but arguably impact of this should be noted	Implications tied in with previous research and research aims, enriching understanding of non-attendance. Recommendations for school and EP practice shared- including individual, relational and systemic factors. Practical suggestions tie closely to EP role and skill set
Mortimer, E.	Going back to school following a period of extended school non-attendance Thesis paper	CYP found it difficult to define causes of school non-attendance (therefore are semi structured interviews best approach?) Thorough background literature, highlighting dominant theories, interventions and CYP voice. Linked closely	AI; whilst this captured lots of useful information, it is also focused on specific aspects of school/avoidance, perhaps at expense/exclusion of other aspects that may be relevant Clear links between research	Lots of detail on researcher's values, position and aims; reflexive and honest Transparent methodology Clear participant criterion Extracts provided throughout	CYP still unhappy on return/ not full attendance Development of an appreciative model as well as steps to implement into practice- practical and useful

		to researcher perspective Ethical issues addressed	methodology and theoretical underpinnings		
Nuttall,C. & Woods, K.	Effective intervention for school refusal behaviour Educational Psychology in Practice	What is 'success'? Success seen as increased attendance and reductions in anxiety = could be perceived as a within child explanation Term 'school refusal' used throughout; suggests a more within child, purposeful act (despite recognising social constructionist views) 2 participants (plus families and professionals); wide range of views but limited in CYP views due to sample size Sociocultural setting less clear	Case study approach, focus is not on CYP (range of views); is another methodology more suitable? Thorough analysis; cross-coding and reviewed and discussed with EP (reliable and good construct validity)	Sometimes hard to distinguish which themes and subthemes come from who; CYP, staff or parent? – is CYP voice fully upheld? Or is it an adult interpretation? Breakdown of themes provided Researcher view/ position unknown	Not much specific detail on what CYP found helpful – adults given more of a voice in case study approach- however, aim of research was not specifically children's experiences Not great exploration on what was useful for EBSA or supportive elements Developed a systemic model of 'school refusal'; very useful, context based and holistic approach However- clear steps to implement model are not provided

Orme Stapleton, C.	A Qualitative Exploration of Persistent Non-Attendance in a South-West Local Authority Area Thesis paper	Families of primary age children were more engaged with the research, reflected in the data collected Staff contributed views more than parent/child – whilst secondary families contributed, only primary age CYP took part (view appeared limited)	Changes to choice in analysis, sufficient depth Whilst exploration of terminology was in depth, some limitations in terms of argument for CYP voice due to low numbers	Participants selected by schools to demonstrate good practice Close working relationship with researcher (ie worked with 2 families before commencing research) Hard to distinguish some views due to gaps in the data and merged analysis	Implications around consistent terminology highlighted as important
Shilvock, G.	Investigating the factors associated with emotionally-based non-attendance from young people's perspective Thesis paper	Comprehensive engagement with topic and clarity on terminology Creative and flexible methodology, appropriate for needs of CYP Power imbalances not explicitly addressed	PCP used throughout in a unique and meaningful way; as a lens to interpret findings and as a framework for intervention. Consequently, v person centred In depth engagement with topic, sufficient completeness of	Questions around recruitment criteria; attendance is quite high- but not hugely problematic Clearly identified values, identity, aims – linking to methodology and epistemology In depth detail on methodology and research fidelity	Practical implications for practice, backed by research findings and theory

			data collection/analysis		
Smith, J.	An Appreciative Inquiry into the school-related factors which help pupils experiencing Persistent School Non-Attendance to attend secondary school Thesis paper	Clear definitions and understanding of terminology and background literature. National, local context shared, including info relating to Covid19 (unique) Relevant literature leading to RQs	Some questionable methodological choices- AI focuses on positive elements and set in present and future; does this limit CYP responses? How appropriate is Ideal School task for CYP who struggle to attend school? One CYP refused to engage in this activity	Epistemology and ontology shared but not explicitly stated Participant criteria arguably slightly vague (only 1 out of 8 criteria needed to participate)	Development of a model to provide a suitable school environment and an audit tool to go alongside; meaningful contribution to the field Implications for school and EPs offered considering each level (individual, group, systemic) and supported by research
Want, H.	A Narrative Oriented Inquiry into emotionally based school avoidance: hearing the voices of young people and their parents Thesis paper	One CYP on roll at PRU; rather than mainstream Both CYP diagnosed with ASC Clear on current policies and prevalence; aware of and sensitive to needs of a vulnerable group. Ethical considerations highlighted and power	Sufficient depth and engagement with topic as highlighted in background review and during research process Clarity around methodology and data collection providing details on framework used	Families knew one another; possibly skewed findings and exaggerated similarities between cases? Links between theory and research noted and transparency around data collection and analysis	Diversity important in understanding EBSA Generally good; gaps in literature identified and addressed, used to promote CYP voice Participants from white (middle class) British background; often a dominant voice in research

		imbalances were addressed Parent voice arguably elevated compared to CYP (more parents responded and views seem to be explored in more depth)		Some transcripts provided and extracts from research diary (reflexive practice) No member checking with participants	

Appendix D

University of East London Ethical Clearance

School of Psychology Research Ethics Committee

NOTICE OF ETHICS REVIEW DECISION

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

REVIEWER: Christian Van Nieuwerburgh

SUPERVISOR: Lucy Browne

STUDENT: Guy Tamlyn

Course: Prof Doc in Educational and Child Psychology

DECISION OPTIONS:

1. **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/examination.

2. **APPROVED, BUT MINOR AMENDMENTS ARE REQUIRED BEFORE THE RESEARCH COMMENCES** (see Minor Amendments box below)**:** In this circumstance, re-submission of an ethics application is not required but the student must confirm with their supervisor that all minor amendments have been made before the research commences. Students are to do this by filling in the confirmation box below when all amendments have been attended to and emailing a copy of this decision notice to her/his supervisor for their records. The supervisor will then forward the student's confirmation to the School for its records.

3. **NOT APPROVED, MAJOR AMENDMENTS AND RE-SUBMISSION REQUIRED** (see Major Amendments box below)**:** 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.

DECISION ON THE ABOVE-NAMED PROPOSED RESEARCH STUDY
(Please indicate the decision according to one of the 3 options above)

APPROVED

Minor amendments required *(for reviewer)*:

Major amendments required *(for reviewer):*

Confirmation of making the above minor amendments *(for students)*:

I have noted and made all the required minor amendments, as stated above, before starting my research and collecting data.

Student's name *(Typed name to act as signature):*
Student number:

Date:

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

ASSESSMENT OF RISK TO RESEACHER *(for reviewer)*

Has an adequate risk assessment been offered in the application form?

YES / NO

Please request resubmission with an adequate risk assessment

If the proposed research could expose the researcher to any of kind of emotional, physical or health and safety hazard? Please rate the degree of risk:

☐ HIGH

Please do not approve a high risk application and refer to the Chair of Ethics. Travel to countries/provinces/areas deemed to be high risk should not be permitted and an application not approved on this basis. If unsure please refer to the Chair of Ethics.

	MEDIUM (Please approve but with appropriate recommendations)
x	LOW

Reviewer comments in relation to researcher risk (if any).

Reviewer *(Typed name to act as signature)*: Christian van Nieuwerburgh

Date: 23 April 2021

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

Appendix E

Local Authority Ethical Clearance

Guy Tamlyn

9 April 2022

Reference: CERGF257
RGF Application Approval

Dear Guy

Research Title: An exploration of the narratives of young people who have experienced emotional-based school avoidance.

This is to confirm that your research proposal has been approved by the Research Governance Framework Panel.

Upon completion can you please submit a copy of your report or an extract from your conclusion to the above postal or email address. We may then publish details of your research on the National Social Care Research Register or equivalent.

Please do not hesitate to contact me should you need any further assistance.

I wish you well in your research study.

Yours sincerely,

Appendix F

Headteacher information letter

University of East London

[address removed]

Monday 24th May 2021

Dear

I am a Trainee Educational Psychologist working in [removed] and I am studying at the University of East London. As part of my doctoral studies, I am conducting some research into the experiences of young people who have experienced school avoidance behaviour. The research project has received ethical approval from the University of East London and the [removed] Ethics Committee.

Research has indicated that low school attendance can lead to poor outcomes for young people in comparison to peers who attend more regularly, as well as an increased likelihood of mental health issues and social isolation. There appears to be a lack of research into the views and experiences of young people who struggle to attend school. I believe that gathering this information can help provide insight into this behaviour and how we can support young people who find it difficult to attend school.

What would this involve?

I have a criteria list that I can pass to the school SENCo to identify pupils that might be eligible to participate. I would like to have an initial online meeting with potential participants who may be identified as having had a period of emotional-based school avoidance to invite them to take part in the research study. I will also need to gain parental consent ahead of this meeting.

I am writing to ask you if you are happy to support the research. This would involve:

- Agreement for SENCo to send out consent forms to students who might meet the inclusion criteria for the research study

- Agreement for me to meet with students online to explain the study. Students who agree to participate and provide ethical consent would take part in an individual interview for around an hour. This would take place online at a time that is agreed with the young person. A final meeting would take place where I can individually feedback the key aspects of their experience in a strengths-based way. This is often considered to be a therapeutic and empowering process for the young person.

What happens next?

If you agree to support the research, I would greatly appreciate you replying either by phone or e-mail, using the contact details below.

The prevalence of school avoidance behaviour appears to be increasing in recent months and I feel this is an area that justifies further research in order to support the young people themselves as well as the adults around them.

Thank you for taking the time to read this and I look forward to hearing from you. If you have any questions about any aspect of the research, please do not hesitate to get in touch.

Yours sincerely,

Guy Tamlyn
Trainee Educational Psychologist Supervised by Dr Lucy Browne,
l.browne@uel.ac.uk
u1815174@uel.ac.uk

Appendix G

Participants Information Sheet

Hello!

Who am I?

My name is Guy and I'm training to be an Educational Psychologist. As part of my training, I am doing some research with young people.

What is this research about?

This research is about young people's experiences and stories about attending school. Some young people can find it difficult to attend school for different reasons. I am interested in finding out what young people might find helpful to attend school

What will I do?

We will have a conversation about your school experiences. This will be an online meeting. I have some questions I can ask you so you can tell me your story about attending school. I also have some images which can help you to remember the key parts of your story. I imagine the interview will take around 1 hour. After our meeting, I will listen to your story and think about the important parts. At a later date, I can share my new version of the story with you. This is kind of research is called a 'narrative approach'

What happens to my information?

I will be recording our meeting online and using a voice recorder. I will store this on a computer with a password to make sure it is secure. After I have finished typing up the recording, I will delete the recording.
Any names we talk about in our conversation will be changed so information is anonymous. I will be writing a report using the information I collect. I will share the report with school and my colleagues. I can share what I have learnt with you, too.

Why should I take part?

Good question! I can think of three reasons why you might like to take part:

1. This is a great opportunity to talk about your experience and share your story. Talking and sharing our experiences with other people is important for our own wellbeing
2. Hearing a 'new' story about your life often makes people feel strong and you can learn about your own strengths and special qualities
3. Your voice is important. Sharing your story might help other young people who find it difficult to go to school. I've looked at other studies about school attendance and it seems that not many people have found out about the views of young people, so I'd like to hear more!

What if I change my mind?

No problem! You are free to stop taking part in the study at any time. You can tell me if you want to stop, or we can think about a code word you can use to show me you don't want to carry on.
You can tell me you don't want to take part anymore until August 2021 which is when I will be writing up the findings.

What happens next?

I have a consent form for you and your parents/carers. This will need to be signed and returned to the school SENCo who can pass it to me. Next, we can decide on a date to meet online.

If you have any questions about the study, you can e-mail me at u1815174@uel.ac.uk

Appendix H

Parents information sheet

Dear Parent,

I am a trainee Educational Psychologist at the University of East London. As part of my training, I am undertaking some research into supporting children with their school attendance.
Research suggests that regular school attendance can lead to more positive outcomes, from an academic and social perspective. However, some young people can find school difficult for various reasons and can find it challenging to attend. I am keen to explore why this may be the case, in order to think about the type of support that would be most beneficial.

Your son/daughter has been identified as a child who may be able to provide some insight into the study. I will be meeting with the children involved in the project on three occasions. These meetings will take place online:
In the first meeting, I will introduce myself and I will explain the aims of the study and answer any questions the young person may have. An online interview will follow on the second meeting which will last around 1 hour.
On the third meeting, I will be sharing a summarised version of the young person's experience with them, highlighting key aspects of their story. This is often a very empowering and therapeutic experience for them.

I will be recording the audio from each interview so I can write-up their views following the interview. Recordings will be saved on a password protected computer and will be deleted once the recording has been analysed.
Any information (names, places) that is shared during the interview will remain anonymous and confidentiality will be upheld at all times. Your child has the right to withdraw from the study at any point.

A report will be produced from the study's findings, but this will remain anonymous. I can share the report with yourself once this is complete. I hope the findings will contribute to improving the support available to young people who may find it difficult to attend school. The findings can guide strategies which can benefit young people, families, teachers and other professionals.

If you agree for your child to take part in the research, please complete the attached form and return it to me at the e-mail address below. If you have any questions about any aspect of the research, please feel free to contact me.

Thankyou for your time,

Guy Tamlyn
u1815174@uel.ac.uk

Appendix I

Parent/Carer Consent Form

[Local Authority logo]

Research into the views and narratives of young people who have experienced school avoidance

XXXXXX, Trainee Educational Psychologist at University of East London

Parent/ carer reply form

I have read the information sheet and I consent to my child taking part in the study. I understand that you will meet with my son/daughter at school. I understand that you will check they are happy to take part in the study. I understand my child can withdraw from the study at any time, up until [XXXXXXXX] date.

Child details

Name of child: _____

Date of birth: _____

School attended: _____

Parent/carer details

Parent's name: _____

Relationship to child: _____

e-mail address: _____

Date: _____

Signed: _____

Please return to:
[member of staff] at [name of school]
OR
Local Authority Address / XXXXXXX@uel.ac.uk

Appendix J

Participant consent form

Child Consent Form

Pupil Name: ……

Please circle your answers below:

I have read the information sheet	Yes	No
I understand what the research is about	Yes	No
I understand what I will be asked to do at our next meetings	Yes	No
My questions about the study have been answered	Yes	No
I understand that I can stop taking part in the study any time	Yes	No
I know how I can tell the researcher if I want to stop	Yes	No
I know how my information will be stored	Yes	No
I know that my information will be deleted after it has been analysed		

If you answer 'No' to any of the questions above, you will not be taking part in the study

Finally, please tick one box:

Yes, I would like to take part in the study

No, I would NOT like to take part in the study

Appendix K

Debrief Form

Dear

Thank you for telling me your story about school. I enjoyed meeting you and listening to what you told me. I hope you also enjoyed talking about your experiences and hearing a 'new' version of your story.

Everything you've shared with me will help me to understand what can help children and teenagers attend school.

If you remember our first meeting, I told you that I will be writing a report based on what I've learnt from our conversation. I can share this report with your school and I would also like to send a letter to you. I can explain about some of the things I've found out.

If you feel you have any more questions about what we've talked about, you can talk to [school SENCo / key teacher] as they know about the research. Or, if you'd like to ask me a question directly, you can e-mail me using the address below.

Once again, thank-you for taking part in my study. I hope you continue to do well at school.

Best wishes

XXXX

XXXXX@uel.ac.uk

Appendix L

Timeline / Interview Questions

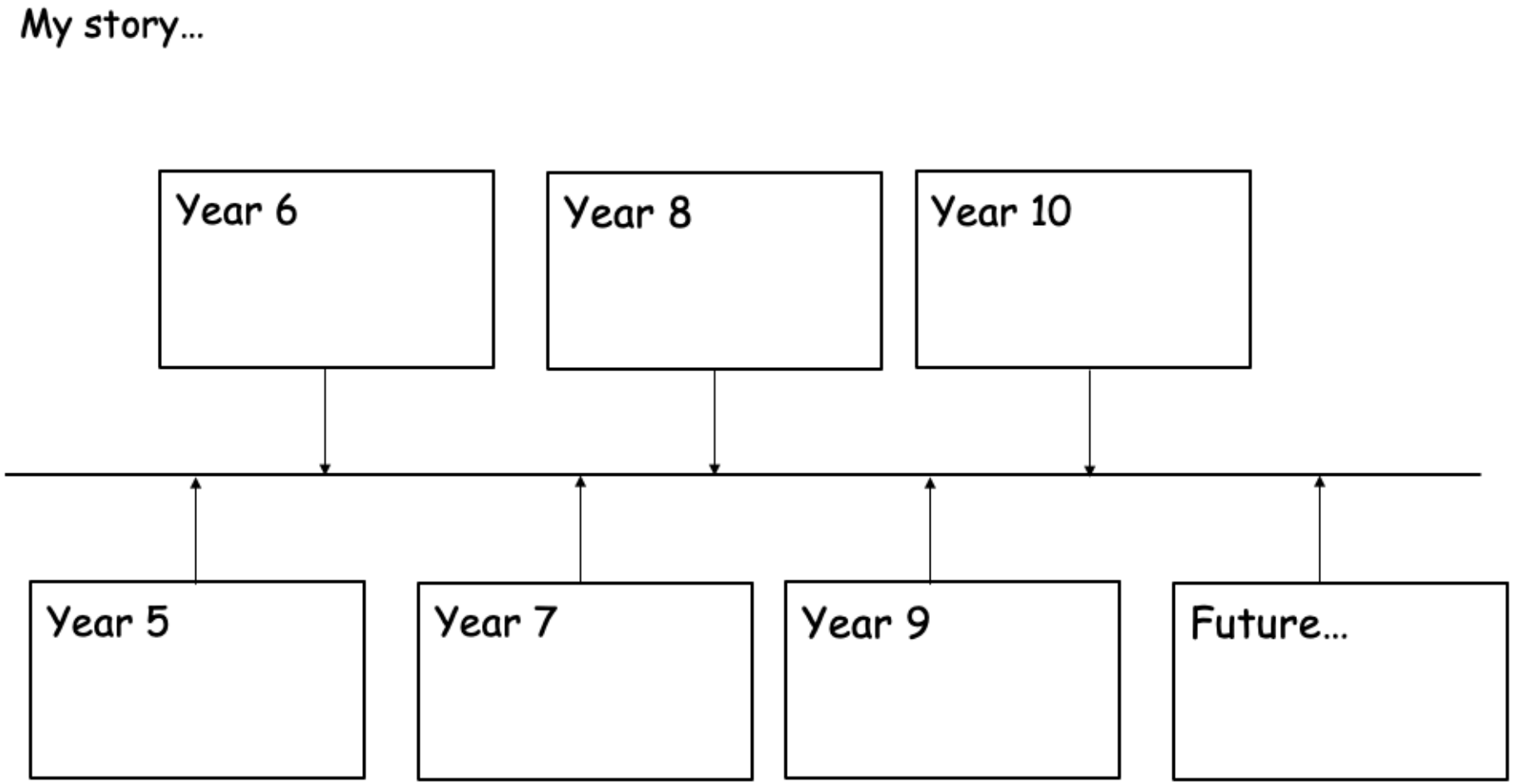
To help you to tell your story, we can look at this image together to help you to think about what you'd like to share. As you can see, there are several boxes on the page and each box represents a significant time or event that has taken place and plays a part in your story. The beginning of your story can go in the first box and the most recent part of your story goes in the final box. Can you have a think about what you might like to label the other boxes on your timeline?

If using a visual prompt e.g. timeline, look at these and complete together. Follow up questions…

- Can you tell me about…[e.g. year 7, lockdown]
- What did you like about…?
- What didn't you like about…?
- What, when, who?
- How did you feel about it?
- Can you tell me a bit more?
- What was that like for you?
- Why was that important for you?
- Did you see that as a good thing or a bad thing or something else?
- Did that make things easier or more difficult?
- How did that impact [person]?
- Who else knows this?
- Anything else you would like to share?

Appendix M

Example of A's completed life story grid



Appendix N

Example transcript from H's interview

H: I would like to start from Year 6

INT: OK, could you tell me a little bit about Year 6?

H: When I think back to the start of Year 6, everything in school was OK. Then in in the middle of Year 6 and that's, like, when I started to get bullied by all my friends…

INT: OK…

H: And, things back at home started to change a bit as well.

INT: OK, so there were some tricky times at school and also at home

H: Yeah, that's like when it all comes, in Year 6, that's when it all started to happen…

INT: OK, so in year 6, you said that there was a little bit of bullying that was going on. Did anyone help you at that time?

H: Not until I told my mum, then she spoke to the teachers and like they had a word with the people. Yeah, but apart from that, I felt quite alone.

INT: Yeah, I'm sure, it sounds tricky… so you talked to your mum first of all…

H: yeah, she called up the school and she spoke to the teacher.

INT: OK, did that make things easier?

H: kind of did, yeah, kind of did.

INT: What happened after that?

H: once she spoke to my friends and said that what they're doing is wrong, they started speaking to me again, but it wasn't the same….you just felt like they were being kind of fake towards me.

INT: Yeah, OK, so it felt a bit different after they'd been talked to as well…

H: Yeah, and it just felt like they just turned against me for no reason

INT: So that was a challenging time in Year 6…did anyone know about this? that this was happening at school?

H: nobody knew until I told my mum. Yeah

INT: yeah yeah, you described that you felt like you were quite alone. And that it was useful talking to your mum.

H: Yeah, 'cause when I was in primary, I never had a voice or would speak up for myself…and I would just avoid any situation that I came across

INT: Sure..did you find that it easier to not to tell someone? Was it difficult to tell someone?

H: I think sometimes that it depends on what it is. Like sometimes I feel I can be open to someone, and sometimes I can't.

INT: Yeah, sure. And at primary school, was there a member of staff that you could talk to?

H: When my mum opened up to my teacher then I felt like I could open up to her.

INT: OK, yeah, so you could talk to her afterwards. And how did that help?

H: Well…before everything happened in Year 6, I used to have quite a bigger friendship and then they all went against me and after the teacher spoke to them, they started speaking to me again, but it wasn't the same. And then my friendship group, it became smaller, to two people. And then I became closer to those 2 again,

INT: OK, yeah, so it started off as a big friendship group

H: Yeah

INT: And then some of them weren't very kind to you

H: Yeah?

INT: And then after your mum spoke to your teacher and she spoke to some of this group. Yeah, and you said you ended up with a smaller group afterwards.

H: Yeah

INT: and you grew closer to those 2 friends after

H: Yeah….and they admitted to…they sort of turned against me and they admitted to not liking me to me for no reason.

INT: Uh OK. And how did it feel when they opened up to you and told you that?

H: I just felt quite angry and annoyed 'cause… especially 'cause I didn't do nothing wrong, I was just trying to be a good friend

A's interview

INT: OK. You mentioned earlier, in Year 5, that sometimes when you had, was it math lessons? You felt like you didn't wanna come in, yeah? But did anyone else know about this at the time?

A: No…

INT: Ok, I just wondered if anyone was able to help you at that time?

A: No, I like basically, uh, uhm, I just didn't wanna come in so I just said to mum I don't wanna come in and that's when the tears came out and then my mum was like 'OK, fine, you don't have to go' and she wouldn't let me go and that was it.

INT: OK, so did she spend some time with you if you stayed home?

A: Uhm, I would just…because my mum worked in my school, she would stay with me…and we like stayed together and I felt safe with mum but like… then when she has to go to school, which is around like 11 o'clock, she goes, and then she calls back around 1 o'clock..or 2ish and then she comes back and that's it.

INT: Right, so that's a little bit about Year 5 and 6. Then there's a big change for Year 7, cause that's when you started at your new school.

A: In Year 7, I realized like who true friends were and people can change. Because the friend I was with in Year 5 and Year 6, she completely changed. She was very rude. She used to talk behind my back, and I was a girl…well I still am, but I was a girl who wouldn't take that so I did like stand up and I was like 'you cannot do that, just cus we're in secondary school, you can't do those kind of stuff' and I did tell her that I don't wanna be like this and it's still going on. I don't know why it's still going on, I just wanna end it so I did try and end it in Year 7 but like in Year 7, I wasn't in any of her classes which was good because I was in Set 2 for everything….and I didn't have to do anything like that and now she keeps like bringing up rumours from the past and she tries to keep like pushing me and like telling other people about me, telling the teachers what I'm doing. But the teachers don't know what I'm doing…she tells off us, but she doesn't know what to tell off because I'm not doing anything right now.

INT: So, it's been going on for quite a while now.

A: Yeah...it's been tricky

INT: It still sounds like it's still quite tricky for you

A: yeah..

INT: And you've actually known the girl for a long time…

A: Yeah I did

INT: and even in Year 7, there was a few things that were going on between you.

A: I did make new friends.

INT: You did? Okay, and did that make things easier?

A: Yeah, the things is...I find it hard talking to other people, so it was kind of hard in the beginning but I spoke to other people and then I realized that there was this girl that I knew. Because her brother, my sister, were in the same year, so we became friends and we're still friends. Now we're like besties. And I also knew these twins and I knew them from my primary school, we used to go on trips, her school and my school, and that's how I met them too. And I'm still friends with them too. And I just made other friends.

I: Yeah, and how did you make those friends?

Appendix O

Example of transcript from H's interview, colour-coded according to aspects of Three-dimensional Framework

Interaction		Continuity			Situation
Personal	***Social***	***Past***	***Present***	***Future***	***Context***

H: I would say it took quite like couple of months for me to actually realize,… stuff was happening at home and then they all the rumours were said about me at school and my attendance was really bad and my mum saw that….well I stopped being friends with the first girl from my primary because something happened between that girl and the girl I was friends with before.. Yeah, so I just decided to be friends with the new girl that I became friends with

INT: So you became friends with her instead?

H: Yeah, yeah…

INT: And how was she?

H: She was actually worse, she was a bad influence

INT: She was worse? So you were first friends with someone who was a bad influence and then it got worse?

H: Yeah…her true colours come out after the second one

INT: So it made the situation even more complicated?

H: yeah

INT: Yeah, and then you said things at home were quite difficult at that time

H: Yeah, dad was home and then he wasn't around…

INT: Okay, were these things that you talked to the NSPCC about?

H: Yeah

INT: And did you talk to anyone else?

H: Yeah some staff in inclusion

INT: OK. That sounds like there was a lot going on for you at that time

H: I would say like that was the worst year and I wouldn't want to go back

INT: Okay...and then you your attendance….at that time, you were spending some time at home?

H: Yeah, I was at home a lot…I was in for 1 or 2 days a week at school.

INT: Yeah, OK. And how was it when you were in school?

H: When I was in school, it was still the same

INT: So you went back into all your lessons as normal?

H: 'cause I was getting like in trouble and stuff and that there was this one girl, she actually said quite a lot of stuff, and that's when I started like speaking up. And whenever someone would say something offensive. to me like just like, or just making up stuff that wasn't true or making assumptions then it would make me really angry. Yeah, so I reacted this one time. So I was in in the inclusion room for 2 weeks.

INT: OK, so after this incident you went to the inclusion room.

H: Yeah, it's like…all this anger brought up inside of me

INT: And in the inclusion room, what did you do there for the two weeks?

H: I went down to inclusion, you just sit at a desk with other people there and you just like do work and stuff

INT: OK, so is it a punishment or is it more like support in the inclusion room?

H: I would say both because it sort of teaches you a lesson and it can give you time to think and reflect, but also like a punishment for what you've done.

INT: Yeah, I guess you're out of the normal classroom. How was it?

H: Yeah, actually, it was quieter and actually a lot better

INT: What did you like about that?

H: cus the woman in the inclusion room she's always in there, and she's a nice woman and she's supportive and she made me feel better…and every year were in that room….like those people that didn't really speak about me in that room, that just felt better

INT: Yeah, OK, so there were some people there who didn't know you as much. And they wouldn't say bad things

H: Yeah

Appendix P

Example of H's story organised according to Three-Dimensional framework

Interaction		Continuity			
Personal	**Social**	**Past**	**Present**	**Future**	**Situation/ Place (time)**
	I started to get bullied by all my friends and things back	When I think back to the start of Year 6, everything in school was OK. Then in in the middle of Year 6… at home started to change a bit as well. Yeah, in Year 6, that's when it all started to happen…			Year 6, school and home
Yeah, but apart from that, I felt quite alone. which made things easier, kind of easier. I just felt like they were being kind of fake towards me…and it just felt like they just turned	No-one helped me until I told my mum, then she spoke to the teachers and they had a word with the people at school Mum called up the school and she spoke to the teacher Once she spoke to my friends and said that what they're doing is wrong,				Year 6, school and home

against me for no reason	they started speaking to me again but it wasn't the same				
'cause when I was in primary, sometimes I feel I can be open to someone, and sometimes I can't. I think sometimes that it depends on what it is	Nobody knew until I told my mum When my mum opened up to my primary school teacher then I felt like I could open up to her too	I never had a voice or would speak up for myself…and I would just avoid any situation that I came across.			Year 6, school
[but] it wasn't the same. I just felt quite angry and annoyed especially 'cause I didn't do nothing wrong, I was just trying to be a good friend	I used to have quite a bigger friendship and then they all went against me and after the teacher spoke to them, they started speaking to me again, and the others turned against me and they admitted to not liking me to me for no reason.	Before everything happened in Year 6 And then my friendship group, it became smaller, to two people. And then I became closer to those 2 again I grew closer to them afterwards, throughout Year 6 until the end			Year 6, school
	my dad was always in and out of my life. In Year	In Year 6, things at home changed			Year 6, home

that's when I started changing, I became more of an angry person. and that's what made me even more angry	6, it changed completely, he disappeared for quite a while and I didn't see him for almost a year I just saw all the stress it was putting on my mum At home is just me and my mum. my nan and grandad and my uncles knew, they were all there helping, being there… they spoke to me and told me that if I needed to speak to them then they're there for me, and not to worry what my dad's done, it's not our fault				

Example of *A*'s story organised according to Three-Dimensional framework

Interaction		**Continuity**			
Personal	**Social**	**Past**	**Present**	**Future**	**Situation/ Place (time)**
	I had friends, who I thought was friends (11)	In Year 5 (11) He taught us Algebra, he supported us by giving us by giving us strategies in the back of our maths book (13-17)			School, Year 5

I was really good at that (Algebra). I understood everything (18-19) I really liked that..(24) I was playing around, I got a really bad score But I didn't care. I just thought about having fun in Year 5 Some days, I even missed lessons if I didn't feel like waking up, I just said that I didn't feel well and then I wouldn't go and that was it. (33-35)	I had a really nice teacher, his name was Richard (12) Mum worked in my primary school, so the teacher would tell my mum what I'm doing and how well I'm doing (22-24) Most people were working hard and doing things properly (26-30) Mum found out and she got sad, she told me "you need to start concentrating" (30-32)	We were doing our exams at the end of the year. It was the first time using laptops (24-26)			School Home
		my mum worked in my school (196)			Home (year 5)

I felt better	I told mum I didn't want to go in (189-190) Mum said OK, fine, you don't have to go' (191-192)	I would feel really upset and the tears would come…(190-191) and she wouldn't make me go (192) She would stay with me at home. She would need to go into school around 11:00 and would return around 1pm (199-200)			
	We had one teacher for every lesson. But sometimes, other teachers came and would tell us how things are going to be in Year 7 (39-42)	So they "changed things up" (88-89)			Year 6 School
In Year 5 and 6 I had a scary teacher for Maths. I was scared of him, he was very strict and I wasn't a big fan of him (43-45) I was scared of that so sometimes I wouldn't come in when I knew that I had lessons with	I remember 'cause my sister went to my primary school, she was telling me how he was really scary and you shouldn't be naughty in his class (46-48) Other kids were scared of him too (68-69)	I remember during break time, we used to say "we have maths first, I'm scared, I don't like Mr M, I'm not fond of him" (67-70) Afterwards, we'd go there and everyone was quiet. Except for the clever kids, they knew what to do and could get on with the work (72-74)			Year 5 & 6 Home Breaktime at school Maths class

that teacher (52-59) I had no idea what I was doing I was scared to ask for help (78) I was really bad in his lessons	 He'd just repeat the question, instead of showing us how to do it. He'd expect me to know it even though I'm the one asking for help (82) We'd have different teachers for those lessons. Mr M was teacher for set 1 maths (91-92)	In Year 6, they changed things up, they put us in sets for English, Maths and Science (89-90)			Maths class

Appendix Q

Example of development of narrative stories from interim narratives; H's story

Interim Narrative	**Final Narrative**
When I think back to the start of Year 6, everything in school was OK (10). Then in in the middle of Year 6… I started to get bullied by all my friends (10-12) and things back at home started to change a bit as well (16) I'd say Primary was quite nice (184-185)	<u>Year 6</u> H's story starts in Year 6, at primary school. H felt that Primary school was quite nice, although Year 6 was seen to be a challenging time. At home, things started to change a bit too.
II used to have quite a bigger friendship and then they all went against me, I just felt like they were being kind of fake towards me…and it just felt like they just turned against me for no reason (81) 'cause when I was in primary, I never had a voice or would speak up for myself…and I would just avoid any situation that I came across (61-62). sometimes I feel I can be open to someone, and sometimes I can't. I think sometimes that it depends on what it is (67-68 No-one helped me until I told my mum Yeah, but apart from that, I felt quite alone.(27) Mum called up the school and she spoke to the teacher (32) and they had a word with the people at school (26-27) which made things easier, kind of easier. Once she spoke to my friends and said that what they're doing is wrong, they started speaking to me again, but it wasn't the same (40-42) When my mum opened up to my primary school teacher then I felt like I could open up to her too (73-74)	<u>Experience of bullying and feeling alone</u> H had a big friendship group at primary school. However, in the middle of Year 6, H experienced some bullying from the group of friends, who turned against her and acted in a fake way, seemingly for no reason at all. H acknowledged she found it difficult to speak up for herself in primary school, sometimes feeling that she didn't have a voice. It was often easier for H to avoid tricky situations that she faced. Initially, H felt quite alone in managing the situation at school. H spoke to her mum about what was happening at school, who in turn spoke to H's teacher. Once H's mum had opened up to the teacher, H felt like she could open up to her too.
During primary school, sometimes I would miss a couple of days and then in Year 6 when that happened, I started to miss more days again (190-192) I just felt better being home (192) 'cause I thought: what was the point in going in? (191-192) I would just allow them to just	<u>School absence</u> Earlier in primary school, H would occasionally miss a couple of days here and there, but in Year 6, H started to miss school more often, asking herself 'what's the point in going in'? Especially

ignore me (196) 'cause I just couldn't speak up at all (196) stayed home with my mum. Mum was quite angry and upset as well, about what was happening (206). Mum was supporting me at home. When I went back in, it was after my mum had spoken to the teacher, she had a word with me and with all of them there. And…they started speaking to me again (215-217) but it wasn't the same(80-82) I just felt quite angry and annoyed especially 'cause I didn't do nothing wrong, I was just trying to be a good friend (108-109)	if I allow my friends to just ignore me.' H felt better at home. At home, H's mum was angry and upset at what was happening at school and what H was going through. H's mum supported her at home, and by speaking to her teacher, she was trying hard to improve the situation for H at school. H's teacher spoke to the group at school who told the group that what they were doing was wrong. H felt this made things slightly easier and they started speaking to H again, however it wasn't the same. H felt angry and annoyed as she'd done nothing wrong and was just trying to be a good friend.

Example of development of narrative stories from interim narratives; *A*'s story

Interim Narrative	**Final Narrative**
I had friends, who I thought was my close friends (11) I had a really nice teacher, his name was Richard (12) Most people were working hard and doing things properly (26-30) But I didn't care. I just thought about having fun in Year 5 I was really good at that (Algebra). I understood everything (18-19) Mum worked in my primary school, so the teacher would tell my mum what I'm doing and how well I'm doing…I really liked that.. (22-24)	<u>Year 5</u> A's story begins in Year 5 at primary school. A had friends at school and she had a really nice teacher whose name was Robert. A didn't always listen in class as she mostly wanted to have fun. A was really good at Maths, especially Algebra. A's mum worked at her primary school so Robert would often talk to her mum and tell her the things that were going well. *A* felt good about this
In Year 5 and 6, I had a scary teacher for Maths. I was scared of him, he was very strict and I wasn't a big fan of him (43-45) And I had a few lessons with him and I didn't like it, 'cause I felt like when I didn't get the work right or whatever, he picked on me (54-55)	<u>Scary teachers</u> A had a different teacher for Maths called Mr M who was scary. He was very strict and A wasn't a big fan of him. *A* felt like Mr M picked on her when she didn't get the work right and whenever she got an answer wrong, he'd look at her as if she was dumb.

whenever I got the answer wrong, he just looks at me as if I'm dumb (57-58) I remember 'cause my sister went to my primary school, she was telling me how he was really scary and you shouldn't be naughty in his class (46-48) I was scared of that so sometimes I wouldn't come in when I knew that I had lessons with that teacher (52-59) I had no idea what I was doing I was scared to ask for help (78) Other kids were scared of him too (68-69) He'd just repeat the question, instead of showing us how to do it. He'd expect me to know it even though I'm the one asking for help (82) I'll just say that I don't feel well and then I wouldn't go, but that was it (34-35) I told mum I didn't want to go in (189-190) I would feel really upset and the tears would come…(190-191)and she wouldn't make me go (192) She would stay with me at home and I felt better, I felt safer (197) She would need to go into school around 11:00 and would return around 1pm (199-200)	A's sister had warned A that Mr M was scary and that she shouldn't be naughty in his class. A was so scared that sometimes she wouldn't come in if she knew she had maths with him. Other kids were scared of him too and the class would sit quietly in class, apart from the clever kids who got on with the work. A was scared to ask for help from Mr M and had no idea what she was doing. In class, Mr M would just repeat the question instead of showing the class how to do it. A attended school regularly but sometimes stayed home if she didn't feel comfortable coming in, telling her mum she didn't feel well. A would also become quite tearful. A's mum was understanding and would stay home with her, besides a few hours when her mum was working at school. A felt better at home. She felt safe.
We had one teacher for every lesson. But sometimes, other teachers came and would tell us how things are going to be in Year 7 (39-42) We sat down in Assembly and they called out our names. We thought we weren't going to be with our friends. (99-101) My name got called with my friend and we were placed in the class with every other clever kid, they were smart and knew the Maths. (104-105) My friend encouraged me to come. (106)	<u>Moving into different sets</u> In Primary school, A had one class teacher but in Year 6, the class were put in sets for English, Maths and Science with different teachers to prepare for secondary school. Everyone was placed in sets in assembly and thought they would be separated from their friends. A's name was called, along with her friend, and they were placed in a class with all the clever kids who were smart and good at maths. A was surprised that her name had been called.

I was surprised they put me there. I was thinking “what, me?” (106) In the higher set I was scared people were going to look at my work (116-117) They might think I didn’t know how to do the work A few days later, the teacher realised their mistake and put me down a set. (108-109) That’s where I got help from my actual teacher (109-110) I had people around, friends (113) I wasn’t scared of making mistakes I put my hand up (119)I felt comfortable (124) I participated It was better (124-125) There was one time where we had a World Book Day where we dressed up. I dressed up as Katniss Everdeen from Hunger Games. I had my hair in a plait and I had a bow and arrow (162-166) And I won a prize (158) My mum warned me that no would recognise me (164) And no one knew who I was! (168) I became comfortable with the other teachers. I was able to come and talk to Mr M (156) He was surprised that I was trying to talk to him (157-158)	A was scared that if she went into the higher set, people were going to look at her work. A few days later, A’s teacher realised a mistake had been made and moved her down a set. At that point, A got help from her actual teacher. She had friends around and wasn’t scared of making mistakes. She felt comfortable and started participating, whereas she hadn’t before. World Book Day took place in Year 6 and everyone dressed up. A dressed up as Katniss Everdeen from Hunger Games and won a prize, despite the fact that not many people knew who she was. It was a memorable day as A grew more comfortable in talking to her teachers, including Mr M. He seemed impressed that she started conversation with him.
At secondary, the friend I was with in Year 5 and Year 6 completely changed. She was very rude. She used to talk behind my back (207-208) I was a girl who wouldn't take that, saying “You can’t do that, just because we’re in secondary school, you can't behave that way” (209-210) it's still going on, I don't know why it's still going on..I just want to end it (212) I did try and end it in Year 7 but in Year 7, I wasn't in any of her classes which was good because I was in set 2 for everything….. (211-212) now she keeps like bringing up rumours from the past and she tries to keep like	<u>The start of secondary school and tricky friendships</u> A started secondary school in Year 7 which was a big change. A had a friend at secondary school who she’d known since Year 5 as they’d attended the same primary school. However, A’s friend completely changed. She was very rude and started talking behind A’s back and A didn’t stand for it. A tried to end the friendship in Year 7 but it was difficult. Even now, there are some issues with her as she sometimes tries to bring up rumours from the past or talks to other people about *A* or tells the teachers she’s misbehaving.

pushing me and like telling other people about me, telling the teachers what I'm doing (214-216). So it's been going on for quite a while and it's been tricky (220-222)	

Appendix R

Example of coding – H's story

Master Themes	Individual	Family/home	School	Professional/ systemic	Other
Sub themes	Inconsistent attendance	Supportive family members	Positive peer relationships; friendships	Impactful support from external professionals	Covid / authorised absence
	Negative emotions	Valuing communication between home and school	Negative peer relationships; bullying		Transition to secondary school (age)
	Having aspirations	Parent stress	Positive staff relationships; supportive staff		
	Acknowledging progress	Change in family dynamic	Access to an alternative learning space		
	Having coping strategies	Home as a safe place	Not feeling safe at school		
	Success with learning	Challenges associated with home learning			

Year 8 was a better year for H. At school, H's friendships were getting better and she wasn't getting into trouble as much as in Year 7. However, rumours continued to circulate and H still felt some people were against her with no clear reason. It seemed that the whole year were aware of the rumours. H spoke with her head of year and staff in inclusion about this; it didn't really make things better or worse although H felt better for letting it out. Outside of school, H continued to have some feelings of confusion and occasionally anger, possibly relating to the situation at home with her dad. H felt confused about her dad, and started to ask herself questions: why was he not in my life? why did he do what he did? H turned to her mum who answered her questions, although then she would want to ask more and more. H was mindful that she didn't want to give her mum any additional stress, but at the same time she felt like her head was going to explode. H missed some school in Year 8, preferring to stay home with her mum where it felt safe.	Feeling better for talking/ being heard Feeling confused anger Feeling confused Stressed; not knowing how to cope	Uncertainty around dad (not always around) Supportive mum Parental stress	Friendships, less trouble Bullying, rumours persisted		

At the time, H didn't feel safe at school unless she was with her friends. H felt hated by some other students. Eventually, H wanted to change school so she and her mum decided to apply for another school. H had the letter in front of her but her gut feeling was telling her not to sign it, and to wait and see how things go. H told herself: I've come all this way, what's the point in moving now? Later, H spoke of how she was glad she didn't change schools. H managed many challenging situations at school and at home by reminding herself of the people that really cared about her, including her family and her friendship group. H saw how Year 8 was a lot better than Year 7 and that's what kept her going.	Persistence; patience Acknowledging progress Coping strategy recognising support systems Recognising progress	Home as a safe place	School not feeling safe Bullying/feeling hated		

Due to Covid, H didn't have an entire Year 9 at school. School closed in March and everyone had 6 months at home due to the Covid19. Initially, H enjoyed home learning but acknowledges it was boring at the same time. The school sent a learning pack home for H to do. At first, she didn't do it but then realised she should. Towards the end of the holiday, H started completing it, bit by bit. Having spent a long time at home, H got used to being at home and didn't want to return to school. H was aware that this had an impact on her emotionally; having six months at home made her feel better and worse at the same time. There was lots of time to think about everything that was going on and she was overthinking. In many ways, Year 9 appeared to be a turning point for H and in her attitude towards things. In Year 9, H's Head of Year arranged for her to meet with a school coach. They tend to meet on a one-to-one basis to discuss how things are going and talk about forthcoming plans, such as what college to apply to or what H would like to study. H has started to look forward to the future which feels helpful.	Feeling bored Nervous; lack resilience in returning Mental health/ anxiety (overthinking at home) Aspirations, feeling hopeful	Home learning; viewed positively (also boring) Home learning – less ready to return to school Home as a safe place, but also reduced resilience	support staff at school; personalised support (school coach)		Covid 'absence'

H felt that Year 9 was when things were starting to turn around. Whilst H still experienced feelings of confusion and anger, she started to realise the need to look forward and move on. H started back in Year 10 in September. H was quite nervous about returning. On her return to school, H spoke to staff in inclusion and her coach. A new member of staff joined school as a mentor who H started talking to. H felt the new staff member was helpful and nice. In Year 10, H sometimes spent a lesson in the inclusion area, particularly if she was feeling off or a bit down.	Feeling confused, angry Feeling hopeful, having aspirations Feeling nervous about school Low mood		Supportive staff, positive relationships Helpful staff Change of learning environment		

Example of coding – *A*'s story

Master Themes	Individual	Family/home	School	Professional/ systemic	Other
Sub themes	Negative emotions	Valuing communication between home and school	Positive peer relationships; friendships	Plans for external support	Authorised absence
	Academic concerns	Supportive family	Positive staff relationships		Transition to secondary (age)
	Having aspirations	Home as a safe place	Negative view of teaching style		
	Acknowledging progress	Not enjoying home learning	Negative peer relationships/ bullying		
	Supportive cultural beliefs	Vulnerable family member	Unsuitable learning environment		
	Coping strategies	Support network outside of school	Access to an alternative learning space		
	Inconsistent attendance	Loss of family member			

Raw data	Individual	Family/ home	School	Professional	Other

A started secondary school in Year 7 which was a big change. A had a friend at secondary school who she'd known since Year 5 as they'd attended the same primary school. However, A's friend completely changed. She was very rude and started talking behind A's back and A didn't stand for it. A tried to end the friendship in Year 7 but it was difficult. Even now, there are some issues with her as she sometimes tries to bring up the past or talks to other people about A.	Initially stood up for herself; later lack of agency? (bullying issue remains)		Friend from primary school Negative peer relationship / bullying		Transition to secondary school
In Year 7, A had a strict teacher for Maths called Mr Smith. He reminded A of her maths teacher from primary school as he was strict and sometimes told her off. A sat next to a boy in class who would look at A's work and make comments about it which made her worry. At home, A spoke to her sister and told her that she wasn't enjoying maths and that she found Mr Smith scary. Mr Smith expected *A* to know things that she didn't know and that felt scary for *A*. On one occasion, A was sitting in maths class and drawing on a piece of paper when suddenly the teacher asked her a question. A had no idea and the class started laughing. Since then, A doesn't like talking in front of other people.	Memories of previous scary teacher Feeling worried about work Academic pressure/ concerns Feeling confused about work Low confidence in talking aloud	Sibling support	Strict teaching style / negative teacher perception Negative peer relationship Scary teacher Negative peer (class) relationship		

In Year 7, A found it hard to talk to new people and this made it hard at the beginning. However, A realised there was a girl she knew as her brother and A's sister were in the same year so they became friends and now they're besties. A also made friends with twins from primary school who went on the same school trips as A. They're still friends now. A made another friend in maths class called S. Whilst they both joked around at times, they also helped each other if they didn't understand the work.	Social anxiety		Positive peer relationships Friends from primary school New friend, Positive peer relationships = support in class		

In Year 7 science class, A sat next to a girl who she felt scared of, in case she looked at A's work and made her feel dumb. The science teacher would sometimes question A, asking her things she didn't know. A couldn't remember doing her Science SATs at primary school and so it felt like she was learning Science for the first time. It was a blur. After a while, A was moved down a set. She felt upset because she was worried everyone would think she was dumb. A knew that Set 3 often had cover teachers and didn't like this. When there was a cover teacher, no-one really learned anything and A cared less about the lesson. However, when A went to set 3, everyone welcomed her by calling her name and they gassed her up. A knew that she would need to work hard and get herself a good grade to move back to Set 2 and in the end she did really well, moving back up to Set 2 in Year 8.	Worries about work / other children judging her Worries about other children judging her abilities Determination / perseverance, aspiring to move up a set		Negative peer relationships Academic pressure Negative impact of being placed in sets Inconsistent teaching staff Positive relationships peers-supported her		

The beginning of Year 8 was a good time for A as she had good friends and the seating plan was the best. A really liked her timetable and since most teachers organised the seating plan in register order, A sat with her friends. When A sat with her friends, she could be more honest and seek their help with work which helped her feel more comfortable. Outside of school, A was supposed to get braces fitted. A missed some school going to the dentist and orthodontist who would refer A to one other and it went on and on. A missed some school when this was happening.	Feeling comfortable / safe, feels able to ask for help		-Positive peer relationships, - positive classroom environment (seating plan) -Friends helping with work		School absence, dentist (authorised absence)
When Covid hit, A had to isolate earlier than the rest of her year as her mum had a low immune system and was asked to isolate as was at high risk of getting covid. A also came into contact with someone at school who had covid so had to remain home.		vulnerable family member leading to school absence	Covid; contact with someone at school		Impact of covid

Appendix S

Change of title

University of East London

School of Psychology Ethics Committee

REQUEST FOR TITLE CHANGE TO AN ETHICS APPLICATION

For BSc, MSc/MA and taught Professional Doctorate students

Please complete this form if you are requesting approval for a proposed title change to an ethics application that has been approved by the School of Psychology

By applying for a change of title request, you confirm that in doing so, the process by which you have collected your data/conducted your research has not changed or deviated from your original ethics approval. If either of these have changed, then you are required to complete an 'Ethics Application Amendment Form'.

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	Using your UEL email address, email the completed request form along with associated documents to Dr Jérémy Lemoine (School Ethics Committee Member): j.lemoine@uel.ac.uk
4	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.

Required documents	
A copy of the approval of your initial ethics application.	**YES** ☒

Details	
Name of applicant:	**Guy Tamlyn**
Programme of study:	**Professional Doctorate in Child and Educational Psychology**

Title of research:	**An exploration of the narratives of young people who have experienced Emotional Based School Avoidance**
Name of supervisor:	**Lucy Browne**

Proposed title change

Briefly outline the nature of your proposed title change in the boxes below

Old title:	An exploration of the narratives of young people who have experienced emotional-based school avoidance
New title:	An exploration of the narratives of young people who have experienced Emotional Based School Avoidance
Rationale:	Grammatical change to reflect the correct terminology

Confirmation

Is your supervisor aware of your proposed change of title and in agreement with it?	**YES** ☒	**NO** ☐
Does your change of title impact the process of how you collected your data/conducted your research?	**YES** ☐	**NO** ☒

Student's signature

Student: (Typed name to act as signature)	**Guy Tamlyn**
Date:	**25/03/2022**

Reviewer's decision

Title change approved:	**YES** ☒	**NO** ☐
Comments:	**The new title reflects the correct terminology better than the previous one due to a small grammatical change. The change will not impact the process of how the data are collected or how the research is conducted.**	
Reviewer: (Typed name to act as signature)	**Dr Jérémy Lemoine**	
Date:	**25/03/2022**	