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***Supporting Sense of School Belonging for  
Primary School Children with Social,  
Emotional and Mental Health Needs: The Views  
and Perspectives of Teaching Staff.***

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Submitted by Georgia Lovell (620015077EDPS03) to the University of Exeter as a thesis for the degree of Doctor of Educational Psychology in Educational Child and Community Psychology.

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I certify that all material in this thesis which is not my own work has been identified and that any material that has previously been submitted and approved for the award of a degree by this or any other University has been acknowledged.



Signature: .....

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## **Abstract**

There is a wealth of research evidencing that feeling a sense of belonging at school is important and necessary. However, research suggests that one in four students do not feel that they belong at school whilst children with Special Educational Needs (SEN) are more vulnerable to disliking school and experiencing rejection. This two phase project addressed a gap in the literature to explore why children with Social, Emotional and Mental Health (SEMH) needs are less likely than their peers to experience a sense of school belonging and consider what contributes to their school belonging.

Within the first phase, a systematic literature review was conducted exploring how children and young people with SEN experience school belonging and what they identify as contributing to their sense of school belonging. 14 studies were included in a narrative synthesis. The findings highlighted that children with SEN appear to need more support in building school belonging than their peers. Multiple factors appear important to building school belonging, however interpersonal relationships was a dominant theme in what children and young people with SEN identify as supporting their sense of belonging at school. The review also suggested that children and young people with needs that could be described as SEMH are amongst the most vulnerable to not experiencing a sense of school belonging. This suggests that attention is warranted to explore how to promote these children and young people's connections and relationships at school to help develop their sense of school belonging.

In light of the findings within phase one, the second phase focused on how to enhance children with SEMH needs' sense of school belonging. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 primary school classroom teachers and Teaching

Assistants (TA). The interviews explored participants' experiences of supporting children with SEMH needs and gathered their views on how to develop school belonging for the children they work with. Data were analysed using thematic analysis. Findings suggested both differences and similarities in how teachers and TAs describe their experiences of supporting SEMH. Both groups of participants highlight that it is an emotive experience including both rewarding highs and challenging lows. There was further a sense that both teachers and TAs felt unsure and inexperienced when supporting social and emotional needs. These findings suggest that mainstream teaching staff could benefit from more support to cope with this aspect of their role in addition to giving them more knowledge about SEMH and what would help. Findings also suggested participants did not view SEMH to be a clear area to understand, there was a sense that it is a broad and wide area encompassing many different aspects.

Findings further suggested that participants valued school belonging and considered it a priority. The research highlighted multiple ways to enhance school belonging for children with SEMH needs. Themes included having supportive relationships with adults, valuing children's strengths, listening to the child, developing secure peer relationships and a school ethos emphasising wellbeing. The present research also explored the barriers children with SEMH needs face in developing school belonging. Findings suggested a range of reasons children with SEMH may find experiencing school belonging difficult. In particular, difficulties forming friendships and being excluded from the classroom were emphasised as key barriers to school belonging.

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## List of abbreviations

ASC	Autism spectrum condition
CAMHs	Children and adolescent mental health service
DfE	Department for Education
EP	Educational psychologist
KS	Key stage
PRISMA	Preferred reporting Items for systematic reviews and meta-analyses
SEBD	Social, emotional and behavioural difficulties
SEMH	Social, emotional and mental health needs
SEN	Special educational needs
SEND	Special educational needs and disabilities
SENCo	Special educational needs coordinator
TA	Teaching assistant
TEP	Trainee educational psychologist
UK	United Kingdom
WHO	World health organisation

## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

### **1.1 Context relevance and rationale for engagement**

The purpose of this chapter is to demonstrate the relevance and significance of the topic and to provide the reader with context. I will begin by exploring the significance of school belonging in relation to wellbeing and academic progress. I will then explore governmental policy regarding school belonging before introducing myself as a researcher. I will then describe the necessary adaptations made to the research in light of the Covid-19 outbreak. This chapter will conclude with a summary of the structure of the project to give the reader a picture of the overall project.

#### **1.1.1 School belonging and wellbeing**

It is well established that a sense of belonging is important to psychological wellbeing and self-esteem (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), and research suggests that having a sense of belonging at school is positively associated with emotional and psychological wellbeing, mental health, happiness and hopefulness regarding the future (Furrer & Skinner, 2003; Osterman, 2000; Kidger et al., 2012; Prince & Hadwin, 2013; Waters et al., 2010). School belonging has been found to be associated with meaning in life, self-identity and life purpose (Lambert et al., 2013; Reschly et al., 2008). In addition, Roffey et al. (2019) highlight that there is compelling research showing the moderating influence of school belonging against loneliness (Benner et al., 2017; Cavanaugh & Buehler, 2016). School belonging has further been related to positive outcomes such as psychological resilience, sleep and self-esteem (Roffey et al., 2019; Werner, 1993).

Experiencing school belonging has also been found to give children and young people an increased ability to cope with stressful events in their lives (Dunleavy &

Burke, 2019). A recent meta-analysis of 82 correlational studies found a small to moderate positive correlation for school belonging with social, emotional and behavioural outcomes with similar results were found across different age groups and locations (Korpershoek et al., 2019). Due to the correlational nature of the studies included in this review, caution needs to be taken when considering direct casual links between these variables as it may provide an oversimplified explanation of the link between school belonging and wellbeing. Whilst this review included research from a range of countries including the United Kingdom (UK), the authors concluded that that overall school belonging plays an important role in students' school lives (Korpershoek et al., 2019).

### **1.1.2 School belonging and academic progress**

A sense of school belonging is argued to not only support wellbeing and mental health, but also boost academic engagement (Roffey et al., 2019). It is well established that a sense of school belonging is related to positive academic performance (Goodenow, 1993; Sari, 2012), and research has highlighted that school belonging is associated with a number of positive factors within learning. School belonging has additionally been found to boost academic resilience, which is crucial to learning and other life experiences (Anderman, 2011; Roffey et al., 2019). It has been demonstrated that experiencing school belonging is associated with positive interactions with teachers and peers, increased attendance and school completion (Marraccini & Brier, 2017; Waters et al., 2010). Furthermore, a sense of school belonging has been found to be positively related to commitment to school goals, positive self-efficacy, expectations of future success and school satisfaction (Finn, 1989; McMahon et al., 2008; Smerdon, 2002). It has further been related to

both sleep and self-esteem, both of which are necessary to successful learning (Roffey et al., 2019).

School belonging is also argued to build a shared identity for students that leads to motivation and positive goal pursuit (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Lambert et al., 2013).

Goodenow and Grady (1993) theorise that creating a sense of school belonging is associated with students aligning themselves with peers who they perceive to have similar social values. Reflecting this, research suggests a strong sense of school belonging is usually associated with fewer behavioural and emotional difficulties in addition to increased pro-social behaviour (Newman et al., 2007; Waters et al., 2010). Despite this, research has also highlighted that regardless of whether a sense of belonging is consistent with school or peer group values, it offers both psychological and educational benefits (Dunleavy & Burke, 2019). Sanders and Munford (2016) suggest that when student's values align with the values of the school and pro-social peers, the student develops a self-identity that encompasses school success, including academic achievements, which they want to be a part of.

### **1.1.3 What happens without a sense of school belonging**

To emphasise the importance of school belonging for children and young people, research has also considered what happens when a child or young person does not experience a sense of belonging at school. Not experiencing school belonging has been found to be associated with disruptive behaviour and emotional distress (Allen et al., 2016b). School belonging has also been found to decrease the incidence of bullying, misconduct and truancy (Bond et al., 2007; Roffey et al., 2019; Turner et al., 2014) whilst acting a protective factor against absenteeism and risk-taking behaviour (McNeely et al., 2002; Sanchez et al., 2005).

Research has further highlighted that the need to belong can drive vulnerable children and adults of into risky groups, such as gangs, in the search for somewhere to belong (Whiteway, 2019). For example, when researching children who had been excluded from school, Biggart et al. (2013) found that a reduced sense of belonging led to pupils feeling disconnected from school and engaging less in it. This sometimes then led to relationships outside of school, such as with peers also not attending school, to pull children further away to school. Similarly, Briggs (2010) found that young people being educated outside of mainstream education described not feeling respected or wanted at their schools and having their relationships with staff and other students deteriorate. Briggs (2010) theorised that their social lives outside of school, including spending time with others not attending school, provided them with a sense of belonging that they were not finding within school. It is worth highlighting that whilst both the referenced studies have been described as smaller scale involving less than 20 participants, the ethnographic nature of Briggs' (2010) research led to a high level of detail and understanding of the experiences of children who although in complex situations involving a number of factors described their experience of not feeling a sense of belonging at school. Looking forwards, developing a sense of school belonging has been highlighted as being important to positive behaviour change in children and young people (O'Hare, 2019). Reflecting how this may come about, research specifically investigating the experiences of children and young people not currently attending mainstream education highlights that perceiving that teaching staff cared and supported them helped to foster a sense of belonging (Nicolson & Putwain, 2018).

#### **1.1.4 Policy regarding school belonging**

Given the above positive benefits of experiencing school belonging, it is argued that school belonging is good educational practice and should be regarded as part of the wider inclusive approach to education (Anderson & Boyle, 2015). There has historically been debate regarding whether developing children and young people's sense of school belonging is a priority for schools in light of the pressures of exam results, league tables and a focus on academic performance over emotional needs (Osterman, 2000). However, in recent governmental guidance the Department for Education (DfE) (2015a) states that school should be a safe place for children where they can develop a sense of belonging and feel able to build trust and talk openly with adults about their feelings. In identifying mental health and behaviour as a priority for schools, guidance specifically outlines that schools should allow children to develop a sense of belonging and consider this a priority alongside academic development (DfE, 2015b). In a published literature review regarding permanent school exclusion, it is highlighted that the extent to which pupils felt they belong is critical. When considering the school-based causes of school exclusion, amongst other factors such as mental health difficulties and falling behind academically, children feeling that they do not belong at school was identified as an important cause of permanent school exclusion (DfE, 2019). It is argued to be essential that all students feel a sense of belonging to their school as it is associated with a range of academic, psychological and physical health benefits in children and young people (Roffey et al., 2019). Reflecting this, Educational Psychologists (EP) have been argued to have a role in promoting the importance of school belonging in contextually relevant, everyday ways (Whiteway, 2019). Whilst England continues to progress towards a more inclusive and child-centred education system (DfE, 2018), researchers have highlighted that it is likely that the field of school belonging will



likely continue to expand (Roffey et al., 2019). Highlighting that promoting school belonging is still an area in need of attention, Dunleavy and Burke (2019) state that whilst there are many benefits of developing a sense of school belonging, it is not yet a common practice.

## **1.2 Personal and professional relevance**

In my current role as a trainee educational psychologist (TEP), I often work with both children and the adults around them to understand what school is like for them and what would make it a more positive experience. In my experience, children with SEN often find school harder to navigate than their peers and appear to have less connection to and enjoyment of school. In previous roles within the Children and Adolescent Mental Health service (CAMHs) and youth work settings, I noticed that when exploring children and young people's experiences of school they were often negative with the individual describing a range of difficulties resulting in a high sense of disconnection. Within my role within CAMHs in particular, I reflected on the difficulties children and young people had returning to school and the perceived lack of acceptance and understanding they often faced from some of the adults at their school. Contrastingly, in my work as a TEP I reflected on the powerful impact that both TAs and classroom teachers can have on children with SEN's school experiences and subsequent progress. In my experience, this seemed especially important for children facing social and emotional difficulties or struggling with mental health and low self-esteem. I was therefore interested in how children with SEN experience school belonging in addition to teaching staff's perceptions of supporting both children with SEMH needs and school belonging. This area also has relevance for the professional practice of EPs who work with a variety of children within schools to support their wellbeing and learning. As the previous sections suggest, school

belonging is proposed to play an important role in both wellbeing and learning and is therefore significant to the EP role. EPs are well placed to promote school belonging within schools, particularly to children vulnerable to having negative experiences within education.

### **1.3 Reflection on adaptations in current context of the research**

Prior to the Covid-19 outbreak the project aims initially focused on conducting face-to-face interviews with primary school children who had been identified as having needs which could be described as SEMH difficulties. The interviews would have explored the factors which impact their feelings of school belonging and considered how to support an increased sense of school belonging for this group. The initial project also would have explored classroom TAs perspectives on supporting school belonging in children with SEMH needs before conducting a training intervention for TAs on how to support school belonging in children with SEMH needs.

Following the Covid-19 outbreak the initial project was adapted in light of the safety restrictions and ethical concerns related to the outbreak so that it would not involve any face-to-face contact. The project remained within the area of supporting school belonging but the content, research methods and research participants were all adapted. An overview of the project is provided in the following sections whilst more in-depth rationales are provided within the chapter introduction of each phase.

### **1.4 Thesis overview and structure**

This study comprises of two related phases focusing on the supporting school belonging. The overall aim of this research is to explore the views and perceptions on how to support school belonging for children with SEN. In particular, the second phase of research focuses upon children with needs described as falling under

SEMH. The first phase utilises a systematic literature review to explore the views and experiences of children and young people with SEN regarding school belonging. The second phase used semi-structured interviews to explore mainstream primary school teaching staff's perceptions about supporting children with SEMH needs in the classroom with a particular focus on enhancing school belonging. This is with a view to better understand the support needs of this vulnerable group in order to inform future support in educational settings.

In the following sections of the thesis, I will present relevant literature highlighting the significance and rationale for each phase of the research. Details of the methodology employed in each phase are then outlined. This is followed by the analysis, findings and discussion for each phase. Within phase two the findings and discussion are combined to give the opportunity to discuss a wider range of present research findings in relation to relevant literature. A general discussion is then provided in order to recognise the significance of the findings and their relevance to the profession of educational psychology and the wider context. Strengths and limitations of the research and future research directions will also be discussed.

## **Chapter 2: Phase One Systematic Literature Review**

### **2.1 Introduction**

#### **2.1.1 Theory and Definition of Belonging**

Belonging has been consistently theorised to be a basic human need that enables people to thrive psychologically (Baumesister & Leary, 1995; Maslow, 1943).

Considering belonging to be a key psychological need, Maslow (1943) states that belongingness is a need as opposed to a want. Maslow (1943) proposes that experiencing a sense of belonging is a basic need which must be met before an individual can experience higher functioning and self-actualisation. Reflecting this within the Hierarchy of Needs model, Maslow (1968) identifies experiencing a sense of belonging as being a fundamental pre-cursor to the development of self-esteem, confidence and self-actualisation. Building upon this, Baumeister and Leary (1995) propose that belonging is a fundamental need and motivator for human behaviours. Viewing the need to belong as one of the most important human motivations Baumeister and Leary (1995) suggest that fulfilling this need can have critical consequences for how people think and behave. A need to belong is regarded as innate and universal across all cultures and societies, with all individuals being born with a need to connect with others (Baumeister & Leary, 1995).

Described as being complex and multi-faceted, belonging has been defined in multiple different ways (Cartmell & Bond, 2015). Baumeister et al. (2005) defined belonging as a need to form and maintain strong, stable interpersonal relationships. Research has also highlighted that a sense of belonging is subjective and may mean different things to different people. For example, Maher et al. (2013) state that belonging is defined as a subjective feeling of value and respect derived from a

reciprocal relationship built on a foundation of shared experiences, beliefs and personal characteristics. There is limited research considering whether all individuals possess a need for belonging to the same extent. It has been suggested that individuals may differ in the extent of their need for interaction and acceptance, which in turn affects their experience of belonging (Osterman, 2000; Rosenberg, 1979). Belonging has also been defined as an experience of involvement in a system or environment to the extent that an individual views themselves as being an integral part of the system or environment (Hagarty et al., 1992). For children and young people, one of their most prominent systems is their school environment and it is therefore important that they experience belonging here (Greenwood & Kelly, 2019). Within their definition Hagarty et al. (1992) identified two dimensions of belonging: the person's valued involvement (their experience of feeling valued, needed and accepted) and their fit (their perception that their characteristics complement the system).

### **2.1.2 Defining School Belonging**

Described as a small but growing area (Roffey et al., 2019), there are a number of different definitions of school belonging and school belonging is often used interchangeably with terms such as connectedness, relatedness, engagement and community (Allen et al., 2016a). Hamm and Faircloth (2005) define school belonging as individuals having their developmental need for relatedness met, whilst Allen and Kern (2017) define school belonging as an individual feeling of being cared for, supported and emotionally connected with others. Reflecting an ecosystemic viewpoint, Allen and Kern (2017) further define school belonging as a student's sense of affiliation to their school, influenced by individual, relational and organisational factors within the unique school community and within a political,

cultural and geographical landscape. Allen and Kern (2017) view school belonging as an individual feeling connected to the school within the school's social systems. School belonging has also been defined as the extent to which students feel personally accepted, respected, included and encouraged by others within their school social environment in addition to feeling oneself to be an important part of the life and activity of the class (Goodenow & Grady, 1993). Goodenow (1993) adds to this definition that school belonging is more than simply believing that you are liked, highlighting the importance of support and respect for the student as an individual. Greenwood and Kelly (2019) summarise that school belonging encompasses a range of concepts including feeling valued, securely connected, encouraged and fitting in.

Contrastingly, research has also proposed that a sense of belonging to school is a social construct and means different things to different people (Nichols, 2008; Shaw, 2019). Highlighting the complexity of the construct of belonging, research asking children and young people to define school belonging has resulted in a range of definitions for what belonging to school means to individuals encompassing a wide range of factors (Nichols, 2008; Shaw, 2019; Whitlock, 2006). Six themes generated in research seeking young people's definitions of school belonging include familiarity, reciprocity, membership, inclusion, support and identification (Shaw, 2019). These themes highlight the importance of relationships and interactions within the school environment, but also suggest significant differences in what young people view to be belonging at school. For some, school belonging relates to what they do to make themselves feel that they belonged to school, whilst for others it is more important what other people do to them to make them feel they belong (Shaw, 2019). Shaw (2019) found that for some pupils feeling a sense of school belonging was about the

relationships established with peers and staff, for others it was about participating in school life, whilst for a significant minority it was about the academic experience of learning and how this would help them later on in their lives. Adding to this, Biggart et al. (2013) found that children described belonging as being the polar opposite of feeling excluded. This research highlights the complex and multifaceted nature of what it means to belong to school and highlights the importance of considering these differences in any definition.

### **2.1.3 School Experiences of Children with SEN**

Before exploring children with SEN's experiences of school, it is important to first explain exactly what is meant by the term 'special educational needs' as it is defined in legislation. The Children and Families Act (2014) defines SEN as when a child or young person has a learning difficulty or disability which means they have significantly greater difficulty learning than most children their age and which calls for special educational provision to be made for them. The SEN Code of Practice (DfE, 2015) states that many children and young people who have SEN may have a disability under the Equality Act (2010) which defines disability as "...a physical or mental impairment which has a long-term and substantial adverse effect on their ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities" (p5). The SEN Code of Practice (2015) identified four broad areas of need which schools can use to help identify and support children and young people with SEN. These areas are not designed to categorise children and young people, but to outline what SEN may look like and help schools to understand a child's needs. The four areas are; communication and interaction, cognition and learning, social emotional and mental health, and sensory and/or physical needs.

Research has suggested that children with SEN face challenges at school.

Frederickson and Furnham (2004) found that children and young people with SEN experience high levels of rejection at school whilst multiple other studies have found that they are less accepted and have fewer reciprocal friendships than their typically developing peers (Avramidis et al., 2018; Chamberlain et al., 2007; Tipton et al., 2013). Adding to this, research has found children with SEN were less popular than their typically developing peers (Kuhne and Wiener, 2000) as well as being more likely to experience peer difficulties in school (Buysse et al., 2002; Buhs & Ladd, 2001). Furthermore, children with SEN appear to be more vulnerable to bullying (Pavri & Luftig, 2000; Nic et al., 2007). When exploring whether children with SEN like going to school, McCoy and Banks (2012) found that twelve percent of children with SEN did not like school, significantly higher than non-SEN children. Although a complicated picture, it appears that overall children with SEN's experiences of school are more challenging than their typically developing peers particularly regarding peer relationships.

## **2.2 Rationale for the focus of the present review and research questions**

It has long been proposed that a sense of belonging plays an important role in both wellbeing and development in life (Baumesister & Leary, 1995). There is also now a wealth of research evidencing that this is also reflected within children and young people relating to their school belonging, with extensive research evidence showing that feeling a sense of belonging at school is important and necessary (Goodenow, 1993; Roffey et al., 2019). The United Nations Convention for the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989) first highlighted the importance of listening to and including children's views and this is reflected in recent legislation which emphasises the importance of child voice (DfE, 2014). Furthermore, listening to the views of children



and young people is important in the field of educational psychology (Harding & Atkinson, 2009). Within the topic of this review, researchers state that children have sensible and useful suggestions regarding building sense of school belonging (Sancho & Cline, 2012). This highlights the relevance of seeking children and young people's views and opinions on school belonging.

Given the importance of school belonging and that research suggests that children and young people with SEN are more vulnerable to not liking school and experiencing rejection (Frederickson and Furnham, 2004; McCoy and Banks, 2012), I feel it would be beneficial to understand how children with additional needs experience school belonging and what contributes to their sense of belonging. No published systematic reviews are currently available in this area to consolidate the body of research relating to children with SEN and sense of school belonging, and the need to synthesise evidence and consider the need for future research is significant. This review therefore aims to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the views and experiences of children and young people with SEN regarding school belonging?
  - a. How do children and young people with SEN experience school belonging?
  - b. How do different groups within SEN experience school belonging?
2. What do children and young people with SEN identify as contributing to their sense of school belonging?

## **2.3 Method**

### **2.3.1 Search Strategy**

The Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) framework (Moher et al., 2009) was used to identify and select the appropriate papers to answer the review question. A systematic literature search of studies was carried out using the following electronic databases; Web of Science, APA PsycINFO, Education Resources Information Centre (ERIC), British Education Index and Education Research Complete.

Key words and search terms were developed and tested following scoping searches of the literature. Boolean operators were used ('AND', 'OR') between terms, and a proximity operator was used to search for phrases that contained the key search terms five words apart to expand the search. Literature searches were carried out between July 2020 and August 2020. Table one shows the search terms used mapped onto key concepts. Asterisks were used at the end of words to expand the search to terms with different endings. For example, child\* would find child and children. Quotation marks were used to search for exact phrases. Additionally, citation chaining was used to find further relevant studies and identify any studies missed from the main bibliographic search (Papioannou et al., 2009; Hinde & Spackman, 2015), Studies which were included had their references harvested to identify other potential papers that met the inclusion criteria.

**Table 1**

*Phase one search concepts and terms*

	Concept 1	Concept 2	Concept 3	Concept 4
Key concepts	School Aged Children and Young People	School Belonging	Special Educational Needs	Experience

Free text terms / natural language terms (synonyms, UK/US terminology, medical/laymen's terms, acronyms/abbreviations, drug brands, more narrow search terms)	School*	"School belonging"	SEN	Views*
	Education*		"Special educational need**"	Experience*
	Pupil*	"School connectedness"		Levels
	Student*	"School relatedness"	"Special educational needs and disability**"	Perception*
	Child*			Descri*
	Adolescent*			Perspective*
	"Young people"		SEND	Voice*
	"Young person"		"Learning difficult**"	
			"Learning disability**"	
			LD	
			"Additional needs"	
			"Additional learning needs"	
			Need*	
			"Additional support"	
			"Specific learning difficult**"	
		SLD		

### 2.3.2 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Pre-defined inclusion and exclusion criteria were developed (Table 2) to minimise the possibility of selection bias of studies. Articles were scanned for relevance against these criteria.

**Table 2***Phase one inclusion and exclusion criteria.*

Study Item	Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
Type of research	Original/primary research.	Secondary research such as discussions, review articles, conference presentations.
Date	Published between 1995-2020 (inclusive).	Any date prior to 1995.
Language	English language.	Any language other than English.
Context	Primary and secondary schools (or international equivalent).	Any context outside of primary/secondary schools.
Phenomenon of interest	Is an investigation primarily focusing on children with SEN's experiences of school belonging.	N/A

Searches were limited to results published between 1995-2020. This date range was chosen because it follows lead theorists in the field Baumeister and Leary's (1995) theory of belonging first being published. Participants were aged 4 to 18 to capture all experiences across the school-age range. Quantitative, qualitative and mixed methods research was included to ensure that all studies relevant to school belonging and SEN could be captured. Criteria relating to publication type (for example only including papers which appear in a peer reviewed journal) was not utilised in this review so as to allow for grey literature. Including grey literature within a search is argued to minimise publication bias (Booth et al., 2016). In addition, there is a vast quantity of potential evidence in grey literature such as dissertations, theses and practitioner journals alongside evidence found in official publications (Grayson &

Gomersall, 2003; Young et al., 2002). Given that there is limited research into the area central to this review, the inclusion of grey literature has the potential to generate more findings and extend the breadth and depth of the review.

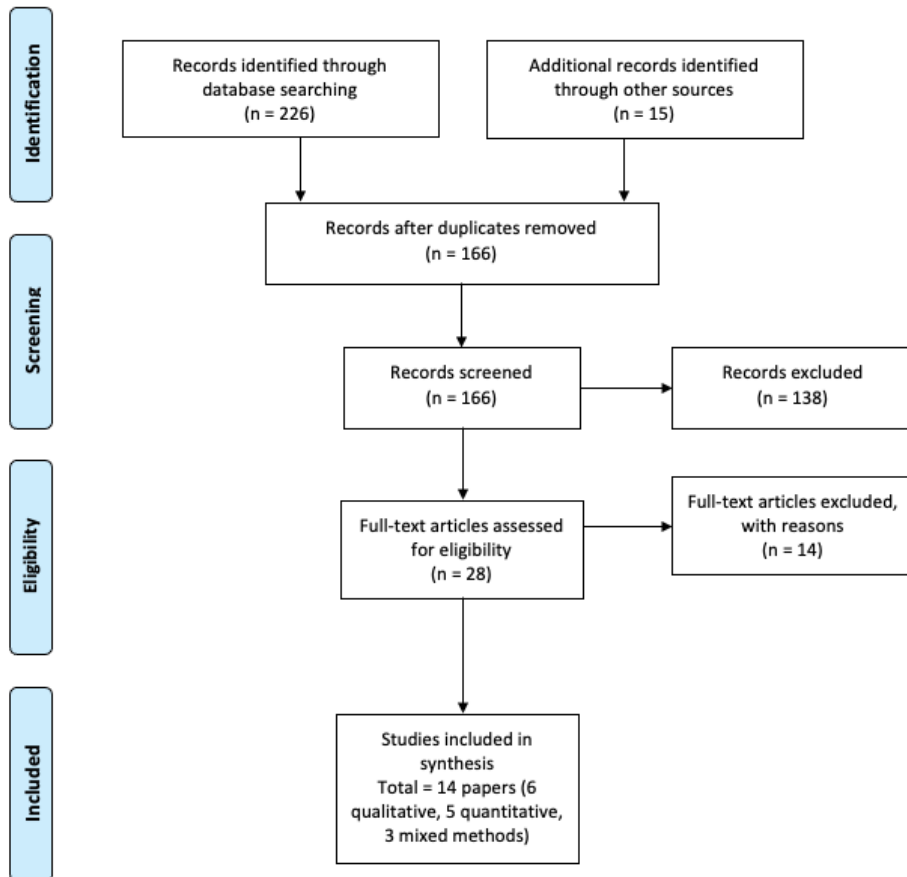
The bibliographic software used to store and manage the results of the scoping searches and main literature search was Zotero, whilst Microsoft Excel was used to manage and organise the results.

### **2.3.3 Study Selection**

The initial searches in each database produced a total of 226 records (Education Research Complete n = 59; British Education Index n = 13; ERIC n = 54; Web of Science n = 96; APA PsycINFO n = 4). An additional 12 studies were identified via reference harvesting, whilst citation chaining identified 3 additional studies. Removal of duplicates left a total of 166 results. I then screen the titles and abstracts of these records for their relevance against the predetermined inclusion and exclusion criteria. This led to the exclusion of 138 papers. 28 full-text records were retrieved for a more in-depth review. Of these, 4 full text studies were excluded due to them not meeting the inclusion criteria; reasons for exclusion include the studies not covering participants with SEN and the study not focusing on children and young people's experiences of belonging. This led to a total of 14 articles in the current review (6 qualitative, 5 quantitative and 3 mixed methods). See Figure 1 for the PRISMA recording flow diagram, which shows the paper identification and search/screening process (Moher et al., 2009).

### **Figure 1**

*Phase one PRISMA flowchart*



### 2.3.4 Quality Assessment of Research

To provide an objective and rigorous way of evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of the methodology and reporting of eligible studies, studies underwent a quality assessment process. The ‘weight of evidence’ (WoE) framework outlined by Gough (2007) was used to review each paper in terms of:

- Methodological quality (WoE A)
- Methodological appropriateness (WoE B)
- Relevance of focus (WoE C)

#### Methodological Quality (WoE A)

Qualitative research studies were assessed for quality using an investigative framework previously utilised by Bond et al. (2011). The framework incorporates 12

criteria including: research design appropriateness, analysis close to the data, emergent theory related to the problem, transferable conclusions and evidence of attention to ethical issues. Each study was awarded 0, 1 or 2 points for each of the criterion; after scoring summation, the study was categorised as either low (0-4 points), medium (5-8) or high (9-12) quality. The framework questions utilised are attached as appendix A. Quantitative research studies were assessed for quality using a 6-criteria framework previously utilised by Bond et al (2011). The framework incorporates 6 criteria: focus on a specific and well-defined problem, use of outcome measures with demonstrably good reliability and validity and fidelity checking. Each study was awarded 0, 1 or 2 points for each of the criterion; after scoring summation, the study was categorised as either low (0-2 points), medium (3-4) or high (5-7) quality. The framework questions utilised are attached as appendix B. Three studies adopted mixed method designs and so both frameworks were applied, with the higher of the two scores assigned as the study quality evaluation. All research studies included in the review were evaluated to be either medium or high quality.

#### Methodological appropriateness and relevance of focus (WoE B and C)

The included studies were also evaluated in terms of their 'methodological appropriateness' and 'focus of study'. Following Gough's (2007) framework, a review specific tool was created by the researcher to assess WoE B and C. The tool is attached as appendix C. Methodological appropriateness criteria (WoE B) included the research aim relating to school belonging, the study sample being school-aged children and young people (age 4-19) and the study having clear findings. Each study was awarded 0, 1, 2 or 3 points and after scoring summation, the study was categorised as having either low (0-1 points), medium (2) or high (3) appropriateness. As the present review question considers how children with SEN

experience school belonging, the focus of study criteria (WoE C) included the study focusing on children and young people's experiences of school belonging including those with SEN. Each study was awarded 0, 1 or 2 points and after scoring summation, the study was categorised as having either low (0 points), medium (1) or high (1) appropriateness. All studies achieved a medium or high rating for appropriateness and focus.

Table 3 shows each included studies rating for methodological quality, methodological appropriateness and relevance of focus. All studies included were rated to be of at least medium quality in each area and a reasonable level of confidence can therefore be placed in the findings of this review.

### **2.3.5 Data Extraction**

14 papers judged to be of medium or high quality were selected to be included in the final review. Key data regarding the study's characteristics and findings were summarised in a data extraction table (Table 3). These data included authors' names, study title, year, country, study aims, participant information (e.g. sample size, ages and genders), context, study method, study design, summary of findings relevant to the review and their quality assessment ratings. This information provided the basis for a thematic synthesis of the readings of the 14 papers. I will first provide a brief summary of the included studies before outlining the narrative synthesis.



**Table 3**

*Phase one data extraction*

Author(s), year, title and location	Study aims and objectives	Sample and context	Study method/ design	Summary of findings	Weight of Evidence A, B and C
		SEN included	Publication Type		
<p><b>Cockerill (2019)</b> Pupils attending a shared placement between a school and alternative provision: Is a sense of school belonging the key to success? UK</p>	<p>To examine the role that a sense of belonging has for students receiving education through a shared placement.</p>	<p>11 students (age 10 to 16, nine male and two female) at mainstream primary schools, mainstream secondary schools and alternative provision settings in England.</p> <hr/> <p>Participants were accessing or had accessed a shared placement.</p>	<p>Semi structured interviews and questionnaire/ mixed methods. Peer-reviewed journal.</p>	<p>The study found that some students attending a shared placement reported a higher sense of belonging at their alternative provisions than at their mainstream school. The importance of relationships with staff was highlighted as being viewed as central to school belonging.</p>	<p>A: Medium B: High C: High</p>
<p><b>Craggs and Kelly (2018)</b> School belonging: Listening to the voices of secondary school students who have undergone managed moves. UK</p>	<p>To understand how secondary school students who have undergone a managed move experience school belonging and what they feel would make it easier to experience a sense of school belonging.</p>	<p>4 students (age 13 to 15, three male and one female) at mainstream secondary schools in England.</p> <hr/> <p>Participants had experienced a managed move. Some participants had social, emotional and mental health difficulties.</p>	<p>Individual phenomenological interviews/ qualitative. Peer-reviewed journal.</p>	<p>The study found that for students who had experienced a managed move, a sense of school belonging resulted from positive relationships with peers and an attendant sense of safety, security, and acceptance.</p>	<p>A: Medium B: High C: High</p>
<p><b>Cullinane (2020)</b> An Exploration of the Sense of Belonging of</p>	<p>To compare the level of belonging of students with SEN with a sample of their non-SEN peers. To explore what helps and hinders</p>	<p>Participants attended one mainstream primary school in Ireland. Quantitative:</p>	<p>Semi-structured interviews and a questionnaire/ mixed method.</p>	<p>The study found that students with SEN presented with lower levels of belonging than their mainstream peers and experienced a range of barriers</p>	<p>A: Medium B: High C: High</p>

<p>Students with Special Educational Needs. Ireland</p>	<p>students with SEN's connectedness to school.</p>	<p>50 students, 25 with SEN and a matched sample of mainstream peers (age 12-18).  Qualitative:  23 students, 12 with SEN and 11 mainstream peers (age 12-18).  Study included participants with specific learning difficulties, emotional and behavioural difficulties, learning difficulties and autism spectrum condition.</p>	<p>Peer-reviewed journal.</p>	<p>that impacted on their sense of connection to school.</p>	
<p><b>Dimitrellou &amp; Hurry (2019)</b>  School belonging among young adolescents with SEMH and MLD: the link with their social relations and school inclusivity.  UK</p>	<p>To investigate whether there are differences in belonging and social relations between typically developing pupils and those with SEND and to understand the schooling experiences of pupils with behavioural difficulties and learning difficulties.</p>	<p>1440 students (age 11 to 15) at three English mainstream secondary schools. Of these students 273 were identified as having SEN.  Study included participants with Social, Emotional and Mental Health difficulties and Moderate Learning Difficulties.</p>	<p>Questionnaire/ Quantitative.  Peer-reviewed journal.</p>	<p>Findings demonstrated that pupils with SEND are not a homogeneous group, as pupils with behavioural difficulties were found to have less of a sense of belonging, and social relations than those with learning difficulties.</p>	<p>A: Medium B: High C: High</p>

<p><b>Hebron (2018)</b></p> <p>School connectedness and the primary to secondary school transition for young people with autism spectrum conditions.</p> <p>UK</p>	<p>To explore school connectedness across the primary to secondary school transition for young people with ASC considering if their levels of school connectedness differ from their typically developing peers.</p>	<p>49 students including 28 with autism (23 male, 5 female) and 21 with no additional needs (16 male, 5 female). Study included 24 primary, 27 secondary and 7 special schools in England and Wales.</p> <hr/> <p>Study included participants with autism spectrum condition.</p>	<p>Questionnaire/ Quantitative.</p> <p>Peer-reviewed journal.</p>	<p>Students with ASC reported positive levels of school connectedness across transition, although their scores remained lower than those of their typically developing peers.</p>	<p>A: Medium</p> <p>B: High</p> <p>C: Medium</p>
<p><b>Lapinski (2018)</b></p> <p>The lived experience of school belonging: A phenomenological study of middle school students with emotional and/or behavioral disorders.</p> <p>USA</p>	<p>To explore how school belonging is experienced and understood within the lives of students with emotional and behavioural disorders and what factors contribute most to their school belonging.</p>	<p>10 students (aged 13 to 16, five male and five female) at two middle schools in the USA.</p> <hr/> <p>Participants had emotional and behavioural difficulties including anxiety, ADHD and autism.</p>	<p>Semi-structured interviews/ qualitative.</p> <p>Unpublished doctoral thesis.</p>	<p>The study found that although participants experienced belonging in some unique ways, their experiences were still similar to that of other students. Participants were seeking acceptance and understanding, respect, inclusion and supportive relationships.</p>	<p>A: High</p> <p>B: High</p> <p>C: High</p>
<p><b>Midgen, Theodoratou, Newbury &amp; Leonard (2019)</b></p> <p>'School for Everyone': An exploration of children and young</p>	<p>To explore the views of children and young people with a range of needs on whether they experience a sense of belonging within their educational settings and what they feel influences this.</p>	<p>84 students (aged 3 to 16, 46 male and 38 female) at seven primary schools, two secondary schools, three special school and a nursery.</p>	<p>Semi-structured interviews, questionnaire/ mixed methods.</p> <p>Peer-reviewed journal.</p>	<p>Findings found that the majority of the children who took part in the project scored positively for school belonging, whilst a small number did not including those who had SEN needs that were described as ASD or SEMH.</p>	<p>A: Medium</p> <p>B: High</p> <p>C: High</p>

<p>people's perceptions of belonging.</p> <p>UK</p>		<p>The study included participants with a range of SEND including with autism, learning difficulties, social and emotional difficulties, hearing impairment and physical disabilities.</p>			
<p><b>Myles, Boyle &amp; Richards (2019)</b></p> <p>The social experiences and sense of belonging in adolescent females with Autism in mainstream school</p> <p>UK</p>	<p>The study explored the lived social experiences and sense of belonging of adolescent females with autism in mainstream schooling.</p>	<p>10 students (aged 12 to 17, all female) at three secondary schools in England.</p> <hr/> <p>Participants had a diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Condition.</p>	<p>Semi-structured interviews/ qualitative.</p> <p>Peer-reviewed journal.</p>	<p>The findings suggest that key friendships, understanding and perceived social competence are important for adolescent females with autism in developing a sense of belonging in mainstream school.</p>	<p>A: High</p> <p>B: High</p> <p>C: High</p>
<p><b>Nepi, Facondini, Nucci &amp; Peru (2013)</b></p> <p>Evidence from Full-Inclusion Model: The Social Position and Sense of Belonging of Students with Special Educational Needs and Their Peers in Italian Primary School.</p> <p>Italy</p>	<p>The study aimed to describe the social position and the sense of belonging to their school of SEN students, included full time in ordinary school, compared to the social position and the sense of belonging of their typically developing classmates.</p>	<p>418 students (aged 8 to 11, 225 male and 193 female) at three primary schools in Italy.</p> <hr/> <p>Study included participants who had a Statement of Disability (either cognitive or sensory-motor) and participants with learning or behavioural difficulties.</p>	<p>Questionnaire/ quantitative.</p> <p>Peer-reviewed journal.</p>	<p>Within the group of SEN students, the findings suggested that they struggle to gain a good social position, are less accepted and more peripheral within the class and feel quite distant from their school.</p>	<p>A: Medium</p> <p>B: High</p> <p>C: High</p>

<p><b>Nind , Boorman &amp; Clarke (2012)</b></p> <p>Creating spaces to belong: Listening to the voice of girls with behavioural, emotional and social difficulties through digital visual and narrative methods.</p> <p>UK</p>	<p>To use digital, visual and narrative methods to listen to girls excluded from mainstream education and with a label of behavioural, emotional and social difficulties.</p>	<p>10 students (aged 11 to 16, all female) at one secondary special school in England.</p> <hr/> <p>Participants attended a special school for young people with behavioural, emotional and social difficulties.</p>	<p>Digital visual and narrative methods including interview/ qualitative.</p> <p>Peer-reviewed journal.</p>	<p>Participants voiced strong messages about belonging and not belonging, situating their learning in the context of relationships with the self and others. The study identified the following key themes: space, identity, relationships, community and belonging.</p>	<p>A: Medium B: Medium C: Medium</p>
<p><b>Smedley (2011)</b></p> <p>The experience of school belonging: An interpretive phenomenological analysis.</p> <p>UK</p>	<p>To explore and understand the lived experience of belonging or not belonging for boys with literacy difficulties.</p>	<p>Three students (aged 8 to 10, all male) at one primary school in the UK.</p> <hr/> <p>Participants had persistent literacy difficulties.</p>	<p>Semi-structured interviews/ qualitative.</p> <p>Unpublished doctoral thesis.</p>	<p>The study found that although participants' experiences of belongingness had similarities, there were also clear differences in their accounts.</p>	<p>A: High B: High C: High</p>
<p><b>Svavarsdottir (2008)</b></p> <p>Connectedness, belonging and feelings about school among healthy and chronically ill Icelandic schoolchildren.</p> <p>Iceland</p>	<p>To evaluate the level of school connectedness and feelings about school among Icelandic preteenagers who were either with or without a chronic health condition.</p>	<p>480 students (aged ten to 12, 209 male and 271 female) at 12 elementary schools in Iceland.</p>	<p>Questionnaire/ quantitative.</p> <p>Peer-reviewed journal.</p>	<p>The study found that children with chronic illnesses report significantly lower school connectedness and significantly lower positive feelings about their school than children without chronic illness(es).</p>	<p>A: Medium B: Medium C: High</p>

Study included participants with chronic illnesses, mental illness and learning difficulties.

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<p><b>Ware (2020)</b> Experiences of self and belonging among young people identified as having learning difficulties in English schools UK</p>	<p>To explore the experiences of young people identified as having learning difficulties, specifically considering the way in which the young people describe and experience a sense of belonging in their educational settings.</p>	<p>6 students (ages 12 to 19) at two mainstream secondary schools and a special school in England.</p>	<p>Case study/ qualitative.  Unpublished doctoral thesis.</p>	<p>The study found that all of the young people participating described, on some level, having a sense of belonging within school. Positive relationships with teachers and support staff were vital in promoting a sense of belonging.</p>	<p>A: High B: High C: Medium</p>
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<p><b>Vandekamp (2013)</b> The social experiences of secondary students with intellectual and learning disabilities: school safety, victimization, risk-taking and feelings of belonging USA</p>	<p>To examine the social and behavioural experiences of secondary students in terms of self-reported victimization, bullying, racial discrimination, gender harassment, sexual imposition, feelings of school safety, and belongingness, as well as engagement in high-risk behaviours.</p>	<p>151 students with special educational needs (aged 13 to 19 years, 83 males, 68 females) and a matched sample of 151 students without disabilities (83 males, 68 females) at 10 secondary schools in the USA.</p>	<p>Questionnaire/ quantitative.  Unpublished doctoral thesis.</p>	<p>The study found that adolescents with mild intellectual disabilities and specific learning disabilities did not report lower feelings of belonging than their peers without disabilities.</p>	<p>A: Medium B: High C: High</p>
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The study included participants with intellectual disabilities and specific learning disabilities.

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## **2.4 Results**

### **2.4.1 Overview of included studies**

The final 14 studies were published between 2008 and 2020. Studies were from a range of countries nationwide; United Kingdom (9), United States (2), Iceland (1), Italy (1) and Ireland (1). 10 studies were peer-reviewed journal articles published in journals including Educational and Child Psychology, School Psychology International and the European Journal of Special Education. The remaining 4 studies were unpublished doctoral theses.

All studies included in the reviews discuss the views and experiences of children with SEN, although the nature of the SEN varied in each paper. Some, such as Craggs and Kelly (2018) and Hebron (2018), focused on one specific type of SEN. Other papers, such as Midgen et al. (2019) and Dimitrellou & Hurry (2019), included a range of special educational needs and provided a comparison with peers who did not have special educational needs. Two papers, Cullinane (2020) and Vandekamp (2013), also included a matched sample of peers without special educational needs. Overall, the studies included children and young people with Autism Spectrum Condition (ASC), attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, moderate and specific learning difficulties, SEMH difficulties, hearing impairments and physical disabilities, in addition to children and young people who had experienced permanent school exclusion and managed moves.

Six studies used qualitative methods with sample sizes ranging from three to 10 students. Five studies used quantitative methods with sample sizes ranging from 70 to 1440 students. Finally, three used a mixed method approach with sample sizes ranging from 11 to 98 students. The majority of studies included both female and male participants whilst two studies had all female participants and one study all

male participants. Overall, papers included both primary, secondary and special schools with the age of participants ranging from three to 18 years. All but one study was cross-sectional, in which data were collected at one time-point with no follow up. The exception, Hebron (2018), explored school belonging across the primary to secondary school transition and collected data at three time points across one academic school year.

A range of measures were used in the included studies. For quantitative studies, measures used included the Psychological Sense of School Membership Scale (Goodenow, 1993), the Belonging Scale (Frederickson et al., 2007) and the School Connectedness Scale (Resnick et al., 1997). The majority of qualitative studies utilised semi-structured interviews whilst some included other visual and narrative methods such as video journals. The aims of the studies varied with each study having a slightly different focus. However, all included studies lie within the context of gathering children and young people views and experiences of school belonging.

#### **2.4.2 Synthesis of Findings**

A narrative synthesis was chosen for this review. A narrative synthesis requires the use of words and text to summarise and explain the findings of a synthesis process and can be applied to both qualitative and quantitative findings (Joanna Briggs Institute, 2019). Whilst there is some variability in terms of the value of the studies, it was felt that all fourteen studies provide some value in answering at least one of the research questions. Consequently, the findings from all 14 papers were synthesised to answer the two research questions:

- 1. What are the views and experiences of children and young people with SEN regarding school belonging?*



- a. *How do children and young people with SEN experience school belonging?*
  - b. *How do different groups within SEN experience school belonging?*
2. *What do children and young people with SEN identify as contributing to their sense of school belonging?*

For the findings on question one, the aim of the review was to explore the school belonging experiences of children and young people with SEN. Within this section, it is also explored how different groups within SEN experience school belonging. As previously highlighted, the studies included a range of different SEN. The synthesis therefore first considers the overall experiences of children with SEN before exploring the views and experiences of children and young people with specific needs such as autism or learning difficulties. The findings were therefore separated into these areas of need. To complete the synthesis, relevant data for the research question was extracted from each paper. That findings were then drawn together into a narrative synthesis to show each relevant paper's conclusion relating to the research question. I then compared the conclusions and considered whether they found similar or differing findings. Potential reasons for differences were also considered.

The findings for research question two, considering what children and young people with SEN identify as contributing to school belonging, were categorised into themes. To complete this synthesis, data was extracted from each paper showing what the authors found contributed towards school belonging. These findings were then listed on Microsoft word and thematic analysis was used to code and categorise the findings relating to what children and young people view as contributing to their experience of school belonging. Following careful categorising, the findings were

organised themes, such as peer relationships and sense and safety. All themes discussed in the synthesis are from my analysis of the included studies.

#### **2.4.2.1 Research question 1: What are the views and experiences of children and young people with SEN regarding school belonging?**

##### Part A: How do children and young people with SEN experience school belonging?

Several studies compared the school belonging experiences of children with and without SEN. Cullinane (2020) found that students with SEN presented with a lower level of school belonging than their non-SEN peers. They found that whilst there was significant commonality within their experiences, the SEN group reported a number of differences in how they experienced belonging, for example reporting greater academic difficulties, negative peer relationships and instances of bullying. Similarly, Dimitrellou and Hurry (2019) found significant differences between how students experienced school belonging, with children and young people with SEN displaying lower school belonging than their typically developing peers. Furthermore, Nepi et al. (2013) found that students with SEN reported lower school belonging than their typically developing peers. Nepi et al. (2013) also found that typically developing students were more accepted and less rejected than students with SEN.

Svavarsdottir (2008) found that children with learning difficulties, mental health difficulties or a chronic illness reported lower connection to school than those without these needs. Contrasting with all the previously discussed studies, Vandekamp (2013) found no significant differences regarding school belonging between students with SEN including specific learning difficulties and mild intellectual disabilities and their typically developing peers. These differences could be explained by considering that different studies included different types of needs under the label of SEN. For example, Cullinane (2020) and Dimitrellou and Hurry (2019) included a range of

needs such as autism and mental health difficulties whereas Vandekamp (2013) chose to solely focus on learning needs. As will be explored in part B of the research question, it may be that different types of SEN show different levels and experiences of school belonging. The conflict may also be further explained by differences in the samples used. For example, Svavarsdottir (2008) included children aged ten to twelve at elementary schools in Iceland, Vandekamp (2013) included young people aged thirteen to nineteen at secondary schools in the USA, Cullinane (2020) included young people aged twelve to eighteen at post-primary schools in Ireland and Nepi et al. (2013) included children aged eight to eleven at primary schools in Italy. It may be that age and school culture contribute towards experiences of school belonging and therefore towards the differences in findings between these studies. In addition, the studies used different methodologies which impacted both the nature of their research aims and data collected. For example, Cullinane (2020) adopted a mixed methods approach including both questionnaires and semi-structured interviews whilst Dimitrellou and Hurry (2019) and Nepi et al. (2013) used quantitative methods. Whilst the variety of methods used impacted the conclusions drawn, all included studies gave insight relating to this research question. For example, whilst Dimitrellou and Hurry's (2019) research aims did not involve exploring how students felt they belonged, their results demonstrated that school belonging varies between children with SEN and their peers.

Other studies specifically explored how children and young people with SEN experience school belonging and did not use comparative measures. Midgen's et al. (2019) findings suggested that the majority of children and young people with SEN do experience a sense of belonging to school, with approximately 90% of participants reporting a sense of school belonging. Similarly, Ware (2020) found that

all children and young people with SEN participating in the study experienced a sense of belonging at school. However, Lapinski (2018) concluded that belonging is experienced and understood on an individual level. Similar to Lapinski (2018), Smedley (2011) found that accounts of school belonging from children and young people with SEN differed greatly demonstrating both commonalities and differences of experiences. These differences in findings by Midgen et al. (2019), Ware (2020), Smedley (2011) and Lapinski (2018) may be explained by considering that the studies used different methodologies. Midgen et al. (2019) adopted a mixed methods approach with the use of a questionnaire alongside semi-structured interviews. The use of quantitative methods such as the belonging scale (Frederickson et al., 2007) meant that Midgen et al. (2019) could compare the levels of school belonging for children with different types of SEN. Comparatively, Ware (2020), Lapinski (2018) and Smedley (2011) all used qualitative methods with a research focus on capturing the lived experiences of children and young people with an identified need, their research did not aim to provide any comparison between groups or quantification of belonging such as that of the scoring on the school belonging scale (Frederickson et al., 2007). Ware (2020) adopted a case study approach whilst Lapinski (2018) and Smedley (2011) utilised semi-structured interviews analysed using interpretive phenomenological analysis (Smith, 1996).

Multiple studies highlighted the methodological limitations within their research. Importantly, Dimitrellou and Hurry's (2019) findings were correlational in nature and assumptions about the casual relationships of variables can therefore not be made. Dimitrellou and Hurry (2019) further highlight the potential limitations of their use of self-report measures to explore school belonging, commenting that students may have misrepresented their experience of belonging to project a more favourable

image. Furthermore, Cullinane (2020) considered that their research used a relatively small sample size (50 students) and focused only on one school setting. Relatedly, Dimitrellou and Hurry (2019), who included three schools with a sample size of 1440 students, also highlight that their data is limited by the number of schools recruited and comment that they recognise that their findings are not generalisable. Both Lapinski (2018) and Ware (2020) also comment that small sample sizes are a limitation of their research and impacts the generalisation of their findings. However, it is important to consider the methodological approaches and aims of the included studies. For example, Smedley (2011) comments that whilst the small sample size may be viewed as limiting, it is also a strength in that it allowed in depth analysis and that generalisability was not the aim of the study. It is also important to highlight the strengths of the included studies, for example Cullinane (2020) emphasised strong implications for practice regarding the promotion of wellbeing and social inclusion for children with SEN whilst Midgen et al. (2019) also reflected on the strong implications for supporting children with SEN.

#### Part B: How do different groups within SEN experience school belonging?

Several studies suggest that feelings of school belonging are affected by type of special need with students with SEN not being a homogenous group regarding experiences of school belonging (Dimitrellou & Hurry, 2019; Midgen et al., 2019; Svavarsdottir, 2008). The findings for this section are synthesised and organised using the framework within the SEN Code of Practice (2015) which separates SEN into four broad areas of need: Communication and interaction, cognition and learning, SEMH and physical and sensory.

##### *Communication and interaction*

Midgen et al. (2019) included participants with a range of Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) including with autism, learning difficulties, social and emotional difficulties, hearing impairment and physical disabilities. Using the school Belonging Scale (Frederickson et al., 2007) and the School Connectedness Scale (Resnick et al., 1997), Midgen et al. (2019) found that 6 out of 63 children and young people with SEN did not report a sense of belonging to school and 5 out of these 6 children and young people had SEN needs described as ASC or SEMH. Whilst Midgen et al. (2019) reflects that the sample size of the study limits the possibility of generalisability, Midgen's et al. (2019) findings regarding ASC are supported within other studies. When considering the school belonging experiences of children and young people with ASC, Hebron (2018) found that students with ASC reported lower levels of school connectedness across their transition to secondary school than their typically developing peers. However, it is important to highlight that Hebron (2018) also found that one year into secondary school the disparity between young people with ASC and their typically developing peers had reduced and the gap in school connectedness was no longer significant. Myles et al. (2019) also suggest that children and young people with ASC needs experience more difficulty in developing school belonging, highlighting the specific social difficulties experienced by females with autism and how this impacts their experiences of school belonging. Myles et al. (2019) proposed that differing from their non-SEN peers, school belonging for this group may develop from one key friendship rather than feeling a membership to a larger group or setting.

### *Cognition and learning*

Studies exploring how children with learning needs experience school belonging appear to have mixed findings. Dimitrellou and Hurry (2019) found that pupils with

learning difficulties had more of a sense of belonging than those with behavioural difficulties. However, Svavarsdottir (2008) found that children with learning difficulties reported significantly lower positive feelings about school than children with physical illnesses. Contrasting this, Vandekamp (2013) found no differences between the way in which students with specific learning difficulties, mild intellectual difficulties and their typically developing peers experienced school belonging. Midgen et al. (2019) explored the school belonging experiences of a wide range of children with different SEN including learning difficulties and like Vandekamp (2013) found that those with learning difficulties reported positive experiences of school belonging. Furthermore, Smedley (2011) found the accounts of school belonging from boys with literacy difficulties differed greatly with participants describing both a range of experiences both positive and negative. The studies use different methodologies and appear to explore school belonging through differing lenses which may explain the varying findings. For example, Dimitrellou and Hurry (2019) use quantitative scales to investigate whether there are differences in school belonging between those with learning difficulties and behavioural difficulties, whilst Smedley (2011) uses qualitative case studies to explore and understand the lived experiences of belonging for boys with literacy difficulties.

#### *Social, emotional and mental health difficulties*

As discussed above, Midgen et al. (2019) also found that children with SEN who did not report a sense of belonging to school often had needs described as SEMH. Children with SEMH needs' experiences of school belonging have been explored in multiple other studies. Dimitrellou and Hurry (2019) found that pupils with behavioural difficulties had less of a sense of school belonging than those with learning or emotional difficulties. Dimitrellou and Hurry (2019) propose that this may

be due to difficulties these pupils have with maintaining sufficient social relationships in addition to experiencing negative reactions from teachers (Allan, 2015; Frostad & Pijl, 2007). Similarly, Cockerill (2018) found that young people with SEMH needs often felt rejected and unsupported by their mainstream schools and experienced feelings of failure which affected their sense of school belonging. Cockerill (2018) also considered school belonging within different educational settings and found that young people's school belonging was higher at alternative provisions than it was at their mainstream schools. Adding further weight to the viewpoint that children and young people with SEMH needs face difficulties experiencing school belonging, Svavarsdottir (2008) found that children with mental health difficulties reported significantly lower positive feelings about school than children with physical illnesses. Contrasting with the above studies, Lapinski (2018) found mixed responses when exploring how young people with behavioural and emotional needs experienced belonging. Some participants shared that they felt a great deal of belonging within their schools whilst others described feeling little belonging to the school (Lapinski, 2018). Participants with behavioural and emotional needs also had mixed views when discussing how important belonging was to them. Whilst belonging at school was very important to some, for others they felt other aspects of school were more important and emphasised that they could belong somewhere other than school (Lapinski, 2018). The difference in findings between Lapinski (2018) and the other studies may be explained by the research methods and epistemology they used. Lapinski (2018) used qualitative semi-structured interviews whereas Midgen et al. (2019), Dimitrellou and Hurry (2019), Cockerill (2018) and Svavarsdottir (2008) all used quantitative questionnaires.

*Sensory and/or physical needs*



Midgen et al. (2019) included children and young people with hearing impairment and physical disabilities and did not identify this group of students as experiencing low school belonging. Comparatively, Svavarsdottir (2008) found that children with chronic illnesses report significantly lower connection to and positive feelings about school than children without a chronic illness.

#### **4.1.2.2 Research question 2: What do children and young people with SEN identify as contributing to their sense of school belonging?**

For this section, I analysed the included studies for findings relating to the research question. The following themes were identified: relationships with peers, relationships with adults, sense of safety and experiences of bullying, extra-curricular activities, having additional needs supported and school ethos. Differences between the views of young people with different forms of SEN are also discussed.

##### Relationships with Peers

Multiple studies highlighted friendships as being important to children and young people's sense of school belonging (Midgen et al., 2019; Nind et al., 2012; Smedley, 2011). In some studies friendships and peer support were viewed as being "by far the most prominent theme" associated with a sense of school belonging and mentioned by all participants (Craggs & Kelly, p62, 2018; Cullinane, 2020). For example, when considering what would help students experience school belonging, participants who had experienced a managed move also overwhelmingly focused on the need for support to focus on forming friendships (Craggs & Kelly, 2018). In line with these findings, Lapinski (2018) also reports that friendships were viewed as being central to building belonging. Myles et al. (2019) found that reciprocal friendships were an important basis for experiencing both happiness and school belonging. The importance of having peers perceived as being similar to them and a

sense of fitting in with peers was also highlighted (Cockerill, 2019; Ware, 2020). Age was not a factor in the findings relating to peer relationships across studies with similar findings found with children from ages 3 to 16 years (Cullinane, 2020; Midgen et al., 2019; Smedley, 2011; Ware, 2020).

It was also clear that children and young people with SEN describe challenges regarding their relationships with peers. Negative relationships with peers were identified as impacting school belonging by a number of studies (Craggs & Kelly, 2018; Cullinane, 2020; Smedley, 2011). Cullinane (2020) found that participants frequently highlighted friendship difficulties and social interaction problems as a barrier to school belonging for children with SEN, with some participants describing feeling excluded and bullied. Comparably, Craggs and Kelly (2018) reported that fear or doubt over the participant's ability to forge positive peer relationships was a significant barrier to experiencing school belonging. Ware (2020) found that young people were highly aware of how their peers perceived them and spoke of attempting to minimise the chance of being identified as different to their peers. One participant spoke of trying to "contain" his behaviour in order to appear "normal enough" to belong at school (Ware, p143, 2020). Children with SEN feeling different and the negative impact this was felt to have on belonging was a theme among several papers (Myles et al., 2019; Ware, 2020). However, it is important to highlight that this does not appear to be the case for all children and young people with SEN (Ware, 2020).

### Relationships with adults

Several studies identified relationships with staff as a central factor to children and young people's feelings of school belonging (Cockerill, 2018; Dimitrellou & Hurry, 2019; Midgen et al., 2019; Ware, 2020). Positive relationships with staff were found

to contribute towards children and young people feeling valued and supported at school and thus promoted a sense of school belonging (Cockerill, 2018; Cullinane, 2020; Ware, 2020). Smedley (2011) highlights interpersonal relationships as the most dominant theme in building belonging for children with literacy difficulties with the teacher-pupil relationship emerging as central to participants narratives of what contributes to their school belonging. Whilst many studies highlight the important role of the teacher (Dimitrellou & Hurry, 2019; Smedley, 2011; Ware, 2020), research also suggesting a range of adults contribute towards school belonging (Cockerill, 2018; Dimitrellou & Hurry, 2019). The way in which adults treat children and young people with SEN appears central within this theme. Feeling accepted by staff was identified as being significant in experiencing school belonging (Cockerill, 2018). For example, one participant with social and emotional needs spoke of feeling surprised that staff appeared happy to see them, which positively impacted their belonging at the setting (Cockerill, 2018). Smedley (2011) and Ware (2020) also highlighted the importance of children and young people perceiving the teacher to like them. Nind et al. (2012) and Smedley (2011) found that the perception of being disliked by the teacher significantly lowered students' sense of belonging.

Cockerill (2018) found that when children and young people with social and emotional needs experienced a sense of belonging at school, they highlighted that their relationships with staff were very positive. Similarly, Nind et al. (2012) suggested that relationships with adults are key to building belonging for young people with behaviour, emotional and social difficulties. Participants described building strong attachments to staff they viewed to be kind, helpful and funny (Nind et al., 2012). Lapinski (2018), who also included participants with emotional and social difficulties, similarly identified staff humour as a factor supporting school

belonging (Lapinski, 2018). Contrastingly, conflictual relationships with school staff were identified as a barrier to belonging. Disciplinary related difficulties and low expectations around academic potential were identified by participants as contributing to poor relationships with school staff (Cullinane, 2020; Lapinski, 2018). Lapinski (2018) further found that participants identified classroom management and perceived unfairness as impacting school belonging, for example by being excluded from the class or feeling blamed by the teacher for something because they had additional needs (Lapinski, 2018).

### Relationships with peers and adults

Whilst many studies highlighted the importance of relationships with adults, some studies found it to be either not central to school belonging or less important than other factors (Cullinane, 2020; Myles et al., 2019). For example, Craggs and Kelly's (2018) study reported relatively little mention of school staff when exploring what contributed to young people's sense of school belonging. When adults were mentioned, it was in relation to facilitating school activities and peer interaction. This inconsistency may relate to the age of participants, with peer relationships being well documented as becoming more important in adolescence (Brown & Larson, 2009). In support of this, Cullinane (2020) found that positive peer relationships become ever more important to students' sense of belonging as they progress through adolescence. The inconsistent findings may also relate to differences in type of SEN with adult relationships appearing more important to those with needs such as SEMH (Cockerill, 2018; Nind et al., 2012). Given these findings, it is interesting that relationships with adults was not mentioned at all within Myles et al. (2019) exploration of what adolescent females with ASC identified as contributing to their sense of school belonging. In addition, Dimitrellou and Hurry (2019) noted a weak

association between school belonging and school staff relationships in comparison to peer relationships. These differences may also reflect the quantitative nature of the study as many of the contrasting studies, such as Myles et al. (2019) and Cullinane (2020) used qualitative methods.

### Sense of safety and bullying

Studies suggested that in order to experience school belonging, students need to first feel safe within the school. Craggs and Kelly (2018) found that friendships promoted school belonging by increasing the participants' feelings of safety at school. Furthermore, Lapinski (2018) found that feelings of comfort, security and safety were critical to participants who felt that they belonged within their school. Midgen et al. (2019) also highlighted safety as contributing to belonging. Like Craggs and Kelly (2018), Myles et al. (2019) suggested that social security comes through peer relationships and encourages feelings of confidence and belonging. Safety provided by physical aspects of the school environment was also highlighted (Myles et al., 2019). Feeling accepted and safe was also related to the physical school environment by Ware (2020) who found participants identified specific places within school that they felt both safe and a sense of belonging towards.

Unsurprisingly bullying was identified as having a negative impact on a student's belonging, with studies also suggesting the need for stronger support to reduce bullying for children and young people with SEN (Cullinane, 2020; Lapinski, 2018; Smedley, 2011; Vandekamp, 2013). Smedley (2011) found that children with SEN did not have confidence in the teacher's ability to protect them from bullying with poor teacher relationships appearing to leave pupils vulnerable to being bullied. Being bullied was also raised within Ware's (2020) findings, with concerns around not fitting in and being perceived to be different being related to potential bullying.

This was especially emphasised by young people with autism and social and emotional needs (Ware, 2020).

### Extra-curricular opportunities

Research also identified opportunities to participate in extra-curricular activities as helping to facilitate a sense of school belonging (Midgen et al., 2019; Smedley, 2011; Svavarsdottir, 2008). Midgen et al. (2019) suggested that children appreciated these activities for a range of reasons such as opportunities to be with their friends, doing things they enjoyed and the chance to do something different. Lapinski (2018) found that main advantage of extra-curricular activities was that it allowed participants to meet more people. Within this theme, Craggs and Kelly (2018) further identified the opportunity for children and young people to make a positive contribution as appearing to facilitate school belonging. For example, one participant spoke of how being a peer mentor supported her sense of connection at school, whilst another spoke of how participating in a boxing club supported his friendships and consequently his experience of school belonging. Adding to this, Cullinane (2020) found that participants experience a heightened sense of school belonging and connection when participating in extra-curricular activities alongside their peers, including when they represented their school. However, within Cullinane's (2020) study it was also found that only a minority of children and young people with SEN reported involvement with extra-curricular activities so most participants with SEN were not benefitting from this. Cullinane (2020) suggests that students with SEN may need additional support to successfully engage in extra-curricular activities which may support their experiences of school belonging.

### School ethos

School ethos was also identified by children and young people as contributing to their experience of school belonging. Dimitrellou and Hurry (2019) found that the perception of school ethos was positively associated with sense of school belonging. This strongly related to behaviour management and inclusion and students who perceived the school as having inclusive policies and behaviour management strategies were more likely to experience a positive sense of school belonging (Dimitrellou & Hurry, 2019). Lapinski (2018) also found that participants identified school culture as contributing to experiences of belonging, in particular they highlighted inclusivity, open-mindedness, acceptance and understanding. Participants further highlighted school culture around mental health and stigma around additional needs as being problematic for students with SEN's sense of belonging (Lapinski, 2018). Similarly, Nind et al. (2012) highlighted students valuing schools with a caring ethos where "*we all look out for each other*" (p646).

#### Identification of and support for additional needs

Studies also suggested that school belonging appeared to be facilitated by children and young people receiving appropriate support for any additional needs. For example, Craggs and Kelly (2018) highlighted the example of participants being offered counselling and educational psychology input in response to the young person's emotional needs (Craggs & Kelly, 2018). Cockerill (2019) also emphasised the importance of appropriately meeting the needs of children and young people with complex needs (Cockerill, 2019). Relatedly, Midgen et al. (2019) also found that tailored support was reported to impact school belonging but noted that it was viewed as less important than a number of other factors including friendships, relationships with staff, extra-curricular activities, safety and group work.

#### Differences between nature of SEN

The research also highlights differences in the factors that children and young people with SEN identify as building school belonging. It is important to note that children with SEN are not a homogenous group and the papers cover a variety of different needs. For example, for adolescent girls with ASC establishing and adhering to social expectations was significant to their experience of school belonging and this does not appear to be relevant within research looking at overall SEN. Whilst friendships are undoubtedly important to support a sense of belonging for the majority of children and young people with SEN, Myles' et al. (2019) emphasised the importance of feeling comfortable and having one key close friend for female young people with autism which does not appear to be the case in other studies. Additionally, Smedley (2011) identified long-term illness as contributing to low belonging at school whilst participants also reported that emotional difficulties impacted their school belonging by hindering their ability to engage with others (Lapinski, 2018). Smedley (2011) also raised similar themes, with one participant speaking of how his self-exclusion and social withdrawal related to a low sense of belonging. Craggs and Kelly (2018) found that children who had experienced managed moves, often due to mental health difficulties and experiences of bullying, closely associated school belonging with a sense of being accepted and feeling able to 'be themselves'. Craggs and Kelly (2018) further found that for these young people, belonging and safety needs were intertwined. Midgen et al. (2019), whose research included a large range of different needs, highlights that whilst there were key themes, they also found significant variation in what individuals felt impacted upon their sense of school belonging.

## **2.5 Discussion**

### **2.5.1 Summary of findings**



This review has contributed to a topic area which is less represented and has not previously been reviewed. The synthesis has drawn on the views and experiences of children and young people with SEN to explore how they experience school belonging. The review has further highlighted what they feel contributes towards them feeling a sense of belonging at school.

Findings regarding the comparison between the school belonging experiences of children with and without SEN were mixed, however a significant number of studies found that children with SEN presented with a lower level of school belonging than their non-SEN peers (Cullinane, 2020; Dimitrellou & Hurry, 2019; Nepi et al., 2013; Svavarsdottir, 2008). Comparatively, only one study suggested no significant differences regarding school belonging between students with SEN and their peers and this study specifically focused on children with cognition and learning needs (Vandekamp, 2013). Some findings also suggested that belonging is individually experienced and understood with children and young people with SEN showing both similarities and differences in their experiences of school belonging (Lapinski, 2018; Smedley, 2011).

Findings also show that students with SEN are not a homogenous group regarding experiences of school belonging (Dimitrellou & Hurry, 2019; Midgen et al., 2019; Svavarsdottir, 2008). Findings highlight that children and young people with needs that could be described as ASC or SEMH are most likely to experience a low sense of school belonging (Cockerill, 2018; Dimitrellou and Hurry, 2019; Hebron, 2018; Midgen et al., 2019; Svavarsdottir, 2008). One study also found that children and young people with chronic illnesses report low connection and positive feelings about school, however this area of need was not explored in any other studies within this review. In comparison, the findings regarding school belonging experiences of

children and young people with learning difficulties are slightly mixed, however they appear to be more positive than findings relating to children with ASC and SEMH (Dimitrellou & Hurry, 2019; Midgen et al., 2019; Smedley, 2011; Vandekamp, 2013). Findings demonstrate a number of contributing factors to school belonging for children with SEN. In particular, interpersonal relationships with both adults and peers are repeatedly highlighted as a central part of belonging (Midgen et al., 2019; Nind et al., 2012; Smedley, 2011). In several studies, friendships were viewed as being the most important factor associated with a sense of school belonging, although studies identified that some children with SEN face challenges in building supportive peer relationships (Craggs & Kelly; 2018; Cullinane, 2020). Feeling safe at school was also identified as a precursor to belonging (Craggs & Kelly, 2018; Lapinski, 2018; Myles et al., 2019), with studies also suggesting the need for stronger support to reduce bullying for children and young people with SEN (Cullinane, 2020; Lapinski, 2018). Research also suggested that there are differences in what children and young people with SEN feel supports and hinders their belonging (Midgen et al., 2019).

### **2.5.2 Implications for Educational Psychologists**

The review shows the depth of children's and young people's views and suggests that children and young people have importance opinions on school belonging. An implication for EPs is to seek and value views on belonging and support children and young people to express them. An important aspect of the EP role within individual casework is to think about how the child experiences school and exploring their school belonging may be part of this. This might include rapport building and using personal construct techniques to explore whether school belonging is important to a young person and if so, what they feel develops and supports it for them as an

individual. This is especially important for those who are having a difficult time and not experiencing a sense of belonging at school.

The review also highlights the need for additional support for children and young people with SEN to help develop their sense of school belonging. In particular it appears that children and young people with needs relating to ASC and SEMH are in need of support. EPs have a role to play in both acknowledging this within their work and sharing how best to support belonging. This review highlights what children with SEN identify as contributing to their school belonging and EPs would be well placed to share this knowledge and work with schools to develop some of these areas. For example, at a whole school level EPs could highlight the importance of ensuring children with SEN have access to extra-curricular activities and are encouraged to participate. Within this EPs might highlight the research findings that children with SEN are less likely to be included in extra-curricular activities and emphasise the positive impact working to improve this might have.

### **2.5.3 Strengths and limitations**

Due to the importance of the topic, it is promising that research is considering children and young people with SEN's views on school. Strengths of the evidence base include that all studies were quality assessed using the weight of evidence framework (Gough, 2007) and rated a minimum of 'medium' for methodological quality, appropriateness and relevance and focus. The review also included both published and unpublished literature and therefore is less affected by publication bias. A further strength is that all the studies were relatively recent and conducted within the last twelve years with nine of the fourteen studies taking place between 2018 and 2020.

Despite these strengths, there are a number of limitations of the review which may impact conclusions being drawn. Firstly, as the field of research in this area is relatively small, quantitative, qualitative and mixed methods studies were included in this review and subsequently there was a variety of different methodologies and measures used across studies. This range of different measures and methodologies may also be contributing to some of the inconsistent conclusions. Secondly, a number of studies included had small sample sizes which may limit the generalisability of findings. Thirdly, as research into children with SEN and school belonging is fairly limited, the context within the inclusion criteria was wide and included all educational settings attended by children and young people with SEN. This meant that included studies has samples with a mix of ages and types of settings, for example primary schools, secondary schools and alternative provision. Whilst this is a strength in that it covers a wider range of children and young people's views and experiences, it could also be viewed as a limitation as there are likely differences in how different settings would be able to promote school belonging. It may have been more impactful in terms of generating implications to focus solely on one age group or type of educational setting. In addition, studies were undertaken in the United Kingdom, the United States, Iceland, Ireland and Italy, and the context specific nature of a sense of belonging may be constructed differently in different cultural contexts. It would therefore have been beneficial to include a larger range of countries and cultures. Furthermore, within some of the qualitative studies, such as Ware (2020), children and young people reported experiencing fluctuations in feelings of school belonging depending on factors such as peer relationships and their home lives. This suggests that longitudinal studies may be well placed to explore how children and young people experience school belonging as they could

consider that sense of belonging is likely to change over time. All included studies except one used a cross-sectional design which therefore do not allow for exploration over time. Further highlighting this limitation, the one included study which was longitudinal found differences in reports of school belonging at multiple time points (Hebron, 2018).

#### **2.5.4 Future research**

Whilst the review highlights that children and young people with SEN may need additional support regarding school belonging, those with autism and SEMH appear most vulnerable to not experiencing a sense of school belonging. The review findings suggest that attention is warranted to explore how to promote these children's connections and relationships at school to help develop their sense of school belonging. Future research could explore why these children and young appear to face challenges in experiencing school belonging and what would support them. Furthermore, research shows that some areas of SEN are under researched when considering the views of children regarding school belonging. For example, there appears to be little research focusing upon children and young people with more significant SEN who may be attending special schools. The views and experiences of children with physical difficulties or speech and language needs also appear under researched. Future research could focus upon gathering the views of these groups regarding school belonging. In addition, the majority of research in this area appears to be cross sectional and future research could utilise longitudinal methods. As discussed in the limitation section above, it appears that longitudinal research into children and young people's experiences of school belonging would be beneficial to better understand how school belonging is experienced over time and what influences it.

### **2.5.5 Phase one conclusion**

This systematic literature review has drawn on the views and experiences of children and young people with SEN to gain an understanding of how they experience school belonging and what they identify as contributing towards their sense of school belonging. The findings highlight that children with SEN need more support in building school belonging than their peers. Multiple factors appear important to building school belonging, however interpersonal relationships was a dominant theme. Overall, there appear to be differences in how children and young people with different presentations of SEN experience school belonging and correspondingly there are also differences in what children and young people feel supports and hinders their school belonging.

## Chapter 3: Phase Two Empirical Study

### 3.1 Introduction and linking section

#### 3.1.1 Definitions and terminology

##### ***School belonging***

As previously explored within chapter two, there are a number of definitions of school belonging with some research also arguing that school belonging is social construct and means different things to different people (Nichols, 2008; Shaw, 2019). Overall, it is clear that school belonging is a complex construct.

Reflecting the view that belonging has multiple dimensions I have combined definitions of school belonging from Goodenow and Grady (1993), Hagarty et al. (1992) and Greenwood and Kelly (2019) into the following definition which I subscribe to. School belonging is:

- The extent to which a student feels connected to, valued, respected, included, and accepted by others within their school social environment.
- The extent to which a student perceives that they fit in at school and believe that they are an important part of their school.

##### ***SEMH needs***

Similar to the challenges defining school belonging, there is suggested to be a lack of consensus around definitions of the term 'SEMH' (Frederickson & Cline, 2009; Taylor-Brown, 2012). The area has been described as being transient and fluid (O'Connor et al., 2011). Previously described as Social, Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties (SEBD) the shift in terminology to SEMH was a significant development within the SEND reform Code of Practice (DfE, 2015c). This change reflected a move away from viewing needs as behavioural with more emphasis on the emotional

and mental health aspects with the aim of encouraging schools to establish the underlying reason for the difficulties (Martin-Denham, 2021). Following the implementation of the SEN Code of Practice (DfE, 2015c), the term SEMH is widely used within educational contexts having replaced terminology such as SEBD. The introduction of mental health terminology has drawn attention to the underlying emotional and mental health difficulties which impact upon children and young people's education and life experiences (Grant, 2020).

According to the SEND Code of Practice (DfE, 2015c), SEMH difficulties are defined as follows:

*“Children and young people may experience a wide range of social and emotional difficulties which manifest themselves in many ways. These may include becoming withdrawn or isolated, as well as displaying challenging, disruptive or disturbing behaviour. These behaviours may reflect underlying mental health difficulties such as anxiety or depression, self-harming, substance misuse, eating disorders or physical symptoms that are medically unexplained. Other children and young people may have disorders such as attention deficit disorder, attention deficit hyperactive disorder or attachment disorder”.* (DfE, 2015c, p.12).

Considering the limitations of this definition, Martin-Denham (2021) highlights that when describing 'good mental health' the World Health Organisation (WHO, 2014) use terminology such as wellbeing, potential and contribution. In contrast, Martin-Denham (2021) observe that the DfE definition includes observable indicators such as feeling isolated or self-harm but omit other indicators which suggest ill mental health and do not refer to identifying the absence of key protective factors within mental health (Harris et al., 2019). Despite this limitation, the Code of Practice (DfE,



2015c) description suggests that SEMH needs are varied and encompass a wide range of factors, it is viewed by many as being an umbrella term (Grant, 2020). Due to its prevalence in the UK education system, the above definition of SEMH outline by the DfE is one which I will adopt throughout the current study. As the above definition highlights, I will also view SEMH needs as presenting in wide and varied ways.

### **3.1.2 Reflection on phase one**

The systematic literature review in phase one highlighted that children with SEN appear to need more support in building school belonging than their peers. The review further suggested that multiple factors appear important to building school belonging, with interpersonal relationships emerging as an important factor (Midgen et al., 2019; Nind et al., 2012; Smedley, 2011). The review also emphasised the role that adults can play in developing school belonging for children with SEN (Cockerill, 2018; Nind et al., 2012). Furthermore, differences were highlighted in how children and young people with different presentations of SEN experience school belonging. The review found that children with needs that could be described as SEMH as amongst the most vulnerable to not experiencing a sense of school belonging (Cockerill, 2018; Dimitrellou and Hurry, 2019; Hebron, 2018; Midgen et al., 2019; Svavarsdottir, 2008). This suggests that attention is warranted to explore how to promote these children and young people's connections and relationships at school to help develop their sense of school belonging.

### **3.1.3 School staff and promoting school belonging**

As the definition of school belonging earlier in this chapter suggests, school staff can play an important role to a sense of school belonging. It has been proposed that

whilst there are a range of factors which predict school belonging perceived support from teachers plays an important role in addition to social and emotional competencies (Allen et al., 2016b; Roffey et al., 2019). Dimitrellou and Hurry (2018) found that sense of school belonging for children with SEN was associated with perceived positive relationships with teachers and how inclusive they were viewed to be. This perception of teacher relationships was more important for children with SEN than their peers. The school environment is an important area where positive relationships with adults can be developed (Catalano et al., 2004). Children have been found to search for emotional support, trust and feelings of belonging from the adults around them (McMurray et al., 2010) and as consistent adults in the classroom teachers and TAs are well placed to impact school belonging.

#### **3.1.4 School belonging and children with SEMH needs**

International data suggests that one in four students do not feel a sense of belonging at school (OECD, 2017). As phase one highlights, research has consistently suggested that children with SEMH needs are amongst the most likely to not experience belonging at school (Midgen et al., 2019; Dimitrellou & Hurry, 2018; Cosma & Soni, 2019; McCoy & Banks, 2012). It was also found that lower belonging for children with SEMH needs was reported in mainstream settings than in specialist and alternative provisions (Cosma & Soni, 2019; Cockerill, 2013). Adding to this, Jalali and Morgan (2018) interviewed children and young people with SEMH needs who reported experiencing a sense of belonging when attending an alternative provision that they did not feel in their previous mainstream schools. Some participants also described feeling that their behaviour was a consequence of being disliked by their peers, feeling unsupported by teachers or unfairly blamed, all of which contributed to their sense of disconnection and lack of school belonging (Jalali

& Morgan, 2018). Phase one explored what children and young people with SEN, including those with SEMH needs, feel supports and hinders their sense of belonging at school. Key themes from research including children and young people with SEMH needs included friendships, relationships with adults at school, feeling safe, feeling supported and listened to and accessing extra-curricular activities (Dimitrellou & Hurry, 2019; Lapinski, 2018; Midgen et al., 2019; Nind et al., 2012).

There is limited literature exploring the views of teaching staff on how they support school belonging specifically for children with SEMH needs. Chapman et al. (2014) found school staff viewed prioritising nurturing, positive and trusting relationships helped students feel that they belonged at school. Similarly, Anderson et al. (2006) found teachers felt developing peer support was needed for young people's connection to school. Meanwhile, research has also highlighted that teaching staff also view school ethos as an important aspect of building school belonging for all students (Dimitrellou, 2017; Greenwood & Kelly, 2019). In an area not as emphasised by the child views within phase one, Bower et al. (2015) found that teachers viewed creating a partnership and engaging parents as helping to promote student's school belonging. Furthermore, Biag (2016) found that teaching staff also viewed children being able to participate in learning as important to school belonging.

### **3.1.5 Increased focus on supporting SEMH needs**

In recent years, there has been increasing interest in promoting positive mental health and wellbeing considering its implications for health and functioning at an individual and societal level (Stewart-Brown & Shrader-McMillan, 2011). Potentially related to the increased awareness and acceptance of mental health difficulties in recent years, the scale of the unmet needs for children and young people is argued

to be becoming clearer (Baker et al., 2017). Demonstrating this focus, a recent research report from the DfE (2020) commented “*the wellbeing of children and young people is central to government policy and is central to achieving the aims of the Department for Education*”. Despite this, the report also noted that the wellbeing of children in England and the UK remains relatively low compared with other countries and with decreasing trends over time (The Children’s Society, 2020, Sizmur et al., 2019, UNICEF, 2020).

There are reported to be growing numbers of children with SEMH needs (DfE, 2017). The National Health Service (NHS, 2020) recently reported that one in ten children experience mental illness whilst MIND (MIND, 2020) notes that at least one in four people would experience mental health difficulties each year in the UK. Furthermore, a study considering school census data in one region of England from 2014 to 2019 suggested that SEMH needs had increased over the five years (Martin-Denham & Donaghue, 2020). Whilst this particular study looked at regional data, a UK wide survey by the NHS identified that one in eight children reported experiencing an identified mental health need (Sadler et al., 2017) and the number of children struggling with mental health appears to be on the rise (The Key, 2015). Highlighting the recent governmental focus on supporting mental health for children and young people in response to concerns around the prevalence of mental health, the Green Paper (2017) outlined national measures to support mental health needs in schools. Martin-Denham (2021) notes that in the UK there is growing concern regarding the increasing prevalence of SEMH needs experienced by children and young people. The prevalence of SEMH in the UK suggests that it is a significant area in need of further research.

Highlighting the vulnerabilities for this group of children and young people, recent findings from the DfE (2018) report that fifty percent of children and young people excluded from school have a SEMH need. The higher permanent school exclusion rates for pupils with SEMH needs is proposed to reflect the challenges faced by schools in identifying and meeting these needs (DfE, 2019). Furthermore, research suggests that school staff often feel ill-resourced and not sufficiently trained to effectively support children with SEN, in particular those with SEMH needs (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; Burton & Goodman, 2010). Research has emphasised that primary school teachers often lack confidence in understanding and supporting mental health difficulties (Gowers et al., 2004). Whilst this research is arguably in a different context to today, it demonstrates the long-term nature of this issue and is supported by more recent research. For example, Bostock et al. (2011) reported that teachers had a lack of confidence in detecting mental health problems, whilst Shelemy et al. (2019) reported that teachers wanted more advice on supporting mental health in schools. This research gives weight to the proposal that increased support is needed for school staff supporting children with SEMH needs. Dimitrellou and Hurry (2018) highlight that literature considering the schooling experiences of children with SEN often find that they report negative experiences in mainstream settings (Bouchard & Berg, 2017). Dimitrellou and Hurry (2018) continue that this is particularly the case for children and young people with SEMH difficulties. This suggests that research considering how best to support children and young people with SEMH attending mainstream settings is warranted.

Previous research has to an extent explored teaching staff's experiences of supporting children with SEMH needs. As it is a relatively recent term, there is limited research looking at teaching staff's views on SEMH (Kennedy, 2015). As discussed

earlier in this chapter, research on BESD is likely to be similar but not fully relevant due to the increased focus on mental health. Some research has suggested that supporting SEMH is difficult for teaching staff. For example, Burton and Goodman (2011) found TAs described their role supporting SEMH as stressful and challenging, whilst Angel (2019) suggested secondary school TA's find the work difficult emotionally and experience feelings of worry about the children they support. Similarly, Cole (2010) found that teachers also report that supporting SEMH is challenging both emotionally and physically. Contrastingly, Conboy (2020) found that TAs supporting SEMH on an individual child basis found the experience both hard and enjoyable. Research has also suggested teaching staff feel they need of more support for SEMH (Abbott et al., 2011). The above studies include a range of educational professionals, however Angel (2019) highlights that there appears to be limited research exploring the experiences of TAs in their support of children and young people with SEMH needs in mainstream settings. Angel continues that little is known about TA's views of supporting mental health, despite its emphasis in recent governmental legislation (DfE, 2017).

### **3.1.6 Rationale for the current research**

Schools are widely recognised to have the potential to be 'game changers' in the lives of vulnerable children (Samel et al., 2011), and enhancing a sense of belonging at school of pupils with SEMH difficulties is suggested be important in improving their outcomes (McCoy and Banks, 2012). The phase one finding that children with SEMH needs are among the least likely to experience a sense of belonging suggests that that attention on supporting belonging within this group of children is warranted (Midgen et al., 2019). Relatedly the growing prevalence of children facing difficulties within SEMH (DfE, 2017; Sadler et al., 2017) further emphasises that research in this

area is necessary. There is also less research exploring school belonging for pupils with SEN such as SEMH than their peers (Dimitrellou & Hurry, 2018) and it has been highlighted that further research into school belonging, especially from EPs, has long been called for (Midgen et al., 2019; Smedley, 2011). There is a clear need to understand how to help build school belonging for children with SEMH needs and to also further understand why this group of children are vulnerable to not feeling that they belong at school. The present research aims to fill this gap in the literature.

As discussed above, school staff can play an important role in building a sense of school belonging. Prior research into school belonging has suggested a need to focus on helping staff to understand how to promote children's connections and relationships with the adults and peers around them in order to increase their sense of school belonging (Midgen et al., 2019). There is a gap in the research to explore how to support school belonging for children with SEMH needs in a mainstream educational setting. There is also limited research capturing the lived experiences of classroom teaching staff on supporting children with SEMH and their views on developing belonging. In particular, the voices of TAs has been emphasised as being excluded from research (Clarke, 2019; Wilson & Bedford, 2008). There appears to be limited research gathering views on school belonging of the adults that work with children with SEMH needs and I feel it would be beneficial to explore their experiences to help develop an understanding of what supports the development of these children's school belonging. Relatedly, literature suggests that school staff often experience difficulty in supporting children with SEMH (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; Burton & Goodman, 2010) and highlights that further research into teaching staff's experiences supporting SEMH needs would be helpful. Whilst this area has been researched to an extent (Burton & Goodman, 2010; Conboy, 2020), the

present research aims to explore both teachers and TAs viewpoints and consider if there are differences in their experiences. The present research aims to address gaps in the literature relating to the lack of research seeking the views of the adults who support children with SEMH needs in order to better understand what would support school belonging in mainstream schools.

### **3.2 Research Aims and Questions**

*Aims:*

- To explore mainstream primary school teaching staff's perceptions about supporting children with SEMH needs in the classroom
- To explore classroom teaching staff's perspectives on supporting school belonging in children with SEMH needs

Having established the aims of the current study, I then shaped these aims into specific research questions (Thomas, 2017).

*Research Questions:*

1. How do mainstream primary school teaching staff describe their experiences of supporting children with SEMH needs in the classroom?
2. What do mainstream primary school teaching staff understand by the term 'school belonging'?
3. What do mainstream primary school teaching staff think contributes to children's experiences of school belonging?
4. For children with SEMH needs, what do mainstream primary school teaching staff think supports school belonging and what do they think acts as a barrier

Within the above research questions and aims, teaching staff refers to both classroom teachers and TAs.



### **3.3 Methodological Orientation and positionality**

The problem I am researching is exploratory and descriptive, and this is reflected within my choice of research questions and design. Before discussing the methods used in the current research, I must first explain the paradigm, or approach to knowledge, that I have chosen. A paradigm is a fixed set of assumptions about the way inquiry should be conducted (Thomas, 2017; Ghiara, 2019) and an individual's paradigm is therefore inextricably linked with the research they do (Ghiara, 2019). Epistemology is the branch of philosophy concerned with whether knowledge is possible, and if so how it can be gained and what its limits are (Hammersley, 2012). Epistemology is concerned with how truth can be discovered through research (Schwandt, 2015). Meanwhile, ontology is defined by Thomas (2009) as the study of reality and existence, considering what is real and true. Hammersley (2012) states that ontology refers to enquiry into, or assumptions or theories about, the nature of what exists, including whether anything can be said to exist at all. Having previously conducted smaller scale research projects alongside colleagues, I have begun to establish both my ontological and epistemological standpoints on research.

As a researcher I am working within the paradigm of interpretivism. Hammersley (2012) outlines that a common starting point for interpretivism is an insistence that there is a fundamental difference between the nature of the phenomena investigated by the natural sciences and those studied by historians, social scientists, and educational researchers. Hammersley (2012) explains that people, unlike atoms and chemicals, interpret or give meaning and value to their environment and themselves and are shaped by the particular cultures in which they live. Therefore, different forms of social organisation, ways of life, beliefs about and attitudes toward the world, can be found coexisting at the same time (Hammersley, 2012). Interpretivism

proposes that that knowledge is everywhere and is socially constructed (Thomas, 2017) and considers that the social world can only be understood from the point of view of the individuals who are part of the ongoing action being investigated (Cohen et al., 2007). The position argues that we cannot understand why people do what they do without grasping how those involved interpret and make sense of their world (Hammersley, 2012). Cohen et al. (2007) outlines that interpretivist researchers begin with individuals and set out to understand their interpretation of the world around them, theory is therefore emergent from particular situations.

Constructivism and interpretivism are related concepts that address understanding the world as others experience it (Kawulich, 2012). Social constructivism states that knowledge is created and sustained by social processes and that knowledge and social actions intertwine (Young & Collin, 2004). It continues that through the process of these interactions, environmental stimuli are processed by individuals to create their own meanings (Burns, 2000). I believe that the social world is not straightforwardly perceivable because it is constructed by each of us in a different way as a consequence of our perception of the world and our interactions with those around us (Thomas, 2017). This paradigm emphasises the need for openness from the researcher alongside a willingness to learn the culture of the people being studied. As a result of this, normally, interpretivists adopt or recommend qualitative methods (Mustafa, 2011). I appreciate that the act of trying to know should be conducted such that the knower's own value position is taken into account in the process. Within my research process I will therefore recognise my positionality and consider how this may be affecting my interpretation.

I am also aware of the criticisms made of interpretivism. Hammersley (2012) states that the sort of description encouraged by interpretivism is too vague or variable to

give a sound basis for comparison and also implies the standpoint of the spectator rather than genuine engagement with the people being studied. Furthermore, Scott and Morrison (2006) argue that the interpretivist paradigm does not take into account the multi-perspectival nature of descriptions of social reality. In addition, Mustafa (2011) suggests that the paradigm has an inability to yield generalisations that are applicable to a wider spectrum of contexts and situations. Perhaps most importantly, Silverman (2001) adds that information is not uncovered but created by the researcher. Despite these criticisms, my epistemological position is that individuals are experts in their own lives, with knowledge being co-constructed following interactions and therefore best fits with the interpretivist paradigm. I feel that taking an interpretive stance reflects my goal to successfully gather teaching staff's voices and work in a collaborative way. A sense of school belonging is suggested to be an individual experience for both the student and the school (Roffey et al., 2019), and I therefore feel that interpretive methods are appropriate and useful. It has been proposed that "knowledge" is co-created through interaction and language, and that the importance of collaboration between participant and researcher should not be overlooked in order to understand the participant's experiences (Clandinin, 2013). Within my research I hope to focus on listening to and interpreting the lived experience of my participants.

I am a woman in my mid-twenties from the Southeast of England. Prior to beginning my doctorate in educational psychology, I worked within CAMHs as a health care assistant and had experience of supporting children and young people who had experienced significant mental health difficulties and were spending time in an adolescent mental health unit. When exploring these young people's experiences of school, I noticed that they were overwhelmingly negative, describing a range of

difficulties and a high sense of disconnection. I also noticed that during this difficult period of their lives young people often appeared to lack a sense of belonging at home or at their schools. Similarly, in my role as a TEP I reflected on the importance of children and young people feeling safe at school and building secure relationships. Within my first year of training in particular, I also reflected on the prevalence of children experiencing social and emotional difficulties which impacted significantly on their lives. These experiences have contributed to my interest in this topic as well as my approach within the research. Throughout the study I was aware of the need for me to be as reflexive as possible, as advocated by Ahern (1999). Whilst carrying out this research I therefore did my best to be conscious of the possibility of my beliefs and experiences influencing the findings. In particular, I tried to make questions as open as possible and to refrain from leading participants' responses. During analysis of the data, I remained open to the emergence of unexpected themes so as not to pre-empt the findings.

### **3.4 Research Design**

The interpretivist position informs a qualitative approach to research, and it was important to choose the methods which I thought would best answer my research questions (Briggs, 2019). The selected design frame of the study was cross-sectional (Thomas, 2017) and semi-structured interviews were employed to obtain the views and experiences of classroom teachers and TAs. Based on the prior knowledge of the researcher, the questions are often pre-structured, although the researcher may then choose to use encouraging kinds of questions to give the participant permission to speak freely of their experience with minimal direction from the researcher (Percy et al., 2015). Semi-structured interviews in phase two were

analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2013) in order to gain a rich and detailed account of the data.

### **3.5 Phase two method**

#### **3.5.1 Participants**

Participants were selected purposively using the following inclusion criteria:

- Participants will be working within a classroom which has at least one child who has been identified as having a primary need of SEMH and in need of extra support through either the SEN register or an EHCP. This child will not be identified during the research.
- Participants will be working as either a classroom teacher or TA within a mainstream primary school.
- Participants will volunteer to take part in the project and give informed consent prior to participation.

The inclusion criteria relating to participants working in a classroom with a child with SEMH needs was chosen because research suggests that children with needs that could be described as SEMH as amongst the most vulnerable to not experiencing a sense of school belonging (Cockerill, 2018; Hebron, 2018; Midgen et al., 2019; Svavarsdottir, 2008). There are also reported to be growing numbers of children with SEMH needs (DfE, 2017). This suggests that it is important to explore how to promote these children and young people's connections and relationships at school to help develop their sense of school belonging.

The inclusion criteria of participants working as either a classroom teacher or TA reflects the important impact that school staff can have on children's sense of school belonging (Craggs & Kelly, 2017; McMurray et al., 2010). As consistent adults in the

classroom both classroom teachers and TAs are well placed to impact school belonging and therefore were chosen to be included within this research project. The primary school age group was chosen because there appears to be less research into school belonging for children with SEN for this age group than for secondary aged young people (Cullinane, 2020; Myles et al., 2019; Nind et al., 2012; Ware, 2020). The inclusion criteria of working in mainstream school reflects research which suggests that children with SEMH needs attending mainstream settings are more in need of support regarding school belonging than those in specialist settings (Cosma & Soni, 2019; Cockerill, 2013).

The sample was selected through the use of my existing working relationships with contacts alongside the use of social media and a recruitment poster (see appendix I). The sample therefore included four participants I had previously worked with as both a TEP and in previous roles and already knew. Between October 2020 and January 2021 information sheets were sent via email to participants who had expressed interest alongside a consent form (see appendix J for the information sheet and appendix K for the consent form). Signed consent forms were returned to me via email.

Fifteen teachers and TAs participated (14 Female, 1 Male) from 13 primary and infant schools. At the time of the research all participants were working with children from across the primary school age range (Age 4-11). Table 4 below shows the role of each participant alongside the year group and key stage (KS) they work with, their time in the role and the geographic area they work in. for TAs, table 4 also shows whether their role involved working on a 1:1 basis with a particular child as opposed to working as a TA for the entire class.

**Table 4***Phase two participant details*

Pseudonym	Role	Age Group Work With	Time in Role	Geographic Area
Eliza	Classroom Teacher	Year 5/KS2	1 year	London
Katie	Classroom Teacher	Reception/KS1	3 years	South East
Martha	Classroom Teacher	Year 2/KS1	30 years	South East
Sean	Classroom Teacher	Year 4/KS2	6 years	South West
Rebecca	Classroom Teacher	Year 2/KS1	20 years	London
Haley	Classroom Teacher	Year 5/KS2	16 years	South East
Taylor	Classroom Teacher	Year 5/KS2	7 years	South West
Amelia	1:1 Teaching Assistant	Reception/KS1	4 years	South East
Lucy	Teaching Assistant	Reception/KS1	2 years	South East
Cassie	Teaching Assistant	Year 2/KS1	8 years	South East
Dawn	1:1 Teaching Assistant	Year 2/KS1	12 years	South East
Ellen	Teaching Assistant	Year 4/KS2	10 years	South East
Niamh	Teaching Assistant	Year 4/KS2	1 year	North West
Maddie	1:1 Teaching Assistant	Year 6/KS2	3 years	Midlands
Laura	1:1 Teaching Assistant	Year 2/KS1	2 years	London

**3.5.2 Rationale for Using Semi-Structured Interviews**

Fylan (2005) describes semi-structured interviews as “conversations in which you know what you want to find out and so you have a set of questions to ask and a

good idea of what topics will be covered but the conversation is free to vary and is likely to change substantially between participants” (p.65). Advantages of using semi-structured interviews include that they are a time efficient way of collecting rich, qualitative data whilst allowing the researcher to feel prepared and perform the interview with competence and still give the interview the opportunity to express their views on their own terms (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006). Smith et al. (2009) highlights that semi-structured interviews allow participants to give rich and deep accounts of their experiences as well as explore topics that arise spontaneously. In addition, Lawthom and Tindall (2011) state that the semi-structured interview can be used to generate first person accounts of individual experiences. This is important in the current research, given that the purpose is to gain insight into the views and experiences of classroom teaching staff whose role involves supporting children with SEMH needs. As previously discussed in the research design section, semi-structured interviews also have the advantage of a high level of flexibility (Horton et al., 2004). One-to-one interviews allow the researcher to build rapport with the participants with the aim of acquiring rich and detailed information (Reid et al., 2005). Given that the interview explored personal experiences of supporting children with opportunities for reflections individual interviews were felt to be most appropriate and supportive for participants to feel comfortable and able to open up about their experiences.

I am also aware that semi-structured interviews have some limitations. Braun and Clarke (2013) highlight that qualitative interviews can be time consuming for researchers to organise, conduct and transcribe. Semi-structured interviews are also suggested to be time consuming for participants as interview times often take at least an hour to complete (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Within this project, this limitation is



mitigated by communicating how long interviews were likely to take on the recruitment poster as well as the reasons why the research is important and allowing participants to then choose whether to take part. Braun and Clarke (2013) further suggest that semi-structured interviews contain a lack of anonymity that methods such as online questionnaires would provide. They argue that this may be off-putting for some participants, in particular those who are considered to be harder to engage (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Within this project, it is emphasised to participants that their interview data and transcripts will be fully anonymised and no record is made of the school that the participants work at. Despite this, I am aware that this lack of anonymity may have influenced the participants included in the project. Furthermore, Silverman (2001) suggests that within qualitative interviews data are not uncovered but created by the researcher. Whilst I acknowledge the restriction raised by Silverman (2001), my epistemological position is one of interpretivism and centres around a belief that as a researcher I need to begin with individuals and set out to understand their interpretation of the world (Cohen et al., 2007). Mustafa (2011) recommends that interpretivists adopt qualitative methods such as semi-structured interviews (Mustafa, 2011). Therefore, despite the limitations of semi-structured interviews, I feel that they are the most suitable method of data collection considering my research aims, questions and epistemological position earlier discussed (section 3.3).

### **3.5.3 Construction of the Semi-Structured Interviews**

Phase two of the research aimed to explore primary school teaching staff perspectives on working with children with SEMH needs and creating school belonging. Semi-structured interviews were used to obtain the individual views and experiences of teaching staff in regard to what 'school belonging' means, how they

can support school belonging with the children they support and what they think within school supports children with SEMH needs' sense of belonging to school. The interviews also explored teaching staff's lived experience of supporting the children with SEMH needs. The interview schedule was developed to provide a tool to help me to support participants to explore their experiences in a structured but flexible conversational manner. The interviews were planned to last for approximately 45 minutes. During the interviews I used skills acquired from my role as a TEP to actively listen, effectively communicate, take an empathetic stance, remain aware of participant's emotional states and give participants an opportunity to process their experiences. Rosetto (2014) also suggests that qualitative research interviews can help participants to make sense of their experiences.

Guidance from Smith et al. (2009) was followed when creating the interview schedule to elicit participants' views. Smith et al. (2009) describe an interview as aiming "largely to facilitate an interaction which permits participants to tell their own stories, in their own words. Thus, for the most part, the participant talks and the interviewer listens." (p. 57). Therefore, my role as a researcher was to encourage the participant to explore their experiences and support them to lead the interview. To encourage this, Smith et al. (2009) propose that interviews start with a question that encourages the participant to recount a descriptive experience. Furthermore, Smith et al. (2009) and Doody and Noonan (2013) state that the researcher should aim to be impartial and questions should not be leading or making assumptions about the participant's experience. Consequently, the interview schedule aimed to use open questions and began by giving the opportunity for participants to share a descriptive experience before exploring more specific questions. To accompany some verbal questions, participants were presented with a visual prompt. This was to prompt

ideas and support discussion around abstract concepts such as belonging. The interviews were virtual using the platform 'Microsoft Teams'. Doody and Noonan (2013) suggest that interviews should take place in a private environment which the participant considers to be safe and the participants' homes are likely to provide this. The interview schedule is included as appendix G whilst a visual used within the interviews is attached as appendix H.

### **3.5.4 Piloting**

To ensure data collection would be as successful as possible a pilot study was conducted. Piloting is important to check the feasibility of the method and adapt the interview schedule to overcome any issues (Robson, 2002). Prior to data collection, the semi-structured interview was piloted with one TEP who had prior experience working as a TA as well as one primary school teacher.

As a result of the pilot study, I was able to modify and improve the schedule used for the semi-structured interviews. Minor amendments were made to the interview schedule following the pilot. This involved changing the wording of three questions to make it clearer and easier to understand with more accessible language:

- Question 6 was changed from "*what do you think impacts upon children's experiences of 'school belonging'?*" to "*thinking generally about all children, what do you think affects their sense of 'school belonging'?*".
- Question 7 was changed from "*how do you think children with SEMH needs experience school belonging?*" to "*what do you think 'school belonging' looks like for children with SEMH needs?*". In addition an alternative question was added if the main question was challenging for participants. The alternative question is "*do you think children with SEMH needs feel that they belong at*

*school?*". Whilst this is not worded as an open question, I felt it was easiest to understand for participants and I would be able to seek further elaboration on their answers through further questions or non-verbal prompts such as "can you tell me more about that".

- Question 8 was changed from "*what do you think impacts upon children with SEMH needs' experiences of school belonging?*" to "*thinking about children with SEMH needs, what do you think affects their sense of school belonging?*".

The order of two questions were also changed to improve clarity and support the flow of the interview. Questions six and seven were swapped to the following order:

- Question six: "*Thinking generally about all children, what do you think affects their sense of 'school belonging'?*".
- Question seven: "*What do you think 'school belonging' looks like for children with SEMH needs?*".

### **3.5.5 Procedure**

To inform participants of the purpose of the research I created information sheets.

These included the following information:

- Background and rationale for the study
- An overview of the study procedures including participants and methodology
- Information about ethical approval
- Information about how to express interest in participating
- My contact details and an invitation to ask me any questions

All participants were interviewed virtually using the platform 'Microsoft Teams'. Prior to meeting the participants virtually, I emailed them agreeing the date and time we

would be meeting and giving guidance on using Microsoft Teams. The email also gave a reminder of the purpose of the research and details of what the interview was likely to involve including the topics covered in the interview and how long the interview was likely to last. I interviewed participants on one occasion with interviews lasting between 30 and 90 minutes. The difference in interview times appeared to relate to how much experience participants had alongside the extent of their views on the topic, with some sharing more detailed examples than others. I also feel that the difference may relate to participants' personality and confidence in sharing their views. At the start of each interview, I reintroduced myself, my role as a researcher and the broad aims of the research. I asked for permission to audio record the interview to ensure that I captured all the information. I also informed them that they could request for the recording to stop at any point and reassured them that once the interviews were transcribed the audio recordings would be permanently deleted. I reminded participants of their right to withdrawal and also explained that all data would be kept anonymous. All participants signed a consent form confirming that they had understood and agreed to the procedure. Prior to the interview starting, participants were also given the opportunity to ask any questions.

All interviews were recorded using a Dictaphone and transcribed using Microsoft Word. I transcribed 10 of the interviews and the remaining five were transcribed using the support of a professional transcription service. For these five interviews additional participant consent and ethical approval was sought prior to using the transcription service.

### **3.5.6 Rationale for Using Thematic Analysis**

Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2013) was considered an appropriate methodological approach within this research for a number of reasons. This form of

analysis was chosen as it is theoretically flexible and can be used to examine the way in which people construct and understand experiences, events and meaning whilst not being tied to any particular theoretical assumptions (Braun & Clarke 2006; Clarke & Braun, 2013). It also provides a detailed account of the data which allows the researcher to capture the individual experiences of the participants and the identification of common themes across their experiences. In addition, the ability to easily apply thematic analysis to real life, complex and 'messy' situations made it useful when considering that the research questions in the study explore complex and abstract research concepts (mental health and belonging). At the early stages of my research, I also considered the use of Interpretive Phenological Analysis (IPA) as I felt it may be a good fit with my epistemological position given that IPA is concerned with how people make sense of their lived experiences and is interpretative (Braun & Clarke, 2013). However, I ultimately decided against using this method. Despite the many strengths of IPA such as it allowing a focus on individual experience and including clear and precise procedures (Braun & Clarke, 2013), I chose not to use IPA because of some identified limitations. Parker (2005) states that IPA is viewed as lacking substance and sophistication due to its small sample sizes, whilst Braun and Clarke (2013) suggest that the focus on individual cases and themes mean that it can lack the depth and richness of thematic analysis and is at risk of simply describing participant's experiences. Furthermore, I considered that IPA lacks the theoretical flexibility of thematic analysis as it can only be used to answer research questions about experiences and understand perceptions (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Overall, I felt that thematic analysis was a better fit for my project.

The systematic nature of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2013) also adds the rigour and structure necessary to help develop trustworthy and authentic research, with the method of analysis involving a rigorous process of data familiarisation, data coding and theme development and revision (Braun & Clarke, 2006). To support this, I also adhered to the 15-point checklist of criteria for good thematic analysis outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). Table 5 outlines how I met each of the criteria.

**Table 5**

*Thematic analysis checklist applied to the present research.*

Criteria	How the project meets the criteria
1) The data have been transcribed with an appropriate level of detail, and the transcripts have been checked against the tapes for 'accuracy'.	Data was efficiently and carefully transcribed before being checked against the interview recording.
2) Each data item has been given equal attention in the coding process.	Each transcript was read multiple times and coded carefully prior to analysis. Throughout analysis it was considered whether any transcripts were being used more than others.
3) Themes have not been generated from a few vivid examples (an anecdotal approach), but instead the coding process has been thorough, inclusive and comprehensive.	Through the use of N-Vivo, coding was thorough and considered with time spent ensuring that there were many examples of each theme within multiple transcripts.
4) All relevant extracts for each theme have been collated.	Relevant extracts for each theme were collated through N-Vivo.

5) Themes have been checked against each other and against the original data set.	Themes were checked against each other in addition to the original transcripts.
6) Themes are internally coherent, consistent, and distinctive.	Themes were checked to ensure they were coherent and contained a distinctive concept. The key concept is outlined at the start of each theme within the findings section.
7) Data have been analysed – interpreted, made sense of - rather than just paraphrased or described.	Data was analysed, interpreted and drawn together into themes.
8) Analysis and data match each other – the extracts illustrate the analytical claims.	Within the findings section the included extracts demonstrate the analytical claims.
9) Analysis tells a convincing and well-organised story about the data and topic.	The themes are well organised for each research question and tell the story of the data.
10) A good balance between analytical narrative and illustrative extracts is provided.	There is a careful balance between the analytical narrative and illustrative interview extracts.
11) Enough time has been allocated to complete all phases of the analysis adequately, without rushing a phase or giving it a once-over-lightly.	Time was taken to complete each phase of analysis in appropriate detail. For example, additional time was taken to accurately transcribe all interview data.
12) The assumptions about, and specific approach to, thematic analysis are clearly explicated.	The method section included information about my understanding of thematic analysis, how the analysis was carried out and my assumptions relating to the approach.



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13) There is a good fit between what you claim you do, and what you show you have done – i.e., described method and reported analysis are consistent.	The analysis described within my method section is consistent with the findings section.
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14) The language and concepts used in the report are consistent with the epistemological position of the analysis.	Language and concepts are consistent with the epistemological position.
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15) The researcher is positioned as <i>active</i> in the research process; themes do not just ‘emerge’.	I actively played a role within the research process including analysis and am aware that themes did not emerge. My positionality within the research is discussed.
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Despite the strengths of the approach, I am also aware that there are a number of identified potential pitfalls within thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and I was mindful to try and avoid these. For example, Braun and Clarke (2006) state that there is a risk that the researcher fails to actually analyse the data and instead lists extracts with little analytic narrative. I was therefore mindful to ensure that I was using extracts as a way to illustrate and support my analysis alongside an analytic narrative. Braun and Clarke (2006) further highlight the limitation of identifying themes that overlap or are not internally coherent and consistent. I was therefore careful to review my themes carefully and provide clear descriptors of each theme. It could also be argued that the flexibility of thematic analysis acts as a disadvantage in that a wide range of conclusions could be drawn from the data and it could be difficult for the researcher to decide which aspects of the data to focus on (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The research questions in the present research were consequently open enough to allow for themes to be identified inductively, whilst giving a general, overarching focus. There is also a risk of the researcher’s beliefs and values

influencing the interpretation of the data and it was important to avoid making presumptions about what themes would emerge. Overall, thematic analysis was viewed as being appropriate for my research questions and as a way to give a rich description of the participants' views.

### 3.5.7 Thematic Analysis

Semi-structured interviews in phase two were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) in order to gain a rich and detailed account of the data.

The thematic analysis followed a series of six stages, these are outlined below in table 6.

**Table 6**

*Stages of thematic analysis*

Stage	Description
1)	Transcription and repeated reading of transcripts to increase familiarity
2)	Generating initial codes and mapping out initial themes
3)	Repeated examination of the data to ascertain emerging themes
4)	Review and refinement of themes
5)	Finalising and naming themes
6)	Reporting the findings

I personally transcribed the recorded data from 10 of the 15 interviews using Microsoft Word. This gave me the opportunity to immerse myself in the data, and notice subtleties in the way the interviewees responded which added to the richness of the data. The remaining 5 interviews were transcribed by a professional transcribing service. Following this I carefully read all interviews which had been professionally transcribed in order to immerse myself in the data as far as possible. I

then read the transcripts a number of times to further familiarise myself with the data. At this stage, I highlighted sections of the text and made hand-written notes based on my thoughts and interpretations on each individual transcript. An example annotated transcript is included as Appendix L. I re-read each transcript at least twice, each time adding notes and making links within the data. This process of immersion in the data and re-reading on multiple occasions builds the 'trustworthiness' of my interpretation of the data. In making my initial notes, I was careful to be aware of my positionality in relation to the data collected. I recognised that my first initial notes may have reflected a noticing of topics and subjects that I might have expected as a researcher or that are important to me.

Once I had finished physically annotating each transcript, I then imported each digital transcript file into computer software NVivo 12. I analysed each group of interviews separately in NVivo. These groups were: Classroom Teachers and TAs. Analysing groups separately allowed me to observe if there were differences between the two groups. I repeated the coding process for each individual transcript by working through each transcript and coding various sections. A complete coding approach was used, whereby all data collected was coded (Braun & Clarke, 2013). These codes were predominantly data derived codes, with the codes reflecting a summary of what was explicitly said. There were also some researcher-derived codes that reflect more implicit ideas and sought to understand the assumptions and frameworks that underpin what was explicitly said (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Samples of transcripts with coding are included as appendix M (teacher) and appendix N (TA). The process was ever evolving and with each transcript I coded I would have cause to reflect and revisit previous transcripts and codes. These codes reflect my own interpretation of the data, based on patterns and links that I have drawn from the

transcript data. Coming from an interpretivist researcher standpoint, I was mindful of my influence on the data throughout analysis and therefore used a systematic approach to coding the data, using the text from the transcripts as a starting point for formal analysis, utilising a bottom-up, rather than top-down process, so as to reduce confirmation bias.

To transition from codes to themes, I noted each code onto post-it notes. Each group had a different coloured set of post it notes. I then worked through the codes, sorting them into similar categories and condensing codes where required. Pictures of this process are attached as Appendix O. At times, I noticed that text from one code list fitted better with another, and I would go back to NVivo and change this. For example, the following quote from a teacher transcript ("*like coming away from that meeting, it made you feel really sad and almost like really responsible as well*") was initially coded as 'difficult or challenging experience' before being moved to 'emotional'. I then combined all of the categories from the two groups to search for common themes. A table is also included in the appendices showing all codes alongside the final themes (appendix P). Sometimes codes were omitted as I felt that they were not relevant to the research questions. This is demonstrated in Appendix P. I was careful to remain observant of how many different participants' coded transcripts were within each section as I wanted to ensure that the comments did not reflect only one person's perspective. I created concept maps for individual themes and subthemes, to help visualise the key points for each set of interviews. These are included in Appendix Q. Using post-it notes allowed me to begin to create visual maps to reflect groupings in relation to the data and the research questions. I feel this approach to analyse allowed me flexibility as I was able to adapt and rearrange themes as I became more familiar with the data. Through this process, I was able to

group codes into themes and sub-themes and give themes initial names (Appendix P). The process of identifying codes, then categories and finally themes allowed these themes and categories to be fluid throughout the process of analysis. Once defined and named, I checked my codes, categories and themes.

### **3.7 Phase two findings and discussion**

The following section outlines the results found from the second phase of the current research. As described in the analysis section of this chapter (3.5.7), thematic analysis was used during this phase of the research. Within this section, findings are also discussed in relation to relevant literature. Both consistency and differences from relevant literature are considered.

Thematic analysis generated key themes corresponding to the research questions for phase two of the study. For each research question, a summary of the relating themes and sub-themes is presented, followed by relevant quotes taken from the interview transcripts.

#### *Research Questions:*

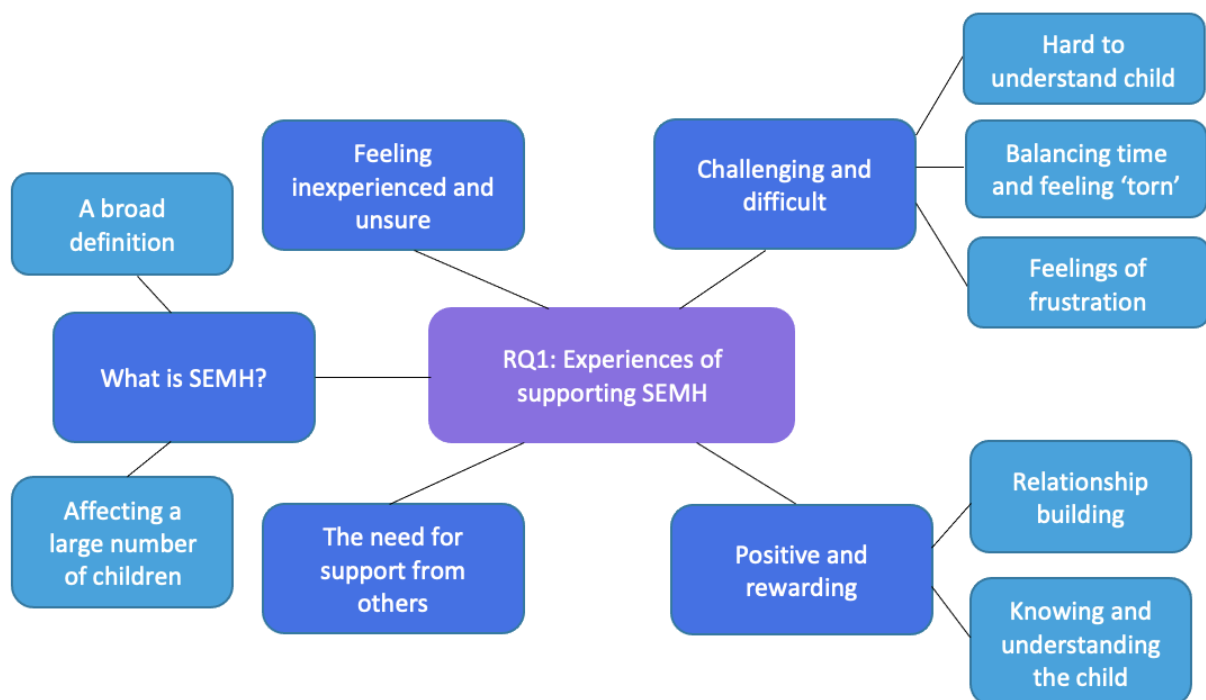
1. What are mainstream primary school teaching staff's experiences and perceptions about supporting children with SEMH needs in the classroom?
2. What do mainstream primary school teaching staff understand by the term 'school belonging'?
3. For children with SEMH needs, what do mainstream primary school teaching staff think supports school belonging?
4. For children with SEMH needs, what do mainstream primary school teaching staff think acts as a barrier to school belonging?

**3.7.1 Research Question 1: How do mainstream primary school teaching staff describe their experiences of supporting children with SEMH needs in the classroom?**

The below concept map (figure 2) shows the themes and sub-themes for research question 1 for both teachers and TAs. The research question is in purple, themes are in dark blue and sub-themes are in light blue. Table 7 also lists the themes and sub-themes for research question 1.

**Figure 2**

*Concept map for phase two research question 1 (Teachers/TAs)*



**Table 7**

*Final themes and sub-themes for phase two research question one (Teachers/TAs)*

Themes	Sub-themes
Challenging and difficult	Balancing time and feeling 'torn'
	Hard to understand child

	Feelings of frustration
An emotive experience	
Positive and rewarding	Relationship building
	Knowing and understanding the child
Feeling inexperienced and unsure	
The need for support from others	
What is SEMH?	A broad definition
	Affecting a large number of children

### **Challenging and difficult**

The theme 'challenging and difficult' refers to participants describing their experiences of working with children with SEMH needs as being hard for them.

Within this, the theme also includes participants discussing not having enough time to support children with SEMH in the classroom, difficulties understanding the child and feeling frustrated; these all contributed towards the experience being negative and difficult.

Participants describing their experiences of supporting children with SEMH needs as being challenging or difficult was a recurring theme. Participants described supporting social and emotional needs as being stressful for them. For example, Katie (Teacher) commented "*it was quite overwhelming at times and quite stressful*". When reflecting on experiences supporting a child who becomes distressed in class, Sean (Teacher) concluded "*it can be draining*" whilst Dawn (TA) stated that "*its wearing*". This theme is corroborated by existing research such as Burton and Goodman (2011) who found that TAs described their experiences supporting SEMH as intense, stressful and impacting upon their own wellbeing.

When exploring why they found supporting children with SEMH needs to be challenging and difficult, participants in the current study described the challenge of trying to help a child with social and emotional needs whilst also supporting the rest of the class. Katie (Teacher) noted that for one child with SEMH needs, *“he kind of took up so much of my time and lots of other children in the class had other needs as well”*. Relatedly, Haley (Teacher) added *“there are other children in the school that probably then you didn’t give support to because these children took so much time”*. This captures the experience of finding it hard to have the time and space to support social and emotional needs alongside teaching responsibilities. This appeared to impact upon classroom teachers more than TAs. For example, Sean (Teacher) commented on the stress of supporting mental health needs but also feeling pressure to *“keep grades up”*. Whilst this sub-theme was more prominent for teachers, a few TAs also spoke of feeling a lack of time to support. For example, Ellen (TA) shared *“it’s really hard because you feel like you’re torn constantly, of not wanting to let any one of them down but there’s only one of me”*. Prior literature has also highlighted the difficulty for teachers of having time to support SEMH. For example, Finney (2006, p24) described this as a “problem of capacity” and found that teachers already see themselves as so stretched in the academic aspect of their role that supporting mental health is viewed as being difficult to prioritise. Similarly, Kidger et al. (2009) described the conflict between competing agendas of supporting academics and supporting wellbeing, whilst Burton and Goodman (2011) reported that class size and pressure to meet academic targets made the extent to which classroom teachers can include vulnerable children with social and emotional needs challenging. Whilst this view is partially reflected by TAs such as Ellen’s comments,



in line with existing literature it is more salient for the teachers participating in the current research.

Also contributing to experiences feeling challenging, was a perception that it is hard to understand why the child acted in the way that they did and that did not make sense to participants. For example, Martha (Teacher) commented:

**Martha (Teacher):** *“I think in retrospect, with knowledge of attachment, I can see now what he was doing. But at the time, it was just very difficult because it felt like every time someone tried to do something to help him, he just pushed them away.”*

Participants also highlighted the positive impact that increased knowledge in this area had on them and consequently the children they work with. For example, Sean (Teacher) emphasised the importance of understanding what is behind the behaviour presented by some children with SEMH needs commenting *“I don’t want to say its draining and frustrating because it’s important to understand that here’s a reason behind it”*.

Participants also spoke of feelings of frustration. Maddie (TA) described her experiences as frustrating and further explored that impact it has on her, stating *“it can be quite frustrating, it can be quite demanding on me, it makes me tired as I have to have quite a lot of patience”*. Within this sub-theme, Amelia (TA) highlighted the unpredictability of the nature of SEMH needs making her feel frustrated:

**Amelia (TA):** *“It was frustrating because you know we’d have one day and it would be good and we’d think great you know a breakthrough. And the next day it would just be like screaming and it would be like why are we back to square one? So, a lot of the time it was frustrating”*.

Similar findings were reported by Conboy (2020), however there was an emphasis on participants experiencing difficulty due to feeling helpless rather than frustrated. Conboy's research included TAs and focused on mental health in particular rather than the broader description of SEMH. This slightly differing lens may account for this difference.

### **An emotive experience**

The theme 'an emotive experience' refers to participants describing the experience of supporting children with SEMH needs as being highly emotional for them. This theme differs from the previous theme (challenging and difficult) in that it refers to the experience provoking a number of emotions, both positive and negative.

Demonstrating the emotional impact that supporting a child with SEMH had, Cassie (TA) stated "*it's really intense*" whilst Taylor (Teacher) noted that for her "*I think emotionally its challenging*". This theme is reflected in wider literature with Conboy (2020) finding that participants reported that supporting SEMH was difficult emotionally. When exploring how supporting SEMH needs impacted upon them, participants referenced feelings of sadness. For example, Laura (TA) shared "*I was coming home just as upset as I'd left the little girl*". Participants linked feelings of sadness to them feeling sympathy for the child and their home life and early experiences. There was a sense from participants that worry and empathy about children's home lives affected them emotionally:

**Laura (TA):** "*it's really sad. Sometimes I'd come home quite upset and wondered What is she going through? What is her night going to be like?*"

**Ellen (TA):** "*but the weight of that, the weight of not being able to be there for these children*".

In particular, those whose role involved working individually with one child reported this impacting their personal lives, and the nature of their role may have contributed to why they experienced such strong emotions. Suggesting this is widely experienced, Sheffield and Morgan (2017) note that children with SEMH needs are the most likely to receive one to one support from a TA whilst Angel (2019) found that TA's supporting SEMH in a secondary school setting also described feelings of intense worry about the children they support. However, adding to these findings, this theme in the current research was prominent for both teachers and TAs with teachers also describing the impact of children's home lives on them:

**Haley (Teacher):** *“and when you actually listen to some of the background to some of these children, it can get to you if you let it”.*

**Katie (Teacher):** *“I think because I got told about what happened in his life, it made you feel really sad and almost like really responsible as well. So it was quite overwhelming at times”.*

For Haley, who has 16 years teaching experience, there was a sense that she needed to detach herself emotionally at times. Whereas for Katie, who particularly reflected on her experiences in her first year of teaching, she discussed feeling both sad and emotionally overwhelmed at the child's early experiences. This finding is reflected in research from Cole (2010) who proposes addressing SEMH can be both emotionally and physically exhausting for teachers. It is interesting that the present research did not report findings of physical exhaustion, however like Cole (2010) there was a strong sense of participants being emotionally overwhelmed. Some participants commented on the child's difficulties leading them to feel both emotional and demoralised:

**Niamh (TA):** *“it was hard work for us to watch him try and fail to make friendships”.*

**Amelia (TA):** *“I think it makes you a little bit demoralised because you know that they’re always going to find socialising really hard”.*

Within this, there was a sense that part of the emotion came from a feeling of not being able to help the child. For Katie (Teacher) feeling that she was unable to make a difference for a child was emotional and she reflected *“you don’t feel like you’ve made much of a difference”*. This finding is corroborated by Armstrong and Hallet (2012) who found that teachers felt a sense of failure that children with social and emotional difficulties were not having their needs met and that as professionals they were unsure how best to meet these needs.

Participants also commented on the unpredictable nature of social and emotional needs, with some linking this to their own emotional experiences:

**Martha (Teacher):** *“with SEMH children, it can be very unpredictable and a bit of a rollercoaster ride of emotions”.*

**Cassie (TA):** *“there’s no predictability at all which is hard”.*

This finding is corroborated by research considering secondary school TA’s experiences supporting SEMH which also found that participants experienced an array of positive and negative emotions (Angel, 2019; Conboy, 2020).

### **A positive and rewarding experience**

The theme ‘a positive and rewarding experience’ refers to participants describing their experiences of supporting children with SEMH needs in a positive way, speaking of the experiences being rewarding and enjoyable. Within this theme, participants also spoke of building a relationship with the child being central to the

experience being positive. Relatedly, participants highlighted the importance of getting to know and understand the child.

The idea of supporting children with SEMH needs being challenging but also rewarding was a recurring theme:

**Katie (Teacher):** *“it was challenging, but then it was quite rewarding seeing him do and achieve different things”.*

**Eliza (Teacher):** *“on the whole it’s a challenge I’m enjoying”.*

This reflects supporting social and emotional needs being both difficult and enjoyable at points. Sean (Teacher) also described finding the challenge of supporting social and emotional needs as being interesting and rewarding for him. This finding is reflected in literature exploring teaching staff’s experiences supporting SEMH with Conboy (2020) finding that mainstream TAs working one-to-one with a child with SEMH needs reported finding their job both rewarding and enjoyable.

The relationship and bond participants were able to build with children with social and emotional needs appeared to be central to their work being so rewarding:

**Ellen (TA):** *“it’s really rewarding when you see a little person trust you. That’s incredible and I feel absolutely privileged that I’m in a position where I get to create relationships like that in my role”.*

**Sean (Teacher):** *“it is what I like to do as well because I think you have more of a relationship”.*

In particular, Ellen (TA) describes the reciprocal relationship between her and the child as incorporating trust and safety. Meanwhile, Niamh (TA) described building positive relationships with children with SEMH needs as being *“incredibly meaningful and really, really powerful”*. This suggests that relationship building with children with

SEMH needs can be particularly rewarding, however it was clear from participant's descriptions that this could only occur when there was sufficient time to get to know the child and build up a quality relationship. Previous research considering TA's experiences has found that, like the current research, TAs describe being happy with their role and enjoying working with children with additional needs such as SEMH (Hammersley-Fletcher & Lowe, 2011; McVittie, 2005). In the current study, Martha (Teacher) shared that her experiences related to having sufficient time:

**Martha (Teacher):** *“it's really, really satisfying, and really fantastically motivating, but that's only possible when you can have regular interaction and enough time”.*

Maddie (TA) described her experiences as feeling *“really, really challenging”* but also said that *“although I used to tear my hair out with him, I couldn't help but like him”*. This comment captures the experience of building a relationship with the child where you come to like and understand them. When reflecting on the positive aspects of their experiences supporting social and emotional needs some participants described enjoying having the opportunity to really get to know and understand the child. Notably, this was largely reported by those working as TAs and possibly relates to their role sometimes involving spending more time with an individual child. For example, Cassie (TA) shared that her role supporting a child with SEMH needs *“gives a really good opportunity to get to know that child so well”*. Within existing literature, this concept was highlighted by Burton and Goodman (2011) who noted that TAs spoke of the greater amount of time they spent with students with SEMH allowed to really know the child and therefore know how to support them best which contributed to enjoying their role.

Participants spoke of their experiences also feeling encouraging for them. For example, Lucy (TA) noted that she felt encouraged by his progress because she understood how difficult he found some things. Lucy's comment also captures the impact of her understanding and emphasising that things were difficult for the child. This concept is also included in similar research. For example, Angel (2019, p54) explored the experiences of TA's supporting young people with SEMH in secondary schools and also noted that participants viewed understanding the young person as central and as "the overall objective" of their role. Whilst there are differences in the age group being supported, this suggests that for TA's working with children with SEMH building an understanding of the child is crucial.

### **Feeling inexperienced and unsure**

This theme refers to participants feeling that they were inexperienced and unsure of how to support children with SEMH needs. It is clear that this strongly relates to the theme of supporting social and emotional needs feeling challenging and difficult. Unsurprisingly, this theme was highly dominant for participants who were newer to working in schools, although participants with more experience also described these feelings. The theme was more prominent amongst TAs than teachers.

When asked about how she had found supporting social and emotional needs Lucy (TA) recalled "*just feeling like I've been thrown into things*". This notion of feeling thrown in was also reflected by other participants:

**Cassie (TA):** "*I started off thinking, oh my goodness, I don't know what I'm doing, I don't know what's gonna make it better*".

**Laura (TA):** "*I just felt out of my depth of knowledge. So, there was just that almost rabbit in the headlights moment of what do I do?*"

Participant's descriptions suggest a sense of feeling unsure how they should act and not feeling that they know how to help or cope with the situation. This experience of feeling unsure is also captured by existing literature, for example Shelemy et al. (2019) found that teachers reported concerns regarding their perceived lack of knowledge of understanding and supporting mental health in the classrooms. In the current study, some participants also reflected that as a result of feeling inexperienced they were concerned about whether they had responded in the way they should have. For example, Laura (TA) commented "*I didn't want to do something that I shouldn't and make it worse*". This suggests a feeling of vulnerability due to the nature of the situations staff found themselves in which was challenging to manage.

Some teachers also shared that they felt unsure of how to effectively support SEMH needs. Reflecting on a challenging situation supporting a child who was distressed, Eliza (Teacher) shared that she felt unsure what to try to help commenting that "*I didn't know quite how to act*". This was also reflected by Martha (Teacher) who noted "*there would always be something going wrong, so then it was really hard because it felt like there wasn't a lot I could do*". This further suggests a sense of feeling helpless and unable to effectively support which may contribute to the first theme of experiences being difficult or stressful.

Taylor (Teacher) highlighted that for her supporting SEMH needs was the most challenging:

**Taylor (Teacher):** "*I'd kind of say I know how to deal with most other children and what strategies to put into place, whereas with mental health there's no rhyme or reason*".



Here, Taylor (Teacher) is also reflecting that the unpredictable nature of mental health contributes to her experience of feeling unsure despite her experience in teaching. Some participants felt that their schools overall were inexperienced in supporting children with SEMH needs and subsequently they felt uncertain of how they could help:

**Lucy (TA):** *“it was challenging at times because I felt like I didn't have all the skills I needed to help him. And it was a mainstream school and none of the teachers had a lot of experience, so I felt like a lot on me”.*

Here, Lucy (TA) is reflecting that not only did she feel deskilled but that others at her school also did not have the skills and experience to support effectively. This is reflected in research focusing specifically on mental health in schools which found that whilst 89% of mainstream teachers felt responsible for children's mental health, only 34% felt that they had the necessary knowledge and experience to do so (Reinke et al., 2011). Furthermore, Laura (TA) explained that she felt her school lacked staff with knowledge of interventions for SEMH in particular, saying *“it's not great if you've got nobody who does great interventions with behaviour and emotional regulation and all the things that actually help the child stay in the classroom and engage with learning and the social aspect of it”.*

Some participants, both teachers and TAs, emphasised that this experience of being new to the role and feeling unsure was not helped by a lack of training in how to support social and emotional needs:

**Cassie (TA):** *“I think what is challenging is I've got work experience, but I haven't had training”.*

Laura (TA) further shared that one reason she found this area challenging was a lack of training into social and emotional support rather than solely how to support academic learning:

**Laura (TA):** *“it’s really challenging because I’m not trained in it at all, I wish there was much more investment in TA CPD that was about supporting behaviour rather than addressing academic learning. If we can’t get them to stay at the table, what good is it that I’m great at phonics teaching?”*

Reflecting Cassie and Laura’s views, research has voiced concerns about a lack of training for TAs which leaves them vulnerable to feeling inexperienced and out of their depth (Blatchford et al., 2009). Abbott et al. (2011) interviewed TAs and found that they expressed a need for more training, whilst Syrnyk (2018) found that SEMH specific TAs described the positive impact of training and felt it should be more widespread. Additionally, this theme was more prominent in the current research amongst teachers who were newer to the profession, and literature has highlighted the need for initial teacher training to include more training on understanding students with SEMH so that newly qualified teachers feel less out of their depth (Piper, 2021). Considering the mental health aspect of SEMH in particular, research has consistently found that teachers report a lack training on supporting mental health and would like support to increase their knowledge of how to help (Connelly et al., 2008; Rothi et al., 2008)

### **The need for support from others**

This theme refers to participants highlighting the need for support from those around them when supporting SEMH needs. This likely relates to previous themes of experiences being challenging and involving a sense of uncertainty from participants.

Some participants described the positive impact that support from others had on them. Reflecting on academic pressures on him as a teacher, Sean (Teacher) shared that he felt the senior leadership at his school was understand and supportive of him but that he needed more support for helping children's mental health than academic learning. While discussing difficult experiences supporting a specific child in her class emotionally, Haley (Teacher) noted "*but school did support me with like how to help him*". This suggests that for some participants, support for coping with social and emotional needs in the classroom is more needed than for academic needs. Participants highlighted that they got support from different places including senior leadership, other teaching staff, parents and through support with specific interventions. Existing literature also highlights teachers and TAs feeling support is important. For example, Bracewell (2011) proposed the positive effect of teachers and TA's giving and receiving support from each other when supporting children's mental health. However, Conboy (2020) suggests that there is conflicting literature about whether teaching staff feel supported when working with children with SEMH needs and this is mirrored in the current research.

For participants, the lack of support from others made their work more challenging. Laura (TA) reflected on feeling "*continued pressure*" from other staff members to get a child struggling emotionally back into the classroom which she felt was not the right course of action for the child at the point. Laura felt unsupported and reflected that the support she was given did not make her feel better concluding that she "*didn't get the response I'd hoped*". TAs in particular suggested that they often did not feel supported or valued within their work with children with SEMH needs. Relatedly, research looking specifically at TA's experiences also highlights a sense of feeling undervalued by their colleagues (Hammersley-Fletcher & Lowe, 2011).

There was a sense that some participants felt isolated due to a lack of support from others at their school. Like Laura, Katie (Teacher) reflected on negative experiences she had had whilst seeking support to help her support social and emotional needs. She found that due to time pressures and a large number of children requiring support she did not receive the level of support she had hoped for, commenting *“often, no one really came to kind of see how they were getting on in class”*.

Participants’ responses suggest the lack of support negatively impacted them. The experience of not receiving support is referred to within existing literature. For example, Burton and Goodman (2011) found that TAs working with children with behavioural needs reported feeling unappreciated and of others having little understanding of how challenging their role was and that support they would need. Burton and Goodman (2011) did not include the views of classroom teachers, but it was commented upon that TA’s did not feel they were as respected as teachers. Interestingly the theme of respect was not prominent in the current research whilst feeling unsupported was raised by both teachers and TAs.

Participants also noted the importance of the teacher and TA relationship in supporting social and emotional needs in the classroom:

**Rebecca (Teacher):** *“I think you need a good relationship with your TA”*.

**Eliza (Teacher):** *“and when that TA I mentioned isn’t there necessarily, sometimes there’s been nobody there it’s just me”*.

Reflecting participants experiences around the importance of TAs, Syrnyk (2018) found that classroom teachers at a specialist school for children with SEMH needs suggests that TAs played an important and valued role. Whilst this research relates to a different educational setting than the present research, it still corroborates the

need for supportive relationships between teachers and TAs when working with children with SEMH needs.

### **What is SEMH?**

This theme refers to participants' understanding of what the term 'SEMH' means. Whilst reflecting on their experiences of supporting SEMH, participants explored what they understood this term to mean. Within this theme, participants spoke of viewing SEMH to be a broad definition and believing that the term affects a large number of children.

It was clear that participants viewed SEMH to be a broad definition including a vast number of children:

**Sean (Teacher):** *“There are so many different aspects of it and it's so broad”.*

**Maddie (TA):** *“I think it covers quite a wide and varied area”.*

**Ellen (TA):** *“I think the more I've done this role, I think it includes so much more than what you would initially think”.*

This viewpoint is reflected the language used within the SEN Code of Practice (DfE, 2015) which uses the descriptor broad when defining SEMH. Referencing to SEMH alongside three other areas they comment, “these four broad areas give an overview of the range of needs” (DfE, 2015, p97). The term broad is also included within existing literature from Norwich and Eaton (2015) which describes educational professionals viewing SEMH as being diverse. Norwich and Eaton (2015) also highlight that guidance is unclear on what the threshold for identifying SEMH difficulties is and this is reflected in the current research, when exploring what they would include under the term 'SEMH', participants gave varied answers including having autism, having a difficult home life, experiencing trauma, anger management

difficulties, emotional regulation, anxiety, depression, experiencing low self-esteem and having low self-confidence.

Martha (Teacher) viewed SEMH to be the widest term out of the SEN Code of Practice noting that *“it’s a very wide area with lots of other diagnoses or needs which are masked by this general umbrella term”*. Sean (Teacher) continued to describe SEMH as *“everything and everything isn’t it really”* suggesting that he viewed it to be a wide definition including a large number of elements. Similarly, Haley (Teacher) described SEMH as including *“such a big, wide range of children”* whilst Martha (Teacher) noted that in every class she has taught there have been children who have SEMH difficulties. This finding is corroborated by research investigating the views of UK head teachers on the definition of SEMH (Martin-Denham, 2021).

Martin-Denham (2021) found that no consensus amongst head teachers regarding a definition of SEMH. Similar to the findings in this study, Martin-Denham (2021) found that participants gave common characteristics such as having difficulties coping emotionally in the classroom. Angel (2019) also had similar findings, stating that the definition of SEMH is open to interpretation and individuals will therefore have differing views of what this means. Additionally, research found that participants were united on the link between autism and SEMH (Martin-Denham, 2021). This was also reflected in the current study, with the majority of participants speaking of emotionally supporting children with a diagnosis of autism when asked to consider their experiences of SEMH.

Participants viewed SEMH to be a spectrum on which every child lies. For example, Sean noted *“the overall theme of well-being and resilience”* for all children and individuals *“being somewhere on the spectrum of mental health”*. Similarly, Ellen

(TA) noted *“I guess at some point in all of our lives we could be categorised as falling into that category”*.

Participants also suggested that SEMH is becoming more prevalent in schools:

**Martha (Teacher):** *“as I’ve gone through my career, I think mental health issues have become more and more prevalent, maybe because it’s more recognised and talked about and children themselves are aware of it”*.

Sean (Teacher) also shared this view noting that in recent years there seems to be more children struggling with mental health, considering the impact of the Covid-19 impact he noted *“I don’t think it’s all down to Covid. I think Covid is definitely there and affecting wellbeing and it adds to it, but their anxiety was there before”*. This view was also found by Martin-Denham (2021) whose participants felt they were seeing an increase in children presenting with SEMH needs. Martin-Denham’s research included headteachers which suggests that the view that SEMH needs are becoming more prevalent is shared by multiple educational professionals.

Some participants were unsure of what SEMH means. For example, when describing children she had supported, Eliza (Teacher) noted *“so I don’t know if that fits the definition”* and *“I don’t know if that’s SEMH”*. Similarly, Katie (Teacher) shared *“so, it’s quite interesting because I’ve never really heard that term at all”*. Both Eliza and Katie had been teaching less than three years and this may better reflect the views of more newly qualified teaching staff. However, equally this uncertainty may relate to SEMH being viewed as a difficult term to define and a broad area. This is reflected in research from Norwich and Eaton (2015) who describe the category of SEMH as being ambiguous and hard to define. It was clear that participants in the present research did not view SEMH to be a clear-cut area or label to give to

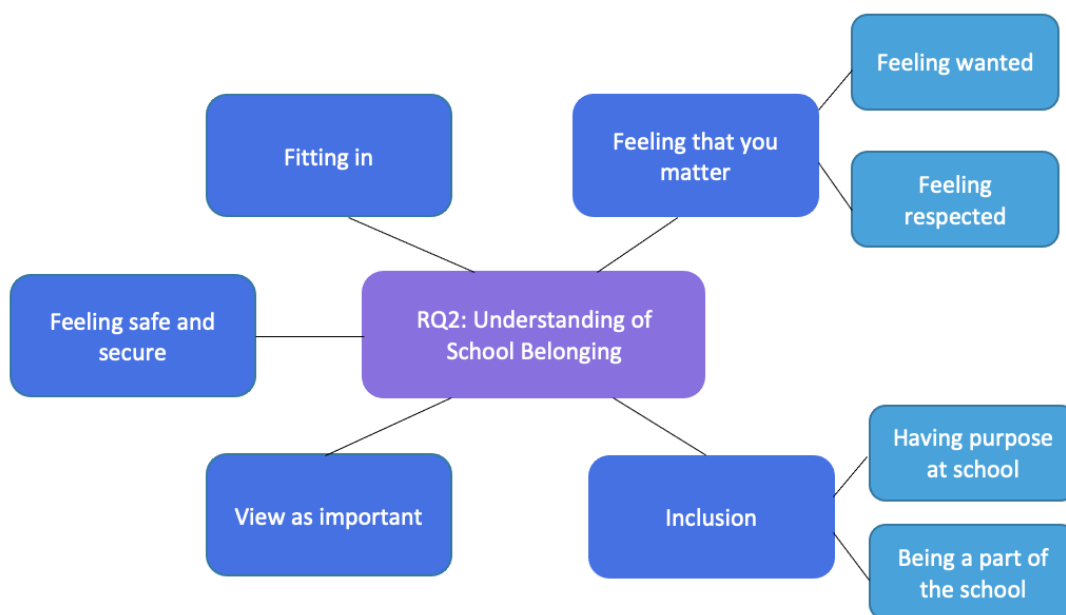
children. However, it was also clear that participants viewed a large number of children to be struggling with social and emotional difficulties and in need of support.

### 3.7.2 Research Question 2: What do mainstream primary school teaching staff understand by the term ‘school belonging’?

The below concept map (figure 3) shows the themes and sub-themes for research question 2 for both teachers and TAs. The research question is in purple, themes are in dark blue and sub-themes are in light blue. Table 8 also lists the themes and sub-themes for research question 2.

**Figure 3**

*Concept map for phase two research question 2 (Teachers/TAs)*



**Table 8**

*Final themes and sub-themes for phase two research question two (Teachers/TAs)*

Themes	Sub-themes
Fitting in	
Feeling that you matter	Feeling wanted



	Feeling respected
Inclusion	Being a part of the school
	Having a purpose at school
Feeling safe and secure	
Viewed as important	

### **Fitting in**

The theme ‘fitting in’ refers to participants viewing the experience of feeling as if you fit in as a central component of school belonging. What is meant by ‘fit in’ was explored by participants and defined as feeling you are where you are meant to be. The notion of fitting in was also viewed to apply to multiple settings.

Whilst exploring the concept of school belonging, participants also discussed the importance of feeling that you fit in at a variety of settings, including home, school and the wider community. For example, Taylor (Teacher) explained:

**Taylor (Teacher):** *“feeling like you fit into a workplace, feeling like you fit into a family, feeling like you fit into school.”*

Within the concept of fitting in, some participants emphasised that to them, this involves feeling that you are where you are meant to be. For example, Maddie (TA) noted *“I think it’s feeling like where you are is where you’re meant to be, there isn’t anywhere where you feel like you’d fit in better”*. The idea that a sense of belonging occurs when you feel like there is nowhere you would fit in better is also captured by the description of school belonging as an experience of feeling at home somewhere. For example, Lucy (TA) stated that to her school belonging *“just means being at home somewhere”*. Ideas of comfort and unconditional acceptance were proposed as part of school belonging and fitting in:

**Laura (TA):** *[...] that you fit in there, that it provides you comfort; it's like a special place.*

**Ellen (TA):** *I think for me, it's being connected to something bigger than yourself, being part of something, an unconditional fit.*

The majority of existing school belonging definition include the concept of fitting in (Greenwood & Kelly, 2019), however it is interesting that it was so overwhelmingly prominent in the current research as in most definition it is not considered the central aspect. The concept of school belonging relating to feeling at home is also not widely referred to in existing literature.

### **Feeling that you matter**

This theme refers to participants speaking of the individual feeling that they mattered at school as a part of school belonging. Within this theme, participants elaborated that 'feeling that you matter' included feeling valued and cared for by the people around them. They also spoke of how important they felt it was that children and young people feel that they matter to the people in their lives.

Amelia (TA) commented "*it's so important for children to feel that they matter where they are and that they play an important role in life*". Within this theme, participants further highlighted that to belong at school individuals need to feel that they are wanted and needed by others at the setting. They spoke of this meaning that individuals are welcomed and accepted:

**Laura (TA):** *"That you're wanted, "I belong there, I have a place there."*

**Amelia (TA):** *"Definitely the feeling of being wanted. They turn up to school and they've got friends there and the teachers are pleased to see them and remember things that they've said to them"*.

Here, participants are including what other people at the setting do to make children feel that they matter. This likely mirrors Shaw's (2019) view that for some individuals' definition of school belonging, it is most important what other people do to them to make them feel they belong.

Participants also discussed that in order to feel like you matter to others, you need to also feel respected by others. Respect from peers and from adults at school were both highlighted as crucial elements of school belonging with Niamh (TA) noting that the term school belonging made her think about "*the importance of the adults being respectful*". Niamh (TA) appears to be reflecting that in order to create connections and experience a sense of belonging the child or young person needs to feel respected by adults at the setting. Several existing definitions of school belonging also refer to the idea of feeling respected (Goodenow & Grady, 1993; Greenwood & Kelly, 2019). However, the earlier description of feeling wanted is an interesting concept and less frequently referred to in school belonging research.

### **Inclusion**

When describing what the term 'school belonging' meant to them, participants saw inclusion as being central. The theme 'inclusion' refers to participants feeling that school belonging involves a sense that the individual is included and a part of school life. Similar to the 'feeling you matter at school' theme, relationships were significant within this theme. Relating to the umbrella term of inclusion, participants additionally spoke of individuals feeling that they were a part of the school and having a purpose at school.

Illustrating this theme, Dawn (TA) described school belonging as "*where they're included. It's about being inclusive, isn't it?*". Participants discussed inclusion as resulting in feelings of connectedness to the school environment and people within it.

As a consequence of inclusion, some participants elaborated that they also view school belonging as the young person wanting to be at school. For example, Niamh (TA) commented that school belonging means that *“the pupil is connected to the rest of the people in the class and they want to be there.”* Participants also spoke of school belonging being not only about children being included, but also not being excluded. As in the current research, several existing definitions of school belonging also refer to the idea of inclusion (Biggart et al., 2013; Goodenow & Grady, 1993; Shaw, 2019).

Participants identified the importance of belonging not only within the child or young person’s class but on a wider whole school and community level. Participants stated that individuals need to feel included and a part of all forms of school groups, for example their class, their friendship group and the school community overall.

Rebecca (Teacher) commented that the child needs *“to feel that they’re part of the school community and part of their class and that they’re valued in class”*. This reflects Allen and Kern’s (2017) view that school belonging is an individual feeling connected to the school’s multiple social systems.

Furthermore, participants also stated that school belonging includes individuals feeling that they have a purpose and a way to contribute to school. They explored that concept of belonging involving a sense of feeling not only accepted but needed by the school setting and as if they are contributing to it. The idea of contribution is not commonly referred to within existing literature, however purpose and participation in school life is emphasised by some research into defining school belonging (Shaw, 2019). Some participants also felt that school belonging additionally includes adults working at the school. Within this, the need for adults to have a purpose and feel a part of school life was emphasised. Considering their own

experiences of school belonging as teaching staff, some participants further likened feeling a part of the school as relating to their identity, for example, Sean (Teacher) commented *“I like that identity and being a part of the school”*.

### **Feeling safe and secure**

The theme ‘feeling safe and secure’ refers to the idea that a sense of school belonging includes an individual feeling safe and comfortable in the setting. Building on the ideas of fitting in and acceptance discussed above, participants also viewed school belonging as involving feelings of security at school.

The idea of belonging involving an individual feeling secure and comfortable at school was captured by participants:

**Amelia (TA):** *I think it’s about them feeling as if they they’re secure and they’re comfortable in their school environment.*

**Dawn (TA):** *That security, that feeling of a base, of home, that affiliation to something that you can always come back to.*

Within feelings of safety, participants commented on school belonging occurring when the child feels that people at school know and understand them, which allows them to then feel happy and comfortable. Relationships and having people to go to within the school were emphasised as playing a role in feelings of happiness and security at school. For example, Dawn (TA) noted that school belonging is *“when you feel comfortable with the people around you. When they know you, they understand you, I guess?”*. Feeling understood and supported by people in school was clearly identified as a significant component what school belonging meant to participants.

When discussing feelings of safety forming part of school belonging, participants also spoke of feeling accepted and feeling safe enough that you could be yourself.

Taylor (Teacher) concluded that to her, *“school belonging would be about feeling that you’re safe in school, that you have friends in school, feeling that you’re accepted in the class.”* Some participants particularly highlighted that this acceptance allows individuals to be able to be themselves and feel confident that they will be valued for that. The concept of acceptance is widely referred to in existing school belonging research (Hagarty et al., 1992; Goodenough and Grady, 1993).

Feelings of acceptance were further likened to feeling positive about yourself within the group and feeling a sense of unconditional acceptance and support:

**Rebecca (Teacher):** *“a sense of belonging is being accepted by the group you’re with. You feel good about yourself being with them, with that group”.*

**Ellen (TA):** *“whatever you have to offer is accepted and it’s welcomed and celebrated. That you’re accepted, I think that’s a huge part of it”.*

This feeling of safety and security and how it relates to unconditional acceptance is captured by Rebecca’s (Teacher) reflection that school belonging involves children believing that *“they can say anything they like, and it won’t be laughed at or anything like that.”* In this example, school belonging is understood as meaning that an individual feels safe and secure at school and believes that they will not be rejected by adults or their peers. This theme was only spoken of by some participants and this may reflect research which suggests that a sense of belonging to school is a social construct and means different things to different people (Nichols, 2008; Shaw, 2019).

### **Viewed as important**

The theme 'viewed as important' refers to participants believing that a sense of school belonging is an important and significant aspect of school for children and young people. The theme includes a number of variations and nuances, one such idea is that school belonging should be prioritised and emphasised. Furthermore, the theme includes the concept that children and young people need a sense of school belonging to develop both academically and personally.

School belonging was highlighted as playing an important role in children's positive experiences of school. For example, Maddie (TA) gave an example of the positive impact that an increase in school belonging can have on children's self-esteem describing the difference in both his self-esteem and engagement with learning as "remarkable". Relatedly, Niamh (TA) commented:

**Niamh (TA):** *"I think pupils need a sense of belonging to the school. To succeed there, they need to feel that they want to be there and that they are going to learn and that they are going to gain positive things from the experience of being at the school".*

Participants also spoke of the negative impact that not having a sense of belonging at school can have. Some participants considered whether children and young people who dislike school do not feel a sense of belonging and if this subsequently relates to why they view school so negatively. For example, Amelia (TA) reflected whether the children she had worked with who strongly disliked school had felt any sense of school belonging:

**Amelia (TA):** *I think it's quite interesting the amount of children you see who feel like they hate school. Do they feel like they hate school because they don't actually belong to it? Like they don't matter really? Particularly the ones*

*that are always being told of or always sort of people are always shouting at them or not shouting but they're always almost in trouble.*

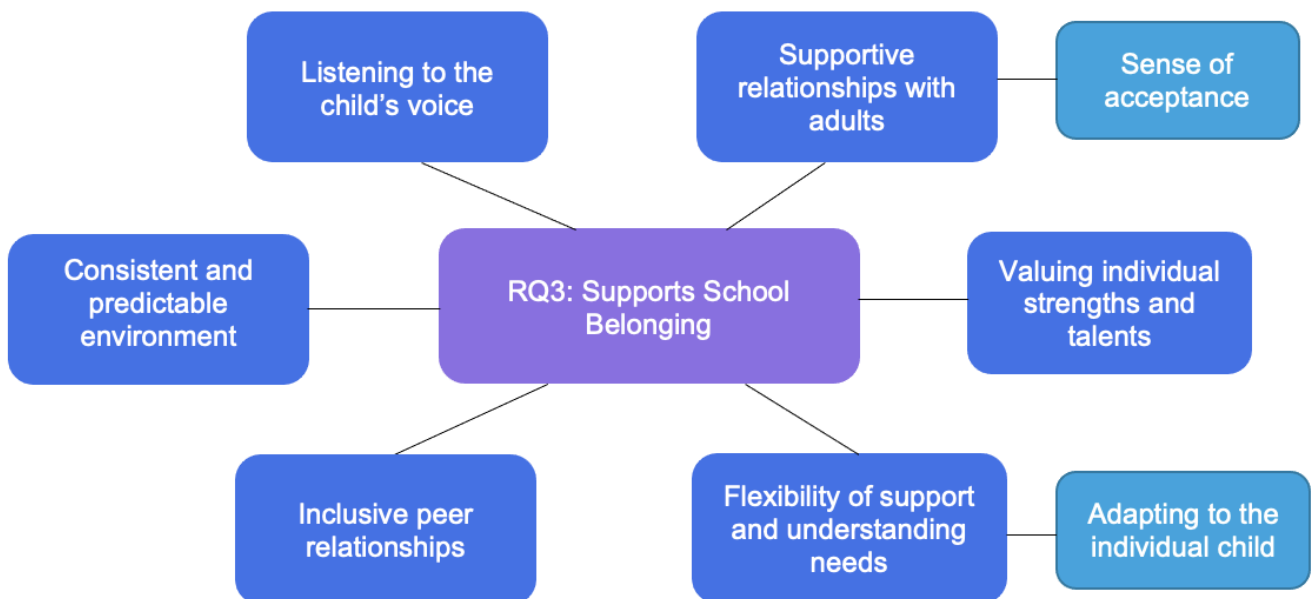
The finding that teaching staff view school belonging as being important is consistent with existing literature such as Bouchard and Berg (2017). The concept raised by some participants that school belonging relates to children disliking school also supports previous research (Bond et al., 2007; Turner et al., 2014).

### **3.7.3 Research Question 3: For children with SEMH needs, what do mainstream primary school teaching staff think supports school belonging?**

The below concept map (figure 4) shows the themes and sub-themes for research question 3 for both teachers and TAs. The research question is in purple, themes are in dark blue and sub-themes are in light blue. Table 9 also lists the themes and sub-themes for research question 3.

**Figure 4**

*Concept map for phase two research question 3 (Teachers/TAs)*





**Table 9***Final themes and sub-themes for phase two research question 3 (Teachers/TAs)*

Themes	Sub-themes
Supportive relationships with adults at school	A sense of unconditional support and acceptance
Valuing individual strengths and talents	
Listening to the child's voice	
Flexibility of support and understanding needs	Adapting to the individual child
Consistent and predictable environment	
Inclusive peer relationships	
Positive school ethos	

**Supportive relationships with adults at school**

This theme refers to children having secure and supportive relationships with adults at school, for example their teachers, TAs working with them and wider staff members. Within this theme the idea of adults accepting the child and the child therefore feeling a sense of unconditional support was explored. In addition, the role empathy plays in having supportive relationships was highlighted.

Participants predominantly spoke of supportive relationships with adults at school building school belonging. For example, when exploring what she thinks is most important to school belonging Ellen (TA) commented that "*I think fundamentally, from my experience, key relationships*" whilst Katie (Teacher) shared that she felt relationships were essential to feelings of belonging and highlighted that even one quality relationship could make a big difference. Previous research considering how school staff feel school belonging is created has also highlighted the important role adults in the classroom play (Greenwood & Kelly, 2019). In particular, the

accessibility of staff was viewed by teaching staff to influence the extent students experience school belonging (Greenwood & Kelly, 2019). Similarly, Chapman et al. (2014) found school staff felt developing nurturing, positive and trusting relationships helped students feel that they belonged at school. It is important to highlight that unlike the present research, the above studies were all conducted with an emphasis on all children rather than just those with SEMH, however the consistency of findings still demonstrate that teaching staff view this theme to strongly support school belonging.

Within this theme, participants spoke of the power of the child feeling there was somebody at the school who could offer them unconditional support. Martha (Teacher) likened unconditional support to being like a safety mat which could catch the child when they struggle, noting *“it’s going to make them feel secure and bring back that sense of belonging”*. The impact of feeling unconditionally supported and valued was viewed as especially important for children facing social and emotional challenges. For example, Laura (TA) commented on the impact of adults showing support during difficult times for the child:

**Laura (TA):** *“just having an adult who’s willing to sit down with you, even though there’s disgraceful language coming out of your mouth and possibly you’ve done awful things [...] to show some kindness, I think makes a massive difference to them.”*

This finding is also in line with research considering how teachers create school belonging for children and young people who have experienced a managed move (Flitcroft & Kelly, 2016). Like those experiencing SEMH difficulties, children who have undergone a managed move are considered a vulnerable group and often have social and emotional needs (Hoyle, 2016). When exploring why adult relationships

were viewed to be so important to school belonging, helping the child to feel valued and wanted was emphasised. In particular, participants viewed adults to support school belonging by showing the child that they were interested in them and wanted them there. For example, Haley (Teacher) noted *“I would say the first thing is to feel liked or valued, so to feel that your teacher values you and likes you”*. When discussing the success of building children’s interests into learning, Ellen (TA) commented that it had the power to *“make them feel special and make them feel like they mean something to you”*. Similarly, Taylor noted the power of remembering things about the child’s life commenting *“acknowledging the little things, I think, that is really important”*. Relating to this finding, Chapman et al. (2014) found that teachers viewed adults showing that they are interested in students as playing an important role in building school belonging.

Participants also viewed adults showing empathy as crucial. For example, Niamh (TA) noted *“I think staff with real empathy is probably 95% of the recipe, because I think if you have that, it goes a long, long way to that child thinking that they care”*. This finding is also reflected in wider literature. Syrnyk (2018) found that teachers and TAs working with children with SEMH needs valued in particular the characteristics of empathy and patience. Mirroring Niamh’s comments, participants in Syrnyk’s (2018) study viewed empathy as crucial to building a relationship with child and being able to help them progress. Likewise, Piper (2021) and Cockerill (2019) reflect the importance of showing both empathy and encouragement.

Participants also considered the different professional roles of adults within the school. Considering the strength of the TA role, Martha (Teacher) noted:

**Martha (Teacher):** *“TAs are often really good with children who have SEMH needs, because they’ve built up a relationship with them and they know them,*

*and sometimes they're from the local area so they really know the lives that some of these children are living and dealing with".*

Here, Martha is discussing both the impact of understanding the child's experiences and having the time to get know them.

### **Valuing individual strengths and talents**

The theme 'valuing individual strengths and talents' refers to people in the setting appreciating and acknowledging the child's positive traits and abilities. For example, emphasising that a child is skilled at drawing or within sports. Within this, the idea of praise was discussed as being relevant to valuing strengths and building school belonging.

When considering what positively supports belonging, participants spoke of the impact of finding and celebrating the child's talents. Participants commented on the variety of these talents including those outside of academics. There was a sense that participants felt every child had a key strength which could be nourished:

**Dawn (TA):** *"definitely celebrating their talents, because everybody's got something, everybody's got a talent or something they're good at".*

**Maddie (TA):** *"really opening your eyes and noticing everybody's talents, not just the obvious ones like winning the football or achieving an exam pass in music. It's just about noticing the little things as well".*

Participants also spoke of celebrating small steps of progress which may not seem significant for the majority of children but were meaningful for those with social and emotional needs:

**Haley (Teacher):** *"I think it is making sure that you praise the positive, even if the positive is tiny".*

**Ellen (TA):** *“having recognition for their achievements, even if that’s “you got up and you got into school today and we’re really proud, and so glad that you’re here”.*

Participants also viewed praise to be supportive of school belonging for children with SEMH needs. Martha (Teacher) commented that the way you speak to a child is *“massively important”* and felt giving genuine praise enables children to *“feel like they’re more part of something”*. Participants felt that praise was more effective when it was small, regular and often. Some highlighted the challenges within this, for example, Amelia (TA) noted:

**Amelia (TA):** *“it’s tricky to praise the behaviour when they might have had a 45-minute meltdown and they might have had 2 minutes of an activity that they should have done for 25. But sort of trying to find a positive in it, like I’m glad you managed to calm down and get some work done and that’s a good thing”.*

This suggests that praise and celebrating strengths might be more challenging for children experiencing challenging behaviour. However, responses also suggest that praise and encouragement make a child feel part of that class, particularly if they are already excluded in some way as children with SEMH often are suggested to be (DfE, 2015). Celebrating strengths and talents was viewed to facilitate school belonging as it led to children feeling like they can achieve and contribute at school. Interestingly, this theme is not widely reflected within similar research. Given the limited research into school belonging and SEMH, it may be that this theme is particularly important for those with these needs. Additionally, there appears to be a greater breadth of research into views on building school belonging within the

secondary school age group. It may be that this theme is especially relevant for primary age students.

### **Listening to the child's voice**

This theme refers to adults at school taking the time to seek and listen to the child.

This includes listening to both their views in general and any worries or problems they are experiencing. This theme was viewed to be important in developing school belonging. This theme was also emphasised more by classroom teachers than TAs.

Within this theme, the idea of showing the child that you have time for them and want to listen to how they are feeling was prevalent:

**Haley (Teacher):** *"I think the first thing to do for children who have SEMH difficulties is spend time with them and try to find out what you can do to help lessen some of the difficulties or anxieties".*

For some participants, child voice was important because of the potential to pick up any worries the child had. When considering what else could support school belonging for children with SEMH needs, Eliza (Teacher) commented, *"I think just regularly listening and like hearing out the child, just how's your week been, do you have any worries, do you have any concerns"*. This view is also demonstrated within existing literature. Like the current research, Burton and Goodman (2011) considered children with SEMH needs and highlighted the importance of adult relationships and young people feeling confident to approach staff with concerns. This is also highlighted by several participants in the present research, for example Haley (Teacher) felt that *"weekly check-ups"* to give reassurance would be supportive of belonging. Whilst not specifically consider children with SEMH needs specifically, Biag (2014) also reported similar findings. Biag (2014) found that

teachers reported that an 'open-door' policy to listen to student views and worries helped all students to feel connected at school. Considering that children with SEMH needs are likely to experience worries or difficulties that may need support, it appears likely that their belonging would be supported by being listened to. Emphasising this, Rebecca (Teacher) noted the positive impact having a classroom worry box had on school belonging for children with mental health needs, in particular for those struggling with feelings of anxiety. Participants also felt that children's views on what helps them belong to school could shape the support they receive. For example, Martha (Teacher) felt that school belonging could be supported by "*asking the children what they think and how they feel about it, and what would make the difference to them*". Martha further expanded that a questionnaire could be used at points during the school year. The view that children feeling listened to is crucial to school belonging is also consistent with the views of children and young people with SEMH needs (Nind, 2012) suggesting its significance.

### **Flexible support and understanding children's needs**

The theme 'flexible support and understanding children's needs' refers to adults both understanding the child's individual needs and being able to adapt to support these needs, both emotional and academic.

Participants emphasised the need for support to be flexible and adapted to the individual child:

**Laura (TA):** "*I suppose the summary point is just more flexibility, just have a little bit more flexibility*".

**Taylor (Teacher):** "*it's working out what each individual child wants*".

**Lucy (TA):** *“I think the main things are just having adults that understands them well, having just a good understanding of their needs and from that being able to provide what they need”.*

Considering flexibility within rewards in particular, some participants felt that rewards need to be adapted for children with social and emotional difficulties to what they find challenging and what is achievable for them. When considering how children with SEMH were supported at school, participants also highlighted the role of interventions such as nurture groups and emotional literacy teaching. Others highlighted support from external agencies such as educational psychology, behaviour specialists and pastoral support staff. The view of flexibility being necessary for school belonging is referenced within the existing literature.

Considering some student’s need for support emotionally, research has suggested examples of flexibility as providing counselling when necessary, being sensitive to student’s emotional states and supporting them to access medical appointments (Biag, 2014; Greenwood & Kelly, 2019; Bower et al., 2015). The findings relating to emotional support are particularly relevant to the current research’s focus on SEMH needs. Whilst these examples differ to those given by the participants in the present research, they corroborate the finding that flexibility and adapting to meet the individual child’s need is supportive of school belonging.

Some participants in the current research spoke especially of the need for flexibility relating to academic learning:

**Katie (Teacher):** *“there was no point doing learning with them if that wasn't what was going to help them. I think having the flexibility to be able to go through the well-being side of things, I think that's really great”.*



**Ellen (TA):** *“I think having that understanding that today is just not going to be one of those days and we have to be okay with that, and we have to do things that make this child feel comfortable and settled and secure as much as possible”.*

Both Katie and Ellen’s comments suggest the importance of valuing the views of those who know the child best at school and supporting them to provide learning and emotional support in the way they view to be most productive. Martha (Teacher) concluded that *“in order to even start to offer someone a sense of belonging we need to work on their emotional and mental health needs”*. Relating to Martha’s view, Anderson et al. (2006) similarly highlighted that flexibility is needed to develop supportive relationships and give the necessary wellbeing support that help build school belonging.

### **Consistent and predictable environment**

This theme refers to children experiencing a school environment which is consistent and enables them to build up a predictable routine. This was viewed to positively support children’s school belonging.

There was a particular sense that this theme is more important for children facing SEMH difficulties than their peers. For example, when discussing the changes to school routine that come during topic weeks such as ‘Arts Week’, Ellen (TA) noted that she felt *“what should be a really positive experience for some of our SEMH children can become that hypervigilance, that anxiety can really set in, that lack of routine and structure”*. Participants highlighted that changes to routine, even perceived positive changes, are likely to lead to increased anxiety and emotional

distress for children with SEMH needs as they lose that security of being able to predict their day:

**Rebecca (Teacher):** *“I think they like that routine, they know what’s going to happen every day, it’s consistent and secure. I think it’s important they know what’s going to be happening in the day”.*

Participants viewed consistency from the adults working closely with children with SEMH needs as crucial to building school belonging. Participants emphasised the importance of children being able to understand and experience consistent boundaries in school for example, Taylor reflected:

**Taylor (Teacher):** *“I think knowing where the boundaries are is a massive one. As long as they know what they are coming in to, then they feel secure and they feel like they belong”.*

Having a calm and consistent manner was also viewed as a strength. In similar findings, Burton and Goodman (2011) found that teaching staff felt it was important to create a caring and fair environment for those with SEMH needs which help children to feel safe and secure. However, Burton and Goodman (2011) did not find that participants felt consistency was as important as participants in the present study did. This may relate to the differing approaches by the two studies, with Burton and Goodman (2011) including the views of Special Educational Needs Coordinators (SENCo) and TAs at mainstream secondary schools and alternative provisions whilst the present study focused solely on mainstream primary school experiences.

Participants reflected that consistency in adult support is important to school belonging. For example, Katie (Teacher) felt that there was a danger of school feeling *“overwhelming and also quite uncertain”* without that sense of predictability.

However, participants also suggested that building an extremely consistent routine can be challenging as there was always the need for potential change. When considering why this theme is important to school belonging, some participants suggested that with a consistent environment the child feels more in control and therefore feels safer and more able to experience belonging. For example, Martha that it was important at school for children with SEMH needs *“to feel that you’ve got some sort of control over it”*.

### **Inclusive peer relationships**

The theme ‘inclusive peer relationships’ refers to children with SEMH experiencing positive and accepting relationships with their peers and not feeling excluded. Within this theme, the role that adults play in promoting peer relationships is also explored. Friendships and peer acceptance were viewed by participants to be vitally important to school belonging for children with SEMH needs:

**Lucy (TA):** *“and then the students, students are really important because you’re surrounded by them, you want to feel included, you want to feel accepted and I think having at least even just one person that could go to straight away in class, that they could go and talk to them, or they could go walk with them out to lunch”*.

**Rebecca (Teacher):** *“being accepted by the children in class and getting on and knowing how to play with the children and having a friend in class”*.

Participants appeared to suggest that children with SEMH did not need to maintain a large number of friendships but felt that one key supportive friendship made a big difference to a child’s school belonging. This is reflected by research considering young people with ASC, Myles et al. (2019) found that young people spoke of the

positive impact on their belonging of having one secure friendship at school. In the current research, being understood by their peers and receiving patience and tolerance was also emphasised, in particular when children were having more difficult days. The need for the child's peers to have adult support to help them understand social and emotional difficulties was also emphasised:

**Eliza (Teacher):** *"I think just having that extra conversation will make people aware, rather than people just kind of expecting the kids to know what to do".*

Participants explored what adults can do support peer relationships for children with experiencing social and emotional challenges. Amelia (TA) emphasised group activities in the classroom as supporting children with SEMH to form friendships and *"making them feel like they are really part of the team"* whilst Martha (Teacher) highlighted the positive impact of assigning carefully chosen 'buddies' to make children feel more connected to their peers. This theme is corroborated by research findings from Anderson et al. (2006) who found that teachers felt developing peer support was needed for young people's connection to school. Importantly, this finding is also consistent with the views of children and young people with SEMH needs (Midgen et al., 2019; Nind et al., 2012), suggesting its significance. Some studies including the views of young people with social and emotional difficulties found that peer relationships were viewed as being critical to them experiencing belonging at school (Craggs & Kelly, 2018; Lapinski, 2018).

### **Positive school ethos**

This theme refers to the role that a school's ethos plays in the school belonging experiences of children with SEMH needs. School ethos was largely defined by participants as being the atmosphere and values of the school on a wider whole

school level. A school's ethos was viewed by participants to have an impact on every person in the school. Within this theme, valuing both wellbeing and mental health within ethos was emphasised.

The potential for a positive school ethos to influence school belonging was highlighted:

**Cassie (TA):** *"I think from a wider point of view, the whole school feeling like they're a big team and they all work really well together for the bigger purpose [...] That kind of stuff gives people a real sense of belonging that actually this is our school".*

**Martha (Teacher):** *"a school ethos that values children as individuals and values being kind and helping others and supporting each other in a community, is something which I think is really, really important for a school to develop".*

Overwhelmingly, good school ethos for children with SEMH needs were described in terms of supporting mental health and wellbeing with participants emphasising nurturing and compassionate attitudes:

**Eliza (Teacher):** *"I think the school in general just needs an ethos of community and supporting each other".*

**Katie (Teacher):** *"we place quite a high priority on the well-being side of things, which I think is amazing".*

There was a sense that participants perceived a conflict between schools emphasising either academic achievement or mental health and some participants related this to governmental policy. Reflecting on the need to promote positive mental health, Ellen (TA) commented *"I think this needs to be more fundamental to*

*underpinning absolutely everything that we do in school, and then the teaching sits on top of that*". Considering children's mental health, Maddie (TA) noted *"I think its seeing it as important and not just airy fairy, its giving it priority really"*. Some participants further explored the impact that educational policy has on schools' ability to emphasise wellbeing within their ethos. For example, Sean (Teacher) commented that he felt wellbeing was being mentioned more at a governmental level but emphasised the need to build on what schools are already doing. Similarly, Katie (Teacher) viewed a barrier to school ethos being academic pressures, commenting *"if you've got people higher up than you that are caring more about the data of your school and what Ofsted are going to think, then it's not really helpful and supportive to as children"*.

The perception that positive school ethos plays a role in building school belonging is consistent with existing literature exploring teaching staff's views (Dimitrellou, 2017; Greenwood & Kelly, 2019). However, the emphasis on wellbeing and mental health is not included by all similar research. For example, Biag (2014) found that teachers thought that a school culture with high academic expectations positively influences children's school belonging as they are more able to learn and succeed. This was not referred to within the current study, however it is important to note that whilst the current research and Biag share key similarities in some of their aims, Biag (2014) focused upon teacher's views for building school belonging for all children whilst the current research focused solely on children with SEMH. This difference may therefore reflect that wellbeing and mental health is understandably viewed by teaching staff as being more important to children with SEMH's belonging than academic progress. Furthermore, research considering the needs of children with

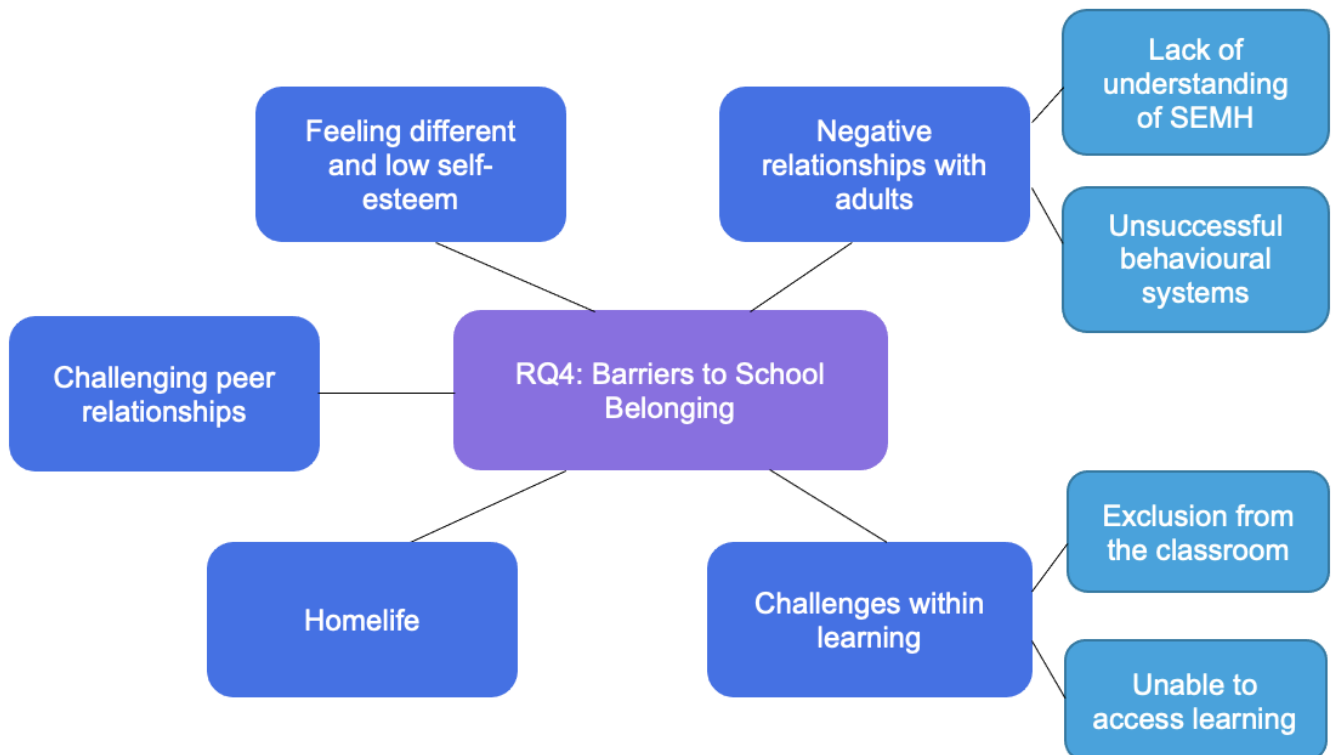
SEMH highlighted that having an inclusive school ethos appears to promote feelings of belonging (Dimitrellou, 2017) and this is consistent with the present findings.

### 3.7.4 Research Question 4: For children with SEMH needs, what do mainstream primary school teaching staff think acts as a barrier to school belonging?

The below concept map (figure 5) shows the themes and sub-themes for research question 4 for both teachers and TAs. The research question is in purple, themes are in dark blue and sub-themes are in light blue. Table 10 also lists the themes and sub-themes for research question 4.

**Figure 5**

*Concept map for phase two research question 4 (Teachers/TAs)*



**Table 10***Final themes and sub-themes for phase two research question 4 (Teachers/TAs)*

Themes	Sub-themes
Feeling different and low self-esteem	
Challenging peer relationships	
Negative relationships with adults	Unsuccessful behavioural systems
Challenges within learning	Unable to access learning
	Exclusion from the classroom
Homelife	

**Feeling different and low self-esteem**

The theme ‘feeling different and low self-esteem’ refers to children with SEMH needs feeling that they are different to their peers and this negatively impacting upon their school belonging. Within this theme, the perception that children with SEMH needs experience low self-esteem and confidence was explored.

When considering the barriers to belonging for children with SEMH needs, Amelia (TA) commented “*I think they know that they’re different, you know it’s quite obvious for a lot of kids*” whilst Eliza (Teacher) noted the emotional struggle of “*feeling like you’re different to your peers*”. When considering why this has a negative impact, some participants considered the child being excluded by people at school as a result of their differences:

**Katie (Teacher):** “*he knew that he was different to other children but didn’t quite know why he was different to other children. So, I think that was quite tricky for him to feel belonged in the class*”.



**Rebecca (Teacher):** *“they’d probably struggle with that belonging and being part of a group and fitting in and feeling different”.*

The suggestion that children with SEMH needs feel different to their peers and this negatively impacts their school belonging is consistent with existing literature (Myles et al., 2019; Ware, 2020). For example, Ware (2020) interviewed young people with a range of SEN including SEMH and found that participants spoke of trying to minimise being identified as different to their peers in order to belong at school and not be excluded. Related to this concept, Sean (Teacher) commented *“if they aren’t as “normal” or “like everyone else”, then the rest of the school might not be as inclusive of them”.*

Participants also proposed that the experience of feeling different negatively impacted self-esteem and in turn school belonging. Participants suggested that many children they viewed to have SEMH needs experienced low self-esteem, and this was thought to negatively impact upon their school belonging:

**Dawn (TA):** *“I think because they have low self-esteem, that actually probably stops them feeling important in class”.*

**Taylor (Teacher):** *“the child’s self-belief is a massive barrier too. They have none of that and so therefore they don’t feel like they belong”.*

Low self-esteem was strongly related to low school belonging by participants and there was a sense this related to difficulties in feeling comfortable and safe at school. For example, Martha (Teacher) concluded *“you don’t want to belong somewhere if it’s scary, you don’t want to belong somewhere if it makes you feel anxious”.* Self-esteem being a barrier to school belonging for children with SEMH was a prominent theme in the current research but does not appear to be widely

referred to in existing literature considering what contributes to a sense of school belonging. However, there is a wealth of research suggesting that children with SEMH needs often experience low self-esteem (Stanbridge & Mercer, 2019) so it follows that participants in the present study would consider this in relation to children with SEMH needs' school belonging.

### **Negative peer relationships**

This theme refers to a barrier to school belonging for children with SEMH being challenging peer relationships. The idea of rejection from peers is explored alongside reasons for these difficult peer relationships are explored .

Participants viewed difficulties within friendships as a crucial barrier to school belonging for children with SEMH needs and noted that children's difficulties can make it challenging to form friendships. For example, Rebecca (Teacher) commented that on the challenge of the child not knowing how to get on with their peers, even if they are motivated to. Other participants suggested that peer rejection was an unintentional impact of the child's needs:

**Taylor (Teacher):** *"I think also some children become a victim of their own need, in a way. Because they've got social and emotional needs, they then act up and their peers just get fed up and then don't want to play with them".*

**Sean (Teacher):** *"they are almost ostracised by other children for things that they are not intending to do. Like, they are not intending to throw chairs. They are saying I need help".*

This is consistent with research from Pillay et al. (2013) who found that young people with social and emotional needs may be more likely than their peers to have unconstructive peer relationships which contribute to feelings of anxiety and

loneliness. Relatedly, participants in the present study also emphasised the negative impact of their peers not understanding their needs. Cassie (TA) commented that they may be viewed as different by their peers and therefore treated unkindly which might make them feel that they did not belong. Cassie (TA) further noted that due to their difficulties their peers may exclude them within play. This is in line with research considering the views of children and young people with SEMH needs. Multiple studies have suggested that children with SEMH needs may be more likely to have difficulties forming and maintaining secure friendships and this then impacts upon their school belonging (Craggs & Kelly, 2018; Cullinane, 2020; Smedley, 2011).

Within this theme, participants highlighted the role that adults could play in supporting understanding and acceptance:

**Maddie (TA):** *“I think we could do more to help other children understand, so talk more about things like autism and behavioural needs and children in care. I do think they could do more to talk about those things more and why some people are the way they are”.*

Katie (Teacher) also spoke of the positive impact of building other children’s understanding, sharing *“we had discussions with them to say, this is why he does what he does and things and I think they understood”*. There was a sense that building this understanding led to greater acceptance and therefore greater school belonging. It is also important to highlight that some participants noted large variability in friendships for children with SEMH. For example, Ellen (TA) commented that some have a really strong group of key friendships, but others find this much more challenging. This is reflected in research from Ware (2020) who highlighted variability in friendship difficulties for children and young people with SEN including those with needs described as SEMH. Overall, there was a sense in the current

research that a lot of children with SEMH needs want to be liked by their peers but due to their needs do not experience this which negatively impacts their school belonging.

### **Negative relationships with adults**

The theme 'negative relationships with adults' refers to children with SEMH having difficult relationships with adults at their school. Reasons for this are discussed, for example the perception that some teaching staff view children with SEMH needs in a negative way and lack understanding of what SEMH is and how to support children with these needs. Like the previous theme 'challenging peer relationships', difficulties in relationships with adults was viewed to be a barrier to experiencing school belonging. Within this theme, the role that school's behavioural systems play on difficult adult relationships is also highlighted.

The views and perceptions of some teaching staff were suggested to be a potential barrier to belonging.

**Maddie (TA):** *"I think some of it will be to do with teacher attitude, so if the teacher makes it visible that the child is an annoyance and nuisance and almost gangs up on the child with the other children that's going to have a massive impact".*

**Laura (TA):** *"children know how they're being perceived by the adults, and it can't feel nice to know that adults don't really want to work with you".*

These quotes suggest that a fractured relationship with adults at school, where the child feels disliked or unwanted, is an important barrier to them feeling that they belong at school. In line with this finding, research has suggested that the perception of being disliked by the teacher significantly lowered students' sense of belonging

(Nind et al., 2012; Smedley, 2011). In addition, research has suggested that due to the challenging behaviour demonstrated by children with SEMH needs, they are often viewed negatively by adults in school (Hibbin & Warin, 2020). Multiple reasons for difficulties in teacher relationships with children with SEMH needs were explored by participants in the present study. Cassie (TA) hypothesised that adults may find children with SEMH difficult to support because of the adult's lack of confidence and knowledge in how to help whilst having limited time was also viewed as a predominant factor in this barrier. For example, Sean (Teacher) shared about the stress of feeling limited in supporting children struggling with mental health in the classroom *"because you're doing so many other things and you think, I just can't deal with it right now"*. For Sean, effectively supporting SEMH appeared important to him and he felt confident in understanding the area and knowing how to support, but he struggled in having enough time to provide the support he would like to.

Relating to difficult adult relationships, participants spoke of school's behavioural systems being a barrier to school belonging. There was a sense that children with SEMH often rarely get the praise or rewards due to their difficulties and therefore only see the negative and exclusionary side of the system:

**Niamh (TA):** *"sometimes I think schools have these praise and punishment systems and there are some children who will never get the praise. And it's quite unfair"*.

**Laura (TA):** *"the behaviour policy is probably going to lead to an exclusion for children with SEMH, it's more like an exclusion policy than a behaviour policy"*.

Children with SEMH needs' experiences with the behaviour system, then impacts their school belonging as they experience school as a negative place where they are always, as Niamh (TA) notes, "*in trouble*". The perceived negative impact of behavioural systems on children with SEMH needs is consistent with existing research. For example, Hibbin and Warin (2020) found that children's behaviour as a consequence of social and emotional needs often resulted in a "disproportionately punitive response" (p316) rather than one related to their individual needs. Similarly, Laura (TA) commented "*I do think that behaviour policies are very old-fashioned and just not suited to SEND*".

### **Challenges within learning**

This theme refers to the idea that difficulties related to learning act as a barrier to children with SEMH experiencing school belonging. This theme includes a number of nuances, with participants discussing the negative impact of children with SEMH being excluded from the classroom in addition to them having difficulty accessing learning.

Participants spoke of children with SEMH needs not being able to access learning as a barrier to them experiencing school belonging:

**Cassie (TA):** "*I think academically if they can't access things that's a massive barrier to making them feel like they belong*".

**Amelia (TA):** "*if they struggle academically, their sense of enjoying school and feeling like they're wanted and appreciated is probably going to go out the window*".

This finding is consistent with existing literature suggesting the importance of academic support to developing a sense of school belonging (Anderson et al., 2006;

Biag, 2016). Similar to the present research, Biag (2016) found that teachers viewed academic support ensured students were able to participate in learning which in turn developed their school belonging. When exploring why academics has a strong impact on school belonging, there was a sense from participants in the current research that it prevents children from feeling involved in the classroom and school overall. Within learning, participants particularly mentioned difficulties arising when learning was not being at an appropriate level that the child feels is achievable:

**Dawn (TA):** *“if they don't understand what everybody else is around them that probably makes them feel like a less sense of belonging. Because how come everyone else knows but I can't get it”.*

This suggests that key to this barrier is the child feeling unable to understand the learning in addition to feeling pressure from comparing themselves to their peers. This is consistent with research considering children's views on what impacts their school belonging. For example, Cullinane (2018) found that participants which included children with SEMH needs viewed academic difficulties as a barrier to school belonging describing feeling disheartened and like a failure when not understanding the learning. Lapinski (2018) had similar findings and further proposed that struggling academically may result in feeling alienated from peers and therefore negatively impacting belonging. This view is reflected in Dawn's above comment of feeling alienated from their peers at not understanding the work.

Related to learning, participants referenced the negative impact of children being excluded from the classroom:

**Niamh (TA):** *“she sits in a different area for a lot of the day, she doesn’t always feel included with the rest of the class, so that can be a massive, massive barrier”.*

**Dawn (TA):** *“I think that, if he’s taken out of class too many times affects his sense of belonging”.*

Within this, there was a sense that this was so damaging to belonging because it led to children feeling isolated from their class. Participants reflected that being outside of the classroom contributed towards the child feeling separate and having limited opportunities to form friendships. This also extended to relationships with adults, with participants highlighting the child’s relationships with the class teacher in particular. For example, Katie (Teacher) reflected on supporting a child with SEMH needs and commented *“I found it hard to build a relationship with him because I felt like I just didn’t really know him because I never saw him. And again, he never really saw me.”* This finding is consistent with existing research. For example, Goodman and Burton (2010) found that teachers described a high level of variability in the time children with social and emotional needs spend in mainstream classrooms alongside their peers. Like the participants in the present research, Goodman and Burton (2010) found teachers reported that some children spent the majority of their time excluded from the main classroom and separate to their peers. Participants in current research highlighted a difficult balance between giving the necessary support such as interventions outside of the classroom and supporting school belonging by the child feeling a part of the class. For example, Rebecca (Teacher) reflected *“it was great that he had one to one support, but then it’s also not so great, because he’s just taken away from everything else”.*

### **Homelife impact**



The theme 'homelife impact' refers to the role that children with SEMH needs' lives outside of school have on their experiences of school belonging.

When considering what the barriers are to school belonging for children with SEMH needs, participants emphasised a child's homelife:

**Cassie (TA):** *"I think home life definitely can play a massive, massive, massive role".*

Participants spoke of many different home situations which could have an impact on the child being able to experience school belonging in addition to attachment needs impacting on the child feeling able to belong at school. When discussing barriers to school belonging, Ellen (TA) commented *"I think about children that have got family dynamics at home that are really, really tricky, the impact that has on the school, what they've been subject to in their early years"*. This suggests that the child's difficult experiences outside of school have a big impact on them feeling able to belong at school. Similarly, Rebecca (Teacher) noted *"if they've come from a chaotic home life and they've found it hard to feel belonging with adults at home, that might affect how they feel at school"*.

Participants also highlighted the challenges to belonging when a parent does not appear to value what is happening at school:

**Maddie (TA):** *"I think if you've got parents that are anti-school [...] the child isn't going to want to belong to that school and they're not going to see it as a positive thing in their life"*.

**Amelia (TA):** *"if you've got a really disengaged parent who really badmouths school all the time, then the child is going to feel a bit like schools a negative and they don't want to be associated with this"*.

Taylor (Teacher) viewed this to be mixed messages for the child from school and home and commented that this is in her view the “*greatest barrier*” to school belonging. Participants also explored why parents find it hard to value school:

**Maddie (TA):** “*quite often parents will have anxieties left from their school days*”.

**Taylor (Teacher):** “*some parents have such low literacy and numeracy skills they were actively discouraging their children because they did not want their child to become more intelligent than they are*”.

**Martha (Teacher):** “*sometimes the school don’t actually encourage parents to buy in; they make them feel excluded, they don’t make them feel welcome*”.

This appeared to be a complex and emotive topic for participants to make sense of and participants emphasised the need to foster stronger and more supportive relationships with parents whilst Niamh (TA) noting “*I think schools could do a lot more to engage parents*”. There was a sense that the overall goal was for parents and school to be working together and that this was positively support belonging. In line with this finding, existing literature has also suggested that the link between home and school is important to student’s sense of school belonging. For example, Bower et al. (2015) found that teachers suggested that creating a partnership and engaging parents helps to promote student’s school belonging. This mirrors the viewpoints of participants in the present study, for example, Eliza (Teacher) commented “*the more streamlined something is the better it is for them, rather than us having two polar opposite things going on at school and home*”. Participants in research from Bower et al. (2015) suggest facilitating school and parent breakfast morning as a way to support the parent-school partnership, whilst participants in the

current study commented that *“it’s not about preaching to people, but it’s about helping them support their children in the best way”*. Overall, this theme painted a complex picture, but it was clear a child’s home life was viewed by participants to be a potential barrier to belonging and the need to support and involve parents was emphasised.

### **3.8 Phase two summary**

The research addressed a gap in the literature to explore why children with SEMH experiences are less likely than their peers to experience a sense of school belonging and consider what supports their school belonging. The research was conducted from the perspectives of school staff who play an important role in supporting school belonging and therefore also considered their experiences of supporting children with SEMH needs.

Findings suggests both differences and similarities in how teachers and TAs describe their experiences of supporting SEMH. Both groups of participants highlight that it is an emotive experience including both rewarding highs and challenging times. These findings are consistent with existing literature in this area (Burton & Goodman, 2011; Conboy, 2020). In particular teachers highlighted the stress of trying to support social and emotional needs whilst ensuring making academic progress whilst TAs and less experienced teachers spoke of the emotional impact of supporting children with SEMH at times affecting their personal lives. There was further a sense that both teachers and TAs felt unsure and inexperienced when supporting social and emotional needs, with participants describing feeling out of their depth. These findings highlight that both teachers and TAs could benefit from more support to cope with this aspect of their role in addition to more knowledge about SEMH and what would help. The project also found that participants did not

view SEMH to be a clear area to understand and there was a sense that it was a broad and wide area encompassing many different aspects. This is also consistent with existing literature (Martin-Denham, 2021). Findings differed on what participants viewed SEMH to include and their familiarity with the term, but it was clear that participants viewed a large number of children to be struggling with social and emotional challenges and in need of support. Findings highlighted that participants valued school belonging and considered it a priority for their work with children with SEMH needs. Participants gave descriptions of school belonging which were largely consistent with leading research in this area. In particular, school belonging was viewed to significantly include feelings of fitting in and being accepted and wanted by others at school.

Building on previous research considering what builds school belonging for all children, the present research highlighted multiple ways to enhance school belonging for children with SEMH needs. Themes included having supportive relationships with adults, valuing children's strengths and progress, listening to the child, giving flexible support, providing a consistent environment, secure peer relationships and a school ethos including wellbeing. There was a sense that some themes were especially relevant for children with SEMH needs. For example, considering research finding that having social and emotional needs can make school more difficult (Lapinski, 2018), the current research highlighted the importance of receiving unconditional support from adults in addition to empathy. Furthermore, participants felt that the child feeling listening to was crucial to children with SEMH's belonging as it allowed them to both share any worries and feel valued by staff. The majority of themes were consistent or partially consistent with similar research, however it is important to highlight that due to the limited research into

children with SEMH needs and building school belonging, research compared was often related to wider groups of children and young people than only those with social and emotional needs. Some themes, such as providing a predictable environment and having an ethos which priorities child wellbeing and mental health were less prevalent within existing literature.

Given that research has suggested that children with SEMH needs are less likely to experience a sense of school belonging than their peers (Midgen et al., 2019; Smedley, 2011; Vandekamp, 2013), the present research also explored what barriers children with SEMH needs face in developing school belonging. Findings demonstrate a range of reasons children with SEMH may find experiencing school belonging difficult. Themes included children feeling different, difficulties within peer relationships, fractured adult relationships, behaviour management systems, challenges with learning and the impact of the child's homelife. In particular, problems forming friendships and being excluded from the classroom was emphasised as key barriers to school belonging. Some themes, such as exclusion from the classroom, were consistent within research considering children with SEMH's school experiences but had not before been related to belonging.

## **Chapter 4: Overall Discussion**

This chapter will consider the overall findings from both phases of the project whilst demonstrating the project's contribution to literature. Phase one of this study considered research eliciting the views of children and young people with SEN on school belonging. In phase two, mainstream primary school teachers and TAs shared their views on supporting children with SEMH needs. There was a focus on what contributes to school belonging for children with SEMH needs.

### **4.1 Overall aims**

The overall aims of this project were to explore what helps to build school belonging for children with SEN. The first phase focused upon children and young people with SEN's experiences of school belonging and what they felt supported them to belong. As a result of the findings in phase one, phase two focused specifically on children and young people with needs described as falling under the area of SEMH. Phase two explored school belonging from the perspective of primary school teachers and TAs working in mainstream classrooms. The research aimed to consider their views and experiences of supporting children with SEMH needs, with a particular focus on how to enhance their sense of school belonging. It is argued below that the aims of research were met, however notable limitations are also later highlighted.

### **4.2 Overarching findings**

#### **4.2.1 Vulnerable to experiencing low school belonging**

A key finding from the systematic literature review in phase one is that there are significant differences in how children with SEN experience school belonging. A number of studies included within the review found that children with SEN experience less school belonging than their non-SEN peers (Cullinane, 2020;

Dimitrellou & Hurry, 2019; Nepi et al., 2013; Svavarsdottir, 2008). However, other research found that feelings of school belonging are affected by children and young people's type of need (Dimitrellou & Hurry, 2019; Midgen et al., 2019). Findings from the included studies suggest that children and young people with needs that could be described as SEMH are amongst the most vulnerable to experiencing a low sense of school belonging (Cockerill, 2018; Dimitrellou and Hurry, 2019; Hebron, 2018; Midgen et al., 2019; Svavarsdottir, 2008).

Phase two's findings added to this by exploring the perspectives of classroom teaching staff on the need to support belonging for children with SEMH needs. Relating to phase one's conclusions, phase two found that teaching staff viewed children with SEMH needs as needing additional support to build their sense of school belonging. Within phase two, teaching staff also identified a number of barriers impacting upon why children with SEMH have difficulty with school belonging. These barriers included children feeling different from their peers, experiencing low self-esteem, having challenges with friendships and difficulties in their relationships with adults at school. These findings add to phase one's conclusion by demonstrating that teaching staff think children with SEMH struggle with feeling that they belong at school and are aware to an extent that they need additional help to build their sense of belonging at school.

#### **4.2.2 A challenging term to define**

Phase two found that participants did not view SEMH to be a clear area to understand and there was a sense that it is a broad and wide area encompassing many different aspects. The finding that SEMH is viewed to be a broad area is reflected the language used within the SEN Code of Practice (DfE, 2015) as well as within existing literature (Martin-Denham, 2021). Findings from phase two of this

project differed on what participants viewed SEMH to include as well as their familiarity with the term. When exploring what they would include under the term 'SEMH', participants gave varied answers including the child having autism, experiencing trauma, struggling with emotional regulation, having anxiety and having low self-confidence. It did not appear to be a clearly understood definition for participants, for example one participant described it as "*everything and everything*". In line with these findings, Norwich and Eaton (2015) highlight that guidance is unclear on what the threshold for identifying SEMH difficulties is, whilst Martin-Denham (2021) found no consensus amongst head teachers regarding a definition of SEMH. It was clear that participants in the current study viewed a large number of children to be struggling with social and emotional needs and some participants viewed SEMH to be a spectrum on which every child lies. A small number of participants were unsure of what SEMH means and this uncertainty may relate to SEMH being viewed as a difficult term to define and a broad area. This is reflected in research from Norwich and Eaton (2015) who describe the category of SEMH as being ambiguous and hard to define. The present study adds to this by highlighting that this ambiguity is experienced specifically by classroom teaching staff, existing literature such as Norwich and Eaton (2015) and Martin-Denham (2021) focused upon the views of academics and more senior school staff such as headteachers and SENCos. The present study also contributes to the existing research knowledge in this area by showing that in 2021 the term 'SEMH' is still not fully understood or defined by those working in education despite first being introduced in the 2015 code of practice (DfE, 2015c).

#### **4.2.3 "A rollercoaster ride of emotions"**



The quote used as the title of this section comes from one of the research participants (Martha, Teacher). The quote was chosen because it captures the research finding that supporting children with SEMH needs is an emotive experience including both rewarding highs and challenging lows. As Martha (Teacher) states, it feels like a “*rollercoaster ride of emotions*”. Phase two found that participants described their experiences of supporting SEMH to, at times, be stressful, frustrating and difficult. Contributing to these difficulties was a perception that it was hard to understand the child why they acted in certain ways. Alongside this, was also a sense that participants also enjoyed supporting social and emotional needs and found it to be a rewarding area. This was particularly true when they had the time and opportunity to get to know the child well. Furthermore, there was a sense from both teachers and TAs that worry and empathy about children’s home lives affected them emotionally with participants describing feelings of sympathy and sadness. Within this, there was a sense that part of the emotion came from a feeling of not being able to help the child and the nature of SEMH being unpredictable. These findings align to an extent with existing literature in this area (Burton & Goodman, 2011; Conboy, 2020), however there were additional interesting comparisons between the participant groups when exploring why it was such an emotive experience for them. In particular teachers highlighted the stress of trying to support social and emotional needs whilst ensuring making academic progress whilst TAs and less experienced teachers spoke of the emotional impact of supporting children with SEMH at times affecting their personal lives. The unique contribution of the project here is that it highlights specific details of what it is like to support children with SEMH needs including in particular a very emotional response from both teachers and TAs.

#### **4.2.4 “I just felt out of my depth”**

The quote used as the title of this section comes from one of the research participants (Laura, TA). The quote was chosen because it captures the research finding that when supporting children with social and emotional needs, both teachers and TAs often feel unsure and inexperienced. As Laura states, they often feel a sense of being “*out of my depth*”. This appeared to relate to participants feeling unsure of how to support children with SEMH needs. Perhaps unsurprisingly, this theme was highly dominant for participants who were newer to working in schools, however participants with more experience also described these feelings. The theme was also more prominent amongst TAs than teachers. This theme is also captured by existing literature, in particular around how to support mental health in the classroom (Reinke et al., 2011; Shelemy et al., 2019). The project adds to this literature by showing that both classroom teachers and TAs experience feelings of insecurity and uncertainty around supporting social, emotional and mental health needs and that this is felt by teaching staff with a wide range of experience. When describing their experiences, participants highlighted the need for support from those around them when supporting SEMH needs with participants stating that the lack of support from others made their work more challenging than it needed to be. There was a sense that some participants felt isolated and unsupported. Relating to these feelings of uncertainty, phase two also found that a lack of training in how to support social and emotional needs was relevant. Literature demonstrated that training on understand and supporting SEMH needs has a positive impact of staff efficacy (Syrnyk, 2018) and the present research adds to this argument that training should be more accessible and widespread. Additionally, this theme was more prominent in the current research amongst teachers who were newer to the profession arguing

that initial teacher training could also emphasise how to support SEMH more.

Similarly, the current project suggests that TAs need support both practically and emotionally when beginning to work with children with SEMH needs.

#### **4.2.5 The impact that adults can have on school belonging**

The project found that both teachers and TAs feel that adults in the classroom play a big role in children with SEMH needs' sense of school belonging. This was perceived to be in both positive and negative ways. When considering how adults help to build school belonging, participants spoke of helping the child to feel valued and wanted, showing empathy, seeking and listening to children's views and celebrating the child's strengths. Some participants also discussed the power of the child feeling there was somebody at the school who could offer them unconditional support. This overall finding is consistent with similar literature (Chapman et al., 2014; Greenwood & Kelly, 2019), however it provides additional insight into the specific actions that teaching staff feel are important. On the other hand, participants also felt that there was the potential for adults to negatively impact children's school belonging. The views and perceptions of some teaching staff were highlighted as a potential barrier to belonging, with participants theorising that the child may consequently feel disliked or unwanted. This is reflected in wider literature (Nind et al., 2012; Smedley, 2011) and some research highlights that children with SEMH are much more likely than their peers to be viewed negatively by adults (Hibbin & Warin, 2020). The current project extended these findings by exploring why relationships with adults may become fractured for children with SEMH needs. Phase two found that participants identified a lack of knowledge around SEMH in addition to having limited time and working with behavioural systems which do not adjust for SEMH.

#### **4.2.6 Feeling different and the need for secure friendships**

When considering why children with SEMH needs may not feel that they belong at school, phase two of the project found that teaching staff particularly thought that there was a risk that children with SEMH feel different and isolated from their peers. There was a perception that children with SEMH needs were likely to experience rejection from peers which, understandably, negatively affects their belonging. This is consistent with similar research (Cullinane, 2020; Pillay et al., 2013; Smedley, 2011), but the findings are unique in that they come from the perspectives of two groups of participants who work closely to support children with SEMH needs. Additionally, phase two findings not only describe a perception that children with SEMH are likely to experience rejection for peers but the impact that this has on children's self-esteem. Participants also highlighted supportive friendships and receiving understanding and acceptance from peers to be an impact aspect of building school belonging. There was a sense that even one reciprocal friendship could make a big difference to the child's sense of belonging. The need for secure friendships is also reflected in relevant literature within phase one (Midgen et al., 2019; Nind et al., 2012) but phase two of the research adds to this by highlighting the need for adults to support the child's peers in understanding their needs.

#### **4.2.7 Exclusion from the classroom**

Another prominent finding relates to school belonging and accessing learning. Participants emphasised the need for support to be flexible and adapted to the individual child but also spoke of children not being able to access learning as a barrier to school belonging. This finding complements existing literature suggesting the importance of academic support to developing a sense of school belonging (Anderson et al., 2006; Biag, 2016). When exploring why academics has a strong impact on school belonging, there was a sense from participants in the current

research that it prevents children from feeling involved in school. In a finding unique to the experiences of children with SEMH needs, participants also considered the negative impact of children being excluded from the classroom. This was viewed to be damaging to belonging because it led to children feeling isolated from their class. Participants reflected that being outside of the classroom contributed towards the child feeling separate and having limited opportunities to form friendships and positive relationships with teachers. The impact of being excluded from the classroom was consistent within research considering children with SEMH's school experiences (Goodman & Burton, 2010; Lapinski, 2018) but had not before been related to belonging. For example, Goodman and Burton (2010) discussed that a lack of resources and expertise led to children with BESD, a prior descriptor similar to SEMH, being excluded from the classroom but considered this from the lens of inclusion rather than children's experiences of school belonging. The present study therefore makes a unique contribution in considering that children with SEMH needs are experiencing exclusion and isolation from the classroom which negatively impacts their school belonging. Furthermore, participants also emphasised the difficulty of finding a balance between giving necessary support such as interventions outside of the classroom and supporting school belonging by the child being present in the classroom and feeling a part of the class.

## **Chapter 5: Conclusion**

The purpose of this chapter is to discuss the implications of the research for EP practice. The strengths and limitations of the research will then be assessed before potential future directions for research within the field of school belonging are shared. Lastly, final thoughts and conclusions from the project will be summarised to end the chapter.

### **5.1 Significance and implications of the research**

The research project found that teaching staff often find supporting SEMH to be challenging and difficult to manage emotionally. Findings further highlight that both teachers and TAs could benefit from more support to cope with this aspect of their role. This is reflected in research finding that educational professionals such as teachers and TAs are not confident supporting SEMH needs (Conboy, 2020). It therefore seems essential that teaching staff are offered support to help them feel able to effectively support children with SEMH needs and also manage their own emotional wellbeing. This is an important implication for EPs who could provide support in a number of ways. Firstly, EPs would be well placed to offer either supervision groups or individual supervision to staff working with children with SEMH needs. The findings show that participants, in particular TAs, felt their role affected them emotionally outside of work. However, the project also found that they often received limited support and could not share these worries. Supervision from EPs could therefore provide a containing place to share how they are feeling, how their role is impacting upon them and think about what would help them further. Secondly, EPs could highlight within their work with schools that teaching staff working with children with SEMH needs are likely to feel unsupported and overwhelmed at points and need additional support within school structures. Whilst there may be a

perception from other professionals of how challenging this work can be (Burton & Goodman, 2011), the present research found that many teachers and TA feel unable to share their concerns and unsupported within their school. For many there a feeling that they were left to cope with little support or advice.

Phase two of the project also found that many teachers and TAs felt inexperienced and unsure in their work with children with SEMH. Participants described feeling that they did not know how to act or what would help and further could not understand why the child acted in the way that they did. An implication for EPs therefore relates to sharing knowledge and advice at both an individual and whole school level. Within individual casework, EPs are able to support staff in understanding the child's feelings and behaviour as well as considering collaboratively what may help. The research also gives insight into how teaching staff experience supporting SEMH needs and this is helpful for EPs to be aware of when working consultatively with this group. At a whole school level, EPs are well placed to give training on supporting SEMH needs and wellbeing in the classroom. Many participants highlighted the need for training in this area and the effectiveness of training has been suggested by recent research (Syrnyk, 2018). Additionally, the need for training appeared more prominent amongst teaching staff who were newer to the profession and initial teacher training could include more training on both supporting mental health and understanding students with SEMH.

The research also has implications for what may support children with SEMH needs to experience school belonging within a mainstream setting. Findings highlight that teaching staff supporting children with SEMH needs feel that they are at risk of feeling different and isolated at school. This corresponds with the phase one findings that children with SEMH are more vulnerable to not feeling that they belong at school

(Cullinane, 2020; Dimitrellou & Hurry, 2019; Svavarsdottir, 2008). An implication for educational professionals is to have an awareness of this vulnerability within their work and consider what this group of children's experiences of school may be like. Relatedly, findings highlight many themes relating to what teaching staff feel creates school belonging for children with social and emotional needs with a number of practical suggestions. These include supporting the child's peers to understand social and emotional needs, encouraging acceptance from both peers and adults, doing short check ins to listen to the child, considering and celebrating the child's individual strengths, and doing whole class surveys on school belonging to identify children in need of further support. Furthermore, the findings highlight the usefulness of trying to advocate for the child spending a balanced amount of time within the classroom and adapting behavioural systems so that it is more in line with where the child is and they are able to access some rewards.

## **5.2 Strengths and limitations of the research**

The strengths and limitations relating specifically to the first phase of the research are discussed in chapter two. This section therefore considers the research as a whole project but primarily focuses upon phase two.

The findings from phase one's systematic literature review helped to inform the second phase of the research. The methods chosen for phase two helped to explore teaching staff's experiences of supporting SEMH and building school belonging. The research has given an in-depth exploration of teaching staff's experiences of supporting children with SEMH needs and how they feel school belonging can be developed for this group. One of the key strengths of the study is that it included the voices of the adults working in the classrooms. In particular, the voices of TAs are argued to be ignored in research (Clarke, 2019; Wilson & Bedford, 2008). By



focusing on both classroom teachers and TAs, the experiences of those working closest with children with SEMH needs were gathered leading to a number of significant findings. In this way, the comparison of the two groups was also a strength of the research. The findings from phase two provide a useful contribution to the existing field of both school belonging and SEMH, for example by highlighting that supporting children with SEMH is a challenging and emotive experience for teaching staff who would benefit from additional support and guidance in this area.

It is also important to consider the limitations of the current research. One of the findings from the research related to perceptions around the term SEMH. However, this topic was not reflected within the research questions or initial interview questions which focused more upon participant's describing their experiences of supporting children identified as having SEMH needs rather than exploring participant's perception of the term 'SEMH' itself. Once it became clear that perception of SEMH was likely to be a significant aspect of the interview data, I adapted my responses within the interview to further explore participants' understanding of the term if they raised this topic. However, this area could have been a bigger focus within the research and on reflection additional pilots would have potentially highlighted that participants may have differing understanding of the term SEMH. Although two pilot interviews were conducted, both individuals (a teacher and a TEP with previous experience as a TA) had significant experience of SEN which would have impacted their responses.

It is also important to note that the research comprises a relatively small sample. However, the interpretivist stance of this research did not require a population representative sample and the depth allowed by including a smaller group of participants is viewed to be a strength (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006; Smith et al., 2009).

Additionally, the teaching staff who chose to take part in the research may have held particularly strong views or a high level of interest and motivation in this area. For example, one participant reflected that they really enjoy supporting children SEMH needs because they find the topic interesting and are passionate about it.

Particularly regarding mental health, this also appeared to be a valued topic for other participants. This has the potential to create some bias within the data as it may be that only teaching staff who felt that SEMH and school belonging was important took part.

Having reflected on my role as a researcher during the project, I am also aware that my interpretation of the data is likely to have been influenced by own experiences working with children and my constructs around mental health and belonging.

However, this research is within the realm of constructionism, and it therefore acknowledges that all knowledge is affected by an individual's beliefs and values (Hammersley, 2012). As discussed in more detail within the phase two methodology section, I took steps to try and remain as reflexive as possible within the research process.

Furthermore, although the present research had a strong focus on participant voice it did not directly include the voices of children and young people. This is important to consider particularly in relation to phase two RQ3 and RQ4 because children and young people are the ones experiencing school belonging and would likely have interesting insights into what they feel helps and hinders their experience of belonging. This will be further explored in the next section considering recommendations for future research.

### **5.3 Directions for future research**

The research explored the views of classrooms teachers and TAs on supporting SEMH and belonging. Both groups of participants spoke of the importance of receiving support from other educational professionals. In particular, the role that SENCos play was emphasised with some participants highlighting limitations to the support that they received whilst trying to promote positive wellbeing and learning. It would therefore be beneficial to seeking the views of SENCos in how they feel it is best to support both children with SEMH and the staff working with them.

The findings also demonstrated that for TAs in particular, supporting children with SEMH can be emotionally overwhelming at times. Within the research, a small number of TAs worked one to one with an individual child whilst others supported multiple children or an entire class. These are highlighted within the table showing the participant's details (section 3.5.1, table 4). Given some participants working one to one with a child in particular described feeling emotionally exhausted and unsupported, it would be beneficial for future research to further explore the views and experiences of TAs whose role involves working individually with a child. Within this, a focus on their perceptions of working individually with a child and what else would support them in their role would be helpful.

Another finding relates to perceptions and understanding of the term 'SEMH'. As the findings demonstrate that for both teachers and TAs this term is difficult to conceptualise and understand, future researchers could explore what other professionals, such as EPs and SENCos, understand by the term. Research could also consider the usefulness of the term and the potential impact that it has children and young people. As the term was introduced in governmental policy in an attempt to better consider the underlying reason for difficulties (DfE, 2015c; Martin-Denham,

2021), research into this area could also incorporate whether educational professionals feel that this has had the desired impact.

Findings identified that teaching staff perceive there to be a number of barriers potentially preventing children with SEMH needs from feeling that they belong at mainstream primary schools. Future research could seek the views of children with SEMH needs being educated in mainstream schools on what they feel builds school belonging and acts as a barrier for them. Previous research has considered school belonging for children attending shared placements including mainstream and specialist settings, (Cockerill, 2018). Given the high permanent exclusion rates for children with SEMH needs (DfE, 2019), future researchers could also explore their experiences with a strong consideration of the possible ethical challenges.

#### **5.4 Concluding comments**

The current research was successful in exploring the views and experiences of classroom teachers and TAs whose role involves supporting children identified as having SEMH needs. Through a systematic literature review, the study also explored children and young people with SEN's experiences of school belonging and identified children most at risk of feeling that they do not belong. Based on the perspectives of classroom teaching staff, the research considered how best to support children with SEMH needs to feel that they belong at school as well as what is potentially acting as a barrier to this.

Key themes emerging from teaching staff's experiences of supporting social and emotional needs in the classroom included feeling a range of positive and negative emotions, feeling inexperienced and unsure, and having a strong need for support from others. These findings suggest a number of implications for EPs in how to best

support teaching staff who work closely with children with SEMH needs. This includes greater training and supervision support. Furthermore, the research explored perceptions around the term SEMH with contrasting findings. This highlights that SEMH is a challenging term to define, and future research could further explore what different professionals understand by the term as well as its usefulness to children and young people.

The research also explored teaching staff's perceptions of how to enhance children with SEMH needs sense of school belonging. Both phases of research highlight a number of areas which impact children's school belonging. Themes included peer relationships, supportive adults, the child feeling listened to, receiving flexible support and the school having a positive ethos built around wellbeing. These had a number of implications for how to build school belonging for children struggling socially and emotionally. In light of the phase one finding that children with SEMH needs are less likely than their peers to feel that they belong at school, phase two also explored perceived barriers to belonging. Themes included the child feeling different and having low self-esteem, difficulty with friendships, fractured relationships with adults at school, behavioural systems, the child's homelife and being excluded from the classroom. This suggests that this is a complex area in which a number of factors interact to affect school belonging. However, the findings also have implications to how to try and reduce some of these barriers. For example, adapting behavioural systems to better meet the child's needs and support the child's peers to understand social and emotional needs better.

School belonging and mental health are both important and growing areas of research. Working on this research project has informed the ways I would like to practice as an EP. In particular, it has made me consider the challenges teaching

staff face in supporting social and emotional needs in the classroom and the ways EPs can support this area. It has made me value listening to both child voice and the voices of the adults around them. In addition, it has highlighted in particular the significant impact that TAs have on the children they work with but also how this affects them professionally and that they do not always receive the training and support they deserve. Completing this research project has confirmed to me the benefits of working in a consultative way to benefit a range of children and young people. The current study shows the importance of seeking the views of the adults supporting vulnerable children, in particular groups which are underrepresented in research, such as TAs. Future studies could build on these findings and add to the literature on school belonging and children with SEN.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A: Phase one qualitative investigation/evaluation review framework (Bond, Woods, Humphrey, Symes & Green, 2011)

Criterion	Score	Comment
Appropriateness of the research design <i>e.g. rationale vis-à-vis aims, links to previous approaches, limitations</i>	1 0	
Clear sampling rationale <i>e.g. description, justification; attrition evaluated</i>	1 0	
Well executed data collection <i>e.g. clear details of who, what, how; effect of methods on data quality</i>	1 0	
Analysis close to the data, <i>e.g. researcher can evaluate fit between categories/themes and data.</i>	1 0	
Evidence of explicit reflexivity <i>e.g. impact of researcher, limitations, data validation (e.g. inter-coder validation), researcher philosophy/stance evaluated.</i>	1 0	
Comprehensiveness of documentation <i>e.g. schedules, transcripts, thematic maps, paper trail for external audit</i>	1 0	
Negative case analysis, <i>e.g. contrasts/contradictions/outliers within data; categories/themes as dimensional; diversity of perspectives.</i>	1 0	
Clarity and coherence of the reporting <i>e.g. clear structure, clear account linked to aims, key points highlighted</i>	1 0	
Evidence of researcher-participant negotiation of	1 0	

meanings, <i>e.g. member checking, empower participants.</i>		
Emergent theory related to the problem, <i>e.g. abstraction from categories/ themes to model/ explanation.</i>	<b>1 0</b>	
Valid and transferable conclusions <i>e.g. contextualised findings; limitations of scope identified.</i>	<b>1 0</b>	
Evidence of attention to ethical issues <i>e.g. presentation, sensitivity, minimising harm, feedback</i>	<b>1 0</b>	
<b>Total</b>	<i>Max 12</i>	

**Appendix B: Phase one quantitative evaluation review framework (Bond, Woods, Humphrey, Symes & Green, 2011)**

<b>Criterion</b>	<b>Score</b>	<b>Comment</b>
Use of a randomised group design	<b>1 0</b>	
Focus on a specific, well-defined disorder or problem	<b>1 0</b>	
Comparison with treatment-as-usual, placebo, or less preferably, standard control	<b>1 0</b>	
Use of manuals and procedures for monitoring and fidelity checks	<b>1 0</b>	
Sample large enough to detect effect (from Cohen, 1992)	<b>1 0</b>	
Use of outcome measure(s) that has demonstrably good reliability and validity  <i>(2 points if more than one measure used).</i>	<b>2 1 0</b>	
<b>Total</b>	<i>Max 7</i>	

**Appendix C: Phase one weight of evidence B and C scoring framework**

	<b>Weight of Evidence B: Methodological appropriateness</b>	<b>Weight of Evidence C: Relevance of focus</b>
	<b>Criteria:</b> 1. Research aim relates to school belonging	<b>Criteria:</b>

	2. Sample includes school-aged children and young people (age 4-19) 3. Study has clearly defined findings	1. Includes the views/experiences of children and young people with Special Educational Needs 2. Focuses on the children and young people's experiences of school belonging
High	All 3 criteria met (score = 2)	All 2 criteria met (score = 2)
Medium	2 criteria met (score = 1)	1 criteria met (score = 1)
Low	0 or 1 criteria met (score = 0)	0 criteria met (score = 0)

## **Appendix D: Ethics application**



### **COLLEGE OF SOCIAL SCIENCES AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES**

All staff and students within SSIS should use this form; those in Egenis, the Institute for Arab and Islamic Studies, Law, Politics, the Strategy & Security Institute, and Sociology, Philosophy, Anthropology should return it to [ssis-ethics@exeter.ac.uk](mailto:ssis-ethics@exeter.ac.uk). Staff and students in the **Graduate School of Education** should use [ssis-gseethics@exeter.ac.uk](mailto:ssis-gseethics@exeter.ac.uk).

**Before completing this form please read the Guidance document** which can be found at <http://intranet.exeter.ac.uk/socialsciences/ethics/>

<b>Applicant details</b>		
<b>Name</b>	Georgia Lovell	
<b>Department</b>	Graduate School of Education – DEdPsych Programme	
<b>UoE email address</b>	GI353@exeter.ac.uk	
<b>Duration for which permission is required</b>		
Please check the meeting dates and decision information online before completing this form; your start date should be at least one month after the Committee meeting date at which your application will be considered. You should request approval for the entire period of your research activity. Students should use the anticipated date of completion of their course as the end date of their work. Please note that <u>retrospective ethical approval will never be given.</u>		
<b>Start date:</b> 05/10/2020	<b>End date:</b> 01/09/2021	<b>Date submitted:</b> 02/10/2020
<b>Students only</b>		
All students must discuss (face to face or via email) their research intentions with their supervisor/tutor prior to submitting an application for ethical approval. <b>Your application <u>must</u> be approved by your first or second supervisor (or dissertation supervisor/tutor) prior to submission and you <u>MUST</u> submit evidence of their approval with your application, e.g. a copy of an email stating their approval.</b>		
Student number	620015077	
Programme of study	Doctor of Educational Psychology (DEdPsych)	
Name of Supervisor(s) or Dissertation Tutor	Dr Shirley Larkin and Dr Will Shield	

Have you attended any ethics training that is available to students?	Yes, I have taken part in ethics training at the University of Exeter EG the Research Integrity Ethics and Governance: <a href="http://as.exeter.ac.uk/rdp/postgraduateresearchers">http://as.exeter.ac.uk/rdp/postgraduateresearchers</a> OR Ethics training received on Masters courses. If yes, please specify and give the date of the training: <b>Lecture provided by Dr Chris Boyle</b> 13/11/2019
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**Certification for all submissions**

**I hereby certify that I will abide by the details given in this application and that I undertake in my research to respect the dignity and privacy of those participating in this research.**  
I confirm that if my research should change significantly I will seek advice, request approval of an amendment or complete a new ethics proposal. Any document translations used have been provided by a competent person with no significant changes to the original meaning.

**Georgia Lovell**  
Double click this box to confirm certification   
 I confirm that if I travel outside the UK to conduct research I will:  
(a) Obtain [International Travel Insurance](#) from the University of Exeter. (b) Monitor Travel Advice from [Worldaware](#) and the [Foreign & Commonwealth Office \(FCO\)](#) and (c) Complete an [International Travel Risk Assessment](#)

*Submission of this ethics proposal form confirms your acceptance of the above.*

**TITLE OF YOUR PROJECT**

Supporting Sense of School Belonging and Wellbeing for Primary School Children with Social, Emotional and Mental Health Needs: Exploring the Views and Perspectives of Teaching Staff

**ETHICAL REVIEW BY AN EXTERNAL COMMITTEE**

No, my research is not funded by, or doesn't use data from, either the NHS or Ministry of Defence.

If you selected yes from the list above you should apply for ethics approval from the appropriate organisation (the NHS Health Research Authority or the Ministry of Defence Research Ethics Committee). You do not need to complete this form, but you must inform the [Ethics Secretary](#) of your project and your submission to an external committee.

**MENTAL CAPACITY ACT 2005**

No, my project does not involve participants aged 16 or over who are unable to give informed consent (e.g. people with learning disabilities)

If you selected yes from the list above you should apply for ethics approval from the NHS Health Research Authority. You do not need to complete this form, but you must inform the [Ethics Secretary](#) of your project and your submission to an external committee.

**SYNOPSIS OF THE RESEARCH PROJECT**

*Maximum of 750 words.*

The importance of experiencing a sense of school belonging is increasingly being acknowledged (Craggs & Kelly, 2017), with research demonstrating the positive impact of school belonging on a range of outcomes, including positive interactions with teachers and peers, engagement with learning, and emotional wellbeing and self-esteem (Baumeister & Leary, 1995, Kidger et al., 2012 ;Marraccini & Brier, 2017; Prince & Hadwin, 2013). It has been highlighted that there is less research exploring school belonging for pupils with Special Educational Needs (SEN) than their

peers (Dimitrellou & Hurry, 2018). It has also been suggested that further research into school belonging, especially from educational psychologists, has long been called for (Midegen et al., 2019 ;Smedley, 2011).

International data suggests that one in four students do not feel a sense of belonging at school (OECD, 2017). Children with Social Emotional and Mental Health (SEMH) needs have been consistently identified as being amongst the least likely to feel that they belong at school (Cosma & Soni, 2019; Dimitrellou & Hurry, 2018; Midgen, Theodoratou, Newbury, & Leonard, 2019). Enhancing a sense of school belonging for pupils with SEMH difficulties is suggested be important in improving their outcomes (McCoy and Banks, 2012). The finding that children with SEMH needs are amongst the least likely to experience a sense of school belonging suggests that attention on supporting belonging within this group of children is warranted (Midgen et al., 2019). There are also reported to be growing numbers of children with SEMH needs (Office of National Statistics: Special Educational Needs, 2018), further highlighting that research in this area is needed.

Teaching staff can play an important role in building a sense of school belonging. Dimitrellou and Hurry (2018) found that sense of school belonging for children with SEN was associated with perceived positive relationships with teachers and how inclusive they were viewed to be. This perception of teacher relationships was more important for children with SEN than their peers. Children have been found to search for emotional support, trust and feelings of belonging from the adults around them (McMurray, Connolly, Preston-Shoot, & Wigley, 2011). As consistent adults in the classroom, teachers and teaching assistants are well placed to impact school belonging. However, research suggests that school staff often feel ill-resourced and not sufficiently trained to effectively support children with SEN, in particular those with SEMH needs (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; Goodman & Burton, 2010). Given that there appears to be limited research into gathering views on school belonging from the perspectives of the adults supporting children with SEMH needs, I feel it would be beneficial to explore what promotes school belonging and wellbeing for children with SEMH needs from this perspective.

The proposed study therefore seeks to answer the following research questions:

#### Research Aims

- To explore teaching staff's perspectives on supporting school belonging and wellbeing in children with SEMH needs

#### Research Questions

- What are mainstream primary school teaching staff's views and perceptions about supporting children with SEMH needs in the classroom?
- What do mainstream primary school teaching staff who support children with SEMH needs understand by the terms 'school belonging' and 'wellbeing'?
- What do mainstream primary school teaching staff think contributes to a sense of belonging for children with SEMH needs?
- What do mainstream primary school teaching staff think supports school belonging and wellbeing, and what do they think acts as a barrier?

## **INTERNATIONAL RESEARCH**

This research will take place in the UK.

The following sections require an assessment of possible ethical consideration in your research project. If particular sections do not seem relevant to your project please indicate this and clarify why.

## **RESEARCH METHODS**

*This research will not involve any face-to-face contact and will utilise remote methods of data collection.*

This research will adopt qualitative methodology to explore the perspectives of teaching staff in mainstream primary schools on how to support wellbeing and school belonging for children with SEMH needs. Semi-structured interviews have been selected as a data collection method, and thematic analysis has been selected as the data analysis method.

**Sampling:** Between ten and twenty teaching staff will be recruited for this phase of the study. Convenience sampling will be employed. The teaching staff recruited will not necessarily be employed at the same school, although some may be.

**Data collection:** The teaching staff will be interviewed individually, by the researcher, using a semi-structured interview schedule. Tomlinson's (1989) hierarchical focusing approach will be used when developing the interview schedule aiming for a balance between the research agenda and participant's own perspectives. Within the interviews I will aim to explore teaching assistant perspectives on what 'school belonging' means, how they can support school belonging and wellbeing with the children they support and what they think within school supports children with SEMH needs' sense of belonging to school. If relevant I will also explore teaching assistant's lived experience of supporting belonging for the children with SEMH needs. Due to current social distancing restrictions as a result of the COVID-19 global pandemic, the interviews will take place remotely using the online video conferencing platform, Microsoft Teams. The interviews will be expected to last approximately 45 minutes. The audio from these interviews will be recorded and verbatim transcriptions will be made.

**Data analysis:** Transcriptions will be analysed through thematic analysis, a six-phase process that involves data familiarisation, initial coding, theme search, theme review, theme naming, and write-up (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2012, 2013). Thematic analysis has been chosen for its adaptability, in that it can be applied to a variety of theoretical frameworks and can be used to identify themes through deductive and inductive analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Braun and Clarke's (2006) 15-point checklist of criteria for good thematic analysis will be observed. Data analysis will be supported through the use of NVivo software.

**Output:** In addition to the written thesis, the findings of the study may be included in journal articles, academic and/or professional conferences and seminars, as well as professional reports. At this stage in the research, it is not known what the output will be, but as a researcher and professional I will be open to exploring all of the above. Participants will be made aware of the potential outputs and the consent form will seek permission for their obscured data to be used in academic publications, professional reports, as well as presentations and seminars.

Please see below section on possible harm for further discussion on how I intend to minimise harm for participants. I have read the BERA ethical guidelines and will abide by them.

## **PARTICIPANTS**

I expect to recruit 10-20 teaching staff to participate in the study. I will seek to gain informed written consent from all participants. Participants will be recruited according to the following inclusion criteria:

- Participants will be working as a teacher or teaching assistant within a mainstream primary school.
- Participants will be working within a classroom which has at least one child who has been identified as having a primary need of SEMH and in need of extra support through either the SEN register or an EHCP.
- Participants will volunteer to take part in the project and give informed consent prior to participation.

No financial or other incentive will be offered. The research will encourage participation by highlighting the professional and personal benefits of partaking in academic research. For further information about recruitment, please see the section on the voluntary nature of participation below.

## THE VOLUNTARY NATURE OF PARTICIPATION

There is a gap in the research to specifically explore what would support school belonging for children with social, emotional and mental health needs. Research highlights that these children are amongst the most likely to experience low school belonging, demonstrating the need to explore this. The intention is that this research will add to existing research on children with SEN and school belonging and highlight ways in which school belonging can be developed.

The participants, who will all be teaching staff in mainstream primary schools, will be approached through existing contacts that the researcher has made through their role as a trainee educational psychologist. Written consent from the participants will be obtained. If emailing potential participants or schools, I will use my university email address, to preserve confidentiality and to distinguish my professional and academic roles because I am currently on placement in the local authority where the research will likely take place.

*Informed Consent:* Participation is voluntary and fully informed written consent will be sought before any data collection takes place. At the beginning of the interviews I will use a short script informing participants of the voluntary nature of participation, processes around confidentiality and anonymity, the right to withdraw their participation at any point and the right to withdraw their data before the data analysis stage. The consent form will cover confidentiality, anonymity and information regarding the right to withdraw. The researcher will ensure that the participants enter into the study freely and willingly. The participants will be informed of what the study involves via an information sheet, as well as through discussion with the researcher. The researcher will ensure that the participants fully understand what they are agreeing to before they begin data collection. Interviews will be audio recorded to ensure accuracy and participants will be informed of this. At the beginning of the interview I will ask participants if they are happy for me to record them and will also explain that they can choose to stop the recording at any point during the interview.

*Confidentiality:* Anything discussed during the interviews will remain confidential unless there are safeguarding concerns. Concerns will be reported within the school's safeguarding procedures. Before participating in the interview, confidentiality will be discussed with the participants to ensure that they are clear of the confidentiality procedures. The information collected will only be used for the purpose it was collected and I will be aware of participant's rights to access information they provide.

*Anonymity:* All data will be pseudonymised with potentially identifiable information redacted. The identity of the participants will remain confidential in the write-up of the thesis, as well as in any other output resulting from the study, such as conference presentations or seminars. Prior to the interviews the participants will be asked to not use any names or identifying information about the children that they work with.

*Right to withdraw:* The participants will be given the right to withdraw from the research up until the point of data analysis. Within the information sheets it will be emphasised that all participation is voluntary and that consent can be withdrawn at any point up until data analysis. The research will ensure the participants' right to withdraw without explanation or negative impact.

Sample information and consent forms are below which include information relating to confidentiality, anonymity, project information and the right to withdraw at any time.

### **SPECIAL ARRANGEMENTS**

Any participant with additional needs will be accommodated by allowing time for them to complete the interview at their own speed and take breaks if needed.

### **THE INFORMED NATURE OF PARTICIPATION**

As outlined above, the participants will be provided with an information sheet which will support potential participants in deciding whether to participate in the research or not. Among other things, the information sheet will detail the purpose of the research; what participation will involve; the possible benefits and disadvantages of taking part; information about anonymity, confidentiality and withdrawal; how data will be stored; information about the researcher, along with their contact details; as well as information detailing how they can make a complaint if they are unhappy about any aspect of the study (*See 'Information Sheet' section below*).

In addition, at the beginning of the interview will be a short script detailing information about the nature and purpose of the study and emphasising that the participant can choose to leave at any point. As much as possible, the researcher will ensure that the participants involved in the research feel they are equal to the researcher, by explaining that their participation is up to them and that they are free to leave at any time. The researcher will answer any questions which participants have. Because the researcher is currently on placement in the same local authority that the participants will be involved with, the researcher will be mindful of the need to remind participants during the interviews that the research is not conducting in conjunction with the local authority and all information will be kept confidential and anonymous as far as possible.

### **ASSESSMENT OF POSSIBLE HARM**

Given the nature of the research topic, there is a minimal risk of harm to participants which goes beyond the risks encountered in normal life. Furthermore, the study does not involve any deception, the participants will receive detailed information regarding the purpose of the research and what participation involves, informed consent will be sought, and the right to withdraw will be made clear. Teaching staff will not be asked to share about their personal experiences of belonging. The researcher will also remind participants at the start of the interview that their participation is voluntary and they are free to not answer a question or stop the interview at any point. In the unlikely situation that a participant experiences emotional or psychological distress during the interview, they will be free to leave at any time and if appropriate the researcher will signpost the participant to the Education Support Partnership telephone helpline (08000 562561), which can provide them with support. The Education Support Partnership is a UK charity that is dedicated to supporting the mental health and wellbeing of education staff. The Education Partnerships number will also be placed on the participant information sheet. On request, they will be able to view the interview schedule prior to the interviews. Participants will be debriefed following the interview and provided information about the results of the study. If appropriate, participants will be signposted to the relevant support services. At the end of the interview, the participants will be given the opportunity to reflect on the process and provide any feedback.



Although there is a limited risk of harm to participants, particular consideration will be given to confidentiality, anonymity and the storage and processing of data, as breaches which uncover the identity of participants may cause potential emotional or psychological harm.

It should also be noted that the researcher has had an enhanced DBS check, and is familiar with working with people in a psychological capacity through their work as a trainee educational psychologist.

This study poses extremely limited risks to the researcher. The interviews will take place remotely, and the researcher will have access to supervision throughout the process. If anything discussed is distressing to me, I will discuss this with my research supervisors.

## **DATA PROTECTION AND STORAGE**

Individual interviews will take place over the online video conferencing platform, Microsoft Teams, which meets the University of Exeter's data security criteria. The interviews will be audio-recorded using a password-encrypted device. Participants will be informed when recording has begun, has been paused or has been stopped. All participants will be provided with clear and unambiguous information on data protection and storage via the information sheets and will be given access to the University of Exeter's data privacy notice for research. The information sheets and consent forms, as well as the privacy notice, are General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) compliant.

Recordings will then be uploaded to the University of Exeter's secure OneDrive at the earliest opportunity and will be kept for transcription purposes only. Interviews will be transcribed verbatim, with pseudonyms assigned to all participants. Any references made to other people, places, organisations, or other potentially identifying details will be redacted as part of the transcription process. As such, transcription data uploaded to NVivo will be pseudonymised with all identifiable information redacted. Data will be kept confidential unless for some reason I am required to produce it by law or something in the interview causes me concern about potential harm to participants. In the case of the latter, I will first discuss with my supervisor what, if any, further action to take. If it is a safeguarding issue, the procedure in the setting will be followed.

The research's information sheet explains how data will be stored and contains written privacy notice:

- Consent forms will be scanned and uploaded into a separate file on the University of Exeter's One Drive from the password protected spreadsheet and the original forms will be confidentially shredded.
- Digital recordings will be deleted as soon as I have an authoritative transcript of the interview or focus groups.
- I will ensure that any analysis of the data which is not stored on the University of Exeter's secure One Drive only uses the pseudonyms.
- Data that includes confidential details (including contact details) may be kept for up to 5 years so that, if necessary, I can contact participants during my Doctorate. It will be destroyed as soon as my Doctorate is awarded.
- Anonymised data may be stored indefinitely, in line with GDPR guidelines. .

Collection of personal data will be kept to a minimum and will only be gathered if necessary. For instance, personal data in the form of participants' names, gender and email addresses will be collected on password-encrypted devices and will then be stored on a password-encrypted file on the universities' OneDrive. Sensitive data will not be intentionally collected, though may be disclosed by the participants during the interviews. Again, pseudonyms will be assigned to the participants and all potentially identifiable information will be redacted through the transcription process.

All data, including audio-recordings, transcriptions and personal data will be destroyed within five years of the research completion date. Participants' identities will remain confidential and will not be discernible in any output, including academic and/or professional reports, articles, or presentations.

#### **DECLARATION OF INTERESTS**

My doctoral research is funded through a government bursary provided through the Department for Education. This is explained in the information sheet.

#### **USER ENGAGEMENT AND FEEDBACK**

Due to the practicalities of participant review of oral transcripts, this approach is not intended. However, participants will be made aware that they may request a copy of their own interview transcript.


A summary of key findings and access to the final research will be prepared and emailed to participants once the research is completed. They will also be given the opportunity to ask any questions and discuss any issues that arose during the research via email or telephone contact.

#### **INFORMATION SHEET**

*NB A copy of the information sheet is attached alongside this application.*

### RESEARCH STUDY

**Supporting Sense of School Belonging for Primary School Children with Social, Emotional and Mental Health Needs: Exploring the Views and Perspectives of Teaching Staff**

Georgia Lovell is a Trainee Educational Psychologist at the University of Exeter 

#### WHAT IS INVOLVED AND WHEN?

- Interviews with **Teachers and Teaching Assistants** who:
  - Work in a **mainstream primary school**
  - Work in a classroom where at least one child has been identified as having **SEMH needs**.
- One **virtual interview** on Microsoft Teams lasting **no longer than 45 minutes**.
- The interview will take place in **November or December 2020**.

The importance of experiencing a sense of school belonging is increasingly being highlighted, however research suggests that one in four children do not feel a sense of belonging at school. Children with Social Emotional and Mental Health (SEMH) needs have been consistently identified as being amongst the least likely to feel that they belong at school. This research project aims to explore what supports children with SEMH difficulties to experience a sense of school belonging through gathering the perspectives of teachers and teaching assistants.

Please take time to consider the information carefully and to discuss it with family or friends if you wish, or to ask the researcher questions.

**What would taking part involve?**

Taking part in this research will involve answering questions that relate to your views and experiences on supporting children with SEMH needs, thinking about what promotes school belonging and wellbeing for these children and what may act as a barrier. On request, I can provide you with the interview schedule prior to the interviews. The interview will be carried out by myself, a trainee educational psychology doctoral student (TEP) with enhanced DBS clearance through the University of Exeter.

With your consent, the interviews will be audio recorded and transcribed. You can choose to stop the audio recording at any point during the recording. The digital recordings will be deleted as soon as there is a written transcript of the interview and you will be assigned a pseudonym in order to keep your identity confidential. Information you share during the interview will not be shared with any other person. However, if something you discuss relates to an unreported safeguarding concern, it will be passed on to the relevant agencies and organisations with your knowledge.

Version Number: 1.0      Date: 28.09.2020      Page 1 of 2

#### What are the possible benefits and risks of taking part?

Contributing to research can be a rewarding experience and an opportunity to share your perspectives and reflect on belonging and wellbeing in the classroom. There are little risks involved in participating in this research. Participation is voluntary and you are free to leave the interview at any time or choose not to answer any question. If necessary, I can also assist you in accessing support from the Educational Support Partnership, a UK charity dedicated to supporting the mental health and wellbeing of education staff. Their national helpline is 08000 562561 and their website is <https://www.educationsupport.org.uk>.

#### What will happen if I do not wish to continue with the study?

In order to take part in the study, you will be required to give your written consent. You will be able to withdraw your consent up until the point that the data is analysed, which will be approximately six weeks after our interview. You will not have to provide an explanation for withdrawing and there will be no negative consequences for you. Your data will be destroyed and not included in the research.

#### How will my information be kept confidential?

Your data will be collected and stored on password-encrypted files and devices. All data, including audio-recordings, transcriptions and personal data will be destroyed within five years of the research completion. Your identity will remain confidential and will not be identifiable in my doctoral thesis, as well as any publications, reports or presentations that result from the research. Confidentiality will only be broken if there is a safeguarding concern. The information provided will be used for research purposes, and personal data will be processed in accordance with current data protection legislation.

If you have any queries about the University's processing of your personal data that cannot be resolved by me, further information may be obtained from the University's Data Protection Officer by emailing [dataprotection@exeter.ac.uk](mailto:dataprotection@exeter.ac.uk).

This project has been reviewed by the College of Social Sciences and International Studies Research Ethics Committee at the University of Exeter. If you have any questions or concerns about the research that I cannot resolve, you can contact my supervisors, Dr Will Shield ([w.e.shield@exeter.ac.uk](mailto:w.e.shield@exeter.ac.uk)) and Dr Shirley Larkin ([s.larkin@exeter.ac.uk](mailto:s.larkin@exeter.ac.uk)), or the Research Ethics and Governance Manager ([g.m.seymour@exeter.ac.uk](mailto:g.m.seymour@exeter.ac.uk)).

*Thank you for your interest in this project. I would really value and appreciate your participation in this research, as I believe it could support children experiencing social, emotional and mental health difficulties.*

If you are happy to be involved or have any questions, please contact me:

**Email:** [g1353@exeter.ac.uk](mailto:g1353@exeter.ac.uk)    **Phone:** 07539376240


Version Number: 1.0      Date: 28.09.2020      Page 1 of 2

## CONSENT FORM

*NB A copy of the consent form is attached alongside this application.*

### RESEARCH STUDY

**Supporting Sense of School Belonging for Primary School Children with Social, Emotional and Mental Health Needs: Exploring the Views and Perspectives of Teaching Staff**

UNIVERSITY OF EXETER 

I have been fully informed about the aims and purposes of the project. I understand/confirm that:

- I have read the information sheet dated 28.09.2020 (version number 1.0) for the above project. I have had the opportunity to consider the information and ask questions, and have had these answered satisfactorily;
- my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw up until the point that the data is analysed, which will be approximately six weeks after I have given my interview. I understand that I can withdraw without explanation;
- any information which I give will be used solely for the purposes of this research project, which may include publications or academic conference or seminar presentations;
- observed\* interview transcripts may be used for professional reports, academic publications and presentations;
- I will be audio-recorded which will be confidential. This will be deleted as soon as the information is transcribed;
- all information I give will be treated as confidential;
- the researcher will make every effort to preserve my anonymity.

\*Observed means that you, your school and anyone you discuss will not be identifiable.

Name of participant \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_ Signature \_\_\_\_\_

Name of researcher \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_ Signature \_\_\_\_\_

Please contact Georgia Lovell if you would like more information. Email: [g1353@exeter.ac.uk](mailto:g1353@exeter.ac.uk)  
Phone: 07539376240

Version Number: 1.0      Date: 28.09.2020      Page 1 of 1

## SUBMISSION PROCEDURE

Staff and students should follow the procedure below.

**Post Graduate Taught Students (Graduate School of Education):** Please submit your completed application to your first supervisor.

**All other students** should discuss their application with their supervisor(s) / dissertation tutor / tutor and gain their approval prior to submission. Students should submit evidence of approval with their application, e.g. a copy of the supervisors email approval.

**All staff** should submit their application to the appropriate email address below.

This application form and examples of your consent form, information sheet and translations of any documents which are not written in English should be submitted by email to the SSIS Ethics Secretary via one of the following email addresses:

[ssis-ethics@exeter.ac.uk](mailto:ssis-ethics@exeter.ac.uk) This email should be used by staff and students in Egenis, the Institute for Arab and Islamic Studies, Law, Politics, the Strategy & Security Institute, and Sociology, Philosophy, Anthropology.

[ssis-gseethics@exeter.ac.uk](mailto:ssis-gseethics@exeter.ac.uk) This email should be used by staff and students in the Graduate School of Education.

Please note that applicants will be required to submit a new application if ethics approval has not been granted within 1 year of first submission.

## Appendix E: Certificate of ethical approval



**GRADUATE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION**

St Luke's Campus  
Heavitree Road  
Exeter UK EX1 2LU

<http://socialsciences.exeter.ac.uk/education/>

### **CERTIFICATE OF ETHICAL APPROVAL**

Title of Project:

Supporting Sense of School Belonging and Wellbeing for Primary School Children with Social, Emotional and Mental Health Needs: Exploring the Views and Perspectives of Teaching Staff

Researcher(s) name: Georgia Lovell

Co-Investigators:

Supervisor(s): Will Shield, Shirley Larkin

This project has been approved for the period

From: 05/10/2020

To: 01/09/2021

Ethics Committee approval reference: D2021-004

Signature: 

Date: 05/10/2020

(Professor Justin Dillon, Professor of Science and Environmental Education, Ethics Officer)

## Appendix F: Ethics substantial amendment request and approval



### SSIS RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE SUBSTANTIAL AMENDMENT REQUEST

NAME OF PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR

Georgia Lovell

Email: gl353@exeter.ac.uk

Tel: 07539376240

#### **Main Changes:**

Ethics amendment for the use of transcription services for some audio interview data including collection of further participant consent for this.

Following university guidance, a transcription service will be used which:

- Is based in the UK and regulated by GDPR
- Will agree not to transfer data outside of the UK for transcription
- Is registered with the UK Information Commissioners Office or equivalent
- Will not subcontract to another transcription service
- Has experience providing transcription services to academic researchers

When disclosing data to the transcriber I will:

- Upload to the transcriber's secure service or provide a University OneDrive download link that requires username and password access. I will not email interview files to them.
- Pseudonymise and edit audio files, no identifying information (such as name or email address) will be provided to transcribing services. Wherever possible I will guard identities and will not disclose irrelevant data to help to reduce risk.
- Use a dedicated folder to restrict wider access. I will not store audio files in a folder alongside other files that may not be needed by the transcriber if I provide a download link.
- Confirm with the transcriber once the transcription has been performed that all original data has been deleted.
- Remove transcriber's access to your cloud drive once the job is done if it was provided.
- All data, including audio-recordings, transcriptions and personal data will be destroyed within five years of the research completion date.

The privacy and confidentiality of data will be considered paramount. Participants will retain the right to withdraw their interview data within 6 weeks of their interview, if a participant chooses to withdraw their audio interview data will not be shared with transcribers and will be deleted.

Additional consent will be sought from participants whose interview audio data may be shared with a transcribing service. This will take the form of an addition information and consent sheet. This is attached alongside this application. All participants will have the opportunity to choose not to have their interview recording shared with a transcription service and no recordings will be shared without clear written consent from the participant.

#### **Purpose of Change:**

To allow the use of transcription services for some audio interview data.

SSIS Ethics Reference	D2021-004		
Title	Supporting Sense of School Belonging and Wellbeing for Primary School Children with Social, Emotional and Mental Health Needs: Exploring the Views and Perspectives of Teaching Staff		
Start Date	05/10/2020	End Date	01/09/2021

**DESCRIPTION OF REQUESTED AMENDMENT**

*Summarise the main changes proposed in this amendment.*

*Explain the purpose of the changes and their significance for the study.*

**OTHER DOCUMENTS SUBMITTED**

Consent Form  Information Sheet  Amended application form  Certificate

Questionnaire  Other [Click here to enter text.](#)

SIGNED  PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR DATE 05/02/2021

**Admin purposes only**

APPROVED  Date 08/02/2021 Reviewer Dillon

## **Appendix G: Phase two interview schedule**

### **Before the interview:**

- As you know, my name is Georgia, and I am a trainee Child and Educational Psychologist studying at Exeter university. As part of my training, I have to carry out a research project.*
- I have chosen to focus on teaching staff's views and experiences of supporting children with social, emotional and mental health needs, particularly thinking about children's experiences of school belonging.*
- This interview should take approximately 30 - 45 minutes. Please let me know if you want to stop at any time and take a break.*
- Before we start, I just want to highlight some key points from the information sheet:*
  - I will be recording this interview. I will let you know when the recording starts and when it finished. If you would like me to stop recording at any point please let me know. The data from this interview will be kept confidential, on password encrypted devices. When analysing and writing up the findings for my these, you will be given a pseudonym, and any names of people and places will be anonymised.*
  - I will keep a record of your role (check), the year group you work with (check), the number of years that you have been in your role (check) and the rough geographic area you work in (check), but I will not keep a record of which school you work at. Everything you say will be kept confidential from your school, unless there are any safeguarding concerns that arise as a result of this interview, in which case we'll discuss together what actions need to be taken.*
  - If you wish to withdraw, you have six weeks to do so. I'll delete your interview and your data won't be used in my thesis.*
  - If anything that we discuss leaves you feeling unsettled or upset, then please do contact Education Support, whose contact details you can find on the information sheet. They are a brilliant resource for teaching staff wellbeing, and can provide further support, such as counselling sessions.*
- Do you have any questions about the interview or anything you'd like to discuss before we start?*
- Before I start the recording, I just wanted to reassure you that there are no 'right' answers; I am interested in your unique perspective. Similarly, there may be more than one way of interpreting the questions that I'm going to ask you. Please take your time and answer them in your own way.*

<b>PART ONE</b>	Experiences supporting children with SEMH needs	<b>PART TWO</b>	Understanding of school belonging	<b>PART THREE</b>	Supporting school belonging for children with SEMH needs
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**PART ONE**

<p>1. Can you tell me about a time that you've supported a child who has social, emotional and mental health needs?</p> <p>➤ What does the term "SEMH" mean to you? What do you include within SEMH?</p> <p>➤ Share definition from Code of Practice.</p>	<p><input type="checkbox"/> What did you do?</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> What impact did that have on the child?</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> What was the experience like for you?</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> How did you feel about that?</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> What impact did that have on you?</p>
<p>2. Thinking more broadly, can tell me about any other experiences you have of working with children with SEMH needs?</p>	<p><input type="checkbox"/> What was that like for you?</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> How did you feel about that?</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> What impact did that have on you?</p>

**Prompts:**

- Tell me more about that.
- And then?
- Can you expand on that?
- That sounds interesting.
- Returning to something you said just now.
- Can you tell me any more about that?
- Go on

**PART TWO**

<p>3. What does the term 'sense of belonging' mean to you?</p>	
<p>4. What does the term 'school belonging' mean to you?</p>	
<p><i>Share definition of school belonging visual.</i></p> <p>5. Thinking about your experiences as a teacher/TA, what are your thoughts or reflections after reading this definition?</p>	<p><input type="checkbox"/> Was there anything you particularly thought about when reading this definition?</p> <p><input type="checkbox"/> Has this definition changed your thinking about belonging?</p>

**Prompts:**

- Tell me more about that.
- And then?
- Can you expand on that?
- That sounds interesting.

- Returning to something you said just now.*
- Can you tell me any more about that?*
- Go on.*

**PART THREE**

<p>6. Thinking generally about all children, what do you think affects their sense of 'school belonging'?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> <i>Is there anything else that you can think of?</i></li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> <i>Do you think any of these have a bigger impact than others?</i></li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> <i>Within the classroom?</i></li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> <i>Within the wider school?</i></li> </ul>
<p>7. What do you think 'school belonging' looks like for children with SEMH needs? AQ: Do you think children with SEMH needs feel that they belong at school?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> <i>What do you think that is like for them?</i></li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> <i>What makes you think that?</i></li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> <i>How do you think this compares to other children you have worked with?</i></li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> <i>Could you tell me about a specific example when this happened?</i></li> </ul>
<p>8. Thinking about children with SEMH needs, what do you think affects their sense of school belonging?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> <i>What makes you think that?</i></li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> <i>Do you think any of these have a bigger impact than others?</i></li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> <i>Is this different to their peers?</i></li> </ul>
<p>9. What do you think positively supports children with SEMH needs to feel that they belong at school?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> <i>Within the classroom?</i></li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> <i>Within the wider school?</i></li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> <i>Which of these do you think are most supportive?</i></li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> <i>Do you think this may vary for individual children?</i></li> </ul>
<p>10. What do you think acts as a barrier to children with SEMH needs feeling a sense of belonging at school?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> <i>Within the classroom?</i></li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> <i>Within the wider school?</i></li> </ul>
<p>11. Is there anything you think could be done differently to support school belonging for children with SEMH needs?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> <i>Barriers to these?</i></li> </ul>

**Prompts:**

- Tell me more about that.*

- And then?*
- Can you expand on that?*
- That sounds interesting.*
- Returning to something you said just now.*
- Can you tell me any more about that?*
- Go on.*

<b>Ending</b>	Is there anything else that you would like to add or anything you would like to follow up on?
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**After the interview:**

- Thank you so much for allowing me to interview you. It was fantastic to gather your views and explore your experiences of supporting children with SEMH needs. I chose this area of research as children with SEMH needs are consistently highlighted as being amongst the most likely to feel that they don't belong at school and I wanted to find out more about how we can support them.*
- Once I have analysed all the data, I will create a one-page overview of my findings that I will send you, in case you're interested.*
- Please don't forget to contact Education Support if necessary.*
- Lastly, are there any questions you have about my research, or any comments that you'd like to make about the experience of being interviewed?*

**Appendix H: Phase two interview visual**

## School Belonging

The extent to which students:

- feel accepted, respected, included and encouraged by others within their school social environment.
- feel valued, securely connected and that they fit in at school.
- feel that they are an important part of the life and activity of the class.

(Goodenow & Grady, 1993; Greenwood & Kelly, 2019)

## **Appendix I: Recruitment poster**



Version 1.1, Date: 20.10.2020  
Ethics reference: D2021-004

Following the project we are also able to offer participating schools a resource pack on supporting belonging

Please contact **Georgia Lovell** to register interest or if you would like more information.

Email: [gl353@exeter.ac.uk](mailto:gl353@exeter.ac.uk)

### **RESEARCH STUDY**

This doctoral project explores **Primary School Classroom Teachers and Teaching Assistant's** views on supporting school belonging and wellbeing for children with Social, Emotional and Mental Health Needs.

#### **What Is Involved?**

One **virtual interview** on Microsoft Teams lasting **between 30 and 45 minutes**.

The interview will take place in **November 2020, December 2020 or January 2021**.

The interview can take place at a **time convenient for you**.

Children with **SEMH needs** are amongst the most likely to feel that they don't **belong at school**. Your views would be hugely appreciated to help understand how best to support them.

Georgia Lovell is a Trainee Educational Psychologist at the University of Exeter



## Appendix J: Phase two information sheet

### RESEARCH STUDY

Supporting Sense of School Belonging for Primary School Children with Social, Emotional and Mental Health Needs: Exploring the Views and Perspectives of Teaching Staff

Georgia Lovell is a Trainee Educational Psychologist at the University of Exeter



### WHAT IS INVOLVED AND WHEN?

- Interviews with **Teachers and Teaching Assistants** who:
  1. Work in a **mainstream primary school**
  2. Work in a classroom where at least one child has been identified as having **Social, Emotional and Mental Health needs**.
- One **virtual interview** on Microsoft Teams lasting **no longer than 45 minutes**.
- The interview will take place in **November or December 2020**.



Experiencing a sense of school belonging is highlighted as being important, however research suggests that one in four children do not feel a sense of belonging at school. Children with Social Emotional and Mental Health (SEMH) needs have been consistently identified as being amongst the least likely to feel that they belong at school. This research project aims to explore what supports children with SEMH difficulties to experience a sense of school belonging through gathering the perspectives of teachers and teaching assistants.

Please take time to consider the information carefully and to discuss it with family or friends if you wish, or to ask the researcher questions.

#### **What would taking part involve?**

Taking part in this research will involve answering questions that relate to your views and experiences on supporting children with SEMH needs, thinking about what promotes school belonging and wellbeing for these children and what may act as a barrier. On request, I can provide you with the interview schedule prior to the interviews. The interview will be carried out by myself, a trainee educational psychology doctoral student (TEP) with enhanced DBS clearance through the University of Exeter.

With your consent, the interviews will be audio recorded and transcribed. You can choose to stop the audio recording at any point during the recording. The digital recordings will be deleted as soon as there is a written transcript of the interview and you will be assigned a pseudonym in order to keep your identity confidential. Information you share during the interview will not be shared with any other person. However, if something you discuss relates to an unreported safeguarding concern, it will be passed on to the relevant agencies and organisations with your knowledge.

**What are the possible benefits and risks of taking part?**

Contributing to research can be a rewarding experience and an opportunity to share your perspectives and reflect on belonging and wellbeing in the classroom. There are little risks involved in participating in this research. Participation is voluntary and you are free to leave the interview at any time or choose not to answer any question. If necessary, I can also assist you in accessing support from the Educational Support Partnership, a UK charity dedicated to supporting the mental health and wellbeing of education staff. Their national helpline is 08000 562561 and their website is <https://www.educationsupport.org.uk>.

**What will happen if I do not wish to continue with the study?**

In order to take part in the study, you will be required to give your written consent. You will be able to withdraw your consent up until the point that the data is analysed, which will be approximately six weeks after our interview. You will not have to provide an explanation for withdrawing and there will be no negative consequences for you. Your data will be destroyed and not included in the research.

**How will my information be kept confidential?**

Your data will be collected and stored on password-encrypted files and devices. All data, including audio-recordings, transcriptions and personal data will be destroyed within five years of the research completion. Your identity will remain confidential and will not be identifiable in my doctoral thesis, as well as any publications, reports or presentations that result from the research. Confidentiality will only be broken if there is a safeguarding concern. The information provided will be used for research purposes, and personal data will be processed in accordance with current data protection legislation.

If you have any queries about the University's processing of your personal data that cannot be resolved by me, further information may be obtained from the University's Data Protection Officer by emailing [dataprotection@exeter.ac.uk](mailto:dataprotection@exeter.ac.uk).

This project has been reviewed by the College of Social Sciences and International Studies Research Ethics Committee at the University of Exeter. If you have any questions or concerns about the research that I cannot resolve, you can contact my supervisors, Dr Will Shield ([w.e.shield@exeter.ac.uk](mailto:w.e.shield@exeter.ac.uk)) and Dr Shirley Larkin ([s.larkin@exeter.ac.uk](mailto:s.larkin@exeter.ac.uk)), or the Research Ethics and Governance Manager ([g.m.seymour@exeter.ac.uk](mailto:g.m.seymour@exeter.ac.uk)).

Thank you for your interest in this project. I would really value and appreciate your participation in this research, as I believe it could support children experiencing social, emotional and mental health difficulties.

If you are happy to be involved or have any questions, please contact me:

**Email:** [gl353@exeter.ac.uk](mailto:gl353@exeter.ac.uk)

## Appendix K: Phase two consent form

### RESEARCH STUDY

Supporting Sense of School Belonging for Primary School Children with Social, Emotional and Mental Health Needs: Exploring the Views and Perspectives of Teaching Staff



I have been fully informed about the aims and purposes of the project. I understand/confirm that:

1. I have read the information sheet dated 28.09.2020 (version number 1.0) for the above project. I have had the opportunity to consider the information and ask questions, and have had these answered satisfactorily;
2. my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw up until the point that the data is analysed, which will be approximately six weeks after I have given my interview. I understand that I can withdraw without explanation;
3. any information which I give will be used solely for the purposes of this research project, which may include publications or academic conference or seminar presentations;
4. obscured\* interview transcripts may be used for professional reports, academic publications and presentations;
5. I will be audio-recorded which will be confidential. This will be deleted as soon as the information is transcribed;
6. all information I give will be treated as confidential;
7. the researcher will make every effort to preserve my anonymity.

*\*Obscured means that you, your school and anyone you discuss will not be identifiable.*

Name of participant

*Georgia Lovell*

Date

*11.11.2020*

Signature

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads 'Georgia'.

Name of researcher

Date

Signature

Please contact Georgia Lovell if you would like more information. **Email:** [gl353@exeter.ac.uk](mailto:gl353@exeter.ac.uk)

**Phone:** 07539376240

**Appendix L: Transcript example with initial annotations**

1

**Teacher 3 Interview Transcription**

**Role:** Teacher  
**Time in Role:** 3 years  
**Year Group or Key Stage:** Reception/KS1  
**Geographic location:** South East  
**Interview Time:** 32 minutes

**Interviewer**  
 Participant (3)

**So the first question is if you're able to tell me about a time that you've supported a child who has social, emotional and mental health needs.**

Yes. So in my first year of teaching I had a young boy that had a lot of trauma in his life.

Okay.

He was a looked after child as well. He had a one to one support throughout, but he wasn't really in class that often. When he was, he just used to have massive meltdowns and kind of throw furniture everywhere and just things like that. Did you want me to kind of explain how I supported him or?

That would be brilliant if you don't mind.

So I used to obviously liaise quite closely with the one to one. But he wasn't so focused on learning, we were trying to nurture him a bit more now. And then throughout the year, he kind of progressed to doing 45 minutes in class without a one to one, which was amazing. I think that he used to just kind of join for a little bit, he couldn't even sit on the carpet nothing. And we'd often just go off and like look at emotions and how to deal with his anger because that was his big thing, he just couldn't control that anger. But yeah, it was quite, for my first year of teaching is like "oh I don't really know what to, what I should be doing or things like that". Yeah, that's one child that I had. I've dealt with children with autism as well. So, I've had a child that was going through a diagnosis of autism, so he just used to, it was quite tricky, because we didn't know if it was just the behaviour or if it was just the autistic behaviour, because he definitely sometimes would play up to it. But he used to have me quite a lot and we just used to focus with him, he used to get quite overwhelmed by writing and things like that, so we used to just have to kind of break it down for him, give them some time to kind of let off his energy, run around the playground, come back in, do some work again, go off again. But yeah, that's as much as I can remember really from my experience.

No that's brilliant. So, if we think back to that first child, when you're in your first year of teaching, what was the kind of experience of supporting him like for you?

Um, it was quite stressful. I think because I got told about what happened in his life. Yeah. Like coming away from that meeting, it made you feel really sad and almost like really responsible as well. And because you had this child that was so young, that had gone through so much, and you kind of just wanted to do the best by him. So it was quite overwhelming at times, and quite stressful. But school did support me with like how to help him. And some days, it was quite hard because you thought he was taking it out on you or you weren't quite building a relationship, because he found it difficult to build relationships. And even now he's moved on to a different group and I see him around, he's not like other children where he like say "Oh, hello" or whatever. And so feels a bit weird that you work so hard with the child, and then you don't feel like you've made much of a difference. So yeah.

And was that when you were teaching in year one?

Yeah.

So he was quite young and sort of new to the school.

Yeah, he was about six or seven at the time.

*Handwritten annotations:*

- perception of what SEMH means / includes.
- challenging early experiences.
- New to teaching
- positive of seeing more progress
- feeling inexperienced and out of depth.
- unsure how to support
- feeling sad and emotional
- due to child's life experience
- motivation to help / support child
- support from others being important
- feeling inexperienced? Or just unable to make impact?
- view as different.
- stress
- hard, impacted her.
- difficult to cope with
- feel overwhelmed and out of depth
- autism inclusion within SEMH for participants



And just thinking about his behaviour and presentation in class, what was that like on a kind of day to day?

It was very up and down → hard to predict.

So unpredictable.

Yeah. It was mainly just he had down days really. It was very rare that you saw him quite happy and comfortable in school. So he really struggled to actually come into school. Like I said before, when he was in he just kind of had these massive anger issues. And would just lash out at anyone and everyone really and would throw things at people and just didn't really have a care about what he was actually doing. Yeah.

Seeing child struggle

That's great. Thank you. And if we talk a little bit about kind of the phrase "SEMH". Now what does that mean to you? So social, emotional and mental health needs.

Yeah. So it's quite interesting because that's why I checked with you about what it includes because I've never really heard that term at all. We just have to use SEN. I think that's to me, I was like "oh what does that like kind of involve", but when you break it down, it kind of involves everything I guess. And, and to me, maybe it involves children that have a diagnosis of something but also the children that don't, especially with the mental side of it, there's definitely children that come in that struggle with mental issues as well and their wellbeing and things like that, which is a school which we actually try and prioritise really is the wellbeing and think a bit more about that.

Not familiar with term

wide/broad definition

prevalence of mental health?

Yeah, absolutely, that's really interesting. I'm just gonna share a definition from the code of practice of this. To be honest, there's quite a lot of definitions out there and this is just about the code of practice say but its quite similar to what you said, really. So they say that children may experience a wide range of social and emotional difficulties that manifest in different ways. These may include being withdrawn or isolated, as well as displaying challenging, disruptive and disturbing behaviour. They then talk about underlying mental health difficulties, such as anxiety, depression, and they also talk about ADHD and attachment disorders. So I'm guessing attachment is probably quite important to the first boy that you mentioned. Yeah, it's interesting that and schools kind of talk about SEND more broadly.

not only children with diagnosis

Yeah, I don't think I've ever come across the term SEMH, really, at all. And it's weird, because like that first boy, you really put him down as an SEN because you kind of think that's something like autistic or ADHD or something like that. Whereas his definitely was more from a behavioural perspective, from the from the wellbeing side.

due to experience possibly?

Yeah, definitely. But like you said it if you can't get the wellbeing side sorted, then the academics is a struggle. That's great, thank you. So just thinking a little bit more broadly than the children you've already mentioned. It's okay if there isn't anyone, I was just wondering if there's anything else about your experience of working with this type of children that you could tell me?

Could you kind of rephrase that if that's okay.

So, if we're thinking thoughts about the first boy and what it was, like supporting him, what was it like supporting the other children that you mentioned, so I think it was a girl with autism?

It was another boy with autism yeah.

So, what was it like supporting him?

Challenging for her

It was a bit better because I've kind of had a relationship with him a bit more. It was quite difficult, again, to say, to kind of understand him, because he was going through the diagnosis at the time. So, when I first had him, he wasn't autistic. And then I had to fill out the information and it came back as that he was. So it was quite tricky to understand him when he was actually going through something that was really overwhelming, or when he was going through something that he was just being silly and just acting out just to be a bit

Importance of relationship in experience supporting

→ hard to know how to support?

suggesting out of depth?

annoying really. But he kind of took up so much of my time and the class that he was in, so the whole cohort that he was in, lots of other children had other needs as well.

time as a barrier to effective support?

Okay.

And to be in a class all together. So it was a very, very difficult year because he was in the same class as this other boy that I've mentioned.

need to balance with supporting rest of class

Yeah.

So he was kind of affected by his environment as well. But, yeah, it was challenging, but then it was quite rewarding seeing him do and achieve different things. But compared to the other boy, he had a lot more academic focus. So it wasn't really well being, his was more just helping him not have autism as a barrier to his learning.

Balance of experience being positive and negative

rewarding seeing him achieve -> positive aspect of experience

Great, thank you for sharing your experiences about that. So we're now gonna move away from SEMH towards belonging. And so these questions are a little bit open, so we're gonna see how they go. But what does the term belonging mean to you?

I think it's when so specifically looking at children in school I guess, its that they tfeel involved in the school environment, that they belong in the classroom, that they belong with everybody else around them, like they don't compare themselves to other children, and also that they feel belonged at home with the family. It doesn't really matter what kind of family that is because I've had lots of children that again, like I said, were looked after by guardians and things like that, but they just feel like they've got a sense of a home really.

Involvement? Inclusion? home and school

Yeah, definitely. So that sort of sense of belonging at school, but then also at home as well, needing both.

Yeah.

So my next question was about school belonging, but we've kind of discussed that. So, I'm just gonna share a definition of what school belonging means in the literature. So, there's lots of definitions out there, I just quite liked this one because it's quite a nice easy read I guess. I'll just give you a minute to read that through.

That's a good definition.

Was there anything that kind of comes to mind when you were reading it? Any children you've worked with or anything?

I don't know if there's any like specific children that come to mind, but I think it's quite nice that I know that the school that I'm in, and the teachers that I work with, this is quite like a key part of what we do. And I think people often forget that, that we don't just like teach English and Maths or wherever, and that our whole, like school vision and values and things like that, really tries to make all children feel that they belong. And like feel valued and connected. Yeah, just feel that they're, that they're, they're important as well.

school ethos/ whole school?

Oh, that's so good that its coming from a sort of school wide level and you've got that sort of support from leadership.

school belonging link to feeling important

Yeah.

I'm just gonna stop presenting. So, if we sort of talk a little bit more about school belonging. Just sort of thinking generally about all the children in your class, what do you think affects their school belonging?

And I think sometimes it can be that they can't access what we're learning. Yeah. That really prevents them from feeling involved. Things like that. I think also, it does depend on their home life as well. So if they have a stable home life, then I think they struggled to kind of fit in and feel comfortable at school. And I think it could depend on the staff that they're working with, if they built relationships with them. So I'm quite lucky that in

Academic barrier - access

Importance of feeling involved

staff relationship - important role

time is an enabling factor for school belonging

reception, where I am now is so relaxed, and so much time to kind of get to know the children. But it is, yeah, it just makes them all feel really valued. And yeah, I think that's probably about it.

No, that's brilliant. So we've got a being able to access the learning their home life, and then their relationships with staff, with their teachers. Do you think any of these have a sort of bigger impact than others?

I think probably the relationships one, because I think even if their home life isn't stable and they don't have relationships at home, at least if they've got one really good relationship, then that helps them to feel like yeah, that they're belonging to someone or to something.

Yeah, so just having that one key relationship, even if their friends or things like that aren't quite as good.

Yeah, I think even if it's not adults, it could mean with peers as well that they can feel connected to.

Yeah. Do you think peer relationships have an impact on belonging at school?

I think at the young age that I work with, particularly, it means the world to them when they've got a friend or their world comes crashing down when something happens with their friends. So yeah, I do think like peer to peer relationships do have a great impact as well.

Okay, so if we're speaking about children with social, emotional needs, so potentially the children you talked about right at the start. Do you think they feel like they belong at school?

I think the first one not so much. I think there may have been points when I had him that he did kind of feel like oh, yeah, maybe I do belong to something but his was such like a serious case that it almost, he had so much trauma that it's how do you get a child that young age to kind of come back from that. But the other child, I definitely think he had a good home life, I meant he had separated parents, but he had a really nice relationship with his mum and his dad. And although he kind of acted up at school, I think deep down he does really enjoy coming in. And again, he had lots of friends, whereas the other boy didn't have any friends because he was quite isolated from everyone else. Yeah. Yeah.

So that's sort of different experiences of home life and friendships really making the difference. Thinking back to the first child, what do you think the school day was like for him?

I think it was quite overwhelming. He, I don't know if it's when I had had him, but he kind of went on a reduced timetable and he was sometimes doing half days. There were particular points in the day where he'd kind of break down because he, it was something like phonics where he kind of knew he couldn't do it, and he couldn't access it, but he kind of still had to kind of do it in his own way. So it was a struggle to kind of get anything out of him. But then that's what was quite nice that he had this one to one, that he'd go off and do other things that that were more important and build a relationship with them. But he did end up going through quite a few different adults and that upset him, so it was kind of uncertainty in the day, so sometimes he'd have one adult in the morning and then a different adult in the afternoon. And he'd ask me "who have I got" and sometimes I wouldn't know and they hadn't arranged who was with him and that would really upset him. And so I think it was kind of school was overwhelming but it's also quite uncertain. And although we have quite a routine of what we do when, everyday is so different that you just don't know what's gonna happen.

So that not being able to predict his day is quite important.

Yeah, definitely.

So if we continue just thinking about him, just because he's who've talked about a lot. What do you think affected his belonging at school?

I think the more time he had out of class, I think that affected probably the most. So he had quite a family in school because he comes from a traveller community.

Relationships as predominant factor for school belonging.

viewed to mitigate child's home-life.

Strength of support in time + ability to build relationship with the child.

Being excluded or outside of the classroom is difficult.

Beauty of positive impact on child eg feel valued and listened to.

Both peers and adults. peer relationships crucial to belonging at school.

Trauma/life experiences barrier to belonging.

Can't access learning. Lack of routine is challenging for child with SEMH. Not consistent. Can't make predictable. relates to SEMH predictability?

Isolation from class as a consequence of child's needs  
Negative impact on school belonging

Yeah.

So he did know quite a few people, but he didn't really get to socialise with them much because his school day was so different to everyone else's and it was great that he had one to one support, but then it's also not so great, because he's just taken away from everything else. And I think he could tell that he was different from everyone else. For them, which is quite nice to see at the end of the year when I had him, like I said before, he had he managed to sit in for 45 minutes doing something. And that was with me teaching him not even his one to one, which is really good. But yeah, I think him being out in class just didn't really help him really.

View/feel are different from peers  
↓  
barrier.

No, he's maybe feeling quite separate to his peers and to this class overall. And what kind of things was he doing when he was out of classes, interventions or?

At the beginning it was more just keeping him calm and doing things of his own interest. So it might just be like playing games in the hall with a ball. Different things like that, and then eventually it would come on to the whole going through emotions and talking through that and then every so often, he'd kind of try to access what we were doing in class. So you'd go off and do like the worksheet we were doing or the writing that we were doing. So it was quite varied but I'd say more often it was just more relationship building than academics.

And what was his relationships like with the other children in the class?

Within the class he was in, not so great because I think the children often feared him. And because when the did see him, he'd be like, throwing over tables and all sorts. But I think we kind of had discussions with them to kind of say, this is why he does what he does and things and I think they understood. But I think again, because his timetable was so different he often didn't want to come out to play with everyone. So he didn't really make many friends within his actual class.

different needs to peers.

key impact

Yeah, so it was more the kind of existing friendships from outside of school.

Yeah.

Which I guess it's still important but if they're not in his class then he's still a little bit isolated.

adults play the role in supporting friendships  
peer relationships are negatively impacted by child's SEMH needs

And he didn't have that belonging then either.

No, no. I guess he potentially might have had a good relationship with whoever it was taking him out of class. But maybe not a sort of connection to the classroom or anyone in there.

Not feeling belongs.

Yeah. And I think that's why, like I said before, I found it hard to kind of hard to build a relationship with him because I felt like I just didn't really know him because I never saw him. And again, he never really saw me. Yeah, it was tricky.

Yeah that is tricky, I guess especially when you're sort of new to teaching and you've got presumably 30 other children that also want your attention and are in the classroom.

Yeah, yes definitely.

Great, so if we sort of think on the positive side now, what do you think positively supports children with social and emotional needs to feel like they belong?

I think having daily interactions with staff, so we have, our priority in school is with our PPE children we have five daily interactions with an adult. So I think that's really key that, again, it's trying to have interaction with, so if they had a one to one they had that interaction but also with their main class teacher and other teachers around or the head teacher and things like that. But I think also having key interactions with children in that class. So the second boy that I had with autism, he made good relationships in class. I think breaking it down for their support where we prioritise academics, there was no point doing learning with them if that wasn't what was going to help them. I think having the flexibility to be able to go through the well-being side of things, I think that's really great. And although school has quite a lot of pressure on data and things like that,

Being outside of class also impacting on his teacher relationships and thus belonging

positive impact of relationships on school belonging

flexibility of support - relating to wellbeing but school pressures on academics.

these children kind of, were kind of excluded from those outcomes, which is sometimes a bit like, "Oh it's a shame because if they've worked really hard they don't often get values for what they've done". But it was also quite good, because then they didn't have the pressure of having to kind of keep up with everyone else.

**Yeah so is that academic outcomes that you're talking about them being excluded from?**

Yeah, yeah. So our academic data. And often, I think, I don't know this from my experience, because I never did it. But I know some teachers if they've got someone coming in to watch them or observe them, often that child that's quite difficult would often kind of disappear and not be there.

That's interesting.

Yes. But I mean, I think the main thing is just that we had time to kind of nurture their needs.

Yeah, that emotional side.

Yeah.

**And did you have much support from anyone about how to support kind of children with extra needs?**

Yeah, so I often went to our SENCo at school. It was quite difficult because her of her role, she's the only one that we have that does what she does and our school has a lot of children with SEN or SEMH so we've got a lot more, we've got more average than the rest of the schools in that area.

Oh, okay.

So I'd go to her for further support and she'd be really great but then I'd also know that she's got quite a lot of other children to have to kind of deal with. And often, no one really came to kind of see how they were getting on in class. So, the first boy was known about across the whole school, I think he was the most, I can't think what the word was, but I think it was the most vulnerable child that we had in the entire school. Whereas the second boy with autism, he wasn't often looked at or observed. So I felt like I was explaining stuff to people, but they didn't quite understand. And they'd be like, "oh, try this, try this" but without actually understanding that child.

Yeah.

So I did feel supported but it was tricky because it was just more verbal support than in, seeing what it was like, and then kind of giving me action points from that.

**Yeah, and I wonder if that's time or like you said, if they've got just so many children to get through.**

Yeah. Yeah, and I think it depends, so this boy that we had with autism, I think he was kind of lower down the list of priority which is a shame. And I think also, some people didn't quite believe that he was autistic. So he ended up going through a private diagnosis because school didn't quite believe that he was. So I think there's still a few staff that were a bit like "is he actually or is he just kind of playing up and is it behaviour?"

**So difficult to differentiate, but I guess that's why they do the assessments.**

Yeah.

**People that are really qualified to do them.**

Yeah, definitely.

**But then he got the diagnosis. And was there sort of more support following that?**

Impact possible relate to earlier point about child being excluded from the classroom?

time again as enabler?

challenges getting support needed.

perceived by or not what F was expecting hoping for.

Important that she feels listened to + that others understand the situation.

Accessing external support important

who working with SEMH

Not really. Like I said, because of all the other children we had, he kind of just was left a little bit, but I knew I could always go for support and they did give me advice on ways to work with him. But he kind of got the diagnosis closer to the end of the year that I had him. But I know the support continued up until his next class with his new teacher and as a school we create lots of different kind of target plans and stuff for them so we have individual education plans where they've got targets to work through throughout the year and things like that. And I was supported with kind of how to do that best for those particular children. So that was really helpful.

→ positive effect of support

Yeah, that sounds really helpful. So just kind of returning to school belonging. So we've talked about what affects school belonging, and sort of what positively helps children to feel like they belong. I'm just thinking on the kind of negative flip side, what do you think are the barriers to children with social and emotional needs feeling like they belong at school?

child's needs as barrier

I think it's sometimes the understanding of how to build a relationship. So particularly going back with children that maybe don't have such a nice home life, they don't have anything to model off of how to kind of interact with adults, but also children. So I think that's a huge barrier. I think also like the communication, so they might not, so the first child he couldn't communicate how he was feeling or what was wrong. So that can be a huge barrier if they can't really deal with their own emotions, let alone talk to someone else about it.

home life as barrier - relate to models.

Yeah, definitely,

Trying to think if there's anything else, I think those are probably the two main things is like the whole relationship and communication.

→ child's needs as a barrier

- emotionally and within communication.

Yeah, so building those relationships with others. And then is that kind of communication of feelings or just in general?

Probably more so feelings, but I think in general as well if they can't communicate as well as other children, then yeah they're just going to really struggle to kind of feel like they belong. And I think also, if they were quite wary of if they had a diagnosis, that they knew that they were different. And I think the boy with autism, because he kind of got diagnosed throughout the year I had him, I could kind of see how he knew now that he had this diagnosis, but didn't know what that kind of meant and he knew that he was different to other children but didn't quite know why he was different to other children. So I think that was quite tricky for him to feel belonged in the class.

child feeling that they're different is a barrier to belonging.

→ alongside difficulty understanding diagnosis.

Yeah, that must be really difficult to manage if you're kind of five or six and you've got this big diagnosis which has probably been going on a year, I'd guess with the waiting list.

Yeah.

Did you notice any differences in his behaviours after the diagnosis?

I don't think so no. I think in a way, it did kind of get worse. But that could have, I don't know why, but that could have been with the whole he knew that he was different so was kind of acting out. But yeah, I think that's why school didn't really seem to think that he was autistic because they thought a lot of it was behaviour and it seemed to be that there was a lot more autistic traits happening at home and less so in school. And then when it did come through with the diagnosis, I'd say it was more apparent. And his behaviour got worse. Yeah again, I can't I can't really say why.

Of course, interesting. And so we're onto the last question and this is a little bit kind of blue sky thinking so maybe not quite as realistic as the other questions. I was just wondering if there's anything that you think schools could do differently to support belonging for children with these needs?

School ethos - important to value wellbeing

I think the school that I'm currently in with us having more children on average with needs, we place quite a high priority on the well-being side of things, which I think is amazing. But I know from experience of other schools and my placements and things that they don't really have that as a priority, and it's a bit of a shame, they just kind of send off SEN children or children with well-being issues they don't kind of give the time. They

→ giving more time.

→ impacts belonging for SEMH children.

Not emphasising wellbeing or mental health. Participant  
↑ feels should be.

just more see it as a nuisance in a way, which is really such a shame. Could you repeat the question again, please?

Of course, I can, no you answered it brilliant. So, I was just asking if there's anything you think schools in general could do differently to support belonging?

Yeah, I think like I said my school does a brilliant job but it kind of comes from outside of the schools as well. So, we're part of like an academy trust so our school does a really good job of it but then if you've got people higher up than you that are caring more about the data of your school and what Ofsted are going to think and different things like that, then it's not really helpful and supportive to as children.

external factors.

Yeah, definitely its interesting to think about it from that perspective, of the kind of academic focus versus the wellbeing side. But it sounds like your school are doing a great job in supporting blogging and wellbeing which is brilliant. So that's the end of the question. Thank you so much. Is there anything you'd like to ask me or anything you'd like to add?

→ Negative barrier of academic and data pressures on the school.

I don't think so no.

So, the reason I've chosen this area is because there's a lot of research suggesting that children with social and emotional needs don't like school, they don't feel that they belong at school and they just generally have quite a difficult time. And so I wanted to explore from teaching staff's perspective what it's like to teach these children, and also what they think sort of helps them.

Yeah.

So I've now got to write it all up as my thesis and I'm hoping to make a one page summary which I can send out to you if you'd like to see the kind of results and what other people have said, but that won't be so like February, March time I don't think.

That would be really interesting yeah.

And was the interview okay for you, sort of your experience of it?

Yeah, no, it's absolutely fine. It's just, it's quite tricky, because it's so broad. And then you're just trying to think of stuff that you've had in the past. But yeah, I thought it was really good so thank you.

## Appendix M: Transcript sample with coding (teacher)

Coding Density	Transcript	Emotional Regulation as SEMH
	Yeah.	
	<b>I'm just gonna stop presenting. So, if we sort of talk a little bit more about school belonging. Just sort of thinking generally about all the children in your class, what do you think affects their school belonging?</b>	
	And I think sometimes it can be that they can't access what we're learning. Yeah. That really prevents them from feeling involved. Things like that. I think also, it does depend on their home life as well. So if they have a stable home life, then I think they struggled to kind of fit in and feel comfortable at school. And I think it could depend on the staff that they're working with, if they built relationships with them. So I'm quite lucky that in reception, where I am now is so relaxed, and so much time to kind of get to know the children. But it is, yeah, it just makes them all feel really valued. And yeah, I think that's probably about it.	<p>Not understanding the work</p> <p>Accessing learning</p> <p>Impact on rest of class</p> <p>Home life</p>
	<b>No, that's brilliant. So we've got a being able to access the learning their home life, and then their relationships with staff, with their teachers. Do you think any of these have a sort of bigger impact than others?</b>	
	I think probably the relationships one, because I think even if their home life isn't stable and they don't have relationships at home, at least if they've got one really good relationship, then that helps them to feel like yeah, that they're belonging to someone or to something.	
	<b>Yeah, so just having that one key relationship, even if their friends or things like that aren't quite as good.</b>	
	Yeah, I think even if it's not adults, it could mean with peers as well that they can feel connected to.	
	<b>Yeah. Do you think peer relationships have an impact on belonging at school?</b>	
	I think at the young age that I work with, particularly, it means the world to them when they've got a friend or their world comes crashing down when something happens with their friends. So yeah, I do think like peer to peer relationships do have a great impact as well.	Peer Relationships
	<b>Okay, so if we're speaking about children with social, emotional needs, so potentially the children you talked about right at the start. Do you think they feel like they belong at school?</b>	
	I think the first one not so much. I think there may have been points when I had him that he did kind of feel like oh, yeah, maybe I do belong to something but his was such like a serious case that it almost, he had so much trauma that it's how do you get a child that young age to kind of come back from that. But the other child, I definitely think he had a good home life, I meant he had separated parents, but he had a really nice relationship with his mum and his	
		<p>Peer Relationships</p> <p>Staff relationships</p> <p>Feeling Supported</p> <p>School belonging experience for SEMH</p>



## Appendix N: Transcript sample with coding (TA)

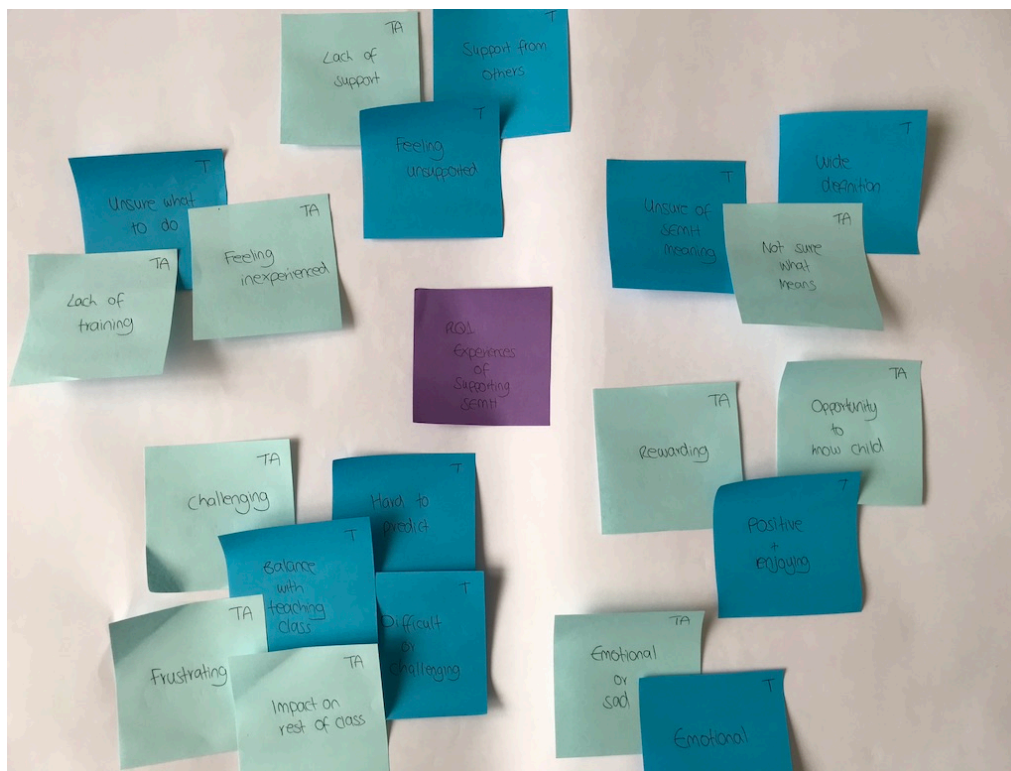
Feeling secure	
Emotional or sad	
Opportunity to know the child very well or build up relationships	
Included	
Can't access learning	
Unpredictable	
Communication difficulty	
Outside of class	
Ownership in the classroom	
Trial and Error	
	<u>Adult relationships</u>
Feeling inexperienced and lack of training	
	<u>Peer relationships</u>
	<u>Communication</u>
Reassurance	
	<u>School ethos</u>
Adult relationships	
SEMH experience of school belonging	
What is SEMH	
Home life	
Peer Relationships	
Coding Density	

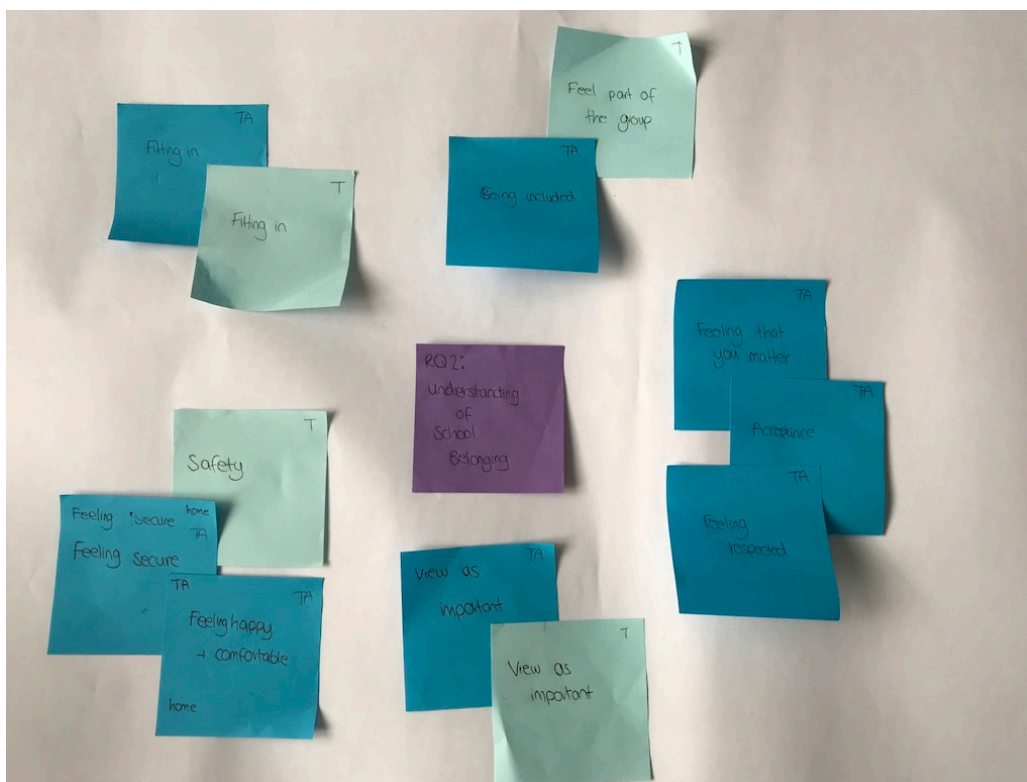
<p>most things together helped him to just feel that sense of belonging, along with just the fact that by year 2 the maturity has kicked in. When you get to year two you're the top of the school because we're an infant school so you're then the big people and you're then the example for little people in school because you're as high as it gets kind of thing. And I think all of those things really, really helped him to be to feel a much, much bigger sense of belonging when he was sort of at the upper end of the school.</p> <p><b>So, lots of things combining together. Great, so we've talked about this quite a bit already so feel free to just give me the kind of highlights or the top three or whatever you like really. But I'm just wondering what you think really positively supports children with social and emotional needs to feel that they belong at school?</b></p> <p>I think finding their voice, allowing them to use their voice and teaching them that its really important to use their voice. Because then if there's stuff they do or don't like, to be able to say "no, that's not okay" or "I don't like that". That helps them then to advance that into what is it that I do like and then explore that conversation with other people and then with their peers, and without that conversation with their peers that's the bit that makes them feel like they belong isn't it really.</p> <p><b>Yeah.</b></p> <p>I think the team knowing really well those children and being able to share their ideas from a staff point of view because then things that you know need to happen the following day or the following week to help that child feel like they belong in something because they sat back and didn't feel like could get involved. That really, really helps if everybody can give consistency.</p> <p><b>Consistency yeah.</b></p> <p>And also knowing and supporting the friendships that are there because at the end of the day we don't get on with everybody you know as humans we don't. So if there are people who are never going to get on and feel part of a team or a good partnership then they're never going to play together but they're also never going to work well together. So that then effects what they're doing work wise and that can massively influence how much you belong. And I think as well from a wider point of view, like we were saying about school actually, the whole school feeling like they're a big team and they all work really well together for the bigger purpose so things like their work being up all over and different classes being able to go and read in other classes and support younger readers. That kind of stuff gives people a real sense of belonging that actually this is our school we own it and we can make it the best place it can be so yeah all of those things together I would say.</p> <p><b>Yeah, that's brilliant. So many different points there. I'm just thinking on the less positive flip side, what do you think acts as a barrier for children with social, emotional and mental health needs to feel that sense of belonging?</b></p>	
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## Appendix O: Phase two post it note visuals

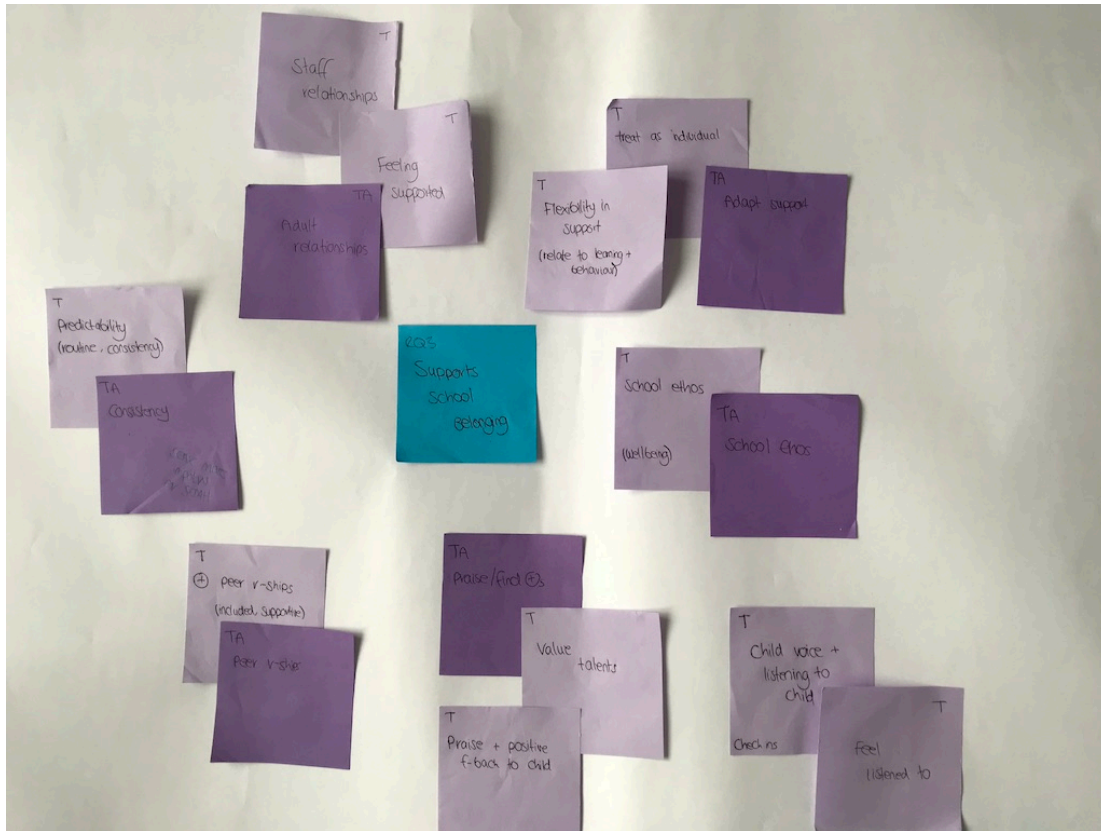
### Research question one:



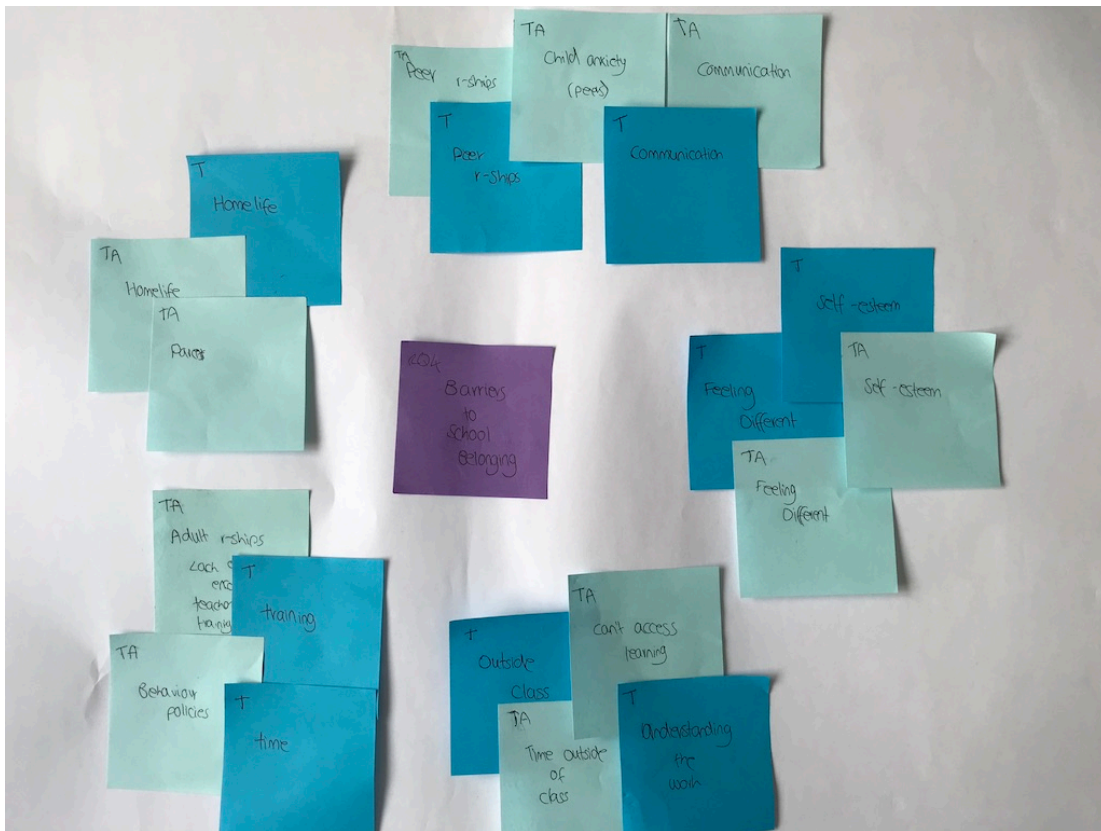
### Research question two:



Research question three:



Research question four:



## Appendix P: Phase two theme and codes table

<b>Research Question One</b>		
<b><u>Initial coding</u></b>	<b><u>Emerging themes</u></b>	<b><u>Final theme and sub themes</u></b>
Challenging (TA)	Challenging and difficult <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Frustrating</li> <li>- Hard</li> </ul>	<b>Challenging and difficult</b> Balancing time and feeling 'torn' Hard to understand child Feelings of frustration
Difficult or challenging experience (T)		
Frustrating (TA)		
Academic pressures making hard (T)	Difficulties supporting whole class <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Academic pressure</li> <li>- Difficulty giving everyone necessary support</li> </ul>	
Balance with class (T)		
Impact on rest of class (TA)		
Impact on rest of class (T)		
Hard to understand him (T)	Hard to understand child	
Unpredictable (TA)	Hard to predict	
Unpredictable (T)		
Emotional or sad (TA)	Emotional <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Feeling sad</li> <li>- Feelings fluctuating</li> <li>- Feeling ineffective leading to sadness</li> </ul>	<b>An emotive experience</b>
Emotional (T)		
Feel not made an impact (T)		
Opportunity to know the child (TA)	Positive, rewarding and enjoyable <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Relationships with child</li> <li>- Knowing the child</li> <li>- Spending time with the child</li> <li>- Seeing impact made</li> </ul>	<b>Positive and rewarding</b> Relationship building Knowing and understanding the child
Rewarding (TA)		
Positive and enjoying (T)		
Being the adult (TA)	Feeling inexperienced <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Inadequate training</li> <li>- Need to 'step up'</li> </ul>	<b>Feeling inexperienced and unsure</b>
Feeling inexperienced (TA)		
Lack of training (TA)		
Trial and error (TA)	Feeling unsure <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Difficulty knowing what will help</li> </ul>	
Unsure what to do (T)		
Lack of support (TA)	Need for more support	
Feeling unsupported (T)		

Support from others (T)	Positive impact of support from others	
View as wide definition (T)	Broad definition	<b>What is SEMH?</b> A broad definition Affecting a large number of children
Increase in mental health difficulties (T)	Affecting many children	
Widespread (TA)		
Social difficulties (T)	Different viewpoints on what SEMH includes - Unclear definition? - Not widely understood what's within definition	
Emotional regulation (T)		
Autism (T)		
Trauma (T)		
Challenging homelife (TA)		
Unsure on SEMH definition (T)	Unsure what SEMH means	
Not sure what means (TA)		
<b>Research Question Two</b>		
<b><u>Initial coding</u></b>	<b><u>Emerging themes</u></b>	<b><u>Final theme and sub themes</u></b>
Fitting in (T)	Feeling that they fit in at school	<b>Fitting in</b>
Fitting in (TA)		
Feeling that they matter (TA)	Feeling that you matter	<b>Feeling that you matter</b> Feeling wanted Feeling respected
Acceptance (TA)	Feeling accepted and wanted at school	
Feeling wanted at school (T)	- By adults and peers	
Feeling respected (TA)	Feeling respected - By adults and peers	
Feeling part of the group (T)	Inclusion - Feeling part of school and community - Extends to parents	<b>Inclusion</b> Being a part of the school Having a purpose at school
Being included (TA)		
Parental aspect (T)		
Pride (TA)	Having a purpose at school	
Having purpose (TA)	- Feeling pride at school	
Safety (T)	Feeling safe and secure at school - Feeling happy	<b>Feeling safe and secure</b>
Feeling happy and comfortable (TA)		

Feeling secure (TA)		
Feel is important (T)	View school belonging as being important <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Needed for all children and adults</li> <li>- Is a journey towards belonging</li> </ul>	<b>Viewed as important</b>
View as important (TA)		
View as necessary (TA)		
Journey and continuum (TA)		
<b>Research Question Three</b>		
<b><u>Initial coding</u></b>	<b><u>Emerging themes</u></b>	<b><u>Final theme and sub themes</u></b>
Adult relationships (TA)	Relationships with adults <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Unconditional support</li> <li>- Feeling accepted</li> </ul>	<b>Supportive relationships with adults at school</b>  A sense of unconditional support and acceptance
Staff relationships (T)		
Feeling supported (T)		
Reassurance (TA)	Supporting child to feel safe and supported	
Safety (TA)		
Safety (T)		
Valuing talents (T)	Valuing talents and strengths <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Seeing the positives</li> <li>- Giving appropriate praise</li> <li>- Seeing individual child</li> </ul>	<b>Valuing individual strengths and talents</b>
Highlighting the positives (T)		
Praise (TA)		
Praise (T)		
Child voice (T)	Listening to child's voice	<b>Listening to the child's voice</b>
Feeling listened to (T)		
Flexibility of support (T)	Flexible support	<b>Flexibility of support and understanding needs</b>  Adapting to the individual child
Adapting to their needs (TA)	Understanding individual needs <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Adapting to child</li> <li>- Using different interventions to meet needs</li> </ul>	
Treating as individual (T)		
Extra-curricular clubs (TA)		
Interventions (T)		
Nurture groups (TA)		
Predictability (T)	Environment	

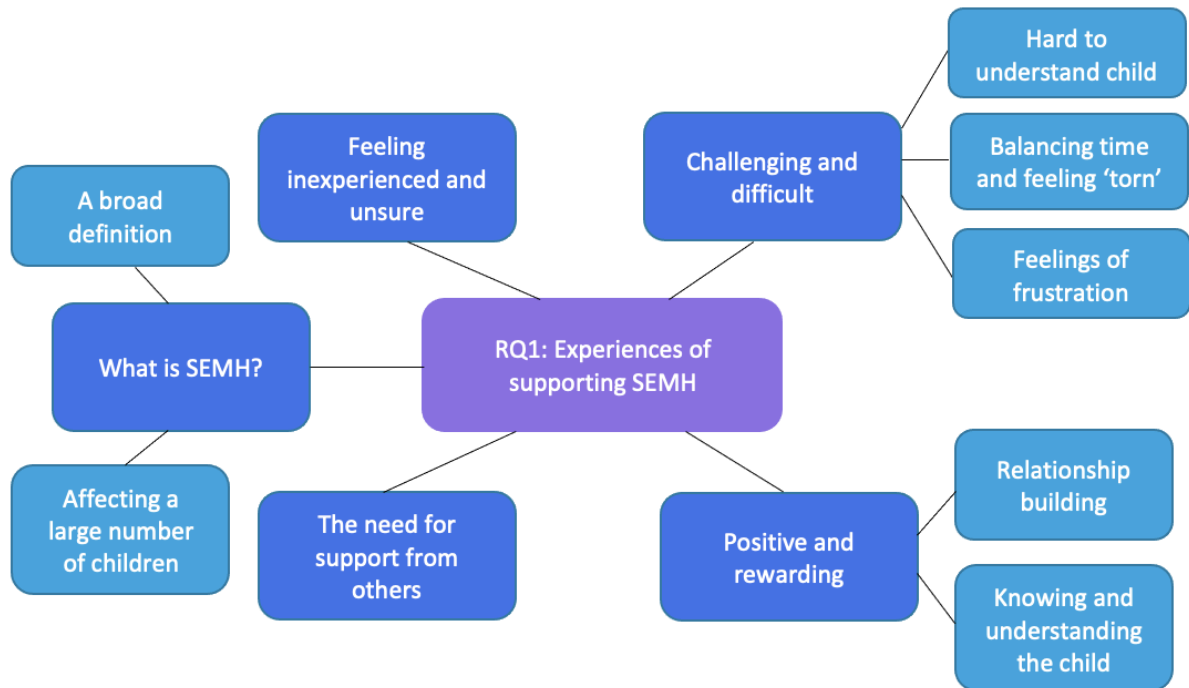
Consistency (TA)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Predictable</li> <li>- Consistent with adults and support given</li> </ul>	<b>Consistent and predictable environment</b>
Peer relationships (T)	Peer relationships	<b>Inclusive peer relationships</b>
Peer relationships (TA)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Supportive</li> <li>- Inclusive</li> </ul>	
School ethos (TA)	School ethos	<b>Inclusive school ethos</b>
School ethos (T)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Inclusive to students and parents</li> <li>- Mental health</li> </ul>	
Ownership in classroom (TA)		
Parents (T)		
<b>Research Question Four</b>		
<b><u>Initial coding</u></b>	<b><u>Emerging themes</u></b>	<b><u>Final theme and sub themes</u></b>
Feeling different (T)	Feeling different to peers	<b>Feeling different and low self-esteem</b>
Feeling different (TA)		
Self-esteem (T)	Experiencing low self-esteem	
Low self-esteem (TA)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Feelings of anxiety</li> <li>- Low self-belief in abilities</li> </ul>	
Child's anxiety (TA)		
Peer relationships (T)	Difficult peer relationships	<b>Challenging peer relationships</b>
Peer relationships (TA)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Child's needs impacting upon relationship with peers</li> <li>- Difficulties within friendships</li> </ul>	
Communication (T)		
Communication difficulties (TA)		
Adult relationships (TA)	Difficulties within adult relationships	<b>Negative relationships with adults</b> Unsuccessful behavioural systems
Not being able to build relationships (T)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Time as a barrier</li> <li>- Lack of training as a barrier</li> <li>- Behaviour management negatively impacting upon child</li> </ul>	
Teacher time (T)		
Teacher training (T)		
Behaviour management systems (TA)		
Can't access learning (TA)	Can't access the learning	<b>Challenges within learning</b> Unable to access learning Exclusion from the classroom
Not understanding the work (T)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Not understanding learning</li> <li>- Feeling pressured</li> </ul>	
Pressure (T)		

Time out of class (T)	Excluded from classroom	
Outside of class (TA)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Feeling isolated from class</li> </ul>	
Homelife (T)	Homelife impacting sense of belonging	<b>Homelife</b>
Homelife (TA)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Difficult experiences within homelife</li> </ul>	
Parents (TA)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Parental views on schools</li> <li>- School's engagement with home</li> </ul>	

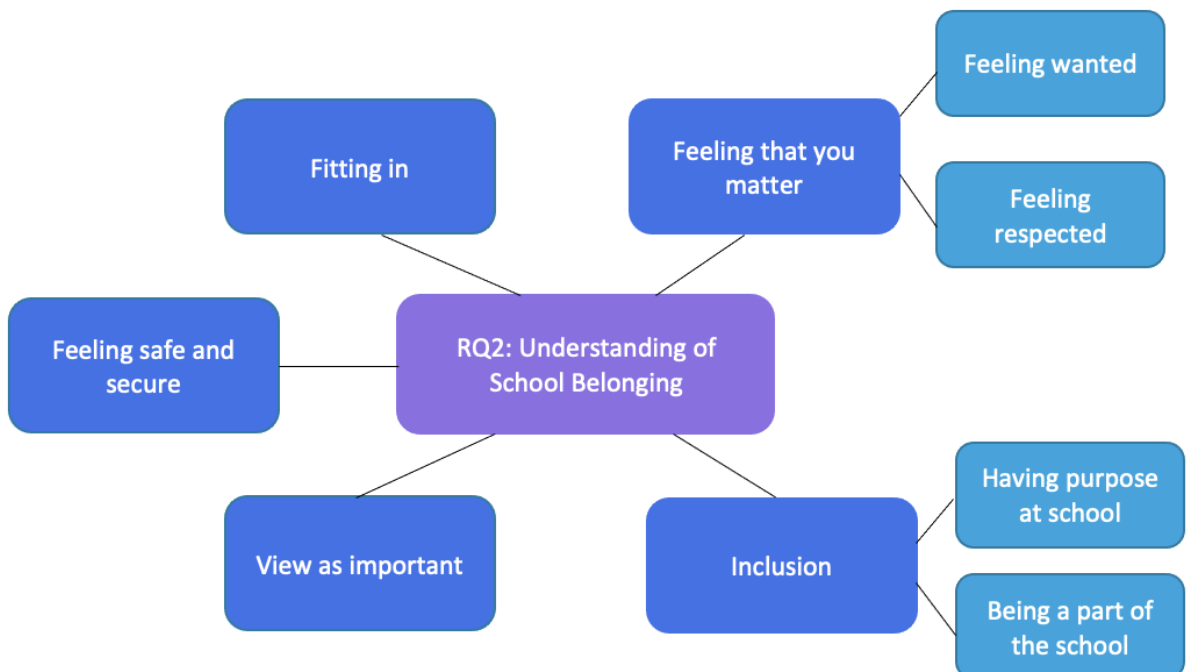


## **Appendix Q: Concept maps showing themes and subthemes**

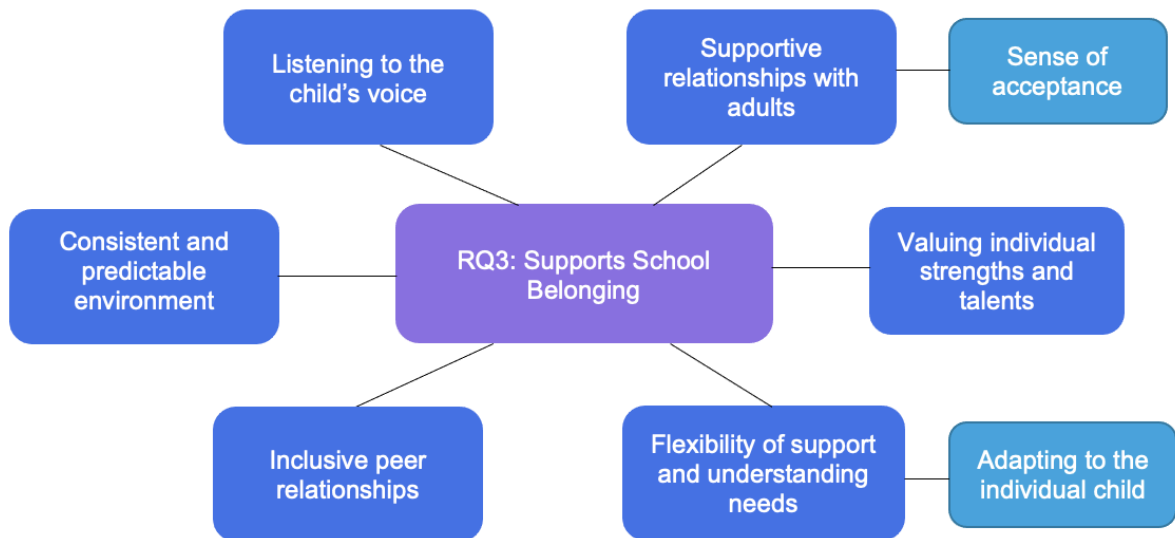
*Research question 1 themes and sub-themes (Teachers and TAs).*



*Research question 2 themes and sub-themes (Teachers and TAs).*



Research question 3 themes and sub-themes (Teachers and TAs).



Research question 4 themes and sub-themes (Teachers and TAs).

