

***Doctorate in Professional Educational,  
Child and Adolescent Psychology***

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**The role of student support workers from external organisations  
in Alternative Provision; a case study involving 'School-Home  
Support' practitioners.**

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## Declaration

I, Hannah Broadbent confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

Signed: (H.J. Broadbent)

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## Abstract

Students excluded from mainstream schooling and referred to alternative provision (AP) often present with complex support needs. However, the quality of provision in this sector varies hugely, and there remains a pressing need to develop policy and models of good practice. Although emerging data indicates there may be added value from embedding student support practitioners from external organisations such as 'School-Home Support' (SHS) into AP, this study sought to address the paucity of research exploring *how* these practitioners work in AP and the factors facilitating or impinging upon their role in supporting these students.

The role of SHS practitioners (SHSPs) in AP was explored using a multiple-case study approach. Observations of SHSP practices using ethnographic principles and semi-structured interviews with SHSPs, senior leadership team staff, and students were conducted across two AP settings. Using reflexive thematic analysis, unique as well as shared patterns of meaning were interpreted within and across the different sources; providing rich insight into the systems, nuanced interactions, and challenges faced by these practitioners.

SHSPs were perceived to provide holistic support across multiple systemic levels in order to promote improved attendance, engagement and behaviour. They were seen to bridge gaps between the school, students, families, and agencies, particularly where other staff lacked time, resources and expertise. Underpinned by a focus on developing secure relationships with students and their parents, they were seen to break down barriers of epistemic distrust, and fostered student and parental autonomy and independence in order to have wider-reaching and more sustainable impact. In an education system that presses towards the exclusion of some of our most vulnerable young people, the findings provide pivotal insight into the additionality and inclusive practices that specialist practitioners in AP can offer, and has implications for other professionals such as Educational Psychologists working with these students.

## **Impact Statement**

This research provides insight into elements of good practice for supporting students who have been excluded from mainstream schooling and find themselves in alternative provision (AP). This study is unique in addressing significant gaps in the literature regarding the role of student support workers from organisations such as 'School-Home Support' (SHS), who work in AP. The findings have implications for policy, AP practice, and research, as well as for Educational Psychologists (EPs) working with excluded young people.

The AP sector is often overlooked regarding research and policy development. Given the variability of practice and outcomes in AP, there is urgent need for government policy and good practice guidance. These findings offer a framework for policy development in AP regarding the need for staff designated to providing students with holistic and person-centred support across different systemic levels.

This study provides pertinent insight into beneficial contributions practitioners from organisations such as SHS make, not only to attendance and engagement, but also to student's social, emotional, and relational development. These findings will be of interest to SHS and similar organisations for further training of practitioners and development of their vision for AP reform. Additionally, the findings highlight how staff in AP typically lack time, resources, and expertise in order to be effective, but that the addition of practitioners such as those from SHS can be essential in bridging these gaps, as well as substantially improving relationships between the school, families, and other agencies. Factors perceived in this study to facilitate this role are also relevant to other educational professionals looking to shape the vision, ethos and culture in AP.

EPs are well placed to provide training and supervision to other professionals. This study further adds to the body of theoretical knowledge and psychological frameworks that EPs can draw from to provide effective training to practitioners and other staff to improve support for students in AP. In particular, training staff in the importance of impacting positive change at different systemic levels is well within the EP remit and skillset. EPs

also play an essential role in identifying needs that can inform appropriate support for individual students. This study highlights the importance of practitioners in AP having in-depth knowledge of a student's needs and so implies the need for EPs to collaborate further with practitioners to help bring about effective change.

The case-study methodology used in this study that drew upon multiple sources (interviews and observations) provided rich insight into how staff practices transpire in AP, and can be considered an effective framework for conducting research in this field. Giving young people in AP a voice to express their experiences of what helps them feel included and motivated to engage was also a key element of this study and advocates for the inclusion of student voice in similar research. Moreover, this study highlights additional practical and ethical considerations that are essential for establishing trust and rapport with staff and students in AP, and paves the way for engaging in research in these settings.

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## Glossary of Abbreviations

<b>Abbreviation</b>	<b>Term</b>
AP	Alternative Provision
CAMHS	Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service
CYP	Children and Young People
DfE	Department for Education
EP	Educational Psychologist
LA	Local Authority
NEET	Not in Employment, Education or Training
PRU	Pupil Referral Unit
rTA	Reflexive Thematic Analysis
SEMH	Social Emotional and Mental Health
SEN	Special Education Needs
SHS	School-Home Support
SHSP	School-Home Support Practitioner
SLT	Senior Leadership Team
TEP	Trainee Educational Psychologist
YP	Young People

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## 1. Introduction

In the UK, students who have experienced marginalisation and exclusion from mainstream schooling are often referred to Alternative Provision (AP). AP is hugely diverse, providing support and education to students with a vast range of learning needs as well as social, emotional, and mental health (SEMH) needs (Mills & Thomson, 2018). Moreover, considerable variety exists in the quality of provision across AP (Hummel & Wilcock, 2020; Thomson & Pennacchia, 2016). Despite the known complexities and diversity of AP, research exploring approaches and practices that facilitate positive outcomes within this sector is limited.

Outcomes for students referred to AP are generally poor (Hummel & Wilcock, 2020; Pirrie & Macleod, 2009), with these young people (YP) typically more vulnerable to experiencing social isolation, substance misuse, youth offending, as well as mental health difficulties (Hall-Lande et al., 2007). Regarding academic outcomes, Department for Education (DfE) data in 2022 showed that only 4.9% of students attending AP achieve GCSE grades 9-4 in English and Mathematics (DfE, 2022e), and in 2021 only 36% of students who had experienced AP continued in education post-16 (compared to 82% of mainstream students) (Beynon, 2022). These persistent challenges regarding low levels of educational engagement, attainment, and social and emotional outcomes for students in AP indicates that there continues to be a need to further our understanding of effective practices within these settings (CSJ, 2020).

An emerging body of research has started to highlight a number of key characteristics and practices that staff in AP use to support YP in these settings (e.g., Malcolm, 2021; Michael & Frederickson, 2013), as well as key strategies for engaging with, often marginalised, families of these students (Page, 2021c). The use of support workers employed through charities and external organisations has also been proposed as an effective solution to supporting student behaviour, attendance, and engagement in schools and AP (Brookes et al., 2007; Timpson, 2019). However, there remains a lack of research exploring the role of practitioners employed through external organisations and how they operate to support

students, particularly in AP. Capturing effective approaches of practitioners in AP from outside organisations that work to support these YP is, therefore, the key focus of this thesis; the findings from which can be shared to inform practice across AP and other settings supporting some of the most marginalised and vulnerable students in our society.

## **1.1 Research context**

### 1.1.1 National and local context

National figures indicate there were 2,175 permanent school exclusions and 200,826 suspensions in England in Spring term 2021/22 (DfE, 2023a). Although lower than pre-pandemic levels, this is equivalent to 3 in every 10,000 pupils. The most recent exclusion data from the Local Authority (LA) in which the current research took place states there were 631 'suspensions' (including both fixed-term and permanent exclusions) between September 2022 and March 2023, a number of whom would have been referred to one of the AP settings included in this study on either a temporary or permanent basis. Of the excluded students, 29.3% of these students had an SEMH need and 42.7% were eligible for Free School Meals (FSM). With SEMH needs accounting for only 2.2% of the whole school population and FSM accounting for 23% in this borough, these exclusion data indicate these students are disproportionately represented in AP; a finding in line with national trends (Timpson, 2019).

In the DfE's (2018) paper '*Creating opportunity for all*', the government announced its vision for AP reform. This looked to establish a robust evidence-base regarding how AP operates and what constitutes effective practice to best support outcomes for students who access these settings (Bryant et al., 2018). A review of projects transpiring from this (MacLeod et al., 2021), alongside the Timpson (2019) review of school exclusions have highlighted a necessity for specialist staff who are able to cater to the complex needs of these students, particularly given the disproportionality of needs in AP. These reports advocate for the importance of high-quality staff in AP, including support workers, who have the skillset and expertise to work with the complex needs of these students and can

build strong and trusting relationships with them. Moreover, the commissioning of charities or outside organisations to support with specific interventions in AP has been advocated as a possible effective approach (CSJ, 2021; Timpson, 2019).

### 1.1.2 'School-Home Support'

In the LA in which the current research was based, one organisation providing support within AP is 'School-Home Support' (SHS); a UK-based charity that offer support to under-resourced YP and their families with an aim to improving school attendance, engagement, and behaviour. SHS practitioners (SHSPs) working in AP offer a family-centred approach to supporting students with a range of complex needs, and typically work with a variety of external agencies including benefits, housing, and bereavement services to improve outcomes for students and their families (SHS, 2023a). The SHS approach used across mainstream and AP settings (Figure 1.1) consists of working directly with children and young people (CYP) and their families through a personalised and collaborative plan that aims to ultimately support the family towards independence.



**Figure 1. 1** The ‘School-Home Support’ (SHS) Approach (SHS, 2022)

It was recently indicated that following six months of SHS involvement in AP, attendance of previously ‘severely absent’ students (attendance <50%) improved on average by 44%, amounting to an additional 88 extra days in school per pupil per year (SHS, 2023b). Likewise, an analysis of long-term economic gains found that every pound dedicated to SHS involvement amounted to £11 in savings across society (Marsh & Surgey, 2012). Although these data allude to the efficacy of SHS involvement, this provides little insight into the role of SHSPs within AP, or *how* these practitioners operate within these settings to support students.

## 1.2 Inspiration for the research

This research was conducted as part of the Professional Educational, Child and Adolescent Psychology doctoral programme. During my professional placement as a Trainee Educational Psychologist (TEP) in an outer-London LA, my work has included

cases in which secondary-school-aged YP have spent fixed-term exclusions within the local AP settings included in this study. Whilst collaborating with AP staff and SHSPs, I have found that often at the forefront of plans to support students with their learning and reintegration into mainstream has been a focus on meeting the YP's relational and emotional needs. This is often in stark contrast to the focus of mainstream staff at the level of behaviour. Working collaboratively with SHSPs has, therefore, been integral to identifying student's needs underlying challenges with attending or engaging with their education. Further exploration of the ways in which practitioners such as SHSPs work within these settings would be highly beneficial for Educational Psychologists (EPs) in identifying elements of good practice that can be shared across AP and mainstream settings to support effective re-engagement of excluded students.

At the centre of my previous roles in youth work and as a support worker in a special school was the development and nurturing of relationships with students and families for whom exclusions and breakdowns in school-home relationships had been a salient part of their previous experience. This provided me with valuable insight into the impact that organisations outside of school as well as non-teaching practitioners can have on a YP's sense of self-worth, motivation, and ability to engage with learning. These experiences further underpin my inspiration to explore the role of such professionals within an educational system where teachers are often not afforded time to build and invest in relationships with the students or their families (Malcolm, 2021; Page, 2021c), an issue particularly pertinent to supporting the needs of some of our most vulnerable YP in AP.

### **1.3 Research aims and questions**

The primary aim of this research was to explore the practices of SHSPs working within AP who support students of secondary school age with a diverse range of needs. This study aimed to focus specifically on *how* SHSPs work to support students in these settings, as well as highlight potential facilitators and barriers to their role. Given the value of gathering voices of different groups to establish a range of perspectives on a phenomenon (Quintão



et al., 2020), this study aimed to explore the SHSP role from multiple sources (SHSPs, staff and students). Additionally, the study aimed to explore more nuanced aspects of the SHSP role in real-time through observations of their practice, seeking to identify additional aspects of their role that might not otherwise be obtainable through interviews alone (Cotton et al., 2010). Based on the above aims, the following research questions (RQs) were proposed:

**RQ1:** How do SHSPs work to support students in AP?

a) from the perspectives of SHS practitioners and SLT staff;

b) from the perspective of students in AP;

c) how is the SHSP role conceptualised through observations of their practice in AP?

**RQ2:** What are the facilitators and barriers to the SHSP role in AP?

#### **1.4 Thesis overview**

This chapter presented an outline of the background, context, aims and RQs for this study. Chapter 2 will present a comprehensive review of the relevant literature examining factors facilitating outcomes in AP as well as previous research into the use of support workers and home-school practitioners across schools and AP, culminating in a rationale for the current study. The justification and description of the methods and methodological approaches used will then be presented in Chapter 3, with the study findings presented in Chapter 4. In Chapter 5, a discussion of the findings in light of the relevant literature and theory will be presented followed by the implications of the research and consideration of the strengths, limitations and future directions.

## **2. Literature Review**

This chapter provides an overview of the context of AP as well as a comprehensive and critical review of literature exploring the role of staff in supporting students in these settings. This review highlights existing gaps in the literature relating to the role of support workers and external practitioners, and how they operate to effect change in AP. The potential implications of this research for the role of EPs working with staff and students in AP will also be discussed in this chapter, followed by a summary and rationale for the current study. For details of the databases and search terms included, see [Appendix A](#).

### **2.1 The context of AP**

In line with the Education Act (2002, 2011), LAs have a statutory responsibility to arrange suitable alternative education for students of compulsory school age who are not currently attending mainstream schooling for reasons including permanent or fixed-term exclusion, mental or physical health needs, or complex special educational needs (SEN) (DfE, 2016). Current government guidelines (DfE, 2022c) state that full-time education arrangements must be made no later than the sixth school day following exclusion, and that a student cannot be suspended for one or more fixed-term periods for more than 45 days in one academic year. Most commonly, these students are placed in AP.

AP is a diverse sector and offers a variety of placements on a part-time or full-time basis and for different timeframes outside of the mainstream setting. For instance, some students might be registered solely with an AP, or have dual-registration, meaning they attend both their mainstream setting and the AP on a part-time basis (DfE, 2016). Other students might only be placed in AP for a few weeks before being re-integrated into their mainstream school or college (Mills & Thomson, 2018). Re-integration for students in Years 10 and 11 occurs less frequently, with these older students often completing their education in AP (Bryant et al., 2018).

In the majority of LAs (83%), over three quarters of placements in state-maintained AP are within Pupil Referral Units (PRUs), AP academies, and AP free schools, with only 14% of placements supported by independent AP providers (Bryant et al., 2018). Moreover, a large number of LAs also commission placements to specialist settings for YP with complex SEMH needs (Bryant et al., 2018). Although the number of students in PRUs has decreased from 12,785 in 2020/21 to 11,684 in 2021/22, the number of pupils attending AP as a whole has increased by around 10% per year over the past 5 years (currently 35,600 in 2021/22) (DfE, 2023b).

Placements in AP are predominantly commissioned for secondary-aged students (84%), with the main factors underpinning referrals for placement in AP being pupil disengagement from learning and persistent disruptive behaviour (Mills & Thomson, 2018). As such, the English model of AP provides interesting insight into societal perspectives and policy positions regarding a need to separate YP off from mainstream education who are unable to conform to behavioural standards. Despite growing recognition that referrals to AP disproportionately impact the most vulnerable students in society (DfE, 2016; Graham et al., 2019), the focus on behaviour and control in current attendance and behaviour policies (DfE, 2022a, 2022d) mean that the needs of students from disadvantaged and complex backgrounds are often not being met until they access AP. By this point, they are likely to have experienced high-levels of marginalisation and breakdowns of relationships with peers, school staff and other professionals (Malcolm, 2021). This thesis aims to work within the status quo and prevailing discourses around exclusion to explore good practice in AP. However, the absence of AP in many other European countries is noteworthy as this raises the question whether AP in England exists due to some fundamental difference in English students, or is driven predominantly by policies that fail to enact inclusion (Bagley, 2021).

Students attending AP settings often come from home contexts where social and economic deprivation, family breakdown, drug and alcohol abuse, domestic violence and parental mental health needs are commonplace (Bowman-Perrott et al., 2013; Taylor,

2012; Timpson, 2019). Other students in AP include those with a range of SEMH needs, as well as a significant proportion of students with SEN (Bryant et al., 2018). Students in AP are also more likely to be male (72.9%), and pupils from ethnic minority backgrounds (particularly black Caribbean, Irish traveller or Roma/Gypsy pupils) are disproportionately represented in these settings (DfE, 2022c).

This diverse range of needs and heterogeneity of the pupils who have experienced exclusion means that no single, comprehensive approach to intervention in AP is likely to be sufficient. Instead, an interdisciplinary response and support that can be adapted to the needs of the individual YP within the AP is likely to be most beneficial (Hummel & Wilcock, 2020; Rogers, 2015). That said, reviews of effective practice in AP (e.g., Gutherson et al., 2011), highlight that there may be common components of 'good practice' across successful AP. These can be drawn upon to better meet the range of needs of these YP, to foster their social and emotional wellbeing, and provide them with the support they need to improve attendance, engagement and academic outcomes.

## **2.2 Contributors of positive outcomes in AP**

Despite negative outcomes associated with exclusion, AP can have a significant positive impact on a YP's life trajectory (Malcolm, 2015, 2019; Rogers, 2015). A growing body of research has sought to examine the efficacy of AP in supporting students to re-engage with their education and to elucidate the factors that contribute to successful outcomes. These studies state there is likely to be a multiplicity of protective factors AP can provide, particularly as they tend to be smaller and more nurturing environments than mainstream settings (Hart, 2013; Mills & McGregor, 2016). A number of studies have also been dedicated to examining what factors lead to more successful re-integration of students back into a mainstream setting following time in AP (Lawrence, 2011; Owen et al., 2021; Pillay et al., 2013; Thomas, 2015). Atkinson and Rowley (2019) suggest that successful reintegration factors can be conceptualised in line with Bronfenbrenner's (1979) eco-systemic framework. Here they state that successful reintegration is contingent upon not

only within-pupil factors but also the complex interrelating systems in which the child exists such as staff and peer relationships, family support, school environment, and wider policy and legislative factors.

As part of an extensive study of successful practices across alternative schools in Australia, Mills and McGregor (2016) noted that given the complex needs of students in AP including an increased need for access to health, welfare, and community services, AP settings may be better equipped than mainstream to tackle factors that contribute to disengagement and poor outcomes. Comparable factors that positively impact students in AP have also been identified in UK-based studies. These include the presence of positive staff-student relationships (Looney, 2018; Malcolm, 2021; Michael & Frederickson, 2013), the use of flexible curricula developed in line with the needs of individual students (Cahill et al., 2020; Rogers, 2015), and effective and clear communication of student's needs between the relevant involved staff and external agencies (Gutherson et al., 2011).

Measuring what is meant by successful outcomes in AP, however, remains an elusive task (Malcolm, 2021), and is seen to vary hugely across the literature. Some studies have identified outcomes in relation to improvements in school-home relationships (Page, 2021c), student attendance (White et al., 2012), engagement with learning (Nicholson & Putwain, 2018), and academic outcomes such as higher grades than students had been predicted in mainstream (Cajic-Seigneur & Hodgson, 2016). Others propose that time in AP can lead to positive behaviour change for some YP (Murphy, 2011; Solomon & Thomas, 2013), although these findings have typically been based on student perspectives rather than measurable outcomes. In addition, improved behaviour in AP is sometimes argued to occur at the expense of academic rigor (Taylor, 2012).

### 2.2.1 The role of relationships

It is recognised in the literature that multiple aspects of positive student outcomes including motivation and engagement are highly related to contextual factors external to the individual such as teacher-student relationships (Skinner et al., 2008), even when

controlling for other individual, family, or teacher variables (Quin, 2017). In line with this, research has repeatedly highlighted the importance of high quality and nurturing staff-student relationships in contributing to successful outcomes in AP (Malcolm, 2021).

Nicholson and Putwain (2015) used semi-structured interviews with students in AP to explore factors that they felt facilitated their re-engagement at affective, cognitive and behavioural levels. A key facilitator of perceived success at each level was that of positive staff-student relationships. Students remarked that staff showed them respect, invested time getting to know them and actively promoted self-belief. Similarly, others have found that where staff in AP were supportive, understanding and responsive to student's needs, students perceived this as a motivator towards positive behavioural change (Hamilton & Morgan, 2018).

Although the above two studies were based solely on student views, a corroborative study by Nicholson and Putwain (2018) exploring both student and staff perspectives in AP found trusting, caring and respectful staff-student relationships to be key drivers of student motivation to re-engage with their learning. In addition, by using classroom observations, the study found that staff behaviours such as using a non-confrontational approach, developing meaningful personal connections, and providing clear expectations were considered to enhance the quality of student-staff relationships. In these studies, Nicholson and Putwain (2015, 2018) drew on motivation-based theories of learning and engagement that emphasise students have fundamental psychological needs for *autonomy* (the need to express one's authentic self), *competence* (the need to feel capable and successful), and *relatedness* (the need for belonging and secure connections with others). These concepts are rooted in self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) and the self-system model of motivational processes (Connell & Wellborn, 1991). In particular, these studies concluded that it is relational factors of AP staff that foster psychological need satisfaction in students. By conceptualising staff relational factors in line with these models, these studies provide a clear theoretical basis on which to examine specific factors in AP that can facilitate or inhibit student progress. Moreover, the latter study (Nicholson

& Putwain, 2018) provides particular insight into the importance of obtaining both student and staff perspectives alongside observational data. Together, these methods can ensure in-depth explorations of practices and processes that staff in AP engage in to meet student's needs underlying motivation and engagement.

Common practices in effective AP relating to the role of staff have been corroborated across a range of studies (Thomson & Pennacchia, 2014). These practices include staff having a positive regard for the students, a focus on building relationships as a learning goal itself, and staff being of high quality. A range of skills and characteristics of staff considered 'high quality' included being compassionate, calm, and able to de-escalate situations. 'Good' staff were also considered to be up-to-date with research and policies, providing them with a deeper understanding of the context in which they were working and the students they support. Likewise, Edwards (2018) argues that mutual respect must be developed between staff and students as well as a move away from efforts to maintain authority through coercion or the use of punitive measures, which are actually more likely to limit student engagement. This is in line with other findings indicating that staff who understand the individual needs of the students (Schussler, 2009) as well as the socio-political context of their work (Garner, 1996) are better able to foster positive relationships that lead to improved student outcomes. Fitzsimmons et al (2021), however, found that tutors in AP do not always feel skilled to deliver the high level of investment required to develop and maintain relationships with students, despite understanding the importance of connecting and finding mutual interest.

The language used by staff to describe YP in AP as well as staff perceptions of pupil needs is also important. Some researchers warn of the need to move beyond pathologizing YP in AP with individual deficit labels such as 'disengaged', to instead considering how these YP might be 'disenfranchised' due to their socio-economic and cultural contexts that lead to marginalisation (McGregor, 2017; Mills et al., 2013). In accordance with this, where staff in AP refrain from using an individual deficit rhetoric to label YP, this can be central to the

development of mutually respectful staff-student relationships (Malcolm, 2021; Mills & McGregor, 2013).

These studies contribute greatly to our understanding of effective approaches used by staff in AP to support students, although the distinction between the role of teaching staff and other support staff in AP remains unclear. Thomson and Pennacchia (2014) argue that there is considerable variability in staff quality in AP, with staff coming from a range of different backgrounds, areas of training and the type of support and supervision they are given. Moreover, some AP were found to have support staff who undertook both pastoral and teaching roles, requiring a wealth of knowledge and diverse skill-set. Accordingly, it might often be hard to differentiate between the functions of these different staff members and the extent to which different elements of their roles might be effective.

As well as the role of staff-student relationships in AP, the benefits of developing positive and collaborative school-home partnerships for improving behaviour, attendance, and engagement of vulnerable students has been well documented (Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003; Harris & Goodall, 2008; Page, 2021c). Notably, in AP the development of relationships often occurs within the context of a history of fractured school-home relationships and when the dissolution of relationships in mainstream may have even been a trigger for initial student disengagement (Myconos et al., 2016). A recent Ofsted report (2022) notes that in schools that have a good record of improving attendance, there tends to be a 'constant person' who is able to engage with the student's family. Of note is that the constant person was not always a member of teaching staff. Instead, skills and experience offered by individuals with a background in social work, the police or mentoring were considered as particularly valuable for these roles.

Given the complex support needs and backgrounds of AP students, Page (2021c) argues there is a crucial role for home-visits by staff and that this itself can be an effective intervention for supporting students. Page states that these home-visits can address a need to move away from the use of coercive or judgemental practices, to working collaboratively with family members to develop a joint understanding of the YP's needs



and to co-create effective solutions to re-engagement. The author considers the 'micro-work' with families that AP staff engage in such as providing welfare, acquiring household items, or supporting parents with setting boundaries, as filling the gaps that other external agencies are unable to do. This essential work by staff and practitioners in AP, however, is not without challenges. Indeed, the requirement to maintain empathy and openness when exposed to the narratives of abuse and trauma frequently experienced by families of students in AP can be emotionally strenuous on staff (Page, 2021b; Thomson & Pennacchia, 2014). Likewise, Danby (2020) argues that barriers to success for teaching assistants in AP were often found in having to navigate the challenges of dealing with parents who had experienced previous relationship breakdowns with mainstream school staff.

Beyond staff-student relationships, multiple different types of relationships exist that can positively impact student outcomes in AP including peer, staff-staff, and staff-parent relationships (Malcolm, 2021). The author surmises, however, that further research is needed to clarify the specific relational factors and practices that shape outcomes in AP, especially as the majority of work in this area relies on perceptions of staff and students. In particular, few studies have used observational methods to examine the way in which support staff operate to develop positive relationships, which might elucidate further factors beyond what interview participants are cognisant. In addition, Malcolm (2021) argues that a dominant emphasis on relationships in AP can be limiting, when some students in these settings may not be motivated by or have the ability to engage with positive relationships. For this reason, it may be beneficial to develop a broader understanding of the multiple factors that staff can draw on to foster positive outcomes with students in AP.

Meeting the relational needs of students who have been excluded has been understood by others through the lens of psychodynamic notions of containment and attachment, as well as neuropsychological theories of emotional development (Cassidy & Shaver, 2016; Pillay et al., 2013). Attachment theory proposes that the tendency to form strong emotional bonds with others is underpinned by our fundamental need for relational security

(Ainsworth, 1978; Bowlby & Holmes, 2005). Relational attachments occur predominantly with close family members but can also develop between students and individuals in schools such as teachers with whom they have a secure and affectionate bond (Verschueren & Koomen, 2012). Research examining teacher-student relationships has conceptualised secure attachments as key to students' positive coping skills and engagement (Wentzel, 2016), and are reliable predictors of academic outcomes, particularly for 'at-risk' groups or those who have experienced insecure attachments with other caregivers (Bergin & Bergin, 2009).

In AP, as staff-student relationships develop and staff become more attuned to the student's own mental representations about themselves and expectations of others, they are perceived to respond more sensitively to student needs (Fitzsimmons et al., 2021). Moreover, Soloman and Thomas (2013) argue that for AP staff to be effective, they themselves need to be supported so that they are emotionally contained and have an awareness of both the student's and their own attachment and relational needs. In this way, staff would be more able to devise appropriate strategies for working with different groups of YP, depending on the relational needs they are faced with, as well as provide more 'containing' spaces for these students.

Relational paradigms in psychology and education maintain that learning is a social process and occurs within relational contexts (Gergen & Gill, 2020; Vygotsky, 1978). In line with constructionist thinking, others propose that knowledge and learning can only be actualised within and through relationship with others (Dragonas, 2020; Gergen, 2011). Extensive research supports the notion that positive teacher-student relationships and cooperative learning approaches in particular are key factors in enhancing learning and moderating classroom behaviour (Hattie, 2008). Moreover, students and the adults teaching and supporting them come to the learning environment already embedded within multiple relationships with family, friends, colleagues and the community; all of which impact their sensitivities and capacity for relational engagement (Gergen, 2011). For this reason, Gergen suggests that a student's home life can significantly influence the

teacher/student relationship. This necessitates a focus not only on the development of direct student-teacher relational practices but on extending the relational focus to the other circles within which a student exists. This has important implications for working relationally with other individuals in the life of students in AP, particularly where there might have been many experiences of previous relationship breakdown.

Relationship-based models of practice in education and social work also emphasise the importance of maintaining a relational approach to engaging with students (Edwards & Richards, 2002). These perspectives move beyond individualistic theories of attachment and related psychodynamic theories to herald the importance of interpersonal connections (Miller & Striver, 2015). Edwards and Richards (2002) propose that relational approaches within the classroom environment consists of mutual engagement, mutual empathy and mutual empowerment, and sets the foundation for personal growth. Additionally, they suggest the use of relational teaching approaches are important in the nurturing and development of individuals from disenfranchised groups, and so may be especially relevant for supporting engagement and learning of students in AP.

### 2.2.2 The role of pedagogical practices

Beyond positive relationships facilitated by staff in AP, research has identified a number of pedagogical practices that staff use to support students in AP. For instance, Mills and McGregor (2013) argue that the flexible structures and teaching in AP as well as the focus on vocational or practical elements to learning can be key to student's reengaging with their education. Supporting this, Cahill et al (2020) purports that the use of non-traditional curricula and learner-centred pedagogies in AP serve to heighten student accessibility and subsequent motivation. In addition, this study found that a greater emphasis on the use of interactive learning resources and digital platforms in AP encouraged student creativity and willingness to participate. However, these factors might also be evident in many mainstream environments, and provides little acknowledgement of how these factors, if at all, impact other aspects of student engagement, wellbeing or development in AP.

Almost half of AP-experienced YP are not in education, employment or training (NEET) after leaving school (IntegratED, 2023). Cajic-Seigneur and Hodgson (2016) argued there are likely many systemic factors involved in leading to these students becoming NEET. They found that students perceived factors such as being treated like adults and having their views heard and valued alongside the use of vocational courses and formative assessment processes helped them see the relevance of their education and improve their behaviour. This study was restricted by the lack of clarity regarding details of participants included in the study and the methods used to examine 'engagement' at each systemic level. Despite this, the view that a systemic approach is necessary in order to meet the needs of excluded students has been proposed in other studies. For instance, using an Appreciative Inquiry approach to examine the views of students, staff and parents, Looney (2018) highlighted a range of factors perceived to facilitate successful engagement of students in a secondary school AP unit. Alongside positive staff-student relationships, the school's empowering ethos, supportive behavioural management systems, highly-structured learning environment, as well as a flexible and meaningful curriculum were factors that all participant groups expressed as being effective. Importantly, these factors were considered to enhance the student's sense of belonging and intrinsic motivation for learning.

Using observations, as well as staff and student interviews, Dean (2018) found that even given previous negative experiences in education, AP gave students an opportunity to develop a positive personal identity. Student's development of positive self-identity in this study was considered to be due predominantly to the use of alternative pedagogies such as art, music, and nature-based education which allowed YP to reinvent themselves and to experience education in a different way.

The use of in-depth case studies examining the role of staff in AP have been informative of the types of effective staff practices that are used to support students in these settings. Cook (2005) evaluated the role of the 'Virtual College' (a model of AP) and found that a carefully structured re-engagement process was facilitated by the use of parent/carer

telephone calls, having an individual tutor who was well-matched to the student, and individual target-setting. Using a similar case-study methodology, Putwain and colleagues (2016) examined the use of instructional practices in one AP. The findings indicated that staff instructional practices such as breaking tasks down, use of instructional dialogue and prompts, scaffolding, and encouraging self-belief, facilitated students to become more self-regulated in their learning. In line with self-regulated learning theory (Zimmerman & Cleary, 2009), the authors found that students were gradually able to assimilate these practices in order to manage their own learning, but that this was often a slow and challenging process. Despite this, they found that it was this steady and flexible approach that allowed students to internalise the value of their learning. Notably, this study included interviews with 'therapeutic engagement workers' contracted to the AP from a local charitable trust and who also had teaching responsibilities. However, the findings did not distinguish between the instructional practices used by staff with different roles and the authors did not consider practices that the therapeutic engagement workers might have engaged with outside of the more formal instructional setting to support students in other ways.

Despite these positive attributes identified through case studies in AP, a DfE report on improving AP (Taylor, 2012) noted that a huge variety of provision exists in this sector and not all AP are adequate in supporting students, particularly where alternative curriculum approaches maintain low expectations for more able students. Additionally, research in one UK PRU found that even though this setting provided respite from mainstream, the staff focus on classroom control through the use of punitive methods of discipline meant that student attitudes towards the curriculum and alternative pedagogies was not improved (Meo & Parker, 2004).

### **2.3 Support workers and external professionals in AP**

The ability to develop positive and nurturing relationships, as well as deliver flexible and individualised teaching practices have been repeatedly cited as key characteristics that staff can bring to support students in AP. However, little of this research has sought to

explore the role of other professionals such as support workers or paraprofessionals from external organisations including the charity sector (Spink, 2011). Instead, research has focused predominantly on the role of teaching or leadership staff in AP, leaving it unclear whether there is a unique role for these other professionals in supporting students in these settings.

The appointment of external professionals in schools and AP such as 'key-workers', 'family support workers', or 'pastoral practitioners' is becoming increasingly recognised (Graham et al., 2019). In addition, the call for inter-agency collaborations since the introduction of *Every Child Matters* (2003) has driven awareness of the importance of partnerships between education and professionals such as social workers in the support of students and their families (Jopling & Vincent, 2020). Even prior to this, the role of charitable organisations aimed at facilitating social-work support in schools to improve attendance and reduce the risk of exclusions was starting to be considered (Jenkins, 1994; Pritchard, 2001).

Evaluations of initiatives in mainstream settings that have employed non-teaching professionals such as social workers have generated mixed findings about their efficacy. Behaviour and Education Support Teams, for example, were introduced to provide specialist support to marginalised YP and their families, improve attendance, and promote positive behaviour (DfE, 2003). Reviews of their impact suggest that such teams can provide more individual child-centred approaches to preventative work with vulnerable families (Hallam, 2007; Halsey et al., 2005). However, a common theme highlighted across many studies is the notable tensions that can exist in the working relationships between school staff and other professionals, particularly school-based social workers. These tensions have been perceived as driven by differences in values, working practices, and terminology concomitant with their own individual training and expertise (Webb & Vulliamy, 2003; Wolstenholme & Kolvin, 1980). Similarly, a lack of communication and trust of pastoral support staff in secondary school settings was reported by teachers; indicative of tensions between the working practices of teaching and non-teaching staff (O'Toole &

Soan, 2021). Atkinson (2005) also argues that tensions arising from difficulties in communication between different professionals as well as competing priorities can limit the impact of support staff in schools. It is unclear from these studies, however, whether such tensions arising from different professional perspectives and practices seen in mainstream settings would also be seen in AP, where teaching staff in AP might also be likely to prioritise the development of positive relationships and emotional wellbeing of students (Malcolm, 2021).

### 2.3.1 Family support workers

The inclusion of 'family support workers' or 'parent support advisers' into staff teams in some mainstream schools have been used effectively to develop home-school partnerships and support vulnerable families. The introduction of the 'parent support worker' initiative (DfES, 2005), signalled a changing focus to improving collaboration between families and schools; an essential factor in promoting positive academic outcomes (Harris & Goodall, 2007, 2008). Most notably, these paraprofessionals were envisioned to have a degree of autonomy and to work predominantly with disadvantaged families in order to improve student behaviour and attendance, and have been found to effectively reduce fixed-term and permanent exclusions (Cullen et al., 2013).

Evaluations of the impact of 'home-school support workers' in secondary schools suggest that professionals with backgrounds in social work can provide important additionality for supporting students by relieving pastoral responsibilities from other staff who would not otherwise have time to dedicate to this (Vulliamy & Webb, 2003). These support-workers were deemed effective due to their predominant focus on working to develop trusting relationships with students and their families through regular home visits and referrals to external agencies (Vulliamy & Webb, 2003). Through extensive interviews with teachers and pastoral staff, questionnaires, and reviewing existing case-load documents, the study found that over the course of the three-year project to embed home-school support workers, teachers became increasingly appreciative of the skills of the support workers

and how their skills offered a different method of support. However, some tensions continued to exist that formed a barrier to the efficacy of the project. Despite this, the support workers were perceived as being able to bridge the gap between social work and education as well as provide essential pastoral support to students that teachers were unable to provide due to time pressures and the lack of flexibility in their own role. Insufficient funding for this role, however, meant they were not able to become fully established in schools beyond the three-year government pilot (Webb & Vulliamy, 2003). Although this research highlights the possible positive impacts of such family support workers, insight into the ways in which these practitioners work to achieve these outcomes is limited.

More recently, charity-based family support workers in schools have been found to provide effective support through running small groups such as anger management, bullying, and relationship education (Evans, 2010). Due to their role being seen by stakeholders as more external from the school, these practitioners were able to advocate and intervene on behalf of the student and their family as well as develop a depth of relationship and trust beyond that provided by teachers. This finding was reflected in an earlier case study of a charity-based family support worker in a primary school, where stakeholders noted the practitioner's ability to develop trusting relationships was due to being able to provide unbiased support, stating 'she is working with the school, but she is not the school' (Featherstone & Manby, 2006, p34).

Schools are often reported to lack confidence and time to liaise effectively with specialist services such as mental health or domestic abuse teams (Fitzgerald & Kay, 2007). Therefore, practitioners commissioned from external agencies can provide an important mediating role between families and external services (Jopling & Vincent, 2020). Placement of family support workers in mainstream school settings can therefore reduce pressure on school staff to deal with welfare and pastoral issues. In one study where the support worker was an experienced social worker and seconded to the school from an external organisation, the practitioner was able to provide a fundamental link between



home and school that teaching staff reported they might not have been able to develop alone (Senior et al., 2016).

Others have also highlighted that school-based family support workers are well-placed to meet the needs of vulnerable children and their families, to improve behaviour and attitudes to learning, and to help break the cycle of family disengagement with education (Pritchard, 2001; Pritchard & Williams, 2001). In a three-year project examining the efficacy of a family support worker in a primary school, Pritchard and Williams (2001) found that the support worker was able to enhance the work of other staff in the school by helping others to view families in a non-stigmatising way. Pullman et al (2013) concluded that school-based family support workers had a positive impact, albeit marginal, on school attendance and improving connections with external agencies. Pertinent to this thesis, however, is that many of the abovementioned studies explore the impact of support workers in mainstream schools, limiting what can be inferred about how these roles would be operationalised or experienced in AP.

### 2.3.2 Charities in partnership with schools and AP

The use of external charitable organisations that provide additional support workers to schools can be key to tackling educational disengagement, although there remains little understanding of the factors that contribute to high-quality, flexible interventions run by charities within schools. In a report by Sodha and GuGlielmi (2009), a key commonality found across working practices of charitable organisations in schools such as 'The Place2Be', SHS, and 'Beatbullying' was that they tended to utilise highly trained and skilled practitioners. They also had the ability to fully engage with both school staff and parents, could effectively build positive relationships between students and school staff, and could promote the use of initiatives that encouraged self-evaluation and self-reflection.

The employment of practitioners from the SHS charity has also been seen to effectively increase the impact of educational interventions in school. By underpinning a literacy and numeracy intervention with support from SHS practitioners, a significant increase was

seen in student attendance, which was maintained across the 3-year study (Rogers et al., 2013). Interviews with school staff also identified there were perceived improvements in children's learning behaviours, such as staying on task, following routines, and improved ability to regulate their emotions. The practitioners were found to be integral to engaging families with complex lives and overcoming language barriers, as well as supporting families to tackle difficult social issues, which in turn contributed to children's engagement with the targeted intervention programmes. Despite these benefits, however, the research highlighted a number of barriers to effective working for the practitioners, including initial difficulties building trusting relationships with parents, a lack of flexibility afforded from school leadership that constrained the nature and extent of work practitioners could engage in, as well as a lack of physical resources limiting the scope of the work.

Evaluations of the impact of practitioners from outside organisations discussed above suggest that charity-based support workers can adopt effective roles to supporting students within mainstream schools. However, whether this is able to be achieved in AP in a way comparable to that seen in mainstream is unclear. Kendall and colleagues (2007) argue that students who have experienced exclusion should have regular and direct access to external agencies and services such as CAMHS and counselling services that can ensure that their needs are met effectively. They also emphasise the importance of high-quality staff to work with the YP as being key, where staff can meet the complex needs of the students and contribute a range of specialist skills. Further exploration as to the ways in which practitioners from external organisations who have relevant background training undertake these tasks in AP would provide insight into how and why these practitioners might be beneficial and effective in these settings.

## **2.4 Implications for Educational Psychology**

Supporting students who are excluded from school or who disengage from education continues to be a key role for EPs (Farrell et al., 2006). Through their work in schools and AP, EPs are well placed to facilitate collaboration between different professionals to better

support students experiencing difficulties with attendance or engagement (Carroll, 2015). EPs also contribute systemic thinking to help staff and parents construct alternative narratives about why CYP might be having difficulties at school or have experienced exclusion (Fox, 2009). In addition, EP assessment skills and ability to develop holistic understanding of a student's needs are highly valuable for working in AP. Although the current study did not aim to explore how EPs can work collaboratively with SHSPs and other staff in AP, the findings will provide valuable theoretical insight into factors that can contribute to effective outcomes for students in these settings as well as highlight potential future opportunities for collaborative work.

Through exploring the working practices of practitioners in school-home support roles in AP, the findings would be of relevance to EPs in developing an evidence base within this field that can inform EP practice with these students and the staff who work to support them. With current pressures on schools and continued rise in exclusions and referrals to AP, it is imperative for EPs to have a more in-depth working knowledge of how practitioners such as those from external organisations can promote better outcomes for these students, and how they might be complementary or additional to the role of other AP staff. Moreover, understanding *how* practitioners can work with students and families and the psychological models underpinning their work is likely to be useful for EPs for disseminating examples of good practice. In particular, with appeals to EPs to communicate research and theory to policy makers (Anderman, 2011), these research findings may hold potential for EPs to use this knowledge to inform broader systemic change in AP.

Findings from this study relating to possible areas of training or supervision needs for staff and support workers in AP is also of interest to EPs working in these settings. This is particularly pertinent as EPs are well-placed to offer training and facilitate connections with external agencies (Lee & Woods, 2017), as well as to offer high-quality and emotionally containing supervision to other professionals (Dunsmuir & Leadbetter, 2010). An identification of the systemic barriers to the practice of SHSPs and other staff in AP would

also be beneficial for EPs who are well-placed to help identify barriers and facilitate organisational change (Chidley & Stringer, 2020; Farrell et al., 2006).

## **2.5 Qualitative research paradigms**

Qualitative inquiry is an interpretive, naturalistic approach that is concerned with the study of lived experience and seeks to explore how phenomena are interpreted and given meaning through an individual's own experiences and perspectives (Banister et al., 2011). With its roots in philosophical traditions such as phenomenology and constructivism, qualitative approaches to psychological research are often seen to sit in contrast with the previously-dominant positivist positions (Willig & Stainton-Rogers, 2017). Where quantitative methods might seek objective measures of reality, qualitative standpoints argue for the need to recognise the importance of interpretation and subjectivity in seeking to understand psychological processes (Demuth, 2015).

Newman and Clare (2016) argue that research exploring interpersonal processes -such as in the current study- should adopt qualitative research methods, as these are well suited to studying complex interactions and processes underlying human relationships within real-life contexts. They argue that this is particularly relevant to the field of Educational Psychology given the relational nature of the profession and interest in human interactional processes. Qualitative research paradigms are considered a powerful and relevant way of exploring research questions pertaining to the 'how' and 'why' of relational phenomenon and can allow for exploring how this is understood from different individual perspectives (Willig & Stainton-Rogers, 2017).

Researchers setting out to pursue relational research should consider the *paradigms* (assumptions and world views) that they as researchers bring to the study, the *methodology* that best matches these paradigms, *methods* for data collection, and a consideration of the research *trustworthiness* (Newman & Clare, 2016). Within relational-based paradigms, the researcher is not 'neutral', serving instead as an essential component of interpreting meaning that individuals assign to the phenomenon in question

(Patton, 2002). These aspects were therefore considered essential components in the development of the current research design in relation to the research questions. In addition, through seeking to gain an in-depth understanding of the role of SHSPs in real-life contexts, this required thoughtful consideration as to my own role in the research processes and interpretation of meaning, and is discussed further in the following chapter.

## **2.6 Summary and rationale for present study**

Emerging literature exploring the role of staff working in AP indicates that they can offer a range of skills and attributes that are often beyond what is possible for staff in mainstream schools. Secure and trusting relationships with staff that can serve as a necessary attachment base for some students are consistently identified as being key factors driving positive experiences in AP (e.g., Malcolm, 2021). Building relationships with the parents/carers of these students and engaging in 'micro-work' that supports each family based on their own individual needs often also comes within the remit of AP staff (Page, 2021c). Moreover, relational factors that foster student autonomy are considered by staff and students as particularly important to meeting a fundamental psychological need that underpins motivation (Hamilton & Morgan, 2018; Nicholson & Putwain, 2018). Other factors integral to the nature of AP such as having smaller class sizes, flexible curricula, and more personalised learning opportunities have been heralded as key contributors of positive outcomes for these students (Cajic-Seigneur & Hodgson, 2016; Looney, 2018; Mills & McGregor, 2013). Although effective measurements of outcomes in AP remains elusive (Malcolm, 2021), staff and students in AP perceive these relational and pedagogic factors to be important drivers of academic progress, improved attendance and behaviour, and effective re-integration back into mainstream.

Students entering into AP typically come from disadvantaged backgrounds and present with a range of complex needs. Although future trajectories are varied for students in AP, outcomes for this group remain poor (Hummel & Wilcock, 2020; Timpson, 2019). Seeking to establish effective practices in these settings is, therefore, imperative. Working with

excluded students requires not only a unique set of relational and pedagogic skills, but also the ability to understand and deal with the various systemic factors impacting upon their development. This ranges from individual factors within the YP, their school and home environments, family circumstances and cultural backgrounds, to factors in the communities in which they live (G. Atkinson & Rowley, 2019; Cajic-Seigneur, 2014).

Although a growing understanding of what constitutes 'good practice' by staff in AP is documented, there are limitations to the existing literature. Some of this research has been conducted outside of the UK (Mills & McGregor, 2016; Myconos et al., 2016) or within AP settings situated within primary or secondary settings (Looney, 2018) that might not be easily generalisable or be fully relevant to other AP such as PRUs. Research has also sometimes only included the perspectives of pupils (Atkinson and Rowley, 2019) or staff (Cahill et al., 2020; Fitzsimmons et al., 2021), and rarely included observations of staff practices, limiting the ability to develop broader perspectives of the role of staff in AP pooled across different sources of information. In addition to methodological limitations, currently missing from the literature are explorations of the role of AP practitioners and support staff who are placed within these settings whose sole remit is to improve student attendance and engagement.

Bridging the gap between school and home is an essential contributor to successful outcomes in AP, but is challenging for staff who have a range of other responsibilities (Page, 2021b; Senior et al., 2016). Practitioners from the SHS charity offer a unique repertoire of skills and characteristics for conducting this type of work in AP (CSJ, 2021). Impact statements have emphasised SHS's role in improving attendance and parental engagement in these settings (SHS, 2022). Additionally, research has highlighted the efficacy of SHSPs in relation to economic outcomes (Marsh & Surgey, 2012). Existing data therefore suggests that practitioners from SHS can be highly effective in AP, particularly in their work improving attendance of the most disengaged and marginalised students (SHS, 2023b). However, despite the growing insight into their impact, there remains a need

for research to explore the ways in which such practitioners operate to support students in AP as well as the specific facilitators and barriers to effective working practices.

An exploration of the ways in which the SHSP role is implemented within AP may serve to identify factors that facilitate effective support for YP who have experienced exclusion, as well as the potential barriers to the efficacy of these programmes within AP. The current study, therefore, sought to address these gaps in the literature by exploring how SHSPs work in AP. Expanding on previous qualitative methodologies used to examine staff practices in AP, this study sought to explore the SHSP role by drawing from a range of different perspectives and sources of information in order to develop rich insight into the behaviours, actions and practices of practitioners in these settings.

### **3. Methodology**

#### **3.1 Introduction**

The context and philosophical underpinnings of the research are discussed within this chapter to provide a fundamental position on which the research design and methods for data collection, analysis and interpretation were based. An overview of the case settings, participants and research procedure are also provided. Ethical considerations as well as the ways in which research quality was considered and addressed in this study are also highlighted.

#### **3.2 Context to research design and methods**

The context in which this study was conducted had significant influence on the design and methodological procedures used. In-depth explorations of the work of staff in AP requires additional consideration for conducting research in contexts with potentially vulnerable young people (Quinn, 2015). Indeed, students in AP are amongst those with the highest levels of socio-economic disadvantage, complex family backgrounds, and learning and

behavioural needs (IntegratED, 2022). This was particularly pertinent as the current study took place within AP in an outer London LA with high levels of deprivation, crime, and low social mobility. In one AP included in this study, over 50% of the YP had involvement with the police prior to starting at the AP. Therefore, as will become evident throughout this chapter, this necessitated a high amount of sensitivity to the needs of participants, extensive negotiation and collaboration with SHS and other gatekeepers, protracted time within the research settings to establish trust and rapport, as well as additional consideration regarding student participant's capability of exercising autonomy and giving informed consent. These elements were essential components considered throughout the development, design and implementation of the study and will be elaborated upon further throughout this chapter.

### **3.3 Philosophical position**

Philosophical assumptions of the researcher provide a fundamental basis for the research design and are primarily related to positionality regarding 'ontology' (beliefs about the nature of reality and *what* it is possible to know about the world), 'epistemology' (assumptions about the nature of knowledge and *how* it is possible to find out about the world) (Ormston et al., 2014), and 'axiology' (philosophical position regarding values and ethical decision making in connection to the research) (Hart, 1971).

Contrasting positions from which research can be conducted range from positivist to social constructionist (Willig, 2013). *Positivist* assumptions follow the notion that there is a pre-existing, objectively measurable reality. In contrast, *social constructivist* stances hold that meaning and knowledge are constructed by our social interactions and engagement with our experiences (Burr, 2015). In a research capacity, the social constructivist position states that whatever the nature of reality, this cannot be objectively gathered from the data, but is only accessed indirectly through the perceived reality of participants and that of the researcher (Robson & McCartan, 2016). This epistemological position acknowledges the



importance of meaning and discourse, where different individuals may produce different perspectives and interpretations of that reality (Willig, 2013).

The current research was concerned primarily with understanding the working practices of SHSPs and to explore what they do and how they might support students in AP. In line with social constructivism, it was deemed that the nature of this reality (what SHSPs do) could not be objectively measured, but is given meaning by the people experiencing it. Accordingly, a 'social constructionist' position was considered most appropriate for the current study, influencing the nature of the research design, data collection, and methods of analysis.

### **3.4 Rationale for the research design**

With exploration of phenomena that are not objectively measurable, a flexible research design is warranted (Robson & McCartan, 2016). Qualitative methodologies underpinned by a social constructivist stance aim to explore how people understand their experiences and interpret their world (Mertens, 2019). The use of a qualitative design was deemed suitable, which sought to interpret the role of SHSPs in AP in terms different perceived patterns of meaning expressed in the data.

Flexible, qualitative research designs typically involve multiple methods of data collection (Robson & McCartan, 2016). To achieve an in-depth exploration of the role of SHSPs in AP, the study therefore employed a case study approach to gather the perspectives and lived experiences of SHSPs, senior leadership team (SLT) staff, and students in AP, as well as conduct unstructured observations of SHSP working practices. The interpretive nature of qualitative research in line with a social constructivist axiology, therefore, also required reflexivity (Pathiranage et al., 2020) (see section 3.8.3). This is the acknowledgement that my own perspectives and positionality as the researcher would have influenced the analysis and interpretation of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2022a), and was considered an integral component of the design, analysis and interpretation of data in this study.

### 3.5 Research design

#### 3.5.1 Case studies

Case study designs are used to extrapolate rich data about an individual, entity, or organisation within its real-world setting (Merriam, 2015; Yin, 2018). A social constructivist position is considered particularly well suited to case studies that propose exploratory research questions pertaining to *how* a particular phenomenon operates within a given context from the perspective of different informants (Robson & McCartan, 2016). An additional criterion for a case study approach is that there is no manipulation of the participants or phenomena of interest; thus requiring the organization to already be in operation (Yin, 2018). This was considered appropriate for this study as the research provided an exploration of the work of SHSPs already established within AP settings.

Case studies taking a qualitative position (e.g., Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1995) can employ either single- or multiple-case designs, with the use of multiple cases allowing for more in-depth exploration and greater variation of the phenomena of interest (Merriam, 2015). However, this is not for the purposes of *statistical* generalisation as would be the case with increased sample size in quantitative research, but with the view to maximise *theoretical* generalisability (Robson & McCartan, 2016). The current study used a multi-case study of the work of SHSPs, exploring practices within two AP sites within one LA. Both sites were included, not for comparative purposes, but to encapsulate the diverse range of strategies, approaches, and challenges in the work of SHSPs within AP. This was particularly important in this instance given the diverse needs of students across the different AP settings.

A variety of different methods of data collection and interpretive practices can be utilised in case studies, such as interviews, direct observation, focus groups, and the examination of archives, reports, or documents (Harrison et al., 2017). The collection of data using multiple sources (e.g., interviews and observations) allows for a richer understanding of how an organisation operates within its setting, as well as increasing research validity

(Cronin, 2014; Yin, 2018). To examine the proposed aims and RQs, ethnographically-informed observations of the work of SHSPs within the two AP settings were conducted as well as semi-structured interviews to explore the views and experiences of SHSPs, SLT, and students.

#### *3.5.1.1 The use of ethnographic principles in case study research*

Ethnography, in part, pertains to the engagement of the researcher in the lived experiences of individuals in order to gather detailed descriptions of the behaviours, actions and contexts in which participants exist (M. Atkinson, 2016). Moreover, ethnographically-informed researchers maintain reflexivity by considering and examining the influences of their own positionality, thoughts and motives during data collection, analysis and interpretation. Often, ethnographic methods involve the researcher engaging in an intensive period of immersion in the study setting. However, ethnographic principles can also be successfully applied to smaller-scale research so long as there remains a focus on the meaning of individuals' actions through direct and sustained contact with the participants in their natural setting (O'Reilly, 2011). In the current study, even though prolonged time in the AP settings was not possible, ethnographic principles including periods of direct observations over four weeks in each setting were used to allow for close collaboration between myself as the researcher and participants. Additionally, this approach allowed for the documentation and analyses of naturally occurring activities and processes of the SHSP role within their everyday context, and provided additional details of their conduct and interactions that would have otherwise be unobtainable through participant interviews alone (Heath & Luff, 2008).

#### *3.5.1.2 Observational methods*

The use of direct observations are considered an invaluable case study method; allowing the researcher to uncover additional information about a phenomena that may not be

accessible to or realized by the participants through interviews (Merriam, 2015; Morgan et al., 2017). This method of data collection was considered particularly appropriate for exploring aspects of *how* the work of SHS is implemented within its real-world context beyond that which could be drawn from participant's self-reported accounts. Observations of practice provide a more direct route into understanding behaviours, daily activities and interactions (Cotton et al., 2010). Cotton argues observations are also a way of avoiding only including data that might be subject to participant selectivity, memory limitations or potential stereotyping of their role when describing their behaviours.

Approaches to observations vary depending on their level of formality and structure. Formal approaches impose structure and direction on what should be observed, whereas informal approaches are less structured and allow for more complexity and 'completeness' as the observer is given more freedom in what information is gathered (Robson & McCartan, 2016, p. 322). More informal and unstructured approaches to observation – albeit requiring a more complex level of synthesis and interpretation of the data – is particularly well suited to the study of processes (Fetters & Rubinstein, 2019) such as the ways in which SHSPs were seen to interact with staff and students, how they position themselves, and the contexts in which they work.

Observational approaches using ethnographic principles can also differ concerning the stance adopted by the observer. This ranges from the observer becoming a fully 'active' participant and part of the social group being observed, to being a complete (often hidden) observer (Merriam, 2015). A middle-ground approach that assumes a 'marginal-participant' role was considered most appropriate for the context of the current study. Within this, my role was able to be clearly demarcated as an observer, but with the added possibility of interacting and establishing relationships with SHSPs, staff and students. This allowed me to ask clarification questions and to participate in activities that would help me develop a deeper understanding of processes being observed (Robson & McCartan, 2016, p.326).

Given the relatively unstructured nature of the observations, my role as a 'marginal participant', and the use of ethnographic principles in this study, a suitable method of collecting and recording observational data was required to provide a 'thick description' of events (Geertz, 2008). Fetter and Rubinstein's (2019) '3 Cs' approach to collecting field notes during unstructured observations was considered appropriate for this. This framework allowed me to document the 'context' (the circumstances under which an observation occurred), 'content' (what happened) and 'concepts' (e.g., theoretical insights emerging) that were noticed during observation sessions in each AP site. This was important in the current study for recording my active engagement with the participants (see [Appendix B](#) for an example completed observation schedule).

### *3.5.1.3 Interviews*

As well as observational data, semi-structured interviews were collected from SHSPs, SLT staff and students across the two AP sites. This method was used to develop a deeper understanding of the involvement of SHSPs from the perspectives of the practitioners themselves as well as other groups with whom they work (e.g., SLT and students). Moreover, semi-structured interviews aligned with the study's aim to acquire different subjective perspectives about the SHSP role from the position of multiple key informants. Interviews are one of the most commonly used data collection methods in case-study research as they can be effective in uncovering perceived explanations of key events and concepts (Yin, 2018). The flexible nature of semi-structured interviews allowed me to pursue ideas and thoughts as they emerged throughout the interview process, meaning that a deeper and richer exploration of phenomenon could be conducted than would have been possible with more formatted structures such as survey methods (Robson & McCartan, 2016). Semi-structured interviews were also considered appropriate given my close involvement as the researcher and need to maintain rapport with participants (particularly students who might have difficulties engaging with formal interactions), allowing the process to be similar to a guided conversation (Yin, 2018).

#### *3.5.1.4 Development of interview schedules*

Separate interview schedules were developed for SHSPs, staff, and students (see [Appendix C](#)). Interview schedules and questions needed to consider the nature of each participant group, including language accessibility and opportunities to develop rapport prior to the interviews. For instance, with SHSP interviews, these were set to take place following observations and development of rapport and so required fewer rapport-building questions than with SLT and students, with whom I would have had less direct contact with.

Initial questions for each participant group were considered through identifying previous research with comparable groups and research foci. In addition, the extent that questions would foster in-depth responses related to the RQs was considered. Through discussions with two representatives from the SHS charity and research supervisors, some open-ended questions were added to the original schedules for SHSPs. These pertained to their training and previous experience as it was felt these might help further explore different aspects of their role as well as provide additional informative context to how they work. The SLT interview questions were also further developed and re-ordered following these discussions to ensure an in-depth background as to the reasons for having a SHSP in the AP before more details about their role were explored.

Student interview schedules were developed with additional consideration of my own positionality as the researcher and the need to establish rapport with the each student to ensure they were comfortable with the process (Kennedy-Macfoy, 2013). This resulted in adding the option of playing a game and additional informal questions at the start of the interview. Students would also be offered alternative methods of communicating their perspectives as part of the interview such as drawing their experiences or writing responses on post-it notes to form a collage.

Given the limited number of SHSPs and SLT staff available for the study, no formal piloting was conducted for these groups. However, one SHSP and one SLT were shown the initial

interview questions in advance to check through their feasibility. No changes were requested from the SLT, but the SHSP noted that they did not understand the question 'What helps *facilitate* your work...', and so this was re-phased for the actual interviews to 'What helps you to do your job well...'.

Student interview questions were checked for comprehension and accessibility with a student at one AP site (not included in the data) with whom I had started to develop a rapport with through the observation sessions. The first student participant was also considered initially as a pilot, but as no changes were made to the schedule following this, this participant's data were included in the study.

### **3.6 Recruitment and sampling**

In line with Merriam (1998), the use of a two-tier sampling technique for case-study designs was employed where, in the first instance, 'cases' to be studied were selected. Secondly, individual participants within each case were recruited for inclusion in the study.

#### **3.6.1 Case settings**

In the preliminary stages of the study, a representative from SHS was contacted to describe the initial ideas and rationale for the research. Through this contact, two AP settings within the LA were identified using purposive sampling. Purposive sampling for case studies is considered appropriate when the research aims for an in-depth exploration of a particular case, or where a specific entity exists that can be particularly informative to the RQs (Robson & McCartan, 2016). Following the identification of suitable settings, SHS then contacted the AP to gain provisional agreement from the SLT that they might be willing to participate.

The two identified sites are part of the same umbrella AP, but are based on two separate campuses within the LA. The two sites offer diverse support and models of education based on the different needs of the students they serve. For the purposes of this study,

each AP was, therefore, considered as an individual 'case'. In multi-case designs, similarities and differences between two cases need to be considered in a meaningful way, with the two selected cases having some level of homogeneity (Merriam, 2015). A number of prerequisite factors were identified to help ensure that the inclusion of the two cases provide a coherent and detailed representation of the involvement of SHSPs in AP. Thus, case criteria for the involvement of the two cases were:

1. Each case (site) must provide AP for secondary-school aged young people.
2. Each case (site) operates within the same LA.
3. SHS has been embedded within the AP for at least one year prior to the study.
4. SHSPs work on a full-time basis within the AP.

#### *3.6.1.1 AP site A ('Oakmead')*

Site 'A' is an AP based in an outer London borough. The pseudonym 'Oakmead' will be used hereafter for this site. Oakmead provides full-time placements for students aged 11 to 16 years (key stages 3 and 4) who have been excluded on a permanent or fixed-term basis (more than six days), or are on respite from their mainstream school. The school offers pupils the opportunity to follow a range of GCSE and vocational courses. Students at this AP are typically referred based on social, emotional or behavioural difficulties in their previous schools. At the time of data collection, there were 92 students on role at this site, with 44.8% eligible for Pupil Premium. Ethnicity of current students included 55% White British, 35% Black African, 3% Black Caribbean, and 7% Other. The core school staff team consisted five members of SLT, eight teachers, three learning support workers, and two SHSPs. During the course of the study, one SHSP left the role and was replaced by another full-time SHSP.

#### *3.6.1.2 AP site B ('Riverwood')*

The AP at site B (Pseudonym 'Riverwood'), provides education and support for students aged 11 to 16 years who have had difficulties attending mainstream provision due to



underlying emotional and mental health difficulties and who require a smaller educational setting. 'Riverwood' is located in the same outer London borough as 'Oakmead' and is part of the same umbrella AP. At the time of data collection, there were 34 students on role at this site, with 94% of students eligible for Pupil Premium. Ethnicity of current students included 55.9% White British; 26.5% Asian heritage; 8.8% Black African; and 8.8% Other heritage. The core school staff team consisted of three members of the SLT, five teachers, two learning support workers, and one SHSP.

### 3.6.2. Participant details

Following ethics approval (see 3.8.1), prospective participants within each of the two AP sites were identified for inclusion in the study using purposive sampling. This process selects potential participants to invite based on eligibility that they would be able to provide data matched to the aims and objectives of the research (S. Campbell et al., 2020). Preliminary invitations to participate in the study were sent to SHSPs and Heads of Campus at both sites through existing contacts at SHS and followed up with a meeting to explain more about the research with the SHSPs, SLT staff, and a SHS representative. Prospective participants from SHS and the school SLT were given a detailed information sheet about the study and consent form to complete if they were happy to participate. Student participants from both settings were recruited at a later date, following completion of the observations (see 3.6.2.3). For all participant information sheets and consent forms, see [Appendix D](#) and [Appendix E](#).

#### 3.6.2.1 SHS participants

Two SHSPs (one from each site) who were employed full-time as 'family support workers' in the AP participated in the direct observations and interviews. The SHSPs were both female and had been working as a SHSP in their current setting for 4 years and 5.5 years. Further participant descriptors are not included to protect the identity of the practitioners.

Both SHSPs had received extensive training for their roles from SHS and had a background of experience working with CYP with SEN and at risk of exclusion.

### 3.6.2.2 SLT participants

Four members of school SLT staff (two from each site; 3 females), who were either involved in the initial implementation of SHSPs or had working knowledge of the operation of SHSPs within their setting were also included in the study. This included the Head of Campus for each site, and the Pastoral or Education Support Managers from each site. All SLT staff included in the study had been working at the AP for between six and thirteen years.

### 3.6.2.3 Student participants

Five students (two females from Riverwood; two males and one female from Oakmead) participated in individual interviews (see Table 3.1 for details). Only one student participant attended the AP on a fixed-term basis with a view to reintegrate back into mainstream.

**Table 3. 1.** Student Participant Details and Pseudonyms

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Year group</b>	<b>Time in AP</b>	<b>Registration status</b>
Bethany	11	4 months	Permanent
CJ	9	3 months	Fixed-Term
Talika	11	6 months (+ 1 month 2 years ago)	Permanent
Tyrone	10	1 year, 7 months	Permanent
Zaya	11	8 months	Permanent

Recruitment of student participants for interviews was conducted following the direct observations and interviews with SHSPs in the settings, as well as additional informal visits to each site to spend time with the students. Given the potential vulnerability of these students, this was considered important so that they had additional opportunities to become familiar and develop a rapport with me as the researcher before inviting them to

participate. The SHSP at each site was first asked to consider which students might be appropriate for inclusion in the study based on their level of involvement with the student (ensuring increased understanding by the student of the SHSP role). Additionally, only students who had opportunities to spend time with me during the observations and visits were considered as appropriate for inviting to participate. Informal conversations between the researcher, SHSP and students in each site were then used to identify students who would be happy to participate. Information sheets with details about the study as well as parental consent forms were then given to parents of these students by the SHSP. The SHSP was included in this part of the student recruitment process due to their existing relationships with families (for further details of informed consent, see 3.8.1.2).

### **3.7 Procedure**

#### **3.7.1 Direct observations.**

Unstructured observations of formal and informal practices of SHSPs took place during four once-weekly visits to each AP site. Once-weekly observations consisted of two-hour visits undertaken at different times of the day and week to obtain varied insight into the work of the SHSPs. Site visits were arranged through the SHSP at each site based on their availability and schedule of weekly activities.

Observation data were initially recorded as hand-written field notes using the 3Cs observation schedule and written up immediately following each visit. Information regarding the observational context (e.g., environmental setting or factors influencing the observation process), formal and informal operations of practitioners, and dialogic details were noted throughout and following each visit. These elements were used to capture a richer picture of the ways in which the SHSP role might be actualised in practice, such as non-verbal behaviours or discourse techniques that might provide additional information about the ways SHSPs work (Cotton et al., 2010).

In Riverwood site, observations provided an opportunity to build rapport with students and staff to establish a level of trust for effectively communicate the purposes of the research to potential participants. In Oakmead site, however, observation sessions were conducted at the end of school summer term, and the SHSP who had been observed and interviewed left her position by September and was replaced by another SHSP. This meant further extended informal visits to the setting had to be conducted to develop rapport and familiarity with the YP before inviting them to be involved in the research (Wanat, 2008).

As part of the observations, a personal reflective log from each visit was also kept to help identify any personal biases that may have impacted the study and interpretation of the data (see section 3.8.3 on reflexivity). This was considered important given that the practice of reflexivity is central to maintaining validity and dependability of qualitative research (Yardley, 2008), and is a fundamental tool in the reflexive analytical approach used in this study (Braun & Clarke, 2022b, pg. 15).

### 3.7.2 Semi-structured interviews

Semi-structured interviews with SHSPs were conducted within the week following the final observation at each site. Interviews with SLT staff and students in each setting were then conducted in subsequent weeks. As set out above, student participants were offered alternative methods of communicating their responses to interview questions. All student participants chose to verbally respond, with two participants selecting to engage in an unrelated mindfulness drawing exercise whilst being interviewed to help them to focus and reduce any potential anxiety.

Informal member-checking to improve validity (Candela, 2019) was conducted at the end of each interview by summarising and confirming with participants the main points of meaning from their interviews. One participant asked to add more information and recording was continued. Following transcription, participants were also given the opportunity to read their interview transcripts to validate their data and check for accuracy.

No participants felt they wanted to read the transcripts when offered as these had already been discussed informally.

All interviews were conducted in a quiet place within one of the two school settings, recorded using a digital audio recording app on a password-protected laptop, and saved in password-protected files on the University College London (UCL) network. Audio files were later uploaded and transcribed using an online transcription program (<https://otter.ai>) and were checked for accuracy by re-listening to the recordings. Complete and edited transcriptions were pseudonymized and saved as word documents for later analysis. Interviews with the SHSPs lasted between 32 and 67 minutes (mean = 49.5 minutes), SLT interviews lasted between 15 and 23 minutes (mean = 19 minutes), and student interviews took between 6 and 14 minutes (mean = 9.2 minutes).

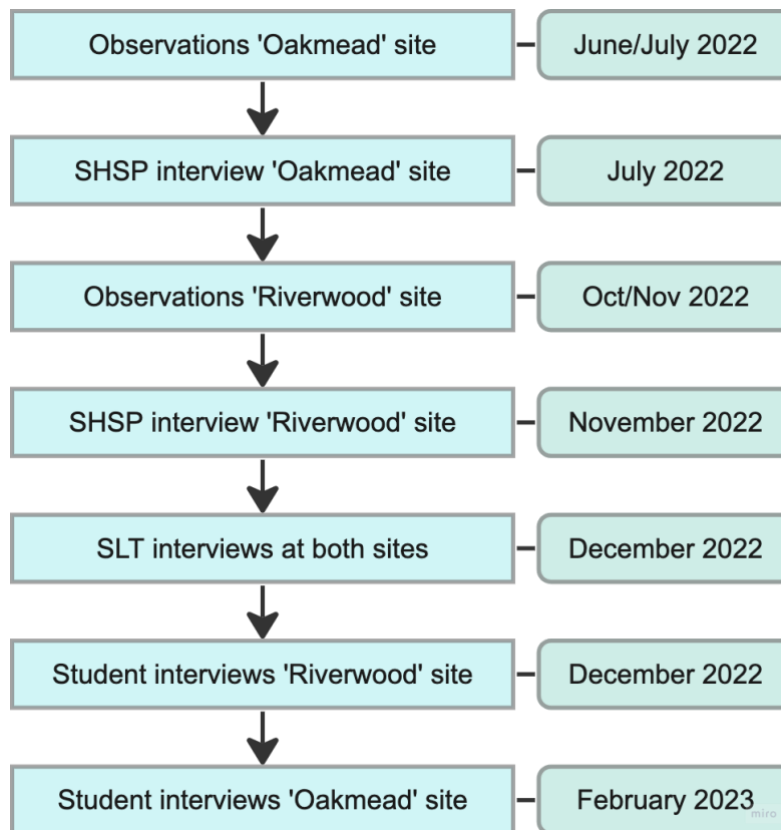
### 3.7.3 Order of data collection

Different approaches to the order of data collection from the different sources were considered. Some case-study researchers propose the importance of first gathering and analysing observation field notes before collecting interview data (e.g., Morgan et al., 2017). This enables observation data to better inform the development of interview questions and avoid potential bias of only attending during observations to information that arose in interviews. Others (e.g., Yin, 2018) advocate more for the consideration of the quality of data collection from different sources to increase the construct validity of the study, rather than the order of data collection.

Given the time constraints of the current study as well as the logistics of collecting data from both observations and interviews at two sites, a linear ordering of data collection methods (e.g., Morgan et al., 2017) was not fully possible (i.e., not all observation data across both sites were collected before any interviews commenced). However, within each site, the four once-weekly observations of the SHSP were conducted before interviews for that site. Student interviews at Oakmead were conducted last following a need for

additional informal visits to spend time with students in the setting (Jan-Feb 2023).

Chronological order of data collection is shown in Figure 3.1.



**Figure 3. 1** Order of data collection

### 3.8 Evaluation of research quality

#### 3.8.1 Ethical considerations

Ethical approval for the research was obtained from the UCL Ethics Committee in March 2022 before participant recruitment and before commencement of data collection. Additional ethical approval for the study to include student participants was obtained in November 2022 (see [Appendix F](#)). This study was registered with the UCL Data Protection Office [registration number: Z6364106/2022/04/62; issued: 12.04.2022].

The study adhered to the ethical guidelines outlined in the British Psychological Society (BPS) *Code of Human Research Ethics* (Oates et al., 2021). Given the nature of the current study involving a group of vulnerable YP as well as direct observations within an AP

setting, a number of additional key ethical considerations were required (Quinn, 2015) and are outlined below.

#### *3.8.1.1 Confidentiality*

During the process of the study, all participants were informed their data would be collected and held confidentially except in the **instance** of safeguarding concerns, where this would be raised with the school or LA safeguarding lead. Identifying features including names of the AP settings were pseudonymised, and participant names were removed from all interview transcripts and observation notes. In addition, only minimal participant descriptors were included in the analysis and write up of the data to limit the possibility of participants being identified.

Given that there were only two SHSPs (one from each site), there were additional challenges involved with maintaining confidentiality of these participants. It was considered that this may also have had implications regarding reliability if SHSPs felt their responses could render them identifiable, leading to possible social desirability effects. To overcome this, only the researcher was allowed access to participant and AP information, and participants were assured that their names and personal identifiers would not be used. In addition, data gathered from across the two sites were combined so that participants could not be linked to a particular AP site. Initially, pseudonyms were also given to all participants. However, pseudonyms for SHSP and SLT participants were later removed and replaced with role-descriptors (e.g., 'SHSP' or 'SLT') as it was felt that it may still be possible to identify the school or participant by combining all the details and transcript extracts from one participant together. Student participants were given pseudonyms to maintain relational aspects of the data in the analysis (Lahman et al., 2015) as it was felt combining quotes from individual students would not lead to identification.

During direct observations of the SHSPs, no student data were collected for inclusion in the study. Where SHSPs were interacting with a student during the observation, students

were reassured that they were not the focus of the observation and that their personal descriptors or responses would not be included unless these were generic.

To further ensure confidentiality of data, all audio recordings were uploaded to a password-protected network that only the researcher could access. All audio recordings were deleted following transcription, and handwritten notes from observations and interviews were destroyed once transferred to digital format.

#### *3.8.1.2 Informed consent*

The ethical responsibility to ensure that all participants understood the purpose of the study was considered particularly pertinent given the vulnerable nature of the student participants. Prior to observations and interviews, all adult participants were given a participant information sheet ([Appendix D](#)) providing details of the study, and a participant consent form ([Appendix E](#)). Student participants were given a simplified information sheet and consent form (Appendices D and E); the information from which was also provided verbally when informally discussing the study with students to ensure they fully understood what they would be consenting to. Additional verbal information about the nature of the study, limits to confidentiality, and their right to withdraw were given to students at the start and end of interviews. Students were also given additional options to discuss their choices with a trusted adult before the interviews or to have a trusted adult in the interview with them. Only one student requested an additional member of staff to sit in their interview (another support worker not involved in the study). They remained at the side of the room and did not interact during the interview process.

One potential gatekeeping issue in the study was the need to also obtain informed consent from parents of student participants. Parents of potential participants (who had already been identified for invitation to participate, see 3.6.2.3) were first approached by the SHSP to provide an informal explanation of the study. Parents were given information sheets and consent forms (Appendices [D](#) and [E](#)) and offered additional opportunities to ask for



clarification about the research purpose and processes through discussion with myself and the SHSP at each site.

#### *3.8.1.3 Reducing risk and possible negative impacts of research*

Factors for minimising disruption to the school day and the work of the SHSPs were important to consider in this study, particularly during the observation sessions. My role as 'marginal participant' was important in this, enabling the work of the SHSPs to continue unaffected, whilst allowing for explanations and reassurances to be given to other staff and students regarding the purpose and focus of the observations. The timings of observations and interviews were also agreed with SHSPs and staff to minimize disruption to lessons and school activities.

Conducting research in a setting with students with high levels of SEMH needs required strict adherence to the school safeguarding policies and procedures. In addition, it was essential that I remained sensitive to the student's need for confidentiality, transparency regarding the research process, and opportunities to develop a rapport with them. Through doctoral training and professional experience, I felt I was equipped with skills relevant for working in this setting including active listening, developing attuned interactions, and being sensitive to the emotional and psychological needs of students and adults working with them.

#### 3.8.2 Validity and reliability

Given the epistemological assumptions and aims of qualitative research, approaches for establishing 'validity', 'reliability' and 'trustworthiness' differ from those required in quantitative research (Yardley, 2017). In relation to 'validity', qualitative researchers need to acknowledge that there are likely different ways of describing and interpreting an experience (Parker, 2005). This emphasises the need for qualitative researchers to remain open to different possible interpretations and methods of description, and to demonstrate

this with transparency. Although no universal criteria for evaluating the validity of qualitative research exists, Yardley (2000) proposes that four dimensions should be considered in evaluating and demonstrating research validity. These include, i) **'sensitivity to context'**, involving having an understanding of the relevant literature, and demonstrating in-depth subject knowledge; ii) **'commitment and rigour'**, demonstrated by in-depth engagement with the topic, including thorough skilled data collection and expertise in the methods employed; iii) **'transparency and coherence'**, such as demonstrating clearly how interpretations were derived from the data; and iv) **'impact and importance'**, where knowledge generation should be demonstrated to be useful and have practical utility. Others have proposed dimensions that relate more specifically to research reliability such as 'consistency' and 'confirmability' (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Noble and Smith, 2015). These related to the use of methods and a route to decision-making that is clear enough for reproducibility, as well as the researcher remaining vigilant of their own positionality and perspectives. A full list of criteria and strategies used for judging the credibility of the current study in line with Yardley (2000) and Lincoln and Guba (1985) are detailed in [Appendix G](#).

As qualitative studies are vulnerable to threats of trustworthiness in relation to the way data is collected and interpreted (Creswell & Miller, 2000), several measures were taken to minimise such threats. Firstly, the inclusion of real-world observations as well as a range of interview groups allowed for in-depth understanding of the phenomenon in question and greater validity (Ellingson, 2009). Secondly, member-checking of transcripts and field notes with participants, and checking initial themes with one SHSP and one SLT participant allowed for additional opportunities improve quality and comprehensiveness of information gathered. This was used to guard against potential researcher bias and to acknowledge the co-constructed nature of knowledge (Birt et al., 2016). Likewise, my role as a marginal participant meant that I was able to ask clarification questions throughout observations and interviews. Finally, rigorous recording of field notes and a reflexive diary also resulted in high-quality documentation of the research process and information

gathered, as well as my personal reflections on these so that these could be considered throughout.

### 3.8.3 Reflexivity

Reflexivity is considered a fundamental aspect of qualitative research to ensure rigor, credibility, and quality (Darawsheh, 2014). This refers to the ongoing process of self-reflection that the researcher engages in throughout all aspects of the research from design, data collection, analysis, and interpretation. Throughout this study, I sought to maintain an awareness of my own positionality, assumptions, values, and experiences and how these might have informed or shaped my engagement with the data and interpretations of meaning (Finlay & Gough, 2008). From an ethical perspective, during observations in particular, I needed to remain mindful not to be selective in the type of information I attended to and interpreted that would only support predetermined positions that I held (Yin, 2018). This was taken into consideration through keeping a reflexive diary throughout the data collection and analysis stages of the study (for reflexive diary extract, see [Appendix H](#)).

Through this reflexive diary, I was able to consider my own cultural and socioeconomic positions that might have impacted the ways in which participants responded to and engaged with me (Kennedy-Macfoy, 2013). Additionally, this process encouraged me to reflect upon my training, theoretical knowledge, and research experiences during the interpretation of meaning from the data. In this way, I became more able to maintain attentiveness to interpreting data in a way that remained true to the participant's stories, whilst acknowledging my own perspectives. Notably, Braun and Clarke (2022b) assert that the subjectivity of the researcher should not be considered as problematic, but is an integral part of analysing data and inferring meaning, and is in line with the social constructivist position of this study.

### 3.9 Data analysis

#### 3.9.1 Rationale for Thematic Analysis

The method of analysis in research should be in line with the epistemological position of the study (Willig, 2013). The use of a Thematic Analysis (TA) approach to data analysis fits well with the philosophical position of the current research as it enables themes and meaning to be gathered from the data in line with the RQs (Braun & Clarke, 2022b; Spiers & Riley, 2019). TA is also an effective and flexible approach for summarising and analysing large qualitative data sets such as those generated from observational field notes and semi-structured interviews (Nowell et al., 2017).

The use of a reflexive TA (rTA) approach was considered particularly appropriate for the current research in comparison to other qualitative methods of analysis such as Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). This was because the RQs sought to understand a phenomenon that is beyond just the personal experience of participants, the use of language, or an exploration of unique features of individual participant data (Braun & Clarke, 2021a). IPA also relies on homogenous datasets and would not have allowed for the flexibility of analysing observational data and interviews from across different participant groups.

#### 3.9.2 Approach to analysis

In rTA, the researcher can use *inductive* (data-driven) or more *deductive* (theory-driven) approaches to coding and theme development, as both are seen as compatible and part of a continuum rather than dichotomous (Braun & Clarke, 2021b). However, rTA acknowledges that, even when seeking to employ inductive approaches and the analytic process is ostensibly 'data-driven' in nature, the researcher does not enter a theoretical void as there are always philosophical or theoretical assumptions that are likely to inform the researcher's interpretations (Braun & Clarke, 2021b). Likewise, when using more *deductive* approaches to analysis in rTA (where existing research or theory provide the

lens for analysis and interpretation), the researcher is recommended to be reflective and transparent about this.

The analysis in this study aimed to employ a predominantly *inductive* approach; seeking to explore the patterns of experiences and meanings within the data, whilst acknowledging that explanations given to the data were fundamentally interpretivist in nature. This meant that codes and themes developed were partially also *deductively* driven from my own knowledge and experience as a ‘theoretically embedded and socially positioned researcher’ (Braun & Clarke, 2022b, pg.56). Indeed, one of the core assumptions of rTA is that themes do not passively *emerge* from the data, but *generated* by the researcher, meaning that the researcher plays an active role in the extraction and interpretation of themes and meaning they are given (Braun & Clarke, 2021a, 2022b). In line with rTA, data were also coded at both a *semantic* (overt meanings staying close to the language of participants) and *latent* level (more implicit or conceptual levels of meaning).

### 3.9.3 The process of data analysis

#### 3.9.3.1 *The recursive stages of rTA*

Braun and Clarke’s (2022b) guideline for recursive phases of rTA was used in order to maintain integrity of the analysis process. In rTA, phases are considered as flexible starting points rather than prescriptive rules to follow; allowing for quality and comprehensive analysis rather than merely following a rigid procedure (Braun & Clarke, 2021b). This method was, therefore, a non-linear approach where previous phases were returned to as the analysis developed. Data were first grouped into datasets (SHSPs; SLTs; Students; Observations) so initial codes and themes from each group could be analysed before drawing out over-arching themes. The rTA phases included:

**Phase 1. *Familiarisation with the data.*** This involved transcribing and re-reading interview and field note datasets. For an example interview transcript, see [Appendix I](#).

**Phase 2. Generating data-driven codes.** This included handwriting initial codes on interview transcripts and then checking and refining codes across the dataset. Codes were then typed up on transcripts to further refine and highlight extracts corresponding to each code. Table 3.2 presents a transcript extract with data codes.

**Table 3. 2.** Example Transcript Extract with Codes

Transcript	Codes
<p><b>SHSP:</b> You just have to keep trying, but not be forceful with it. I've seen a lot of families who have completely like withdrawn children from education, because they feel like things are being forced upon them. We need to tread very, very carefully. With that, I think there's a difference between being persistent and being forceful. And that's quite a difficult line for people to tread. I think you need to know where that balance is.</p> <p><b>Researcher:</b> So how would you say your role is different from other staff in the school?</p> <p><b>SHSP:</b> Within this school? I'm much more multifaceted, I would say I have to be. I often see people with extremely long to-do lists and very detailed plans that I think are so lovely but there's just no point. Because I could come in with my entire day planned and within 10 seconds of arriving my entire day is something completely different, and I love that about my job, I do I love it.</p>	<p><b>26.</b> Role requires full commitment and never giving up</p> <p><b>32.</b> Being respectful by allowing agency</p> <p><b>25.</b> Working with hard-to-reach/disengaged families</p> <p><b>30.</b> Role wider than other AP staff</p> <p><b>5.</b> Need to be flexible</p>

**Phase 3. Initial theme development.** Here, clustering and mapping of codes into initial themes was done by hand based on relationships between codes and inferred shared meaning relevant to the RQs. Code clusters were then drawn out into visual maps of possible themes and subthemes. For a visual representation of theme development, see [Appendix J](#).

**Phase 4. Developing and reviewing themes.** Initial themes were cross-checked against the data to ensure fit. Codes, themes and corresponding data extracts were compiled into tables for each dataset. This allowed for a holistic view of the dataset and redefining of themes by reflecting on suitability of extracts. Table 3.3 shows part of a table from the student interview dataset.

**Table 3. 3** Example Compilation of Themes, Codes and Extracts from Student Dataset

<b>Theme:</b> Forming Secure Attachments		
<b>Subtheme</b>	<b>Code</b>	<b>Corresponding Data Extracts</b>
Emotional safety and containment	Knows how to co-regulate emotions	<p><b>Tyrone:</b> Whenever I get wound up [...] Like they know how to calm me down and they know where to take me.</p> <p><b>Zaya:</b> Say, if I'm having a really bad day, I just don't wanna talk to no-one, I can go sit with her for an hour or like, I'll go talk to her.</p>
	Understands and helps with SEMH needs	<p><b>Zaya:</b> Yeah she's helped my anxiety a lot because I have really bad anxiety like I didn't come school.</p> <p><b>Bethany:</b> [SHSP] got me out of my comfort zone, like, not all out of it, but like, gotten me on like trips</p>
	Other staff not as trustworthy	<p><b>Zaya:</b> It's like, with teachers, they're very just a bit like, I can't really talk to them, [...] I don't really trust them enough to talk to talk to them about stuff like that.</p> <p><b>Talika:</b> Some of them (other staff) need a bit more patience. [...] [SHSP] comes to me calm and patient and yeah, then I'll give it back but come to me (kisses teeth) my reactions might be different.</p>
	Can tell them confidential information	<p><b>Zaya:</b> I know she's a teacher but like, I trust her with everything like if I self-harmed I'd have told her, if I was going through someit, I would've told her.</p>

**Phase 5. Defining and naming themes.** Themes and subthemes were further refined to ensure each told a story related to the RQs, and themes were clearly demarcated. Brief summaries of each theme were written.

In order to develop a rich, thick-description of patterns of meaning from across the entire dataset, an additional phase of analysis was used in the current study to develop overarching themes. The method used was similar to the process of triangulation. However, positivist methods of triangulation search for a single 'truth' or reality, and was not considered in line with the social constructivist and interpretivist approach in this study (Ellingson, 2009). Ellingson (2009) instead proposes the use of 'crystallisation', which

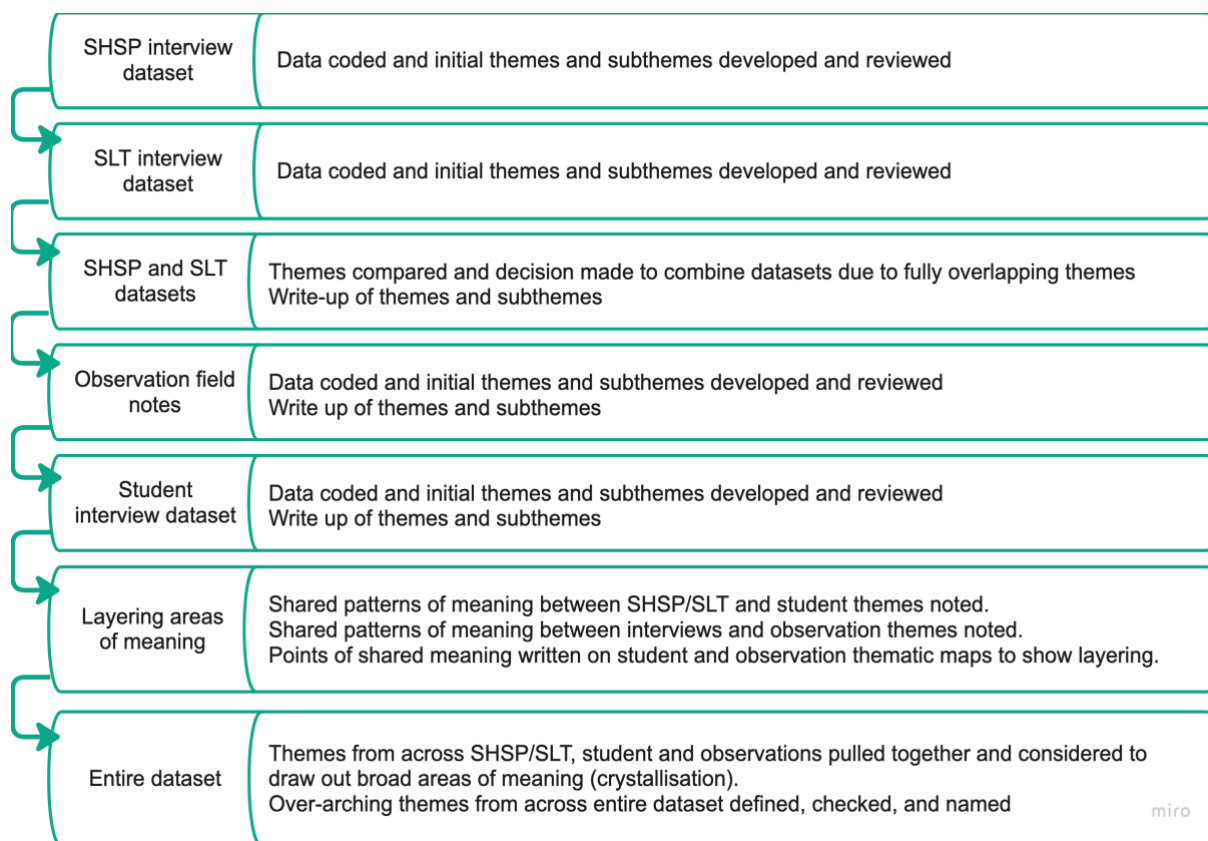
seeks to maintain and uphold the multiple perspectives interpreted across different sources. Here, different sources of information (e.g., multiple interview groups and field notes) are used in a complementary and reflexive way to build and add to the overall narrative (Stewart et al., 2017). To do this, patterns of meaning were layered throughout the analysis process to demonstrate where themes and subthemes were complementary or built upon themes from other datasets, or where there were possible areas of discrepancy. For a visual of the process of layering themes into overarching themes, see [Appendix K](#).

### *3.9.3.2 The order of data analysis*

A systematic approach was taken during the initial stages of data analysis. That is, the order in which the different datasets were coded and analysed for initial themes were carefully considered. A decision was made to analyse SHSP and SLT interview data before analysing the observation field notes, as interview data was considered to best reflect the stories and patterns of meaning from the participant's experiences. For pragmatic reasons associated with timing of data collection, however, student interview data was not able to be analysed until last. Initial themes from each separate dataset (SHSPs, SLT, students, and observation notes) were developed before considering where there were areas of congruence, discrepancy, and uniqueness across the different sources (crystallisation into over-arching themes from shared meaning across the entire dataset).

Data from SHSP and SLT interviews were initially coded and analysed separately to develop themes and subthemes that captured the distinct voices of each group around their perspectives of the role of the SHSP in AP. However, themes and subthemes across the two datasets were highly analogous and so data from these two interview groups (SHSP and SLT) were combined and refined through further analysis. This also ensured that themes and subthemes were drawn from as rich a dataset as possible. The order of data analysis is depicted in Figure 3.2.





**Figure 3. 2** Order of data analysis

### 3.10 Summary of methodology

This chapter defined the methodology for the current study, describing how the design and data analyses were developed in line with a social constructivist position. The rationale was put forward for a multiple case-study method in order to extrapolate rich data regarding the role of SHSPs in their real-life AP contexts using multiple sources of information. Descriptions of data collection across two AP settings using interviews from different informant groups (SHSPs, SLT staff, and students) as well as observations using ethnographic principles were provided. Given the context of the research in AP, this chapter also presented the need for specific ethical issues that were considered and how this impacted the nature of the research design, implementation and analyses.

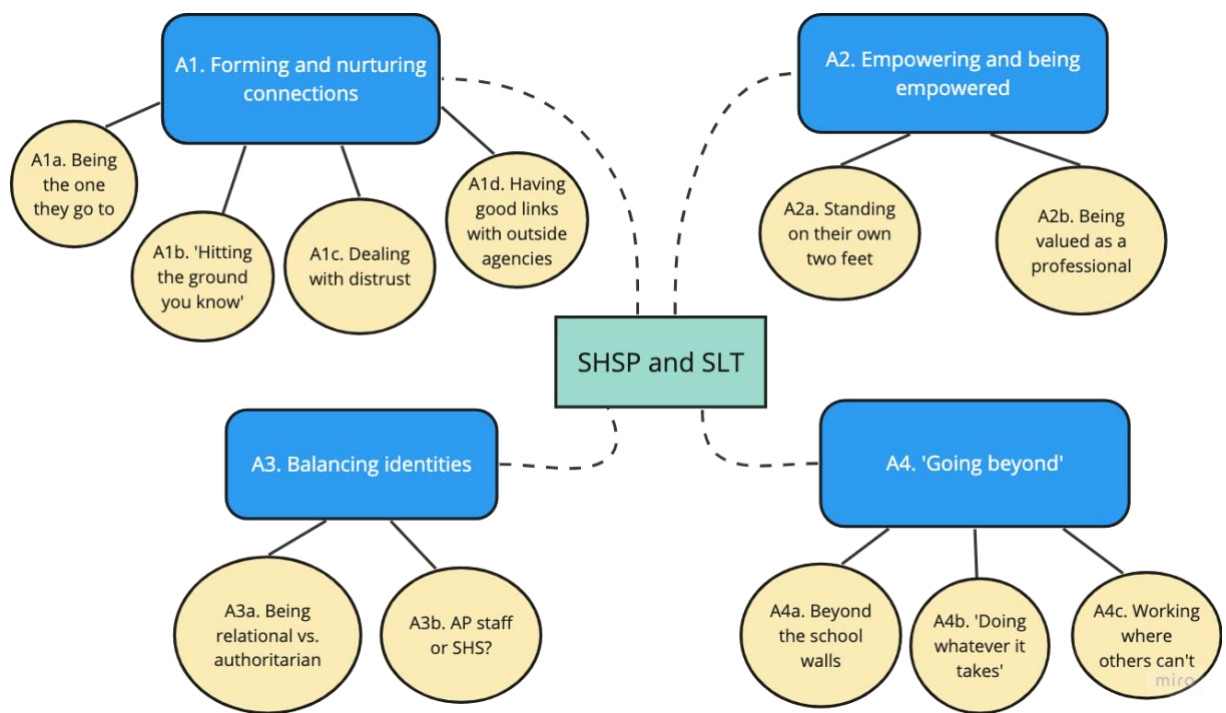
## 4. Findings

### 4.1 Chapter overview

This chapter is presented in four sections. Initially, themes developed from the combined dataset of interviews with two SHSPs and four SLT staff are presented, followed by themes from interviews with the five students in AP. Themes from observation field notes from across the two AP sites are then presented. These different sections present findings in line with RQ1: '*How do SHSPs work to support students in AP, a) from the perspectives of SHS practitioners and SLT staff?*' (4.2), *b) from the perspective of students in AP?*' (4.3), *c) 'how is the SHSP role conceptualised through observations of their practice in AP?'* (4.4). Findings relating to RQ2: '*What are the facilitators and barriers to the SHSP role in AP?*', are embedded within each section. Overarching themes from across the entire dataset are then presented (4.5).

### 4.2 SHSP and SLT interview themes

Data from the SHSP and SLT staff interviews were arranged into four superordinate themes, and eleven subthemes, with each theme considered to have its own central organizing concept (see Figure 4.1 for a thematic map).



**Figure 4. 1** Themes and subthemes from SHSP and SLT interviews.

*Note. Blue rectangles = superordinate themes; yellow circles = subthemes*

#### 4.2.1 Theme A1: Forming and nurturing connections

A prevailing theme from the SHSP and SLT interviews captures the idea that the SHSP role is predominantly about developing relationships with students, families, staff and external agencies to effectively increase student attendance and engagement. This theme also encapsulates the perception that SHSPs have to break down barriers in order to build these connections with others, and the importance of developing trust in order to establish this.

##### 4.2.1.1 Subtheme A1a: Being the one they go to

Participants talked extensively about relationships the SHSPs build with students and parents as being a core component of their work. Partly, these connections were seen to be fostered by the SHSPs positioning themselves as the person that students or parents could trust to go to in a crisis, which came about through always being available to them:

**SHSP:** *"I'm often referred to as the school mum. So if anyone needs feminine hygiene products, for example, it's me. If they need deodorant, it's me, if they've been kicked out, it's my work phone that they call. If a parent is in crisis, and they've opened the freezer and have no food, they'll ring me".*

This was a position that was promoted by SLT to parents as a way of getting them on board and engaged with the school. This suggests that sometimes the offer of SHSP support for meeting the family's needs came before the practitioner had developed a meaningful connection or relationship with them:

**SLT:** *"I will introduce [SHSP] to the family, and I will say, if you need anything, your fridge broke down, or your washing machine, we're here to help because it helps the whole family".*

There was also a notion of the SHSPs always being available for students and families, positioning themselves as approachable and present throughout the school day, with one SHSP stating *"my phone goes on at 7:30 while I'm travelling into work so parents can contact me while I am driving into work to let me know if there's an issue"*.

Some participants felt the connection between the SHSP and parents became an important and trusting bond or attachment, where parents would often ask for the SHSP to be there in difficult meetings with them such as child protection meetings. Likewise, students would often look to the SHSP to advocate for them, as one SLT participant said, *"they consider her as a bit like a mate who happens to work in the school, who will help them fight their corner"*.

As well as being the person students and parents would go to, one SHSP noted that *"often a lot of the agencies will come to us because we're the people that have the most contact, not only with the students but often with the family as well"*, suggesting that even other professionals will make the SHSP their first point of contact since they have developed a deeper connection with the students and know a lot about their needs and lives.

#### 4.2.1.2 Subtheme A1b: 'Hitting the ground you know'

Within the broader theme, participants emphasized the significance of the SHSP getting to know and understand the students and families, as well as the local area they work in as being key to developing trust and connections. For instance, having local knowledge from living and working in the area was seen as essential for appreciating who they were connecting with and how to connect with them. This was considered important for the SHSP to know what to expect when they got into school each day and what kinds of challenges they would likely face when entering someone's home. As well as preparedness, however, there was a feeling that without this knowledge, parents and students would detect this and trust the SHSP less to understand them or be there for them:

**SHSP:** *"if you're not **hitting the ground that you know**, then you're going to be running in the wrong direction [...] If you don't know the area, I think people will know, straight away, people will know".*

Similarly, it was felt that families and students wouldn't be able to trust the SHSPs as much if they weren't seen as being 'one of them' and belonging to the community. This was seen as integral to getting parents to open up to the SHSP:

**SLT:** *"She is a local [redacted] girl, and can really relate to the parents, and when they phone her and speak to her, they don't think, oh, there's this posh person at the end of the phone".*

The practitioners felt that this went beyond just knowing the area, stating that using their own lived experience to bond with students and parents was essential. Both SHSPs spoke of how they often use their own life experiences to demonstrate to the students that they know what they're going through in order to break down potential barriers, relate to them,

and build emotional connections. One SHSP noted that she felt it was important to be open with the students to be able to say:

*“I do know how you're feeling [...] I know what it's like to see your mum hungry, but she's pretending that she's not, I know what it's like when mum's whispering because she doesn't want to wake dad up because it's going to end up in a blow up row”.*

Likewise, the other SHSP felt that her own life experience meant she could better relate to what some of the students might be going through and that the knowledge she's gained through this is superior to *“just assuming ‘Oh, I know what it's like to come from the domestic family’, because I've actually come from it before and I understand”.*

#### *4.2.1.3 Subtheme A1c: Dealing with distrust*

This subtheme captured a barrier that SHSPs perceived they needed to overcome in order to establish and build trusting connections, particularly with parents. This subtheme emphasises the histories of many of the individuals and families SHSPs in AP work with in terms of their previous negative experiences with other professionals and the education system:

**SLT:** *“The challenge also can be to build trust with people who have been perhaps not trusting the school system, or not trusting agencies”*

Each participant talked about scepticism that families often have about other professionals and why, therefore, SHSPs have to position themselves differently in order to gain their trust. In explanation of this, when talking about how difficult it can be to connect with parents of students in AP, one SHSP talked about needing to be the one consistent professional for families, stating *“I think they're so used to being given up on, they're so used to being abandoned, they're so used to having to fight every difficult decision completely alone”.*

As well as distrust in professionals, participants felt that challenges supporting attendance was frequently linked to having parents who did not value the education system, predominantly due to their own negative educational experiences:

**SHSP:** *"...if you've got a parent who didn't go to school, didn't get an education, they then put it on their kids "ah well I didn't go school". So when you work with a family like that, that can be very, very challenging"*

Being someone who is reliable and trustworthy was highly valued by both SHSPs. One SHSP noted that *"transparency"* was an essential factor in breaking down these barriers so that over time trust can be developed. She further stated, *"I will not do smokes and mirrors with people. If I tell the parents something I wanna mean it, and I think that's become such a fundamental part of what I do, in terms of building trust"*.

#### *4.2.1.4 Subtheme A1d: Having good links with outside agencies*

Finally, another subtheme sharing meaning about developing connections as part of the SHSP role in AP was that of forming connections with other professionals. All participants spoke of the many connections the SHSPs have with outside agencies, other charities and mainstream schools, and the importance of having good relationships with these other professionals in order to best support the students. For instance, the SHSPs reported having *"a really good tie with the 'YARM (Youth At Risk Matrix) and speech and language services"* (SHSP), as well as *"contacting doctors, charities, CAMHS"* (SLT).

The SHSP was seen as the key person within the AP to make connections with other professionals so that students would be more able to access the support they needed. This was very much seen to be facilitated by SLT in how they encouraged these connections with *"every professional we can think of we'd get them to work alongside with as well"* (SLT). A potential barrier to the SHSP role in AP, however, was the idea that it can be challenging to get other professionals and agencies to understand the role of the

SHSP and to get them to see the value in developing these connections. One SLT participant felt that *“not getting the support from other agencies that you want to have engaged”* was one of the main challenges to the SHSP role. Similarly, one SHSP stated:

*“Reluctance from other services to acknowledge School Home Support has been really tough. Until services know what we can do, they're very 'well, why do you think you could do that?' You haven't got a magic wand, why do you think you can support on everything?”*

This was indicative of participant's perceptions that it took time for other professionals to trust that SHSPs could deliver on the different types of support they are able to offer students and families.

#### 4.2.2 Theme A2: Empowering and being empowered

Beyond simply building connections with others, SHSPs were seen to focus on empowering students and parents they work with to be resilient and independent. This is captured in one SHSP's statement, *“So much of what we do is empowerment”*. To do this, all participants felt the SHSP must also be empowered to be independent and autonomous practitioners; a position that was felt came about through the support of both SLT and SHS itself, as well as being understood and backed by other staff within AP.

##### 4.2.2.1 Subtheme A2a: Standing on their own two feet

This subtheme embraces the sense that SHSPs worked towards supporting students and their families to be able to cope without them. For instance, one SHSP spoke at length about the importance of learning to *‘let go’*, and of her role as being almost to do herself out of a job so that parents eventually didn't need her help anymore. She noted that *“before we can close the case, I like to make sure I know that family can continue to thrive, and be independent and be resilient”*.



Empowering students to take on more independence was considered to be a gradual process, scaffolded by the SHSP; exemplified when the other SHSP referred to her role in helping students reintegrate back into mainstream:

**SHSP:** *“I take them to their mainstream school, sit in lessons with them, the next day they might do extra, and then when they're ready, they're back in mainstream school”*

This subtheme, therefore, captures the idea that even though a large part of their role is to provide welfare and relational support to families and students, their ultimate aim is to actually move away from families and students becoming dependent on this so that they can thrive going forwards. However, although potentially an empowering and sustainable approach to welfare support, ‘letting go’ was also considered essential to maintaining professional boundaries. One SLT participant felt that she had to help foster these boundaries, stating *“I have to say to [SHSP], do not reply to messages after school hours and things like that, because you've got to be really careful not to cross that boundary that you're not their friend”*. High-quality supervision sessions with SHS managers were also seen as important for maintaining professional boundaries and ensuring the SHSP facilitates autonomy, as *“having supervision with a coordinator, as an external person, they are in a better position to step back and say ‘okay you're too involved, this family isn't getting independence’ (SHSP).*

#### *4.2.2.2 Subtheme A2b: Being valued as a professional*

This subtheme captures the role of AP senior leadership, line managers from SHS, and the SHS charity itself as being vital in supporting and empowering the SHSPs. In particular, the role of supervisors was seen by all participants as essential in providing resources for the SHSPs to feel empowered to perform their role such as *“the opportunity to have a phone, have a laptop, have all those things” (SLT)*. SLT affording the SHSP flexibility and time was also important... *“I will give her time out of the school day to go and do these*

*food shops, go round to family's houses, whatever it is that she needs really" (SLT), allowing practitioners to engage in activities they deemed essential to conducting their role successfully.*

The idea that SLT felt they were there to provide back-up and relational support to the SHSPs also indicated that they believed in the purpose of the SHSP's work. All SLT participants stated that they were able to use their position of authority to help deal with more challenging situations so that the SHSP was free to work in the ways they felt they needed to:

***SLT:** "I'm there to support with difficult conversations that they may need to have [..], where they have perhaps gone in and done for want of a better way of phrasing it the good cop job, I think it then does come to someone else to do the bad cop job".*

When talking about this, two SLT participants highlighted how the support they provide as members of SLT is important as it goes beyond what can be provided by the SHS line managers. For instance, one SLT felt she had an important role in supporting the SHSP, stating *"they're not gonna go to School Home Support for their support if a parent's difficult or if a family's difficult, so that's where we will step in and give that level of support as well, because they pay me more money to get abuse".*

The notion that support from SLT and SHS further empowered their work as practitioners in AP was also indicated in how SHSPs felt they were *"incredibly lucky to be offered a lot of professional development" (SHSP)*. They were able to access a wide range of training such as *"from the NSPCC", "Stonewall", and "Mental Health England", "the school" and "the SHS charity itself" (SHSP)*. One SHSP stated that this helped them *"to work more effectively and from a wider knowledge-base".*

The importance of having a staff team within the AP that fully understood the SHSP role and who are on board with their values and methods is also captured within this subtheme. This was considered essential by both practitioners for allowing their roles to be most

effective and feeling they could implement things that would be accepted and championed by others:

**SHSP:** *“If you haven't got the whole school approach towards it, it's never gonna work because it's too inconsistent. I think that's really important.”*

#### 4.2.3 Theme A3: Balancing identities

A pattern evident in the dataset was related to ambiguity and sometimes even incongruence that the SHSPs experience in defining and undertaking their roles. Two main dichotomies seemed to exist. Firstly, this was seen in terms of the approaches and methods they take within their roles to encourage attendance (subtheme A3a). Secondly, this was seen in consideration of where they felt they belong as a professional, either as another member of AP staff or as an external practitioner for SHS (subtheme A3b). This theme highlights that the nature of the SHSP role is not seen as singular or clearly defined, but is often flexible and variable, which can sometimes lead the practitioner and others to have some confusion about their role and identity.

##### 4.2.3.1 Subtheme A3a: *Being relational vs authoritarian*

In one sense, participants felt the SHSPs had a clear role dictated by their responsibilities for collecting and monitoring attendance information for SHS, the AP and the borough, and having a good understanding of school policies. SHSPs were seen to be responsible for *“legal stuff, taking parents and fining them”* (SLT) and on occasions felt they needed to be *“quite authoritarian with a parent who's refusing to send their child to school”* (SHSP). When discussing their role more broadly, this was often felt to be in contrast to their relational, nurturing approaches with students and their families.

The SLT participants also acknowledged this potential conflict although felt that the SHSPs were generally able to manage this through predominantly maintaining focus on developing relationships and trust (as depicted in Theme 1). When talking about the need for SHSPs to sometimes deal with parents regarding statutory attendance requirements, participants felt SHSPs still resorted largely to relational approaches rather than sanctions, with a *“more carrot than stick”* (SLT) approach. It was felt that the SHSPs were able to maintain the balance between their relational and attendance roles, with one SLT participant stating, *“I think she does it so well, because she has such good relationships with the kids and the parents, and she's jolly and she's happy, and she shows an awful lot of empathy as well to them”* (SLT). Moreover, one SHSP felt that the transparency she has with parents about her role was essential in maintaining positive relationships with them in order to encourage attendance effectively:

*“If I have to send a letter out for low attendance or a letter about meetings, my name is at the bottom and I do I am open and honest with my parents. It is part of my job role”.*

#### *4.2.3.2 Subtheme A3b: AP staff or SHS?*

A separate subtheme within the ‘balancing identities’ theme came from a sense in the data that, as a practitioner working in AP from an external organisation (SHS), there was sometimes ambiguity about who the SHSPs ‘belonged’ to or worked for. This seemed important to acknowledge given the unique nature of the SHSP being employed externally, and whether this might have connotations regarding how they are supported as professionals. For instance, being placed within the AP and being there every day, the SHSPs felt it was sometimes difficult to remember they are not a member of AP staff:

**SHSP:** *“It's a really odd position to be in because I think we're not in contact with School Home Support every day necessarily, because we*

*don't need to be, it can be quite difficult sometimes to remember, oh  
woah, I'm not actually one of those".*

Likewise, SLT participants felt that being considered as fully part of the staff team was actually essential in making sure the SHSP is supported and valued in their role, acknowledging this is not often the case as *"support staff can maybe be marginalised a little bit, and sort of not given the same degree of attention as other members of staff"* (SLT).

Other SLT participants felt that sometimes this confusion regarding who has 'responsibility' of the SHSP could lead to tensions between the AP and SHS charity, particularly as they felt that *"whilst on paper, her employer is School Home Support, I'm paying her salary, so it's a bit of a blurred line in a way"* (SLT). The SHSPs were, therefore, seen to very much belong as part of the AP staff team and SLT wanted to support them in the same way:

**SLT:** *"I treat her exactly like I would any one of the teachers, or any member of staff that's here, rather than someone who's coming in to work for a charity".*

#### 4.2.4 Theme A4: Going beyond

A final dominant pattern of meaning in the SHSP and SLT dataset relates to the notion that SHSPs provide *'additionality'* to AP as they *'go beyond'* what would usually be expected of school staff, even in AP. This was considered to come about due to the specific needs of students and families they work with but also due to the SHSPs living out the values and vision of the SHS organisation. The distinct subthemes indicate how the SHSPs often think more broadly than just what goes on within school so that they can work holistically with students and their families. They were considered to go *'above and beyond'* to meet the needs arising, and have a distinctive and fundamental role in AP that other staff do not have the time, expertise or resources to do.

#### 4.2.4.1 Subtheme A4a: Beyond the school walls

This subtheme depicts a richness in the dataset regarding how SHSPs focus not only on supporting the students getting into school, but also *“consider other factors in a student’s life outside of our boundaries” (SHSP)*. They also sought to identify factors impacting a student’s ability to attend, engage and achieve, acknowledging that *“readiness for learning isn’t just a bum on a seat in a classroom, it’s so much more” (SHSP)*. In defining the role of the SHSP, one member of SLT felt the SHSP sought *“to understand the situation in the home to get a get a grasp of what is underlying this child’s non-attendance or this child’s issues with attending regularly”*.

One SHSP even referenced a psychological concept that underpins some of their thinking, stating: *“I’m really lucky here in that we understand Maslow. We understand the hierarchy”*, showing their understanding of the importance of meeting basic needs of an individual as an initial starting point for their work. In line with this, all participants talked extensively about the different types of welfare the SHSPs provide for families including household goods such as *beds, washing machines, showers or school uniforms, food vouchers*, and in one case *underwear*. It was also noted that this goes beyond just providing goods, but supporting parents with other daily living skills that can ultimately positively impact the life of the student and their family, including *“help[ing] parents with any housing, benefits, food shops, advice, appointments” (SHSP)*. Similarly, SLT felt the role was so much more than supporting the students in school:

**SLT:** *“[SHSP] has definitely been known to go down to the Benefits Office, she’s taken youngsters to the dentist, she takes them to hairdressers”*

As well as their direct work with the families of students, most participants noted that the SHSPs also *“bring the ability to communicate to the teachers things that could be significant to a child’s learning and to a child’s comfortability within school” (SLT)*, meaning

the SHSP would often share background information about students with other staff so that others have a better understanding of what the YP's needs are and what factors might be impacting on their ability within school.

#### 4.2.4.2 Subtheme A4b: 'Doing whatever it takes'

This subtheme captures an attitude of the SHSPs that inspires them to go 'above and beyond' in their roles. Both SHSPs felt that they will often pursue any routes possible to making sure students and their families get the support they need and do not like to leave things unresolved. One SHSP felt "*students know if they come to me, they call it the 'bee in the bonnet' syndrome, I just don't give up*".

At times, both SHSPs felt that even with their considerable remit they would still take on other responsibilities within the AP wherever they saw there was a need to be met, such as "*I make sure that the kids have ordered all their lunches [...] it's not really my job to do that but I've kind of taken it on*" (SHSP).

The idea of the SHSP being able to undertake such a wide variety of roles and responsibilities in this way was often considered difficult to communicate and convince other professionals of. One practitioner spoke about how the SHSP role can be surprising to families and other professionals "*because we have this extensive remit where we can do whatever it takes and I think it's so difficult for people to accept that we can do all of that*".

The SHSPs also both acknowledged that sometimes they themselves are not always the right person with the right expertise in every given situation. However, even this does not seem to stop them from trying to solve a problem for a student:

**SHSP:** "*if there's something that I can't do, there'll be somebody out there that will do it [...] any brick wall that I may hit, I just knock it down and get through it*"

SLT participants noted that sometimes they will be the ones to support the SHSP with this, suggesting that in order for the SHSPs to *'do whatever it takes'*, the whole school and particularly the SLT need to embrace the ethos of SHS. If the practitioner *'hits a brick wall'*, then *"that's about me then jumping up and down, or seeing what we as a school can do that might provide the additionality that they can't"* (SLT).

Moreover, in order to embrace *'doing whatever it takes'*, participants felt this required the SHSP to be flexible, to be able to act spontaneously as soon as issues arise, and to apply themselves across a broad range of skills. The SHSPs felt that even if they did have a plan of what they wanted to achieve each day, *"within 10 seconds of arriving my entire day is something completely different"* (SHSP), requiring them to remain flexible and adaptable to any needs arising.

#### *4.2.4.3 Subtheme A4c: Working where others can't*

Several times, participants spoke about how the role of the SHSP *"bridges the gap"* (SLT) between the AP and home or between the AP and other services. The idea of them being the *"missing link"* (SLT) depicted them as an essential addition to the AP, meaning that they were able to take on roles and responsibilities other staff or professionals could not. This was stated explicitly when SLT noted how their initial reasons for involving SHS arose from the complex needs of the YP in the AP and that *"just having teachers and learning support assistants actually wasn't impacting a lot of the wider issues that was stopping youngsters from coming to school"* (SLT).

The freedom and flexibility of the SHSP *"that wasn't tied to a timetable, wasn't tied to a classroom"* (SLT), meant that they could be that person to focus on the holistic needs of the students rather than on just their academic engagement. Participants felt this was also important for positioning the SHSP as *"not necessarily seen as being a teacher"* (SLT) in order for them to fulfil this role.



The SHSP's links to welfare funds and other charitable organisations was also quoted as being an important factor in their ability to take on the role of providing additional support to families of students in the AP where other staff would not be able to:

**SLT:** *"I think that's where School Home Support lends itself to that, because you've got the access to the additional funds, you've got the access to the resources and facilities that you wouldn't necessarily have had you just had somebody who works in the school."*

The idea that the SHSP even served as a potential replacement for other professionals was also encapsulated within this subtheme. Three of the SLT participants noted how, in some situations, the SHSP replaced their previous use of professionals in the AP such as *social workers (in low-level incidents), education welfare officers and attendance officers*. One SLT participant felt the SHSP took the place of the education welfare officer who *"didn't really have the opportunity or time to develop the relationships with the parents"* and so would not have been able to do the job to the same extent as the SHSP.

In addition, one SHSP felt that her wide remit meant that she was often able to *"be the lead professional"* on cases. Whilst understanding the need to work within their professional boundaries, *"I'm definitely not the expert, I would absolutely signpost to a specialist service"* (SHSP), she felt her role would be able to provide a service to families that meant they did not have to deal with too many different professionals, which can often be overwhelming and intimidating to parents of the students they work with:

**SHSP:** *"we're kind of all of the different professionals they had knocking on their door in one friendlier bubble that can actually do what they need"*.

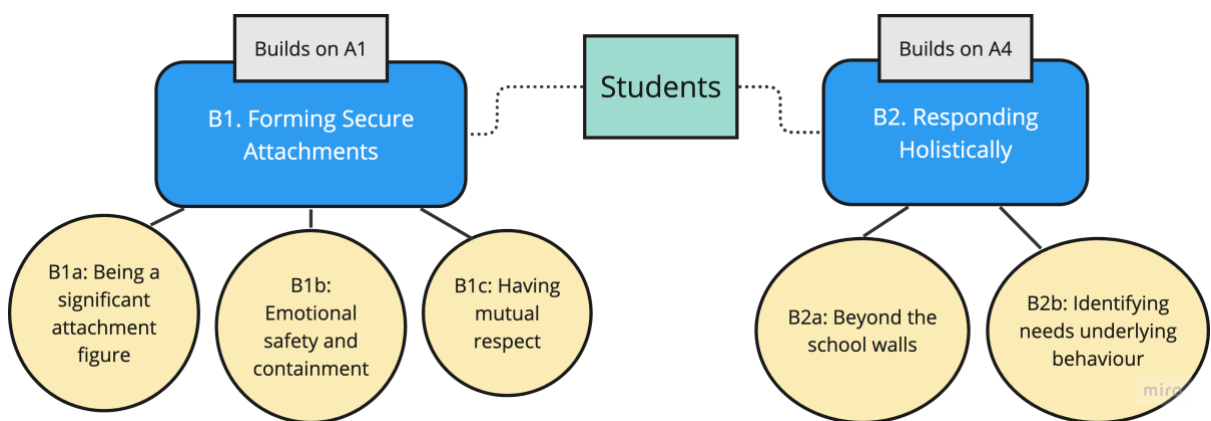
In order to take on responsibilities that others can't, there was a sentiment that the role of the SHSP requires an additional and quite unique skillset. This was often noted as being a facilitative factor in making sure the role of the SHSP was successful, particularly as it is considered *"a very sort of demanding role in many ways, and it requires a skilful person"*

(SLT). In particular, it was felt by some participants that the SHSP role in AP requires someone who is ‘resilient’, ‘multi-skilled’, ‘passionate’ and ‘enthusiastic’, but that this is not a skill-set that everyone possesses. One SHSP stated this unequivocally:

*“You can’t teach AP, you are AP. You have to be someone who is an alternative provider, within alternative provision, you have to be that kind of person. You can’t teach it, you either have it or you haven’t”.*

### 4.3 Student interview themes

Data from student interviews were arranged into two main themes with five subthemes (see Figure 4.2).



**Figure 4. 2** Themes and subthemes from student interviews.

*Note. Blue rectangles = superordinate themes; yellow circles = subthemes; grey boxes denote where themes are similar or build upon SHSP/SLT themes.*

#### 4.3.1 Theme B1: Forming Secure Attachments

One of the most prominent subthemes pertained to the ways students felt they formed secure relational attachments with the SHSPs. This was seen as the students felt the SHSP had stepped into a significant role in their life as a friend or even honorary family member, but also in the emotional connection they had with the SHSPs in terms of their ability to contain and co-regulate the student’s emotions and the development of mutual

respect. This theme and subtheme builds upon Theme A1 from the SHSP and SLT dataset: *'Forming and nurturing connections'*.

#### *4.3.1.1 Subtheme B1a: Being a significant attachment figure.*

Students felt their meaningful attachments with the SHSPs were rooted in the trust that they had developed in the SHSP. One said, *"I know she's a teacher but like, I trust her with everything like if I self-harmed I'd have told her, if I was going through something, I would've told her"* (Zaya). Poignantly, whilst explaining how she can always talk to the SHSP when she's having a difficult time at school, this same student felt that the SHSP took the place of an important honorary family member, stating *"I see her as like my second mum"*.

The role of the SHSP as an important caregiver was also noted more subtly by other students who felt the SHSP was always there for them or watched out for them, *"like she looks after to you to make sure you're okay"* (Bethany), and another stating *"they like keep an eye on students and how their home is and that"* (CJ).

As well as being described as having a caregiver role by some, others felt the connection they had with the SHSP was akin to companionship. On several occasions, students highlighted the depth of their relational connection to the SHSP stating *"I feel like she's more like my friend than she's my teacher"* (Talika), and another saying *"I just see her as part of the family now"* (Zaya). This important relational connection with the students was considered to be in contrast to the relationships with other AP staff, suggesting the SHSPs were more relatable:

**ZAYA:** *"Like she's just real with it [...] like with other teachers I don't really get along with them but like with [SHSP] I genuinely like have a laugh with her"*.

Likewise, Tyrone felt he connected with the SHSP as his equal, even from early on in his time in the AP, *"[SHSP] was like [...] she was like my partner"*. Elaborating on this, Tyrone

described how a member of his family had also previously been at the AP when he first arrived *“but then when obviously he left, [SHSP] was there”*, indicating that when he was left not knowing anyone, the SHSP stepped into that role for him as a significant person who could help him to settle in and get used to the AP.

#### *4.3.1.2 Subtheme B1b: Emotional safety and containment.*

Each student spoke about the ways in which the SHSPs were consistently there to support them emotionally, with Tyrone describing the SHSP role as *“like counselling management”*. When talking about their own difficulties regulating their emotions, students described the role of the SHSPs as one of containment. The SHSP was seen to be someone who was capable of dealing with the student’s emotional needs by being a safe person to go:

**ZAYA:** *“Say, if I’m having a really bad day, I just don’t wanna talk to no-one, I can go sit with her for an hour or like, I’ll go talk to her”.*

Likewise, students felt the emotional safety the SHSP provides by being there for them meant they were now able to achieve more than they previously could have due to SEMH needs, with Bethany stating that *“[SHSP] got me out of my comfort zone, like, not all out of it, but like, gotten me on like trips, because she’s like made that clear that I can stay with her”*. Likewise, Zaya noted how the SHSP had *“helped my anxiety a lot because I have really bad anxiety like I didn’t come school”*, feeling that the SHSP had supported her with her SEMH needs and this had positively impacted her attendance.

Emotional containment was also acknowledged when Tyrone felt the SHSP would emotionally ‘hold’ him when he became angry. When asked to clarify whether he meant being physically held, he responded *“Nah like just to hold you to keep you, calm you down yeah and obviously make you calm down and speak to you”* (Tyrone). Moreover, when describing an incident in which he got into a fight with another student and SHSP was not there, Tyrone felt the SHSP *“didn’t really get to talk to me, [SHSP] didn’t really get to hold me”*. He felt other staff could not contain his emotions in the same way and so was *“still*

*walking around like annoyed*”, suggesting that this was a unique role the SHSPs had stepped into for him, and their absence had a palpable effect on his ability to regulate himself.

Others also compared the SHSP with other AP staff, noting that the way the SHSP responds to them impacts the ways in which they can manage and express her own emotions. One student compared the SHSP to other AP staff, stating that when staff do not help model emotional regulation she feels less contained or able to react positively:

**TALIKA:** “... some of them (staff) need a bit more patience [...] [SHSP] comes to me calm and patient and yeah, then I give it back, but come to me (kisses teeth) my reactions might be different.”

Many of the students also noted that if they had any issues, the SHSPs could be trusted to always be there and try their best “to resolve it as much as [they] can” (Zaya). Whilst describing a time she was having friendship issues, Zaya said, “even though [SHSP]’s got enough to deal with she’d like sorted it out instantly”. This was considered emotionally containing for students as they felt they could rely on the SHSP, with another stating “she doesn’t take her time, like if one thing’s wrong [...] she won’t stop until it’s dealt with” (Tyrone). Moreover, students spoke of how the SHSP would even provide emotional support to their parents in order to indirectly support the students... “even if it’s a weekend and mum’s just having a really bad day, [SHSP] will be there and will be like you can come talk to me, you can phone me even in out of school hours” (Zaya).

#### 4.3.1.3 Subtheme B1c: Having mutual respect.

The attachments between the students and the SHSPs were also highlighted in the ways students talked about the respect the SHSP has for them as well as the respect they, in return, have for the SHSP. In relation to the SHSP’s respect for students, some felt this was evident in the ways the SHSP spoke to them... “Like she speaks to you nice and politely and like not like most of the teachers in mainstream” (CJ). Others felt this was seen

in the way the SHSP would truly listen to them, with one student comparing the SHSP to other AP staff saying: *“they’re more open ears”* (Tyrone). Zaya similarly stated *“she actually listens to what I’m saying to her”*, describing this also in comparison with other AP staff, feeling that *“I don’t really trust them enough to talk to talk to them about stuff like that”*.

As well as the students feeling respected by the SHSP, they also reciprocated this respect. For instance, when asked how they would describe the SHSP to a new student, Zaya stated:

**ZAYA:** *“She’s a genuine person and just like be respectful of her cos like she’s probably one of the best teachers in this school if I’m really honest [...] just respect her as much as you can”*.

When asked if they felt the school or SHSPs could do any more to support them, two other students demonstrated their respect for the SHSP by stating that they wouldn’t want to add anything further to their workload or stress... *“I don’t really think I need more support cos I’ve already got enough and I don’t want to make it even more stressful than the school already is for her”* (Tyrone). CJ also noted that the SHSP already helps him out a lot at home and so didn’t want to ask them to do more, stating *“I’m not like trying to waste their time or anything”*.

Finally, the student’s respect for the SHSP was seen to come from their parent’s perspectives of the SHSP, with one student stating *“my mum said, like, she’s a really nice woman and all that”* (CJ), and another feeling that the relationship the SHSP had formed with their mum meant she was more likely to respect the SHSP when it came to dealing with her attendance:

**ZAYA:** *“If I don’t come to school and my mum don’t know where I am, if I just don’t come in like I bunk off then they’ll communicate and then I’ll go I’ll come to school”*.

#### 4.3.2 Theme B2: Responding Holistically

This theme encapsulates meaning regarding the ways SHSPs were perceived to support students and their families in a way that considers the unique needs of each individual. This captures the ways SHSPs seem to strive to go beyond just meeting basic needs, and how they seek to understand and meet needs underlying behaviours so they can adapt flexibly to each student's circumstances as well as set and hold clear boundaries for the students. This theme and subtheme builds upon Theme A4 from the SHSP and SLT dataset: *'going beyond'* as well as subtheme A3a: *'being relational vs authoritarian'*.

##### 4.3.2.1 Subtheme B2a: *Beyond the school walls*

This subtheme captures points the students raised about how SHSPs do not only support them within the school setting but extend this to meeting the needs of their family... *"she does help me in school as well, but like it's mostly home wise"* (CJ). This was noted in relation to the practical help or welfare support the SHSPs provide for families... *"Obviously helping families with I dunno like house accessories and just accessories for normal things (Tyrone)"*. In particular, the students felt that the care and attention involved in meeting their family's needs was what made the difference for them in feeling respected and supported:

*CJ: "My mum's cooker weren't working [...] and like [SHSP] got people to like remove the old one and put a new one in [...] So yeah, that's also why my mom said like, she's a nice woman".*

Meeting needs of the family, however, also seemed to go beyond just meeting basic practical needs. The SHSPs would sometimes provide them with non-essential items that had a positive impact on the student and family's wellbeing and happiness. Tyrone noted how the SHSP had arranged *"on Christmas she did give us some like stuff, like food and stuff"*, recalling his reactions to this substantial gift, *"I just remember like going home and*

*there was just bare fruit on the side*". Similarly, Zaya discussed how the SHSP *"started this hamper like for me to take home for my mum for Christmas"*, indicative of the additional support the SHSPs provide that are bespoke to each student and family.

#### *4.3.2.2 Subtheme B2b: Identifying needs underlying behaviour*

Much like in subtheme A3a: *'being relational vs authoritarian'*, the students also recognised that SHSPs *"deal with attendance, so that's like a very big job"* (Bethany), but felt that they would frequently look beyond the use of punitive measures to deal with poor attendance, instead seeking to understand the underlying factors such as a student's SEMH needs, and *"deals with like all the wellbeing, like why people ain't in school"* (Bethany).

The students felt that the SHSP would involve the student in trying to identify what might be impacting their attendance or behavioural difficulties instead of deferring to the use of consequences to 'manage' behaviour. In line with this, Zaya said *"if like I don't go to school or like won't go to a lesson wherever that may be, she won't like have a go at me, she'll just talk to me about why I don't want to go"*. The SHSP was not seen to be permissive in this respect, with students acknowledging that *"on some days she'll be like 'I gotta be serious, I got a job to do'"* (Zaya), realizing that sometimes the SHSP had to set clear boundaries for the young people in their care, particularly when it came to keeping them safe:

***TYRONE:*** *"I understand y'know if it's a big fight, where it's like blood and stuff, yeah, you have to pin em down [...] Like obviously, yeah, they will, they'll do what they do, bit like other teachers [...] but they won't be like that afterwards"*

They felt that the SHSPs were able to balance this with ensuring their individual needs were considered, and would work alongside the students to ensure ongoing positive behaviour. Bethany noted that when there is a new student, the SHSP would *"make a plan with them and she'll like ease them in and like try and get them into their class without*



*pushing them too far*”, highlighting the feeling that the SHSP would work collaboratively with the students to enable more constructive outcomes.

It was also felt the SHSPs would aim to relate to the students in order to help identify what might be impacting them, either through investing in talking with them, drawing on their relational connection as highlighted in Themes A1 and B1. For instance, when having difficulties attending, one student stated that the SHSP would come to his house and “*we would just chat and then that’s it*” (CJ). Likewise, others felt the SHSP would seek to identify reasons for non-attendance through their relationship with their parents, “*like she just calls my mum when I’m late to find out what’s going on*” (Talika). Moreover, students felt the SHSP would deal with challenging behaviours in a way that considered their needs and perspectives to be heard and understood:

**ZAYA:** *“Even if I’m in the wrong sometimes she will have my back.*

*She’ll be like well you done this wrong but in your defence, this is what you done for that reason”*

This was done in a way that meant the students did not feel shamed for their behaviours. Zaya felt that “*she ain’t like proper strict and she won’t like always moan at you and won’t be like oh like you’ve done this wrong or like this is wrong or that’s wrong*”. Others felt that this was in stark contrast to the approach taken by staff in their previous mainstream settings:

**CJ:** *“In my old school like they used to literally, say you like had just been out of lesson two minutes, that you’re two minutes late, they’ll literally just scream at you. [SHSP], like she don’t do that”.*

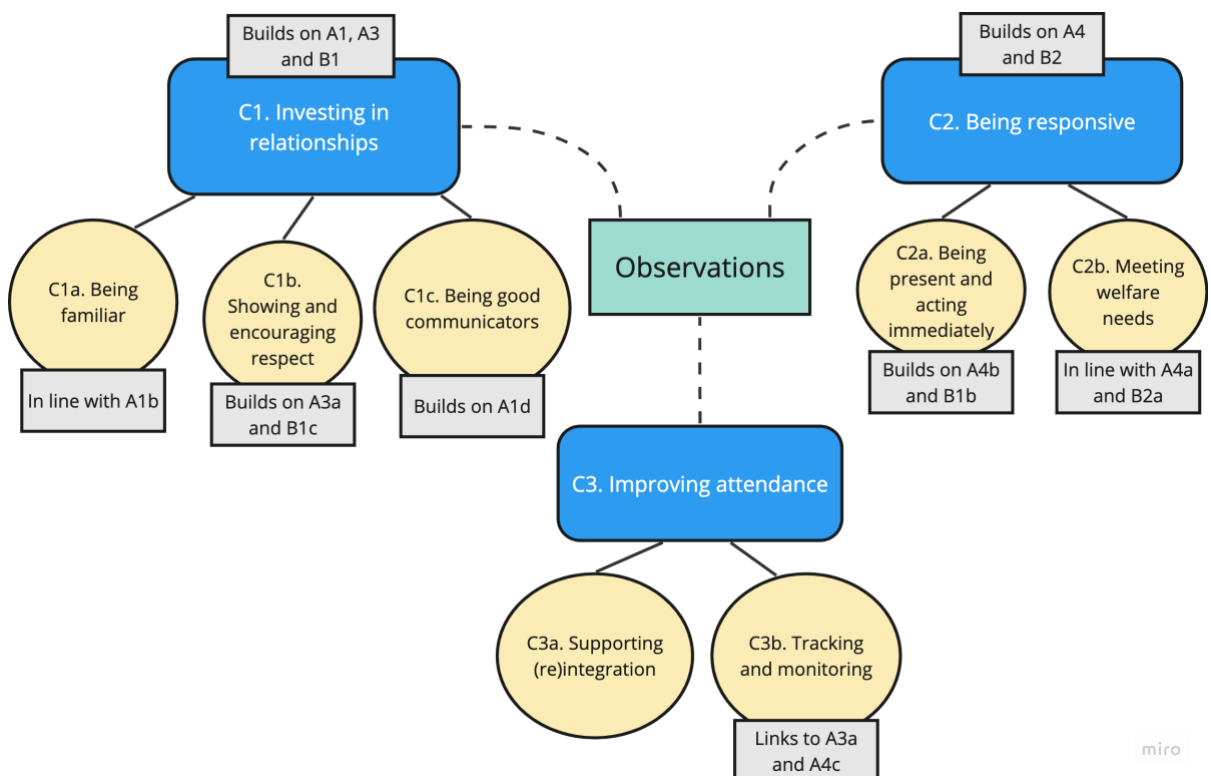
This student in particular felt the SHSP would even notice more than the teachers in AP when he was having difficulties in lessons. CJ stated that “*all the other teachers will say like ‘get up and do your work’ but like [SHSP] says ‘get up and I’ll help you do your work’ because like sometimes when I put my head down like I’m struggling*”, sensing that the

SHSP would seek to support him with his learning needs, rather than assume he was purposely avoiding the work.

Finally, the students also noted the SHSP would take into consideration the different issues arising for each student, meaning their role was person-centred and bespoke to the needs of each young person. For instance, Tyrone felt the SHSP had invested in getting to know him and understanding why he sometimes had difficulties at school... *“Well she basically knew everything about my medical conditions, so that’s what helped me” (Tyrone).*

#### 4.4 Observation themes

Following the coding and analysis of observational field note data, three superordinate themes and seven subthemes were identified (see Figure 4.3 for thematic map). This section delineates where observation themes build upon interview themes, or provided additional insight into the role of SHSPs in AP. No contradictory themes were identified.



**Figure 4. 3** Themes and subthemes from observational field note data.

Note. *Blue rectangles = superordinate themes; yellow circles = subthemes; grey boxes denote where themes are similar or build upon interview themes.*

#### 4.4.1 Theme C1: Investing in relationships

In line with themes that emerged in interviews about the importance of building relationships with students, families and other professionals, this theme captures the different aspects observed regarding the relational role of the SHSP. SHSPs were seen to position themselves as being approachable and trustworthy, consistently working to model respect for the students and families they work with, and ensuring that they maintain excellent lines of communication with everyone they work with.

##### *4.4.1.1 Subtheme C1a: Being familiar*

Having an in-depth understanding and knowledge of the students and families that they worked with seemed to be of paramount importance to the SHSPs. This was comparable, in part, to interview subtheme A1b: *'hitting the ground you know'*, as the SHSPs were seen to invest time and effort in gaining information about the students' lives. This occurred mostly through conversations with parents and by asking students questions that enquired about their wellbeing, family members and experiences. One observation extract notes a conversation between a SHSP and a parent that was indicative of having previously invested time getting to know that family's current circumstances: *'[SHSP] asked about their partner and how they were doing', Riverwood Ob4*). From this, the SHSP was able to enquire further and respond in a way that assumed a caring and familiar position, later turning to the student and stating *"tell your dad that I say he needs to make sure he gets his sleep" (Riverwood Ob4)*'.

Being familiar and informal both with students and parents was used by the SHSPs to show that they were relatable and approachable. Much like in subtheme A1b, the SHSPs demonstrated their knowledge of the local area as a way of relating to the parents and positioning themselves at their level. In one observation, the SHSP met with a parent about their student's transition back into mainstream and they *'immediately started chatting about*

*the local café the parent had visited on the way in and what they both like to get from there (Riverwood Ob1)'.*

Informal language, terms of endearment, body language, and even playful 'banter' (such as answering the phone to a student with *"hello pest, what's the matter?" (Oakmead Ob1)*) were also used as methods that seemed to demonstrate familiarity and remove potential power imbalances between the SHSP and students in order to engage them in conversation:

*'SHSP approached a student in the dining hall and said "Hello my love, how are you? You're not in trouble!" She crouched down to the level of the young person sat in the chair so she was at eye-level with them.*

*(Oakmead Ob2)'.*

Getting to know parents by their first names and *"not just referring to them as 'mum' or 'dad'"*, was also a way one SHSP noted she was able to show them she considered them as individuals. The playfulness and familiarity in the interactions between the SHSPs and students, however, also seemed to represent deeper attachment needs of some of the students they worked with:

*'One student shouted to the SHSP "hey Mother, come and talk to me.*

*Mother, you're neglecting me!" (Riverwood Ob4)'.*

Even though the extract above captured a jovial interaction with a student, *'the SHSP informed me this student often calls her 'mum' or 'mother'"*, and so seemed to represent the extent to which some students see her as integral to their lives. Relatedly, it was often noted that the SHSP knew and understood the students at a deeper level than the other staff in the setting, meaning that they were more able to know how to deal with a situation when it arose:

*'The SHSP recalled a previous time when she was not there and there was a crisis with a new student that escalated. The student had*

*refused to have her bag checked, was sent home and then self-harmed  
(Riverwood Ob4)'.*

SHSPs were also seen to use their own personal experiences to understand and relate to a situation a student was going through. For instance, one SHSP used examples from her own life to demonstrate to students that she could relate to what they were discussing (teenage pregnancy) and to help them develop a deeper understanding about a situation:

*'The SHSP told them about how she grew up in this area and how people assumed she would just be on benefits and not do anything with her life. She said when she was met by professionals their responses to her being pregnant were often "aw shame" (Oakmead Ob4)'.*

#### *4.4.1.2 Subtheme C1b: Showing and encouraging respect*

One theme developed through observing SHSP interactions with students and parents was that of *respect*. This appeared to be a key feature of how the SHSPs sought to develop and enrich their relationships. This was seen in the ways in which the SHSPs dealt with conflict, such as when holding a restorative conversation between two students, *'she explained to the students the different perspectives that she had heard and how the students don't have to take it out on each other (Oakmead Ob3)'*. The SHSP made sure that both students had been listened to and understood.

Asking the student's their opinions was another way both the SHSPs frequently demonstrated that they respected the student's viewpoints and wanted them to be part of decision-making. For instance, when asking a student about their coat preference for a uniform purchase the SHSP, *'asked the student to write down her ideas and have a think about it or to let her know at the end of the day (Riverwood Ob2)'.*

The SHSP's respect for the students was also evident in the way they spoke to them with integrity about how they would look out for them and respect their wishes. When talking to a parent about how she would support their child to reintegrate back into mainstream by staying in the school with them until they were happy, one SHSP said, *"I don't trick, I say what I will do and do it, like I won't say I'll be there and then get into the car and go"* (Riverwood Ob1).

As well as modelling respect to students, the SHSPs encouraged students to respect each other by asking them to give each other space or to ensure that everyone has their opinions heard. When students started talking over each other, the SHSP simply said *"boys, let's listen to each other"* (Oakmead Ob1). At other points, SHSPs were seen to gently challenge students on the appropriateness of their use of language, encouraging them to be more respectful to others:

*'The SHSP said to them "when you use phrases such as "your Baby-Mama", or your "bits on the side", do you think that's alright?". She then challenged the students' choice of referring to females as 'birds' and 'tings' (Oakmead Ob4)'*

Relatedly, respectful interactions with students was seen in the ways in which SHSPs engaged in boundary-setting and discipline; seeking to show that they understood and valued the student's feelings and experiences. In one interaction, a SHSP showed her willingness to consider the student's perspective whilst restating the need for him to engage in a PE lesson, by saying *"refusing to participate ain't gonna get you anywhere. You know I think highly of you and you're trying hard. I know it's hard and your meds are not helping, but let's make an agreement to go together"* (Oakmead Ob3). Although interview participants felt there was sometimes conflict between having to be relational and authoritative (subtheme A3a), such interactions can be considered to build on this theme and demonstrate how SHSPs could be both assertive *and* respectful and responsive to the individual.

#### 4.4.1.3 Subtheme C1c: *Being good communicators*

Both SHSPs were observed to invest a lot of their time communicating and relaying information to parents, students, staff, as well as outside agencies and other professionals. This subtheme builds upon the interview subtheme A1d: *'Having good links with outside agencies'*, but further emphasizes how developing professional relationships can be a ubiquitous part of the SHSP role.

Keeping parents in the loop was a key factor in maintaining relationships with them as well as helping parents deepen their understanding of their child's life. In one phone call to a parent following a conflict between two students, the SHSP told them she had *"done a bit of digging and had a restorative conversation with all those involved"* (Oakmead Ob3).

The SHSP's contact with parents would sometimes reassure them they would maintain good communication with other staff: *"you can rest assured that I will make sure all staff are aware of the previous issues between the students"* (Oakmead O1), or would immediately update parents about incidents at school: *'[SHSP] provided the parent with feedback about the student and their medical needs, how she had checked the medication and that First Aid had been given (Riverwood Ob2)'*.

Immediate sharing of information with other staff in the AP was observed regularly during most visits. SHSPs would spend much of their time walking around the AP having impromptu meetings with SLT or teachers, sharing updates about students. In this observation excerpt, the SHSP was seen visiting multiple staff members across the site to make sure that updates were given immediately and in person:

*'The SHSP then went to the deputy head's office and then the school office to further discuss the student's needs [...] she then went back to the student to check he was okay [...] then went to see the SENCO to tell her about updating the care plan (Oakmead Ob2)'*

Sharing information with other professionals was also seen to be a part of the SHSP role, with both practitioners at times taking on responsibility for liaising with the student's mainstream school to further support the student's education or wellbeing needs. On one visit, *'The SHSP talked to the student about how she would arrange with her school to find out what work she has missed out on and needs to do (Riverwood Ob 1)'*. Having good communication with other professionals, in line with subtheme A1d, was also seen to help enhance and advise the role of the SHSP, *'[SHSP] called the Child Missing Education Officer to check how she might be able to help and was advised to write a letter of support for the parent (Oakmead Ob1)'*. The SHSPs also seemed consistently open to multiagency working in order to get the best support for each student. In one observation during a discussion between the SHSP and another member of staff about which professionals to invite to a meeting about a student's attendance, *'they agreed to have the student nurse, a representative from the youth offending team and a parenting officer, [...] they also agreed to invite CAMHS, an Educational Psychologist and Social Services'*.

#### 4.4.2 Theme C2: Being responsive

This theme captures the distinctive meaning in the data regarding the SHSP having to be present in and around the AP in order to be flexible and spontaneously meet the needs of students and their families as they occurred. This theme builds on interview themes A4 and B2, and also encapsulates how the SHSP role involves strategic planning for supporting welfare needs through home-visits, funding applications, and the use of resources provided through SHS.

##### 4.4.2.1 Subtheme C2a: Being present and acting immediately

This notion of being flexible was briefly noted in subtheme A4b: 'doing what it takes'. During the observations, SHSPs were seen to be consistently available and present in the AP so that they could be immediately responsive to the student's needs as they arose. This was



seen in the ways that they even positioned themselves in the setting. For example, on one occasion, '*[SHSP] sat in the main office to complete the attendance registers, stating that her designated office is quite isolated and she likes to be closer to where the students are in case they need her (Riverwood Ob1)*'. Both practitioners also spent time during their days walking around the AP to 'check in' on students, demonstrating to them that they were present and available should they be needed. On one visit, '*The SHSP got up to walk around the whole site saying that she wanted to see how things were going (Oakmead Ob2)*'.

Both SHSPs would also make time and space for students as soon as they were needed, showing how they prioritised student needs and worked flexibly to meet the demands that arose:

*'[SHSP] then saw another student sat on the floor of the corridor and checked whether they were having a time out and said, "I will be in here (office) if you want me and want to chat" (Riverwood Ob1)*'

They also both followed through consistently on these offers of time and space to students. This was done through engaging students in conversations ('*she invited the student to come and sit at the table in the communal area, the student then explained a story about what had happened to her earlier in the week that had caused her to be upset and not make it into school (Riverwood Ob4)*'), playing games with them ('*she told me that it was not in her job description to play games with the students but she felt that it was important to make sure she does what she can to make sure that no one is left out (Riverwood Ob3)*'), and spending time listening to them ('*the SHSP gave the student some space to talk about bullying concerns in class (Oakmead Ob3)*').

In being responsive to needs, both practitioners were seen to deal with situations as soon as they arose and made sure that conversations with students or parents were acted upon as soon as possible. On one visit, immediately following a conversation with a student, '*the*

*SHSP went straight back into her office to call that student's parents to check and confirm medical needs (Oakmead Ob2)'.*

#### *4.4.2.2 Subtheme C2b: Meeting welfare needs*

In line with subthemes A4a and B2a: 'beyond the school walls', both SHSPs were seen to respond to needs arising through their involvement in supporting student and parent welfare. This was seen in general day-to-day conversations with students and responding to their needs as they arose such as for medical needs (*"have some water and a paracetamol"* (Oakmead Ob1)), food (*'[SHSP] offered her some toast to see if that would make her feel better'* (Riverwood Ob1)), and sanitary items (*'[SHSP] retrieved some sanitary items for the student'* (Riverwood Ob4)). Partly, the SHSP's ability to respond to the family's welfare needs also came through conversations with parents about what they were and were not able to provide for their child themselves in order to help them reintegrate into mainstream or be able to attend school:

*'[SHSP] asked the parent whether he will need a uniform and told her that she will get her company (SHS) to pay for those' (Riverwood Ob1).*

Similarly, SHSPs were seen to have conversations with families about some of the challenges they were facing in their home lives that might be impacting their child's wellbeing or attendance. This highlighted where the SHSPs were able to offer additional support by accessing welfare funds or supporting them to apply for benefits. For instance, *'[SHSP] noted that often requests for welfare funds come directly to her through attendance calls she makes to parents and carers'* (Oakmead Ob1). At other times, the SHSP offered to help a parent access additional support for their child if they did not have the ability, resources or knowledge themselves:

*'[SHSP] told the parent she is able to call the doctor and asked the parents' permission to do this on their behalf. [SHSP] later told me she was not sure that the parent knew how to get an emergency*

*appointment for her child which is why she has stepped in to help.'*

*(Riverwood Ob4).*

Responding to welfare needs was also seen as part of their role more broadly, with both SHSPs observed at points to engage in administrative tasks that would support families more extensively. In one observation, *'[SHSP] started working on a funding application for families who live in financial hardship. She was hoping to get up to £2000 for a family she had visited earlier that week whose home was in poor condition. They needed a bed, an iron, curtains, a bin and books'* (Riverwood Ob2).

#### 4.4.3 Theme C3: Improving attendance

It was addressed in the interviews that attendance was a large part of the SHSP role in the AP where other staff could not have the capacity (subtheme A4c) as well as there being difficulties in balancing their relational role with being authoritative about attendance issues (subtheme A3a). The SHSP role in improving attendance was, however, considered as a distinctive theme in the observations. This theme captures the nature of this part of the SHSP role in focusing on supporting students to get into school, back into lessons and, sometimes back into mainstream, as well as the extensive administrative responsibilities that they undertake in order to monitor and support this aspect of the role.

##### 4.4.3.1 Subtheme C3a: Supporting (re)integration

When students were having difficulties coming into the school building, the SHSPs would go out to meet the student in order to talk with them and encourage them to come in, and often allowed time to listen to the student whilst also enforcing the rules:

*'[SHSP] spoke to a student outside who had been having difficulties at home that morning and said, "perhaps you should see school as a bit of a respite". She also asked the student what needed to happen to get*

*them into school and then restated the need for her to hand in her vape.’ (Oakmead Ob3).*

Supporting students to at least enter the building or to join a lesson seemed to come under the SHSP remit. Encouragement such as *“come and sit in the kitchen because you know it’s always best to at least come in and see how you go”*. (Riverwood Ob1) was observed, but home-visits were also frequently conducted (*‘[SHSP] remarked that this morning she only had to go and collect one student whereas yesterday she had to collect four’* (Riverwood Ob3)). However, the SHSP getting involved themselves in activities to support and model to the student how to integrate was occasionally observed:

*‘[SHSP] laughed and said, “are you really gonna make me play in tights?”. She encouraged him to go into the court and said, “come on I need you to stay to protect my valuable head”. She then said to the student “you’re doing really well keep going”. She waited on the court for a while to make sure that the student was participating in the lesson’. (Oakmead Ob3)*

As well as supporting integration in lessons, one SHSP was seen to support some student’s reintegration into mainstream through joint parent and school meetings. In one observation, *‘the headteacher explained to the parent that [SHSP]’s role as a SHSP was to go with the student into the school and the playground to make sure they were able to integrate back into mainstream gradually’* (Riverwood Ob1).

#### *4.4.3.2 Subtheme C3b: Tracking and monitoring*

On one visit, a SHSP stated that *‘a lot of her work can feel like data management’* (Oakmead Ob1), revealing how attendance tracking can be a large part of the SHSP job, as they need to be able to consistently monitor each student’s attendance every day. Identifying attendance patterns was seen as essential in helping the SHSPs know what might be impacting a student’s attendance, and to aid the SHSP and AP in adapting their

support for each YP. The use of monitoring systems also meant this part of their role was in line with statutory requirements to protect the school and the students:

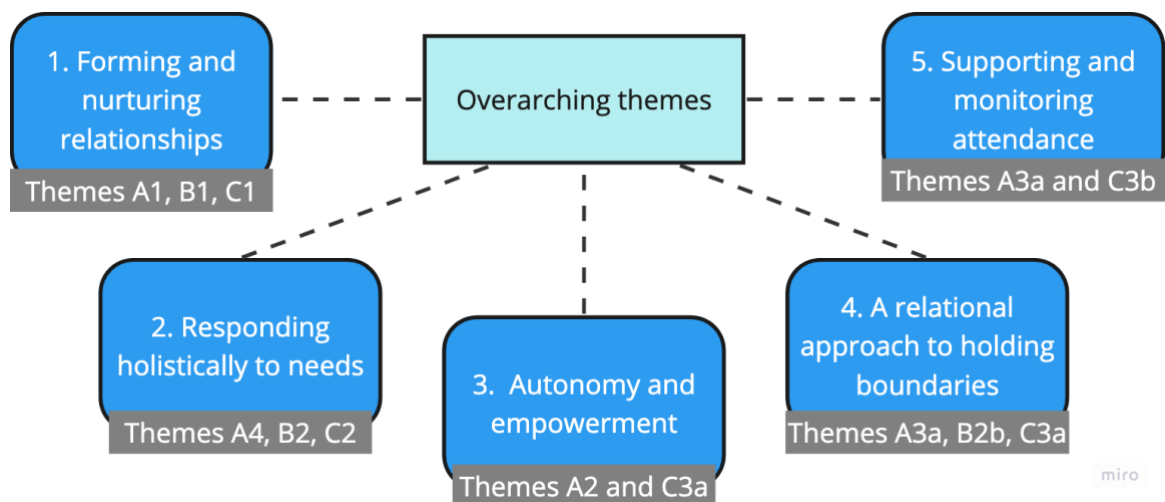
*'[SHSP] placed the reasons for student absences into the digital 'SIMS' record using different codes [...] She noted it was important to have the correct reasons for absences as otherwise it could be difficult for the AP particularly in a legal situation'. (Riverwood Ob2)*

Other digital systems (e.g., using My Star™ (Riverwood Ob3)) were used to share information with SHS, but also so that the SHSP could monitor progress and development of individual students across various areas such as health, safety, self-esteem and education. The SHSP being able to check and monitor attendance themselves highlighted how integral they were within the AP for this role. Moreover, being able to monitor whole-school attendance data also helped the SHSP to evaluate the effectiveness of their role. In one observation, *'[SHSP] checked the attendance record for the last week. It was at 90%, stating this is only 3% below the mainstream level for attendance' (Oakmead Ob2)*. Calling parents and students each morning to check on where students were and what might be impacting their non-attendance was seen to be a daily role for the SHSP. During one observation, the SHSP made eight phone calls in a row to parents saying, *"I'm just trying to find out why X isn't in today"*, or to the student themselves saying *"just remember I can meet you outside the school if you need me to. Fingers crossed I see you soon"* (Oakmead Ob1). These brief interactions gave insight into the SHSP's approach of ensuring that they remained curious about the reasons for non-attendance so that they could take into consideration the circumstances of each individual.

#### **4.5 Overarching themes**

As seen in the above sections (4.2, 4.3, 4.4), interpretations of meaning across each group (SHSP/SLT, students, and observations) could be conceptualised as having complementary or over-lapping themes across the entire dataset. Additionally, the different

sources provided varied perspectives and aspects of the SHSP role. The ‘crystallisation’ of data meant that over-arching themes from across the entire dataset could be considered, whilst maintaining the different unique perspectives (Ellingson, 2009). Themes were therefore crystallised into five main themes relating to the role of the SHSP in AP (Figure 4.4, see also [Appendix K](#)). Firstly, one dominant aspect of the SHSP role in AP was perceived to be in **forming and nurturing relationships** with students and their families that were considered secure, trusting, and mutually respectful (themes A1, B1 and C1). Secondly, the SHSP’s ability to **respond holistically to needs** of the students and their families was identifiable from each dataset (themes A4, B2, and C2). Thirdly, SHSPs in AP were seen to **support autonomy and empower students and parents** in order to encourage them to reengage in education (theme A2, elements of B1b and B1c, C1b and C3a). Fourthly, SHSPs were perceived to be able to **use relational approaches to hold clear boundaries** to support student behaviour (subthemes A3a, B2b, and C3a), and finally, SHSP’s more formal and administrative roles in supporting the **tracking and monitoring of attendance** were noted (subthemes A3a and C3b).



**Figure 4. 4** Overarching themes from across whole dataset.

Note. *Grey boxes depict where over-arching themes have been drawn from across interview and observation themes.*

## 4.6 Summary of findings

Within this chapter, themes and subthemes from interviews with SHSPs and SLT staff, interviews with students, and observations were presented separately. This allowed for the distinct patterns of meaning from different sources to be inferred. Layering together the broad areas of meaning from across the different datasets allowed for the development of five main over-arching themes related to the ways in which the SHSP role was interpreted more broadly, and will be discussed in the following chapter.

## 5. Discussion

### 5.1 Introduction

Key findings are initially summarized in this chapter in light of the RQs; **RQ1**: '*How do SHSPs work to support students in AP, a) from the perspectives of SHS practitioners and SLT staff? b) from the perspective of students in AP? c) 'how is the SHSP role conceptualised through observations of their practice in AP?'*'; **RQ2**: '*What are the facilitators and barriers to the SHSP role in AP?'*. Dominant themes from the study (as highlighted in 4.5) are then discussed in relation to previous research and through the lens of different psychological theories. Implications of the findings for future research, SHSPs working in AP, policy and practice, are then considered as well as key reflections, strengths, and limitations of the study. A summary and conclusions from the study are then presented.

### 5.2 Overview of findings

The layering of patterns of meaning across different groups (SHSP, SLT, students) and observations of practice in this study provided rich insight into the role of SHSPs in AP. Explorations of SHSP and SLT perspectives (**RQ1a**), highlighted the role of SHSPs in AP

as one that provides relational, practical and emotional support to students and their families. SHSPs felt they work holistically across multiple systems surrounding a student, and often have to break down distrust emanating from student and families' historical experiences of exclusion. SLT corroborated these perspectives, emphasising also the additionality that SHSPs bring to AP, often working beyond the remit and capacity of other staff. The inclusion of student experiences are seen as a key source for exploring lived experiences of staff practices in AP (Nicholson & Putwain, 2018). Student interviews **(RQ1b)** provided additional insight into the importance of the SHSP being an emotionally-containing, trusted attachment figure. They also emphasised the ways SHSPs sought to understand and deal effectively with what was really contributing to their difficulties with attendance, learning and behaviour. Finally, observations of SHSPs **(RQ1c)** captured more nuanced aspects of the SHSP role such as their formal administrative roles, and how they speak and relate to the YP and their families. These observations also re-emphasised how SHSPs manage to maintain clear boundaries whilst being relational. Whilst honouring these different viewpoints, the comparable areas of meaning that were layered into five dominant themes regarding the role of the SHSP in AP will be explored and evaluated in light of research and theory in the following sections.

### **5.3. Forming and nurturing relationships**

One dominant facet of the SHSP role was the way they were perceived to form relational attachments with students. Positive staff-student relationships are key to student engagement in learning and promoting positive outcomes, particularly for students who have experienced exclusion (Fitzsimmons et al., 2021; Gutherson et al., 2011; Lawrence, 2011; Malcolm, 2021; Michael & Frederickson, 2013; Thomson & Pennacchia, 2014). In AP, positive staff-student relationships can play an important role in making YP feel valued (Levinson & Thompson, 2016), engendering a sense of belonging (Martineau, 2018) and fostering behavioural change (Malcolm, 2019).



Theories of attachment (Ainsworth, 1978; Bowlby & Holmes, 2005), particularly those that incorporate concepts of epistemic trust and emotional containment (Campbell et al., 2021; Fonagy & Campbell, 2023), may provide useful frameworks for understanding the nature of how relationships such as those fostered by SHSPs might facilitate positive outcomes in AP. Recent data suggests that 64% of students in AP present with SEMH needs as their primary area of need (IntegratED, 2022), and that this is often related to difficulties in communication and learning, but also attachment needs (Allen & Tan, 2016).

Attachments between SHSPs and students were considered as one of the primary facilitative factors driving positive outcomes for these students. This corroborates with previous research emphasising the benefits of staff-student attachments in YP who have previously experienced insecure or disorganised attachments with others prior to exclusion (Bergin & Bergin, 2009; Fitzsimmons et al., 2021).

In the current study, attachments the students formed with SHSPs were seen to be even more robust than those with other AP staff. Facilitative factors (**RQ2**) to this included the SHSP being local, and thus relatable to students and parents; encouraging mutual respect; trustworthiness through being consistent and transparent; having good lines of communication; a willingness to 'go the extra mile'; and being able to provide emotional containment. These factors are in line with facilitators of high-quality adult-youth relationships, or 'trusted adult' relationships previously identified (Pringle et al., 2018). These facilitators could be considered as *intrinsic* to the relationship dyad. However, *extrinsic* facilitators were also identified in the current study. These included the SHSPs being afforded time and flexibility by senior staff; having access to funding and resources; and being given high-quality supervision and training. Additionally, having staff and SLT in the AP understand and embrace the SHSP ethos, values and practices, as well as having opportunities for the SHSP to engage in multiagency work were also inferred as aids to the development of secure SHSP-student relationships. Given the emotional impact of working in these settings and seeking to build rapport and relationships with YP in AP (Fitzsimmons et al., 2021), others have highlighted a need to identify factors that best

support staff wellbeing in AP (Malcolm, 2021). This study therefore provides insight into possible ways of effectively enabling this through the SHSP being well integrated into the AP staff team, whilst valuing the uniqueness of the role.

The importance of relationships was a pervasive theme in this study. As well as developing trusting relationships with students, SHSPs were considered to foster relationships with families, outside professionals, other AP staff, as well as encouraging respect and positive peer relationships. For this reason, relationships fostered by the SHSPs in AP could be considered as integral to maintaining relational processes across multilevel systems within which these YP are embedded (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006; Sameroff, 1995), and corroborates with literature highlighting the role of relationships across different systemic levels in supporting positive outcomes in AP (Atkinson & Rowley, 2019; Malcolm, 2021).

#### 5.3.1. Epistemic trust

Participants felt that a barrier for SHSPs (**RQ2**) in developing positive relationships was overcoming distrust that YP or their parents have in schools, professionals, or even generally in relationships. This resonates with 'epistemic trust'; a concept arising from attachment theory, and relates to an individual's capacity to trust the reliability and relevance of knowledge and information provided by others (Fonagy et al., 2019). Epistemic trust can impact an individual's expectations in relationships where help is offered (Fonagy & Campbell, 2023) and, therefore, has implications for the ability to learn from and bond with others in social contexts (Csibra & Gergely, 2011). Early attachment experiences can influence the ability to trust and learn from others (Fonagy & Campbell, 2017), impacting the way a child learns from others about the social world and how to function within it. Moreover, individuals who have experienced or are facing permanent exclusion from mainstream education can face difficulties developing epistemic trust, particularly where they have been consistently let down by professionals and the systems that are meant to support them (Fuggle et al., 2023; Ludy-Dobson & Perry, 2010). This resistance to professional support has been proposed as an adaptive response to living

within social contexts and situations which are unsupportive or threatening (Fonagy & Campbell, 2023; Mason et al., 2020). Distrust in the education system and educational professionals is also common in parents of excluded CYP (Embeita, 2019; McDonald & Thomas, 2003), with the unequal distribution of power argued to be at the core of these complex parent-school relationships (Razer & Friedman, 2017).

Challenges establishing trust with parents or students in AP is likely to be ubiquitous to all staff working in these settings. SHSPs, however, were seen to be well-placed to develop stronger relationships with parents and YP in AP given their flexibility and relatability. Having culturally representative staff with tacit knowledge of the local communities and customs, who have shared experiences, and who are able fun and relatable has been previously considered as conducive to forming better connections and trust with students and families (Sandwick et al., 2019; Thomson & Pennacchia, 2014).

Research has started to identify clinical implications for supporting the development of epistemic trust in adolescents presenting with SEMH needs (Bateman et al., 2018), and facilitating epistemic trust in therapeutic interventions (Bo et al., 2017; Fonagy & Campbell, 2023), and foster-care relationships (Sprecher et al., 2022). However, an understanding of how epistemic trust might impact learning and engagement in YP who have experienced school exclusions is limited. Moreover, the current findings indicate that the role educational support staff such as SHSPs have in fostering epistemic trust in students in AP and the effect of this on educational engagement may be an important avenue for future research. This also emphasises a need to further explore current practices in mainstream that might be precipitating initial breakdowns in trust for these YP and their families.

### 5.3.2 Emotional containment and co-regulation

Supporting students with emotional regulation was also considered a core aspect of the SHSP's relationships with students and families. With the development of secure attachments, individuals become more able to form internal states of mind that allow them

to better regulate their own emotions (Allen & Tan, 2016; Brenning & Braet, 2013). Individuals who present with difficulties in emotion regulation, however, may continue to rely on more regulated others with whom they have developed relational attachments to provide emotional containment (Butler & Randall, 2013). Others have similarly found that students in AP perceive emotional support from staff as beneficial to reducing their emotional and behavioural difficulties, and can promote their intrinsic motivation to learn (Michael & Frederickson, 2013). SHSPs in this study were perceived particularly by students to be able to do this more effectively than other AP staff. This was supported largely by the ways in which the SHSPs sought to develop a comprehensive understanding of the needs, triggers, and regulation strategies that worked for each YP. This bespoke and child-centred approach to supporting and co-regulating emotions suggests that the SHSPs went beyond using a simple one-size-fits-all approach for dealing with behavioural and emotional challenges. This is in line with the notion that individual attachment differences can result in distinct ways individuals experience and regulate their emotions (Cassidy & Shaver, 2016; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2019), which has implications for the efficacy of different interventions and types of support (Gross, 2015).

Emotional stability and regulation play a fundamental role in educational engagement and learning (Jacobs & Gross, 2014). SHSPs were perceived by both students and staff to be an effective part of this process. However, there is an 'emotional labour' required for working with students in AP with high levels of SEMH needs (Dodman, 2016; Malcolm, 2021). Opportunities to receive appropriate backing from the SLT were considered an essential factor in enabling SHSPs to provide students with this level of support. This also highlights the important role of ongoing training in this area for SHSPs and other staff working in AP, as well as access to high-quality supervision and opportunities for reflection.

#### **5.4 Responding holistically to needs**

As well as understanding the importance of nurturing secure relationships with their students, SHSPs were holistic in their approach to supporting YP in these settings. This

included promoting the importance of educational attendance and engagement, and being responsive to meeting the YP's needs inside and outside of school. Whilst acknowledging that relational attachments are necessary for optimal development, others have also contended that having a singular focus on attachment and relational 'interventions' in educational settings may not be sufficient for supporting CYP (R. Parker & Levinson, 2018). Maintaining a sole focus on relationships at the expense of encouraging academic engagement or tackling wider background social issues might be limiting when supporting vulnerable CYP. Cameron et al (2020) argue this is particularly important where having basic needs met and opportunities for educational engagement might also be essential in mediating social and academic disadvantage.

One SHSP captured this importance of having a holistic approach to supporting students in AP, saying *"just looking at things pastorally is a fool's game, you have to look at things academically as well"*. This did not minimise an acknowledgment of the need to develop secure and nurturing relationships with these YP, as this was seen throughout the data, but underlined the added recognition that the learning environment and educational engagement of these YP should also be prioritised. Indeed, all participants felt the SHSPs worked to provide welfare support and meet basic needs so that students were better able to attend school and engage in their learning.

The SHS philosophy of 'going beyond' in order to meet needs of the students and families outside the school walls was understood by the SHSPs to be informed by Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Maslow, 1943). This theory asserts that an individual's foundational needs such as physiological needs for food, shelter, clothing and sleep must be satisfied before needs for safety and belonging can be met, and that these precede being able to meet 'higher-order' psychological needs including self-esteem and self-actualisation (Maslow & Lewis, 1987). As a theory of human motivation, Maslow's hierarchy has been challenged, with critiques proclaiming it as liberal ideology that is too individualistic and masks social realities that contribute to inequalities (Buss, 1979; Gambrel & Cianci, 2003). The hierarchical ordering of needs has also been questioned (Wahba & Bridwell, 1976).

However, aspects of this theory are frequently applied within education (Mittelman, 1991), and can be an important starting point for educators to consider where basic human physiological needs are not being met and how these might inhibit learning processes and motivation (King-Hill, 2015). Perhaps most importantly for practitioners working in AP is having an understanding of the strong association between family poverty, the home environment, and poor academic outcomes that is found consistently in the literature (Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 1997). The effects of this can be moderated by external support systems including nutrition support, improved housing, and the provision of cognitive-stimulating resources, and parenting programmes (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002), as well as public policies that effectively serve and support low-income families (Carlson et al., 2022). Practitioners working to meet the needs of families of students in AP engage in complex and multifaceted work that can consist of formally structured work (e.g., daily phone calls home), as well as more spontaneous welfare work that addresses immediate practical, financial and wellbeing needs of the families (Page, 2021c). SHSPs in this study were seen to work on this premise and, therefore, considered an important and unique addition to AP. This was salient as other staff were considered less able to provide the same level of support or resources to meet these needs effectively. Home-visits in particular were seen as crucial to building bridges between school and home, although required SHSPs to work sensitively and collaboratively with parents; an essential element where fragile engagement and fractured relationships might already exist (Page, 2021a).

### **5.5 Autonomy and empowerment**

Another key discourse in this study was the perception that SHSPs empower students by working *with* them to remove barriers to engagement and learning, rather than doing things *to* or *for* them. This extended to the ways SHSPs encouraged parental independence by supporting families to access resources they needed and then gradually reducing their involvement over time. This is a salient point to consider in the discussion of the SHSP role in providing welfare support, as this framed the way in which this is realised in practice.

In particular, SHSPs seemed to position themselves away from a deficit narrative that assumes a 'saviour' approach or invoked the idea of practitioners in AP as being there to 'fix' families. Instead, they took a more collaborative and empowering approach; supporting families to remove barriers to inclusion and engagement.

Perceptions of empowerment are significant drivers of motivation (Spreitzer, 1996), and empowerment of students and families can be key to successful outcomes in AP (Looney, 2018; Nicholson & Putwain, 2018). Where parents lack knowledge about decisions made in school about their child, lack agency, or have limited understanding about their rights, they can experience disempowerment (Razer & Friedman, 2017). The issue of unequal power distribution often at the core of strained parent-school relationships (Razer & Friedman, 2017), can be even more complex with families of students who have experienced social and educational exclusion (Abrams & Gibbs, 2002).

SHSPs were observed, and perceived by participants, to spend considerable time in their day communicating with families, including them in decision making and helping them access adequate support. This investment of the SHSPs may have promoted a greater balance of power between the school and families, further substantiating the relationships that were perceived to be so key to student and family engagement. Paradoxically, in the current education system, therefore, it seems that these students are only granted the autonomy and inclusion they require following marginalisation in mainstream and loss of autonomy through being forced into AP. The implications of this, therefore, reach beyond considerations for practice in AP, to the ways in which these students should also be supported in mainstream.

According to self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000), effective motivation and engagement transpires when our fundamental psychological needs for autonomy, relatedness and competence are met. In AP, staff behaviours that facilitate meeting these needs have been perceived as fundamental to building trusting relationships as well as student re-engagement in learning (Nicholson & Putwain, 2018). The work of SHSPs that i) empowered students to feel able to ask for help where they need it, ii) provided emotional

security and connectedness, and iii) supported them via relational approaches to feel more capable of attending school and lessons, can be understood in relation to this model. In particular, the affective and relational elements of the SHSP role were perceived to impact upon motivational processes of students in these settings. Of course, the direction of causal influence could not be inferred from this study, leaving open the possibility that existing competencies of students were the drivers of the quality of SHSP-student relationships. However, students perceived the SHSPs to be able to motivate and support them in this way more than other staff, and is in line with literature stating that perceived emotional support and empowerment from staff are significant predictors of academic motivation (Wentzel, 2016).

In order to empower others, participants felt it essential that the SHSPs were also empowered to work flexibly, supported in their approaches, and able to access resources they needed. School leadership styles that promote a collaborative approach to working with staff reliably improve staff innovation and empowerment (De Dreu & West, 2001). However, the use of more directive approaches to leadership that reinforce staff adherence to rules and boundaries can also improve staff performance (Somech, 2005), and was acknowledged by participants in the current study as occurring within the SLT supervisory role. Indeed, the use of collaborative approaches by SLT that fostered SHSP's motivation and autonomy were used alongside clear directives regarding maintaining professional boundaries, and was deemed essential to SHSP effectiveness.

## **5.6 A relational approach to holding boundaries**

Staff and students both felt that positive behaviour in the AP was fostered through the SHSP's relational approach. This was considered more effective than student's previous experiences of discipline and behavioural management approaches in mainstream or even when compared to approaches by other staff in the AP. The adoption of de-escalation, restorative justice or relational policies as alternatives to 'zero-tolerance' behaviour policies have been proposed as effective approaches to supporting behaviour and



nurturing positive outcomes of students (Deakin & Kupchik, 2016; Sandwick et al., 2019). However, relational approaches to behaviour and restorative practices in AP are currently under-researched, and the ways in which these are being applied might not always align with the underlying principles on which they are based (Bentley, 2020).

Currently, government guidelines (DfE, 2022b, 2022a) explicitly promote the use of school policies that are based on behaviourist principles, which seek to reinforce positive behaviour through systems of rewards and sanctions. The discourse surrounding this is pervasive and, arguably galvanised by a neo-liberal agenda that promotes competition, and tends to disregard robust empirical, experiential and theoretical support for the role of positive relationships in promoting and supporting positive behaviour and outcomes (Mowat, 2022; Skiba & Losen, 2016). At stake is a failure to consider student's holistic needs (Bates, 2013).

From the perspective of the SHSPs, their role in promoting positive behaviour and attendance was sometimes felt to be in conflict with their relational approach. This may have resulted from limited understanding regarding whether it is possible to establish and hold boundaries within a warm and nurturing relationship. From parenting literature, 'authoritative', as opposed to 'authoritarian' (strict or disciplinarian) or 'permissive' (indulgent with few boundaries) approaches, relate to the use of emotional responsiveness, collaboration, and autonomy, whilst also maintaining clear and fair boundaries (Baumrind, 1991). In relation to discipline practices in schools, Baumrind's work (1996) endorses the use of relational models where both behavioural compliance and psychological autonomy are considered as interdependent. With this, schools adopting authoritative approaches are seen to generate the structure and support necessary to promote achievement and engagement, particularly for adolescents (Gregory & Cornell, 2009; R. Parker et al., 2016).

Observations of practice as well as the views of SLT and students were indicative that SHSPs in this study embodied an authoritative approach. This was seen when they sought to understand the underlying causes of student's difficulties with attendance and

engagement, when they removed tension through the use of relatable language and ‘banter’, and by encouraging mutual respect. For this reason, the SHSP’s compassionate promotion of the rights of the YP they work with and a focus on meeting their relational and practical needs seemed to challenge current orthodoxies of behaviour management (Mowat, 2022).

### **5.7 Supporting and monitoring attendance**

Finally, the use of formal systems to track attendance and explore reasons for absences meant SHSPs were deemed integral to the AP in monitoring patterns impacting each student. The use of these systems meant they were better able to determine the type of support each individual needed; a core facet of the SHSP role in ensuring a person-centred and holistic approach to supporting students.

Regular school attendance is an important protective factor against poor academic and social outcomes, and likelihood of involvement in criminal activity (DfE, 2022d; MoJ & DfE, 2019). The SHSP role was considered by SLT in the current study as essential for supporting student outcomes in AP through improving attendance. Moreover, they were considered to fill an existing gap where other staff were less able to dedicate time to systematically monitor and support attendance.

Current DfE guidance advocates for schools to work towards removing barriers to attendance through developing strong trusting relationships, and for this to be a whole-school effort rather than the domain of an individual member of staff (DfE, 2022d). At face value, the role of the SHSP in AP could be conceptualised as one that has sole responsibility for attendance. However, although both SHSPs took on the role of attendance tracking and monitoring, this was seen to be facilitated by the whole-school approach where other staff supported and embedded the SHS ethos and values. Moreover, as discussed above, the role of the SHSP went beyond that of purely monitoring and encouraging attendance. They also sought to respond to the holistic needs of YP, build and nurture relationships with them to support their emotional and social

development, and foster their and their family's ability to re-engage with their education, community and external services.

## **5.8 Implications for practice and research**

### 5.8.1 Implications for research

#### *5.8.1.1 Methodological approaches*

The qualitative case study methodology used in this thesis allowed for an in-depth and rich exploration of the role of SHSPs in AP through multiple perspectives, as well as observations of their work in real time. Research exploring the role of staff in AP has typically focused on the perspectives of individual groups; either students or staff (e.g., Cahill et al., 2020; Michael & Frederickson, 2013). This study sought to reach beyond this to also explore in depth the ways in which perceived aspects of the work of specific staff, namely SHSPs, were actualised in practice. Although consideration of my own subjective interpretations as a researcher was needed, the inclusion of observations provided a unique way of identifying *how* practices and interactions between SHSPs and students, staff and parents can transpire, and the contexts in which they occur (Angrosino, 2012). This study, therefore, provides an exemplar of how to utilise this in future research exploring the role of staff in educational settings. This would be particularly valuable for studies including research questions pertaining to *how* individuals work in these settings.

The AP settings in which this study was based posed a particular challenge due to the nature of the needs of the students, their families and the community. Taking time to build rapport with SHSPs, staff and students was an essential element to recruitment success but also in establishing a level of trust with the students that would allow them to openly share their thoughts and experiences (Wanat, 2008). By way of example to future research in AP, the processes adopted in the current study highlight the importance of laying the groundwork via regular visits to a setting to familiarise the students and staff with the researcher and vice versa. Engaging in informal conversations as well as seeking

opportunities to discuss the purpose and process of the research was also vital in ensuring students in particular had a good understanding of the study so that consent was fully informed. In the current study this was, in part, made possible by conducting the observations in each setting prior to interviews and by taking a marginal-participant position, allowing for discourse and further integration into the setting. EPs are well positioned to employ these methodological approaches due to their training in developing attuned relationships and gathering views of children and young people. EP practice might benefit further from utilising these skills more broadly within research settings, particularly where the views of vulnerable young people would provide noteworthy additional insight.

#### *5.8.1.2 Future research directions*

The voices of additional stakeholders including parents and other AP staff (e.g., teaching staff) are absent from the current study. The addition of interviews with parents was considered less relevant to the current research questions due to parents having less insight into the role of the SHSPs within the AP settings compared to staff and students. In addition, the nature of the current study meant there was little opportunity to develop trust and rapport with parents. This was considered an essential component particularly for the recruitment of students, but would not have been feasible for recruiting parents within the timescales of this study. Future research in this area might, however, benefit from inclusion of parents in order to establish a broader understanding of the flexible and dynamic role of SHSPs, particularly their role in the home and community contexts. More direct comparisons of the role of SHSPs in AP with practitioners working in mainstream settings would also help to further identify the specific factors that are essential to the role in working with students in AP, or whether the same approaches are advantageous or even feasible in both settings.

This study provided insight into an example of SHSP practices in AP, although examining a possible causal relationship between SHSP approaches and positive social, emotional and educational outcomes for students in AP was outside the scope of the research. The

use of comparative studies looking at AP settings with and without SHSPs, or a longitudinal study exploring changes to the setting and student outcomes following the introduction of SHSPs might be useful approaches in elucidating this further.

#### 5.8.2 Implications for support workers in AP

The work of SHSPs in this study was seen to be multifaceted and embedded across multilevel systems; from working directly at the level of the individual student, to engaging in the broader interconnecting family and environment systems, as well as with external agencies and community services. Moreover, their role was seen to acknowledge the even-wider cultural, political and ideological systems impacting on the students they worked with. In line with ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006), the perceived role of the SHSPs in this study provides a holistic model of practice for working with students in AP. Indeed, generating effective outcomes in these settings may require support staff to be engaged and influential across each of the systems in which a YP is embedded. Based on these findings, SHSPs working in AP should not solely be considered as 'attendance monitors'. Instead, this aspect of their role can form part of a much wider remit that seeks to facilitate and support re-engagement with education as well as foster more positive social, emotional and academic outcomes for these YP.

These findings further promote the importance of practitioners working in these settings in developing secure, nurturing and collaborative relationships with students and their families (Malcolm, 2021). Relationships were seen to serve as a basis for developing trust with students and parents to encourage re-engagement. These relationships also underpinned approaches to setting and holding boundaries, providing a framework for practice that is considered both empowering and effective. For staff working in AP, this suggests that the promotion of attendance and engagement occurs through the fostering and developing of a secure relational base. Such connections consist of trust, respect and safety, but also extends beyond this to meet the wider needs of students. This emphasises the nature of this role that goes beyond the remit of other AP staff. Importantly, however,

SHSPs might only have a unique role in this way so long as they are supported effectively by the SLT, and their role is understood and accepted more widely by other staff and professionals.

### 5.8.3 Implications for Policy

Frameworks for practice that promote relational approaches have been influential in the fields of social work and planning for care-experienced CYP (Cameron et al., 2020; Schofield & Beek, 2005). However, current education policies take little consideration of empirical evidence regarding the importance of attachment and relationships in promoting positive outcomes in CYP (Mowat, 2022). This risks undervaluing potential therapeutic impacts on YP from having a stable and consistent individual with which to bond and help them develop emotion regulation strategies. Neo-liberalist ideologies underlying these educational policies prioritise performativity and competitive individualism, leading students to become expendable commodities if they do not 'add value' (Slee, 2019). This age of exclusion is typified by the increasing flow of YP into AP, and begs the question - why must our most vulnerable students be excluded in order to experience inclusion, autonomy and positive relationships with staff such as SHSPs working in these alternative settings?

The use of attachment-aware practices in schools are associated with positive outcomes in relation to behaviour, attendance, attainment, and parental engagement (Dingwall & Sebba, 2018; Levinson & Thompson, 2016). This is particularly relevant to students in AP who may have previously experienced higher rates of attachment difficulties, developmental trauma, and incidences of rejection that impact epistemic trust. Indeed, current government guidelines for improving attendance in schools acknowledges the need for schools to 'build strong relationships with families' (DfE, 2022d), but omits mention of the importance of building and modelling respectful relationships with the students themselves. This is despite having been included in previous guidelines (DfE, 2022b).

Causal links between SHSP-student relationships and outcomes were not quantitatively explored in this study. However, the student voice was particularly informative as to how this is perceived to work in practice. For instance, students reported increased motivation and ability to attend and engage with their learning because of their relationships with the SHSPs. This has implications for developing guidelines for practice in AP, where there is a valuable function for a paraprofessional who takes on the role of attendance and engagement that is embedded within a systemic and relational approach and encompasses facilitative factors, such as being local and relatable, and a willingness to 'go beyond'.

#### 5.8.4 Implications for EP practice

EPs are well-placed to provide professional supervision and training, as well as identify ways of measuring outcomes and the impact of training and educational interventions (Birch et al., 2015; Dunsmuir & Leadbetter, 2010). An exploration of the role EPs play in training and supporting SHSPs in AP was beyond the scope of this study. However, EP's knowledge and understanding of relational and trauma-informed approaches as well as theoretical perspectives on the importance of meeting needs within collaborative and empowering frameworks for practice can be well-utilised by organisations such as SHS who employ and train support workers for AP settings. In relation to training, Redpath and Harker (1999) argue for the use of solution-focused principles underpinned by social constructionism that shift the EP from 'expert informant' to using approaches that facilitate collaborative, active participation, and knowledge exchange. Use of such frameworks by EPs for training professionals such as SHSPs would allow practitioners to construct their own understanding of their role and how to most effectively support and empower the students they work with through reflecting and drawing upon their own strengths and skills. The focus in the current study on drawing out and interpreting 'what works' and areas of competence in the SHSPs was in line with this, and can provide an effective model not only for future research but for approaches to training in these settings.

The EP role in identifying and supporting educational needs, intervention planning, and using systemic thinking (Farrell et al., 2006; Wilding & Griffey, 2015) also indicates a beneficial avenue for further collaborative work with SHSPs. For instance, EPs working in schools and AP with SHSPs could play an essential role in developing practitioner's in-depth understanding of the students they are working with. Additionally, EPs can help identify systemic factors impacting on their development; knowledge considered essential by participants in this study.

EPs play an important role in organisational change (Farrell et al., 2006). The findings from this study provide insight for EPs into the ways practitioners can use holistic approaches to supporting students in AP. These findings alongside other comparable research can support EPs in developing good practice guidance to staff in AP as well as working collaboratively with organisations such as SHS to further develop strategies that promote positive outcomes for these YP.

As well as implications for EP practice in AP, the research methods used in this study illustrate effective strategies for exploring staff-student dynamics and for gathering the voice of students in these settings. Specifically, spending time informally engaging with staff and YP equated to a deeper understanding of the students' needs across each site and ways in which they were being supported by staff and other professionals. EPs are not always afforded additional time in their roles to spend extended time within schools outside of consultation, assessment and therapeutic work. However, the use of contextual observation is a valuable EP tool (Leatherbarrow et al., 2021). Seeking opportunities to engage in extended observations in AP using 'marginal-participant' strategies that allow interaction and engagement could further enhance this element of EP practice.



## **5.9 Reflections, strengths and limitations**

### 5.9.1 Personal reflections

The methodological approach taken in this thesis, underpinned by social constructivist assumptions required an acknowledgement that my own views and interpretations would have informed the research. Information gathered during the observation phase of the study, for instance, would have been impacted by the nature of clarification questions I asked as well as the types of activities I attended to and considered important to acknowledge. By seeking to document as much information as possible, the use of a reflective diary was particularly beneficial for revisiting the aspects that I felt were relevant at the time of data collection and those that I might have overlooked. My positionality as a white female researcher might also have impacted the ways in which the staff and students felt able to engage with me, particularly those from different cultural, ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds (Kennedy-Macfoy, 2013). However, my previous experience in AP settings as a support worker and TEP, and my work with YP who are NEET and who have experienced exclusion meant I was well equipped to conduct this research and engage participants effectively. The methods of observation and interpretation used in this study, as well as the findings that can inform good practice in these settings have indisputably impacted my own practice, and will have a lasting influence on my future role as an EP, particularly in the way I seek to engage with staff and students in AP. In these particular settings, the process of conducting extensive observations and multi-informant interviews also provided a deeper understanding of the specialist knowledge and expertise of the SHSPs. This has allowed me to help staff notice and draw on their own skills and strengths in subsequent case work in AP as well as the complex systemic contexts in which they are and can be effective; an important implication for Educational Psychologists seeking to use strengths-based approaches and systemic thinking.

### 5.9.2 Strengths

The qualitative case study approach used in this thesis allowed for an in-depth account of the role of SHSPs in AP. This was cultivated predominantly by the use of multiple sources (practitioners, SLT and student interviews, as well as observations), allowing for thick description and multiple points of data connection (Ellingson, 2009; Geertz, 2008). The use of ethnographic principles also allowed for the inclusion of 'real world' insight into the SHSP role, enabling more nuanced contextual knowledge regarding the SHSP role to be gathered, as well as insight to how this was actualized through daily routines and their discourse with students and staff (O'Reilly, 2011). My immersion in the AP as a marginal participant also allowed me to ask clarification questions and listen to explanations of individual's actions, enriching the observational dataset. This was further bolstered by the study commitment to rigorous preparation for the research in each setting and ongoing reflexivity.

The use of naturalistic observations in this study ensured a high level of ecological validity, where participants were able to engage in usual daily practices with minimal impact from the researcher (Cotton et al., 2010; Silverman, 2010). Conducting observations in each site prior to interviews was also beneficial as I was not led to only attend to aspects of the SHSP role that were highlighted through interviews. Moreover, conducting observations prior to interviews served to establish relationships with the SHSPs and other potential participants so that they felt more willing to participate and able to express their views and share their experiences.

Although case study findings are not generalisable in the sense they can be used to explain or inform situations outside of the scope of this study, this approach allowed for analytic or theoretical 'generalisations', where the data could be compared to and understood in light of existing theory (Yin, 2014). These results, therefore, provide theoretical-based insight into practices and approaches that might operate effectively in other similar settings.

### 5.9.3 Limitations

The complex nature of students who attend AP led to some challenges in the recruitment process. In particular, the development of professional relationships and rapport required for this study lengthened the study process considerably. With additional time, this study would have benefited from the recruitment of additional student participants in order to enrich the dataset, especially as the student themes were based on only a limited number of voices. Although this was also the case with the SHSPs, it was only possible to have included two SHSPs based on the limited number of practitioners across the two AP settings. However, including other AP sites with SHSPs may have added to the richness of the data and allowed for cross-site comparisons.

Gathering informed consent from parents of student participants relied on the existing professional relationships between parents and the SHSP. This could have impacted the study, where only parents of students that have positive experiences of working with the SHSPs may have been recommended by the SHSP for inclusion or agreed to participate. This said, one student participant had limited views on the SHSP role and so this was not seen to be a significant factor impacting the recruitment process or quality of data.

### 5.10 Conclusions

This study used a case study approach to explore how SHSPs support students in AP. Using multiple informants (SHSPs, staff and students), as well as unstructured observations of SHSPs across two AP settings, the SHSP role was perceived to be relational, affective (i.e., providing emotional support), empowering, as well as practical. In essence, within the SHSP role of supporting attendance and re-engagement with education, they were seen to employ a holistic approach to meeting the needs of students and their families across different systemic levels. Their impact at each level was perceived by all participants to be fostered through the development of secure and positive relationships. Moreover, various facilitators to these relationships were interpreted from the data, including aspects intrinsic to the SHSP such as being local and relatable,

emotionally containing, having in-depth knowledge about each student, and a willingness to 'go the extra mile'. This served to break down barriers such as epistemic mistrust that had been compounded by student's and families' previous experiences of rejection and relationship breakdowns with other school staff and professionals. In addition, extrinsic facilitators to their role in AP consisted of having access to high-quality supervision and training, being afforded time and flexibility to respond immediately to needs, and being fully integrated and treated as a member of AP staff, despite being from an external organisation.

This study adds to the growing body of research recognising the unique role that staff in AP have in supporting students not just academically but in supporting their wider relational, emotional and social development. In this study however, SHSPs were seen to provide additional value by bridging the gaps between school, home, and other external services and professionals. This was particularly salient as other AP staff were not always able to address the wider issues impacting upon student's attendance and engagement, due to lack of time and resources.

There is limited understanding of effective practice in AP and even less insight into the role that practitioners from external organisations such as SHS can play in supporting some of our most vulnerable students. The current findings considered in light of theories of attachment and epistemic trust suggest that the relational role of the SHSP provided emotional containment for students. This relational base also allowed them to consider factors underlying student difficulties and behaviours, and effectively fostered important home-school connections. Beyond being purely pastoral, however, SHSPs were perceived to empower students and parents in a way that sought to promote engagement and foster their independence. Furthermore, their approach could be considered to impact positively upon student's underlying motivational processes (Connell & Wellborn, 1991; Nicholson & Putwain, 2018). This also ensured the impact of SHSPs was sustainable and could lead to longer-term changes in the lives of these students and their families.

The SHSP role as perceived in this study provides a unique model from which to consider the multiplicity of factors needed to support students in AP. Locating a practitioner who can be effective across various eco-systemic levels to tackle poor student attendance, engagement and outcomes was considered fundamental by all participants. Students in AP often present with learning or emotional needs, have complex family circumstances, and have invariably experienced exclusion (IntegratED, 2022). The presence of practitioners who are willing to 'go beyond' in order to effectively tackle the systemic barriers to engagement and promote a more positive life trajectory can, therefore, be invaluable. This has important implications for developing models of good practice in AP that ensure the holistic needs and fundamental rights to autonomy and inclusion of these YP are met effectively and understood by staff working to support them.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A: Details of systematic literature search

The following databases were used to conduct a comprehensive literature search: UCL library search engine, Web of Science, PsychINFO, Education Resource Information Centre (ERIC), Scopus and British Education Index. The databases were selected for their relevance to education, psychology and social sciences. A search of key internet sites and search engines (Google and Google Scholar) was also carried out in order to incorporate a wide range of sources that included key scholarly formats (e.g., peer-reviewed journal articles, conference papers, reports, books, systematic reviews), theses and dissertations, as well as relevant governmental policies and reports, grey literature, legislation and work of third sector agencies. Search terms were updated as the review progressed. The identification of other appropriate articles was also supplemented through a search of reference sections of relevant documents.

	<b>Concept 1</b>	<b>Concept 2</b>
<b>Main concepts</b>	Facilitators and barriers to outcomes in AP	Role of staff and support workers in AP
<b>Search terms:</b> (truncation symbols (e.g., * or \$) were used depending on the database).	Keywords were combined with Boolean operators “OR” or “AND”: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ‘Outcomes’</li> <li>• ‘Facilitators’</li> <li>• ‘Success’</li> </ul> <b>AND</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ‘Alternative Provision’</li> <li>• ‘Alternative education’</li> <li>• ‘Pupil Referral Unit*’</li> <li>• ‘Exclusion’</li> <li>• ‘excluded students’</li> <li>• ‘off-site direction’</li> </ul>	Keywords were combined with Boolean operators “OR”: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ‘Alternative Provision’</li> <li>• ‘Pupil Referral Unit’</li> <li>• ‘Exclusion’</li> <li>• ‘excluded student’</li> <li>• ‘off-site direction’</li> </ul> <b>AND</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ‘Staff’</li> <li>• ‘Tutor’</li> <li>• ‘Adults’</li> <li>• ‘Pastoral staff’</li> <li>• ‘Multi-agency teams’</li> <li>• ‘support worker’</li> <li>• ‘attendance adviser’</li> </ul>

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• ‘family support worker’</li> <li>• ‘Family liaison’</li> <li>• ‘school-home liaison’</li> <li>• ‘outreach worker’</li> <li>• ‘pastoral practitioner’</li> <li>• ‘Personal Adviser’</li> <li>• ‘practitioner’</li> <li>• ‘Social work*’</li> <li>• ‘external agency’</li> <li>• ‘charity’</li> <li>• ‘school-home support worker’</li> <li>• ‘mentor*’</li> </ul>
<b>Excluded concepts</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Research or document over 20 years old</li> <li>• Primary schools</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Research or document over 20 years old</li> <li>• Primary schools</li> </ul>
<b>Limit by</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 11–16 or 11–18 year olds</li> <li>• English language</li> <li>• Past 20 years</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 11–16 or 11–18 year olds</li> <li>• English language</li> <li>• Past 20 years</li> </ul>

## Appendix B: Example (completed) unstructured observation schedule

Template based on Fetters and Rubinstein (2019) three C's approach [Context, Content, and Concepts].

<b>Project Title:</b> The role of practitioners from external organisations in supporting students in Alternative Provision (AP); a case study involving 'School-Home Support'.	
<b>Document Type:</b> Unstructured Field Observations	
<b>Observer:</b> HB	
<b>Date:</b> 04.07.2022	<b>Time:</b> 10am - 12pm
<b>Observation Session Number:</b> 3	
<b>Location:</b> 'Oakmead AP'	
<b>Research Questions:</b>  1. How do SHS practitioners work to support students in AP?  2. What are the facilitators and barriers to the role of the SHSP in AP?	
<b>Participants:</b>  SHSP	
<b>Context</b> ( <i>researcher observations about factors or circumstances under which observation is taking place, including information that might directly or indirectly influence data collection processes or affect the researcher and/or participants</i> )  The observation took place on a Monday morning in AP, Site 1.  On arrival at the school, the SHSP noted that there was a 'crisis' for 4 students going on at that time (one outside the school, one sat outside by one of the school sports court, two inside).  SHSP was feeling "flustered" at there being a crisis straight away, and was aware that I would have to observe her moving quickly from one student to another to help with the crises.  First stop to first student was outside to entrance of school premises. Then to outside sports court at back of school.  Following supporting the students having difficulties, the SHSP did some work in her office (5 minutes), then headed to a 'restorative practice meeting' with two students in a classroom.	

The SHSP stated that she felt 'exhausted' today, especially when having to deal with a student who has complex needs. The SHSP stated that she doesn't feel that she has enough time to meet all the demands of all students.

**Content:** *(Who is being observed? What actions/events are occurring? How do the individuals being observed interact? What is the timing/sequence of events? Quotes from interactions/ responses to researcher's questions)*

On arrival at the school I followed the SHSP to where she was meeting a student outside the premises who was refusing to come into school. The SHSP waited for the student to finish on the phone. SHSP asked her 'what's going on?'. The SHSP discussed with the student about the conversations that had happened at home which led to them not wanting to attend school that day. The SHSP asked the student to think of things from the perspective of their parent and told the student that they needed to come in to school and that their vape would have to go away. The SHSP gave the student some reassurance that their mum would not have meant to what she had said and told the student that adults make mistakes. The SHSP also used her own parenting perspective at this point, telling the student a bit about her own family situation which is why she can see things from the mum's perspective too.

The SHSP said to the student that perhaps they should see school as a bit of a Respite. The SHSP kept her tone jovial and light whilst also being firm about the need for the student to come into school. She said to the student "You like the drama and the aggro, don't you?". SHSP then gave the student some space to talk about bullying concerns in class and reassured the student that they have managed to deal with similar situations together in the past. SHSP asked the student what needed to happen to get them into school and then restated the need for her to hand in her vape. SHSP asked the student to come into the building and asked a member of teaching staff to take over at that point.

The SHSP then went straight to the next student who she had been told was having a crisis and not going into class. SHSP went and sat next to the student and ask them what was going on. SHSP sat and listened to the student and asked them who else they could talk to. When [SHSP] asked the student to join the PE lesson, the student said to her that they 'couldn't be bothered', [SHSP] responded 'I know darlin, but refusing to participate ain't gonna get you anywhere. You know I think highly of you and you're trying hard. I know it's hard and your meds are not helping, but let's make an agreement to go together' (to join the class). When the student stood up the SHSP then laughed and said "are you really gonna make me play in tights?". She encouraged him to go into the court and said "come on I need you to stay to protect my valuable head". She then said to the student "you're

doing really well keep going". SHSP waited on the court for a while to make sure that the student was participating in the lesson. She then went back to her office where the other SHS practitioner was.

SHSP started to make phone calls to parents. She first provided me with some context about the two students that she had dealt with that morning who had been refusing to come into school and go to their lessons and how she understood that the issue had actually been between the two students (a related incident) as they had fallen out along with some other students the evening before. This stated that one of the student's mum 'hates' the other young person and said she will have to deal with the students whilst working within that context.

SHSP said "I need to call a parent now and she is one of my 'estate girls' and has previously threatened assault on one of the students". SHSP called the parent to let them know that her child was now in the school.

SHSP told me that she is in charge of medical needs and care plans and so needs to deal with one of these students from this morning a lot as they tend to attached themselves to a member of staff.

SHSP received a call on the radio from another member of school staff about a young person who is waiting in the school reception. She established with the other member of staff that she did not need to attend and that someone else was able to go instead. A student arrived at SHSP's office door. SHSP said to them "let's find a quiet room for a chat". SHSP invited the student to tell her the story about what happened between him and the other student outside of school (confidential information – not included). SHSP listened to the student and then provided some advice about not letting other students come between the friendships and 'cause drama'. SHSP then invited another student into the room (involved in the situation) and stated to them that she has figured out what was going on. SHSP explained to the student the different perspectives that she had heard and how the students don't have to take it out on each other. She then asked the students "so are we all cool beans?".

When leaving the room, she was then told that another student had hurt their foot. SHSP delegated this student to another member of staff to deal with.

SHSP headed to the school reception to meet with a social worker who had arrived to discuss the first student who had refused to come into school this morning. SHSP invited the social worker into the quiet room where she had just had the restorative meeting with the students. SHSP told her the whole story about what she had seen and observed as well as what both the students had said, and asked whether she was aware about the relationship between the students. SHSP provided background information about previous

assaults and fights that happened (confidential information – not included) and details from the restorative meeting she had just had.

Following this meeting SHSP then went back to her office where the other member of staff in there said to her “lots of people are looking for you”. SHSP then re-counted to the other school home support practitioner what she had been doing that morning, stating “I’ve not stopped”.

SHSP then moved on to looking at the attendance records for the day. She said to the other school home support practitioner about one student who had been asking to leave early, “I need him to stay as his attendance is crap, I need him to build it up a bit”.

SHSP then went on to look at who else was in attendance and who they had not been able to get hold of yet today.

SHSP provided the other SHS practitioner information about which door knocks to do (home visits).

She then said “we need to start looking at PEX (permanent exclusions) by ethnicity as the borough has asked for this and we need to make sure that we are equal”. She stated that they will need to feed that information back to the borough and think about how we can do with supporting the students look into what we can do with those students. SHSP then showed me the proportional data that she had about exclusions leading to admissions to the PRU (this site) and noted that actually their (the AP) proportions were different from what is often seen nationally, as they currently have more White British students than Black African and Black Caribbean on roll (55% White British, 35% Black African, and 3% Black Caribbean).

SHSP was then asked to leave the office to discuss with someone who had arrived at the AP to talk to her about the school PSHE she had been involved in (conversation not observed as SHSP was not sure whether it would be confidential). Returning to the office, SHSP stated that she had previously being asked to write about the innovative way she had been delivering sex education lessons in the AP, including how she had used novels to make concepts more concrete for the students as this is often a difficult subject to teach and is very important for the students in this setting.

SHSP made a phone call to a parent to tell her about what happened between the students that morning and how she had “done a bit of digging and had a restorative conversation with all those involved”. SHSP noted to the parent that the students had agreed to sort it out between them and that if there were any further problems she will be available until just after 4:00 PM if she needs to speak to her.

SHSP then went to the site head(teacher) to ask whether they were able to deal with the student from this morning as SHSP felt that the student was still being “a bit shifty with me” and “I’ve done my bit to get her into the building”. SHSP relayed that the student can sometimes listen into her private conversations through the wall to her office, which raises issues about confidentiality for the other students. SHSP relayed to the Head that the students mum is “exasperated” and she can see why the student and their mum ends up rowing. SHSP noted that the student really needs robust discipline and said that it is hard because we already have a lot of support in place and there’s not much else you can do if she continues to disengage. SHSP told me that these are the cases that are most difficult as there is not anything practical that she can go in and do and instead she needs to think about how to manage the risk. She stated that professionals sometimes put ideas out but they are not always helpful (no further clarification given).

End of observation.

**Concepts:** *(Preliminary ideas, observations, what have I learned that I didn’t know before? Potential implications of what I’ve observed. New questions arising from observation. How did participants respond to being observed?)*

During the observation today with a number of what she termed ‘crises’ with students, she seemed to take her time to let them chat to her and gave them space to understand what was stopping them from engaging. The students seemed to be given space to talk things through and mostly seemed happy to talk to her. She often tried to lift their spirits by making jokes, engaging with them in activities and relating to things in her own life to show that she has understanding.

Today highlighted to me that SHSP knows a lot about the lives of the different students and that this helps her with her work particularly when she has to do things like hold restorative conversations with students. Today she already had an understanding about previous difficulties between students and that things had happened the previous evening which had likely contributed to the relationship difficulties the students were experiencing.

At one point, SHSP noted to me she can sometimes feel it is hard to be professional when she has to deal with these challenging students.



## Appendix C: Interview Schedules

### Protocol Summary

- Prior to meeting send out consent form; stress confidentiality/pseudonymity.
- Explain that I want to hear their views and does not matter if it is positive or negative.
- Gain written consent to record the interview.
- Ask if there are any questions about the project.
- Check how much time they have available.
- Check to see if there is a possibility of a follow-up interview if time does not allow completion.
- Conduct interview covering issues to be included (see full protocol).
- Thank the participant and ask if there are any further request regarding supplying them with more details or data

### Interview Record

Interview number:	
Interview name:	
Participant code name:	
Date of meeting:	
Time of meeting:	
Venue:	
Name of those present:	
Duration of interview:	
Participants occupation (e.g., SHS practitioner, Teacher, Student):	

## Protocol and Interview Questions

### 1) Interview introduction for SHS Practitioners:

Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed by me today. As you know, I am conducting these interviews to get a better understanding of the role of the SHS practitioner in supporting students in Alternative Provision from your perspective, as well as understanding further what you feel the main facilitators and barriers are to this role.

I have a few questions that I'd like to ask you but you're under no obligation to answer them if you don't want to and can withdraw at any point without reason.

### Interview Questions (SHS Practitioner):

1. How long have you worked as a SHS practitioner?
2. Please can you describe for me what your role is in the AP?
  - a. What does your typical day look like?
  - b. What are the main activities you are involved in?
  - c. Who do you work with?
  - d. What do the students and their parents think that your role is?
3. How do you work to support the students in this setting?
  - a. Can you also describe how you work with parents/school staff/other organisations or professionals to support students?
4. What was your previous experience that is relevant to this role?
  - a. Have you previously worked in AP settings?
  - b. How do you feel your previous experience has helped you in your role as a SHS practitioner?
5. What kind of training have you had for your role?
  - a. Where/who did this training come from?
  - b. Do you feel that there is any additional training you might need or would like to have that would help you in your role? If yes, what type of training?
6. What do you feel are the essential skills needed for your role?
7. How is your role different from other staff in the school?
8. How much knowledge of the school policies and procedures do you need to have to do your job?

- a. Which do you think are the most important or relevant to your role?
9. How important is your knowledge of the local community to your role?
10. What helps to facilitate your work as a SHS practitioner in this school?
- a. What facilitates your work with students?
  - b. What facilitates your work with families?
  - c. What facilitates your work with outside organisations?
  - d. What other factors do you think enable your work with students?
11. What are the main challenges in your role?
- a. What, if anything, do you feel would improve this?
12. What do you think are the main barriers to your role?
- a. Are there any other factors that you feel might prevent you from working more effectively as a SHS practitioner?
13. Are there any other aspects to your role that we haven't covered today or you think that I have not observed yet?

**Following the interview:**

Thank you for taking part in the interview. I appreciate your involvement. Once I have transcribed the interview you will have the opportunity to read it to make sure you are happy with what was included and agree to the data being used for the purposes of the research. Following the initial analysis of the transcripts you will also have the opportunity to look at the main themes being gathered from the interview data and to make any alterations or additions, where necessary.

**2) Interview introduction for Member of Senior Leadership Team (SLT):**

Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed by me today. As you know, I am conducting these interviews to get a better understanding of the role of the SHS practitioner in supporting students in Alternative Provision from your perspective, as well as understanding further what you feel the main facilitators and barriers are to this role.

I have a few questions that I'd like to ask you but you're under no obligation to answer them if you don't want to and can withdraw at any point without reason.

**Interview Questions (school staff/SLT):**

1. What is your role within the school?
2. What are some of the main difficulties/areas of need the students in the AP have?
3. Please can you describe what led to the involvement of School-Home Support in this school?
  - a. What were the areas of need? – if not addressed in Q2.
  - b. What was being done before to support these students in a similar way?
  - c. Who, if anyone, was responsible for supporting students in this way previously (before SHS involvement)?
4. Please can you describe for me what you think the role of the SHS practitioner is in the AP?
  - a. In what ways do they work?
  - b. Who do they work with?
5. Do you think SHS practitioners are needed in AP, and if so, Why?
  - a. What additional support do they bring that cannot be provided by other school staff?
  - b. What are the main benefits of having a SHS practitioner in AP?
6. In what ways do you work with SHS to support them in their role?
  - a. How else are SHS practitioners supported to do their role in AP?
7. What other factors you think help to facilitate the work of the SHS practitioners?
  - a. What facilitates their work with the students in the school?
  - b. What facilitates their work with families?
  - c. What facilitates their work with outside organisations?
8. What do you think are the challenges or barriers for SHS practitioners in AP?
9. Do you have any ideas about how some of these challenges/barriers can be overcome?

**Following the interview:**

Thank you for taking part in the interview. I appreciate your involvement. Once I have transcribed the interview you will have the opportunity to read it to make sure you are

happy with what was included and agree to the data being used for the purposes of the research. Following the initial analysis of the transcripts you will also have the opportunity to look at the main themes being gathered from the interview data and to make any alterations or additions, where necessary.

### **3) Interview introduction for Students:**

Thank you for agreeing to talk with me today. As you know, I am doing some research to get a better understanding of how SHS practitioners support students in Alternative Provision. I really appreciate your thoughts and ideas. I have some games and activities that we can do together and I have a few questions that I'd like to ask you but you don't have to answer them if you don't want to and you can decide not to be part of the research at any point without giving a reason. You can also choose to draw or write your answers and ideas if you would rather.

#### **Interview session with students:**

- A. Play a short card game (e.g., Uno or Dobble) of young person's choice. Have informal discussion about their day/ about subject of interest based on researcher's knowledge of the YP (e.g., football team)
- B. Get-to-know-you questions
  1. How long have you been in this school?
  2. What are some of the things you like about being in this school?
  3. Is there anything you would change about this school? If so, what would it be?
- C. Optional activity to create a collage/picture: *'What (SHS practitioner name) has done for me'* with coloured pens, post-it notes and large piece of paper.

#### **Questions/ Prompts:**

4. I'd like you to think about the ways in which [insert SHS practitioner name] has helped you (and/or your family) since you have been at this school. You can either write or draw them on these post-it notes/pieces of paper or you can tell me and I can write them for you.
5. How do you think the job that [insert SHS practitioner name] does is different from other staff at the school?
6. How do you think the job that [insert SHS practitioner name] does is the same or similar to other staff at the school?

7. If a new student was starting at the school? How would you describe to them what [SHS practitioner] does?
8. What, if anything, do you think would help you more during your time at this school?

**Following the interview session:**

Thank you for meeting with me today, I really appreciate your views, thoughts and for sharing your stories with me. If there is anything you would like to change or add to what you have told me today, then you are welcome to do that.

## Appendix D: Participant information sheets

### **The Role of Practitioners from External Organisations in Supporting Students in Alternative Provision (AP); A Case Study Involving ‘School-Home Support’.**

#### **STUDY INFORMATION SHEET (SHS)**

My name is Hannah Broadbent and I am a Trainee Educational Psychologist at UCL, Institute of Education (IOE). As part of my doctoral thesis, I am inviting you to take part in a research project ‘**The Role of Practitioners from External Organisations in Supporting Students in Alternative Provision (AP); A Case Study Involving ‘School-Home Support’**’. I have over 10 years of experience in conducting research in schools and am specifically interested in factors that might contribute to supporting vulnerable young people who have been or are at risk of exclusion. This research is supervised by Dr Lynne Rogers and Dr Chris Bagley at UCL, Institute of Education. This project is registered in line with UCL’s Data Protection Policy, reference No Z6364106/2022/04/62.

Through the use of a case study within AP settings, I am hoping to explore the ways in which School-Home Support (SHS) practitioners operate to support students within Alternative Provision (AP). This is not a study about how effective SHS practitioners are, but will look at *how* and *why* SHS practitioners operate within these settings. Further details about the project can be found below. This information sheet will try to answer any questions you might have about the project but please do not hesitate to contact me for further information about the study.

Your involvement in this study is not compulsory, and you will be free to withdraw completely or withdraw parts of the information you provide for the study at any point, without the need to provide explanation.

#### **Who is carrying out the research?**

The research is being conducted as part of my doctoral training and I will be the primary researcher in the study. All visits to the AP and interviews with staff and SHS practitioners will be conducted by me. Throughout the study, I will abide by the school safeguarding and COVID-19 protocols to ensure safety of the students and school staff.

#### **Why are we doing this research?**

The aim of this study is to examine the ways in which external organisations such as SHS operate in AP to support students to improve their engagement with their education. I am also interested in understanding whether there are any perceived barriers or facilitators to the role of the SHS practitioner in AP. This information will help us to develop a rich understanding of how support workers in AP can work effectively with students and families, as a way of highlighting good practice as well as areas where additional support is needed.

#### **What will happen if I agree to take part?**

During the study, I will observe you during your typical work for up to two hours a week over a period of four weeks. This will form part of a mini ‘case study’ into the role of SHS practitioners and the types of activities you are involved in in AP. I might also ask you questions about your work and role as part of the observations. You will also be invited

to a longer interview with me about the role of SHS practitioners from your perspective. Any interview or observational data that is gathered from you will be pseudonymised and will also be shared with you to check that you agree with the main points being identified in the study. Interviews will include questions such as: “What is your role?”, “How do you help students improve their engagement with their education?”, “What does your typical day look like?”, “What type of training/experience have you had for this role?”, “What are the main challenges in your role?”.

If you do not wish to be observed as part of the study, but are happy to participate in the interviews, this can be selected on the participant consent form.

### **Will anyone know I have been involved?**

All information about you, including your responses to questions asked during interviews and site visits will be pseudonymised and they will not be identifiable in the research data. Your responses will be kept confidential and only be accessible to the researchers directly involved in the study. All information about you and the AP will be pseudonymised and no school identifiers will be included in any write up of the research.

### **Are there any benefits to taking part?**

There is no obligation for you to take part in the study. This will not impact whether other practitioners/staff will be able to take part in the study. I hope that through agreeing to be observed and taking part in the interview sections of the study that this will be an interesting opportunity for you to discuss your role and to highlight any factors that you feel might help or hinder your role.

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

Results of the study will be written up as part of my doctoral thesis and may also be used in research publications and presentations. All data is pseudonymised and neither you nor the AP will be identifiable from any research produced from the study. All data will be kept securely for the duration of the research project and will not be shared with anyone outside of the research study team or used for any other purposes other than the intended research project.

### **Data Protection Privacy Notice**

*The controller for this project will be University College London (UCL). The UCL Data Protection Officer provides oversight of UCL activities involving the processing of personal data, and can be contacted at [data-protection@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:data-protection@ucl.ac.uk)*

*This ‘local’ privacy notice sets out the information that applies to this particular study. Further information on how UCL uses participant information from research studies can be found in our ‘general’ privacy notice for participants in research studies [here](#).*

*The information that is required to be provided to participants under data protection legislation (GDPR and DPA 2018) is provided across both the ‘local’ and ‘general’ privacy notices. The lawful basis that will be used to process any personal data is: ‘Public task’ for personal data and ‘Research purposes’ for special category data. We will be collecting personal data such as gender and ethnicity.*

*Your personal data will be processed so long as it is required for the research project. If we are able to pseudonymise the personal data you provide we will undertake this, and will endeavour to minimise the processing of personal data wherever possible.*

*If you are concerned about how your personal data is being processed, or if you would like to contact us about your rights, please contact UCL in the first instance at [data-protection@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:data-protection@ucl.ac.uk).*



**Contact for further information**

If you have any further questions before you decide whether to take part, you can reach me at [redacted].

If you are happy to be involved, please complete the attached consent form and return to **Hannah Broadbent** by [insert date].

This project has been reviewed and approved by the UCL IOE Research Ethics Committee.

Thank you very much for taking the time to read this information sheet.

Dr Hannah Broadbent

# **The Role of Practitioners from External Organisations in Supporting Students in Alternative Provision (AP); A Case Study Involving ‘School-Home Support’.**

## **STUDY INFORMATION SHEET (school staff)**

My name is Hannah Broadbent and I am a Trainee Educational Psychologist at UCL, Institute of Education (IOE). As part of my doctoral thesis, I am inviting you to take part in a research project **‘The Role of Practitioners from External Organisations in Supporting Students in Alternative Provision (AP); A Case Study Involving ‘School-Home Support’**’. I have over 10 years of experience in conducting research in schools and am specifically interested in factors that might contribute to supporting vulnerable young people who have been or are at risk of exclusion. This research is supervised by Dr Lynne Rogers and Dr Chris Bagley at UCL, Institute of Education. This project is registered in line with UCL’s Data Protection Policy, reference No Z6364106/2022/04/62.

Through the use of a case study within AP settings, I am hoping to explore the ways in which School-Home Support (SHS) practitioners operate to support students within Alternative Provision (AP) settings. This is not a study about how effective SHS practitioners are, but will look at *how* and *why* SHS practitioners operate within these settings. Further details about the project can be found below. This information sheet will try to answer any questions you might have about the project but please do not hesitate to contact me for further information about the study [redacted].

Your involvement in this study is not compulsory, and you will be free to withdraw completely or withdraw parts of the information you provide for the study at any point, without the need to provide explanation.

### **Who is carrying out the research?**

The research is being conducted as part of my doctoral training and I will be the primary researcher in the study. All visits to the AP and interviews with staff and SHS practitioners will be conducted by me. Throughout the study, I will abide by the school safeguarding and COVID-19 protocols to ensure safety of the students and school staff.

### **Why are we doing this research?**

The aim of this study is to examine the ways in which external organisations such as SHS operate in AP to support student engagement in their education. I am also interested in understanding whether there are any perceived barriers or facilitators to the role of the SHS practitioner in AP. This information will help us to develop a rich understanding of how support workers in AP can work effectively with students and families, as a way of highlighting good practice as well as areas where additional support is needed.

### **What will happen if I agree to take part?**

During the study, I will visit the AP and observe the practice of SHS practitioners during their typical work for up to two hours a week over a period of four weeks. This will form part of a mini ‘case study’ into the role of SHS practitioners and the types of activities they are involved in in AP. As part of these observations I might also ask you questions about your involvement with the SHS practitioners to help us to further understand their role in relation to school staff. You will also be invited to a longer interview with the researcher about the role of SHS practitioners from your perspective. Any interview or

observational data that is gathered from you will be pseudonymised and will also be shared with you to check that you agree with the main points being identified in the study. Interviews will include questions such as: “What do you think is the role of SHS practitioners in AP?”, “How do you think SHS practitioners help students improve their engagement with their education?”, “In what ways do you work with SHS practitioners to support them in their role?”, “what do you think are the strengths of having SHS practitioners in AP?”, “What do you think are the challenges for SHS practitioners in AP?”.

If you do not wish to be observed as part of the study, but are happy to participate in the interviews, this can be selected on the participant consent form.

### **Will anyone know I have been involved?**

All information about you, including your responses to questions asked during interviews and site visits will be pseudonymised and they will not be identifiable in the research data. Your responses will be kept confidential and only be accessible to the researchers directly involved in the study. All information about you and the AP will be pseudonymised and no school identifiers will be included in any write up of the research.

### **Are there any benefits to taking part?**

There is no obligation for you to take part in the study. This will not impact whether other practitioners/staff will be able to take part in the study. I hope that through agreeing to be observed and taking part in the interview sections of the study that this will be an interesting opportunity for you to discuss your role and to highlight any factors that you feel might help or hinder your role.

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

Results of the study will be written up as part of my doctoral thesis and may also be used in research publications and presentations. All data is pseudonymised and neither you nor the AP will be identifiable from any research produced from the study. All data will be kept securely for the duration of the research project and will not be shared with anyone outside of the research study team or used for any other purposes other than the intended research project.

### **Data Protection Privacy Notice**

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*Your personal data will be processed so long as it is required for the research project. If we are able to pseudonymise the personal data you provide we will undertake this, and will endeavour to minimise the processing of personal data wherever possible.*

*If you are concerned about how your personal data is being processed, or if you would like to contact us about your rights, please contact UCL in the first instance at [data-protection@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:data-protection@ucl.ac.uk).*

**Contact for further information**

If you have any further questions before you decide whether to take part, you can reach me at [redacted].

If you are happy to be involved, please complete the attached consent form and return to **Hannah Broadbent** by [insert date].

This project has been reviewed and approved by the UCL IOE Research Ethics Committee.

Thank you very much for taking the time to read this information sheet.

Dr Hannah Broadbent

# **The Role of Practitioners from External Organisations in Supporting Students in Alternative Provision (AP); A Case Study Involving ‘School-Home Support’.**

## **STUDY INFORMATION SHEET (for parents)**

My name is Hannah Broadbent and I am a Trainee Educational Psychologist at UCL, Institute of Education (IOE). As part of my training I am running a research project on ‘**The Role of Practitioners from External Organisations in Supporting Students in Alternative Provision (AP); A Case Study Involving ‘School-Home Support’**’. I am inviting your child to take part in this study to share their views and experiences of how School Home Support have worked with them during their time at the Alternative Provision. *This research is supervised by Dr Lynne Rogers and Dr Chris Bagley at UCL, Institute of Education. This project is registered in line with UCL’s Data Protection Policy, reference No Z6364106/2022/04/62.*

This information sheet will try to answer any questions you might have about the project but please do not hesitate to contact me for further information about the study [redacted].

### **Why is my child being asked to take part?**

Your child has been invited to take part as they are known to the SHS practitioner in the AP and their views and experiences of their involvement are a valuable part of better understanding how SHS practitioners support students in AP. This will help inform us further of how best to support students in similar settings through the use of external organisations such as School Home Support. This will help to highlight areas of good practice but also where additional support might also be needed. Your child’s involvement in this study is not compulsory, and they are free to withdraw completely or withdraw parts of the information they provide for the study at any point, without the need to provide explanation.

### **What will happen if my child and I agree they can take part?**

If you and your child are happy for them to take part, your child will be invited to meet with me for a short (30-40 minutes) ‘interview’ session where we will engage in some fun activities and discussions about how the SHS practitioner has worked with them whilst they have been at the AP. These sessions will be audio-recorded and any written/drawing work that your child produces will be kept for later analysis for the study. All data gathered from your child during this session will be pseudonymised (names and personal information changed to maintain confidentiality). All recordings will be deleted once they have been transcribed and analysed. Interviews will include questions such as: “*how has the SHS worker helped you since you have been at the AP?*” and “*If a new student joined this school, how would you describe to them what the SHS worker does?*”.

### **Will anyone know my child has been involved?**

All information about your child, including responses to questions asked during interviews will be pseudonymised and they will not be identifiable in the research data. Your child’s responses will be kept confidential and will only be accessible to the researcher directly involved in the study (Hannah Broadbent). All information about your child and the AP will be pseudonymised and no school identifiers will be included in any write up of the research.

### **Are there any benefits to taking part?**

There is no obligation for your child to take part in the study. I hope that through agreeing to take part in the interview that this will be an interesting opportunity for your child to discuss their views and experiences and to consider other ways in which they feel they could be supported better at school.

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

Results of the study will be written up as part of my doctoral thesis and may also be used in research publications and presentations. All data is pseudonymised and neither you, your child or the AP will be identifiable from any research produced from the study. All data will be kept securely for the duration of the research project and will not be shared with anyone outside of the research study team or used for any other purposes other than the intended research project.

### **Data Protection Privacy Notice**

*The controller for this project will be University College London (UCL). The UCL Data Protection Officer provides oversight of UCL activities involving the processing of personal data, and can be contacted at [data-protection@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:data-protection@ucl.ac.uk)*

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*Your personal data will be processed so long as it is required for the research project. If we are able to pseudonymise the personal data you provide we will undertake this, and will endeavour to minimise the processing of personal data wherever possible.*

*If you are concerned about how your personal data is being processed, or if you would like to contact us about your rights, please contact UCL in the first instance at [data-protection@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:data-protection@ucl.ac.uk).*

### **Contact for further information**

If you have any further questions before you decide whether you are happy for your child to take part, you can reach me at [redacted].

If you are happy for your child to be involved, please complete the attached consent form and return to **Hannah Broadbent** by [insert date].

This project has been reviewed and approved by the UCL IOE Research Ethics Committee.

Thank you very much for taking the time to read this information sheet.

Dr Hannah Broadbent

# The Role of Practitioners from External Organisations in Supporting Students in Alternative Provision (AP); A Case Study Involving 'School-Home Support'.

## STUDY INFORMATION SHEET (for students)

### WHO AM I?

**Name:** Hannah Broadbent

**Job:** Trainee Educational Psychologist

**What I do:** I work in schools with children, young people, teachers and parents to help improve the experiences of students at school and home.

**Why I am at your school:** I am doing a project about how School-Home-Support practitioners work to support students in Alternative Provision.

### WHY YOU?

I am really interested to hear your views and stories about your experience of being in this school and how the School Home Support practitioner has supported you during your time here.

### WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?

- If you are happy to take part, we will meet for around 30 to 40 minutes at your school.
- We will play some games and I will ask you some questions about your views and experiences of what School Home Support workers do in your school. If you don't want to talk we can draw or write instead.
- I will record our chat with an audio recorder so I can remember what we talked about.

### IMPORTANT INFORMATION!

- I will not use your real name when I write what we talk about. No one will know it is you except for me.
- I will destroy the recording once I've written up my project. I will keep my notes (without your name) for another 2 years after the project in case I need to use them again.
- If at any point you decide you do not want to take part or be interviewed, that is fine. If you do not want the collected data to be part of my project I will destroy it.

If you would like to take part in my project and are happy for our meeting to be recorded, please sign the consent form.

Thank you for your help!

**Appendix E: Participant consent forms**

**The Role of Practitioners from External Organisations in Supporting Students in Alternative Provision (AP); A Case Study Involving ‘School-Home Support’.**

**PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM (SHS Practitioners and School Staff)**

Please complete this consent form and return it to the researcher.

1. I confirm that I have read and understood the information sheet, and have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions, and have had these questions adequately answered.
2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason.
3. I understand that I will be observed in my work and that any notes written about my role will be pseudonymised and I will be able to ask for any details to be withdrawn if I wish.
4. I understand that I can refuse to answer any or all of the questions without the need to provide an explanation.
5. I agree for interviews to be recorded for transcribing and understand that they will be deleted after 3 months. Pseudonymised transcriptions of the interviews will be kept for 10 years.
6. I understand that if any of my words are used in reports or presentations, they will not be attributed to me
7. I know that all data will be kept under the terms of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR).
8. I understand that in exceptional circumstances pseudonymity and confidentiality would have to be broken, for example, if it was felt that practice was putting children at risk, or there were concerns regarding professional misconduct. In these circumstances advice would be sought from a senior manager from another Local Authority who will advise us as to the appropriate course of action and as to whether we need to inform the authority of what you have told me.

Name:.....

Signature: ..... Date: .....

Signature of researcher:.....Date:.....



## The Role of Practitioners from External Organisations in Supporting Students in Alternative Provision (AP); A Case Study Involving 'School-Home Support'.

### PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM (for students)

If you are happy to take part in this project, please read this consent form carefully and sign it.

	Yes/No (if 'yes', please tick)
I have seen the information sheet about the project and I understand what I am being asked to do.	
I understand that information about me will be kept confidential.	
I understand that my involvement is voluntary and I can withdraw my participation at any time.	
I understand that the session with the researcher will be audio-recorded and am happy with this.	
I am happy to take part in this research project.	

Name:.....

Signature: ..... Date: .....

Signature of researcher:.....Date:.....

## The Role of Practitioners from External Organisations in Supporting Students in Alternative Provision (AP); A Case Study Involving 'School-Home Support'.

### PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM (for parents)

If you are happy for your child to take part in this project, please read this consent form carefully and sign it.

	Yes/No (if 'yes', please tick)
I have seen the information sheet about the project and I understand what my child is being asked to do.	
I understand that information about my child will be kept confidential (their names and school will be given pseudonyms).	
I understand that my child's involvement is voluntary and they can withdraw their participation at any time.	
I understand that my child's interview session with the researcher will be audio-recorded and am happy with this.	
I am happy for my child to take part in this research project.	

Name (Child)..... Date of birth (child).....

Name (Parent).....

Signature: ..... Date: .....

Signature of researcher:.....Date:.....

## Appendix F: Ethics Form

### Doctoral Student Ethics Application Form

Anyone conducting research under the auspices of the Institute of Education (staff, students or visitors) where the research involves human participants or the use of data collected from human participants, is required to gain ethical approval before starting. This includes preliminary and pilot studies. Please answer all relevant questions in simple terms that can be understood by a lay person and note that your form may be returned if incomplete.

#### **Registering your study with the UCL Data Protection Officer as part of the UCL Research Ethics Review Process**

If you are proposing to collect personal data i.e. data from which a living individual can be identified **you must be registered with the UCL Data Protection Office before you submit your ethics application for review.** To do this, email the complete ethics form to the [UCL Data Protection Office](#). Once your registration number is received, add it to the form\* and submit it to your supervisor for approval. If the Data Protection Office advises you to make changes to the way in which you propose to collect and store the data this should be reflected in your ethics application form.

***Please note that the completion of the [UCL GDPR online training](#) is mandatory for all PhD students.***

#### **Section 1 – Project details**

- a. Project title: [The role of external organisations in supporting students in Alternative Provision \(AP\); a case study involving ‘School-Home Support’ Practitioners.](#)
- b. Student name and ID number (e.g. ABC12345678): [Hannah Broadbent BRO10083156](#)
- c. **\*UCL Data Protection Registration Number: [Z6364106/2022/04/62](#)**
  - a. Date Issued: [12.04.2022](#)
- d. Supervisor/Personal Tutor: [Dr Lynne Rogers and Dr Chris Bagley](#)
- e. Department: [Psychology and Human Development](#)
- f. Course category (Tick one):

PhD	<input type="checkbox"/>
EdD	<input type="checkbox"/>
DEdPsy	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
- g. **If applicable**, state who the funder is and if funding has been confirmed.
- h. Intended research start date: [12.04.2022](#)
- i. Intended research end date: [19.05.2023](#)
- j. Country fieldwork will be conducted in: [England \(UK\). This is a category 1A application. Covid-19 restrictions in England had been lifted at the time of this ethics application.](#)
- k. If research to be conducted abroad please check the [Foreign and Commonwealth](#)

[Office \(FCO\)](#) and submit a completed travel risk assessment form (see guidelines). If the FCO advice is against travel this will be required before ethical approval can be granted: [UCL travel advice webpage](#)

- I. Has this project been considered by another (external) Research Ethics Committee?

Yes

External Committee Name:

Date of Approval:

No  **go to Section 2**

***If yes:***

- Submit a copy of the approval letter with this application.
- Proceed to Section 10 Attachments.

**Note:** Ensure that you check the guidelines carefully as research with some participants will require ethical approval from a different ethics committee such as the [National Research Ethics Service](#) (NRES) or [Social Care Research Ethics Committee](#) (SCREC). In addition, if your research is based in another institution then you may be required to apply to their research ethics committee.

## **Section 2 - Research methods summary (tick all that apply)**

- Interviews
- Focus Groups
- Questionnaires
- Action Research
- Observation
- Literature Review
- Controlled trial/other intervention study
- Use of personal records
- Systematic review – **if only method used go to Section 5**
- Secondary data analysis – *if secondary analysis used go to Section 6*
- Advisory/consultation/collaborative groups
- Other, give details: [Case study methods including field notes and use of reflective diary \(from direct, unstructured observations\)](#)

Please provide an overview of the project, focusing on your methodology. This should include some or all of the following: purpose of the research, aims, main research questions, research design, participants, sampling, data collection (including justifications for methods chosen and description of topics/questions to be asked), reporting and dissemination. Please focus on your methodology; the theory, policy, or literary background of your work can be provided in an attached document (i.e. a full research proposal or case for support document). *Minimum 150 words required.*

### Aims and research questions

'School-Home Support' (SHS) are a UK charity that work within schools and Alternative Provision (AP) to offer support to vulnerable students and their families with an aim to improve attendance, engagement, behaviour and attitudes to learning. The aims of this preliminary study are to explore the ways in which School-Home Support (SHS) practitioners operate to support students within AP from the perspectives of the SHS practitioners, school staff and students in AP. This study is relevant to professionals including Educational Psychologists (EPs) who work within AP as it aims to gain a deeper understanding of the factors and models of practice that may be supporting some of the most vulnerable students back into school. Based on the main aims of the current research, the following research questions are proposed:

- RQ1: How do SHS practitioners work to support students in AP?
- RQ2: What are the facilitators and barriers to the role of SHS from the perspective of the SHS practitioner, school staff, and students within AP?

### Methods

#### *Design*

The current study will use a 'two-case' (multiple) case-study design. As SHS work within two AP sites within the Local Authority (LA) in which the researcher is currently on placement as a Trainee Educational Psychologist, the study will focus on both sites by way of illustrating the diverse range of strategies used in the work of SHS within AP. This is particularly important in this instance given the differing needs of the students across the two AP settings; with one AP supporting students who have been permanently or temporarily excluded from their mainstream setting predominantly due to behavioural difficulties, and the other AP providing a smaller, nurturing environment for students who have difficulties attending mainstream due to complex social and emotional needs. To examine the proposed aims and research questions, direct observations of SHS practitioners within AP settings as well as interviews to explore the views and experiences of SHS practitioners, school staff, and students will be included.

#### *Recruitment and Sampling*

Two AP settings within the researcher's LA have already been identified through researcher connections with SHS. Agreement for the case study to take place in the two AP settings will be sought through a letter of invitation to participate in the study and study information sheet sent to the school senior management and SHS. A follow up meeting to further explain details of the study will be offered. Within each of the two case sites, participants will be identified and recruited for inclusion in the study using

purposive sampling. At each site, data will be collected from one SHS practitioner employed within the setting as a 'family support worker', and the SHS practitioner supervisors. Additionally, four members of school staff at each site who have been involved in the implementation of SHS or who have knowledge of the operation of SHS within the setting will be recruited. Four students from each AP site who the SHS practitioner has worked with will also be recruited as interview participants in the study.

### *Procedure*

This multiple case study will predominantly involve the collection of data from direct unstructured observations of the work of SHS practitioners in AP as well as individual semi-structured interviews with SHS practitioners and supervisors, school staff, and students. Collection of data using multiple sources (e.g., unstructured observations and interviews) allows for triangulation of research data and richer understanding of role of SHS within these settings. Direct unstructured observations of the work of SHS practitioners within the AP settings will take place during four once-weekly visits to each AP site between April and November 2022. The researcher will adhere to all school health and safety policies and procedures in relation to Covid-19 during visits to the settings, including the use of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) and social distancing required by the school. It is proposed that observations will take place at one site initially for two hours each week over a course of four weeks, before visits to the other site will be conducted. Unstructured observations of formal and informal practice operations as well as interactions of SHS practitioners with staff and students within each setting will be undertaken at different times of the day and week to obtain varied insight into the work of SHS practitioners. Visits will be arranged through senior school staff and the SHS practitioner at each site.

Given time constraints, a concise approach to direct observation using ethnographic principles will be adopted. This method seeks to examine aspects of how the work of SHS is implemented within its real-world context, separate from the subjective experience recorded in individual interviews (Morgan et al., 2017). The use of ethnographic principles within an interpretivist framework will permit close collaboration between the researcher and participants throughout the study. This method will also be used to identify other stakeholders such as students or other AP staff who could be approached to be interviewed as part of the study.

The role and purpose of the study (including observation information) will be explained to the SHS practitioners, their line-managers, and members of school leadership team during an initial pre-study meeting organized through the researcher's existing contacts with the AP settings and SHS. Observation data will be recorded initially as hand-written field notes using an unstructured observation schedule based on Fetters and Rubinstein (2019). These will then be written up as date-marked post-observation summaries. Field notes and critical reflections pertaining to the AP context, operations of SHS practitioners, and non-verbal behaviours of the SHS practitioners will be noted preceding, throughout, and following the visits, whilst maintaining pseudonymity of the participants. Given the use of ethnographic principles to the unstructured observations, the research will also note down responses to informal clarification- and information-seeking questions to practitioners and staff as part of the observation. A personal reflective log from each visit will also be kept to help identify a personal bias that may impact the researcher's role in

the study. This will be important given that the practice of reflexivity is central to maintaining validity and dependability of qualitative research (Yardley, 2008).

During the visits to the AP site, data from semi-structured interviews will also be collected from SHS practitioners, school staff working with SHS practitioners, and students attending the AP. This method is proposed in order to develop a deeper understanding of the involvement of SHS within the AP contexts from the perspectives of the SHS practitioners, school staff and students. Semi-structured interviews will be conducted in a quiet place within the school setting. All semi-structured interviews will be recorded using a digital recording device and transcribed for later analysis. Following transcription of the semi-structured interviews, field notes that add context to different parts of the transcript will be added, with use of a standard notation system that clearly denotes later-added content or commentary (Phillippi & Lauderdale, 2018).

### *Analysis*

Data from observational field notes and interview transcripts will be analysed using a reflexive thematic analysis approach (Braun and Clarke, 2019; 2021), a 6-phase recursive and iterative process of generating codes, themes and subthemes from qualitative data. This technique allows the data to be described and interpreted for meaning. This is considered an appropriate method of data analysis for a multiple case study design which seeks to explore patterns of meaning across a wide range of different individuals, and is in line with the epistemological position of the proposed research. Within-case patterns and themes will first be considered separately, before contrasting and converging themes are identified across the two cases; using cross-case synthesis to develop a thematic map (Yin, 2014). This will be done to determine whether there are any replicated themes across the two cases.

## **Section 3 – Research Participants (tick all that apply)**

- Early years/pre-school
- Ages 5-11
- Ages 12-16
- Young people aged 17-18
- Adults please specify below
- Unknown – specify below
- No participants

School-Home Support (SHS) Practitioners, SHS supervisors, AP staff and students.

**Note:** Ensure that you check the guidelines carefully as research with some participants will require ethical approval from a different ethics committee such as the [National Research Ethics Service](#) (NRES) or [Social Care Research Ethics Committee](#) (SCREC).

## Section 4 - Security-sensitive material (only complete if applicable)

Security sensitive research includes: commissioned by the military; commissioned under an EU security call; involves the acquisition of security clearances; concerns terrorist or extreme groups.

- a. Will your project consider or encounter security-sensitive material?  
Yes\*  No
- b. Will you be visiting websites associated with extreme or terrorist organisations?  
Yes\*  No
- c. Will you be storing or transmitting any materials that could be interpreted as promoting or endorsing terrorist acts?  
Yes\*  No

\* Give further details in **Section 8 Ethical Issues**

## Section 5 – Systematic reviews of research (only complete if applicable)

- a. Will you be collecting any new data from participants?  
Yes\*  No
- b. Will you be analysing any secondary data?  
Yes\*  No

\* Give further details in **Section 8 Ethical Issues**

*If your methods do not involve engagement with participants (e.g. systematic review, literature review) **and** if you have answered **No** to both questions, please go to **Section 8 Attachments**.*

## Section 6 - Secondary data analysis (only complete if applicable)

- a. Name of dataset/s:
- b. Owner of dataset/s:
- c. Are the data in the public domain?  
Yes  No   
**If no, do you have the owner's permission/license?**  
Yes  No\*
- d. Are the data special category personal data (i.e. personal data revealing racial or ethnic origin, political opinions, religious or philosophical beliefs, or trade union membership, and the processing of genetic data, biometric data for the purpose



of uniquely identifying a natural person, data concerning health or data concerning a natural person's sex life or sexual orientation)?

Yes\*  No

e. Will you be conducting analysis within the remit it was originally collected for?

Yes  No\*

f. **If no**, was consent gained from participants for subsequent/future analysis?

Yes  No\*

g. **If no**, was data collected prior to ethics approval process?

Yes  No\*

\* Give further details in **Section 8 Ethical Issues**

*If secondary analysis is only method used **and** no answers with asterisks are ticked, go to Section 9 Attachments.*

## Section 7 – Data Storage and Security

**Please ensure that you include all hard and electronic data when completing this section.**

a. Data subjects - Who will the data be collected from?

SHS practitioners, SHS supervisors, school staff in AP setting, and students in AP.

b. What data will be collected? Please provide details of the type of personal data to be collected

Data from direct observations including field notes, responses to informal questions during observations, a reflective diary, and data from semi-structured interviews will be collected. Personal data that will be collected from adult participants include name, job role and details regarding previous training and experience. Student participant data will include names, year group, and how long they have been attending the AP. Year-group and attendance-length data will be presented as descriptive statistics. No personal identifiers will be included in the analysis or write up of the research. Participant names will be pseudonymised.

**Is the data anonymised?** Yes  No\*

Do you plan to anonymise the data? Yes\*  No

Do you plan to use individual level data? Yes\*  No

Do you plan to pseudonymise the data? Yes\*  No

\* Give further details in **Section 8 Ethical Issues**

c. **Disclosure** – Who will the results of your project be disclosed to?

- Written up as the researcher's doctoral thesis
- Dissemination of pseudonymised results to School-Home Support organisation
- Themes gathered from the data following qualitative analysis will be shared with the participants to check for accuracy and resonance with their experience.

- Results may also be published in peer-reviewed journals, presentations of the research at academic and student conferences, presentations to relevant charities, and local authority educational psychology services.

**Disclosure** – Will personal data be disclosed as part of your project?

No – all data will be pseudonymised.

- d. Data storage – Please provide details on how and where the data will be stored i.e. UCL network, encrypted USB stick\*\*, encrypted laptop\*\* etc. Data will be stored on the IOE, UCL drive on a password-protected laptop.

*\*\* Advanced Encryption Standard 256 bit encryption which has been made a security standard within the NHS*

- e. **Data Safe Haven (Identifiable Data Handling Solution)** – Will the personal identifiable data collected and processed as part of this research be stored in the UCL Data Safe Haven (mainly used by SLMS divisions, institutes and departments)?

Yes  No

- f. How long will the data and records be kept for and in what format?

All personal data will be kept secure by the researcher for the duration of the study until the data are analysed. Pseudonymised data will be kept for 10 years, in line with UCL policy relating to GDPR. Data will be stored securely on the UCL network from the end of the project. All data will be in digital format, including case notes and reflective diary. Hand-written notes from observations will be written without identifiable information and will be destroyed once transferred to digital format.

Will personal data be processed or be sent outside the European Economic Area? (If yes, please confirm that there are adequate levels of protections in compliance with GDPR and state what these arrangements are)

No

Will data be archived for use by other researchers? (If yes, please provide details.)

No

- g. If personal data is used as part of your project, describe what measures you have in place to ensure that the data is only used for the research purpose e.g. pseudonymisation and short retention period of data’.
- All participants names and schools will be ‘de-identified’ through pseudonymisation.
  - Interviews will be conducted on the principle of confidentiality. All identifying information will be retracted from interview transcripts.
  - Interview data will only be used with participant consent and participants will be made aware that the data will only be used for the purposes of the research.
  - Personalised research data will only be known to the researcher.

\* Give further details in *Section 8 Ethical Issues*

## Section 8 – Ethical Issues

Please state clearly the ethical issues which may arise in the course of this research and how will they be addressed.

**All** issues that may apply should be addressed. Some examples are given below, further information can be found in the guidelines. *Minimum 150 words required.*

- Methods
- Sampling
- Recruitment
- Gatekeepers
- Informed consent
- Potentially vulnerable participants
- Safeguarding/child protection
- Sensitive topics
- International research
- Risks to participants and/or researchers
- Confidentiality/pseudonymity
- Disclosures/limits to confidentiality
- Data storage and security both during and after the research (including transfer, sharing, encryption, protection)
- Reporting
- Dissemination and use of findings

The nature of the case-study method may put limits on the confidentiality of the SHS practitioner information, given that there are only two practitioners within the identified AP settings that could be included in the study. Their personal data will be protected as much as possible through pseudonymisation of the school setting and removal of individual identifiers within case notes and interview transcripts.

In relation to this, there are likely to be multiple gatekeepers involved in setting up the case study. In particular, agreement for the involvement of SHS practitioners may have to be sought from SHS line managers as well as senior management from the AP settings. As this might have implications for line managers being able to identify the participants, the participants data will be pseudonymised and participants will have the opportunity to check interview transcripts and themes generated from the data to remove any information that may lead them to being identified or that they do not wish to include. Transparency as to the study aims and procedures will be maintained at all times, and pseudonymisation of AP settings and participants involved will be used throughout, particularly in the process of dissemination of results.

This study will involve observations of practitioners within the AP settings who work with children and young people (CYP). However, although students will be present during the observation periods data will not be included from students in the field notes. In instances where the SHS practitioner is observed interacting with a student, no student identifiers will be included in the notes. BPS ethical guidelines will be adhered to and the purposes of the research and the methods of data collection will be explained fully to the school

staff, SHS practitioners and their line managers, as well as to student participants and their parents. Potential student participants will be identified for the study through discussion with the SHS practitioner in each setting to identify students that they work with. These students will then be introduced to the researcher (who will already be recognisable from the observation part of the study) and asked whether they would be happy for an information sheet and consent form to be sent to their parents. SHS practitioners will then give the information sheet and consent form to parents of potential student participants. Parents will have the opportunity to call or discuss with the researcher in person at the school any questions they have about the study.

Informed consent to participate will be collected following these opportunities to understand the nature and purpose of the research. Additional clarification about the study and checking that student participants understand the purposes of the study and informed consent (e.g., checking that they understand their data is confidential, their names will be changed, and they can decide to withdraw their participation at any time), will be given at the start of the interview session. Informed consent for student participants will be obtained from the parents/guardians of these students prior to interviews with students. All participants will be informed that they have the option to withdraw from the study at any point, should they wish. During visits to the AP, safeguarding procedures of the school in which the research is conducted will be adhered to. The researcher has an Enhanced Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) certificate.

Given the vulnerable nature of student participants in the AP setting, student participants will have the opportunity to also have another trusted member of staff or adult in the interview session with them, should they wish. The nature of the study will be clearly explained to the student participants through a separate information sheet for students. Student interview sessions will be kept to a maximum of 40 minutes and will include a range of games and writing/drawing activities that will be used alongside verbal prompts to engage them in discussion.

To maintain integrity of data collection, initial themes generated from individual transcripts and field notes will be shared initially with adult participants of the study in line with 'member-checking' and to ensure these are in line with the views of the participants. Member checking will not be conducted with the student participants in order to remove additional time and cognitive demands from the students. However, clarification regarding responses will be sought during the interview process with students in order to help define meanings and intentions. Research findings will only be shared more widely with participants following pseudonymisation. SHS will not be given access to raw data or full interview transcripts. All raw data will be stored securely on the IOE, UCL drive on a password-protected laptop within locked (password protected) files for the duration of the study. Findings from the study will be disseminated with all participant and school identifiers pseudonymised in the researcher's doctoral thesis, in published peer-reviewed journals, to the SHS organisation, and in presentations of the research at academic and student conferences and presentations to local authority educational psychology services.

Please confirm that the processing of the data is not likely to cause substantial damage or distress to an individual

Yes

## Section 9 – Attachments.

*Please attach your information sheets and consent forms to your ethics application before requesting a Data Protection number from the UCL Data Protection office. Note that they will be unable to issue you the Data Protection number until all such documentation is received*

- a. Information sheets, consent forms and other materials to be used to inform potential participants about the research (List attachments below)

Yes  No

1. Risk Assessment
2. Information sheet for SHS practitioners
3. Information sheet for school staff
4. Information sheet for parents
5. Information sheet for students
6. Participant consent forms (SHSP, staff, parents, students)
7. Observation Schedule
8. Semi-structured Interview Schedule

- b. Approval letter from external Research Ethics Committee Yes

- c. The proposal ('case for support') for the project Yes

- d. Full risk assessment Yes

## Section 10 – Declaration

I confirm that to the best of my knowledge the information in this form is correct and that this is a full description of the ethical issues that may arise in the course of this project.

I have discussed the ethical issues relating to my research with my supervisor.

Yes  No

I have attended the appropriate ethics training provided by my course.

Yes  No

### **I confirm that to the best of my knowledge:**

The above information is correct and that this is a full description of the ethics issues that may arise in the course of this project.

Name [Hannah Broadbent](#)

Date [07.10.2022](#)

**Please submit your completed ethics forms to your supervisor for review.**

## Notes and references

### **Professional code of ethics**

You should read and understand relevant ethics guidelines, for example:

[British Psychological Society](#) (2018) *Code of Ethics and Conduct*

Or

[British Educational Research Association](#) (2018) *Ethical Guidelines*

Or

[British Sociological Association](#) (2017) *Statement of Ethical Practice*

Please see the respective websites for these or later versions; direct links to the latest versions are available on the [Institute of Education Research Ethics website](#).

### **Disclosure and Barring Service checks**

If you are planning to carry out research in regulated Education environments such as Schools, or if your research will bring you into contact with children and young people (under the age of 18), you will need to have a Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) CHECK, before you start. The DBS was previously known as the Criminal Records Bureau (CRB). If you do not already hold a current DBS check, and have not registered with the DBS update service, you will need to obtain one through at IOE.

Ensure that you apply for the DBS check in plenty of time as will take around 4 weeks, though can take longer depending on the circumstances.

### **Further references**

Robson, Colin (2011). *Real world research: a resource for social scientists and practitioner researchers* (3rd edition). Oxford: Blackwell.

This text has a helpful section on ethical considerations.

Alderson, P. and Morrow, V. (2011) *The Ethics of Research with Children and Young People: A Practical Handbook*. London: Sage.

This text has useful suggestions if you are conducting research with children and young people.

Wiles, R. (2013) *What are Qualitative Research Ethics?* Bloomsbury.

A useful and short text covering areas including informed consent, approaches to research ethics including examples of ethical dilemmas.

## **Departmental Use**

If a project raises particularly challenging ethics issues, or a more detailed review would be appropriate, the supervisor must refer the application to the Research Development Administrator via email so that it can be submitted to the IOE Research Ethics Committee for consideration. A departmental research ethics coordinator or representative can advise you, either to support your review process, or help decide whether an application should be referred to the REC. If unsure please refer to the guidelines explaining when to refer the ethics application to the IOE Research Ethics Committee, posted on the committee's website.

Student name: Hannah Broadbent

Student department: PHD

Course: DEdPsy

Project Title: The role of practitioners from external organisations in supporting students in Alternative Provision (AP); a case study involving 'School-Home Support'

### Reviewer 1

Supervisor/first reviewer name: REDACTED

Do you foresee any ethical difficulties with this research? No

Supervisor/first reviewer signature: REDACTED

Date: 3<sup>rd</sup> November 2022

### Reviewer 2

Second reviewer name: REDACTED

Do you foresee any ethical difficulties with this research? No

Second reviewer signature: REDACTED

Date: 2.11.22

### Decision on behalf of reviewers

Approved

Approved subject to the following additional measures

Not approved for the reasons given below

Referred to the REC for review

Points to be noted by other reviewers and in report to REC:

Comments from reviewers for the applicant:

*Once it is approved by both reviewers, students should submit their ethics application form to the Centre for Doctoral Education team: [IOE.CDE@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:IOE.CDE@ucl.ac.uk).*



**Institute of Education**

### UCL Institute of Education Research Ethics Committee Risk Assessment Form - Fieldwork

1- Please enter the risk assessment fieldwork applicant details:	
Name(s) of Researcher (s) submitting this risk assessment:	Hannah Broadbent
Name of Supervisor (if applicable):	Dr Lynne Rogers Dr Chris Bagley
Research Project Title:	The role of practitioners from external organisations in supporting students in Alternative Provision (AP); a case study involving 'School-Home Support'.
Brief Description of Project (including Fieldwork Location):	Pupils in Alternative Provision (AP) who have been excluded from mainstream settings on a permanent or temporary basis are more likely to have poor attendance and disengage from learning. 'School-Home Support' (SHS) are a UK charity that work within schools and AP to

	<p>offer support to vulnerable students and their families with an aim to improve educational engagement, behaviour and attitudes to learning. SHS employs ‘practitioners’ to work with students and families to address the underlying causes of poor school engagement.</p> <p>Using a qualitative, multiple case-study design, this study aims to explore the ways in which SHS practitioners operate to support students within AP. In addition, the study will explore the perceived facilitators and barriers to the role of SHS practitioners in these settings to supporting students. Two AP settings in which SHS practitioners are employed will be included in the study and data will be collected through the use of direct observations of the work of SHS practitioners (two hours per week for 4 weeks) and through semi-structured interviews with SHS practitioners, SHS supervisors, school staff and students. Data from direct observations will be collected through field notes and the researcher’s reflective diary.</p>
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**2- Please enter your IOE Department/Research Centre details:**

Faculty	UCL Institute of Education
Department	Psychology and Human Development
Centre / Unit (if applicable)	

**3- Please tick below the categories of people potentially at risk from any activities covered by this risk assessment:**

Researcher(s)	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Disabled persons	
Doctoral students (PhD, MRes, EdD)	<input type="checkbox"/>	Inexperienced workers/Trainees	
Postgraduate Taught students (Masters)	<input type="checkbox"/>	Women of Child-Bearing Age	
Undergraduate students	<input type="checkbox"/>	Young Persons	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Members of the Public	<input type="checkbox"/>	Other Vulnerable Persons	
Other:			

**4- Please refer to the appendix on hazards and risks and enter details of potential hazards and risks arising from the work planned for the project (i.e. risk of abuse or attack when working alone; risk of personal injury; risk of illness whilst in the field; miscellaneous risks such as food poisoning, allergies, dehydration):**

1. Health – risk of illness from working in the field through exposure to Covid-19.
2. Dealing with people - Risks associated with working within settings with students with high levels of behavioural and social and emotional needs. Includes potential risk of personal attack/abuse or aggressive behaviour due to misunderstanding of the nature of the work.

**5- Please confirm the steps you will take to mitigate risks from any activities covered by this risk assessment (see appendix on control/mitigating measures for details):**

1. To mitigate health risks, the researcher will ensure the establishment has their own health and safety guidelines in place and to follow these guidelines whilst on the premises. For the researcher to follow up to date Government guidelines on limiting risk of exposure and spread of Covid-19.
2. To reduce the risk of causing offence or misunderstanding of my role, or actions that may lead to provocation or aggressive behaviours, the researcher will have respect for all students and employees in the settings through the use of non-threatening body language or questioning, not positioning myself in a place where I may cause an obstruction, always carrying an ID card and be prepared to identify myself,



and through staying calm in any incidence of threat. The researcher will also adhere to school and BPS safeguarding procedures to reduce risk to self and others. This includes not being alone in a room with individual students. During school visits for direct observations and interviews, the researcher will be with a member of school staff or SHS practitioner who is familiar with the setting and the students at all times.

**6- Risk Level – please refer to the matrix below and confirm your assessment of risk level with existing mitigating measures:**

**GUIDANCE FOR NON-SPECIALIST RISK ASSESSMENTS**

**SEVERITY**

- Minor injury
- Lost time injury, temporary disability or illness
- Permanent disability or major injury
- Fatality, multiple serious injuries/illnesses
- Multiple fatalities

**LIKELIHOOD**

	Remote	Unlikely	Possible	Likely	Certain
A	A	B	B	C	
A	B	C	C	D	
B	C	C	D	E	
C	C	D	E	E	
C	D	E	E	E	

**RISK LEVEL**

- A: Very Low / Trivial
- B: Low / Tolerable
- C: Medium / Moderate
- D: High / Substantial
- E: Very High / Intolerable

A – Very low risk	X	B – Low risk	
C – Moderate risk		D – High risk *	
E – Very high risk *			

**9 - Declaration:** All persons carrying out this work declare that they have read, understood and agreed to abide by the safety instructions and control measures stated in the appendix in this generic risk assessment form. This assessment must be reviewed if there is a significant change to the project. \* A full project specific risk assessment must be carried out with the UCL Safety Team if the project risks are deemed high/very high. Please contact [ioe.researchethics@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:ioe.researchethics@ucl.ac.uk) for details.

Researcher's Signature/Name:	
Date:	04.03.2022

**APPROVAL (REVIEWERS' AREA):**

Approval decision ( <i>Approved/Rejected</i> )	Approved
Approver's Name: ( <i>Application Reviewers' Names</i> )	Lynne Rogers

## Appendix G. Criteria and strategies for judging qualitative research quality

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Measure of Research Quality	Examples of How this was Demonstrated
<p><b>Sensitivity to context:</b></p> <p><i>(E.g., understanding of the relevant literature, and demonstrating the researcher has in-depth subject knowledge).</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Familiarity of concepts relevant to the research and the role of staff in AP was developed through an extensive literature search.</li><li>• Use of direct observations as a research method to immerse the researcher in the context of the AP, including the use of a 'marginal-observer' position.</li><li>• Extensive time spent in both research settings to develop rapport and trust with students and other potential participants.</li><li>• During analysis, to avoid imposing pre-conceived categories on the data, careful consideration was given to the participant's own interpretations of phenomena.</li></ul>
<p><b>Commitment and rigor:</b></p> <p><i>(E.g., demonstrated by in-depth engagement with the topic, including thorough skilled data collection and expertise in the methods employed).</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Consideration of methodological approaches used in previous research examining the role of staff in AP (e.g., use of qualitative research methods such as interviews), but also in-depth research into the use of appropriate methods for gathering case study data in line with the research aims and questions.</li><li>• Use of an observation and interview schedule to guide less structured components of data collection.</li><li>• Detailed field notes from each observation visit complimented with the researcher's reflexive diary to consider reflexivity and impact of potential researcher biases.</li></ul>

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- Transcriptions of audio recordings of interviews allowed for repeated revisiting of data to check for themes and possible interpretations.
  - Undertaking a detailed and in-depth analysis of all observational and interview data, in line with an established data analysis technique (reflexive Thematic Analysis) concomitant with the epistemological position of the research.

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**Transparency and coherence:**

*(E.g., demonstrating clearly how interpretations were derived from the data).*

- The use of clarity in presenting the philosophical underpinnings of the research (epistemological and ontological positions) to ensure clear rationale for the methods of data collection, analysis and interpretation.
- Consideration of participant's perspectives on themes generated from the analysis via use of inviting participants to comment on themes and findings ('member checking').
- The use of transcript extracts in the presentation of research results to allow the reader to consider how interpretations were drawn and possible alternatives.
- Providing a detailed aspect of data coding and analysis process, with examples of coded transcripts and initial themes development.

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**Impact and importance:**

*(E.g. Knowledge generation should be demonstrated to be useful and have practical utility).*

- Research was conducted within a setting where research outcomes could lead to the enhancement of good practice.
  - Consideration of the theoretical insights that could be drawn from the data and how these are related to existing theoretical positions were discussed.
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- Practical implications of the research findings for the role of SHSPs, AP and other external organisations that provide support for young people in AP were considered.
  - Discussion of the implication of the research for the role of Educational Psychologists as well as for the researcher's own practice.
  - Potential implications of the research for policy and practice in AP were also considered.

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**Consistency and Confirmability:** (E.g., the use of methods and a route to decision-making is clear enough for reproducibility. Remaining vigilant of researcher's own positionality and perspectives)

- Providing a clear and coherent description of the research methodology.
- Examples of codes and initial themes generated throughout the data analysis stage made available to the reader.
- The researcher kept a reflexive diary to continuously consider her own positionality across the data collection, analysis and interpretation phases.

## Appendix H. Extracts from personal reflexive research journal

### Example reflections from observation sessions – *Data collection phase*

#### **04.07.2022 – Observation 3, Oakmead AP**

The SHSP seemed to be very flustered today and didn't seem to stop moving from one 'crisis' to another. It seemed to be that there was lots of demand on her time and I wondered how much time she has to reflect on the things that happened during the day and discuss the difficulties in supervision. I wondered who she would turn to if things became overwhelming particularly when there are lots of emotional and difficult situations to deal with on a daily basis. Does SHSP just carry all of this alone in her role?

I was aware today my presence in SHSP's conversations with students may have led to them being less natural. When someone else who is not familiar is present this could have potentially led students not to open up as much or being as honest with SHSP. I wondered whether things might not have been resolved as easily if I was not there and if the students had felt less inhibited. Despite this the students did still seem to talk to SHSP and be open and honest. This may have been helped as the SHSP and I explained to and reassured each student I was observing her and not them. This was also explained to other staff and the social worker as I was following the SHSP around.

I noticed that my presence during this observation was not as 'involved' (minimal participant) as it could have been as I often had to hang back or crouch down away and to the side of conversations to make sure that conversations between SHSP and students could still happen as naturally as possible.

From my observations today it seemed that SHSP takes a very parenting perspective on her role and she seemed firm but fair with the students. SHSP voiced her stress to me about the situations she had to deal with today but it seemed as though she was still able to provide students with the space they needed. Even though I was just observing what SHSP did and how she did it, I reflected on my own knowledge of attachment theory and restorative approaches to working with young people and wondered how much of her work or understanding is based on and influenced by these schools of thought and her knowledge of these theories.

#### **06/10/2022 – Observation 2, 'Riverwood AP'**

SHSP seemed to be more authoritative today (talked about having to be tough with the parents, and also being clear to a student about need to go back into class after taking a break) but she seemed to have respect for the students and seems willing to get their view and support them with their individual needs.

There was a limit to her authority regarding attendance, as she is answerable to the head of site for some students. I wondered whether this would be a potential barrier to the role, or whether this keeps the role accountable to the school attendance policies.

I wondered whether because of my role as an active observer that the SHSP sometimes might have chosen to discuss with me only the interesting/positive parts of her role since she was able to discuss and justify some of what she was doing. However, this method does seem to help improve clarity regarding some aspects of the role.

### **Example reflections on interviews – *Data collection phase***

#### **17/11/2022 – Following interview with SHSP 2**

I've just finished conducting the interview with the second SHS practitioner. It felt appropriate to have interviewed both practitioners following extensive time observing each of them at work within their settings. This helped to me put into context a lot of what they were saying. During both interviews I wondered about the potential impact of my role as a professional (both of them know me as a TEP in the LA) as well as personal differences between us (e.g. my accent being quite different from theirs as I am not from this area) on the ways in which the SHSPs related to me or were willing to talk about their roles in depth. Having spent time with each of them over a period of a few weeks, however, and building a rapport with them, this may have been less of an issue as hopefully I had built up their trust and they had a good understanding of the purpose of the research (i.e. it was not about me monitoring or evaluating how good/effective they are in their roles).

#### **12/12/2022 – Following SLT interviews**

I've just returned from interviewing two SLT staff at Site 1. The experience was great and I felt that they provided really interesting information about the SHS that reflected the SHSP interview. One really interesting point that I want to come back to that really struck me was how they both talked about the challenge of the role of the SHS being conflicting where on the one hand the SHSP has to build rapport and trust with the families/students, but on the other hand be the one who does the legalistic side of attendance. This was considered an important part of the role as they need someone to be able to support families in knowing that the school is actually there to support them and make sure that they don't have to go down the legal route unless really necessary. The SHSP helps to challenge families and raise their awareness of the legalities around attendance, whilst getting alongside them to support them to break down the main barriers to attendance. I will need to be mindful of going back through the transcripts carefully to make sure that this is actually represented in the data.

### **Example reflections on building rapport – *prep for data collection phase***

#### **24/11/2022 – Following visit to site 2**

To interview students in AP, trust and a rapport with them was essential. One of the SHSP has said to me at the start that someone had tried to come in before to interview students and the students either didn't want to be part of it or had messed around in the interview and didn't take it seriously. We had agreed it was important for the students to really understand the purpose of the research and what I would be asking them to do, but also for them to feel comfortable with me. This would take time of sitting with the students and meeting them where they were at.

I had been very interactive with the students whilst I had been observing the SHSP in that setting and so they all got to know me well and what I was doing. It was a nurturing and smaller setting than Site 1 and it was easy to feel at ease there. I was able to chat with the students, listen to them, play games with them (Blackjack!) and ask them to show me the craft activities they were doing. On one day I sat and had lunch with them. Having never approached research this way before I was concerned about being too familiar, or that they would start seeing me as another member of staff. When a couple of students said they were really happy to meet with me to chat about SHS, it felt like I had struck the right balance. This has made me realize how essential it will be to go back into Site 1 a few times so the students can get to know me again before I ask them if they're happy to be interviewed as it's been a while since I was there doing the SHSP observations and they might not remember me very well.

### **10/02/2023 – Following visit to site 1**

Today was the third time I've been back into Site 1 to get to know the students this half term. I felt it was important to chat to as many different students this time, not just the ones who the SHSP thought might be happy to be interviewed at some point. I didn't want to single anyone out and make them feel uncomfortable, plus others might become interested as part of the process. I sometimes feel apprehensive walking into this setting, not knowing the circumstances that are going on each day and how the students might react to me being there. I was aware that I might have just looked like another professional. I dressed more casually today to be more approachable and just sat down with some of the students at lunch. It was great to just chat and laugh with them and not always talk about the research. Asking students about the college courses they want to do, their football team, and the finer details of lemon sponge cake felt like essential components to building rapport with these students.

Today was a good opportunity to chat a bit more to some of the students the SHSPs had pointed out might be willing to participate. Joking with some of them about "I hear you've got loads to say" was a way in, but that needed to be followed with reassurance that they didn't have to chat to me if they didn't want to and that I would fully explain what it was I would be asking them to do. I was grateful to have the SHSP walking round with me so that we could both chat about the purpose of the research as she knows each of them better than I do. This made it more friendly and hopefully felt less like they were being accosted!

I was excited that four students said they would be happy to be interviewed, so I told them about the process of getting their parent/carer's consent first and then I'd be back after the half-term break to talk to them about it more so they had time to think it through.

### **Example reflections on positioning myself in relation to the data – *heading into coding phase.***

#### **27/11/2022**

I'm aware that I'm approaching this analysis from the position of knowledge of psychology and experience in extracting meaning from language that people use. I am

also aware that my research background is mostly in conducting and analyzing quantitative, not qualitative, research and so feel unsure at this point whether I am going to do justice to the data and extract all the information in a way that does the participants justice and is consistent with the research focus and aims. I need to remain aware of my potential propensity to want to avoid biases in my data and make everything neat and systematic, when this should actually be more of a recursive and iterative process, and one that is potentially impacted by emotion and a level of subjectivity. I am part of this data and the way it was collected and the type of information that was gathered.

My previous experience as a Support Worker in a specialist provision might also impact the ways in which I interpret meaning from the data, as aspects might resonate with my own experiences. I need to remain reflexive and aware of the things I am thinking and feeling about the coding and analysis process as I go along.



## Appendix I. Example interview transcript

### SLT interview

Wednesday, 14<sup>th</sup> December, 2022. 12:42PM. Total interview time: 22:53.

**Researcher** 00:00

Okay, well, thank you so much for agreeing to be interviewed. So it's about 10 questions, is that ok?

**SLT** 00:09

Yep great

**Researcher** 00:09

Great. Could you first of all just tell me what your role is within this school?

**SLT** 00:14

So I'm the head teacher of the whole school, including the two commissioned provisions, which is [redacted] and [redacted] campus.

**Researcher** 00:18

Okay great, and what are some of the main difficulties or areas of need of the students in this particular alternative provision?

**SLT** 00:23

In the main campus, so here, we are dealing with a number, well the majority of the young people have had either permanent exclusion, or they have been close to permanent exclusion and they have a variety of both educational and social needs. And on top of that, I did the numbers on Friday, Thursday, over 50% of them have already had involvement with the police before they get to us, and that's our current cohort. Which I think is an indicator that there is already criminality to some extent.

**Researcher** 01:11

And can you describe what led to the involvement of School Home Support in this school?

**SLT** 01:14

So historically, and nationally, there is an ongoing issue with persistent absenteeism within alternative provision. And we rewrote our school development plan a number of years ago to include attendance being everybody's responsibility. So the best way for us to work on that was to have an organisation that supported us that had a specific expertise around that. And at that point, we brought in a caseworker to work with us, from School Home Support. And we fund that.

**Researcher** 01:58

Oh okay,

**SLT** 01:59

So although they come from a charity, we fully fund the role.

**Researcher** 02:06

Okay. So what was being done before to support this attendance issue?

**SLT** 02:10

So we were pretty much the same as most schools do, you will do the daily phone calls, you will do the messaging, you'll do the home visits. But we felt that we needed a much more, I wouldn't, I don't like to say systematic because it sounds if we didn't have a systematic process before, we did have, but the volume of students and the level of mobility that we have here means that it was much, much harder for one person potentially to do that within their other roles. So it was about getting somebody in who could have that as their sort of main purpose within the school.

**Researcher** 02:10

So who was it who was responsible?

**SLT** 02:50

So [redacted] was responsible for that previously, she's pastoral manager. But her, her role has expanded over time and so she's also a DSL and so she's taken a lot more of the safeguarding work. So it didn't mean that the attendance had to take a backseat, but sometimes you have to prioritise and so it meant that we needed someone else to be doing some of that.

**Researcher** 02:50

Yep, yeah. So can you describe for me what you think the role of the School Home Support practitioner is in the AP?

**SLT** 03:26

It's very different here. And so we have, you will know, when you go and visit our other campus and speak to [head] the way she uses her School Home Support practitioner there is slightly different version, it's closer in a way to the School Home Support model there than ours is. Whereas what we've done here is we found that it was more useful for us to have somebody really involved in the day to day life of the school, as well as doing the school home support. Now, we've now currently got somebody who is employed as a teacher, but who used to be our school home support practitioner. And so on top of that, we've now got a new school home support practitioner. So we've actually got more. And we also had two days a week from another person last year. So because, as I said, the mobility and the volume and the complexity of the cases means that the role that we would like them to have isn't just making contact with the families and supporting the families, it's a bigger role here I would say. Much bigger than it might be in a mainstream setting, where you would have a list of students and you would go through and you would do all of the normal bits and pieces around attendance and punctuality and making the phone calls and supporting families. Here, it's about looking at what the genuine big barriers are to supporting those young people. I think that's where School Home Support lends itself to that, because you've got the access to the additional funds, you've got the access to the resources and facilities that you wouldn't necessarily have had you just had somebody who works in the school.

**Researcher** 05:14

Yeah, you kind of answered my other question as well

**SLT** 05:17

That's what I thought, I've always got more.

**Researcher** 05:19

Okay feel free to keep going.

**SLT 05:21**

For example, if I give you some examples over the time that we've had, so we've got students that have issues with uniform, footwear, clothes, coats, whatever all of that, that's the normal day to day stuff. On top of that, we've had students in the past where they didn't have a working shower at home. So we facilitated them having a shower attachment and things like that, via school home support. In addition to that, what led on from that, because there was a big complexity around that particular young person, we ended up fitting our own shower, so but if we hadn't done that work first of all with the family, we wouldn't have found out that we needed to have an alternative option for that young person. And as over time, more young people have been able to use the facility here, not so much more recently but in the past, we used that quite regularly. So if a child goes missing, sometimes we'll have children that will go missing overnight, won't go home, but they will come to school because we've got clean clothes for them, we've got facilities for washing for them. But they will come to here because this is their safe space. And all of that has to do with the relationship that's been built up over time. We've provided cookers, fridges, freezers, all that stuff that schools wouldn't necessarily be able to do and a lot of that has come through School Home Support. So I think that, for me, it's about all the additionality that they can provide that we couldn't provide in the same way.

**Researcher 06:51**

And you mentioned a few people like who they work with. So families, who else do the School Home Support practitioners to work with?

**SLT 06:58**

Ours in particular, they work with other agencies, basically any other agency that is working with that family, they will work with Early Help, they'll work with social workers. It could be that there's a YOT practitioner, and they're working with any other agency basically.

**Researcher 07:15**

So you already sort of mentioned what the main benefits of having a School Home Support practitioner, and that additionality. In what ways do you work with the School Home Support practitioner to help support them in their role?

**SLT 07:26**

So last year, when we were working with [SHSP] in particular, so [SHSP] has now got a much more strategic role within the school around looking at the attendance, looking at what we're doing, analysing that data for us, and she now coordinates our weekly welfare meeting. So that's about me and [pastoral manager] combined, supporting her through that during last year when she was still working for School Home Support. And now we've got [SHSP] with us, it is about bringing her on board so that we can then share all of that expertise and experience with [SHSP] as the new practitioner. So it's working with them strategically looking at what we can do overall or supporting them through. So they will come to me so for example, like we had the kid with the shower, "I've got this, this is as far as I can get, I've hit a brick wall now, what can we do now?" And that's about me then jumping up and down, or seeing what we as a school can do that might provide the additionality that they can't, because they haven't got the funding from their trustees. Or last week, I met with [name redacted], for example, from School Home Support, [SHS name redacted] and I touch base at regular intervals. If there's something I'm not happy with, or if I need to talk about something, I go straight to her, because that's where... at this level, you can do that much more easily. And then all the wheels underneath start turning again if there's a problem. So it's about giving that it's a hierarchical support, across from the

school to School Home Support, rather than just supporting with. So [pastoral manager] will mate with [SHSP's] line manager, who used to be [SHSP's] line manager. So it's making sure we've got the support and sort of the communication at different levels.

**Researcher 09:15**

Brilliant. So other than your role, how else do you feel the School-Home Support practitioners are supported in their role?

**SLT 09:21**

Well, they have their own supervision with their, their own organisation, but we still offer anybody who works on this site, get all the same things that the rest of the staff do. So we have our own supervision that they're welcome to go to and I think [SHSP] did that when she was here rather than the School Home Support, because that gives them that just one step further away from their employer and a lot of people need that rather than thinking someone might be watching them.

**Researcher 09:54**

It's nice that they have those two options.

**SLT 09:56**

Yeah, but also it's just about making sure that they are they are part of the school. I don't want anybody coming in working with us for us and not feeling that they're part of the school because [SHSP's] quite new to us, she's only been with us since October halftime. So she really is very new in and I think she's settled in really well but I can still see there's some things that we've got to she needs to relax more into the role but at the core, she's new, so she wants to be. So that's about us working with her to ease her into the role and supporting her with that, and it's difficult for her because she comes on the heels of [SHSP]. So yeah tough cookie to follow. But yeah, so it's really about making sure that they get all of the niceties that we would have here and all of the support mechanisms that are in place for all of our employees, because again, I fully fund her role in the same way. So whilst on paper, her employer is School Home Support, I'm paying her salary. So it's a bit a bit of a blurred line in a way.

**Researcher 11:00**

Interesting. So what is there anything else that you think facilitates the work with students?

**SLT 11:06**

Yeah, so that's about making sure that there is time and space to do what they need to do. So I mean, [SHSP] is new to us but she also is reasonably new to school home support, so she has to have training opportunities with them, I ensure there are training opportunities, so I want them to join all of our staff training opportunities as well, because I think if you don't do that, you don't know what's going on in the whole school. But again, if there's an issue with the parent, I have to back them up and they're not gonna go to school home support for their support if a parent's difficult or if a family's difficult, so that's where we will step in and give that level of support as well, because they pay me more money to get abuse, so.

**Researcher 11:49**

(laughs) yeah, so they have to go further up! And what about their work with the families, the same sort of thing?

**SLT 11:54**

Yeah the same sort of thing. So I mean, if those if there's a so they'll have a caseload, they'll go through their caseload, any issues, so we have our welfare meeting on Friday, if it isn't something that has been addressed before we get to the Friday, then again, that is that's a bigger meeting for us all to discuss. And that would be me, [redacted], assuming I can be there, me, [redacted], [SHSP], [SHSP], [redacted], who's SENCO, as you know, and [head of site], from over at [redacted] and that's quite a an interesting mix of people with all slightly different roles but we can all discuss and that's about us keeping up to date with where we're at with all of our families, but also, it's an opportunity for us to have a conversation if we're not quite sure, or if there's something else that might be valuable. Has anybody heard of this? Or what about that? So it's just really, it's almost like a multiagency internal meeting, if that makes sense.

**Researcher** 12:48

Yeah, yeah. Okay. Great. Thanks. Just a couple more questions if that's okay? What do you think facilitates their work with outside agencies or organisations?

**SLT** 12:59

Again, it's kind of as is always the case in all of these things, communication has to be key to everything, so that's about ensuring that they have the opportunity to, to have a phone, have a laptop, have all those things that they need to do be released for meetings to have people come in and visit on site here, facilitate parents meetings, other agencies, joint meetings, professionals, whatever. So it's really it's time and communication are the two main things I think there.

**Researcher** 13:30

Right. What do you think are the challenges or barriers for a School Home Support practitioner in Alternative Provision?

**SLT** 13:38

The complexity of the cases, which is I think that's that's the sticking point for all of us.

**Researcher** 13:53

Mmm. I've got one more question unless you have anything else to add?

**SLT** 13:57

Ask that question again.

**Researcher** 13:58

So what are the challenges or barriers the School Home Support Practitioner has?

**SLT** 14:00

Yeah, so I think the complexity of the cases, and I think, I genuinely mean that because a case can become more complex, the further you get into it, or things can change, and or you could have so for example, we've got two kids that have been missing for the last week. So we know why they're missing. We don't know where they are, but we have to do the daily communication with the families, but we're also doing daily communication with the missing police and with our schools officer, so it genuinely is about the complexity, I think, because as I said, in most mainstream settings, it'll just be oh, they're not in school today, oh, we haven't got them out of bed or there could be whatever reasons behind that, you don't have the concentrated effect, and here everything is a concentrated effect, whereas you'd be a tiny percentage in a mainstream secondary school, here it's like 'all of em' [laughs] so we chose when we when we went through COVID, we chose to put every single child on our vulnerable list, so all the schools

were asked to produce a vulnerable list and we put every single child on it, because we determined that if they came here, they were vulnerable, because that's the sort of automatic really.

**Researcher** 14:01

How many students do you have on roll?

**SLT** 14:22

We've got 133. They don't all attend on site. There are, there's about 20 of those that go to the mainstream schools, because they're... a little bit more than 20, maybe 30. We've got some on reintegration, some that are on a pilot programme, because they have come in as EAL learners in year 11, so they come on our roll in case of any issues when they go into a mainstream school, because that gives them the better opportunities. And then we've got some that are in off-site provisions but they're dual-rolled with us, they're actually triple rolled, really, because they're with us there with the other provision, and they're with their main school.

**Researcher** 16:04

Right.

**SLT** 16:04

So it gets a bit complicated to triangulate all the information, but they have to be dual rolled without us if there's a five day AP provision that's running and they're not allowed if they're not registered with Ofsted, then there are some that are dual rolled with me but are at that provision, but we are quality assuring, that provision. All very complicated. You wouldn't even want to try and write it all down. And then we've got obviously, the three different campuses, so we've got, but but all of those students have to be on our roll on that on the main roll. So when you go to [head of site], she will say she's got 33 although, by the time you get there, it might be 35. But yeah. But so she thinks in her campus numbers over at [redacted] they think in their campus numbers, and I have to think of the whole, and then I have to split bits off, which is complicated.

**Researcher** 16:53

Yeah, yeah okay. Thank you for explaining that. That was an aside question.

**SLT** 17:01

Yeah but I think it's important for you to understand how it all fits together.

**Researcher** 17:04

Yes, definitely. Yeah, definitely. So going back to thinking about the challenges and barriers, I just was wondering if you had any ideas about how some of these challenges or barriers can be overcome?

**SLT** 17:13

Um, well, again, it all boils down to communication and support, so for, for us and our families, it's about what we can do to support them to build the trust and build the rapport, which allows them to feel that we're not, we're not against them, we might still have to send them a warning letter for court, we might still have to fine them, but it's about building that rapport that says we have to do this because this is a procedural thing, but in the same time as doing this procedural thing, we can cancel that at any given point in time, assuming we can get you back on board. But we have to go through the procedures, and it's about making sure they understand that, and that can be a barrier in itself, because they sent lots of the parents have spent a lot of

years battling against authority, and schools, and whilst I don't want I hate to go down the route of having to send warning letters, for some of them, we don't have choice, we have to do that, and then that makes a difference. It's just that legalese sometimes, oh, hang on a minute, yeah, we do need to do something, but then in the background, they've still got us helping.

**Researcher** 18:27

So is it sort of knowing that when that is the right situation to use? Yeah. Okay. That's really interesting, isn't it and knowing each case individually.

**SLT** 18:35

And more carrot than stick, if that makes sense?

**Researcher** 18:36

Yeah. Yeah.

**SLT** 18:38

So we're trying to, yeah, we're trying to make sure that they really, really understand. So we will we have to follow, because there is an attendance procedure we have to follow, but sometimes we won't send a warning letter as early as we could have done. But as long as we're documenting why we're not sending it at that stage, and it could be 'oh parents have done this, we've done this with them, we're just waiting to see if there's an impact from that, and if not, then we'll delay the sending of the warning letter by this amount of time'. So as long as we're documenting it, because otherwise, we if we got to court at later stages, they'll say well, why didn't you send it here, or why didn't you send that there, we have to actually explain our justification. But that's about us wanting to support the families rather than just sort of bringing them up with the court system.

**Researcher** 19:21

But does that approach come through the work of School Home Support practitioner, or do you feel that's kind of the way that you would do things anyway?

**SLT** 19:28

It's probably the way I would have done things, but so we chose to bring all of our legal work in house, right, so we came away from buying into the borough's attendance service, and we did that because we felt that we would have more ownership and more autonomy around that system. We still run a lot of our decisions passed the borough lead to make sure that we're not going to breach any protocols, but by doing the paper work ourselves, you are doing the carrot and stick yourself if that makes sense. You say, 'Well, look, you're gonna get a letter from me, it will be an official letter', rather than it coming from somebody in the borough or whatever, and so we probably would have tried to do that, but we didn't have the expertise previously, so we we've now got the expertise, because we've got the wonderful [SHSP] who's able to do that she's done all the training and things, and that, and we're we've now taken her on to do a split roll, she still has two days a week where she can work on that within her bigger role.

**Researcher** 20:34

Oh, that's brilliant. Okay,

**SLT** 20:35

Yeah, it is, it's lovely.

**Researcher** 20:36

Great. Thank you. Anything else you want to add about School Home School practitioners or anything?

**SLT** 20:40

What I would say is that, when I talked about additionality, there's lots of other stuff that we don't really that doesn't get publicized in the same way. So for example, we will have Christmas presents for our students, we will have Easter eggs for our students, we will have all the other bits and pieces that I talked about, so there will be a child at the moment who needs some new bras or they need something else, and those might seem that minor things, but the buy in from those from the children and the families is absolutely huge, because that's the bit that shows we care, and that's that that's the bit that will deal with most things. So I just think it's about they're a very caring organisation, but they have a have a role to play to ensure that we very fortunately, now run 20, 25% above the national average for AP for attendance which compared to where we were, and considering that most schools can only compare themselves to the previous year because they got the same cohort, we never know what they're gonna get from one day to the next never mind from one year to the next. So the fact that we can sustain that and have been able to sustain that over the last year or so is I would say, all down to the fact that we've got a fantastic School Home Support practitioner in [SHSP] when she was doing that, but now, [SHSP] is seeming to be efficient, and have building good relationships with people. So I think we're going to be lucky.

**Researcher** 22:20

So you feel it's important to have a School Home Support practitioner in AP?

**SLT** 22:24

Well, I, whilst we would have made a difference to our attendance, I think it would have taken us a lot longer and I don't know that we would have been able to sustain it in the same way because that's what I said, having someone with that focus all the time every single day, doing that analysis of everything, checking that everything's as it should be knowing the families and having those relationships with them, yeah, I, we could never go back.. I just have to find the money for it!

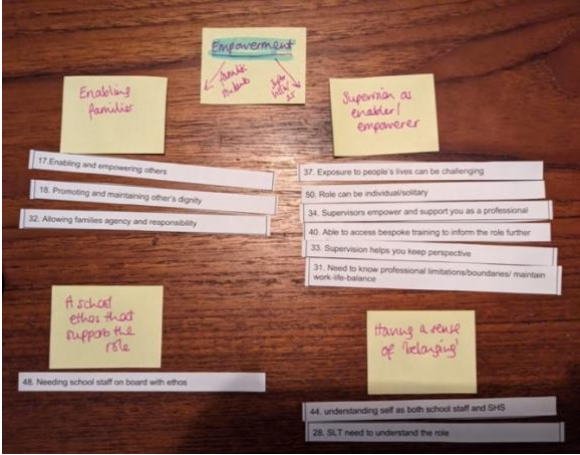
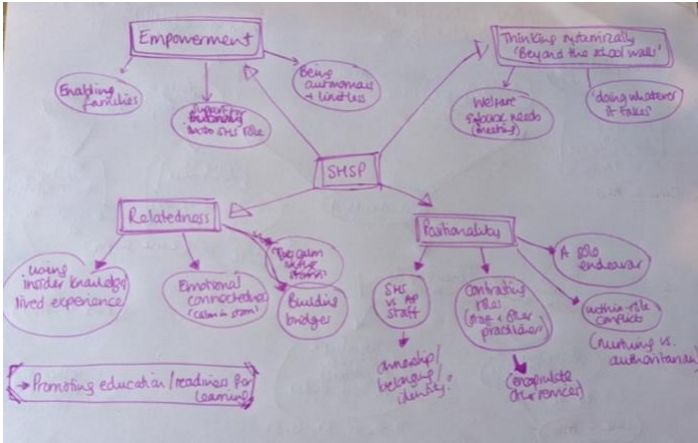
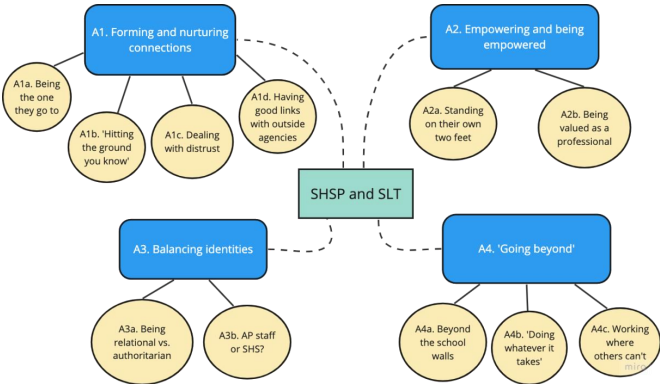
**Researcher** 22:51

Ha, yeah tricky one! Brilliant. I think that's a good place to stop. Thank you...

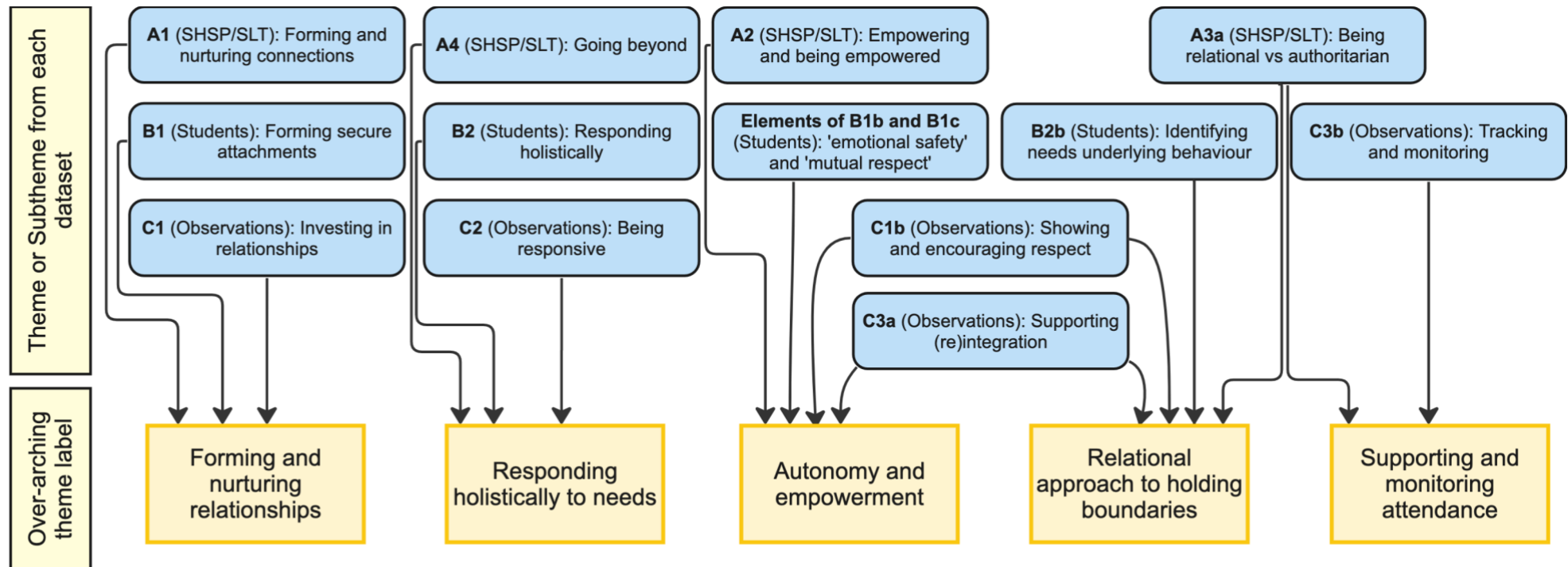


## Appendix J. Visual of code to theme mapping sequence (SHSP dataset).

### Analysis phases 3-5.

Description of step	Visual example
<p>1. Codes printed and clustered to map onto initial themes and subthemes/ broader patterns of meaning.</p>	
<p>2. Visual mind-mapping of developing initial themes and subthemes. Overlapping themes collapsed together.</p>	
<p>3. Initial theme maps cross-checked against dataset, named and refined for write-up. Theme summaries written.</p>	

## Appendix K: Process of developing overarching themes



**Figure K1.** Layering of themes and subthemes (crystallisation) from entire dataset into over-arching themes