



“School is awful, horrible and like a prison.” A reflexive thematic analysis of primary school pupils’ perceptions of the factors which influence their school attendance.

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List of Common Acronyms

Acronym	Definition
CAMHS	child and adolescent mental health services
CYP	children and young people
DfE	Department for Education
EHCP	education, health and care plan
EP	educational psychologist
EPS	educational psychology service
KS	key stage
RTA	reflexive thematic analysis
SENCo	special educational needs co-ordinator
SEND	special educational needs and disability
SLR	systematic literature review

Abstract

Difficulties with school attendance have been linked to poorer academic attainment, as well as later unemployment and reduced emotional wellbeing. This is a particularly pertinent area of research following the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. It is also an area of interest for the UK government, with the Department for Education (DfE, 2022) having recently published guidance on supporting school attendance. Research highlights the benefits of early identification and intervention for these needs, as well as the importance of gaining pupil voice. However, there has been limited research focussing on primary school aged children and young people (CYP)'s views, despite the literature suggesting that barriers to school attendance do begin in primary school.

Therefore, the aim of the present research was to explore the perceptions of primary school aged CYP who are beginning to experience barriers to school attendance. The two research questions focussed on the perceptions of young people on their barriers to school attendance and the factors they perceive to support their school attendance. The research utilised semi-structured interviews to gather qualitative data from a sample of six key stage 2 pupils who were at the early stages of experiencing barriers to school attendance. The data was analysed using reflexive thematic analysis which generated three themes in relation to barriers: negative school experiences, school as a safe space, and psychological and physiological needs. Three themes regarding supportive factors were also identified, which were the importance of relationships, reasonable adjustments and inclusion of pupil voice in planning for support.

Support was found for previous literature and the findings can be understood in terms of Bronfenbrenner and Ceci's (1994) bioecological model, Maslow's hierarchy of needs (1943) and the self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Implications for schools and educational psychologists (EPs) include taking a holistic and interactionist approach to reducing barriers to school attendance.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Chapter Overview

This chapter begins by considering the researcher's positionality and motivations for undertaking the research, before providing an overview of the relevant literature within the area of school attendance difficulties. The chapter will explore some issues surrounding the conceptualisation and prevalence of these needs, within the current context of a post-pandemic return to education. It will then highlight the importance of school attendance in relation to the UK legal system, as well as the impact of school absences on academic attainment and later life outcomes. Research into the factors associated with school attendance difficulties will be presented, followed by a discussion surrounding the importance of including pupil voice in research and professional practice. Key theoretical frameworks which underpin the literature will be considered. The chapter concludes with a discussion around supporting school attendance difficulties, with reference to the recent UK government guidance (Department for Education, 2022a).

1.2 Researcher Positionality and Motivations

The researcher has had a long-term interest in supporting children and young people (CYP)'s social, emotional and mental health (SEMH) needs. This stemmed from her previous experiences working as a teaching assistant in a specialist provision and as an assistant psychologist in an independent educational psychology service (EPS). Here, the researcher's main role was to deliver evidence-based interventions to support CYP's SEMH needs, particularly using cognitive behavioural approaches to support anxious thoughts and feelings. This experience sparked an interest in supporting SEMH needs but focussed on a 'within-child' model of understanding need.

The researcher's knowledge, skills and experience in supporting SEMH needs has developed throughout the three years of the doctoral training programme in applied educational psychology. This has highlighted the use of interactionist and eco-systemic theories, and the importance of exploring CYP's needs holistically and within context. The researcher has been able to apply this theoretical knowledge through undertaking professional practice placements in various EPSs. During the researcher's first placement, she was involved in supporting a year 1 child who was experiencing difficulties with school attendance. The researcher was struck, not only by the fact that these difficulties begin at such an early age, but at how eloquently the young person was able to share their views about their difficulties and suggest ideas to support them. It was this casework which first piqued the researcher's interest in supporting CYP with school attendance difficulties. Since then, the researcher has supported multiple CYP with these needs in her role as a trainee

educational psychologist. Furthermore, the researcher undertook her training during the Covid-19 pandemic, with the resulting lockdowns and partial school closures having a detrimental impact on CYP's school attendance, which will be explored further in this chapter.

1.3 Conceptualising School Attendance Difficulties

There is an ongoing debate within the literature regarding the way in which difficulties with school attendance are defined and conceptualised (Elliot & Place, 2019; Havik & Ingul, 2021; Heyne et al., 2019; Knage et al., 2021). Various terms have been used, often ambiguously and inconsistently, with lack of a shared definition (Heyne et al., 2019; Knage et al., 2021). The terms which have been most widely used within the literature will be discussed below.

1.3.1 Truancy vs. School Phobia

Historically, distinctions have been made between children and young people (CYP) whose school non-attendance is perceived to have an emotional basis and those whose is not (Thambirajah et al., 2008). The term truancy was coined by Broadwin (1932) to describe CYP whose school non-attendance was thought to be due to a lack of interest in the curriculum and an unwillingness to conform to the expectations of school (Elliot, 1999). These CYP typically attempt to hide their school non-attendance from their parents and are often associated with anti-social conduct outside of school (Berg, 1996). In contrast, Johnson et al. (1941) used the term 'school phobia' to describe CYP whose absence was thought to be underpinned by experiencing anxiety around school attendance. Berg et al. (1969) later proposed a set of criteria to differentiate between truancy and school phobia, defining school phobia as:

- a) Severe difficulty in attending school, often leading to prolonged absence
- b) Severe emotional upset surrounding school attendance which may include physiological signs
- c) Staying at home with the knowledge of parents
- d) Absence of anti-social behaviours

However, the term school phobia has been critiqued as it assumes that the school environment is the main reason for school non-attendance, whereas it has more recently been acknowledged that there are various contributing factors, including those relating to the home and family (Havik et al., 2014; Kearney, 2008; Thambirajah et al., 2008). Furthermore, the term phobia implies that it is a pathological fear that can be treated through exposure therapy (Pellegrini, 2007), which is critiqued in the recent literature (Bodycote, 2023).

1.3.2 School Refusal

An alternative term which has been used to describe these needs is school refusal, which places more of an emphasis on the observable behaviour (Berg 1997; Hersov, 1960). Kearney and Silverman (1993) suggested a shift in focus from differentiating between school phobia and truancy, to instead focussing on identifying the underlying functions of the behaviour. They identified four possible functions, including those typically associated with both school phobia and truancy:

- a) To avoid general fear or anxiety that relates to attending school (this would typically be labelled school phobia)
- b) To escape specific school-based situations including academic demands, social situations and environmental triggers
- c) To seek time and attention from significant others (this may reflect separation anxiety)
- d) To pursue tangible reinforcers or positive experiences outside of school (this was typically considered truancy)

The first two functions are said to negatively reinforce school non-attendance, by enabling CYP to avoid uncomfortable emotions and situations relating to school, whereas the last two functions positively reinforce school non-attendance, by allowing CYP to seek preferred experiences outside of school (Kearney & Spear, 2012). Although this model is useful in highlighting the importance of identifying the underlying function of the behaviour, West Sussex Educational Psychology Service (EPS) (2018) argue that the term school refusal is problematic as it implies that CYP have control over their school non-attendance, this is widely rejected by parents of CYP who display these needs (Morgan & Costello, 2023).

1.3.3 Emotionally Based School Avoidance

The term Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA) has more recently been used in the literature (Chian, 2022; Devine, 2021; Tamlyn, 2022; Want, 2020) and professional guidance (West Sussex EPS, 2018). EBSA is defined as a broad umbrella term which is used to describe CYP who experience significant difficulties in attending school due to emotional factors, often resulting in prolonged absences from school (West Sussex EPS, 2018). However, this term has been critiqued by parents of CYP who experience these needs, as they feel that it locates the difficulties within the young person and does not consider the role of the environment in contributing to school attendance difficulties (Morgan & Costello, 2023). In addition, Pellegrini (2007) argued against the use of the terminology 'emotionally based' as it excludes CYP whose school non-attendance may not have an obvious emotional basis, for example, those with physical or medical needs.

1.3.4 Barriers to School Attendance

More recently, the term barriers to school attendance has been introduced within the literature (Bodycote, 2022; Tobias, 2021; Morgan & Costello, 2023) and government guidance (Department for Education [DfE], 2022a). This term moves the focus away from the individual and instead considers school attendance difficulties to be a result of unmet needs within the school environment (Morgan & Costello, 2023). This term suggests taking a more holistic approach to identifying the barriers to school attendance which may not immediately be perceived as having an emotional basis, such as factors relating to health and wellbeing, sensory needs, social and relationships, academic factors, change and transition and family and home factors (Tobias, 2021). It then places the emphasis on adapting the environment to meet CYP's needs.

The term barriers to school attendance will be used throughout this paper as it resonates with the author, who aims to take a broader interactionist view of understanding need, rather than locating the difficulties within the individual. Furthermore, it can be used to refer to the whole spectrum of need, including CYP who are still regularly attending school but are beginning to experience some barriers.

1.4 Prevalence of CYP who Experience Barriers to School Attendance

Pupils who miss at least 10% of school sessions are defined by the government as 'persistently absent' (DfE, 2023). The latest government statistics suggest that 22.5% of pupils were classed as persistently absent in the 2021/22 academic year. CYP who have special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), have an education, health and care plan (EHCP) or receive free school meals are more likely to be persistently absent from school (DfE, 2023). However, these figures include CYP who were absent from school for Covid-19 related reasons, medical appointments, and other authorised absences such as religious or cultural holidays (DfE, 2023), as well as those who experience barriers to school attendance. There is no consistent attendance categorisation for CYP who are experiencing barriers to school attendance, with many being marked as unauthorised or having no reason recorded, and fewer being categorised as illness or other authorised absence (Morgan & Costello, 2023). Square Peg and Not Fine in School (2022) are charities who support parents of CYP who experience barriers to school attendance. These charities are campaigning for a new categorisation system for schools to authorise absences for social, emotional and mental health reasons. This would enable the government to collect data on how many CYP are impacted by these barriers, as well as preventing parents from receiving legal sanctions for these absences (Square Peg & Not Fine in School, 2022).

Due to the inconsistencies in defining and monitoring these needs, it is difficult to gain accurate prevalence figures. However, it is typically estimated within the literature that between 1-5% of the UK school population experience barriers to school attendance (Elliot & Place, 2019; Gulliford & Miller, 2015; Havik et al., 2014; Katz et al., 2016), with Kearney (2007) arguing that up to 28% of CYP will experience these needs at some point during their lives. Research suggests that these needs are equally common across genders (DfE, 2023; González, 2018) but pupils from ethnic minority groups, lower socio-economic backgrounds (Klein et al., 2020) and those with SEND are more likely to experience these barriers (Gee, 2018). There appears to be a higher prevalence amongst secondary school students (Gregory & Purcell, 2014; Gulliford & Miller, 2015), with a peak around the transition period into secondary school (Nuttall & Woods, 2013; Pellegrini, 2007). This is thought to be due to the period of uncertainty and change in terms of the size of the school, the structure of the school day and having to move between lessons (Rae, 2020).

1.5 Impact of Covid-19 on School Attendance

The Covid-19 pandemic and subsequent government restrictions caused global disruption to children's education during 2020 and 2021. Schools were required to close for the majority of CYP from the end of March 2020 and these CYP accessed online learning from home (Institute for Government, 2022). Schools remained open for vulnerable children (defined as those with social care involvement or an EHCP) or children whose parents were keyworkers (defined as having an essential job in public services) (DfE, 2020). Schools gradually re-opened from the beginning of June 2020, but attendance was not compulsory until September 2020. Upon the return to school, CYP were placed in 'bubbles' (small separate groups) to minimise mixing between students in order to prevent the spread of the virus. Children were instructed to remain at home if they tested positive for Covid-19 or were experiencing any symptoms. Due to a rise in the number of positive Covid-19 cases across the UK, schools closed again to the majority of CYP following the Christmas break in January 2021 until March 2021 (Institute for Government, 2022).

Nottingham City and Southend EPS used a survey methodology to explore the experiences and views of CYP during the Covid-19 pandemic (Sivers et al., 2020). There were a total of 1758 responses, combining both qualitative and quantitative data from primary and secondary aged CYP who attended school during the pandemic and those who did not. Around 83% of young people who attended school during the pandemic said they enjoyed being at school. Qualitative feedback suggests that these CYP enjoyed engaging in novel activities such as outdoor learning. Around 81% CYP who did not attend school throughout the pandemic said they enjoyed being at home. Participants shared that they enjoyed being able to spend time with their families and pets whilst at

home. Some students also shared that they enjoyed the reduced academic pressures and demands whilst at home and highlighted a preference for virtual learning. Young people expressed concerns about returning to school due to worries about having to catch up academically and concerns about contracting the virus. The authors suggest that due to the geographical and socio-economic differences between Nottingham City and Southend, the findings are likely to be representative of shared experiences of CYP across the UK. Furthermore, the report states that the findings reflect those identified by Sefton EPS (2020), Phoenix Education (2020) and the Children's Commissioner for Wales (2020).

Furthermore, McDonald et al. (2023) interviewed parents of primary school children who experienced barriers to school attendance following Covid-19 school closures, and professionals working in primary schools across Sussex which included headteachers, SENCOs, class teachers, attendance officers, EPs and Educational Mental Health Practitioners (EMHPs). Their findings suggested that the Covid-19 pandemic exacerbated existing school attendance difficulties, particularly for CYP with SEND. These CYP were reported to enjoy home learning and found returning to school challenging following school closures. The findings suggest that even CYP with no previous difficulties with school attendance were concerned about returning to school due to worries about contracting Covid-19, adapting to new rules and routines, and feeling pressure to catch up on missed learning, which mirrors the findings from Nottingham City and Southend EPS (Sivers et al., 2020).

1.6 Importance of School Attendance

Articles 28 and 29 of the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child (1989) state that all children have the right to an education which aims to develop their abilities to their full potential, respect their human rights and freedoms, respect their culture, family and environment, and prepare young people for life in a free society. Furthermore, The Education Act 1996 states that all CYP of compulsory school age (5-16 years old) in the United Kingdom (UK), must receive a suitable, full-time education appropriate to their age and needs. Parents and carers have a legal obligation to ensure that their children have access to this education, either through attending school, other alternative provisions, or elective home education (DfE, 2022a). If a child is registered at a school, parents have a legal responsibility to ensure that their child attends school regularly and failure to do so can result in legal sanctions including fines and prosecution (DfE, 2022a). The benefits of regular school attendance on both academic attainment and later life outcomes have been widely cited in the literature (Attwood & Croll, 2015; Malcolm, 2003; Taylor, 2012) and will be discussed below.

1.6.1 Academic Attainment

Figures from the UK government highlight the negative impact that low school attendance can have on academic attainment (DfE 2015; 2016; 2022b). The latest report published in May 2022 explores the link between school absence and academic attainment at the end of key stage (KS) 2 and KS4 for the academic year 2018/2019. These are the latest figures available which were not impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic (DfE, 2022b). In both KS2 and KS4, lower levels of school attendance were linked to a reduced likelihood of achieving the expected age-related standards (DfE 2015; 2016; 2022b). Young people's attainment was impacted proportionately to their attendance, irrespective of gender, race, disability or poverty (DfE, 2016). Please see Table 1 for a breakdown of absence percentages, with the corresponding percentage of CYP who achieved the expected standards at KS2 and KS4.

Table 1

Absence Percentages with the Corresponding Percentage of CYP who Achieved the Expected Standards in KS2 and KS4.

Percentage Absence (%)	Percentage of CYP who achieved the expected standards in reading, writing and maths in KS2 (%)	Percentage of CYP who achieved grades 9 to 4 in English and maths in KS4 (%)
0	83.9	83.7
0-5	71.9	76.3
10+ (persistently absent)	40.2	35.6

1.6.2 Later Life Outcomes

Low school attendance has also been associated with negative outcomes later in life. For example, Taylor (2012) suggested that CYP with low levels of school attendance were less likely to be in employment, education or training following secondary education. In addition, UK government figures suggest an association between CYP who were persistently absent from school (defined as missing more than 10% of school sessions) and youth offending, including theft and knife possession (Ministry of Justice, 2018). Around 90% of young offenders were reported as being persistently absent within the five years preceding the offence, although it is important to note that the majority of CYP who are persistently absent from school do not go on to become young offenders (Ministry of Justice & DfE, 2016). Furthermore, Attwood and Croll (2015) conducted a longitudinal study to explore self-reported levels of school non-attendance on later psychological wellbeing. They found that higher levels of school non-attendance were associated with poorer levels of self-reported

psychological wellbeing and life satisfaction later in life, even when controlling for socioeconomic status which has been associated with both school non-attendance and wellbeing separately. However, the authors acknowledged that these associations are not necessarily causal and there may be other unknown mediating variables, which may have influenced both school attendance and wellbeing (Attwood & Croll, 2015).

1.7 Factors Associated with Barriers to School Attendance

Barriers to school attendance are heterogenous in nature, with several complex and interacting contributing factors (Heyne et al., 2019). Research suggests that school non-attendance typically occurs when “stress exceeds support, when risks are greater than resilience and when ‘pull’ factors that promote school non-attendance overcome the ‘push’ factors that encourage attendance” (Thambirajah et al., 2008, p. 33). Some of the most common factors which have been associated with school non-attendance within the literature are presented in Table 2 below, categorised into factors relating to the individual, their home and family circumstances, and the school expectations and environment.

These factors can also be understood in terms of predisposing, precipitating and perpetuating factors (Rae, 2020; Thambirajah et al., 2008). Predisposing factors are defined as those which may increase an individual’s vulnerability to experiencing barriers to school attendance, for example, having a diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder (ASD) or mental health difficulties. Precipitating factors relate to any recent changes or events, such as family separation or bereavement, which may trigger the difficulties with school attendance. Finally, perpetuating factors are those which maintain the school non-attendance and may include positive reinforcements from staying at home.

1.8 Importance of Pupil Voice

Much of the literature around barriers to school attendance tends to focus on the perceptions of parents (Havik et al., 2014) or members of staff (Gren-Landell et al., 2015), rather than the young people themselves. Young people are likely to have different perceptions of their own barriers to school attendance, compared to their parents or teachers (Aucott, 2014). In a systematic review of the literature as part of her doctoral thesis, Devine (2022) compared the attributions of young people, parents and school staff for difficulties with school attendance. She concluded that pupils and parents were more likely to attribute school attendance difficulties to school related factors, whereas school staff were more likely to cite factors relating to the young person and their family. This is in line with previous research (Malcolm et al., 2003).

Therefore, the author feels that it is imperative to gather CYP's views and perceptions of their own barriers to school attendance. Prunty et al. (2012) argues that in order to understand a particular phenomenon within a vulnerable population, we must seek to understand the perspectives of those with direct experience of it. Furthermore, Greig et al. (2012) highlights that CYP have unique knowledge and expertise about their own experiences and are therefore the best placed to suggest what works for them. Moreover, Sewell (2016) highlights the power of using research to empower young people and to elicit their views.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child Article 12 (1989) states that all young people have the right to express their views freely on all matters that affect them, and for their views to be given due weight in accordance with the child's age and developmental stage. This is reflected in the Children and Families Act (2014) and the subsequent SEND Code of Practice (DfE & Department of Health, 2015) which highlights the importance of involving young people in decision making around their care and education.

Table 2

Factors Associated with Barriers to School Attendance Adapted from Rae (2020)

Individual	Home and Family	School
ASD (Munkhaugen et al., 2017)	Separation or changes to family dynamics (Katz et al., 2016)	Difficult relationships with staff (Kearney, 2008)
Learning difficulties (Gee, 2018)	Loss or bereavement (Thambirajah et al., 2008)	Bullying or peer conflict (Kearney, 2008)
Physical or medical diagnoses (Katz et al., 2016)	Parenting style (Gren-Landell et al., 2015)	Academic demands (Havik et al., 2014)
Mental health difficulties (Finning et al., 2019a; 2019b)	Parental physical or mental health difficulties (Kaiser & Schulze, 2015)	Specific events e.g., exams (Havik et al., 2014)

1.9 Theoretical Frameworks

Four psychological theories will be presented to provide a theoretical underpinning to the literature. Two models of human motivation will be discussed: Maslow's hierarchy of needs (1943) and the self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985) which consider barriers to school attendance in terms of unmet needs within the environment. The anxiety avoidance cycle will then be discussed, considering the role of emotional and behavioural factors in maintaining difficulties with school attendance. The final framework which will be considered is Bronfenbrenner and Ceci's bioecological model (1994), an interactionist theory which considers CYP's development within context. These frameworks have been selected as they are influential theories in applied educational psychology and are models which the researcher often refers to in her role as a trainee educational psychologist. Furthermore, these models are frequently cited in the existing literature to explore barriers to school attendance.

1.9.1 Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

Maslow's hierarchy of needs (1943) is a seminal theory of motivation, which states that human behaviour is motivated by the fulfilment of physiological and psychological needs. Maslow (1943) identified five areas of need which are often depicted in a hierarchical pyramid (see Figure 1). His early work postulates that the lower-level needs must be met before the higher levels can be achieved. Within the context of school attendance, having unmet needs within any of these areas may have an impact upon a young person's ability to attend school.

The most basic needs at the bottom of the hierarchy are physiological needs which are defined as the biological requirements for human survival including food, water, shelter and sleep. If a young person has not had an adequate breakfast or enough sleep, they are likely to experience difficulties concentrating and have reduced motivation for attending school (Popoola & Sivers, 2023). The next level of need is safety and security which encompasses both physical and emotional safety and requires the presence of a consistent adult. Therefore, CYP who do not feel like they have trusting relationships with school staff are unlikely to experience feelings of safety at school which may contribute towards their barriers to school attendance (Popoola & Sivers, 2023).

Feeling safe is a prerequisite for developing a sense of belonging, which refers to the human desire for interpersonal relationships and connectedness with both adults and peers. However, Popoola and Sivers (2021) found that many young people who experience barriers to school attendance report a lack of belonging. Maslow (1943) suggested that if young people have unmet physiological, safety and belonging needs, they will be unable to achieve a sense of esteem or self-

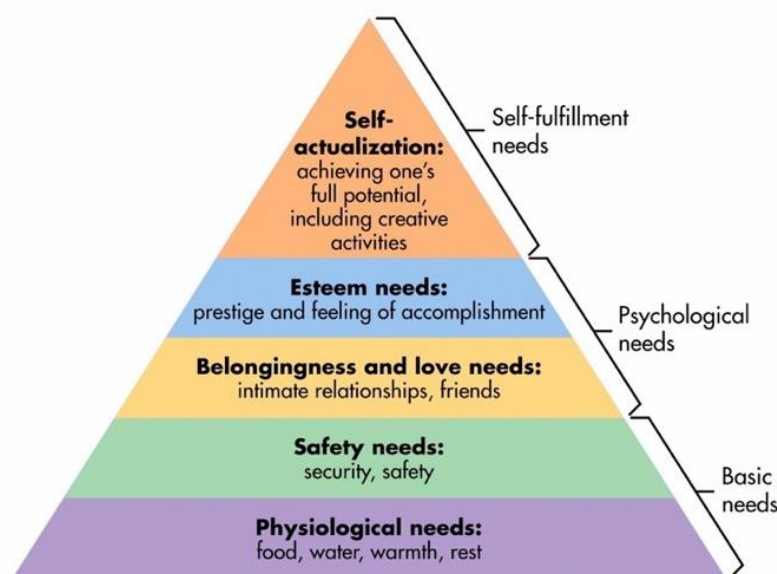
actualisation. Here, esteem refers to having a sense of self-accomplishment, as well as feeling valued by others, whereas self-actualisation is defined as reaching one's full potential.

Although this theory is widely used within education and beyond, it is not without critique. In a comprehensive review of the model, Wahba and Bridwell (1976) concluded that there is minimal evidence for the hierarchical nature of the needs and instead argued that the order of the needs is subjective. Furthermore, Hofstede (1984) highlighted issues of ethnocentric bias as the model is based on a small sample of white, educated males and is therefore not generalisable to the wider population. For example, the goal of self-actualisation reflects Western individualistic values, whereas collectivist societies strive for selflessness and belonging to a community over self-fulfilment (Gambrel & Cianci, 2003; Hofstede, 1984).

As Maslow's hierarchy of needs (1943) was developed as a theory of human motivation, its application to understanding barriers to school attendance could be critiqued as CYP who experience these difficulties do not necessarily lack motivation to attend school. They often want to attend school but feel that they are unable to due to the significant levels of emotional distress experienced in response to school attendance (Morgan & Costello, 2023). However, Maslow's hierarchy (1943) is commonly used as a framework in applied educational psychology to explore CYP's unmet needs within the environment, which can contribute to difficulties with school attendance.

Figure 1

Hierarchy of Needs (Maslow, 1943)



From Simply Psychology (2023)

1.9.2 Self Determination Theory (SDT)

SDT (Deci & Ryan, 1985) is another influential theory of human motivation. The term self-determination refers to an individual's ability to make decisions and take control of their life (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Similarly to Maslow's hierarchy of needs (1943), the SDT (Deci & Ryan, 1985) suggests that human motivation is underpinned by key psychological needs – in this case, autonomy, competence and relatedness. Fisher (2023) suggests that children who experience barriers to school attendance often have unmet needs within these areas.

Autonomy is defined as having a sense of control over one's actions. When applying this to education, Fisher (2023) argues that schools which use behaviourist approaches including sanctions, ultimately removes CYP's sense of autonomy and therefore may contribute to barriers to school attendance. The second psychological need, competence, relates to feelings of mastery and success. However, schools often tend to employ a deficit model, particularly in relation to SEND by focussing on what the CYP can't do rather than celebrating their strengths, which consequently reduces their feelings of competence (Fisher, 2023). Finally, the term relatedness describes having a sense of belonging and connectedness with others. Schools which focus on "content before connection [are] missing an opportunity to improve the quality of motivation and learning in its children, especially its square pegs." (Fisher, 2023, p. 31). Here 'square pegs' refer to CYP whose needs are not being met by the current education system, including children who experience barriers to school attendance (Morgan & Costello, 2023).

The SDT (Deci & Ryan, 1985) can be critiqued by reducing human motivation and action down to the fulfilment of three psychological needs. It does not consider the impact of wider contextual factors on motivation such as environmental, socioeconomic and cultural differences (Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994). Sheldon (2001) identified ten human needs from various psychological theories including: physical needs, security, self-esteem and self-actualisation (Maslow, 1943), pleasure (Epstein, 1990), popularity and money (Derber, 1979), in addition to autonomy, competence and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Of these human needs, Sheldon (2001) concluded that autonomy, competence and relatedness were three of the most influential human needs. However, he argued that self-esteem was equally as important, suggesting that the SDT (Deci & Ryan, 1985) should be developed to include self-esteem.

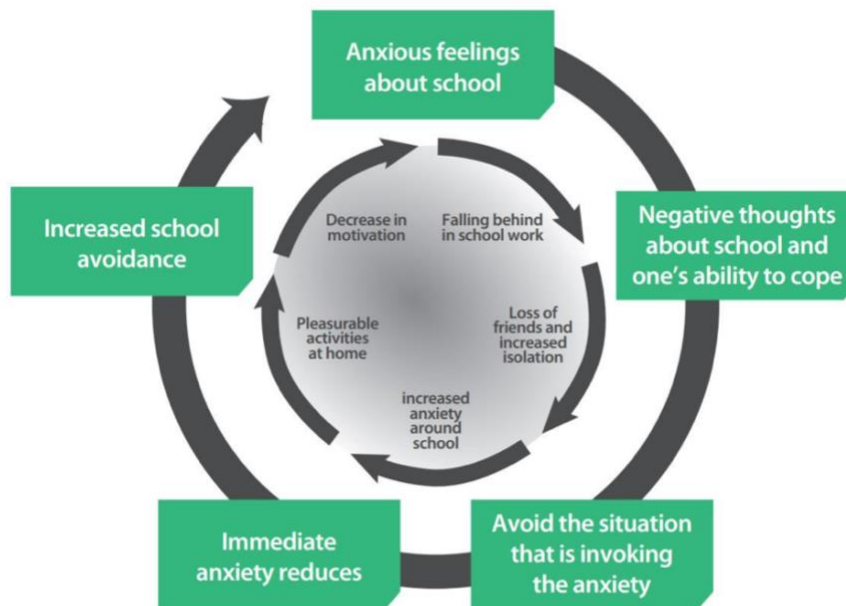
As the SDT (Deci & Ryan, 1985) is another theory of motivation, it is subject to similar critiques as Maslow's hierarchy (1943) when considering barriers to school attendance. CYP who experience difficulties with school attendance do not necessarily lack motivation to attend school, but instead feel that they are unable to attend due to significant levels of anxiety (Morgan &

Costello, 2023). However, this model remains helpful in identifying CYP's unmet psychological needs which may contribute to their barriers to school attendance.

1.9.3 Anxiety Avoidance Cycle

The anxiety avoidance cycle (see Figure 2) highlights the role of anxiety in perpetuating school attendance difficulties (West Sussex EPS, 2018). For example, if a young person feels anxious about attending school, they will typically attempt to avoid school to prevent the negative thoughts, feelings and physiological responses associated with school attendance. This may be displayed through avoiding getting ready for school, leaving the house or entering school, and may be accompanied by challenging behaviours in the mornings or the night before school (Thambirajah et al., 2008, West Sussex EPS, 2018). Although this avoidance may provide temporary relief, it increases the level of anxiety around attending school in the future as the young person has not been exposed to the anxiety-provoking situation and has therefore not developed strategies to manage in these situations.

This model is in line with the first function of school non-attendance, proposed by Kearney and Silverman (1993), which suggests that CYP avoid school to escape feelings of fear or anxiety related to school. However, this model can be critiqued for taking a within child focus and assuming that the difficulties are located within the young person, rather than considering the role of the environment in contributing to school attendance difficulties (Morgan & Costello, 2023). It may also be interpreted to suggest that if CYP avoid school due to anxiety or a phobia of the school environment, then it can be 'treated' through exposure therapy (Pellegrini, 2007), rather than adapting the environment to meet the CYP's needs. However, this model is useful in understanding anxiety as both a predisposing and perpetuating factor to school non-attendance (Rae, 2020; Thambirajah et al., 2008).

Figure 2*Anxiety Avoidance Cycle*

From West Sussex Educational Psychology Service (2018)

1.9.4 Bioecological Model

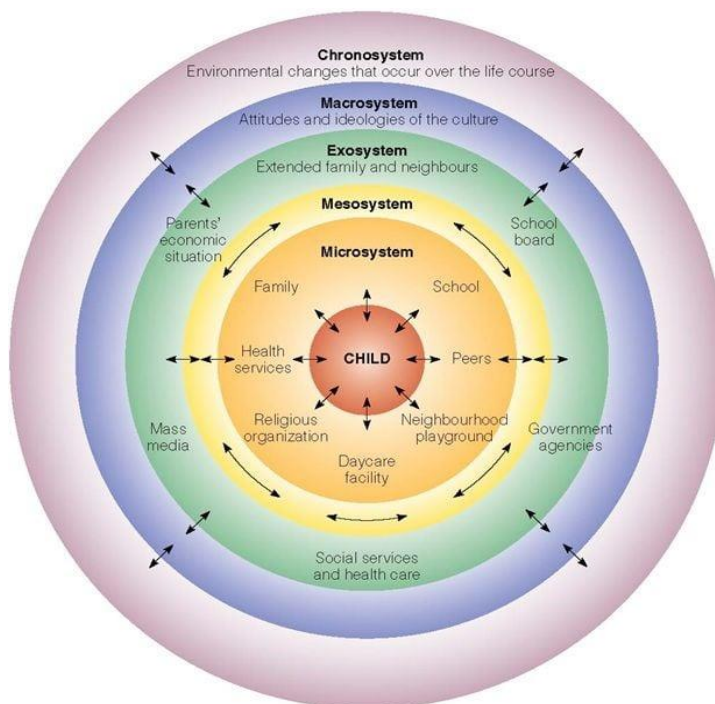
Building on Bronfenbrenner's (1979) original ecological systems theory, Bronfenbrenner and Ceci (1994) proposed a bioecological model of human development. This is an interactionist theory which suggests that development occurs as a result of complex interactions between the individual and their environment. Bronfenbrenner and Ceci (1994) divided the environment into five ecological systems with the child at the centre (see Figure 3). This model suggests that barriers to school attendance are not located solely within the young person, but instead occur as a result of interactions between the young person and the systems around them. Negative experiences within each system may contribute to the development or maintenance of barriers to school attendance.

Firstly, the microsystem consists of the child's immediate context such as their family, school and peers and is considered to be the most influential system on a child's development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Factors within the microsystem which may contribute to barriers to school attendance include bullying (Havik et al., 2014), as well as parental physical and mental health needs (Kaiser & Schulze, 2015). The term mesosystem is used to describe the interactions that occur between aspects of the microsystem, for example, between home and school. Research has suggested that a breakdown in communication between home and school may negatively impact school attendance (Nuttall & Woods, 2013).

The next system is the exosystem, which comprises of wider contextual factors such as the government and the media, which influence the child's development more indirectly. Another factor within the exosystem is parents' employment status, which may impact upon their ability to support their child and take them to school. The macrosystem includes broader social and cultural factors which influence all of the other systems. Within the macrosystem, the child and their families' cultural beliefs and practices may impact upon their school attendance, for example, Gypsy Roma and Irish Travellers have significantly higher levels of persistent absence (DfE, 2023). Finally, the idea of a chronosystem highlights how these systems change over time. An example of this could be the Covid-19 pandemic which is likely to have had an impact upon all levels of the model (Popoola & Sivers, 2021).

Figure 3

Bioecological Model (Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994)



From Special Education Notes (n.d.)

1.10 Reducing Barriers to School Attendance

This section will first outline a model for reducing barriers to school attendance which is explicitly based on the bioecological model (Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994) and Maslow's hierarchy of needs (1943). It will then discuss the recent UK governmental guidance and response to

supporting attendance, as well as a framework developed by an educational psychology service to explore, identify and reduce barriers to school attendance.

1.10.1 Ecological Model of Successful Reintegration

In line with the complex and interactionist nature of barriers to school attendance, Nuttall and Woods (2013) proposed an Ecological Model of Successful Reintegration (see appendix A). This is based on Bronfenbrenner and Ceci's bioecological model (1994) and considers what support can be implemented at the level of the individual, the family, and the role of professionals and wider systems. Psychological factors at an individual level are placed at the core of the model and include developing feelings of safety, security, belonging, self-esteem and aspirations, which are in line with Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs. This model can be used to identify any areas of unmet need and to subsequently inform a plan of intervention to meet these needs, for example, ensuring adults take a positive and nurturing approach, offer specific praise and positive attention, take an interest in the young person and support them to have positive experiences (Nuttall & Woods, 2013). Support at the family level includes developing parenting skills, meeting the needs of the family and fostering positive relationships with school. Finally, the model highlights the importance of early identification and assessment of needs to inform intervention and taking a collaborative multi-agency approach, as well as having a key person within school (Nuttall & Woods, 2013).

1.10.2 Government Response

The UK government has recently published guidance for all maintained schools, academies, independent schools and local authorities entitled 'Working together to improve school attendance' (DfE, 2022a). The DfE (2022a) have reported that this is likely to become statutory advice following public and parliamentary consultation, no sooner than September 2023. The guidance highlights the importance of building strong and trusting relationships with pupils and parents and taking a collaborative, multi-agency approach to supporting school attendance. It also highlights the importance of prevention, early identification and intervention.

The guidance describes a graduated response, from universal provision to more targeted support. At a universal level, schools should work preventatively by developing a culture that promotes the benefits of attendance, having a clear attendance policy and accurately completing attendance registers (DfE, 2022a). Schools should be proactive in thoroughly monitoring attendance, using attendance and punctuality data to identify pupils who may require further support. For these pupils, schools should aim to intervene as early as possible, working with the CYP and their families to explore the barriers to school attendance and working collaboratively to overcome them. If CYP continue to experience persistent and severe absence, which is defined as missing more than 10% of

their education, they will require more targeted and specialised support. Where voluntary support is not being engaged with, the local authority may put more formal support in place through parenting contracts or education supervision orders. The guidance states that legal intervention including fixed penalty notices and prosecution should be the last resort (DfE, 2022a).

1.10.3 Early Intervention

As highlighted in both the government guidance (DfE, 2022a) and the ecological model of successful re-integration (Nuttall & Woods, 2013), early identification and intervention are pivotal in supporting barriers to school attendance. This is widely supported in the literature (Cook et al., 2017; Elsherbiny, 2017; Ingul et al., 2019; Taylor, 2012). Early intervention refers to identifying and providing support to CYP who are at risk of experiencing poor outcomes, with the aim of preventing these negative outcomes (Early Intervention Foundation, 2018). In the context of this research, early intervention refers to identifying CYP who are at risk of, or beginning to experience barriers to school attendance, and putting support in place as soon as possible to avoid these difficulties from becoming entrenched (DfE, 2022a).

Difficulties with school attendance can be considered as a continuum of need (see Figure 4), from occasional reluctance to attend school, to persistent school non-attendance (Kearney, 2001; 2019; Thambirajah et al., 2008). Therefore, it is vital to identify CYP who are at the lower end of the spectrum, who are at risk of, or beginning to experience barriers to school attendance. These CYP are likely to still be attending school but may display patterns of lateness, anxious thoughts and feelings and challenging behaviours during the mornings (Kearney, 2001; 2019). The aim of early intervention is to take a preventative approach to reduce the number of young people progressing into more persistent levels of school non-attendance as it can be more challenging to re-integrate these young people back into education. Reid (2002) suggests that early intervention is six times more likely to produce successful outcomes for pupils at the early stages of school non-attendance, compared to when they have reached more persistent levels of school non-attendance.

Figure 4

Continuum of School Attendance Difficulties

From Kearney (2019)

1.10.4 Local Authority Response

Different local authorities and EPSs have developed various approaches to identifying and supporting barriers to school attendance. One example of this is the ATTEND framework which was developed by Brighton and Hove EPS (Tobias, 2021). It is intended to be used to support early intervention when school attendance falls below 90% and aims to identify all of the contributing factors to a child's barriers to school attendance. The ATTEND framework consists of a series of questionnaires which aims to take a holistic view of the child's needs, considering factors relating to anxiety, health and wellbeing, sensory needs, social and academic factors, change and transition, family and maintenance factors. The ATTEND framework encourages triangulation of data from the pupil, their parent or carer and a key professional who knows them well. It firstly aims to identify any barriers to school attendance, and then to collaboratively form an action plan to address any unmet needs. This framework can also be used to highlight any existing areas of strength or resilience for the young person to further develop.

Chapter 2: Systematic Literature Review

2.1 Chapter Overview

Chapter 1 has highlighted the pertinence of research into the area of barriers to school attendance, particularly following the Covid-19 pandemic. The previous chapter has also highlighted the importance of early intervention, as well as including children and young people's (CYP) views and perceptions in research. Therefore, this chapter will present a systematic literature review and qualitative synthesis of the existing research focussing on CYP's views and experiences of the factors which influence their school attendance. This chapter begins by presenting the aims of the review, before describing the method for undertaking systematic searches and selecting relevant studies. The selected studies will be critically appraised, followed by data extraction and a qualitative thematic synthesis of the findings, following Thomas and Harden's (2008) process. The chapter will then present a discussion of the findings, followed by a consideration of the methodological limitations of the review. The chapter will conclude by presenting a rationale for the present research study.

2.2 Focus of the Systematic Literature Review

The systematic literature review (SLR) aims to synthesise and critically evaluate the existing literature regarding the perceptions of young people who are currently experiencing barriers to school attendance. The following review question will be explored:

What is known about young people's experiences and perceptions of their barriers and supportive factors to school attendance in the UK?

At the time of writing, there were no published systematic literature reviews in this topic area. However, since conducting the initial systematic literature searches in July 2022, a similar SLR has been published in 2023 (Cocoran & Kelly, 2023). This demonstrates the contemporary nature and relevance of the present research paper. Cocoran and Kelly (2023) used a meta-ethnographic approach to provide an overview of the existing literature into the lived experiences of persistently non-attending CYP. They generated seven main themes:

1. Difficult relationships with peer group
2. Inconsistent relationships with and support from adults
3. Negative experiences of school transition
4. Negative experiences of learning in school
5. Emotional wellbeing and mental health needs
6. Others' negative perceptions of the individual's needs

7. Personal beliefs about attendance

The present SLR differs from Cocoran and Kelly's (2023) work as it uses thematic synthesis as opposed to meta-ethnography. Furthermore, it only includes CYP who were experiencing barriers to school attendance at the time of the research, rather than those who were reintegrating back into education after a period of non-attendance. Finally, the present SLR aims to include CYP's perceptions of factors which support their school attendance, in addition to their barriers.

2.3 Search Strategy and Terms

A systematic search was conducted in July 2022 on the following three databases: Web of Science, ERIC (Education Resources Information Centre) and Scopus. These databases were selected as they are relevant to both educational and applied psychological research. Thesis research was identified through EThOS (e-theses online service). Search terms were developed based on an initial scope of the literature, with the addition of commonly used synonyms and alternative spellings. Consistent search terms were entered across all databases, combined using the Boolean operators 'OR' and 'AND'. Where the option was available, terms were searched within the titles, abstracts and key words. See Table 3 for the search terms used. Search limits were applied to ensure that all returns were available in full text in the English language and that the studies were conducted in the UK. The searches were repeated following the same procedure in April 2023 to ensure that the latest research on the topic was included. One additional paper was identified (Tamlyn, 2022).

Table 3

Search Terms Inputted on the Databases

Population	Focus	Topic
child*	voice*	"EBSA"
"young pe*"	view*	"persistent absen*"
CYP	experience*	"school refus*"
youth	perspective*	"school avoid*"
teen*	perception*	"school non-attend*"
adolescen*	qual*	"school phobi*"
pupil*		"truan*"
student*		"school attend*"

Note. The asterisk () ensures the inclusion of all suffix variations of a word, for example, experience* would include experience, experiences and experienced.*

2.4 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Table 4 presents the identified inclusion and exclusion criteria. A decision was made to include doctoral theses as although they are not published in peer reviewed journals, thesis research involves immersion in the topic area and a high level of scrutiny as part of the assessment process. It was essential that the full text was available in the English language to enable the author to access and read the paper. Search limits from 2012 – present were set to ensure that only the most contemporary research from within the last full 10 years was included in the review. Only studies undertaken in the UK were included to ensure that the findings are generalisable to the context within which the author will be working in. The review sought only qualitative research as it aims to hear the voices of young people in relation to their experiences or perceptions of barriers to school attendance.

Table 4

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria for the Systematic Literature Review

Study Parameter	Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
1. Type of publication	Literature published in peer-reviewed journals and theses	Literature published in other sources e.g., books
2. Language	Published in English	Not available in English
3. Text availability	Full text available	Only partial text available e.g., abstract only
4. Date of publication	Published between 2012 and present	Published prior to 2012
5. Study location	Conducted in the UK	Conducted in any other country
6. Research design	Studies which include qualitative data	Quantitative studies and secondary research
7. Sample	School-aged pupils (aged 4 – 18) who are currently experiencing barriers to school attendance	Pupils younger than 4 or older than 18, pupils who previously experienced barriers to school attendance, or studies which focus exclusively on the views of parents or professionals
8. Focus of research	Explores the views of CYP in relation to their experiences or perceptions of their own barriers	Any other focus e.g., studies which focus solely on identifying what supported with reintegration back into

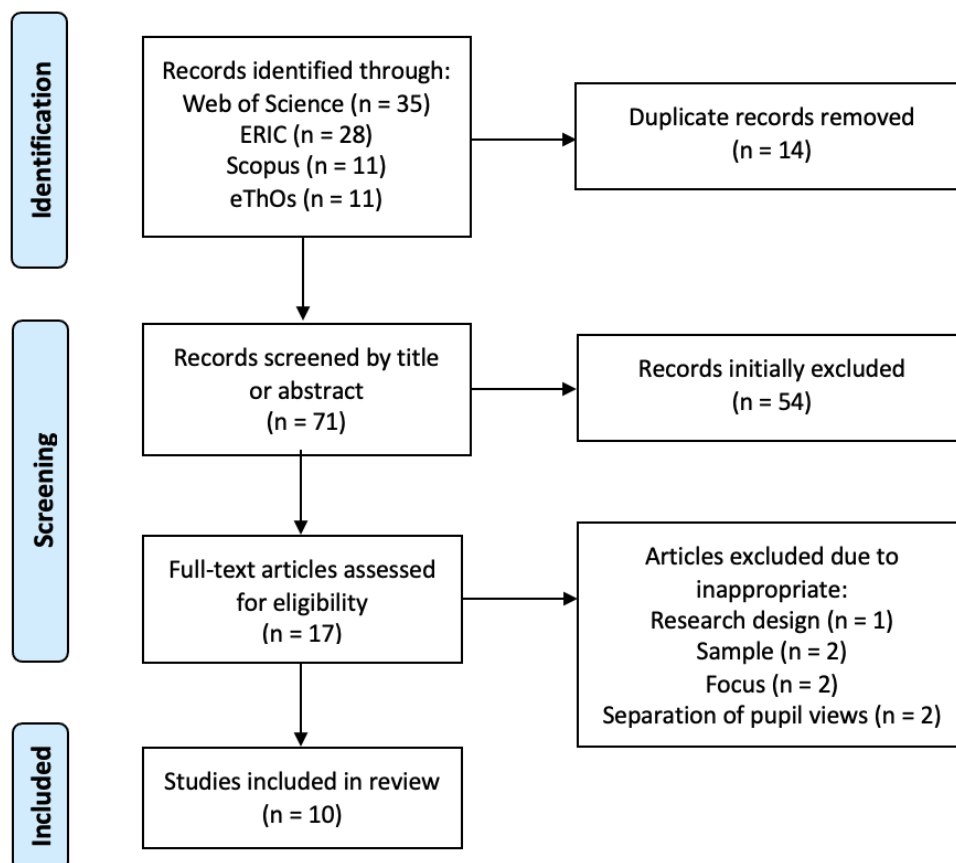
		and supportive factors to school attendance	education following attendance difficulties
9. Research outcome measure	Pupil views presented clearly and separately from any other participants		Studies that do not present sufficient data in a coherent way, or do not separate pupil views where additional participant groups have been included

2.5 Study Selection

Figure 5 presents the number of papers initially identified on each database, and the number of papers excluded at each stage of the screening process. Duplicate papers were removed and then papers were initially screened by title to identify those that clearly met the inclusion criteria. Abstracts were screened if eligibility was unclear, and finally 17 papers underwent full text screening. Appendix B lists the studies which were excluded at the full text screening stage, with reference to the corresponding exclusion criterion.

Figure 5

Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Analyses (PRISMA) Flow Diagram



2.6 Overview of Included Studies

A total of ten papers met the inclusion criteria. Three of these were published in peer reviewed journals (Baker & Bishop, 2015; Gregory & Purcell, 2014; Kljakovic et al., 2021) and the remaining seven were doctoral theses. An overview of the ten studies included in the final review can be found in appendix C, detailing the sample, methods of data collection and analysis, and key findings.

2.6.1 Sample

The majority of studies reported the age, school year and gender of the participants. All but one study (Aucott, 2014) focussed on participants of secondary school age who were between the ages of 11 and 16 years old. Most participants across studies were at the higher end of this age range, in school years 10/11 (equivalent to age 14-16). In contrast, Aucott (2014) used a sample of primary school children who were 6-10 years old. Across all studies, there were a total of 23 males, 19 females and 4 participants' genders were not stated. It was not common to report on the race or ethnicity of the participants but of those that did, the majority were white British and two were British Bengali.

Participants attended a range of educational settings including one mainstream primary school (Aucott, 2014) and mainstream secondary schools (Beckles, 2014; How, 2015; James, 2015; Clissold, 2018; Tamlyn, 2022). Those who were attending mainstream settings tended to have attendance levels of between 70-90%. Other participants had withdrawn from mainstream settings and were accessing education through a pupil referral unit (Kljakovic et al., 2021; Want, 2020), hospital home education (Want, 2020) and elective home education (Gregory & Purcell, 2014; Baker & Bishop, 2015). This reflected the varying level of need and complexity of barriers to school attendance amongst the participants.

In addition to pupil views, some studies also included the views of parents (Gregory & Purcell, 2014; Want, 2020), members of school staff (Beckles, 2014; James, 2015) or both (Aucott, 2014; Clissold, 2018). These studies were included in the review although only the relevant data gathered from pupils was analysed, as the review focusses solely on the experiences and perceptions of young people on their barriers and supportive factors to school attendance.

2.6.2 Terminology

As described in Chapter 1, various terminology is used within the literature to describe barriers to school attendance. The studies included in the review used a range of terms to refer to the target population and their needs. These were: school non-attendance (Aucott, 2014; Beckles,

2014) or extended school non-attendance (Gregory & Purcell, 2014; Clissold, 2018), absent long-term (Baker & Bishop, 2015), low attenders (How, 2015), individuals who are not meeting the government targets for attendance (James, 2015), young people withdrawn from mainstream education (Kljakovic et al., 2021) and more recently, emotionally based school avoidance (Want, 2020; Tamlyn, 2022). This reinforces the author's position that there is a lack of shared terminology and definition to describe these needs.

2.6.3 Data Collection Methods

As part of the inclusion criteria, all studies included in the review employed qualitative methods of data collection. Two studies used narrative approaches (Want, 2020; Tamlyn, 2022), one author used unstructured interviews (Clissold, 2018) and the remaining studies utilised semi-structured interviews. Beckles (2014), James (2015) and Clissold (2018) also used elements of Personal Construct Psychology and Solution Focussed Techniques to support participant engagement. Two studies employed a mixed methods design, using quantitative methods to triangulate the qualitative data from semi-structured interviews. Firstly, James (2015) used the School Refusal Assessment Scale (SRAS) to compare the functions of school avoidance to those reported in the interview. Whereas Aucott (2014) undertook documentary analysis of administrative records in addition to the interview. For the purposes of this review, only the qualitative findings will be included.

2.6.4 Data Analysis

In line with the inclusion criteria, all studies used qualitative methodologies to analyse the data. There were a variety of methodologies present across the review: three studies used interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) (Gregory & Purcell, 2014; Baker & Bishop, 2015; How, 2015), two utilised thematic analysis (Beckles, 2014; Kljakovic et al., 2021), two employed narrative approaches (Want, 2020; Tamlyn, 2022) and one undertook discourse analysis (Clissold, 2018). One was presented as a case study (Aucott, 2014) and one used a novel story board approach to present the data (James, 2015).

2.7 Critical Appraisal

The Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP, 2018) checklist for qualitative research was used to critically evaluate the quality of the ten included studies. The checklist includes ten questions which relate to the appropriateness of the methodology, as well as the validity and utility of the findings. The critical appraisal was not used to exclude any studies from the review, but

instead to give an indication of the methodological quality of the research which may impact the transferability of the findings. An overall score was not calculated but the researcher used qualitative descriptors to highlight the quality of each study. A study which fulfilled all of the ten criteria of the CASP checklist (2018) was rated as 'high quality', those which fulfilled the majority of criteria were considered 'medium quality' and those which only fulfilled some of the criteria would have been classed as 'low quality' although this was not relevant to any of the included studies.

All of the doctoral theses (Aucott, 2014; Beckles, 2014; Clissold, 2018; How, 2015; James, 2015; Tamlyn, 2020; Want, 2020) met each of the ten criteria presented in the CASP checklist (2018). The three published studies (Gregory & Purcell, 2014; Baker & Bishop, 2015; Kljakovic et al., 2021) also fulfilled the majority of the criteria, although some of the details particularly regarding ethical issues and consideration of the relationship between the researcher and participants was minimal. This is likely to reflect the word count restriction for published papers compared to doctoral theses, which have a significantly higher word count allowance which enables them to detail the method in great depth. It is recognised that although the authors of the published papers may not have been able to describe the method in detail, it does not necessarily mean that these factors were not considered, as all published papers go through a process of peer-review and scrutiny. Please see appendix D which considers each study in relation to the 10 criteria from the CASP checklist (2018).

2.8 Data Synthesis

The present review aims to synthesise the findings of the ten included studies. Thematic synthesis was employed, which applies the principles of thematic analysis specifically to systematic reviews (Thomas & Harden, 2008). Thematic synthesis was deemed an appropriate method for the review, in line with guidance from the Cochrane Handbook for Systematic Reviews (Noyes et al., 2022). The three staged process described by Thomas and Harden (2008) was followed, using NVivo software to support analysis. The first stage involved inductive line-by-line coding of all qualitative data in the findings section that focussed on young people's views. Both first and second order constructs were coded in line with guidance from the Cochrane Handbook (2022). First order constructs are direct quotes from the participants in the studies, whereas second order constructs refer to the researchers' interpretations of the data (Noyes et al., 2022). The second stage of analysis involved organising similar codes into groups to form descriptive themes. Finally, relationships between descriptive themes were identified and organised into analytical themes to answer the review question. Thematic synthesis generated four main analytical themes: factors relating to the individual, home and family factors, school factors and perceptions of support. Each analytical theme is composed of several descriptive themes and will be discussed in turn below.

2.8.1 Factors Relating to the Individual

The first analytical theme refers to factors which may be perceived as having a “within-child” origin. Within-child factors are those which are deemed to be innate to the young person and are in line with the traditional medical model of disability (Frederickson & Cline, 2015). The factors which will be explored in this section relate to mental health and emotional wellbeing, medical and physiological needs and future aspirations.

2.8.1.1 Mental Health and Emotional Wellbeing. A theme which was present across all studies included in the review was mental health and emotional wellbeing. This was the most frequently discussed theme across the studies which highlights its relevance to the young people in the research. Participants reported mental health diagnoses including anxiety and depression (Baker & Bishop, 2015; Clissold, 2018; Gregory & Purcell, 2014; Kljakovic et al., 2021), obsessive compulsive disorder (Baker & Bishop, 2015), social anxiety (Clissold, 2018, Kljakovic et al., 2021; How, 2015) and specific phobias such as a fear of fainting (Kljakovic et al., 2021) as contributing towards their barriers to school attendance.

The extent to which these mental health difficulties were considered a predisposing barrier to school attendance, as opposed to a perpetuating factor varied within the literature. For example, Clissold (2018) described anxiety as a predisposing factor which may increase the vulnerability of some young people to experiencing barriers to school attendance. Clissold’s (2018) inclusion criteria included current involvement from child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS) and a clinical diagnosis of depression and/ or anxiety and therefore included participants with complex mental health needs. Whereas other studies described feelings of fear, worry, anger and stress as a response to school attendance (How, 2015; James, 2015; Want, 2020; Tamlyn, 2022) and was therefore viewed as a perpetuating factor.

Although Aucott (2014) did not explicitly mention mental health or emotional wellbeing as a barrier to school attendance, participants described somatic complaints such as feeling sick or their stomach hurting. One participant shared “sometimes I don’t want to go to school because my tummy hurts” (Aucott, 2014, p. 66). Although this may describe a genuine physical illness, it may also be a physiological symptom of anxiety which unfortunately was not further explored in the study.

2.8.1.2 Medical and Physiological Needs. A common theme which was present across the majority of studies was the participants’ medical and physiological needs. These included diagnoses of Asperger’s (Baker & Bishop, 2015; Gregory & Purcell, 2014), autism spectrum disorder (ASD)

(Clissold, 2018) and Chronic Fatigue (Baker & Bishop, 2015). Clissold (2018) describes these diagnoses as a predisposing factor to barriers to school attendance, due to the interactions that can occur between the characteristics of these needs and the school environment. For example, ASD is characterised by difficulties with social interaction and sensory processing (DSM V, 2015) and therefore CYP with this diagnosis are more likely to experience difficulties managing the noise levels and social requirements within the school context (Clissold, 2018). This will be further explored in the subtheme 'physical and social environment'. Participants also described feeling poorly (Aucott, 2014) and experiencing migraines (Want, 2020) as barriers to their school attendance. As previously discussed, this may be linked to genuine physical illness or it may indicate common physiological symptoms of anxiety. Some participants described feigning illness to their parents (Tamlyn, 2022) or pretending to be unwell following a genuine illness to avoid returning to school (Beckles, 2014).

In addition, participants across many studies (Aucott, 2014; Baker, 2015; Beckles, 2014; James, 2015; Kljakovic et al., 2021; Want, 2020) highlighted having an irregular sleep pattern as a barrier to their school attendance. Participants tended to go to bed late, preferring to stay up watching videos (Beckles, 2014) which impacted upon their mood and ability to get up for school in the mornings. One participant shared "Like say the day before [school] if I didn't get any sleep. Then I can't work, can't concentrate I get moody..." (James, 2015, p. 192).

2.8.1.3 Future Aspirations. All but two studies (Aucott, 2014; Clissold, 2018) which were included in the review discussed the future aspirations of participants. This may partially reflect the studies' research questions, with some researchers explicitly aiming to explore pupils' aspirations and future narratives (Want, 2020). Many participants reported wanting to do well in their upcoming exams (Baker & Bishop, 2015; How, 2015; Kljakovic et al, 2021, Want, 2020). A participant in Want's (2020) study shared "I need to be thinking about my GCSEs so I'm going to have to go into school next year." (p. 95). This suggests that exam success could be a motivating 'push' factor to school attendance. Furthermore, participants across the majority of studies had career ambitions in mind and recognised the role of education in meeting these goals. Participants expressed a desire to continue onto further and higher education, despite their difficulties with school attendance (Baker & Bishop, 2015; Gregory & Purcell, 2014, How, 2015; James, 2015; Kljakovic et al. 2021; Tamlyn, 2022; Want, 2020). For example, Tamlyn (2022) describes the narrative of her participant 'H':

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

Having future career aspirations appears to be a supportive factor to school attendance, which may encourage CYP to attend school in order to achieve their goals. However, not all participants recognised the value of education, with one participant describing school as unimportant (Gregory & Purcell, 2014). Similarly, a participant in Kljakovic et al.'s study (2021) shared that they "didn't see anything in school that was taking me anywhere." (p. 1093). Other participants were uncertain about their future (Want, 2020) or their goals were not in line with the education system (How, 2015). For example, one participant shared that his hopes for the future were focussed around maintaining friendships, which was not conducive to his school attendance as he reported that he skips lessons to spend time with his friends (How, 2015).

2.8.2 Family and Home Factors

The second analytical theme includes factors relating to the home and family which were perceived to impact school attendance. This theme encompasses changes in family dynamics, enjoyment of home and the influence of family values, which will be described in turn below.

2.8.2.1 Changes in Family Dynamics. A common theme across the studies relates to changes in family dynamics including bereavement, separation, illness and moving house. This theme was particularly pertinent in Tamlyn's (2022) research with both participants describing experiencing sudden loss or change within their families. One participant described feeling unable to attend school following the loss of her grandmother, as she wanted to stay with her family during this time. The other participant in Tamlyn's (2022) study experienced parental separation, describing a significant change in year 6 in which she did not see her father for almost a year. These events were described as precipitating factors, immediately preceding the pupils' difficulties with school attendance, however Tamlyn (2022) noted that these changes occurred alongside difficulties at school and were not the singular cause for non-attendance.

Other studies mentioned the impact of family arguments on participant's school attendance, although they differ in the direction of impact (Clissold, 2018; James, 2015; Want, 2020). Want's (2020) research suggests that family arguments can have a negative impact on school attendance, with participants reporting that they would not attend school the following day. In contrast, a participant in James' (2015) study suggested that they "come to school for an escape" from these arguments at home (p. 198).

All participants in Beckles' (2014) study were identified as being young carers, who help to look after a parent with physical or mental health difficulties. One participant describes "my mum had really bad depression and sometimes I'd stay home because she needed to always have

someone there otherwise she'd have gone out of control." (Beckles, 2014, p. 78). This demonstrates that this young person felt it was their responsibility to stay at home and care for their parent rather than attending school.

Participants in three studies mentioned the impact of moving house on their school attendance. One participant in Beckles' (2014) study described having to move out of his home due to financial difficulties, he describes "I wasn't attending much because my dad and I had to move house because something happened to his benefits so we had to move further away." (p. 79). This impacted his ability to attend school due to practical constraints of living further away. Two further studies (Baker & Bishop, 2015; Gregory & Purcell, 2014) highlighted the disruption that moving house and subsequently moving schools has on young people's education and sense of belonging. One participant recalls attending eight schools, moving house and country and shared that they "didn't really feel like I fitted in" (Baker & Bishop, 2015, p. 358) which may contribute to difficulties developing and maintaining peer relationships.

2.8.2.2 Enjoyment of Home. A theme which was common across participants in many studies was the varying levels of enjoyment they experienced whilst at home. Some participants enjoyed staying at home as they were able to engage in activities which they perceived to be more motivating and engaging than attending school, particularly playing video games (Beckles, 2014; How, 2015; James, 2015; Kljakovic et al., 2021). Other participants mentioned using technology to keep in touch with friends whilst out of school (Beckles, 2014; Gregory & Purcell, 2014; Kljakovic et al., 2021). This may mediate the need for social connection with peers, by providing an alternative form of communication which does not require school attendance.

Some participants expressed feelings of safety at home, which was in direct contrast to their feelings at school (James, 2015; Tamlyn, 2022). For example, Tamlyn (2022) describes "H missed some school in Year 8, preferring to stay home with her mum where it felt safe. At the time, H didn't feel safe at school unless she was with her friends" (p. 76). One participant in Baker & Bishop's (2015) research described her non-attendance as being the result of wanting to be with her mum, which may indicate some separation anxiety. Another participant described being able to spend quality time with her parents whilst absent from school, "some days my mum and I watch films and have a snuggle day... or I even go with my mum and dad to town" (Beckles, 2014, p. 73).

This suggests that having access to home comforts is a pull factor towards home and therefore a contributing barrier to school attendance. In contrast, some participants described their time at home as boring and lonely (Baker & Bishop, 2015; Beckles, 2014; Gregory & Purcell, 2014; James, 2015). A participant in James' (2015) study described "Basically staying in the house nearly all

day every day, as opposed to at least getting some school work done is boring, and I'm doin' nothin' worthwhile really, so I don't really enjoy it" (p. 189).

2.8.2.3 Influence of Family Values. A theme relating to family values was present in half of the studies included in the review. The value that young people's families place upon school can impact upon their children's school attendance both positively and negatively. Participants in some studies (Aucott, 2014; Beckles, 2014; Tamlyn, 2022) highlighted how their parents encouraged them to go to school over concerns about them not receiving a good education. However, Clissold (2018) suggested that the level of influence families have over their children's school attendance varies between primary and secondary school, due to the increased independence young people tend to have in secondary school. This is illustrated by the following quote:

I think because of my age [at primary school], Mum could always just drag me in and I couldn't really put up much of a fight but now [at secondary school] I think if I just say I am staying in bed, I am not going, she can't really pick me up so... (Clissold, 2018, p. 77)

In addition, some participants described wanting to come to school to avoid putting additional stress on their parents, to make it easier for their family (Baker & Bishop, 2015; Tamlyn, 2022) and to prevent their parents from receiving a penalty fine (Beckles, 2014) or being arrested (Aucott, 2014). This suggests that the high value young CYP placed upon their families can have a positive influence on their school attendance.

Conversely, families who do not place a high value on education can have a negative influence on their children's school attendance. For example, one participant suggested that her mother agreed with her negative views about school and teachers, which Beckles (2014) suggested may have been an unhelpful influence on the pupil's school attendance. Furthermore, one of the reasons for low school attendance in Aucott's (2014) study was due to going on a family holiday during term time. This appeared to be the participant's parent's choice as the participant shared how she would "rather go on holiday during the summer holiday so I don't miss learning and school stuff" (p. 79).

2.8.3 School Factors

The third analytical theme encompasses factors relating to school which were perceived to impact the young people's attendance. This includes the greatest number of descriptive themes in total, indicating the importance and relevance of the theme. Descriptive themes relate to both peer and teacher relationships, engagement with the curriculum and the physical and social environment of school.

2.8.3.1 Peer Relationships. Peer relationships appeared to be a common theme across all studies, highlighting its importance for the young people involved in the studies. Peer relationships were described as both a risk and protective factor towards school attendance. Half of the studies included in the review highlighted the positive influence that peers can have on school attendance (Baker & Bishop, 2015; Beckles, 2014; James, 2015; Tamlyn, 2022; Want, 2020). For example, a participant in James' (2015) study suggested that being able to spend time with his friends and have a laugh with them was a motivating factor for him to attend school. Furthermore, Beckles (2014) findings suggested that peers are an important source of emotional support and encouragement throughout the school day for secondary school aged young people. Participants described missing their friends as a motivating factor for returning to school following a period of absence, for example "I wanted to see them [friends] so I just came in to see them. I can't go more than two days without them [friends]... 'they text me and stuff asking when I am coming back" (Beckles, 2014, p. 76).

However, the loss of these friendships was described as a barrier to school attendance (Baker & Bishop, 2015; Clissold, 2018; How 2015; James, 2015; Want, 2020). How (2015) highlighted how this often coincided with the transition to secondary school and subsequent loss of previous friendships from primary school. Two participants described how their friends "ditched them" and "went off with other people" when they started secondary school (How, 2015, p. 57)

Most studies made reference to feeling isolated (Clissold, 2018; James, 2015; Kljakovic et al., 2021; Want, 2020), lonely and outcasted (How, 2015) or not fitting in (Baker & Bishop, 2015; Gregory & Purcell, 2014). One participant described "They treated me like I was weird and it's not nice to feel different" (Gregory & Purcell, 2014, p. 44). In addition, participants across the majority of studies mentioned experiences of peer conflict and bullying as a barrier to their school attendance (Aucott, 2014; Baker & Bishop, 2015; Beckles, 2014; Clissold, 2018; Gregory & Purcell, 2014; How, 2015, James, 2015; Tamlyn, 2022). For example, one participant reported "Last year I didn't wanna come in because of bullies...I'd be worried about like the people in school like if they were gonna bully me or if they were gonna say something about me" (Beckles, 2014, p. 84). These experiences were not restricted to face-to-face bullying but also included online cyber bullying (Clissold, 2018). One participant in How's (2015) research attributed her non-attendance solely to being bullied by one peer, and she describes how she was able to attend school full-time when the peer was absent from school. Whereas other participants reported that they began to experience barriers to school attendance in primary school, particularly due to bullying (Tamlyn, 2022)

2.8.3.2 Relationships with School Staff. Another factor which was highlighted by young people across the majority of studies was their relationships with teachers and school staff, which

was described as both as risk and a protective factor to their school attendance. Participants across several studies described having poor relationships with staff, describing them as strict (Beckles, 2014, How, 2015; Tamlyn, 2022; Want, 2020) and shouty (Aucott, 2014; Gregory & Purcell, 2014). This tended to be in relation to reinforcing the school rules for perceived minor incidents such as not bringing a pen (Beckles, 2014) or talking in class (How, 2015; Want, 2020). One participant described “Some teachers treat you like a child but you’re not a child anymore...you’re a teenager. ... with the phone rule [not permitted to use mobiles] that’s like treating us like little children.” (Beckles, 2014, p. 79). Furthermore, a participant in Want’s (2020) research highlighted the inequalities between the expectation for staff and pupils: “she asked me why I had a nose piercing and she had one herself and I was so confused at that” (p. 110).

Participants across the studies perceived a distinct lack of care, understanding and belief from teachers, with one participant describing “I just kind of thought they don’t really care, they’ve got too many students to deal with. They didn’t take things seriously.” (Baker & Bishop, 2015, p. 360). Furthermore, pupils felt misunderstood and misjudged by their teachers. For example, a participant in Clissold’s (2018) study suggested that teachers lacked knowledge and understanding of their needs including mental health difficulties and medical diagnoses, and other participants reported being unfairly labelled by teachers as lazy, naughty and a drama queen (Baker & Bishop, 2015).

In comparison, some participants shared examples of experiencing positive relationships with teachers, describing them as fun (Aucott, 2014), chilled (How, 2015), empathetic (Want, 2020), having a caring nature and being easy to talk to (Beckles, 2014; Tamlyn, 2022). Participants appeared to value teachers using relational and humanistic approaches. One participant illustrated “There were some teachers that I really liked. Just the teachers who weren’t, a ‘teacher personality’, like they were actually funny and they showed their ‘out of school’ personality.” (Want, 2020, p. 109).

2.8.3.3 Engagement with the Curriculum. A theme which was developed from the majority of studies related to participants’ engagement with the curriculum. Some participants mentioned disliking specific lessons and were more likely to miss school on days when they had those lessons. Beckles (2014) concluded that the main barrier to the participants’ school attendance was a lack of motivation to attend lessons which they did not enjoy or understand. Participants in some studies described feeling bored in lessons which had a negative impact on their motivation to attend (How, 2015; James, 2015; Kljakovic et al., 2021). Participants across the studies described a preference for interactive lessons with opportunities for group work, as opposed to lessons in which they only read and write.

In addition, other participants described difficulties in accessing the academic content of lessons as a barrier to their school attendance which can have a negative impact on their self-esteem and motivation to engage (Beckles, 2014; Clissold, 2018; James, 2015; Tamlyn, 2022). One participant shared: “um just makes me feel stressed and um. I don’t really like doing work at school cos’ um, cos’ I can never get things right and um, I always have to scribble it out and do it again.” (James, 2015, p. 71). Some participants shared their worries about specific aspects of the curriculum and learning content, including tests and exams (Clissold, 2018; James, 2015; Want, 2020), homework (Want, 2020) and reading aloud in class (Baker & Bishop, 2015; Tamlyn, 2022).

Some studies reported that the fast pace of lessons, combined with a lack of academic support can contribute to this. Participants in Beckles (2014) study reported feeling unable or unwilling to ask for academic support in lessons due to having to wait a long time, a fear of being judged or getting into trouble, or assuming that teachers would not help. However, there were some positive examples of academic support with some students valuing having a teaching assistant to support them with their work and other students accessing the learning support facility (Beckles, 2014). On the other hand, a participant in James’ (2015) study acknowledged that their difficulties in accessing lessons was due to missing teaching input as a result of their absences. James (2015) therefore suggests that academic pressures can be both a precipitating and perpetuating factor, leading to a cycle of maintenance of school non-attendance.

2.8.3.4 Physical and Social Environment. The majority of studies included in the review mentioned aspects of the school environment such as the number of people, the level of noise, specific areas of the school and the journey to school. Participants in Clissold’s (2018) study highlighted the differences between the secondary school environment, compared to their primary school setting, in relation to the size of the setting and the experience of moving between lessons. Although some pupils viewed this negatively, others enjoyed “moving around to different lessons and having different teachers” (James, 2015, p. 72).

One participant in Kljakovic et al.’s (2021) research who described themselves as having social anxiety, identified the large crowds of people in secondary school as a barrier to their attendance. Other participants mentioned the number of pupils in school in relation to the level of noise as a contributing barrier to their school attendance. In some studies (Clissold, 2018; James, 2015) this was highlighted by participants who have a diagnosis of ASD which is characterised by difficulties with sensory processing. Therefore, this demonstrates an interaction between a ‘within-child’ diagnosis of ASD and the school environment. In other studies, (How, 2015; Gregory & Purcell, 2014; Beckles, 2014; James, 2015) the level of noise in the classroom was described by participants

as simply distracting them from engaging in their education. This was illustrated by a participant in Beckles (2014) study who reported “I would usually get a headache every day from going into a class from people screaming, shouting and throwing paper across the room...[I was] pretty annoyed really because you couldn’t get anything done.” (p. 69).

Some studies referred to disliking specific areas of the school. For example, one participant in James’ (2015) research shared that he avoids ‘the Quad’, although the reasons for this were not explored further. Another participant in Tamlyn’s (2022) study described how “The science classroom was freezing and there weren’t any heaters.”, as well as “the science mock exam took place in the science lab which was really hot... I found [myself] falling asleep in the middle of it.” (p. 83). This demonstrates how the temperature of the school environment can have an impact upon pupils’ engagement. Finally, one participant in Want’s (2020) research identified the journey to school as a barrier to her attendance. She describes “the travelling in was horrible. That was also one of the reasons why I stopped attending at one point was like just the stress of literally taking an hour every morning to get there” (p. 110).

2.8.4 Perceptions of Support

The final analytical theme relates to CYP’s perceptions of the support they have been offered to promote their school attendance. This is comprised of two dichotomous themes, the first being a perceived lack of support within school, and the second relating to identification of helpful support.

2.8.4.1 Lack of School-Based Support. Pupils across many studies perceived there to be a lack of support with their barriers to school attendance. They described teachers having a lack of understanding around their school attendance difficulties and a delay in receiving any support (Baker & Bishop, 2015; Beckles, 2014; Clissold, 2018; James, 2015). One pupil specified that her school non-attendance began on the tenth day of secondary school, but she does not remember receiving any support or intervention until several months later (Baker & Bishop, 2015).

Pupils found the support offered to be inconsistent (Baker & Bishop, 2015; Beckles (2014) and perceived teachers to be un-cooperative in sending work home for them to complete (Baker & Bishop, 2015; James, 2015). Another participant from the same study described the pressure to return to school full time, later adding “the only thing they really cared about was their [attendance] figures” (p. 360).

Participants described the use of rewards and sanctions as unhelpful (Baker & Bishop; Beckles, 2014; How, 2015; James, 2015; Want, 2020). Referring to a points-based system, a

participant in How's (2015) research explained "but I just, I just don't care because it's a false reward system, so I just don't care... but they make it out to be something that you're supposed to care about but I just... Sometimes I just forget I'm supposed to" (p. 73).

Furthermore, other participants shared that they had limited opportunities to have their voices heard and to be involved in decision making which resulted in unhelpful and generic support strategies (Beckles, 2014; Baker & Bishop, 2015; Gregory & Purcell, 2014; Clissold, 2018). For example, one participant in Baker & Bishop's (2015) research commented "not everyone's the same – they try to push the same quick fix on everyone, and it doesn't work". (p. 360). Furthermore, a participant in Clissold's (2018) study described the use of an exit card as unhelpful:

I am not really going to use a card that says "X can go to the toilet if he wants to" in the middle of the lesson and then have all the questions from everyone in the class like why have you got a card that says you can go to the toilet?... It just wasn't done in a very easy way. (p. 85)

A participant in Beckles' (2014) research summarises the lack of support for CYP with the following excerpt: "you know they call it student support, but there wasn't a lot of support there, they just told you to get on with it" (p. 70).

2.8.4.2 Helpful Support. In contrast to the previous theme, some participants were able to identify support which has been successful in meeting their needs. Participants in both Tamlyn (2022) and Beckles' (2014) research reflected on the importance of having a safe space to access in school, to reflect and to complete their work in. A participant in Tamlyn's (2022) study explained that her SENCO told her "you don't have to miss school; you can come to school and if you don't feel ready to go to lesson, you can come to the inclusion room..." (p. 84). Similarly, participants in Beckles' (2014) study mentioned interventions they had found helpful outside of the classroom such as pre-teaching and revision of difficult work.

One participant highlighted the success of implementing a reward chart (Aucott, 2014). She shared "Last year my LSA, she done a rewards chart and she said 'if you come into school this many days you get a treat' and I kept getting treats so it encouraged me to go school" (p. 62). It is interesting to note that both Beckles (2014) and How (2015) reported that rewards were not successful in supporting their school attendance. The difference being that Aucott (2014) used a sample of primary school aged children, who are typically more motivated by external rewards. Although Beckles' (2014) participants expressed a desire for their teachers to recognise them more for their positive behaviour rather than negative.

Participants in Baker and Bishop's (2015) study mentioned accessing support from several external professionals including the GP, CAMHS, EP, home education, hypnotherapy and family counselling. In addition to this, participants from other studies also highlighted the value of support from external agencies such as CAMHS (Kljakovic et al., 2021), counselling (Beckles, 2014; Tamlyn, 2022), Family Support Worker (Aucott, 2014) and home tuition (Kljakovic et al., 2021). Furthermore, Tamlyn (2022) described how "school, the lady from the NSPCC and H's mum shared some techniques to manage her anxiety, such as listening to music at home, writing things down or talking to someone. This seemed to have a positive impact on H's learning." (p 58).

2.9 Literature Review Discussion

This section will summarise the findings from the systematic literature review and qualitative synthesis with reference to the theoretical frameworks presented in Chapter 1. This section will conclude with a consideration of the limitations of the review, before presenting a rationale for the present research study.

2.9.1 Summary of Findings

This literature review has highlighted a number of factors which CYP have identified as influencing their school attendance, both positively and negatively. The author identified four main analytical themes relating to the individual, home and family, school and perceptions of support. This supports the view that barriers to school attendance are heterogenous in nature and that there are a number of contributing factors to school non-attendance. Within each of the four analytical themes, push factors which promote school attendance were identified, as well as pull factors which discourage attendance (Thambirajah et al., 2008). Thambirajah et al. (2008) suggests that there is likely to be an additive effect of factors, and school non-attendance is likely to occur when the pull factors outweigh the push factors. These factors can also be understood in terms of whether they are predisposing, precipitating or perpetuating factors. These factors do not exist in isolation, and participants reported a number of different factors as contributing to their barriers to school attendance. This supports an interactionist view, whereby these barriers to school attendance occur as a result of complex interactions between the individual and their environment (Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994).

2.9.1.1 Individual Factors. This analytical theme encompassed factors relating to mental health and wellbeing, medical and physiological needs and future aspirations. Participants described a number of negative emotions and mental health needs which were described as both a

predisposing factor (Clissold, 2018) and a perpetuating factor (How, 2015). This can be deemed as a pull factor away from school and relates to one of the functions of school non-attendance proposed by Kearney and Silverman (1993) which suggests that CYP avoid school to avoid general feelings of fear or anxiety. Furthermore, some participants mentioned medical illnesses and difficulties with sleep as barriers to their school attendance, which is in line with Maslow's basic needs (1943). On the other hand, some young people cited having career aspirations and ambitions as a protective push factor to their school attendance, which is one of Maslow's (1943) higher level psychological needs.

2.9.1.2 Home and Family. Within this analytical theme, the factors contributing towards barriers to school attendance were changes to family dynamics, enjoyment of home and the influence of family values. This overall theme links to two of Kearney and Silverman's (1993) suggested functions of school avoidance, namely seeking time and attention from significant others and pursuing tangible reinforcers and positive experiences outside of school. Participants described home as a safe place, which can be understood in terms of Maslow's hierarchy of needs (1943). Young people are motivated to stay at home where they feel safe. However, this theme also suggests that these factors can be a push factor, encouraging CYP to attend school to avoid negative experiences at home such as family arguments.

2.9.1.3 School Related Factors. This analytical theme relating to school factors comprises of relationships with peers and teachers, engagement with the curriculum and the physical and social environment. This theme supports the view that some CYP avoid school to escape specific school-based situations that cause anxiety (Kearney & Silverman, 1993). However, it also suggests that these can be push factors in motivating CYP to attend school. For example, the importance CYP placed upon their relationships with peers and teachers is in line with Maslow's hierarchy of needs (1943) and the self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985) who suggested that individuals have a human need for belonging and relatedness and therefore are motivated to fulfil this need.

2.9.1.5 Perceptions of Support. The final analytical theme relates to participants perceptions of the support offered to them. The two descriptive themes formed a dichotomy between a perceived lack of support and the identification of helpful support. Participants described school-based support as inconsistent, unhelpful and delayed, and reported that they were not involved in planning for their support. On the other hand, some participants were able to identify helpful support which they accessed outside of school. However, this tended to be focussed on

‘within child’ support such as therapy or counselling, rather than making adaptations to the environment.

2.9.2 Methodological Critique of the Review

When assessing the quality of a systematic review, it is important to consider the relevance of the methods used to address the review questions, the comprehensiveness of the critical appraisal of the individual studies included in the review, the nature of the data synthesis and the usefulness of the findings (UCL, 2023). Although this review followed the Joanna Briggs Institute manual for evidence synthesis (JBI, 2020), it is not without methodological limitations. The review will be critiqued using the JBI critical appraisal checklist of systematic reviews and research syntheses (JBI, 2017). This tool was selected as it has been specifically devised to critically appraise systematic reviews, including qualitative syntheses. The JBI checklist includes eleven items which link to the trustworthiness and transferability of the findings (see appendix E). There are various other tools which can be used to assess the trustworthiness of qualitative research, such as Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Yardley’s (2000) criteria, however, these are more appropriate for appraising primary research rather than secondary research such as literature reviews.

2.9.2.1 Relevance of Methods. The JBI checklist (2017) firstly considers how appropriate the inclusion criteria and search strategy were for answering the research question. The researcher feels that the inclusion and exclusion criteria were sufficiently broad enough to capture the breadth of the existing research into young people’s perceptions of their barriers and supportive factors to school attendance, whilst taking a specific focus on school aged CYP in the UK. A decision was made to include doctoral theses due to the limited number of published, peer-reviewed papers in this area. The researcher feels that the search terms were exhaustive as they were based on an initial scope of the existing literature and included a number of synonyms, pluralisms and alternative spellings. Relevant search limits were applied to ensure that the searches captured all of the relevant and contemporary studies from the UK within the last 10 years. However, search terms were individually devised and the searches and screening processes were carried out by the researcher alone, and therefore may have been liable to human error. Appropriate databases were selected due to their relevance for both applied psychological and educational research. However, due to the small scale of the research project and pragmatic time constraints, only three databases were searched and therefore some relevant studies may have been missed. To minimise the impact of this, grey literature was searched via Google Scholar.

2.9.2.2 Critical Appraisal of Studies. Secondly, the JBI checklist (2017) considers the critical appraisal of the included studies. The researcher used the CASP checklist for qualitative research (2018) to critically evaluate the quality of the ten included studies, considering the appropriateness of methodology, validity and utility of findings. The author selected the CASP checklist (2018) as it is a well-known tool which has been specifically devised to critically appraise qualitative studies. The author acknowledged the limitations of the individual studies but did not exclude any studies from the review. However, there was only one rater and therefore the critical appraisal was based on one individual's subjective view.

2.9.2.3 Data Synthesis. The next area which is explored by the JBI checklist (2017) are the methods used to extract and combine data. A table (see appendix C) was used to extract the relevant information from the included studies, namely the research questions, sample, terminology used, data collection methods, data analysis, and the key findings. Although this was completed by only one researcher, the author revisited the original studies multiple times to ensure that the data was accurately represented within the table. Thematic synthesis was used to explore patterns of similarities and differences across the studies and to identify a gap in research for the present research. Both first and second order constructs were coded to ensure that all relevant data was included in the synthesis. Although thematic synthesis was deemed to be an appropriate method of data synthesis for this review, a common critique of thematic synthesis is the lack of interpretation (Noyes et al., 2022). However, the author would argue that the synthesis has combined the findings of the included studies in a novel way to answer the research question and create new knowledge. The searches were re-conducted by the researcher following data collection and analysis of her own research, to ensure that the most recent literature was included in the review. As a result of this, the researcher had to re-conduct the thematic synthesis and thus, the themes which were identified may have been influenced by this.

2.9.2.4 Usefulness of Findings. Finally, the JBI checklist (2017) considers the usefulness of the findings of the review. The author feels that the review provided a comprehensive overview of the existing research into young people's perceptions of their barriers and supportive factors to school attendance. The specific inclusion and exclusion criterion ensured that only studies which were conducted in the UK were included in the review to ensure the findings are applicable to the context within which the researcher works in. Furthermore, the review has highlighted a gap in the research in terms of an under-represented population of primary school aged CYP who are at the early stages of experiencing barriers to school attendance.

2.9.3 Rationale for the Present Research

This review has provided a comprehensive overview and qualitative thematic synthesis of the existing research into young people's perceptions of their barriers and supportive factors to school attendance. Of the ten papers included in the review, only one study (Aucott, 2014) used a sample of primary school children. The remaining studies in the review focussed on secondary aged pupil's experiences and perceptions of their barriers to school attendance. This may reflect the increased prevalence of need in secondary school settings (DfE, 2021) or it may reflect the difficulty in gaining the voice of primary aged young people.

However, the literature included in this review suggests that CYP can begin to experience barriers to school attendance during primary school (Aucott, 2014; Baker & Bishop, 2014; Gregory & Purcell, 2014; Tamlyn, 2022). Some participants reflected upon their primary school experiences and identified negative events which contributed to their difficulties with school attendance later on. The primary school aged participants in Aucott's (2014) study were able to identify their barriers to school attendance, namely difficulties with teachers and peers, difficulties with sleep, illness and family holidays. This demonstrates that although barriers to school attendance are more common in secondary school aged pupils (Gregory & Purcell, 2014; Gulliford & Miller, 2015), these needs can begin at primary school.

One study was excluded from the review due to not adequately separating the pupils' views from the views of their parents (Orme-Stapleton, 2017). Orme-Stapleton (2017) used semi structured interviews to explore the lived experiences of two primary school aged pupils, as well as three parents of primary school children and one parent of a secondary school pupil. Orme-Stapleton (2017) found that attributions for the causes of persistent non-attendance fell under two overarching themes; child, with mental health and ASD as subordinate themes, and school, which encompassed unmet learning needs, learning environment and relationships with peers and teachers. The support provided was organized into two core themes: school-based wave 2 and 3 interventions, as well as external support.

To the authors knowledge, there are no other studies which have explored primary school children's views of the factors which influence their school attendance. Furthermore, the two studies which included primary school children within their samples also included the views of parents (Orme-Stapleton, 2017), as well as members of school staff (Aucott, 2014) which may have overlooked the CYP's views. Therefore, the author feels that this is a sparse area of the literature which requires further exploration.

The views of primary school children who experience barriers to school attendance is an important area of future research as it links to early identification and intervention of need. The

majority of literature included in the review focussed on the experiences of CYP whose barriers to school attendance are entrenched and are displaying persistent levels of school non-attendance. This reflects inclusion criterion focusing on attendance levels of 90% or below with many of the CYP not attending school settings and being home schooled or attending alternative provisions instead (Baker & Bishop, 2015; Clissold, 2018; Gregory & Purcell, 2014; Kljakovic et al., 2021; Want, 2020). Although Beckles (2014) aimed to explore the perceptions and experiences of secondary school pupils during their early stages of attendance difficulties, their participants had attendance level of between 77% and 87% which the author feels is not indicative of early intervention.

Therefore, the author has identified a need for further exploration into the views of primary school children who are at the early stages of experiencing barriers to school attendance. These CYP may not necessarily have low attendance levels, but may be beginning to display signs of anxiety in response to school attendance, and possible lateness (Kearney, 2019). This research would provide an original contribution, aiming to extend the existing literature base by exploring the views of an under-researched group. The following research questions (RQ) have been identified:

RQ1. What do primary school children perceive as their early barriers to school attendance?

RQ2. What do primary school children perceive as the factors which support their school attendance?

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1 Chapter Overview

This chapter begins by presenting the research aims and questions, before considering the philosophical positioning of the research. It will then provide an overview and rationale for the chosen qualitative research design and reflexive thematic analysis methodology employed to address the research questions. The recruitment process and inclusion criteria are presented, with a description of the final sample of participants. The data collection procedure is then discussed, followed by a consideration of ethical issues. The phases of reflexive thematic analysis are described and the chapter concludes with an evaluation of the quality of the research, with reference to the sensitivity to context, commitment and rigour, transparency and coherence, and impact and importance (Yardley, 2000).

3.2 Research Aims and Questions

Following on from the systematic literature review and qualitative synthesis, a gap in the literature was highlighted in hearing the voices of primary school aged children and young people (CYP) who are beginning to experience barriers to school attendance. The research therefore aims to develop the existing literature base by exploring this under-researched population. The two research questions are as follows:

RQ1. What do primary school children perceive as their early barriers to school attendance?

RQ2. What do primary school children perceive as the factors which support their school attendance?

3.3 Philosophical Considerations

All research is underpinned by philosophical assumptions of ontology and epistemology, which in turn influences the researcher's choice of methodology (Mertens, 2010). This section will describe the main philosophical positions within the literature, before summarising the chosen position of the research.

3.3.1 Ontology

Ontology refers to ideas regarding the nature of reality and can be either realist or relativist in nature (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). A realist ontology assumes that a single, external reality exists which is independent of our knowledge of it (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Tebes (2005) describes this as "mind independent reality" (p. 219). In direct contrast, a relativist ontology rejects the realist

assumption that a single external reality exists, and instead argues that reality is socially constructed and only exists through language and human interactions (Willig, 2013). Therefore, multiple subjective realities exist which are socially and culturally situated (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

3.3.2 Epistemology

Epistemology is intrinsically linked to ontology and is concerned with the nature of knowledge (Mertens, 2010), or how we can know about reality (Al-Ababneh, 2020). Two main epistemological positions will be considered: objectivism and subjectivism (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). An objectivist epistemology assumes that it is possible to gain value-free knowledge about the social world (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). The researcher is independent of the knowledge generated and can investigate the world without influencing it (Braun & Clarke, 2022). This is in line with the correspondence theory of truth, whereby the world corresponds to what we see when looking at it (O'Connor, 1975). The role of the researcher is to uncover and represent the data accurately and objectively. Research is concerned with uncovering the 'truth' and therefore researcher bias is viewed as a threat to reliability and validity (Willig, 2013).

In contrast, a subjectivist epistemology rejects the view that it is possible to gain value-free knowledge about the social world. It argues that knowledge is constructed through social interaction and active interpretation of events based on individual values, motivations and prior experiences (Mertens, 2010). It is therefore the researcher's role to explore the participant's perspective rather than seeking to establish universal truths through observation (Lincoln & Guba, 2000). The researcher is an active part of the data production process and knowledge is co-constructed with the participants (Willig, 2013). Subjectivism highlights the importance of researcher reflexivity, whereby the researcher acknowledges their own values and subjectivity in interpreting and constructing the data and the influence this may have on the research process (Gough & Madill, 2012).

3.3.3 Paradigms

These ontological and epistemological assumptions can be combined in different ways within paradigms. Paradigms are defined as broad systems which encompass values, assumptions and principles that guide ideas about valid and ideal research practice (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). There are three main paradigms – positivism, constructionism and critical realism. Each paradigm will be discussed in turn, with reference to their underlying ontological and epistemological assumptions and their suitability for answering the research question, before providing a rationale for the philosophical underpinnings of the present research.

3.3.3.1 Positivism. Positivism is underpinned by a realist ontology, coupled with an objectivist epistemology. It assumes that a single external reality exists and that it is possible to gain objective knowledge about it (Robson & McCartan, 2015). Research within the natural sciences is typically underpinned by positivism, seeking causal explanations that are universal and generalisable (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Some researchers argue that the social world can be studied in the same way as the natural world, and that it is possible to establish universal laws about human behaviour (Gergen, 1973).

3.3.3.2 Constructionism. Constructionism is fundamentally opposed to the positivist paradigm and was described by Kuhn (1962) as a scientific revolution. The constructionist paradigm is underpinned by a relativist ontology, combined with a subjectivist epistemology (Burr & Dick, 2017). Research within a constructionist paradigm focusses on exploring individual's lived experiences and discourses rather than seeking to establish universal truths about the social world (Mertens, 2010). Research within a constructionist paradigm is often done 'with' the participants rather than 'to' and often involves interaction between the researcher and participants, whereby knowledge is co-constructed (Lincoln & Guba, 2000).

3.3.3.3 Critical Realism. Critical realism combines a realist ontology with a subjectivist epistemology (Fryer, 2022). It accepts the realist idea that a single, external reality exists, although it acknowledges the human subjectivity involved in perceiving it (Pawson & Tilley, 1997). It suggests that the material world is independent of, but only ever accessible through human representations, language and discourse (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Therefore, critical realists acknowledge that there may be different perspectives and interpretations of this singular reality. Research which is situated within a critical realist paradigm aims to explore participant's perceptions of their reality, embedded within their cultural context (Willig, 2013).

3.3.4 Philosophical Positioning of the Research

The research was underpinned by a critical realist paradigm. The researcher feels that an external reality exists independent of our ideas about it, but our experiences and understanding of that reality is mediated by language, culture and personal experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2022). With regards to the research questions, the author acknowledges that there is an external reality whereby some young people experience barriers to school attendance, but each young person may perceive these barriers in an individual and unique way. The researcher does not aim to triangulate the data with parents or teachers to establish the 'truth' of children's barriers to school attendance. Instead,

the researcher is interested in exploring how CYP perceive their own experiences. Furthermore, the research aligns with a subjectivist epistemology, which acknowledges the influence of the researcher in co-constructing knowledge through the research process. The researcher brings their own life experiences which in turn will influence how the data is collected and analysed. The participant's positionings will influence the meanings they express, and the researcher's positionings will affect their interpretation of these meanings (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Therefore, the findings are only one individual's interpretation of the data, whereas other researchers may conclude different meanings which are equally valid.

3.4 Research Design

When planning research, there are a number of decisions which need to be addressed. The first relates to the research design which can be broadly quantitative or qualitative. These two designs will be compared below, with reference to their utility for the present research.

3.4.1 Quantitative

Quantitative research designs gather numerical data for statistical analysis, with the aim of establishing cause and effect (Robson & McCartan, 2015). Quantitative research tends to be situated within the positivist paradigm, which suggests that it is possible to gain value-free knowledge about the social world (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). As the research aims to explore individuals' subjective experiences and perceptions, it was decided that quantitative data would not provide the rich, in-depth quality of subjective data which was required. Furthermore, quantitative research tends to use a deductive method of reasoning, whereby data is gathered to test pre-existing theoretical ideas (Robson & McCartan, 2015). This does not align with the inductive, exploratory nature of the study, which aims to explore participants own subjective views. Quantitative research values objectivity, reliability, accuracy and generalization of findings (Robson & McCartan, 2016) which are not aligned with the chosen philosophical standpoint which seeks to explore individual viewpoints and does not attempt to generalize findings.

3.4.2 Qualitative

In contrast, qualitative research designs involve gathering rich verbal data which is analysed to construct meanings of individual's experiences or perceptions (Robson & McCartan, 2016). Qualitative research can be situated within a social constructionist or critical realist paradigm, both of which are underpinned by a subjectivist epistemology which assumes that knowledge is constructed through social interaction and active interpretations of events (Mertens, 2010).

Therefore, a qualitative research design was deemed appropriate to address the present research aims and questions which focus on exploring the perceptions of primary school aged CYP who experience barriers to school attendance. The systematic literature review and thematic synthesis highlighted the importance of hearing the voices of young people themselves and qualitative research methods will facilitate this. This aligns with the flexible, exploratory nature of the research, which aims to explore all novel lines of inquiry rather than testing existing theories. Furthermore, inductive reasoning is usually employed, whereby the researcher takes an active role in interpreting the data to identify theoretical ideas (Robson & McCartan, 2015). Qualitative research also acknowledges and values the subjectivity of the researcher in the data collection and analysis process and highlights the importance of researcher reflexivity (Gough & Madill, 2012).

3.5 Methodology

The author considered a range of qualitative methods to address the research questions. The four main approaches which were considered were: narrative analysis, discourse analysis, interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) and thematic analysis (TA). These will be described in turn, exploring their strengths and limitations in relation to the research, before stating the rationale for the final choice of TA.

3.5.1 Narrative Analysis

The first qualitative method which was considered was narrative analysis, which has been used in previous research to explore pupil's experiences of barriers to school attendance (Want, 2020; Tamlyn, 2022). Narrative analysis focusses on exploring the stories people use to describe their experiences (Robson & McCartan, 2016). It analyses chronological factors such as story plots, as well as other factors such as values and meanings within the stories (Jovlechovitich & Bauer, 2000). However, it was not deemed appropriate for the present research for a number of reasons. Firstly, narrative analysis is underpinned by social constructionism which assumes that reality is constructed through language and interactions and therefore disputes that there is a single reality (Lyons & Coyle, 2021). This does not align with the chosen philosophical underpinnings of the research which takes a critical realist ontological position, assuming that there is a single external reality but acknowledges the subjectivity in perceiving it (Pawson & Tilley, 1997). Furthermore, narrative analysis tends to focus on analysis at an individual level (Lyons & Coyle, 2021), whereas the research aims to explore shared patterns of meaning across the dataset. The research aims to identify specific barriers and supportive factors to CYP's school attendance, rather than their broad chronological experiences of school.

3.5.2 Discourse Analysis

Discourse analysis is another qualitative method of data analysis which was considered for the research. Discourse analysis involves analysing the participant's use and style of language, as well as the content of their responses, to provide deeper insights into their experiences (Robson & McCartan, 2016). Discourse analysis has been used to explore how young people construct the reasons for their school non-attendance (Clissold, 2018; Jones, 2019). However, similarly to narrative analysis, discourse analysis is located within a social constructionist paradigm, which is underpinned by a relativist ontology with a subjectivist epistemology (Burr & Dick, 2017). This paradigm assumes that reality and knowledge are socially constructed through language and therefore, multiple subjective realities exist (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Mertens, 2010; Willig, 2013). This does not align with the philosophical positioning of the present research, which takes a critical realist view which assumes that there is a single external reality, although it is perceived and interpreted subjectively (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Pawson & Tilley, 1997). Furthermore, the research aims to explore the specific barriers and supportive factors to school attendance, as identified by CYP themselves. Therefore, the analysis will focus on the semantic content of the data rather than the language used to convey it and any underlying meanings.

3.5.3 Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)

IPA was also considered as a method of data analysis for this research. IPA is suitable for exploring individuals' lived experiences and the meanings they give to these experiences (Smith et al., 2021). It has been widely used to explore how secondary school aged pupils make sense of their experiences of school non-attendance (Baker & Bishop, 2015; Gregory & Purcell, 2014; How, 2015). IPA is theoretically flexible (Smith et al., 2021) which would align with the philosophical position of the research, namely critical realism. However, IPA has an ideographic focus on analysis at an individual level rather than identifying patterns of shared meaning across cases (Braun & Clarke, 2013). The research aimed to highlight the shared experiences of young people who experience barriers to school attendance, in order to develop practical implications for a range of stakeholders. Furthermore, IPA is more appropriate for use with articulate individuals who are able to communicate complex lived experiences through language (Tuffour 2017, Willig 2013). Therefore, IPA was not deemed suitable for use with the identified population of KS2 pupils whose expressive language skills are still developing.

3.5.4 Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA)

Braun and Clarke (2022) define RTA as a method for systematically developing, analysing and interpreting patterns of meaning across a qualitative dataset. The use of the word 'reflexivity' highlights the importance of the researcher critically considering their own assumptions, expectations, decisions and actions throughout, and how these might influence the research process (Finlay & Gough, 2003). RTA has been widely used to explore the perceptions of CYP who experience barriers to school attendance (Beckles, 2014; James, 2015; Kljakovic et al., 2021). RTA was chosen to address the research question for several reasons. Firstly, it is theoretically flexible and can therefore be used across a range of philosophical positions (Braun & Clarke, 2022) including critical realism. In addition, RTA values the subjectivity of the researcher which is in line with the critical realist and subjectivist position of the research. Finally, it focusses on identifying common themes across the dataset, which was particularly pertinent to the present research which hopes to develop practice around supporting CYP who experience barriers to school attendance.

3.6 Qualitative Methods of Data Collection

There are various methods of data collection which are deemed suitable for qualitative research, and in particular, RTA. The key methods which were considered for this research and will be explored further below were: focus groups and interviews with varying levels of structure.

3.6.1 Focus Groups

Focus groups involve conducting interviews with a small, homogenous group of participants to gain their views on a topic (Robson & McCartan, 2016). However, focus groups were not deemed to be appropriate for the research due to the heterogenous nature of pupil's experiences within the existing literature. Furthermore, the research aimed to explore barriers to school attendance which may be perceived to be a personal and sensitive topic area which young people may not wish to discuss in a group setting. Therefore, the group dynamics may lead to some individual experiences not being expressed (Gibson, 2012).

3.6.2 Structured Interviews

Individual interviews were deemed the most appropriate method of data collection for this vulnerable population. Interviews can vary in the level of structure, with structured interviews following a strict pre-determined interview schedule which is based on previous research (Robson & McCartan, 2016). This conflicts with the aim of taking an exploratory and flexible approach to exploring CYP's subjective perspectives of the barriers and protective factors to their school

attendance. It was therefore decided that structured interviews lack the flexibility required to explore possible novel lines of inquiry which may be raised by participants, by having a strict pre-determined interview schedule.

3.6.3 Unstructured Interviews

In direct contrast, unstructured interviews are more conversational in nature, whereby the researcher has a general topic of interest to discuss but allows the conversation to occur more naturally (Robson & McCartan, 2016). However, considering the sample of primary school aged children, research suggests that unstructured interviews can be challenging for young children to engage with, as they typically require scaffolding and prompting to remain on the topic of interest (Dogra & O'Reilly, 2016). Furthermore, the research aimed to explore CYP's perceptions of both their barriers and protective factors to school attendance, rather than their general narratives of school and so it was decided that a more structured approach would be beneficial to guide the discussion.

3.6.4 Semi-structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews follow a pre-determined interview schedule, whilst allowing for flexibility in generating additional questions during the interview to explore participant responses further (Robson & McCartan, 2016). Semi-structured interviews were selected as the method of data collection as they offer enough structure to guide the conversation, enabling the researcher to explore areas of interest including both barriers and protective factors to school attendance. Whilst the flexibility of semi-structured interviews allowed the researcher to probe and explore any novel issues or factors raised by the CYP which were relevant to the research question but may not have been considered when developing the interview schedule (Dogra & O'Reilly, 2016).

3.7 Participants and Recruitment

This section will detail the recruitment process with reference to the inclusion and exclusion criteria, before presenting the demographics of the final sample.

3.7.1 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Inclusion criteria were as follows:

- Key stage 2 pupils (years 3-6) in a mainstream primary school
- Experiencing emotional barriers to school attendance (as initially identified by school staff)
- Able to verbally engage in an interview

CYP with current CAMHS or social care involvement were excluded from participation due to ethical considerations, please see Chapter 5 for further discussion on this.

3.7.2 Recruitment Process

The researcher aimed to recruit a sample of 6-10 participants who fit the above inclusion criterion. This number was initially proposed by Braun and Clarke (2013) as the recommended number of participants for a small-scale project using RTA. This also aligned with the sample sizes included in previous research, bound by similar pragmatic constraints. Various statistical models have been developed to determine the ideal sample size for RTA, but Braun and Clarke (2021) argue that these are problematic. The notion of sample size and data saturation is a key element within positivist research which is underpinned by a realist ontology and an objectivist epistemology (Guba & Lincoln, 1994) and aims to select a representative sample to enable the findings to be generalized to the wider population. However, this is not aligned with the philosophical paradigm of critical realism within which this research is situated. Braun and Clarke (2021) argue that the concept of data saturation is not appropriate for use in RTA. Instead, they suggest using concepts such as information power (Malterud, Siersma & Guassora, 2016) which involves considering the richness of the dataset and how it aligns with the study aims and requirements.

Recruitment took place over a period from September 2022 – February 2023. A purposive sample was sought, utilizing the researcher's position as a trainee educational psychologist (EP) within a local authority educational psychology service (EPS) as part of the professional doctoral training. The researcher's host EPS was a key stakeholder in this research and the researcher liaised with the Principal EP who was fully supportive of the research as it aligned with the service's values and priorities. The service has a vested interest in supporting school attendance and was one of the first local authorities to pilot the ATTEND framework, developed by Brighton and Hove City EPS (Tobias, 2021) to support schools with CYP who experience barriers to school attendance.

The model of service delivery within the author's host EPS is that each school which purchases a traded package of sessions has a 'link' EP who is responsible for delivering traded services to the school. The researcher decided that it would be most appropriate for the EPs who hold a 'link' responsibility to advertise the research to their schools due to their existing working relationships. The link EPs distributed an information sheet by email to the SENCo in each primary school within the service. The SENCo was selected as they are typically the EP's key contact within the school. Some SENCos forwarded the email to other relevant members of staff who were more able to identify children who fit the inclusion criteria, such as attendance officers or members of the

senior leadership team including headteachers and deputy headteachers. The information sheet detailed the aims of the research, study requirements and inclusion criteria (see appendix F).

The research was also advertised in a local authority wide training session for school SENCOs and attendance officers on how to support school attendance using the ATTEND framework (Tobias, 2021). The EP who facilitated the training added a slide to their PowerPoint presentation to advertise the research, detailing the inclusion and exclusion criteria and the researcher's email address to make contact (see appendix G). The PowerPoint slides were emailed out to all attendees following the training and the EP sent a follow up email to remind attendees of the research.

SENCOs, or other relevant members of school staff including SENCOs, attendance officers and head teachers were then asked to contact the researcher directly to indicate that they were happy to support recruitment and could identify a pupil or pupils who fit the inclusion criteria for participation in the research. The information sheet included an offer of a phone call to the SENCOs to anonymously discuss whether the pupils in mind fit the inclusion criteria but no SENCOs took up this offer.

School staff acted as gatekeepers to participants and no personal details of participants were shared before consent was gained from the CYP and their parents. The researcher asked the members of school staff to share an information sheet (appendix H), consent form (appendix I) and privacy notice (appendix J) with the parents of the eligible pupils either via email or a paper copy, alongside a further information sheet (appendix K) and consent form (appendix L) for the pupils themselves. The information sheet offered parents and pupils the chance to meet with the researcher to discuss the research in more detail and to ask any questions, but this offer was not taken up by any parents or pupils. Parents sent copies of the signed consent forms either directly to the researcher or indirectly through their school SENCO. Pupils either completed the consent forms at school with a member of staff, at home with their parents or at the beginning of the interview with the researcher.

3.7.3 Final Sample

The final sample consisted of six children in key stage 2 from five different mainstream primary schools in one Local Authority. Table 5 displays the self-reported gender, age and school years of each participant. Based on the inclusion criteria, all children were at the early stages of experiencing barriers to school attendance, as identified by their school SENCO, class teacher or parents. For the purposes of this research, this was defined as children who were still regularly attending school but who were experiencing signs of anxiety surrounding school attendance. These pupils may have had inconsistent attendance or frequent lateness as a result of these needs.

Table 5*Participant Demographics*

Pseudonym*	Gender	Age	School Year	School
Sam	Male	8	3	A
Kyle	Male	9	4	B
Maria	Female	9	5	B
Sarah	Female	9	5	C
Ron	Male	10	6	D
Phoebe	Female	10	6	E

Note. Participant are displayed in ascending order of chronological age.

**Pseudonyms were initially selected by the CYP but were adapted due to being too identifiable.*

3.8 Data Collection Procedure

As previously discussed, semi-structured interviews were selected to gather rich, in-depth qualitative data regarding participant's perceptions of the factors which influence their school attendance. This section details the development of the interview schedule, as well as the interview procedure.

3.8.1 Developing an Interview Schedule

An interview schedule was developed based on the literature review and comprised of open questions to encourage exploration of key topic areas such as the young person's experiences and perceptions of various aspects of school including the environment, teachers, lessons and peers, as well as considering their home and family life. Due to the flexible nature of the research design, the content and questions varied between each interview, depending upon the participants' responses. The more sensitive questions were included in the middle of the interview schedule to allow enough time for them to be explored thoroughly, after having developed rapport. The interview ended with solution focussed questioning to finish on a positive note after exploring some sensitive topics. Questions from the interview schedule, alongside supplementary questions were used to gain clarification and aid exploration of responses. The researcher used their knowledge of child development and professional experience of working with CYP to adapt the wording of the questions to ensure they were accessible to the child's developmental level (Flewitt, 2013). Please see appendix M for the initial draft interview schedule.

3.8.2 Interview Process

Participants were interviewed individually in a quiet, confidential room within their school. A pilot interview was conducted with one young person who met the inclusion criteria, to assess the pupil's understanding of the interview questions and to ensure that the generated data was of significant quality and was useful and meaningful in relation to the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Only minor amendments were made to the wording of the questions and order of the interview schedule to aid comprehension and so the data was included in the final dataset.

The interviews varied in length from 30 minutes to one hour. Participants were offered the opportunity to have a trusted member of staff or a parent present. One participant, Kyle, opted to have his mother present during the interview. The researcher used their prior knowledge and professional experience of working with CYP to engage in rapport-building activities with the participants. The researcher used a sentence completion activity (Treisman, 2017) to build rapport and alleviate any anxiety that the participants may have experienced due to meeting an unfamiliar adult. The cards were also used to gauge participants' understanding of key concepts and terminology which were to be covered in the interview, such as the words "favourite" and "describe". The researcher then explored the participant's emotional literacy levels, using the Bear Cards (Veeken, 2012). This involved asking the CYP to identify and label the emotions being displayed on images of cartoon bears.

Visuals were provided of general topic areas which linked to the interview questions. These were: family, home, school, teachers, lessons, friends and coronavirus (please see appendix N). These visual prompts were used to aid participant's understanding of some of the concepts which were to be covered during the interview. During the interview, the researcher summarised participants responses to check for understanding and to demonstrate active listening. The researcher was non-judgemental and aimed to provide a space where the young people felt comfortable to share their experiences without interruption.

3.9 Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations are integral to all stages of the research process, including planning, data collection and data analysis (Tolich & Tumilty 2020). The researcher obtained ethical approval from the University of Nottingham Ethics Committee (see ethics approval letter in appendix O) prior to undertaking the research. The research was conducted in line with the British Psychological Society's Code of Human Research Ethics (BPS, 2021) which considers the principles of respect, competence, responsibility and integrity. Within these principles, the areas which were deemed particularly pertinent to the research due to its sample of primary school aged children were

informed consent, right to withdraw confidentiality and risk of harm, which will be discussed in turn below.

3.9.1 Informed and Valid Consent

An information sheet was provided to participants and their parents via email to describe the research aims, expectations and the intended use of the data. Signed, informed consent was sought from both the participant and their parents prior to the interview. The information sheet offered a verbal discussion with the participants and/ or their parents before signing the consent forms, although no participants requested this. The participant was reminded of the information sheet and consent form at the beginning of the interview, supported by the physical artefacts, and verbal consent was obtained prior to commencing.

3.9.2 Right to Withdraw

The participants' right to withdraw and have all their data removed was clearly explained to the participants in the information sheet, consent form and at the beginning of the interview in accessible language. A "stop" visual card was provided for the young person to use to indicate if they wished to stop the interview and no longer continue. In addition, a "skip" and a "pause" visual were provided for the young person to indicate that they did not want to answer a particular question or if they wanted a break (see appendix P). These images were thought to be familiar to the children and were explained to them at the beginning of the interview. Participants were provided with the researcher's email address on the information sheet and the debrief form and were reminded again of their right to withdraw following the interview and advised to contact the researcher should this be the case. They were reminded that they did not need to give a reason and there would be no consequence to withdrawing. Furthermore, the researcher monitored the child's body language and non-verbal behaviour during the interview for any indications that they were not comfortable and wished to stop.

3.9.3 Confidentiality

Paper copies of signed consent forms were stored in a locked file and any digital copies were stored securely on an encrypted memory stick. The interviews were audio recorded on a Dictaphone and a laptop which was not connected to the cloud (a storage server connected to the internet). Immediately after the interviews, the audio recordings were transferred to an encrypted memory stick and deleted from the Dictaphone and laptop. All data was stored in line with General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and the audio recordings were deleted following transcription. During

transcription, all personal and identifiable information were removed to ensure anonymity. The participants were asked to choose their own pseudonym to enable them to have autonomy over their data. However, some of the pseudonyms chosen related to specific interests which may have been identifiable to people who know the young person well such as their parents and school staff. This contradicted what the CYP initially consented to and it was therefore decided to adapt these pseudonyms to ensure they were non-identifiable. The participants were made aware of the steps taken to ensure confidentiality, as well as the exceptions regarding any safeguarding concerns. The usual safeguarding protocols were followed, and should a child have made a disclosure of concern, the designated safeguarding lead would have been notified, although this did not occur.

The researcher received a direct request from the parent of one of the participants to access a copy of their child's interview transcript. This request was considered carefully, and advice was sought through supervision from university staff. As per General Data Protection Regulations, the parent had the right to request the data. In order to maintain ethical credibility, the researcher developed a consent form for the young person to consent to releasing their data to their parent. With the parent's permission, the researcher met with the young person in school to explain the implications of sharing their data and to gain free and informed consent.

3.9.4 Risk of Harm to Participants

The researcher acknowledged that the population under study may experience anxious thoughts and feelings around school attendance and therefore, there was a risk that discussing these issues may have caused additional distress to the young people. To minimise this, exclusion criteria for participation in the study included the young person having active CAMHS or social care involvement to prevent participation of CYP with clinical levels of anxiety and safeguarding concerns. As participation was entirely voluntary, the pupil's parents, teachers and the pupils themselves were able to make a judgement about whether discussing these issues was likely to cause them any distress. Furthermore, participants were advised that they could stop the interview at any time, take a break if required and did not have to answer any questions they did not wish to. A stop, pause and skip visual were provided to support the CYP to communicate this (please see appendix P). Finally, the participants were fully debriefed and signposted to any additional support available should it be necessary (see appendix Q).

3.10 Data Analysis - Reflexive Thematic Analysis

Data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (RTA), as first described by Braun and Clarke (2006) and further developed and refined in their more recent work. Braun and Clarke (2022)

emphasise that RTA offers practical guidelines rather than rules for analysis. The analytic process involves 6 phases as below, which will be described in turn. These phases are not necessarily linear, but are better understood as a progressive and recursive process (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2022):

1. Dataset familiarisation
2. Data coding
3. Initial theme generation
4. Theme development and reviewing
5. Theme refining, defining and naming
6. Writing up

3.10.1 Dataset Familiarisation

The first phase of RTA is familiarisation with the dataset through immersion in the data. This involves developing a deep knowledge and awareness of the content of the dataset through re-visiting it several times (Braun & Clarke, 2022). This phase began with transcription of the audio recordings into written form, which was initially undertaken using an online transcription software (trint.com). Although manual transcription is recommended by some authors (McLellan et al., 2003; Bird, 2005), others highlight the time-saving benefits of automated transcription (Bokhove & Downey, 2018). The transcript was checked for accuracy and edited manually by the researcher, whilst re-listening to the audio recordings. Transcription was undertaken soon after the interviews were conducted to aid the researcher's memory in case the audio-recordings were not clear. Audio-recordings were transcribed orthographically in line with guidance from Braun and Clarke (2013). Transcriptions included all spoken words, as well as nonverbal utterances such as filler words, pauses and laughter. The researcher also noted participants' use of the visuals to non-verbally indicate that they wished to skip a question. Transcripts were anonymised, using pseudonyms and redactions of school, teachers' and friends' names to ensure no identifiable information was included. Interviewer questioning and comments were also transcribed to provide context for interviewee responses.

The researcher then read the entire dataset twice more to increase familiarisation with its written form. The researcher actively and critically engaged with the data whilst reading it, making notes of any initial reactions and analytical ideas relating each individual data item on a separate Microsoft Word document. Following that, the researcher made brief notes relating to any reflections on the dataset as a whole and any potential patterns of meaning across the dataset.

3.10.2 Data Coding

The second phase involved systematic coding of each individual data item. Coding is defined as an evolving process of interpretation which involves identifying segments of data, or codes, which are potentially relevant or meaningful to the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2022). The coding process was undertaken on NVivo 12, a qualitative data analysis software (QDAS) as the researcher has a personal preference for working electronically. Although Braun and Clarke (2006) originally advocated for coding by hand, QDAS is becoming more widely used due to its benefits and ease in data management (Maher et al., 2018). See appendix R for an example of coding on NVivo 12.

Each code was given a label to briefly summarise the ideas captured within the code. Some segments of data were coded multiple times as they had more than one possible meaning in relation to the research questions. This allowed the researcher to capture diversity in meaning and to prevent foreclosure of the analysis (Connelly & Peltzer, 2016). Some segments of data were not coded at all as they were not relevant to the research questions, for example, when a participant described the plot of a story she was writing in great detail.

The analysis intended to be exploratory and inductive in nature as it was not looking to test an existing theoretical framework, however, Braun and Clarke (2022) highlighted that purely inductive coding is not possible as the researcher brings prior knowledge about the topic. The researcher acknowledged a tendency to code data which was in line with previous literature and therefore, made a conscious effort to ensure that any novel findings were not being excluded as a result of this. Codes were mainly identified at the semantic, or surface level, based on what participants had explicitly stated, with some latent codes being identified later with more implicit meanings (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

The researcher began the coding process with the longest and most detailed data item as it was likely to produce the greatest number of codes. When a new segment of data was identified, the researcher considered whether it could be added to an existing code, whether the existing code label needed amending or whether creating a new code was most appropriate.

After the initial coding of the dataset, there were a large number of codes, some with only one segment of data and some with many segments of data. The researcher refined the codes, combining similar codes together to capture broader meanings. The researcher then repeated the coding process, working through the dataset in a different order, to disrupt the flow and increase the rigour of the analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022). The researcher then re-visited each code and considered whether the code label adequately described the data assigned to it and whether the codes captured the diversity of meaning across the dataset.

3.10.3 Initial Theme Generation

The researcher then began to consider themes, which are defined as broader patterns of shared meanings across the dataset, which are meaningful to the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2022). The researcher initially continued to use NVivo 12 for this phase but felt restricted by the platform so decided to undertake this phase by hand. The researcher wrote each code on an individual piece of paper and manually grouped together codes which appeared to share some similarity in meaning (please see appendix S). These groups of codes are known as candidate themes, with the word candidate highlighting their provisional nature (Braun & Clarke, 2022). At this phase, the researcher acknowledged that some of the candidate themes were more like topic summaries (Braun & Clarke, 2022) and required further revision and re-grouping of the data. The researcher gave each candidate theme a tentative label to describe the codes within it. The researcher combined all of the unallocated codes which did not appear to fit into the candidate themes into a miscellaneous theme (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

3.10.4 Theme Development and Reviewing

The aim of this phase was to review and refine the candidate themes. The researcher began by transferring the candidate themes onto NVivo 12 which allowed the codes and data extracts to be collated within each theme (see appendix T). The researcher then re-read all of the coded data extracts within each theme to ensure that there was sufficient data to evidence the theme and that each theme had a central organising concept, or unity in meaning, as well as capturing a meaningful idea in relation to the research question (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Themes which were too broad and lacked homogeneity were broken down into two smaller themes. On the other hand, themes which lacked clear boundaries in relation to other themes were also revised. At this stage, the author combined two themes together as the distinction was unclear, and rejected one theme entirely as although it was interesting, it did not answer the research questions.

A visual thematic map (see appendix U) was developed for the research questions, to explore the relationships between themes and the overall story of the analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022). It was at this stage the researcher began exploring the addition of overarching themes and subthemes to add structure and clarity to the analysis. The full dataset was re-read to ensure that the themes accurately captured the richness and diversity in meaning across the whole dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

3.10.5 Theme Refining, Defining and Naming

The final phase in theme development involves defining and naming the themes (Braun & Clarke, 2022). The researcher wrote a brief definition of each theme to outline the scope, boundaries and core concept of the theme. Following this, the author chose a concise yet informative name for each theme.

3.10.6 Writing the Report

Braun and Clarke (2022) suggest that writing up is a key component of the analytical process of RTA. The researcher continued to refine the flow of the analysis whilst writing the report and themes continued to evolve during this process. The final analysis will be presented in Chapter 4, alongside excerpts from the dataset to illustrate the final themes.

3.11 Researcher Reflexivity

In line with the methodology and philosophical assumptions of the research, it was important for the researcher to demonstrate reflexivity throughout the research process. Reflexivity is defined as critical reflection on the role of the researcher and research practices (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Wilkinson (1988) identified three forms of reflexivity: personal, functional and disciplinary, each of which will be discussed in turn, demonstrating the considerations and actions taken by the researcher at each stage of the research process.

3.11.1 Personal Reflexivity

Personal reflexivity refers to how the researcher's characteristics and values may influence the research process (Wilkinson, 1988). The social graces model (Burnham, 2012) was used to reflect upon the researcher's social positionings in comparison to that of the participants. The researcher was aware of her privileged position as a white, cisgender, heterosexual, middle-class, educated professional who is in her late twenties and has no SEND. This contrasted to many of the participants who were primary school pupils in a city with high levels of ethnic diversity and SEND, with many areas of low socioeconomic status. The researcher considered issues of perceived power imbalance and was acutely aware that the participants may have viewed her as an authority figure which may have influenced their openness and honesty during the interviews. Aiming to minimise the influence of this, the researcher ensured that she carefully introduced herself, using simple language without jargon to ensure the participants understood her role. The researcher also chose to dress in smart but informal attire to reduce the perception of her as an authority figure.

The researcher also considered how her own experiences of education may have influenced the data collection and analysis. The researcher attended a primary school in a rural county location in the UK which differs to the participants in the present study who were all attending inner-city schools. Although the researcher attended primary school in the UK, it was two decades ago and the political and societal context has vastly changed. In direct contrast to the participants, the researcher did not personally experience any barriers to school attendance and perceived school as a positive and enjoyable experience and therefore can be considered an 'outsider' to the research topic (Braun & Clarke, 2022). It was important for the researcher to ensure that her own experiences of schooling did not impact the questions asked or the way in which she responded to participant's responses. Furthermore, the researcher grew up in a family that values education highly and it was important not to display any prejudice or make any value judgements if the participants had different experiences.

3.11.2 Disciplinary Reflexivity

Disciplinary reflexivity considers how the researcher's academic discipline may shape the research (Wilkinson, 1988). The researcher's academic background consists of an undergraduate degree in psychology which focussed on quantitative research and valued objectivity. However, the researcher is currently undertaking a doctorate in applied educational psychology, which has developed her knowledge, understanding and experience of using qualitative research methods. This aligns with the researchers' personal philosophical positioning and motivations to hear the voices of vulnerable CYP. However, as the researcher has a background in quantitative methods, she was conscious of experiencing the 'positivism creep' whereby positivist concepts such as objectivity cloud our perceptions of qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2023).

In addition, the researcher considered how her professional experience working as a trainee educational psychologist may have impacted upon the data collection and analysis. The researcher has had prior experience of supporting CYP who experience barriers to school attendance and therefore had some prior knowledge of factors which might influence attendance both positively and negatively. It was important for the researcher to explore novel factors and give the participants the opportunity to share their own ideas, in addition to asking about factors which have been identified in practice.

3.11.3 Functional Reflexivity

Finally, functional reflexivity considers how the methods used may influence the knowledge produced (Wilkinson, 1988). The researcher carefully considered each decision throughout the

research process, which is detailed in the methodology chapter. For example, the researcher considered whether to conduct individual or group interviews and how this may have impacted upon the information shared. Due to the potentially sensitive topic area, the researcher felt it would be more appropriate to undertake individual interviews, although the benefits of focus groups were highlighted. Furthermore, the researcher felt conflicted when deciding whether to use the visuals of topic areas (appendix N), as she wanted to scaffold some areas for discussion whilst also allowing the participants the freedom and autonomy to raise novel issues which the researcher may not have considered.

3.12 Quality of the Research

Research within quantitative paradigms value objectivity, reliability, accuracy and generalization of findings (Robson & McCartan, 2016). However, these concepts are not relevant to qualitative research and various authors have developed criteria to assess the quality of qualitative research (e.g. Lincoln & Guba, 1985). However, Braun and Clarke (2021; 2022) argue that these measures do not align with the philosophical assumptions and best practice guidelines for RTA. Braun and Clarke (2022) recommend Yardley's (2000) criteria as a useful approach to considering the quality of qualitative data due to its theoretical flexibility. Yardley (2000) identified four characteristics of qualitative research: sensitivity to context, commitment and rigour, transparency and coherence, and impact and importance. These will be described in turn, with reference to the research.

3.12.1 Sensitivity to Context

Sensitivity to context refers to the researcher's knowledge and understanding of the existing research in the chosen topic area (Yardley, 2000). The researcher undertook an in-depth systematic literature review of the relevant literature regarding young people's experiences of barriers to school attendance, which developed sensitivity to the context. The researcher acknowledged the impact that this immersion in the existing research may have had on the data, both positively and negatively. The systematic literature review identified a gap in the existing literature to explore primary school pupil's views who were at the earlier stages of experiencing barriers to school attendance. This allowed the research aims and questions to be tailored to meet this gap. Although the researcher aimed to take an inductive approach to data analysis, it is likely that this knowledge of the existing literature may have influenced the generation of codes and themes.

Furthermore, as the philosophical position of the research acknowledges that knowledge is socially constructed through interactions between the researcher and participants (Willig, 2013), it was vital for the researcher to be sensitive to any socio-cultural factors which may influence these

interactions (Yardley, 2000). The researcher was aware of her privileged position as a white British, middle class female which may have contrasted to some of the participants who were pupils in some of the most deprived areas across the city. The researcher also had to consider issues of power imbalance, particularly as the participants were primary school children who were aged 8-10, with the researcher holding a position of professional status.

3.12.2 Commitment and Rigour

Commitment refers to an in-depth engagement with the topic area, as well as competence in the methods used and immersion in the data (Yardley, 2000). The author has a long-term interest in the topic of barriers to school attendance, developed through university lectures and professional practice placements as part of her doctoral training. As the researcher had not previously undertaken reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) and was considered a novice, it was vital to become more familiar with the methods. The researcher had teaching input at university on using RTA, as well as attending additional webinars hosted by Braun and Clarke (2022) and conducting independent research into the analytic process. The researcher accessed regular supervision sessions with an experienced and qualified EP throughout the research process, as well as more informal peer supervision with colleagues who were also using RTA.

Rigour refers to the comprehensiveness of data collection and analysis (Yardley, 2000). This partially depends on the adequacy of the sample and methodology. The researcher recruited a suitable sample and developed an interview schedule which allowed detailed information to be gathered in relation to the research questions. The data was analysed inductively, which allowed for variation and complexity in the data to be discussed.

3.12.3 Transparency and Coherence

Transparency and coherence refer to the clarity of the research process and power of the argument (Yardley, 2000). The researcher detailed each aspect of the data collection and analysis process, and will present raw data excerpts and examples of coding. The author will ensure the quality of the narrative by including direct quotations to aid the reader's understanding. Due to the subjectivist nature of the research, it is accepted that the researcher's own values and experiences will shape their interpretation of the data (Mertens, 2010). The researcher has kept a reflexive journal throughout the research process to record and reflect on their own thoughts, feelings and experiences which may have influenced the research.

Coherence also refers to the consistency between the research question, philosophical assumptions, method and analysis undertaken (Yardley, 2000). The author has described their

philosophical positioning and the decisions made within this, earlier in this section. To summarise, a qualitative methodology is in line with the philosophical underpinnings of critical realism and subjectivism as it allows individual's perceptions to be explored. The researcher was not interested in triangulating this data to seek the 'truth', but instead to explore the participant's subjective views.

3.12.4 Impact and Importance

The last criterion refers to the impact and usefulness of the research (Yardley, 2000). This will be revisited in the discussion, following analysis. However, the aim of the research was to extend the evidence base surrounding young people's experiences of barriers to school attendance, by exploring a novel age range of primary school aged children, at a novel stage of their difficulties i.e., at the early stages of their needs. RTA was used to explore shared patterns of meanings across the dataset, with the aim of identifying implications for a range of stakeholders including school staff and educational psychologists.

Chapter 4: Findings

4.1 Chapter Overview

This chapter will present the themes generated in relation to the research questions:

RQ1. What do primary school children perceive as their early barriers to school attendance?

RQ2. What do primary school children perceive as the factors which support their school attendance?

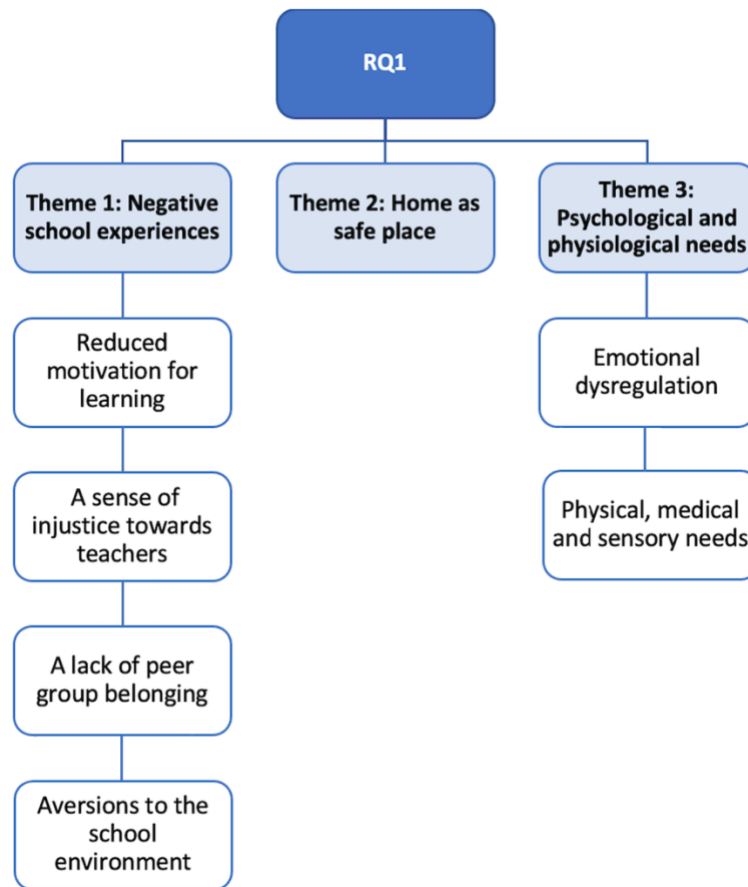
Three themes were generated for each research question, with some additional subthemes to structure the interpretations. Each theme and subtheme will be discussed in turn and illustrative excerpts of data will be used to demonstrate the researcher's interpretations of the findings. Some quotes have been edited for clarity and coherence, with square brackets indicating words which have been added or changed, and an ellipsis signifying that a section of text has been removed (Lingard, 2019). Some proportional language will be used to indicate the number of participants whose data contributed to the development of each theme. This is not an attempt to quantify the relevance of the theme but to highlight the strength of the shared pattern of meaning across the dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

4.2 Perceived Barriers to School Attendance

Three main themes were generated in relation to research question 1, with a total of 6 subthemes. Figure 6 displays a thematic map which demonstrates the relationships between these themes.

Figure 6

Thematic Map Displaying the Themes and Subthemes for RQ1



4.2.1 Theme 1: Negative School Experiences

Accounts of previous negative experiences at school were present across all interviews and formed the basis of this theme. Some participants explicitly named these negative school experiences as factors which contributed to their barriers to school attendance, whereas this was more implicit in other participant's accounts. This theme encompasses four subthemes relating to different aspects of the school experience, namely:

- 1.1 *Reduced motivation for learning*
- 1.2 *A sense of injustice towards teachers*
- 1.3 *A lack of peer group belonging*
- 1.4 *Aversions to the school environment*

4.2.1.1 Reduced Motivation for Learning. A common theme which was present across all interviews relates to a lack of motivation to learn either due to a lack of interest in, or understanding of the curriculum. Participants reported disliking the academic aspects of school, particularly in comparison to the unstructured times of break and lunchtime where they are not expected to engage in learning. When asked what they like about school, Kyle responded “playtime and lunchtime cos we have an hour break”. Similarly, Sam shared that he feels happiest at lunchtime. In direct contrast, all participants mentioned disliking specific school subjects, lessons or parts of the curriculum including maths, writing and drama. This appeared to be linked to their perception of the difficulty of the subject, with participants referring to the academic demands placed upon them. For example, Phoebe described:

We're expected to remember the really, really, really, really, really hard things. Um, so if you ask me like, a question about what we did last year in maths, I wouldn't be able to remember and I wouldn't be able to do the work because we're expected to remember every single thing.

Other participants described how these academic pressures have a negative impact upon their self-confidence and perceived ability in the subject, which can lead to reduced motivation and subsequent disengagement with learning. For example, Maria shared “So we do big writes at school... and sometimes that makes me a little bit um scared because like I'm not very good at writing.”. Similarly, Sarah illustrates:

[In] maths I don't really know my times and divides that well and I don't really like doing it because it gets me frustrated. And English um sometimes I don't like doing it because I do stuff wrong and I can't spell that well.

Some of the older participants highlighted a shift in the workload at school. They described lessons as being much easier and more play-based in the lower school years, with the difficulty of the academic content increasing with age. For example, Maria shared:

[In] nursery I didn't really think that much, I just did it, because you mostly play in nursery, but like I think what started to get me was in year one because we started to do more work... and then more work and then even more work.

Other participants felt that their lessons had become more repetitive which impacted upon their enjoyment of school, as described by Ron “We do the same lessons, like every day just about, now in year 6, we do like the lessons what we already did, we do it over again”. This repetitive nature of lessons appears to contribute to a lack of motivation to engage with learning, with Ron describing these lessons as “boring”. Similarly, Maria shared “they do lessons like over and over and over and

over again because I can't remember it, and when they do it over and over and over again it still doesn't help.”.

Other participants described feeling creatively restricted at school and unable to follow their interests. For example, Phoebe describes:

In English you are limited to what you have to write, when I'm writing my own stories, I'm not limited and I know that they're just for me to say, so in English, I have to really think about what I'm putting on the piece of paper, but when I'm actually writing... sometimes I think about something, and then my hand automatically goes and writes the word that I'm thinking in my head. But I can't do that in [English] because, I couldn't just write loads of random things about YouTube.

Overall, this subtheme suggests that participants perceive the academic aspects of school as challenging, boring and repetitive. It suggests that participants view school as a restrictive environment in which they are unable to engage in their interests, and therefore contributing to a lack of motivation for learning, which subsequently impacts their motivation for school attendance.

4.2.1.2 A Sense of Injustice Towards Teachers. A strong sense of injustice was present across the majority of interviews, particularly in relation to teachers' actions. Many participants described accounts of teachers using behaviour management strategies which they perceived as unfair and unjust. For example, Phoebe shared that in foundation stage, members of school staff used a thinking chair as a sanction:

I... once got put on the thinking chair because I was touching the paintings things on the wall and, and, while we were walking along, and they told me to stop and, and, and, they kept on shouting at me to stop so I didn't stop.

When asked how this made her feel, Phoebe responded “angry at them because I was only just touching the wall.” This account suggests that Phoebe felt she was unfairly reprimanded, with the sanction not being in line with her behaviour. Phoebe went on to describe another example in which a member of school staff used their position of authority to pressure her into complying with the school rules. She reported:

[SENCo] once she said do you want me to put your name on the board... Well she said she would if I didn't go up to the classroom and that's just threatening me, and that doesn't make it any better, I mean, she's nice and all it's just that I didn't like it when she threatened me.

In addition, many participants shared that they disliked teachers shouting at them and being 'told off, as illustrated by Sarah “Sometimes [the teacher] shouts and I don't really like it when he

shouts". Furthermore, Maria shared "Well Miss Z would just shout at you for no reason", which suggests that she did not understand why she was being reprimanded and she did not feel that it was necessary. In addition, Phoebe shared:

They told me off for um, for not writing as much, but even though, in my handwriting, even though I was taking my time, because they said to take your time and don't worry if you've done too little... Well that made me feel just angry and I stopped trusting them. And also, the TA um once she used an excuse of wanting to speak to me but she didn't actually say anything it was just to make me go into school.

These excerpts suggest that young people often feel that the use of sanctions are unfair and unjust, and can contribute to a lack of trust in teachers. Participants also described accounts of teachers using strategies which may have caused them feelings of embarrassment and shame in front of their peers. Ron described how his teacher would highlight his behaviour in front of the whole class "so if you're doing summet wrong, [the teacher] makes a joke out of it, yeah, and then the whole class just starts laughing and then my anger kicks in and stuff." This suggests that young people do not tend to respond well to receiving sanctions, particularly in front of their peers which may cause their behaviour to escalate.

Some participants described feeling misunderstood by their teachers and being wrongly labelled as rude or naughty for "just having fun" (Ron) or as a result of their needs. Phoebe shared "I also don't like people touching me and when [the teacher] touched me I took her hand off me cos I didn't like it and she said that I was being rude to her." This excerpt suggests that young people felt as though their behaviours were misinterpreted by teachers in a negative manner when they did not have that intention. In addition, participants did not feel as though their teachers recognised the hard work and effort they put in. One example of this was described by Kyle "Um sometimes I get really frustrated at school because the teachers think I'm not doing very good work but I was actually trying my hardest." Furthermore, Phoebe shared:

And also when we went on a residential before we started year six, I really didn't want to go on that and, and, the teachers, the both of them... told me and some other people in the residential that they were disappointed in us and that we weren't trying our best, but it was really hard for me to come on the residential because I don't like leaving home for five days.

And they said they were disappointed in us and we didn't try as hard, but I was trying hard.

This suggests that young people felt as though their teachers did not understand their needs and the impact this may have on their ability to engage in learning activities. Finally, a sense of injustice was present in participants' accounts of teachers not allowing them to fulfil their basic needs during lesson time, leading to feelings of anger and frustration. Kyle describes:

If I'm in class and then I'm really desperate to go to the toilet but then I have to wait... and um sometimes I'm really thirsty and really hot but they [the teachers] don't let me get a drink.

Furthermore, young people highlighted the inequality in teachers being able to engage in activities that they were not allowed to. Maria shared "The teachers get to, like, walk around the classroom but we've been sitting down all day and we need to go to, like, the toilet..". This reinforces the school hierarchy whereby teachers do not have to follow the same rules and expectations as CYP.

In summary, this subtheme indicates that a sense of injustice, which occurs as a result of feelings of inequity between CYP and the adults in school, can contribute towards primary school children's barriers to school attendance.

4.2.1.3 A Lack of Peer Group Belonging. A theme which was present across the majority of interviews was participants lacking a sense of belonging to their peer group. Some participants described feeling different to their peers as a result of not enjoying stereotypically gendered activities or simply having different interests to their peers. For example, Phoebe shared "I'm not really like a typical girly girl like some of the girls in my class, um I really like, like games, like the boys do and also, my second favourite sport is football", she later added "I don't really like all the girls who are worrying about makeup and hair... I don't really care about hair." Similarly, Maria explained "I mostly play with boys because I'm not.. I don't really play with girls". When asked why she prefers playing with boys, she explained "...I think it's just because the boys run around more but the girls they just stay in one place." In addition, some participants described the worries they felt about their peers making fun of them as a result of their unique interests. For example, Phoebe shared:

People probably might not want to watch the things I watch [on YouTube] and they might think I'm weird for watching the things I watch. Well... They might just think I'm weird because um they don't like it or they say why are you watching that?

Another way in which participants perceived themselves as different to their peers was in terms of their social and emotional needs and difficulties with school attendance. One participant felt as though the strategies which help the majority of their peers to regulate in school such as listening to calming music, does not tend to help them, as described by Phoebe "It seems to help every single person in school except for me".

Many participants recalled accounts of peer conflict directed towards themselves and the negative emotions associated with these memories. For example, Kyle shared that he feels angry and frustrated when "people push [him] over... at playtime". In addition, Sarah recalled when "someone shouted at [her] when [she had] done something wrong". Other participants recalled

witnessing conflicts between their peers which made them worry about experiencing a similar situation. Maria shared that she didn't want to take her teddy bear out of her bag at school because a peer had previously had their toy taken without their permission:

I just don't want people to know because they could take her, because that's happened before. One of the people in year 6 have lost their little monkey and it's like magnetic and someone stole it and put it in a bush so they had to wash it and everything.

Some participants described feeling lonely and isolated after 'falling out' with their peers, as highlighted by Phoebe in the following excerpt:

Because since I um wasn't friends with the people that I was friends with, it seemed like everybody had turned against me because I was friends with somebody... I was friends with somebody that they didn't like.

Based on these prior perceived negative peer experiences, participants expressed worries of these events occurring again in the future, as highlighted by Sarah "I feel like somethings going to happened and I did it... Sometimes if I accidentally hurt someone, I feel like they won't forgive me... And like try and shout at me and blame it on me and try and get me told off."

To conclude, this subtheme highlights the importance of friendships to primary school children (which will be further explored in research question 2). It demonstrates that the loss of these friendships can be detrimental to young people's wellbeing and sense of belonging, which can ultimately impact upon their school attendance.

4.2.1.4 Aversions to the School Environment. Some participants described aversions to aspects of their school environment. More specifically, these factors related to the number of pupils and level of noise within school. Some participants described disliking particular areas of the school, such as the school dinner hall due to the number of pupils using the space and the resulting level of noise. Phoebe describes:

I don't like the noise in school cause it's really loud. Like in the hall there's so many people. I used to be able to sit in the packed lunch hall but now the now the packed lunch hall is used by the lower years.

In addition, other participants described the level of noise in their classrooms which impacts upon their ability to concentrate. Sarah illustrates this "Well in class, when people are talking and it gets really, really frustrating... if I'm trying to do something and it's loud I don't really like it." She later described how she found it easier to engage with learning at home during the Covid-19 lockdowns "because um I was able to, like, concentrate more because it wasn't too noisy." On the other hand, Sam attended school during the Covid-19 lockdowns as his parents were key workers (defined by the

government as having essential jobs which were required to continue throughout the pandemic). He described his preference for being in a 'bubble' with three or four other children, compared to his usual larger class as "I liked it then because it was quieter."

This subtheme highlights that factors within the school environment, namely the level of noise can be contributing factors to children's barriers to school attendance.

4.2.2 Theme 2: Home as a Safe Place

A theme which was common amongst all participants was their positive descriptions of being at home, which was in direct contrast to their negative descriptions of school highlighted in theme 1. All participants described feeling happy at home as they are able to spend time with their family and pets, and engage in their favourite hobbies which included playing video games, sports and creative arts. When asked how she feels at home, Maria shared:

I feel happy because it's kinda like a break. And, and, um, we go to, like, swimming in the gym it makes me happy because um we get to spend time with family, and I also can do swimming.

This suggests that being at home is preferable to being at school as it is a 'break' from the negative factors identified in theme 1, as well as the additional 'pull' factors towards home such as spending time with loved ones and engaging in preferred activities. Participants described the supportive relationships they have with their family members and described them in a positive light.

The majority of participants identified their family as a source of emotional support, through offering reassurance and co-regulation strategies. For example, Kyle shared that when he feels angry and frustrated his parents give him "a hug and then they just make me feel better". Similarly, Maria shared that her brother helps her when she feels overwhelmed with the schoolwork, she described "Well, he just tells me that it's okay. Because he was in a year six class, sometimes I just ask him um what they did in year six and then I compare it to my teachers." Furthermore, Phoebe shared "And I didn't like leaving home because I know the people that will do something about me being worried aren't gonna be there." These excerpts suggests that young people feel safe at home as their parents offer them emotional containment and support their worries. Maria later described how she feels "free" at home time but in contrast, participants described school as a place where they felt trapped, with Phoebe describing school as "awful, horrible and like a prison."

This theme highlights pull factors which encourage young people to stay at home, including wanting to spend time with their family who listen to them and meet their needs, as well as engaging in preferred hobbies.

4.2.3 Theme 3: Psychological and Physiological Needs

The third theme encompasses barriers to school attendance which relate to the individual and may be perceived as having a 'within-child' focus, relating to the participants' psychological and physiological needs. This theme is comprised of two subthemes:

- 1.1 Emotional dysregulation
- 1.2 Physical and medical needs

4.2.3.1 Emotional Dysregulation. Participants reported varying negative emotions towards school attendance, including feeling worried, angry, frustrated, sad, grumpy and scared. Some participants described the associated thoughts, physiological responses and behaviours linked to these emotions. For example, when asked how she feels in the mornings before school, Sarah described "I have the little sickness in my tummy" and "it's the feeling where you get really hot." This suggests that although she may not have the vocabulary to name the emotion, she was able to describe how her body responds. Whereas Ron described how his difficulties regulating his emotions can impact upon his behaviour:

My brain will just go click and then I'll just snap and I won't even realise what I'm doing, I'll just come to this thing yeah like it's like a robot, I see the target and all I can see is the target and I just go for the person.

Furthermore, Phoebe was able to describe her worries very eloquently:

And I'm also worried about like loads of the other things, like I'm worried about the weather and I'm also worried about um I'm worried about getting told off and not getting the work and just school is hard and I don't like it... and I'm also worried about my friends and if they don't want to be my friends anymore if I've done something wrong.

These quotes suggest that the worries and other negative emotions experienced by CYP tended to be related to the previous negative school experiences which were explored in theme 1 including factors relating to peers, teachers and the curriculum. Although the initial barriers to school attendance may have been related to specific aspects of school, the emotional response may be perpetuating and maintaining these barriers through rumination and worrying about the possibility of the negative events reoccurring.

Other participants described being aware that their peers do not experience the same barriers to school attendance as them and expressed concerns that their peers would notice and highlight these differences. When asked how she feels when getting ready for school in the mornings, Sarah described:

Um I feel like I'm gonna get um people like looking at me all the time when I come in late.

And it just gets me scared to come cos I feel like I'm gonna be sitting next to someone who's mean... I feel like people are gonna like talk about me that you come in late.

This quote suggests that young people do not want to stand out or want their peers to be aware of their barriers to school attendance. This is perhaps because they do not feel that their peers would understand, or they may feel a sense of shame or embarrassment.

Overall, this subtheme suggests that CYP experience emotional dysregulation in response to unmet needs and negative school experiences. The resulting negative thoughts, feelings and behaviours may well interact with environmental factors, making it more difficult for CYP to manage other barriers to school attendance.

4.2.3.2 Physical and Medical Needs. Some participants suggested that difficulties with sleep and subsequently feeling tired in the mornings and during the school day, is a barrier towards their school attendance. Some participants shared that they are sometimes late to school as a result of this, for example, when discussing the reasons she sometimes comes into school late, Sarah explained “So um I have some problems sleeping at night. And I can't really wake up”. Similarly, when asked how she feels in the mornings when getting ready for school, Maria shared “I'm not a morning person. I just always go zzz... [I feel] tired and I don't want to go to school.” Furthermore, Kyle shared that he feels tired when during the school day “And sometimes I'm tired in school... like if it's early in the morning... I just feel like I want to go to sleep.”

Only one participant, Ron mentioned having medical diagnoses which may impact upon his school attendance. Ron shared that he has ADHD and autism and although these are not necessarily barriers to school attendance in themselves, the characteristics may well interact with environmental factors to constitute a barrier to school attendance. For example, Ron also described sensory aversions related to the school uniform, explaining:

As soon as I come home from school, my mum was like calm down, calm down, and I just kept whipping my school clothes off straight away and got into my pyjamas.. It [school uniform] irritated me, I couldn't stand the feel of it.

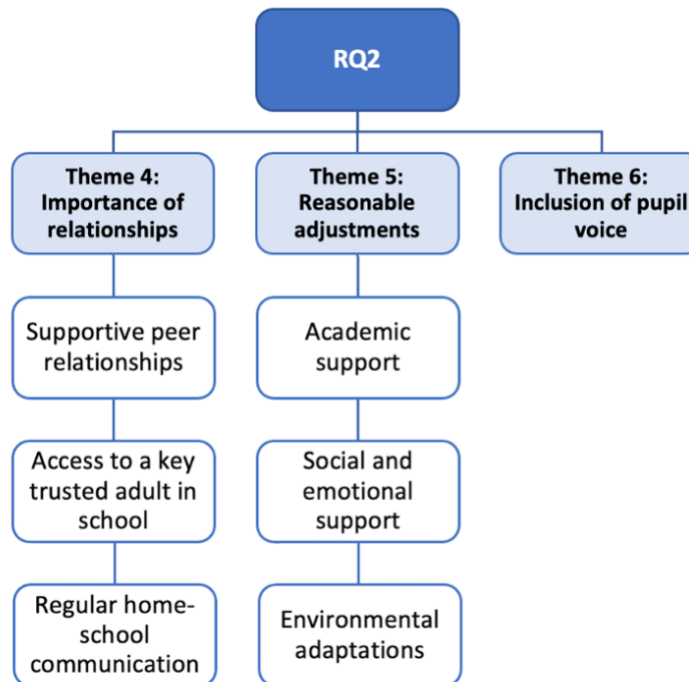
Although this subtheme was not present across as many participant's accounts, it still demonstrates a shared finding that factors relating to the individual's physiological and medical needs, including difficulties with sleep and diagnoses of ADHD and autism, can contribute towards barriers to school attendance by interacting with the environment.

4.3 Factors Which Support School Attendance

Three themes were generated in relation to research question 2, with a total of 6 subthemes. The hierarchical structure of themes is displayed in the thematic map in Figure 7.

Figure 7

Thematic Map Displaying the Themes and Subthemes for RQ2



4.3.1 Theme 4: Importance of Relationships

As previously noted in the findings of research question 1, negative peer and teacher relationships can contribute to barriers to school attendance. In contrast, all participants highlighted how positive relationships can be a supportive and protective factor to school attendance. Three subthemes were identified and will be discussed in turn, focussing on the relationships with peers, adults in school and the communication between home and school. The three themes are as follows:

- 1.1 Supportive peer relationships
- 1.2 Access to a key trusted adult in school
- 1.3 Regular home-school communication

4.3.1.1 Supportive Peer Relationships. As previously noted in research question 1, lacking a sense of belonging to peer group can contribute to barriers to school attendance acting as a pull factor towards staying at home. In contrast, all participants highlighted how positive peer relationships can be a supportive and protective push factor to school attendance. All participants mentioned the importance of their peers, with some specifically identifying them as a source of support and others describing their positive relationships and activities they like to engage in together at school which demonstrates a push factor towards school attendance. Participants described their peers as “kind” (Sam), “fun and nice” (Sarah) and “funny and sometimes a little silly like me” (Maria). The majority of participants described spending time with their friends as one of their favourite things about school. In addition, when asked what she likes about school, Sarah shared that she is “able to come and see my friends and able to play.” All participants described engaging in shared hobbies together at break and lunch times including playing football and basketball, writing stories, and playing games. Furthermore, when discussing how she felt about not being able to attend school during the Covid-19 pandemic lockdowns, Maria said “Well I got kinda sad, because we couldn't see our friends and our friends couldn't help us.” Participants appeared to feel motivated to come to school as they are able to see their friends, this suggests that peers may be a motivating push factor in encouraging young people to attend school.

Some participants explicitly stated practical ways in which their peers have supported them at school such as through offering social and emotional support and reassurance when they are feeling worried. Phoebe, who has a phobia of thunderstorms and also experiences ‘stage fright’ describes:

And he [my friend] reassures me when I think it's going to thunder and he also stands up for me. And Y... she also helps me... when we were doing this thing... I was worried about doing this performance thing, but she really helped me saying that it was fine.

Similarly, Kyle shared that when he feels angry and frustrated his friends “give [him] a hug and... be really kind.” This suggests that peers can be a vital source of emotional support for young people who experience early barriers to school attendance, by helping them overcome any worries or fears they may have and offering reassurance and encouragement.

This subtheme suggests that having a positive friendship group within school can be a protective factor, encouraging school attendance. Furthermore, these peers can be a source of emotional support through offering reassurance and encouragement.

4.3.1.2 Access to a Key Trusted Adult in School. Many participants described how the adults in school support them with their learning, but fewer participants mentioned being supported by adults with their emotions. This may suggest that young people view the role of teachers in an academic teaching role rather than an emotionally supporting role. When asked explicitly, most participants found it challenging to identify an adult in school who helps them with their worries. When asked if they feel they can talk to any adults in school about their worries, both Ron and Sam said “no”, Maria and Kyle responded “not really” and Sarah replied “I don’t really know”. Phoebe shared “Well things that [would] help me when I feel worried about coming to school is like people actually listening and doing something about my worries would actually help massively.” Furthermore, Ron shared that “speaking to people” helps him when he feels angry.

Some participants described having positive relationships with their current or previous teachers and described them using adjectives such as “really good” (Maria), “really nice” (Sarah), “really kind” and “really friendly” (Kyle). Other participants were able to describe what their teachers do that supports them with their emotions. Maria shared “I like Miss A because she helps me and she... always like, she makes sure I’m okay and stuff”. Furthermore, Phoebe describes:

She's really nice and, and when I'm worried about the thunderstorms, she checks the weather for me and she doesn't just say, oh, it's fine you don't have to worry about that. And she... does a lot of things to help like if my work is harder she comes and helps me, and if I'm feeling worried and I can't go into [class] she lets me sit in the book corner and she speaks to me about what's making me feel upset and yeah... she comes down and sees if I'm worried and you know... says that when I feel ready I can come to the classroom instead of you have to come to the classroom now.

This suggests that young people appear to value adults who listen to, and validate their emotions. It also suggests that they value being given autonomy over their support rather than simply being told what to do.

This subtheme highlights the importance of teachers developing positive relationships with the children in their class and ensuring that they are meeting their social and emotional wellbeing needs as well as their learning needs.

4.3.1.3 Regular Home-school Communication. Some participants highlighted the importance of parents having regular and open communication with school staff to advocate for their children’s needs and to help gain additional support within school. For example, Maria shared that her parents “support me a lot and they like, they tell the teachers” when she is feeling worried or sad about school. Another specific example was the parent’s role in applying for an Educational,

Health and Care Plan (EHCP), as described by Phoebe “My mom is trying to get me an.. EHC.. something [EHCP], but they didn’t agree so she's trying to make them agree. She said that I'm not going to secondary school without one.” This highlights the vital role of parents as advocates for their children, particularly when the young person’s voice is not being heard or taken into account.

Ron also described how his teachers visited him and his mum at home when he was not attending school, to explore what his barriers to attendance were and to put a plan of support in place to meet these needs:

They came to my house, it was my old year 4 teacher... and the teacher’s assistant... Me and my mum sat down and spoke to her... we just spoke about school and stuff, then she went to tell [the SENCo].

In contrast, one participant shared an experience of the outcome of poor home-school communication where both parties were contradicting in their approach. Phoebe describes:

Yeah once I was getting really, really worried because... my mom said that I didn’t have to do the work in the afternoon cos I was feeling really, really worried and I refused to go upstairs to the classroom for like half of the whole entire day. And, and, and the teacher Mrs Y, I was sitting in the cloakroom and she said to come in and to do the work, and I said that, and I said that I didn't want to cos my mom said I didn’t have to do it. And then she said, well your mom's not the boss, she isn’t here, I'm the teacher and you have to do what I tell you to do.

This quote demonstrates the negative impact which can occur when there is not open and regular home-school communication in place, with each party suggesting contradictory strategies, leading the young person to feel confused and conflicted about what to do. This demonstrates the importance of home-school communication to ensure both parties are consistent in their agreed approach to supporting needs.

4.3.2 Theme 5: Identification of Reasonable Adjustments

This theme highlights that young people were able to identify a range of factors which are either already in place, or that they would like to be implemented to help them overcome their barriers to school attendance. These reasonable adjustments are divided into three subthemes relating to different areas of support, which link with some of the themes identified in the first research question:

5.1 Academic support

5.2 Social and emotional support

5.3 Environmental adaptations

4.3.2.1 Academic Support. As highlighted in theme 1, participants identified that being given work which they perceived as too academically challenging, led to reduced self-confidence in their abilities and subsequent disengagement from learning, contributing to their barrier to their school attendance. In line with this, many participants referred to provision that had been implemented to support their learning, from scaffolding and differentiated work in lessons, to more targeted interventions to develop specific academic skills. The majority of participants were able to identify how adults in school supported them academically in class, through scaffolding and prompting. For example, when asked if teachers help them in any way, Sarah shared “they help me with my work” and Sam described “when I’m stuck on a question in the lesson then I ask for help.”

Other participants described receiving differentiated learning activities to support their engagement and access to the curriculum. For example, Kyle described how “if I’m in [class] and I’m doing something else a little bit different, like a bit, if we’re writing really big things, um I do something a little bit different.” Similarly, Maria shared “and then they’ll get like, in math tests on the Monday, um they’ll get me like a year five one instead of a year six one.” Furthermore, when asked if there was anything they would like to change about school, some participants referred to making lessons “a little bit more easier” (Maria) or “so they’re not that hard” (Sarah). These excerpts highlight the importance of scaffolding and differentiation of learning activities to ensure that young people can access the curriculum and experience feelings of success. This was supported by Sam who shared that his favourite lesson is history because he “knows a lot already when we do things”, which demonstrates that feelings of confidence directly link to young people’s motivation for learning. Another participant described accessing a targeted intervention to help with her working memory, Maria shared:

[the SENCo] helps me too because she works out solutions like because of my memory. There's another boy in my class, and he is.. he has something too and we just do this memory match game to make our memory a little bit better.

Furthermore, the majority of participants identified a preference for practical lessons which are linked to their interests such as computing, art, science and PE. For example, Phoebe shared that one of her hobbies outside of school is writing stories and therefore she explained that she likes English lessons because “English is where you get to do fun things... I like English because sometimes I get to do big writes.” She later explained:

My ideal school it will have everything that I like in it, it will have a whole room just myself with a load of computers in it, so I can watch YouTube while playing Roblox and Minecraft and, and, and watching Netflix, and also having my favourite characters from my favourite things in there.

Other participants described a preference for lessons which were fun and varied, for example, Maria shared that she enjoys art because “we do different lessons it's not like we just stay on one and it's not like we just paint and do that kinda work we do like shading and stuff.”. In addition, when asked if there was anything he would like to change about school, Kyle said he would like there to be “a bit more games because we don't really do any games... we don't do that much fun things now”. This suggests that young people prefer lessons which are fun and varied, and in which they feel confident in.

These strategies are aimed at increasing young people’s confidence and motivation so they will be more likely to engage in learning. This is in line with theme 1 which indicated that young people disliked lessons which were academically challenging, repetitive and boring.

4.3.2.2 Social and Emotional Support. As highlighted in theme 3, young people experience a range of emotions linked with school attendance. In line with this, the majority of participants identified strategies that they use to help regulate their emotions at school, both independently and with the support of others. Many participants mentioned the notion of being given time and space to help regulate. For example, Ron shared that “alone time” helps him to “calm down” when he feels angry about coming to school. Similarly, when asked if there was anything which would help her more, Phoebe shared “having a place that I could go to with no people there when I’m feeling upset or worried. That would be better without people laughing or staring at me while I feel worried and I’m crying...”

Some participants shared that they had developed self-regulation strategies to use when feeling dysregulated in school such as using fidget toys and distraction techniques. For example, Phoebe describes how she distracts herself by thinking about her interests:

Well, I’ve memorised a whole entire um YouTube video... and um I memorised the whole entire episode of it, so I just think of that when I’m worried, but well, that's not really a thing, well it is a thing that helps. Sometimes it distracts me from like worrying...

Furthermore, Maria shared “I always bring a teddy in my bag because when I'm sad I just take it out and hug it and then it makes me feel better.”

Other participants identified specific interventions which were implemented in school to support their social and emotional needs. For example, Kyle shared “Miss Y does mindfulness with me and a few other people and that helps”, whereas Ron shared that he accesses additional support at through a lunchtime club “it’s basically like an inside thing where you get to do colouring and stuff”. In addition, Maria described using emotion cards to help her to communicate her emotions to

a trusted adult “what Miss X made for me is these cards so they can see what I'm feeling instead of me just telling them”.

To conclude, this subtheme highlights the importance of having support in place for the emotional barriers, particularly anxiety, young people experienced towards school attendance.

4.3.2.3 Environmental Adaptations. As identified in theme 1, some participants experienced aversions to aspects of the school environment including the noise levels and school uniforms. In support of this, a helpful adaptation which was mentioned by participants was having exceptions made to the school uniform and allowing young people with sensory needs to wear alternative clothing. Ron describes how the SENCo supported him: “well the first thing she did, well this was probably like the only thing I really told her was about the school uniforms and stuff, so she lets me wear this but just this [tracksuit bottoms and trainers].” Similarly, when asked what would make school better, Kyle responded that he would like to “not wear our school uniform and wear, just clothes that we wanted to.” This demonstrates the importance of exploring each young person’s individual barriers to school attendance and adapting the environment where possible to reduce these barriers.

When asked if there was anything that they would like to change about school to make it better for them, some participants suggested structural adaptations being made to their school day such as introducing part time timetables and longer breaks. Ron described:

Probably like after like lunch or summat umm so after lunch I get to like... so basically my cousin he has the same stuff as me... ermm he goes home after lunch, so basically he does like half a day, cos after lunch he waits a bit and then his mum comes to pick him up before everyone else goes home.. after lunch he waits for his mum and then he goes home.

Ron shared that he would like to be able to go home after lunch, like his cousin and he explained that “it would make me feel good. It would make me feel [more] able to come, to go to school if it happened.” Other participants shared that they would like to have additional breaks throughout the school day, as described by Maria “A little bit longer breaks in the morning because we've been sitting down the whole day... and we need to go to like the toilet.” This links with subtheme 1.2 which highlighted the injustice felt when teachers do not allow young people to leave the class to meet their basic needs.

Theme 2 highlighted that the participants prefer to be at home as they are able to spend time with their parents and they experience worry when they are away from them and during the separation in the morning. Some participants mentioned strategies which aimed to reduce anxiety and aid this separation from parents to make school a safer place for them. Kyle shared that “on

Thursdays and Fridays, Miss Y comes to the gate and walks me up to class” to support his transition into school in the mornings. Kyle appeared to appreciate the extra effort made by his class teacher to meet him on her working days to take him to class. However, he shared that he would prefer if his parents could walk him up to class. He also suggested that “The grown ups... the parents could come into school whenever they want... whenever they want to see us... we could just have a little chat.” This suggests that having communication with parents throughout the school day may help to ease some of the young people’s worries about being separated from them.

When asked how they would like to change school to make it better, some participants shared that they would like more equipment on the playground, as illustrated by Sarah “I would add stuff in the playground because when we're outside we want to do other stuff outside and not just make up games and do it, we want to play with the equipment and that.” And Maria:

And I think I want a little bit more equipment on the playground because when we were in year 2 they've got a big equipment and we've just got a football pitch and a wooden playground and all that space we could just use.

Overall, this subtheme highlights the importance of making adaptations to the school environment to make it a more motivating and engaging place for young people to be.

4.3.3 Theme 6: Inclusion of Pupil Voice

As the previous theme has demonstrated, the majority of participants were able to suggest strategies which could be implemented to meet their needs and overcome their barriers to school attendance. However, participants shared their frustration at not being asked to input in planning for their support, or if they were asked, they did not feel as though their views were valued or their ideas were implemented. For example, Phoebe described:

I don't feel safe at school... because I feel like when I go there, nobody's gonna listen to what I want them to do, like if I was worried and I tell them that I need this they probably wouldn't do it because they'd say well we can't do that because we're in school.

This suggests that Phoebe has tried to suggest strategies which she feels would be beneficial, but school staff do not appear to listen, or are unable to implement the strategies due to pragmatic constraints in school. Another participant, Ron, when asked if he had spoken to any teachers about his concerns with a particular lesson, shared that:

Well I tried to explain other lessons, and then my mum has, and they listen to my mum yeah but my mum don't understand, they listen to my mum more than they do me but she don't realise it...

This illustrates that Ron did not feel listened to by his teachers, whereas he believes that they will take his mother's views into account over his. Overall, this suggests that young people do not feel heard by their teachers when they try to explain what may help them at school. These young people appear to feel powerless and are not being involved in decision making that is being 'done to' them, rather than 'with'. They are not being heard even though they are the experts of their own needs.

A consequence of not actively involving young people in planning for their support is suggesting generic strategies which may be helpful for some young people but not for others. Many participants described experiences of teachers suggesting strategies which were unhelpful for them. For example, Phoebe describes:

You know how some people say, oh think of nice memories or take a deep breath in... well this is a thing that teachers need to stop doing. Or they say oh yeah just play some relaxing music... Well first of all, making memories makes me worry about losing them and and the people that I spent the memories with are going to go away. And also, and taking a deep breath in just makes it even worse. And thirdly, relaxing music makes me feel sad and makes me think about people dying.

To summarise, this theme highlights the importance of gaining young people's voice and taking an individualised approach to supporting their needs, rather than taking a 'one size fits all' approach.

Chapter 5: Discussion

5.1 Chapter Overview

This research aimed to explore the perceptions of primary school aged children and young people (CYP) on the early barriers and protective factors to their school attendance. This chapter will discuss the findings of the research in relation to the research questions, alongside the existing literature and theoretical frameworks presented in chapters 1 and 2. This chapter will then critique the methodological quality of the research and will conclude with potential implications for practice for schools and educational psychologists (EPs), as well as suggestions for possible future research.

5.2 RQ1. What do primary school children perceive as their early barriers to school attendance?

Participants identified barriers to school attendance across three main themes relating to: negative school experiences, home as a place of safety and unmet psychological and physiological needs. Each theme will be discussed in turn with links to previous literature and theory interwoven throughout, before presenting an overview in relation to the research question.

5.2.1 *Negative School Experiences*

The most common barrier to school attendance which was identified by participants encompassed negative school experiences relating to the curriculum, relationships with peers and teachers and the school environment. Participants were motivated to avoid school to escape these school-based situations which evoke negative emotional reactions (Kearney & Silverman, 1993). All participants mentioned experiencing a lack of motivation for learning, as a result of perceived academic challenge or disinterest in the curriculum. This supports previous research which was included in the systematic literature review (Beckles, 2014; Clissold, 2018; How, 2015; James, 2015; Kljakovic et al., 2021; Tamlyn, 2022), with Beckles (2014) concluding that the main barrier to young people's school attendance was a lack of motivation to attend lessons which they did not enjoy or understand.

This can be understood in terms of the self-determination theory (SDT) (Deci & Ryan, 1985) which states that humans are motivated by having a sense of autonomy, competence and relatedness. Autonomy is defined as feeling in control over one's actions whereas competence relates to feelings of mastery. Finally, relatedness describes having a sense of belonging and connectedness with others. It is apparent that the young people, both in the present study and in previous literature had unmet needs within these three areas. In terms of autonomy, participants lacked control over the content of the curriculum, describing it as boring, repetitive and restrictive.

Furthermore, participants perceived the content of lessons as too academically challenging which reduced their feelings of competence and confidence in their abilities. Finally, participants perceived a distinct lack of support from the adults within school, which is likely to impact their sense of relatedness. The accumulation of these three factors is likely to have a negative impact upon young people's motivation for learning, and subsequently their motivation to attend school.

Another school-related factor which was present across all accounts was a sense of injustice, particularly in response to teachers' actions. Teachers were described as strict and many participants shared accounts of receiving sanctions which they perceived as unfair and undeserved. These findings are consistent with previous research which suggested that young people disliked the use of behaviourist strategies and described teachers treating them like children (Beckles, 2014). Similarly, a participant in Want's (2020) research highlighted the inequalities between the expectations for staff and pupils. She describes "she asked me why I had a nose piercing and she had one herself and I was so confused at that" (p. 110). Furthermore, participants in the present study felt misunderstood and wrongly labelled by teachers as either rude or naughty, which mirrors findings from Baker and Bishop (2015), in which pupils reported being labelled by teachers as lazy, naughty and a drama queen.

This impact of this sense of injustice on CYP's school attendance can be understood by both the SDT (Deci & Ryan, 1985) and Maslow's hierarchy of needs (1943). In terms of the SDT, teachers' use of behaviourist approaches such as sanctions and external rewards are said to reduce intrinsic motivation by reducing autonomy, competence and relatedness. When adults attempt to control CYP and modify their behaviour using sanctions, they are reducing the individual's sense of autonomy (Fisher, 2003). Furthermore, the use of sanctions and negative reinforcement focusses on highlighting the young person's negative behaviour, which they may internalise, thus reducing their sense of competence. Finally, as highlighted by the young people in the present study and previous research, CYP dislike the use of sanctions and the teachers that use these strategies, thus placing strain on their relationships and resulting in a lack of relatedness with members of school staff. This sense of relatedness is also discussed in Maslow's hierarchy of needs (1943), which suggests that young people need to develop trusting relationships with adults in order to experience emotional safety and containment, before they are able to experience a sense of belonging.

Furthermore, participants in the present study highlighted a lack of belonging to their peer group as a barrier to their school attendance. Participants described feeling isolated and perceived themselves as different to their peers, in relation to their hobbies and needs. This is consistent with previous research which illustrated that participants felt as though they did not fit in with their peer group (Baker & Bishop, 2015; How, 2015). This was also illustrated by Gregory and Purcell (2014)

“They treated me like I was weird and it’s not nice to feel different” (p. 44). Similarly, the findings from the present research suggest that many of the participants have experienced peer conflict and bullying, which supports previous findings from Aucott (2014), Clissold (2018) and Tamlyn (2022), which are presented in the systematic literature review.

With reference to the bioecological model, peer groups form part of the microsystem which is thought to be the most influential system on a child’s development (Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994). Negative experiences and interactions between the individual and their environment at each system may contribute to barriers to school attendance. Furthermore, belonging to a peer group is pertinent to developing a sense of belonging, which will be explored further in the findings of research question 2. Without a sense of belonging, Maslow (1943) postulates that young people will not be able to fulfil their esteem needs, and ultimately reach their full potential.

Finally, participants referred to sensory aspects of the school environment as contributing to their barriers to school attendance. This is in line with previous research which identified barriers including large groups of people at school (Kljakovic et al., 2021) and high levels of noise (Beckles, 2014; Clissold, 2018; James, 2015). Although these barriers were likely to be present before the Covid-19 pandemic, the changes that occurred to education during the pandemic and resulting partial school closures may have highlighted this need as CYP were able to experience an alternative way of accessing their education, either at home or in smaller groups.

5.2.2 Home as a Safe Place

The findings illustrate that participants perceived their homes to be a place of safety and enjoyment, particularly in comparison to school. This aligns with previous research which suggests that young people prefer to stay at home as they can engage in hobbies (Beckles, 2014; How, 2015; James, 2015; Kljakovic et al., 2021) or spend quality time with their parents (Baker & Bishop, 2015; Beckles, 2014). This theme encompassed pull factors to home, which encourage young people to stay at home rather than attend school. This is in line with Kearney and Silverman’s (1993) theory that young people avoid school to seek time and attention from significant others, as well as to pursue tangible reinforcers and positive experiences outside of school. However, this contrasts with findings from other research, in which participants described their time at home as boring and lonely (Baker & Bishop, 2015; Beckles, 2014; Gregory & Purcell, 2014; James, 2015). This may be a reflection of the age of participants, with the present study using a sample of primary school children whose parents would need to stay at home with them, compared to previous literature using secondary school aged participants, who may have given more independence at home.

The impact of the home and family life on pupil's attendance can be considered in terms of the SDT (Deci & Ryan, 1985) and Maslow's hierarchy of needs (1943) which suggest that human behaviour is motivated by the fulfilment of different needs. At home, CYP report being able to engage in hobbies and activities of their own choice. These are likely to be activities which they enjoy and can succeed in, thus fulfilling a sense of autonomy and competence. This is in direct contrast to the theme 1, whereby CYP have to engage in the curriculum at school, which they perceived as academically challenging and not engaging. Furthermore, for CYP who stay at home to spend time with their families, they are likely to fulfilling a sense of relatedness, particularly if they do not experience a sense of belonging at school, as suggested in theme 1.

In addition, one of Maslow's basic needs (1943) is that of safety, which encompasses both physical and emotional safety. As participants reported feeling safe and emotionally contained at home, compared to at school, they are likely to be motivated to stay at home to experience these positive feelings of safety. For the CYP in this study, their home lives tended to be predictable and consistent and all participants described home in a positive light, However, this contradicts with previous research in which participants described negative experiences within the family including loss, stress and illness (Beckles, 2014; James, 2015; Tamlyn, 2022). One participant in James' (2015) study described arguments within the family home as motivating factor to attend school, suggesting that they "come to school for an escape" from these arguments at home (p. 198). In this case, school may have been a more predictable, consistent and safe environment for this young person, compared to home. In addition, both participants in Tamlyn's (2022) research who had experienced loss and change, through parental separation and bereavement, reported being motivated to stay at home to either give, or receive emotional support from family members.

5.2.3 Psychological and Physiological Needs

The final theme considers factors which relate to the individual's psychological and physiological needs. Firstly, the majority of participants described feelings of emotional dysregulation and anxious thoughts, feelings and behaviours as a contributing barrier to their school attendance. This is similar to previous research, although research which explored the perceptions of secondary aged CYP tended to mention more complex mental health difficulties such as clinical diagnoses of anxiety and depression (Baker & Bishop, 2015; Clissold, 2018; Gregory & Purcell, 2014; Kljakovic et al., 2021). This contrast in findings may reflect the differing ages of participants and varying levels of need, with those who are younger in age and/ or at the early stages of experiencing barriers to school attendance citing emotional dysregulation as a response to environmental factors whereas older CYP with more complex and entrenched needs may have gone on to develop more

significant mental health difficulties with age. However, it may also be a consequence of the inclusion criterion which excluded CYP with CAMHS involvement for ethical reasons of reducing harm, and thus excluded those who have more complex mental health difficulties. The findings from the present research support the existing literature which suggests that difficulties with mental health and psychological wellbeing can be a predisposing or perpetuating barrier to school attendance (Clissold, 2018). For example, one participant experienced a phobia of thunderstorms which acted as a predisposing barrier to school attendance, whereas other participants describe emotional dysregulation as a response to unmet needs within school, which may subsequently maintain any difficulties with school attendance. This is in line with Kearney and Silverman's (1993) functions of 'school refusal' which suggests that CYP avoid school to escape experiencing negative emotions. It can also be understood in terms of the anxiety avoidance cycle, which highlights the role of avoidance behaviours in maintaining anxious thoughts and feelings, and thus perpetuating school attendance difficulties (West Sussex EPS, 2018).

Furthermore, participants mentioned experiencing difficulties with sleep and feeling tired as a barrier to their school attendance. This corresponds with the findings from previous research included in the systematic literature review (Aucott; 2014; Baker, 2015; Beckles, 2014; James, 2015; Kljakovic et al., 2021; Want, 2020). Participants reported that going to bed late had an impact upon their ability to get up in the mornings for school, as well as on their mood and concentration levels. Participants in Kljakovic et al.'s (2021) study who were not attending school shared that they tended to stay awake all night and sleep all day. Considering Maslow's hierarchy of needs (1943), sleep is one of the basic physiological requirements which are key for survival. Therefore, if young people have not had enough sleep at night, they will find it difficult to wake up in the morning and will be motivated to stay at home to fulfil this need. Furthermore, Maslow (1943) would argue that this basic need must be met before young people are able to experience feelings of safety, belonging, esteem and self-actualisation. Therefore, a lack of sleep will have a detrimental impact upon all areas of a young person's wellbeing.

5.2.4 Summary of Themes in Relation to Research Question One

Overall, participants identified barriers to school attendance across three key areas – school, home and the individual, which is consistent with previous research. There appeared to be a dichotomy between participants' descriptions of school as "awful, horrible and like a prison" (Phoebe) whereas home was described as a safe space. Participants described factors which discouraged them from attending school including difficulties with peers, teachers, the curriculum and the sensory environment. In contrast, they also mentioned factors which encouraged them to stay at home, including being able to spend time with family and engage in hobbies.

Factors relating to negative school experiences appeared to be the most common barriers to school attendance amongst the participants, as evidenced by the greater number of themes relating to school, compared to the home or individual. This contrasts with previous research which identified factors relating to the individual, particularly mental health (Clissold, 2018) as the greatest barrier to school attendance. This may be indicative of a difference in the perceptions of primary school children to secondary school CYP, or those who are at the early stages of experiencing barriers to school attendance, compared to those whose non-attendance is more entrenched. However, it may also be a consequence of the inclusion criterion which excluded CYP with social care or CAMHS involvement, and thus those who have more complex family circumstances and mental health difficulties.

A number of complex and interacting factors were identified, which supports the view that barriers to school attendance is a heterogeneous and interacting experience. This can be understood in terms of the bioecological theory (Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994) whereby an individual exists within a complex set of interacting systems. The individual is often pictured at the centre, with school and home forming part of the microsystem around the child, which is argued to be the most influential system. The barriers do not exist in isolation but instead interact with each other, with factors relating to the individual interacting with environmental factors.

5.3 RQ2. What do primary school children perceive as the factors which support their school attendance?

Participants identified factors across three main themes: the importance of relationships, identification of reasonable adjustments and including pupil voice when planning for support. These will be discussed in turn with reference to previous literature and theoretical underpinnings and will conclude with a summary in response to the research question.

5.3.1 Importance of Relationships

The importance of relationships was a key supportive factor which was present across all participants' accounts. These relationships included those with peers and adults in school, as well as the communication between home and school. Firstly, participants described having a positive and supportive peer group as a factor which encourages them to attend school. Participants described the characteristics they valued in their peers and shared that they enjoy spending time with them at school. This is in line with Beckles' (2014) and James (2015) research, in which participants highlighted how seeing their friends was a motivating factor to attend school.

The importance of these positive relationships can be understood in terms of the SDT (Deci & Ryan, 1985) and Maslow's hierarchy of needs (1943). As highlighted in research question 1, lacking a sense of relatedness, or belonging, can have detrimental effects on a young person's motivation to attend school. In direct contrast, developing positive peer relationships can promote a sense of relatedness and belonging and act as a motivating factor to school attendance (Popoola & Sivers, 2021).

Furthermore, participants described the importance of having a key trusted adult in school who checks in with them, listens to and validate their emotions. This aligns with previous research (Tamlyn, 2022; Want, 2020), whereby participants described experiencing positive relationships with teachers who have a caring nature, are easy to talk to and who value their opinions. The importance of having a key, trusted adult within school can also contribute to feelings of belonging, as well as feelings of safety through providing consistency, predictability and emotional containment (Maslow, 1943). A sense of safety and belonging can be promoted through the implementation of relational and trauma-informed approaches to develop trusting relationships with school staff (Popoola & Sivers, 2023).

In addition, participants highlighted the importance of parents having regular communication with school staff. Examples of this included home-visits and parents coming into school to advocate for their child's needs, which aligns with the findings from previous research by How (2015). However, there appeared to be a greater emphasis on this in the present study, compared to the previous literature. This may reflect a difference in the primary school system compared to the secondary school system in the UK. Typically, parents have more communication with school staff at primary school due to dropping off and collecting their children from school, whereas young people in secondary school tend to have higher levels of independence to travel to and from school independently. This may also reflect a difference in the stages of the young people's needs, as the participants in the present study are still regularly attending school, compared to some of the studies included in the systematic literature review whereby CYP are completely non-attending or are accessing home education or alternative provisions (Kljakovic et al, 2021; Want, 2020). It is apparent that home-school communication would be pragmatically easier if the CYP were still in school. Home and school represent two of the most influential systems in a young person's life and Bronfenbrenner and Ceci (1994) refers to the interactions between these systems as the 'mesosystem'. It is vital to bring these two systems together to enable each system to gain a holistic overview of the young person's needs across different environments, to share strategies which are supporting and to collaboratively develop next steps in order to have a consistent approach to meeting the young person's need.

5.3.2 Reasonable Adjustments

The majority of participants identified reasonable adjustments which were already in place to support them, or suggested strategies which they feel would help overcome their barriers to school attendance. These were divided into academic support, social and emotional support and environmental adaptations. Academic support included differentiation and scaffolding in lessons, as well as more targeted interventions. This supported previous research by Beckles (2014) in which participants described pre-teaching, revision and small group sessions as helpful strategies to supporting their learning. As the participants in the previous literature had more entrenched barriers to school attendance, with many of them not attending mainstream settings, the academic support which was highlighted tended to be focussed on a more targeted level such as individual tuition at home (Baker & Bishop, 2015; Kljakovic et al., 2021). The provision of academic support aimed to increase young people's confidence and competence in their learning (Deci & Ryan, 1985), which in turn would enable them to experience feelings of success and esteem (Maslow, 1943). This would subsequently increase their motivation and engagement with their learning.

Similarly, many participants highlighted strategies to support their social and emotional wellbeing and emotional regulation such as having a safe space in school, fidget toys and engaging in a mindfulness intervention. They also suggested environmental adaptations such as changes to the school day including more breaks and part time timetables. As these participants were at the early stages of experiencing barriers to school attendance, strategies were exclusively school-based and largely considered universal provisions, with elements of targeted support. This is in line with the government guidance (DfE, 2022) which highlights the importance of early identification and intervention. In contrast, previous research tended to focus on the role of external professionals such as CAMHS and counselling (Baker & Bishop, 2015; Beckles, 2014; Kljakovic et al., 2021), for higher level and more complex mental health needs.

5.3.3 Inclusion of Pupil Voice

Participants in the present research shared their frustrations at not being involved in planning for their support, despite being able to identify strategies which would support them. This led to the implementation of generic strategies which were not helpful. This supports previous research by Beckles (2014), Clissold (2018) and Gregory and Purcell (2014) whose participants shared that they had limited opportunities to have their voices heard and be involved in decisions made about them. One participant in Baker and Bishop's (2015) research commented "not everyone's the same – they try to push the same quick fix on everyone, and it doesn't work". (p. 360).

Allowing young people to have some control over their support helps to develop their sense of autonomy in line with the SDT (Deci & Ryan, 1985). This also corresponds with the UK government's guidance on supporting school attendance (DfE, 2022a), which highlights the importance of eliciting CYP's voice to identify specific unmet needs and barriers to school attendance and involving them in the planning for their support. More broadly, this also reflects the Children and Families Act (2014) and the subsequent SEND Code of Practice (DfE & Department of Health, 2015) which promotes involving young people in decision making around their care and education.

5.3.4 Summary of Themes in Relation to Research Question Two

Overall, participants were able to identify a range of factors which support their school attendance, these are referred to as push factors within the literature, which encourage and motivate them to attend school. Relationships appeared to be the most influential factor which supported school attendance, namely relationships with peers, school staff and parents. There appeared to be more of focus on environmental adaptations to the learning environment compared to 'within-child' strategies such as counselling or therapy which were common across the existing literature. This is likely to reflect the lower level of need of the participants in the present study and focus on early intervention, compared to those with more entrenched needs in the previous literature. A number of different strategies were discussed, which highlights the importance of taking an individualised approach to meeting these needs, rather than using 'one-size fits all' strategies. The findings highlight the importance of including pupil voice and parent communication in planning for and regularly reviewing support.

These findings demonstrate support for the Ecological Model of Successful Reintegration, developed by Nuttall and Woods (2013). This model combines Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs with Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory. The model suggests factors to support the young person's feelings of safety, belonging and esteem (Maslow, 1943) including adults having a positive and nurturing interactions with the young person, as well as taking a flexible and individualised approach to support learning. Nuttall and Woods (2013) also highlight the importance of having a key adult within school and positive home-school relationships. Furthermore, the importance of early identification and assessment of need to inform intervention was raised (Nuttall & Woods, 2013).

5.4 Methodological Critique

This section aims to evaluate the strengths and limitations of the research at each stage of the research process including sample and recruitment, data collection and data analysis.

5.4.1 Sample and Recruitment

A sample of six KS2 pupils from five different mainstream primary schools participated in the research. This is towards the lower end of the recommended sample size for a small-scale research project (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Although qualitative research does not aim for data saturation or claim to use representative samples (Robson & McCartan, 2016), a larger sample size would have given more CYP the opportunity to have their views heard and to contribute to the literature base. However, recruitment of participants was challenging and anecdotally, some SENCos commented that it was difficult to identify pupils who were eligible for participation, as they do not currently monitor those who are beginning to experience barriers to school attendance, and instead focus on those with lower attendance percentages. The inclusion criterion relied on SENCos' professional judgements and purposely did not include an attendance percentage as the research focussed on young people who were at the early stages of experiencing barriers to school attendance. These young people were still attending school regularly and would not have been identifiable through attendance percentage. This population may therefore represent a group of young people who would not typically be highlighted as having needs due to being at the early stages of experiencing barriers to school attendance and may therefore often go 'under the radar' until their needs become more entrenched.

At the planning and recruitment stages, the researcher focussed more on the terminology of emotionally based school avoidance (EBSA) which is reflected in the inclusion criteria and recruitment documentation. This focusses more on the social, emotional and mental health needs of the CYP and is typically related to anxiety surrounding school attendance. Following more in depth engagement with, and critique of the literature, the researcher felt that the term barriers to school attendance was more appropriate, due to its holistic approach in identifying unmet needs in various areas including health, sensory needs, social and academic factors, change, family and maintenance factors (Tobias, 2021).

Although qualitative research does not claim to be generalisable, the transferability of the interpretations can be supported by providing detailed characteristics of the participants (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). An optional questionnaire was included on the consent forms, requesting the participants' name, age, gender and ethnicity. However, no participants completed the ethnicity section and therefore the contextual information available is limited. This may have been due to a lack of understanding around the terminology and perhaps could have been supported by providing multiple choice options. Due to ethical considerations regarding reduction in psychological harm, CYP with current CAMHS or social care involvement were excluded from participation. In addition, the inclusion criterion included CYP being able to verbally engage in a semi-structured interview,

which may have consequently excluded CYP with speech, language and communication needs. The experiences and perceptions of these groups is likely to differ from the CYP included in the present research, due to these additional contributing environmental and individual factors. Therefore, care should be taken in any attempts to transfer the findings to these groups. This may justify the emphasis which was found on school-based barriers to attendance, rather than factors relating to the home or the individual.

5.4.2 Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were used to gain the views and perceptions of primary school children on their barriers to school attendance. Semi-structured interviews were employed as they were able to provide focus to the interviews, whilst offering flexibility to explore any novel factors raised by the participants (Dogra & O'Reilly, 2016). The aim of research was to gather rich, qualitative data, however, some participants found it difficult to answer open questions, as demonstrated by responding 'don't know'. Therefore, these participants required re-wording of the question and more closed questions in order to elicit their views. In addition, a visual 'skip' card was provided to participants to enable them to exercise their right to withdraw and to ensure that they did not have to answer any questions they did not wish to (see appendix O). Participants tended to use this when asked an open question to elicit elaboration on their answers. This impacted upon the quality of the data gathered, with great variation in the depth and detail of the data provided by different participants. This tended to be associated with the participants' age, with the Y3 participant requiring more follow up questions. Although the participants who provided less detailed accounts still contributed to the generation of themes, excerpts from the more articulate participants were presented to illustrate the interpretations more clearly. Upon reflection, it may have been useful to use a combination of more participatory methods such as drawing, alongside the semi-structured interviews to offer participants an alternative method for conveying their views, particularly considering their age and developmental stage (Dogra & O'Reilly, 2016).

The researcher reflexively considered their own impact on the data collection. Firstly, the researcher's personal and professional background may have influenced the interview schedule and follow up questions asked in the interview. Within the researcher's role as a trainee educational psychologist, she aims to take a holistic and systemic approach to understanding and supporting CYP's needs. Therefore, the questions asked may have focussed on the influence of the systems around the child including home and school, rather than within-child factors. Furthermore, the perceived power dynamics between the researcher and the participants may have influenced the data collected. The researcher is a white, female, middle class professional, whereas the participants

were all of primary school age. The participants may have viewed the researcher as a teacher or other authority figure, despite attempts to reduce this through careful introduction of her role, using simple language without jargon and dressing in smart but informal attire. In addition, the interviews took place in the young person's school to ensure that it was a familiar environment to them. However, this may have added to the perception of the researcher as a teacher. Despite attempts to reduce any perceived difference in status, participants may not have felt as comfortable sharing negative views about school and teachers in particular. This was reflected in one interview, in which the participant requested to 'skip' any questions about teachers, and a few other participants displayed hesitation before responding with a negative view. In these situations, participants were reminded that their responses were confidential and would not be shared with their teachers. One participant chose to have a parent present during the interview, which may have restricted their ability to talk freely. However, the presence of the key attachment figure appeared to facilitate the young person to feel more comfortable and to speak openly.

5.4.3 Data Analysis

Reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) was considered to be an appropriate method for answering the research questions. It allowed shared patterns of meaning to be generated across the data set, identifying both supportive factors and barriers to school attendance, which directly informed practical implications. However, this minimised the focus on each individual's experience which may have excluded factors which were influential to only one participant, but still important to that individual, particularly considering the heterogeneity of experiences across the sample.

Furthermore, the researcher was a novice to qualitative analysis and in particular RTA, before undertaking this research. However, RTA is considered to be suitable for novices as it provides clear guidelines for the process of analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022), the researcher also sought supervision from her university tutor, as well as seeking peer support from fellow trainee EPs and qualified EP colleagues who were experienced in using the approach.

The researcher aimed to take an inductive approach to data analysis, although Braun and Clarke (2022) argue that it cannot be purely inductive due to the researcher having prior knowledge of literature in the area. Though undertaking a systematic review of the existing literature prior to data collection and analysis, the researcher became familiar with the findings identified within the literature. The author found it challenging to code the data with this knowledge in mind, and found herself coding the data almost deductively, in line with the findings from the systematic literature review. The researcher critically reflected on the impact that this had on the development of themes

and decided to re-analyse the data, consciously trying to focus on generating novel codes and themes from the data, rather than fitting it into existing themes.

Finally, the researcher used a reflexive journal to consider how her own background and experiences may have impacted upon the analysis of the data. Although the researcher considered herself to be different to the participants in many ways, the researcher did also attend primary school in the UK, although almost two decades ago. The researcher lived and attended primary school in a rural county location, which differs to the participants in the present study who all attended inner-city schools. In contrast to the participants, the researcher did not personally experience any barriers to school attendance and perceived school as a positive and enjoyable experience. The researcher has had professional experience during her role as a trainee educational psychologist, in supporting CYP who experience barriers to school attendance which may have also influenced the process of coding and theme generation.

5.5 Possible Implications

The possible implications for both schools and EPs will be considered, as well as suggestions for future research. As indicated in Chapter 3, this is in line with Yardley's (2000) fourth and final criteria which focusses on evaluating the impact and usefulness of the research and its findings.

5.5.1 Implications for Schools

This research has several practical implications for schools. Firstly, it highlights the importance of early identification and intervention of barriers to school attendance in primary schools. This corresponds with the recent government guidance (DfE, 2022) which suggests that schools should aim to monitor all patterns of attendance, including punctuality, to enable these needs to be identified as early as possible to prevent them from escalating. Furthermore, the findings highlight that primary school children are generally able to identify their barriers to school attendance, as well as strategies to support them. Therefore, this research reinforces that school staff should include pupils views and wishes when planning for their support.

The importance of having a key adult within school to develop a positive and trusting relationship was a key finding from this research, alongside disliking the use of sanctions. This highlights the role of taking a relational and trauma-informed approach to supporting CYP rather than using behaviourist strategies (Popoola & Sivers, 2023). Relational approaches aim to develop internal regulation and motivation through developing a sense of autonomy, competence and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Furthermore, peer group belonging was another important factor for these young people. School staff can promote these positive peer relationships using targeted

interventions to teach social skills, as well as facilitating lunchtime clubs in areas of interest. Finally, the research highlighted the importance of regular home-school communication. Schools could facilitate this through the use of home-school communication books or regular meetings with parents to review the young person's progress.

5.5.2 Implications for EP Practice

This research also has implications for EP practice, both at the individual and more systemic levels. This topic is pertinent to the field of applied educational psychology as EPs are ideally situated to support schools with understanding the psychological theory underpinning barriers to school attendance and thus supporting CYP to attend school more regularly (West Sussex EPS, 2018).

The findings suggest that young people experience complex and interacting barriers to school attendance across home, school and the individual. Models such as the ATTEND framework (Tobias, 2021) can be used to explore these areas, considering barriers relating to anxiety and health and wellbeing (individual factors), sensory, social and academic factors (school related factors), and change, family and maintenance factors (factors relating to home). The ATTEND framework encourages triangulation of data from the pupil, their parent/ carer and a key professional and aims to collaboratively form an action plan to address the unmet needs.

At a more systemic level, there is a role for EPs in raising awareness of the importance of early identification of CYP who are beginning to experience barriers to school attendance. EPs could support schools and parents by delivering training or workshops on the early signs to look out for. EPs could also provide staff training on strategies which can be implemented to increase autonomy, relatedness and competence (Deci & Ryan, 1985), as well as feelings of safety, belonging and esteem (Maslow, 1943) to support attendance.

5.5.3 Suggestions for Future Research

The present research offered a distinct contribution to the literature base by undertaking research to gain the views and perceptions of primary school children who are beginning to experience barriers to school avoidance. The majority of existing research focusses on more entrenched needs, where CYP are out of school and attending alternative provisions or accessing home education. Furthermore, the vast majority of research included in the systematic literature review explored the voices of secondary school aged pupils and therefore primary school pupils' views were underrepresented in the existing literature.

Any future research with this specific population of primary school children who are beginning to experience barriers to school attendance, would be invaluable in enabling more underrepresented voices to be heard. Future research may aim to overcome some of the

methodological limitations of the present research, for example, considering the use of more participatory methods of data collection to support primary school aged children to share their views, as well as including CYP with speech and language needs or social interaction needs. Future research may wish to use a more diverse sample, including CYP from a range of settings such as specialist provisions and alternative provisions.

In addition, future research may wish to consider exploring specific aspects of the theoretical models referenced in this study, namely Maslow's hierarchy of needs (1943) and the self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985) within this specific population. For example, exploring CYP's sense of belonging or aspirations of CYP who experience barriers to school attendance. Finally, it would be of interest to conduct research into the views and perceptions of school staff and parents in supporting primary school CYP who are at the early stages of their difficulties. Although there is much existing research into the views of parents and school staff, it tends to be focussed on supporting secondary school pupils with more entrenched needs and complete school non-attendance.

5.6 Conclusion

The research has offered a distinct contribution to the literature base by exploring the views and perceptions of primary school children who are beginning to experience barriers to school attendance. The findings support and extend previous literature which suggests that CYP perceive barriers to school attendance within three main areas, factors relating to themselves, factors relating to their home and family and factors relating to school. Participants also identified a range of supportive factors which focussed on the importance of relationships, inclusion of pupil voice in planning for support and reasonable adjustments.

These findings are in line with Thambirajah et al. (2008) who suggested that school non-attendance occurs when "stress exceeds support, when risks are greater than resilience and when 'pull' factors that promote school non-attendance overcome the 'push' factors that encourage attendance" (p. 33). As the young people involved in the research are still attending school and are considered to be at the early stages of experiencing barriers to school attendance, it can be concluded that the push factors are currently outweighing the pull factors. This research has highlighted implications for schools and EP practice regarding the importance of early identification and intervention, by identifying and nurturing the existing areas of resilience and by putting support in place to overcome the barriers, it is hoped that these CYP will continue to attend school and thrive.

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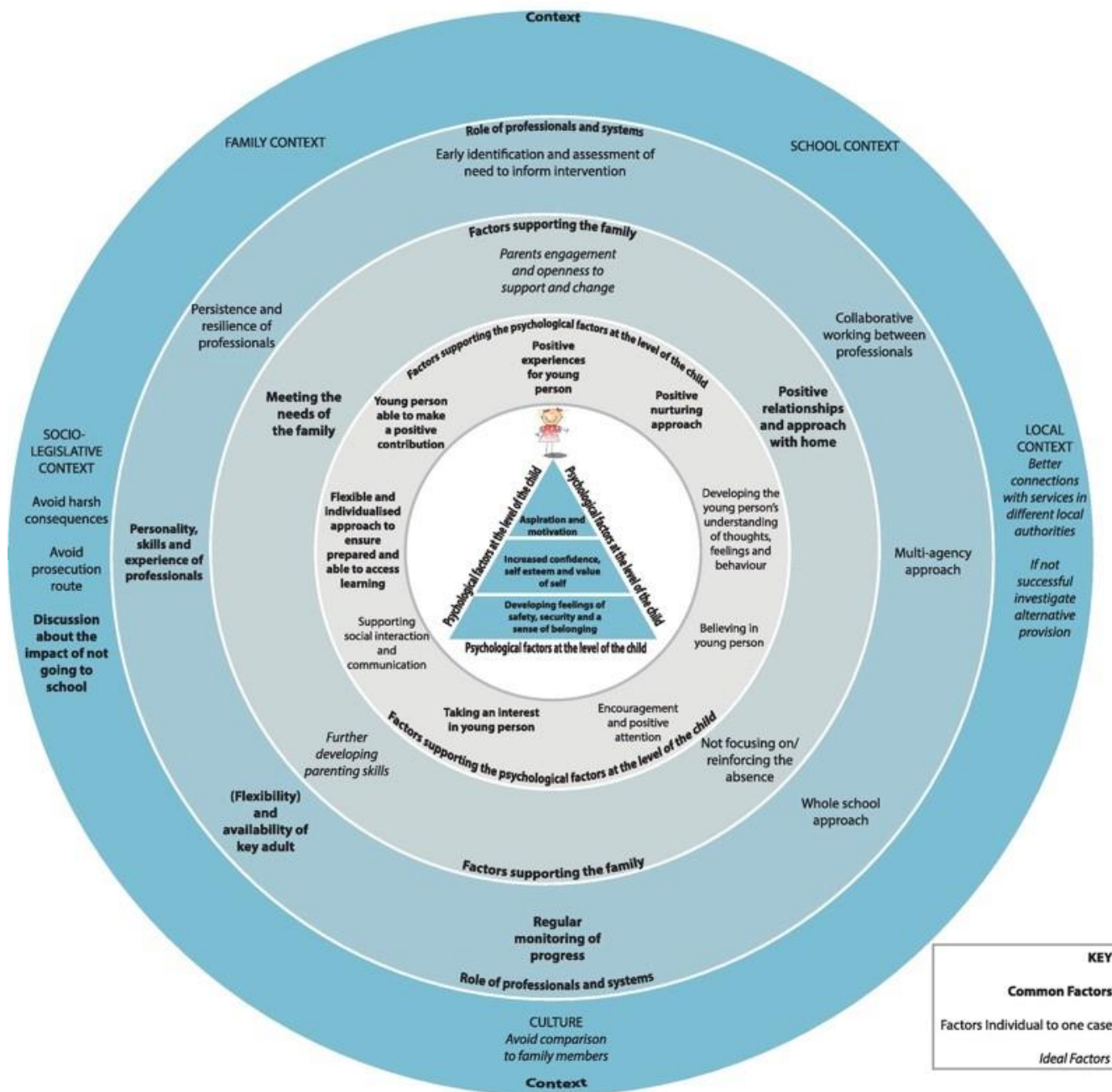
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Appendix A: Ecological Model of Successful Reintegration (Nuttall & Woods, 2013)

Ecological Model of Successful Reintegration



Appendix B: List of Studies Excluded from SLR at Full Text Screening

Reference	Reasons for Exclusion
Corcoran, S., & Kelly, C. (2023). A meta-ethnographic understanding of children and young people's experiences of extended school non-attendance. <i>Journal of Research in Special Educational Needs</i> , 23(1), 24-37.	6 Inappropriate research design (SLR – secondary research)
Kljakovic, M., & Kelly, A. (2019). Working with school-refusing young people in Tower Hamlets, London. <i>Clinical Child Psychology and Psychiatry</i> , 24(4), 921-933.	7 Inappropriate sample – school staff
Billington, K. (2018). <i>Using an active listening approach to consider the views of three young people on the topic of missing education. Educational Psychology in Practice</i> , 34(1), 337-351.	7 Inappropriate sample – includes CYP who were absent due to exclusion
Orme-Stapleton, C. (2017). <i>A qualitative exploration of persistent non-attendance in a South West local authority area</i> [Doctoral thesis, University of Exeter]. ETHoS.	9 No clear separation of pupil views from family views
Higgings, M. (2022). The ideal school: Exploring the perceptions of autistic students experiencing emotionally based school non-attendance (EBSNA)	8 Inappropriate focus – only perceptions of school, not holistic
Jones, C. A. (2019). <i>“No-one likes what I say”: A Foucauldian discourse analysis of problematic absenteeism from school</i> [Doctoral thesis, Cardiff University]. ETHoS.	9 No clear separation of pupil views from staff views
Chian, L. S. J. (2022). <i>Emotional based school avoidance: Exploring staff and pupil voices on provision in mainstream schools</i> [Doctoral thesis, UCL]. ETHoS.	8 Inappropriate focus – only perceptions of school, not holistic

Appendix C: Overview of Included Studies

Author/ Year/ Type of Publication/ Reference	Research Questions (Relevant to the review)	Participants	Data Collection and Data Analysis	Key Findings
Aucott (2014) An exploration of pupils', parents' and teachers' perceptions of the causes of pupil nonattendance and the reasons for improvements in attendance University of Birmingham Thesis	In cases of improved attendance, what were the perceived causes of the pupil's non-attendance? In cases of improved attendance, why did the pupil's attendance improve?	3 pupils (2M, 1F) aged 6-10 77-93% attendance + parent and teachers	Semi structured interviews Documentary analysis Administrative records Case study	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Difficulties with teachers - Difficulties with peers - Medical problems/ illness - Family holiday - Providing reinforcement - Staff's approach with the pupil - Rewards - Clear expectations - Fun activities - Impact of non-attendance on parent
Baker and Bishop (2015) Out of school: a phenomenological exploration of extended nonattendance South of England Article in Educational Psychology in Practice	How do children who have been absent long-term from school make sense of their experience?	4 pupils (2M, 2F) in Y10/Y11 who originally attended LA maintained mixed-sex comprehensive schools in one LA Absent for > one academic year and receiving support from Home Education service, or on the elective home education register due to non-attendance	Semi-structured interviews IPA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Initial school experiences - Participant's perceptions of the causes of non-attendance - School and other support experiences - Punishment, blame and control - Friendship and belonging - The future - Impact on the child's phenomenon

Beckles (2014)	What are the perceptions and perceived experiences of pupils during the early stages of their school non-attendance?	12 pupils (6M, 6F) in Y8/9 77-87% attendance criteria No actual attendance levels One mainstream secondary school	Semi structured interviews with: Ideal School (PCP) Scaling (SFBT) Timeline Thematic analysis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Lesson enjoyment and understanding of work - Thoughts and emotions about school and attendance - Effects of absence - Impact of family and friends - Communication and relationships within the school context - Gaining and acknowledging pupil views
England Institute of Education Thesis	What are the perceived experiences of the type of support pupils have been offered or used since experiencing attendance difficulties?	(+ 6 staff)		
Clissold (2018)	How do young people, parent/carers and educators construct the reasons for extended school non-attendance?	3 pupils (1M, 2F) aged 15-16 White British On roll at 3 different mainstream secondary schools, absent from school for a minimum of 10 weeks and continuing to non-attend at the time of the interview Current involvement from CAMHS and a diagnosis of depression and/or anxiety	Unstructured interviews + all about me, school timeline and grid elaboration method Discourse analysis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Negative school experiences - Mental health - Lack of understanding - Support and provision
A Qualitative Exploration of Pupil, Parent and Staff Discourses of Extended School Non-Attendance University of Birmingham Thesis		(+ 4 parents, 3 staff)		

Gregory and Purcell (2014) Extended school non-attenders' views: developing best practice Article in Educational Psychology in Practice	Can the views and experiences of extended school non-attenders and their families be elicited in order to inform best practice in Educational Psychology Services?	3 secondary aged pupils (don't know gender or age) On the register for elective home education or accessing the home tuition service (+ 5 parents)	Semi-structured interviews IPA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Current situation - Medical - Social - School experience - Emotional responses - Child's voice - The future
How (2015) Exploring the experiences and perceptions of Key Stage 4 students whose school attendance is persistently low (an interpretative phenomenological study) The University of Sheffield Thesis	What are participants' experiences of becoming low attenders, and how do they understand and give meaning to these experiences? What are their perceptions of the barriers to regular attendance?	5 pupils (3M, 2F) in Y11 78-89% attendance One mainstream secondary school	Semi structured interviews IPA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Social and relational experience - Passivity and lack of control - Values, beliefs, motivations and priorities - Personal competence, agency and control - School systems and the establishment - The emotional self - Impression management and positive self-presentation - School as a holistically negative experience - Temporal aspects of experience
James (2015) Pupil Voice in School Non-Attendance: Exploring the perceptions of Pupils, whose attendance is below 85%	How do individuals who are not currently meeting the government targets for attendance, construe school and school attendance?	6 pupils (3M, 2F, 1 not stated) aged 12-15 <85% attendance criteria Actual 0-84% (+ 2 key workers)	Semi structured interviews with PCP (triadic elicitation, laddering, reparatory grid)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Not feeling safe in school - Experiencing mental health difficulties - Poor quality of sleep - Difficulties with peers

University of Birmingham Thesis			School Refusal Assessment Scale (SRAS)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Lack of understanding from adults in school - Perception that adults do not care - Teaching style/ lesson delivery
Kljakovic, Kelly and Richardson (2021)	What do these young people believe has led them to withdraw from mainstream education?	5 pupils (1F, 5M) aged 13-16 Out of mainstream education for > 6 months and enrolled in the Individual Tuition (IT) programme at an inner London Pupil Referral Unit (PRU)	Semi-structured interviews Thematic analysis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Isolation - Reasons for school refusal - Internet use - Individual Tuition - Current situation - Values
School refusal and isolation: The perspectives of five adolescent school refusers in London, UK.				
Article in Clinical Child Psychology				
Want (2020)	How do the young people understand their experiences of EBSA?	2 pupils (1M, 1F) Y10 White British 1 at PRU (75%) 1 at HHE (0%) + parents	Narrative interviews with life path tool (adapted from life story grid) Narrative oriented inquiry	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - School policies, systems and consequences - Characteristics and attitudes of teachers - Teacher-pupil relationships - Attitude towards learning and behaviour at school - Behaviour and self-expression at school - Emotions related to school - School avoidance behaviours - Friendships - Cyclical relationship between school and home
University of Nottingham Thesis				

Appendix D: CASP Appraisal for Included Studies

Item	Aucott (2014)	Baker & Bishop (2015)	Beckles (2014)	Clissold (2018)	Gregory & Purcell (2014)	How (2015)	James (2015)	Kljakovic et al. (2021)	Tamlyn (2022)	Want (2020)
1. Was there a clear statement of the aims of the research?	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
2. Is a qualitative methodology appropriate?	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
3. Was the research design appropriate to address the aims of the research?	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
4. Was the recruitment strategy appropriate to the aims of the research?	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
5. Was the data collected in a way that addressed the research issue?	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
6. Has the relationship between researcher and participants been adequately considered?	✓	?	✓	✓	x	✓	✓	x	✓	✓
7. Have ethical issues been taken into consideration?	✓	?	✓	✓	?	✓	✓	x	✓	✓
8. Was the data analysis sufficiently rigorous?	✓	?	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
9. Is there a clear statement of findings?	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
10. How valuable is the research?	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	?	✓	✓
Overall rating	High	Medium	High	High	Medium	High	High	Medium	High	High

Appendix E: JBI Checklist

Item From JBI Checklist	Example of how the item has been addressed
Is the review question clearly and explicitly stated?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yes – “What is known about young people’s experiences and perceptions of their barriers and supportive factors to school attendance in the UK?”
Were the inclusion criteria appropriate for the review question?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yes – appropriate inclusion and exclusion criteria in terms of design and population were applied to address the review question e.g. school aged CYP, qualitative studies. • The studies took place in the UK, which is where the researcher lives and works.
Was the search strategy appropriate?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yes – exhaustive search terms and search limits were applied to ensure the searches captured all relevant studies. • However, search terms were individually devised, and the search and screening of the studies carried out individually which may be liable to researcher error.
Were the sources and resources used to search for studies adequate?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yes – relevant databases were searched which were selected due to their relevance for both applied psychology and educational research. • However, only 3 databases were searched due to pragmatic time constraints and therefore, this review may not have captured all of the relevant literature within the topic area. • Grey literature was also searched via Google Scholar and eThOs. These were included due to the limited number of published, peer-reviewed papers in this area.
Were the criteria for appraising studies appropriate?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yes – used CASP to critically evaluate the quality of the included studies, considering the appropriateness of methodology, validity and utility of findings. • Used CASP as it is a well known checklist, with specific checklist for qualitative studies. • Author acknowledged the limitations of the individual studies but did not exclude any studies from the review.
Was critical appraisal conducted by two or more reviewers independently?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No – due to this being a small scale doctoral research project, the critical appraisal was conducted by the researcher alone and therefore was based on one individuals’ subjective views.
Were there methods to minimise errors in data extraction?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yes – the researcher used a table (see appendix C) to ensure that all of the relevant data was extracted. This was double checked. The contexts of each included study was described in detail in the appendix in terms of the sample, method and findings. • However, this was not checked and may be liable to human error.

Were the methods used to combine studies appropriate?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Yes – thematic synthesis was used to explore patterns of similarities and differences across the studies and to identify a gap in research for the present research.• However, a common critique of thematic synthesis is the lack of interpretation and creation of new knowledge.
Was the likelihood of publication bias assessed?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• n/a – this SLR was undertaken as part of a doctoral research project and therefore was not necessarily aimed for publication
Were recommendations for policy and/or practice supported by the reported data?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Yes – identified a gap in the existing research to explore primary school CYP’s views at the early stages of their needs.
Were the specific directives for new research appropriate?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Helped to plan the methodology of the present research

Appendix F: SENCo Information Sheet

Recruitment for Research

Who am I?

I am a student at the University of Nottingham and a Trainee Educational Psychologist at Nottingham City Council. As part of my training, I am conducting a research project into **Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA)** and barriers to school attendance.

Who can participate?

- KS2 pupils who may be at risk of EBSA or at the early stages of EBSA.
- They may still have good attendance levels but present with some of the following difficulties:
 - Experiencing anxious thoughts and feelings around attending school, which may be accompanied by physiological signs of anxiety such as nausea, vomiting, shaking and sweating.
 - May refuse to get ready for school, leave the house or enter school and they may display challenging behaviour during these times.
 - May have inconsistent patterns of attendance or frequent lateness as a result of these needs (but this is not necessary).
- Pupils must not be known to CAMHS or social care for ethical reasons and they must be able to understand and verbally engage in an interview.

What is involved?

- I hope to interview pupils in a confidential room within your school, which will last up to one hour. Pupils will have the option to bring a trusted member of staff with them. The interviews will be audio recorded and transcribed.
- Pupils will be asked about their perceptions of the barriers and protective factors to their school attendance.
- All data collected will be kept confidentially and will be used for research purposes only.
- All information will be anonymised and stored securely in line with GDPR regulations. All participants will be safeguarded by the usual protocols.
- Following my research, I would be happy to share the findings with you to develop and share best practice.

What happens next?

- If you are happy to support recruitment and know of any pupils who may meet the above criteria, please contact me at sophie.wright@nottingham.ac.uk
- I will then send a consent form for you to share with parents. Parents will then be asked to contact me directly and will be given an opportunity to discuss the research in more detail and to ask any questions.
- Consent will be gained from both the parent and the young person.

If you have any questions or concerns, please don't hesitate to contact me at the above email address.

Primary school pupils' perceptions of the factors which influence their school attendance

Ethics approval number: XXXX

Researcher: Sophie Wright sophie.wright@nottingham.ac.uk

Supervisor: Marie House marie.house@nottingham.ac.uk

Appendix G: PowerPoint Slide Used to Advertise Research in ATTEND Training

Recruitment for research into Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA)

- Trainee EP at Nottingham City is looking to interview **KS2 pupils** who are **beginning to experience difficulties with school attendance**.
- They may still have average attendance levels but experience anxiety surrounding school attendance.
- They must not be known to CAMHS or social care.
- If you know of any pupils who may meet the criteria, please let Hannah know or email sophie.wright@nottinghamcity.gov.uk for more information.
- Thank you! 😊



Appendix H: Parent Information Sheet

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Parent Information Sheet

Who am I?

My name is Sophie Wright and I am a student at the University of Nottingham and a Trainee Educational Psychologist at Nottingham City Council. As part of my training, I am conducting a research project into **Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA)** and barriers to school attendance.

Your child has been identified by their school SENCo or class teacher as being eligible to take part in my research. I would therefore like to invite your child to take part. Participation is entirely voluntary and you are under no obligation to agree for your child to take part.

Who can take part?

Children in years 3-6 who are beginning to experience barriers to school attendance. They may still have good attendance levels but experience some of the following:

- Anxious thoughts and feelings around attending school, which may be accompanied by physiological signs of anxiety such as nausea, shaking, sweating etc.
- Complaints of feeling unwell such as stomach pain or headaches without any physical signs of illness
- Reluctance to get ready for school, leave the house or enter school in the mornings and they may display challenging behaviour during these times
- Distressing transitions into school in the mornings and difficulties separating from parents
- Inconsistent patterns of attendance or frequent lateness as a result of these needs (but this is not necessary)

Children must not be known to Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) or social care for ethical reasons and they must be able to understand and engage in a discussion about the barriers and protective factors to their school attendance.

What is involved?

- If you think your child fits the above criteria and both you and your child agree for them to take part, I would like to interview them in school for up to one hour. They may choose to bring a trusted member of staff with them if possible.
- Interviews will be audio recorded and then transcribed. All data will be anonymised and will not be identifiable. All participants will be safeguarded by the usual protocols.
- All data collected will be kept confidentially and will be used for research purposes only. It will be stored safely and securely in compliance with the Data Protection Act and GDPR regulations.

What happens next?

If you are happy for your child to take part, please sign the consent forms and email them to me at sophie.wright@nottingham.ac.uk. You are free to withdraw at any point during the research.

Please don't hesitate to contact me if you have any questions or concerns or wish to discuss the research in more detail.

Ethical approval number: S1437R

Researcher: Sophie Wright sophie.wright@nottingham.ac.uk

Supervisor: Marie House marie.house@nottingham.ac.uk

Appendix I: Parent Consent Form

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Parental Consent Form

You should answer these questions independently. Please circle your responses:

- Have you read and understood the Information Sheet? **YES/NO**
- Have you had the opportunity to ask questions about the study? **YES/NO**
- Have your questions been answered satisfactorily (if applicable)? **YES/NO**
- Do you understand that you and your child are free to withdraw from the study at any time and without giving a reason? **YES/NO**
- I give permission for my child's interview to be audio recorded. **YES/NO**
- I give permission for my child's data from this study to be shared with other researchers provided that their anonymity is completely protected. **YES/NO**
- Do you agree for your child to take part in the study? **YES/NO**

"This study has been explained to me to my satisfaction, and I agree for my child to take part. I understand that my child is free to withdraw at any time."

Name (in block capitals):

Date:

Signature:

I have explained the study to the above person and they have agreed for their child to take part.

Signature of researcher:

Date:

Ethical approval number: S1437R

Researcher: Sophie Wright sophie.wright@nottingham.ac.uk

Supervisor: Marie House marie.house@nottingham.ac.uk

Appendix J: Privacy Notice

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Privacy Notice

For information about the University's obligations with respect to your data, who you can get in touch with and your rights as a data subject, please visit:
www.nottingham.ac.uk/utilities/privacy/privacy.aspx.

Why we collect your personal data

Your personal data is being collected as part of a research project. The purpose of the research is to gain the voices of children who are at risk of displaying Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA).

Legal basis for processing your personal data under GDPR

The legal basis for processing your personal data on this occasion is Article 6(1e) processing is necessary for the performance of a task carried out in the public interest. We hope that this research will help with meeting the needs of vulnerable pupils, and help education settings, parents and other professionals to develop their practice in supporting these pupils.

Special category personal data

We will be collecting some 'special category personal data' such as data regarding your child's ethnicity. The basis for processing this data is GDPR Article 9(2a) the data will be collected with explicit consent from the research participants.

How long we keep your data

The University may store your data for up to 25 years and for a period of no less than 7 years after the research project finishes. The researcher who gathered the data may also store the data indefinitely and reuse it in future research. Any data collected will be anonymised and stored electronically on a password protected drive.

Who we share your data with

Anonymous extracts of your data may be disclosed in published works that are posted online for use by the scientific community. It may also move with the researcher who collected your data to another institution in the future.

Ethical approval number: S1437R

Researcher: Sophie Wright sophie.wright@nottingham.ac.uk

Supervisor: Marie House marie.house@nottingham.ac.uk

Appendix K: Pupil Information Sheet

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Participant Information Sheet

Hi! My name is Sophie and I am a Trainee Educational Psychologist. This means that I go into different schools and help children with things like their learning and their feelings.



I am doing a research project about children who can sometimes find it difficult to come to school. Your teacher and your parent(s) think you might like to take part in my project, but it is **your choice**.



If you agree to take part, I would like to meet you at your school to talk about:

- Why it might be difficult for you to come to school sometimes
- Anything which might make it easier for you to come to school



This will last up to one hour and you can bring a teacher with you if you would like to. You do not have to answer any questions that you do not want to and you can stop at any time.



I would like to record our conversation so I don't forget what you have said. I would then like to write about the things you tell me but I won't use your real name so nobody will know it is about you.



If you would like to take part, please read and sign the Participant Consent Form. If you decide that you do not want to take part, that is ok. If you decide that you do want to take part, you can change your mind at any time.

If you have any questions about my research, please ask your parent(s) or teachers to email me.



Appendix L: Participant Consent Form

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Participant Consent Form

You should answer these questions on your own. You can ask an adult to help you read them. Please pick **YES** or **NO**.

Have you read and understood the Information Sheet?

YES/NO



Have you had the opportunity to ask questions about the study?

YES/NO



If you had any questions, have they been answered?

YES/NO



Do you understand that you can stop at any time without giving a reason?

YES/NO



Do you agree for our conversation to be voice recorded?

YES/NO



Do you agree for me to write about the things you tell me without using your real name?

YES/NO



Do you agree to take part in the study?

YES/NO



Ethical approval number: S1437R

Researcher: Sophie Wright sophie.wright@nottingham.ac.uk

Supervisor: Marie House marie.house@nottingham.ac.uk

Appendix M: Semi-structured Interview Schedule

Intro

- Greet, introduce self
- Thank for coming
- Recap info sheet
- Purpose of interview
- No right or wrong answers – interested in what you think

Ethics

- Re-visit the consent letter and check participants' understanding – ask them to explain what they're going to do
- Remind participants of the right to stop and/ or withdraw at any time
- Remind them that they do not have to answer any questions they do not want to
- Introduce skip/ pause/ stop/ don't understand and visuals
- Remind of Dictaphone
- Start recording

Rapport Building

- Treasure deck - favourite colour/ hobbies/ happiest/ describe self
- Bear cards – can you tell me how the bear is feeling? How can you tell?

Semi-Structured Interview

- What year are you in?
- How long have you been at this school?
 - *Have you been at this school since reception?*

1. How would you describe school?

- *What words would you use?*
- *Why do you think/ say that?*
- *What do you mean by that?*
- *Could you tell me a bit more about that?*
- *Could you give me an example of that?*
- *Have you always thought that school was X?*
- *When did you start thinking school was X?*

2. What kind of things do you like about school?

- *What do you like doing at school?*
- *When are you at your happiest?*
- *What is the best thing about school?*

3. What kind of things do you not like about school?

- *What do you not like doing at school?*
- *What is the worst thing about school?*

4. How do you feel when you're at school?

- *How about in the mornings when you're getting ready for school? Or the night before school?*
- *Why do you say that?*
- *What sorts of things make you feel X?*
- *Have you always felt like that?*
- *When did you start feeling like that?*
- *Has anything changed to make you feel that way?*

5. What sorts of things make you feel X about school?

- *What do you not like about school?*
- *What is the worst thing about coming to school?*

6. Does anyone help you when you feel X about coming to school?

- *If yes, who? Can you tell me a bit more about them?*
- *What are they like? Can you describe them?*
- *What do they do that helps? Why does that help?*
- *Is there anything else they could do to help you even more?*

7. Does anything or anyone else help you when you feel X about coming to school?

- *If yes, what? How does that help?*
- *Can you tell me a bit more about that?*

8. Is there anything else that would make school better for you?

- *Is there anything X could do?*
- *Is there anything you would like to change about X?*

9. Imagine you wake up tomorrow and all these worries about school have disappeared...

- *How would that feel?*
- *What would that look like?*
- *What would you be doing?*
- *What would others be doing/ saying?*

10. Would you like to tell me anything else?

Optional/ Probes**11. Can you tell me about your friends?**

- *Have you got some friends at school? Outside of school?*
- *What do you like to do with them?*

12. Can you tell me about your teachers?

- *How would you describe your teachers?*

13. Can you tell me about your lessons?

- *What lessons do you like? Why?*
- *What lessons do you not like?*
- *What are your favourite lessons?*

14. Can you tell me about your family?

- *Who is in your family?*
- *Who lives in your home?*
- *What do you like to do at home?*
- *How do you feel when you are at home at the weekend or school holidays?*

15. Did you come to school when it was the coronavirus lockdowns?

- *What did you think of school then?*
- *What did you think of learning from home?*
- *Did you like it? Why or why not?*

Closing

- Anything else you wish to tell me?
- Thank participants for their time
- Summarise the discussion
- Debrief and signpost to support services
- Ask if they have any questions or further comments

Appendix N: Topical Visuals Used in the Interview



School



Home



Family



Friends



Teachers



Lessons

Appendix O: Ethical Approval Confirmation Letter



School of Psychology

The University of Nottingham
University Park
Nottingham
NG7 2RD

T: +44 (0)115 8467403 or (0)115 9514344

SJ/AL

Ref: **S1437R**

Monday 8th August 2022

Dear Sophie Wright and Marie House,

Ethics Committee Review

Thank you for submitting an account of your proposed research: *Exploring the experiences of primary school children who are at risk of displaying Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA)*.

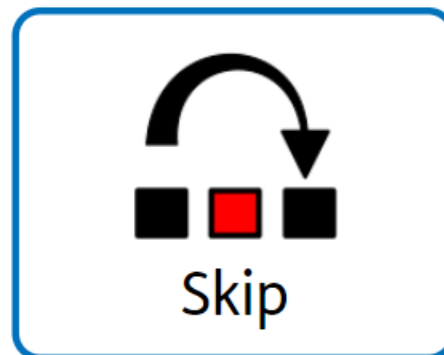
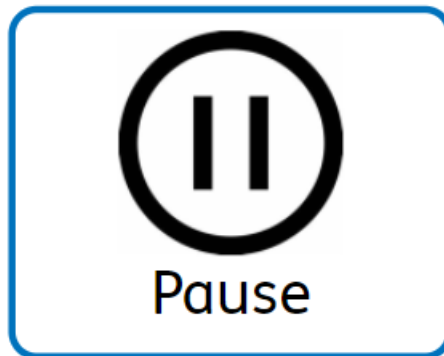
The proposal has now been reviewed by the Ethics Committee and I am pleased to tell you that your submission has met with the committee's approval.

Final responsibility for ethical conduct of your research rests with you or your supervisor. The Codes of Practice setting out these responsibilities have been published by the British Psychological Society and the University Research Ethics Committee. If you have any concerns whatever during the conduct of your research then you should consult those Codes of Practice. The Committee should be informed immediately should any participant complaints or adverse events arise during the study.

Independently of the Ethics Committee procedures, supervisors also have responsibilities for the risk assessment of projects as detailed in the safety pages of the University web site. Ethics Committee approval does not alter, replace, or remove those responsibilities, nor does it certify that they have been met.

Yours sincerely

*Professor Stephen Jackson
Chair, Ethics Committee*

Appendix P: Right to Withdraw Visuals Used in the Interview

Appendix Q: Debrief Form

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Debrief

Thank you for talking to me about why it can sometimes be difficult for you to come to school.



Sometimes talking about things can bring up unpleasant thoughts and feelings.

You can talk to your **parents**, your class **teacher** or your school **SENCo** if you are feeling upset or worried about anything we have spoken about.

You can also call **Childline** on 0800 1111 or visit www.childline.org.uk/kids to talk to someone. You can contact Childline at any time of day and you do not have to tell them your name.

Remember - if you change your mind and decide that you do not want me to write about the things you have told me, that is ok. Please email me at sophie.wright@nottingham.ac.uk to let me know.

If you or your parents have any more questions about my research, please contact me or my supervisor at the below email addresses.

If you or your parent wish to make a complaint about any aspect of the study, please contact Stephen Jackson (Chair of Ethics Committee) at stephen.jackson@nottingham.ac.uk



Ethical approval number: S1437R

Researcher: Sophie Wright sophie.wright@nottingham.ac.uk

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Appendix R: Example of Coding on NVivo 12 (Phase 2)

The screenshot displays the NVivo 12 software interface. On the left is a dark blue sidebar with navigation options: **IMPORT** (Data, Files, File Classifications, Externals), **ORGANIZE** (Coding, Codes, Cases, Notes, Sets), and **EXPLORE** (Queries, Visualizations). The main workspace is titled "Thesis.nvpx (Edited)" and contains a menu bar (Home, Edit, Import, Create, Explore, Share, Modules) and a toolbar with icons for Clipboard, Item, Organize, Visualize, Code, Autocode, Uncode, Code In Vivo, Spread Coding, Case Classification, File Classification, and Workspace. Below the menu is a tree view of data sources, with "1 FAMILY" selected. The central pane shows a transcript titled "Phoebe Transcript 2" with text from an interview. Several segments of the transcript are highlighted in yellow, indicating they have been coded. On the right side of the transcript, a "Coding Density" sidebar lists the codes applied to the selected text, including "Parent vs. school", "Dismissing or not helping with worries or feelings", "Labelled as rude", "Foundation stage was easier", "Not acknowledging needs", "Lack of trust in school staff", "Unhelpful strategies", "Feeling different to peers", and "Being told off by teachers". The bottom status bar shows "1 item selected" and the current file path: "Data > Files > Phoebe Transcript 2".

Appendix T: Table to Demonstrate Examples of Themes and Codes

Theme	Subtheme	Codes	Example data excerpts
Negative school experiences	Reduced motivation for learning	Disliking specific aspects of the curriculum	<p>“So basically erm maths fluency is like, not, I don’t know how to explain it, more like erm, more harder.” (Ron)</p> <p>“Maths I don't really know my times and divides that well and I don't really like doing it because it gets me frustrated.” (Sarah)</p>
		Increased academic demands	<p>“But like I think what started to get me was in year one because we started to do more work and you've just got out of doing a little bit more work, and then you go all the way up to more work and then more work and then even more work.” (Maria)</p> <p>“Foundation was a bit easier because you didn't really have to do anything, like, you didn't really have to worry about anything because you didn't know, and you didn't have to learn such hard things.” (Phoebe)</p> <p>“So it's harder for us because you, if you have brothers and sisters, you know, like they have done stuff that is really like fun, like, kind of hard, but then we have to do something really hard.” (Maria)</p> <p>“Yeah, because we're expected to remember the really, really, really, really, really hard things. Um so if you ask me like a question about what we did last year in maths I wouldn't be able to remember and I wouldn't be able to do the work because we're expected to remember every single thing.” (Phoebe)</p>
		Reduced confidence in academic abilities	<p>“And sometimes that makes me a little bit um scared because like I'm not very good at writing and also maths.” (Maria)</p> <p>“And English um sometimes I don't like doing it because I do stuff wrong and I can't spell that well and I just don't really like doing it.” (Sarah)</p>
		Lessons are boring, repetitive and restrictive	<p>“...we don't do that much fun things now.” (Kyle)</p> <p>“Because erm basically... we do like, we do the same lessons like every day just about, now in year 6, we do like the lessons what we already did, we do it again over and over and over.” (Ron)</p> <p>“It's just when they have like um they do lessons like over and over and over and over again.” (Maria)</p> <p>“...In English you are limited to what you have to write. When I'm writing my own stories, I'm not limited. And I know that they're just for me to say so in English, I have to really think about what I'm putting on the piece of paper.” (Phoebe)</p>
	A sense of injustice	Unfair use of sanctions	<p>“I got, once got put on the thinking chair because I was touching the paintings things on the wall and, and, while we were walking along and they told me to stop and and, and, they kept on shouting at me to stop so I didn't stop.” (Phoebe)</p>

towards teachers		<p>“Well Miss Z would just shout at you for no reason.” (Maria)</p> <p>“um like when I'm um in class, and my teacher.. And I was doing some, and I was just talking, my teacher said stop talking and I just got a little bit angry then.” (Kyle)</p> <p>“And sometimes he shouts and I don't really like it when he shouts at others.” (Sarah)</p> <p>“And um and, and, and they told me off for um, for not writing as much but even though, in my handwriting, even though I was taking my time because they said to take your time and don't worry if you've done too little.” (Phoebe)</p>
	Feeling misunderstood	<p>“Um sometimes I get really frustrated at school because the teachers think I'm not doing very good work but I was actually trying my hardest.” (Kyle)</p> <p>“And also when we went on a residential before we started year six, I really didn't want to go on that and, and, the teachers the both of them, the TA and my teacher, told me and some other people in the residential that they were disappointed in us and that we weren't trying our best, but it was really hard for me to come on the residential because I don't like leaving home for five days. And they said they were disappointed in us and we didn't try as hard. But I was trying hard and probably the people that also got told that were trying hard as well. And that wasn't fair on the other people, because it might have been just as much as hard for them as it was for me.” (Phoebe)</p>
	Being wrongly labelled	<p>“And then on the bus. I was getting really worried. And then the teacher um said that I don't want you being rude to any of the teachers, but I wasn't being rude to them. They were calling me, technically calling me rude and I wasn't being rude, I was just really stressed and worried and they didn't care about that.” (Phoebe)</p> <p>“I took her hand off me cos I didn't like it and she said that I was being rude to her. And she said, and she said, I said, I don't like it when people touch me. She said, I don't like it when people are rude to me, but I told her I wasn't being rude to her. Cos I wasn't, I just didn't like it.” (Phoebe)</p> <p>“I know I am [naughty] cos I just get told off all the time... Just for having fun really I get told off.” (Ron)</p> <p>“And also Miss W once she said do you want me to put your name on the board. But I wasn't being naughty.” (Phoebe)</p>
	Inequality in teacher's actions	<p>“Maybe like um like if I'm in class and then I'm really desperate to go to the toilet but then I have to wait.” (Kyle)</p> <p>“The teachers get to, like, walk around the classroom but we've been sitting down all day and we need to go to like the toilet. But in in most classes, if you haven't gone to the toilet at break, you're not allowed to.” (Maria)</p> <p>“And um sometimes I'm really thirsty and really hot but they don't let me get a drink.” (Kyle)</p>

Appendix U: Initial Thematic Map of Provisional Themes (Phase 4)

