"*I lie to myself to fit in*". Understanding an Ideal Education through the eyes of pupils presenting with Emotionally Based School Non-Attendance

Katie Hughes

20504846

Thesis submitted to the University of Nottingham for the degree of Doctor of Applied Educational Psychology

May 2025

Word count – 41.560

Table of Contents

Abstract 7

Dedication 8

Acknowledgements 9

List of Figures 10

List of Tables 11

Glossary of Acronyms 12

List of Appendices 13

1 Introduction 15

1.1 Introduction to Thesis ***15***

1.2 Researcher Position and Rationale for First-Person Writing ***15***

1.3 My Personal and Professional Interests Shaping this Study ***16***

1.4 The Centrality of Pupil Voice in this Study ***17***

1.5 Contextual Background and Contemporary Importance of the Research ***18***

1.5.1 The Educational System in England and the Importance of Attendance 18

1.5.2 The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on School Attendance 19

1.5.3 Alternative and Home-Based Educational Pathways 20

1.5.4 Recent Government Policy and Initiatives 22

1.6 The Role of Educational Psychologists ***23***

1.6.1 Pupil Voice in EP Practice 24

1.7 Summary of Chapter and Purpose of the Study ***24***

1.8 Overview of Thesis Chapters ***25***

2 Literature Review 26

2.1 Chapter Overview ***26***

2.2 Conceptualising School Attendance Difficulties ***26***

2.2.1 Earlier Perspectives 27

2.2.2 Contemporary Frameworks 28

2.3 The Current Landscape of Emotionally Based School Non-Attendance 29

2.3.1 Prevalence and Misrecognition 29

2.4 Theoretical Perspectives for Understanding Emotionally Based School Non-Attendance 30

2.4.1 Anxiety Avoidance Cycle 30

2.4.2 Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs 31

2.4.3 Self-Determination Theory 33

2.4.4 Ecological Systems Model 34

2.5 Contributing Factors to Emotionally Based School Non-Attendance 36

2.5.1 Individual Related-Factors 37

2.5.2 Family and Home-Related Factors 39

2.5.3 Education-Related Factors 40

2.5.4 Wider Systemic-Related Factors 44

2.6 Eliciting Pupil Voice in EBSNA Research 44

2.7 Summary of Chapter and Rationale for Systematic Literature Review 47

3 Systematic Literature Review 49

3.1 Chapter Overview 49

3.2 Definition of a Systematic Literature Review 49

3.3 Focus of the Systematic Literature Review 49

3.3.1 Search Strategy and Terms 50

3.3.2 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria 51

3.3.3 Study selection 53

3.3.4 Overview of included studies 54

3.3.5 Sample 54

3.3.6 Methods used to elicit pupil views 54
3.3.7 Data analysis 55
3.3.8 Critical appraisal 55
3.3.9 Data synthesis 56
3.3.10 Research findings 56
3.3.11 Methodological Critique of the Review 63
3.3.12 Systemic Literature Review Summary 64
3.4 Rationale for the Current Research 65
4 Methodology 67
4.1 Overview of Chapter 67
4.2 Research Aims & Research Questions 67
4.3 Philosophical Positioning 68
4.3.1 Ontological and Epistemological Stance 68
4.3.2 Research Paradigms 69
4.3.3 Ontological and Epistemological Position within this Current Research 70
4.4 Research Design 71
4.4.1 Quantitative 71
4.4.2 Qualitative 71
4.4.3 Research Purpose 72
4.4.4 Personal Construct Psychology 73
4.5 Data Collection Methods 74
4.5.1 Overview of Data Collection 74
4.5.2 Data Collection Tools 75
4.5.3 Pilot Study 78
4.6 Research Context and Participants 78

4.6.1 Context of the Local Authority 78
4.6.2 Identification and Recruitment of Participants 79
4.6.3 Setting and Location of the Sessions 79
4.6.4 Participants and Sampling 80
4.7 Data Analysis 83
4.7.1 Selection of Analytical Approach 83
4.7.2 Alternative Qualitative Approaches Considered 83
4.7.3 Reflexive Thematic Analysis 84
4.7.4 Process of Reflexive Thematic Anaysis 86
4.8 Ethical Considerations 89
4.8.1 Ethical Approval 89
4.8.2 Consent & Withdrawal 89
4.8.3 Confidentiality, Anonymity and Data Protection 90
4.8.4 Participant Safety and Risk of Harm 90
4.8.5 Researcher Safety and Risk of Harm 91
4.9 Increasing Research Rigour and Trustworthiness 91
4.9.1 Credibility 91
4.9.2 Transferability and Reflexivity 92
4.9.3 Dependability 93
4.9.4 Confirmability 93
5 Findings 93
5.1 Overview 93
5.2 Findings for Research Question 1 94
5.2.1 Theme 1. The Role of Educational Structure 96
5.2.2 Theme 2: Autonomy, Privacy, and Educational Rules 97

5.2.3 Theme 3. Emotional and Psychological Safety 102

5.2.4 Theme 4. Learning Preferences and Future Aspirations 118

5.3 Findings for Research Question 2..... 124

5.3.1 Theme 1. Educational Environment and Structure 127

5.3.2 Theme 2: Teacher-Student Relationships 128

5.3.3 Theme 3: Student Autonomy and Participation 129

5.3.4 Theme 4: Future Aspirations and Career-Related Learning 130

5.3.5 Summary of Findings and Overarching Themes 131

6 Discussion..... 134

6.1.1 Overarching Theme 1: Educational Structures 134

6.1.2 Overarching Theme 2: Relational Safety and Emotional Support 136

6.1.3 Overarching Theme 3: Autonomy, Fairness, and Pupil Voice 140

6.1.4 Overarching Theme 4: Purposeful and Personalised Learning 142

6.2 Possible Implications of Study..... 144

6.2.1 Implications for Educational Settings 145

6.2.2 Implications For Educational Psychologists 146

6.3 Methodological Critique 148

6.3.1 Sample 148

6.3.2 Data collection 150

6.3.3 Data analysis 152

6.4 Suggestions for Future Research 153

7 Conclusion and Original Contribution 154

8 References 156

9 Appendices..... 186

Abstract

Emotionally Based School Non-Attendance (EBSNA) is a growing concern among secondary-aged pupils in the UK. Perspectives of families and professionals are widely documented, and many studies include both adult and pupil voices, with pupil views often considered alongside those of parents or education professionals. More recently, however, research has increasingly prioritised pupil voice, recognising the importance of understanding EBSNA from the young person's perspective.

However, there is little research that explores how CYP presenting with EBSNA envision and perceive their educational experiences. Despite policy efforts such as *Working Together to Improve School Attendance*, no nationally agreed framework exists for supporting CYP experiencing EBSNA. Increasingly, pupils are being educated outside of traditional schools due to unmet social, emotional and sensory needs, yet the features of education including alternative pathways that support wellbeing remain underexplored.

This study aimed to explore how secondary-aged pupils experiencing EBSNA envision their ideal and non-ideal education, and changes that they believe could bring their current education closer to their ideal. A qualitative, constructivist, participatory design was employed. Six participants completed a bespoke, dichotomised "Ideal Education" activity. Data was collected through drawing, verbal and written dialogue and a scaling exercise.

The dichotomous nature of the activity elicited pupils' perspectives on both supportive and challenging aspects of education. Using Reflexive Thematic Analysis, four overarching themes were identified: Adaptive Educational Structures, Relational Saftey and Emotional Support, Autonomy, Fairness and Pupil Voice, and Purposeful and Personalised Learning. These reflected shared domains of meaning across participants' perspectives.

The findings highlight that CYP experiencing EBSNA can meaningfully express their educational needs through participatory methods. The study provides pupil-led insights into the relational, emotional and systemic factors shaping engagement and highlights the importance of emotionally attuned, flexible and inclusive practices. These insights have potential to inform educational environments, Educational Psychologist practice and future research.

Dedication

I dedicate this research to my Dad.

Though dementia has taken so much, it cannot take away the way you have shaped me.

Your love of learning and your curiosity continue to inspire me every day.

I know you are so proud of me – and that means everything.

My commitment to learning, and this journey, is dedicated to you.

Acknowledgements

I want to thank my partner Nathan – I will be forever grateful for your support. Thank you for being by my side through it all: your encouragement, your calm logic when I needed it most, and your belief in me. This would not have been possible without you.

To my amazing mum, whose endless love and support has helped me keep going when things felt overwhelming. To my brother, my sister, and to my nephew Leo and my soon-to-arrive niece. I hope this inspires you to believe that you can achieve anything you set your heart on.

To my nan, my biggest cheerleader, always at the end of the phone. And to my pop, I know you have been with me throughout this journey.

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to the DAEP tutor team at the University of Nottingham, especially Nicholas Durbin and Mark Izzard-Snape, for their supervision, encouragement, and thoughtful guidance.

Thank you also to Jane Park - your emotional support and insightful supervision has been invaluable throughout this process. Thank you for being a calming presence when things felt tough.

To Cohort 17 – thank you for riding the crazy wave with me. I'm grateful for the friendships we have built along the way, your support, laughter and endless pep talks have meant the world. We truly did it together. I wish the best to you all as you ride off into your *sunsets.*

And finally, my deepest thanks go to the participants of this research, for your bravely, honesty and enthusiasm in my research. Thank you for sharing your unique insights and experiences and trusting me with your brilliant thoughts. Your voices are the heart of this research.

List of Figures

Figure 1: Anxiety Avoidance Cycle. Taken from West Sussex EPS (2022) *31*
Figure 2: Hierarchy of Needs (Maslow, 1953) From Simply Psychology (2023) *32*
Figure 3: Bronfenbrenner & Morris (2006). From Simply Psychology (2025) *34*
Figure 4: Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Analyses (PRISMA) Flow Diagram *53*
Figure 5: Thematic Map Displaying the Themes and Subthemes for RQ1 ..... *95*
Figure 6: Thematic Map Displaying the Themes and Subthemes for RQ2 ..... *126*

List of Tables

Table 1: Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria of the SLR 52
Table 2: Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria for Participants, with Rationale 81
Table 3: Demographic Information of Participants 82
Table 4: Summary of Themes Relation to RQ1 94
Table 5: Summary of Themes Relating to RQ2 125
Table 6: Summary of Key Themes (RQ1 and RQ2) and Overarching Themes 132

Glossary of Acronyms

AP	Alternative Provision
AEP	Assistant Educational Psychologist
ASD	Autism Spectrum Condition
CAMHS	Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services
CYP	Children and Young People
DfE	Department for Education
DoH	Department of Health
EBSA	Emotionally Based School Avoidance
EBSNA	Emotionally Based School Non-Attendance
EHE	Elective Home Education
EHCP	Education, Health and Care Plan
EP	Educational Psychologist
EPS	Educational Psychology Service
LA	Local Authority
PCP	Personal Construct Psychology
PRU	Pupil Referral Unit
RQ1	Research Question 1
RQ2	Research Question 2
RTA	Reflexive Thematic Analysis
SDT	Self-Determination Theory
SEMH	Social, Emotional, and Mental Health Needs
SEND	Special Educational Needs and Disabilities
SENDCO	Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Coordinator
SLR	Systematic Literature Review
TEP	Trainee Educational Psychologist
UNCRC	United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child

List of Appendices

Appendix A: Recruitment Poster 186
Appendix B: Initial Recruitment Letter to Local Authority Stakeholders 187
Appendix C: Participant Instruction Poster 189
Appendix D: Young Person Information Sheet and Consent Form 190
Appendix E: Family Information Sheet and Consent Form 195
Appendix F: Exemplar Debrief Letter to Participant 201
Appendix G: Exemplar Debrief Letter to Family 203
Appendix H: Prompt Interview Guide "Ideal Education" Activity - Non-Ideal Education 204
Appendix I: Prompt Interview Guide - "Ideal Education" Activity - Ideal Education 205
Appendix J: Enhancements to the Prompt Interview Guide Following Peer Supervision 206
Appendix K: The "Ideal Education Activity" Section 1: Exemplar Prompt Cards 207
Appendix L: The "Ideal Education Activity" Section 2: Scaling Task Instructions 208
Appendix M: The "Ideal Education" Activity: Section 2: Exemplar Prompt Cards 209
Appendix N: Participant Background Information 210
Appendix O: Summary of Session Context for Each Participant 212
Appendix P: Pen Portraits of Each Participant, Researcher Brief Reflections on Engagement & Context of Sessions 214
Appendix Q: Template of Participant Evaluation Form 215
Appendix R: Ethical Approval from the University 217
Appendix S: Participant Demographic and Background Information Form 218
Appendix T: Search Terms Used in Systematic Literature Review 219
Appendix U: Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria Appraisal in Systemic Literature Review 220
Appendix V: Template for CASP (2018) checklist for Qualitative Research 223
Appendix W: Quality Appraisal Process for the Systemic Literature Review using CASP (2018) . 228
Appendix X: Summary Table of Included Studies in Systemic Literature Review 233
Appendix Y: Systemic Literature Review, Raw Data Initial Coding Development 237
Appendix Z: Excerpts From Reflective Journal 238
Appendix AA: Participant Transcript Example 242
Appendix BB: (RQ1) Reflexive Thematic Analysis Process Example 248
Appendix CC: Example of Coding Process From Raw Data to Final theme for RQ1 255

Appendix DD: RQ1: Initial coding of the whole dataset (Stage 2 of RTA) *259*
Appendix EE: RQ2: Stage 2 RTA: Initial Coding of Participant Responses (Whole Data-Set)..... *262*
Appendix FF: RQ2: Reflexive Thematic Analysis, Summary of Initial Themes & Subthemes *263*
Appendix GG: Participant Contributions to Theme Development *265*
Appendix HH: Example of Participant Drawings (Ideal & Non-Ideal Education Activity) *267*

1 Introduction

1.1 Introduction to Thesis

This thesis will explore the topic of emotionally related school attendance difficulties in children and young people (CYP), referred to here as *Emotionally Based School Non-Attendance* (EBSNA, see Section 2.2).

Foregrounding pupil voice is a central principle of this thesis. By amplifying the views of CYP who experience emotional barriers to school attendance, this research aims to inform more compassionate and responsive educational practices. With research suggesting higher prevalence in secondary-aged pupils (Department for Education, DfE, 2014; Elliott & Place, 2019; Gregory & Purcell, 2014), this study investigates how secondary-aged pupils experiencing EBSNA envision their ideal and non-ideal educational environments, aiming to identifying changes that could support their engagement with education from their own perspective.

This introductory chapter outlines the background and rationale for the study. It explains my research positioning and the use of first-person writing before providing contextual background on the English education system, including different types of provision and the increasing use of alternative and home-based arrangements. The chapter also considers relevant policy developments and the impact of contextual factors such as the COVID-19 pandemic. It then discusses the roles of Educational Psychologists and pupil voice in understanding and supporting EBSNA. It concludes by outlining the purpose of the study, including the contemporary relevance of researching EBSNA and the rationale for undertaking a Systematic Literature Review (SLR).

1.2 Researcher Position and Rationale for First-Person Writing

Academic research is often written in the third person to convey objectivity and distance (Hyland, 2002). However, within qualitative research, using the first person can make the researcher's voice more visible and acknowledge their role in the construction of knowledge (Parker & Foster, 1995) . Similarly, adopting a reflexive stance can enhance the transparency, authenticity and ethical rigour of qualitative research (Etherington, 2004; Finlay, 2002).

For these reasons, I write in the first person throughout this thesis. This stylistic choice aligns with my ontological position (Section 4.3.3) and reflects my commitment to reflexivity and transparency in the co-construction of knowledge with participants. By openly positioning myself in the research, I aim to offer an honest account of how this study was shaped, including the potential influence of my own values (Lewis, 2015).

1.3 My Personal and Professional Interests Shaping this Study

My interest in supporting CYP experiencing EBSNA developed through a combination of personal experiences, professional practice, and theoretical exploration. I previously worked in various roles with CYP who presented with high levels of school-related anxiety. These CYP were often described as "disengaged" or "hard to reach," yet what seemed to emerge from my interactions with them was their desire for emotionally safe, responsive, and meaningful education.

As an Assistant Educational Psychologist (AEP), I was involved in reintegration work with pupils who had been out of school for prolonged periods. I observed that the longer a CYP remained out of school, the more complex reintegration appeared to become. This is often compounded by increasing anxiety and a loss of connection with the school environment represented by the Anxiety Avoidance Cycle (see Section 2.4.1, Kearney & Silverman, 1993b; West Sussex Educational Psychology Service, 2022). I began to feel that early identification and intervention was critical for successful reintegration of CYP. I was inspired and moved by the CYP I worked with, many of whom shared thoughtful and insightful, views about their desire to feel safe, understood, and included. These conversations motivated me to explore ways in which pupil voice could be more meaningfully heard and used to inform systemic change.

I developed an interest in using Personal Construct Psychology (PCP) tools (Kelly, 1955; see Section 2.6 and 4.4.4) during assistantship, which deepened through academic study and applied practice during my Educational Psychology (EP) doctoral training. I have found PCP-informed approaches (Williams & Hanke, 2007) to be flexible, creative and engaging for many CYP I worked with. They often generated rich and practically useful insights, informing both classroom and broader school strategies. Drawing on insights from previous research (Higgins, 2022; Strong, 2019; Wade, 2022), I found these tools particularly valuable when working with anxious CYP. These approaches also

aligned with my person-centred values and belief in the importance of understanding subjective experience (Butler & Green, 2007; Ravenette, 1999; Kelly, 1955).

During my doctoral training, national trends have indicated a rise in EBSNA and increased use of alternative provision (AP) and Elective Home Education (EHE; Children's Commissioner, 2022; DfE, 2024). Within the Educational Psychology Service (EPS) where I was placed as a Trainee Educational Psychologist (TEP), there was increasing emphasis on early intervention and multi-agency working. I noticed that decisions about support were not always informed by a clear understanding of the pupil's perspective.

Professionally, Educational Psychologists (EPs) are being called upon to support school attendance through consultation, early intervention, and pupil voice work (Elliott & Place, 2019; West Sussex EPS, 2022). However, in the local authority I am placed as a TEP, no formal EBSNA guidance or pathway currently exists. Historically, attendance work has been led by Education Welfare Officers (Gregory & Purcell, 2014) but as emotional wellbeing becomes more central to educational engagement (Finning et al., 2019), EPs are taking a more active role in supporting and understanding EBSNA (Elliott & Place, 2019; West Sussex EPS, 2022). This context created an opportunity to carry out research that reflects my personal and professional interests, while also addressing a gap in practice and contributing to local service development.

These experiences, alongside my evolving professional role, have shaped a firm belief in the need to foreground pupil voice. The following section expands the commitment to pupil voice within this study.

1.4 The Centrality of Pupil Voice in this Study

This study places pupil voice at its core, reflecting a commitment to understanding EBSNA from the perspectives of CYP who experience it. While policy frameworks such as the Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) Code of Practice and the Conventions of the Rights of the Child (DfE, 2014; United Nations, 1989) advocate for involving CYP in decisions that affect them, research suggests that this is not always realised in practice, particularly for CYP with additional needs (Franklin & Sloper, 2009; Hodkinson, 2010). Pupils with SEND or emotionally based challenges

often face barriers to meaningful participation, and their views may be marginalised or filtered throughout adult narratives (Hart, 1992; Macconville, 2006).

This study seeks to centre these voices, using accessible and emotionally attuned methods to authentic expression. Prunty et al (2012) and Graham et al (2018) suggest that genuinely listening to CYP can provide unique insights into how environments and relationships shape their wellbeing. Amplifying pupil perspectives is a rights-based imperative (United Nations, 1989) and also a source of useful knowledge for educators, psychologists, and policy-makers (Whitty & Wisby, 2007).

Including CYP meaningfully reflects an ethical commitment to social justice, challenging adult-led assumptions and allowing alternative narratives (Todd, 2007). Building on pupils' strengths and respecting their agency increases the likelihood of meaningful and lasting change (Todd, 2007). Barber (2009) suggest that meaningful participation can enhance pupils' sense of empowerment, belonging and self-worth.

CYP experiencing EBSNA may feel unheard, misunderstood, or excluded from mainstream settings, hence creating space for their perspectives becomes particularly important (Graham et al., 2018). Through participatory, pupil-led methods, this study aims to move beyond tokenism and provide a grounded understanding of how education might be reshaped to better support them.

1.5 Contextual Background and Contemporary Importance of the Research

1.5.1 The Educational System in England and the Importance of Attendance

The United Nations (1989) and DfE (2014a) state that every CYP has a right to an education that promotes development, respects their rights and freedoms, and prepares them for life in a diverse society. These frameworks also stress the importance of recognising individual needs, cultural background, and family context. Legislation such as the Education Act (1996) places responsibility on parents to ensure that CYP aged 5 to 16 receive a suitable education.

In England, there are rising rates of persistent and severe absence among CYP (DfE, 2024c). In 2023/24, 20.0% of pupils were identified as persistently absent, missing 10% or more of sessions

(DfE, 2025b). Although this represents a slight decrease from 21.2% in 2022/23, it remains almost double the pre-pandemic rate of 10.9% in 2018/19 (DfE, 2023b). Severe absence rates in 2023/24 (missing 50% or more of sessions) were 2.0%, almost three times the 0.7% recorded in 2018/19 (DfE, 2020).

Data from DfE (2022a) suggests a correlation between school absence and lower academic achievement at key stages 2 and 4. School attendance has also been linked to wider developmental outcomes. Finning et al (2019) note its importance for academic, emotional, and social development, identifying short-term impacts, such as reduced academic performance and increased anxiety, and longer-term risks, including substance misuse and economic disadvantage.

However, these associations require cautious interpretation, correlation does not imply causation (Pearl, 2012). Broader contextual factors including socioeconomic disadvantage and mental health needs may simultaneously impact both attendance and attainment (Hobbs et al., 2000; Sullivan-Walker et al., 2017). Without acknowledging these complexities, policy responses may risk oversimplifying a multifaceted issue. Contributory factors to non-attendance are explored in Chapter 2.

Kearney et al (2022) in their theoretical paper, challenge the adequacy of traditional attendance metrics. They argue that time "in seat" within a "physical building" (p.8) may not capture the diversity of contemporary routes to accessing education. They call for systemic reform that meets the needs of all learners. This includes adapting to technological advances and expanding on conceptions of developmental readiness for adulthood. Despite the paper's U.S context, its call for a more inclusive understanding of educational participation potentially holds resonance internationally.

1.5.2 The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on School Attendance

The COVID-19 pandemic introduced significant disruptions that reshaped attendance patterns (DfE, 2020, 2025b). With the rise of remote learning, hybrid provision, and greater reliance on digital tools, the notion of being physically "in seat" (Kearney et al., 2022, p. 8) became less relevant.

Thompson et al (2021) found that some CYP felt less pressure from not physically attending school, others experienced increased anxiety and uncertainty. McDonald et al (2023) reported that parents

identified worsening of pre-existing attendance difficulties and heightened COVID-specific anxieties as key concerns. According to Children's Commissioner (2022) report, post-pandemic, over 124,000 CYP did not return to school, highlighting the enduring impact of this disruption and a shift in attendance dynamics.

1.5.3 Alternative and Home-Based Educational Pathways

In England, CYP can access education through a variety of settings, including mainstream schools, AP (DfE, 2025a), and EHE (DfE, 2024). Predominantly, CYP attend state-funded or independent schools following the national curriculum. Increasingly, CYP are being educated outside of traditional school environments, particularly those with emotional needs or SEND (Children's Commissioner, 2022).

Alternative pathways may be pursued in response to unmet needs in mainstream education (Moffatt & Riddle, 2021; Parsons et al., 2009). Research from the perspective of parents (Parsons & Lewis 2009) and graduates (Moffatt & Riddle, 2021) suggest that transitions into AP, EHE, or flexi-schooling are frequently associated with experiences such as peer conflict, bullying, mental health difficulties, or a perceived lack of appropriate support, and such routes may represent protective responses to school-related distress or emotional deterioration.

AP includes Pupil Referral Units (PRU), hospital schools, and specialist settings, it is typically used to support exclusions, medical needs, or complex vulnerabilities (DfE, 2025a). Flexi-schooling, where pupils attend school part-time and learn elsewhere for the remainder (DfE, 2019), was found by Moffatt & Riddle (2021) to support participants in managing personal circumstances. However, their experiences of bereavement, mental illness, and homelessness raise questions about whether such choices were freely made or constrained by systemic barriers. Whilst Moffatt & Riddle (2021) is not UK-centric research, it is useful research for understanding non-standard educational pathways.

Arguably, attendance data may not fully reflect the scale or complexity of educational disengagement. The Centre for Social Justice (2025) notes that some CYP in APs may be excluded from official attendance figures, particularly those who are dually registered or frequently move placements. EHE and flexi-schooling arrangements are also not subject to routine attendance monitoring, which may obscure the experiences of CYP who are technically "on roll" but rarely attend, or who are increasingly disconnected from formal learning environments (DfE, 2019; The Educational Policy

Institute, 2023). These data gaps may limit national understanding of attendance and disengagement, particularly in the absence of a national framework for supporting EBSNA.

Government data show that the number of CYP recorded as being home educated at any point rose from 126,100 in 2022/23 to 153,000 in 2023/24 (DfE, 2024). This increase likely reflects both genuine growth in EHE and the implementation of mandatory LA data returns in 2022/23, which may have improved reporting accuracy. Similarly, attendance in AP has increased by 16%, with 47,600 pupils recorded in the 2023/24 academic year (DfE, 2024b).

Research suggests that many CYP are referred to AP following prolonged school absences or breakdowns in mainstream placements, often rooted in anxiety, emotional distress, or unmet SEND needs (Centre for Social Justice, 2025; Finning et al., 2019). Decisions to pursue EHE or flexi-schooling are similarly driven less by educational philosophy and more by necessity (Parsons & Lewis, 2009; Moffatt & Riddle, 2021).

Attwood and Croll (2006) in their study of 17 secondary-aged pupils with high absence, found that while many valued learning, they felt disconnected from perceived rigid school routines, large class sizes, and insufficient emotional support. Though conducted prior to the introduction of the SEND Code of Practice (DfE, 2014) and initiation of the Senior Mental Health Leads in schools (DfE, 2017) their findings remain relevant in understanding why some CYP disengage with mainstream education.

Kearney et al (2022) argue that traditional education structures may be fundamentally misaligned with the needs of emotionally vulnerable pupils. They call for a reframing of attendance and engagement through a lens of equity and developmental readiness, an argument echoed in Biesta's (2008) critique that an overemphasis on academic performance can obscure education's deeper purposes, such as autonomy, inclusion, and subjectification.

This section considered the evolving educational landscape in England, particularly the increasing movement of CYP into alternative pathways beyond traditional schooling. It highlights key limitations of national attendance data and draws attention to growing research that foregrounds the perspectives of CYP and parents outside of mainstream settings. Finally, international research offers a forward-looking perspective, suggesting the need to reframe educational provision to better reflect the diversity of pupils' needs and experiences in this changing context (Kearney et al., 2022). The

next section explores recent government policy and national initiatives that have sought to address concerns around school attendance and mental health challenges in education.

1.5.4 Recent Government Policy and Initiatives

Government policy in England has appeared to increasingly acknowledge the complexity of school attendance and the role of emotional wellbeing in educational engagement. A series of initiatives have aimed to improve attendance, strengthen early intervention, and promote inclusion (DfE, 2019, 2022b, 2024c).

The *SEND Review: Right Support, Right Place, Right Time* (DfE, 2022b) acknowledged that CYP with SEND or in AP often experience poorer outcomes than their peers across a range of measures. It identified systemic issues including delays in identifying need, insufficient support within mainstream settings, and increasing reliance on AP. The review proposed earlier intervention, more consistent access to support, and improved integration across education, health, and care systems, particularly in relation to mental health and emotional wellbeing. It also highlighted significant regional variation in the availability and quality of provision, calling for the introduction of national standards to reduce inequalities.

Concerns about the rise in CYP who are not registered at school, and the rise of EHE prompted the *Children Not in School* consultation (DfE, 2019) which proposed the introduction of a national register capture CYP outside formal education. Furthermore, the *Working Together to Improve School Attendance* guidance (Department for Education, 2024c) introduced an emphasis on early intervention and multi-agency collaboration. It promoted standardised use of data tracking tools and reiterated the link between attendance and academic outcomes. However, some critics argue that framing absence through binary categories such as ‘authorised’ versus ‘unauthorised’ may oversimplify the experiences of emotionally distressed CYP (Want, 2020). The Education Policy Institute (2024) similarly advocates for a more nuanced, family-centred approach that moves beyond compliance-focused models.

Recognising the importance of emotional wellbeing more broadly, the government introduced the *Transforming CYP’s Mental Health Provision* Green Paper (DfE, 2017), which led to the national rollout of Designated Senior Mental Health Leads in schools. These roles were intended to support

whole-school approaches to wellbeing and better integration with local mental health services. However, the impact and implementation of this initiative varies across settings, and questions remain regarding its sustainability, training, and research (Griffin et al., 2022).

Together, these policy developments appear to signal a shift toward more emotionally responsive schooling. Yet, gaps appear to remain in how schools identify, understand, and respond to EBSNA (Children's Commissioner, 2022). Although recent policies have emphasised national attendance data (DfE, 2024c), there remains no unified framework for identifying and supporting EBSNA, which may contribute to inconsistent provision across schools and regions.

1.6 The Role of Educational Psychologists

According to the DfE (2023a), Educational Psychologists (EPs) are valued for their psychological expertise and their role in promoting development and wellbeing of CYP, particularly those with complex needs. Furthermore, their role spans individual, group, and systemic levels, often involving collaboration across education, health, and social care including within specialist schools and AP (DfE, 2023a).

Pellegrini (2007) argues that EPs are well-placed to lead multi-tiered, ecological approaches to EBSNA due to their ability to work across individual, group, and systemic levels. However, Elliott and Place (2019) highlight that adopting systemic responses to EBSNA remains a significant challenge. For example, it is suggested that within education provisions limited resources, insufficient training, and fragmented multi-agency collaboration can hinder systemic working (Beckles, 2014; Kearney & Silverman, 1993b).

In practice, EPs often use consultation methods, which provide an opportunity for EPs to work collaboratively with school staff and other stakeholders to promote understanding of EBSNA and more supportive, non-judgmental approaches to addressing emotional needs (Jones & Atkinson, 2021). Furthermore, some services have introduced specific resources, for example, the West Sussex EPS (2022) toolkit aims to increase school staff confidence in supporting pupils experiencing EBSNA, whilst also encouraging consideration of environmental adaptations within the school setting that may be supportive for CYP experiencing anxiety.

1.6.1 Pupil Voice in EP Practice

Kelly and Gray (2000), in a UK government sponsored report, emphasise the importance of EPs ensuring CYP voices are central to support meaningful planning. Research by Gersch et al (2008) and Norwich (2006) emphasises that genuine pupil involvement is only effective with use of appropriate, facilitative tools.

Smillie & Newton (2020) demonstrated that EPs do often employ a variety of methods to gather pupil views. In their research conducted in one demographic area in Wales, involving an online survey of 73 EPs and further interviews with 16 EPs from various local authorities, findings revealed that pupil views were gathered through various means such as direct conversations with parents and/ or teachers, activities given to CYP underpinned by solution-focused or therapeutic approaches, self-report scales, and person-centred planning tools.

West Sussex EPS (2022) suggested some of the challenges for EPs in eliciting pupil views may be difficulty of building rapport and trust within a limited timeframe and the tendency of CYP to provide answers they believe the interviewer wants to hear. Furthermore, Billington (2006) and May et al (2004) also suggest that professionals' reliance on their interpretations of pupils' responses can lead to inaccuracies, potentially misrepresenting the true voice of the pupil.

One example of an EP led study, Atkinson et al (2019) used a pupil-participatory design with secondary-aged grammar students. The authors stated that although the project began as EPS led, the project became student-led very quickly. The authors highlighted the significance of giving pupils responsibility, ownership, and fostering genuine pupil autonomy. They concluded in their study that relying solely on educational professionals' interpretations would have been insufficient to genuinely understand the pupils' experiences and the pressures they face, highlighting the benefits of employing child-led approaches.

1.7 Summary of Chapter and Purpose of the Study

This study explores how secondary-aged pupils experiencing EBSNA envision their ideal and non-ideal educational environments, with the aim of informing more emotionally responsive, inclusive, and pupil-centred practice. The research is situated within a national context of rising persistent absence (DfE, 2020, 2023b, 2025b), increasing use of non-traditional educational pathways

(Children's Commissioner, 2022; DfE, 2019, 2024a), and growing concern about EBSNA in secondary-aged pupils (Elliott & Place, 2019; Havik et al., 2015).

Rooted in a constructivist paradigm and informed by my personal and professional experiences (Section 1.3), the research adopts participatory, flexible methods to meaningfully involve CYP in articulating their views. By foregrounding pupil voice, the study seeks to better understand the lived experiences of CYP with EBSNA. In doing so, it aims to address a key gap in both research and practice: the absence of direct insight into what emotionally vulnerable pupils themselves say they need from education.

1.8 Overview of Thesis Chapters

The thesis is organised into seven chapters. Chapter 2 reviews the literature on school attendance difficulties, outlining the conceptualisation of EBSNA, and explores relevant theoretical frameworks and contributing factors. Chapter 3 presents a systemic literature review of qualitative studies centred on the voices of secondary-aged pupils experiencing EBSNA and concludes with a rationale for the current research. Chapter 4 outlines the constructivist methodological approach, including the research design, ethical considerations, and data analysis. Chapter 5 presents the findings in response to the research questions, drawing on themes developed through Reflexive Thematic Analysis. Chapter 6 discusses the findings in relation to existing literature and theory, highlighting implications for schools and EPS, whilst also addressing strengths and limitations of the research, and suggesting directions for future research. Chapter 7 concludes the thesis by summarising the key findings and reflecting on their significance in relation to the research aims.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Chapter Overview

This chapter reviews existing literature relevant to Emotionally Based School Non-Attendance (EBSNA), with the aim of situating the current study within the broader research landscape. It begins by exploring the historical and conceptual development of terms used to describe emotionally influenced school non-attendance, highlighting evolving understandings and implications of terminology. The chapter then explores a range of theoretical frameworks that have been applied to understand EBSNA, including psychological, systemic, and sociocultural models. Following this, the review examines empirical research into the contributory factors associated with EBSNA, drawing on studies across domains: individual factors, family and home-related factors, education-related factors, and wider systemic-related factors. A final section focuses on eliciting pupil voice in EBSNA research, outlining the rationale for centring the perspectives of children and young people (CYP) and justifying the decision to undertake a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) to explore their lived experiences. The SLR directly informs the empirical phase of the current study.

2.2 Conceptualising School Attendance Difficulties

School attendance difficulties appear to be multifaceted and have been conceptualised in varied ways over time (Broadwin, 1932; Elliott & Place, 2019; Lenhoff & Pogodzinski, 2018). Terms such as "truancy" (Thambirajah et al., 2008), "school phobia" (Johnson et al., 1941), "school refusal" (Kearney & Silverman, 1993b), and "extended school non-attendance" (Pellegrini, 2007) have been used in the literature, each reflecting different theoretical and practical interpretations. More recent terminology includes Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA; Want, 2020; Wright, 2023) and Emotionally Based School Non-Attendance (EBSNA; Higgins, 2022) the latter being the term adopted throughout this thesis.

The following section will explore these definitions in greater depth, alongside their implications for understanding and responding to EBSNA.

2.2.1 Earlier Perspectives

2.2.1.1 "Truancy"

Early descriptions, such as "psychoneurotic truancy" (Broadwin, 1932, p254) appeared to reflect a focus on anxiety or depression as a contributing factor to school non-attendance but also whilst engaging in "delinquent" behaviours (Johnson et al., 1941, p705). "Truancy" typically appears to refer to absences without permission, often leaving parents and schools unaware of the pupil's whereabouts (Thambirajah et al., 2008). It can be commonly associated with "unexcused or deliberate absences" (Thambirajah et al., 2008, p18) and may be referred to as "skiving" by other pupils (James, 2015, p197). However, the distinction between 'truancy' and other attendance issues is not always clear, as anxiety can sometimes underlie these 'truant behaviours' described (The Association for Child and Adolescent Mental Health, 2023).

2.2.1.2 "School Phobia"

Johnson et al (1941) describe school phobia as a "psychoneurotic disorder" (p 705) distinct from delinquent truancy. More recent descriptions suggest that school phobia refers to pupils who are unable to attend school due to anxiety (Rettig & Crawford 2000). Berg et al (1969) suggest that, unlike the definition of 'truancy', school phobia typically is accompanied by:

- Significant difficulty in attending school, often with extended absences.
- Physical symptoms like headaches or stomach aches accompany emotional distress.
- Parental awareness and lack of antisocial behaviour.

2.2.1.3 "School Refusal"

Similar to school phobia, school refusal appears to refer to emotionally driven absences where pupils exhibit significant distress when faced with attending school. Kearney & Silverman (1993) categorises school refusal into four functional types:

- Avoidance of negative affectivity-provoking stimuli or situations: situations that provoke general negative emotions related to school.
- Escape from aversive, social, or evaluative situations at school: avoiding socially stressful situations like tests or public speaking.

- Attention-getting behaviour: refusing to attend school to gain attention from significant others, such as parents or carers.
- Seeking positive tangible rewards outside of school: seeking enjoyable activities outside of school that provide immediate gratification

2.2.2 Contemporary Frameworks

2.2.2.1 Extended School Non-Attendance

Pellegrini (2007) introduced the term *extended school non-attendance* as a neutral alternative to deficit-based labels, intending to recognise systemic factors. Hatton-Corcoran (2023) supports this shift, highlighting how such terminology promotes shared understanding across agencies and encourages professionals to consider environmental, relational, and policy-level factors. This perspective appears to reflect a more holistic, non-blaming approach.

2.2.2.2 Emotionally Based School Avoidance

EBSA has gained traction in both research (Chian, 2022; Tamlyn, 2022) and professional guidance (West Sussex EPS, 2022) to describe CYP who experience emotional distress that impedes school attendance. However, some parents and researchers argue that the term risks individualising the problem and overlooking broader systemic contributors (Morgan & Costello, 2023). These critiques have influenced this study's adoption of *Emotionally Based School Non-Attendance (EBSNA)*, which seeks to maintain a focus on emotional distress whilst recognising wider contextual influences.

2.2.2.3 Terminology: Why This Study adopts the term Emotionally Based School Non-Attendance (EBSNA)

This study adopts *EBSNA* as the most perceived inclusive and empathetic framework for understanding emotionally driven non-attendance. Compared to terms such as truancy, school phobia, or school refusal (Section 2.2.1), EBSNA appears to avoid pathologising or stigmatising the CYP and instead emphasises emotional distress as central to the experience (Lester & Michelson, 2024; Rae, 2020).

Importantly, the adoption of this terminology reflects growing concerns from parents and practitioners that alternative terms such as *school avoidance*, risk individualising the problem and obscuring systemic, relational, or contextual contributors (Morgan & Costello, 2023). By using the

term EBSNA, this study aims to promote a more holistic, compassionate understanding of school non-attendance.

2.3 The Current Landscape of Emotionally Based School Non-Attendance

EBSNA is understood as a multifaceted issue shaped by interacting influences across individual, family, school, and societal levels (West Sussex EPS, 2022). This ecological perspective is explored in Section 2.4.4. Symptoms often associated with EBSNA include reluctance to leave home, anxiety, tearfulness, disturbed sleep, and psychosomatic complaints such as stomach aches or headaches (Rae, 2020).

2.3.1 Prevalence and Misrecognition

Estimates suggest that between one and five percent of CYP may experience significant emotional distress related to school attendance (Elliott & Place, 2019; Gregory & Purcell, 2014; Pellegrini, 2007). However, obtaining accurate national data remains challenging, particularly in relation to EBSNA, due to definitional inconsistencies and variation in school-level reporting practices (see Section 1.5.1). Moreover, EBSNA is frequently misinterpreted as defiance, behavioural problems, or truancy (Thambirajah et al., 2008) which may delay appropriate intervention and exacerbate emotional distress.

EBSNA is now increasingly recognised as a complex and layered phenomenon that can be exacerbated during key educational transitions, such as the move from primary to secondary school (Corcoran & Kelly, 2023; King & Bernstein, 2001). As such, secondary-aged pupils may represent a particularly important group to explore when seeking to understand the lived experience of EBSNA, which forms part of the rationale for this study.

A lack of early recognition and understanding may result in CYP being misunderstood or unsupported at a critical stage in their development (Havik et al., 2015; Thambirajah et al., 2008). The following section introduces a range of theoretical perspectives that are commonly drawn upon in the literature to explore the emotional, psychological, and contextual factors that may underpin EBSNA.

2.4 Theoretical Perspectives for Understanding Emotionally Based School Non-Attendance

This section explores four theoretical frameworks that offer perspectives on the psychological and systemic influences on EBSNA: The Anxiety Avoidance Cycle (West Sussex EPS, 2022), Hierarchy of Needs (Maslow, 1943; 1969), Self-Determination Theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 1985; 2012), and Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). I selected these models because they are widely used in educational psychology, both in research and in applied contexts such as my own work as a TEP.

2.4.1 Anxiety Avoidance Cycle

The anxiety avoidance cycle (*Figure 1*) offers one framework to understand how anxiety could perpetuate school attendance difficulties (West Sussex EPS, 2022). Anxiety is characterised as a sustained state of apprehension that can disrupt cognitive and physiological functioning, contributing to behaviours like restlessness, fatigue, and inattention (Knight & Depue, 2019). Kearney & Silverman (1993) proposed that one possible function of school non-attendance could be the avoidance of anxiety-provoking situations. If a CYP experiences anxiety about going to school, non-attendance may dampen the negative thoughts, feelings, and physiological responses that accompany the prospect of attending. This avoidance could manifest as reluctance to get ready for school, difficulty leaving the house, or even resistance to entering the school building. Furthermore, it can also be exacerbated by further challenges such as inconsistent child sleep patterns (Thambirajah et al., 2008; West Sussex EPS, 2022).

This framework suggests that by avoiding the school situation, the CYP may not be exposed to the anxiety-provoking experience, and as a result, they could fail to develop coping strategies that would help them manage these feelings in the future. This, in turn, may lead to increased anxiety around attending school, perpetuating the avoidance cycle.

While this model appears to offer valuable insight into how anxiety may function as both a predisposing and perpetuating factor in EBSNA (West Sussex EPS, 2022), it is important to recognise its limitations. Research suggests that educational environments, family dynamic, peer relationships, and broader socio-political contexts can contribute to EBSNA (Beckles, 2014; Finning et al., 2019)

which will be further discussed in Section 2.5. From this perspective, solely focusing on anxiety through a medicalised lens may risk oversimplifying the issue and placing responsibility within the child, rather than recognising the wider systemic contributors to distress, therefore a more holistic perspective may be needed to fully understand and support CYP experiencing EBSNA.

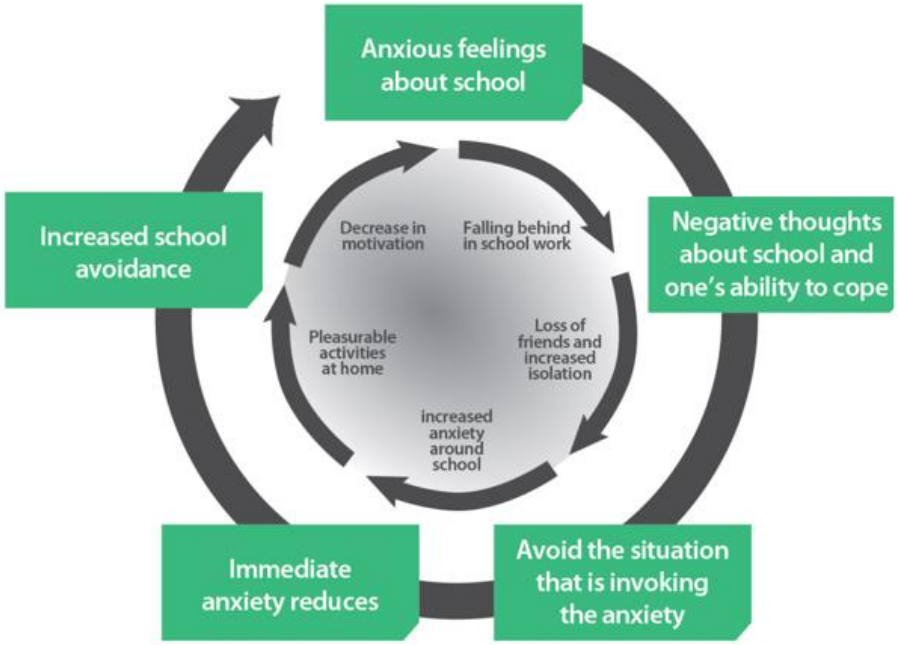


Figure 1: Anxiety Avoidance Cycle. Taken from West Sussex EPS (2022)

2.4.2 Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

Maslow (1943) suggested that humans have a hierarchy of needs ranging from basic physiological needs for survival to higher-level needs for knowledge and understanding, and finally self-actualisation. In his earlier model, Maslow (1943) suggested that lower-level needs must be satisfied before higher-level needs can be addressed. Woolfolk (2016) states that this framework has been widely applied in education to argue that pupils must feel safe, fed, and emotionally secure to learn effectively.

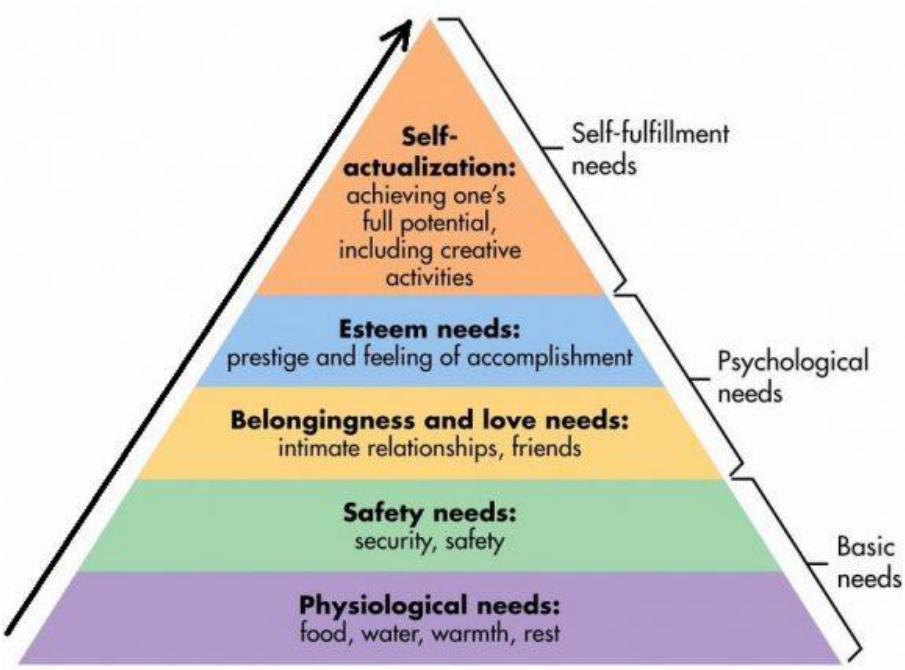


Figure 2: Hierarchy of Needs (Maslow, 1953) From Simply Psychology (2023)

Regarding EBSNA, this model can offer a lens for understanding how unmet needs such as hunger, fatigue, or lack of emotional safety may contribute to disengagement from school (Popoola & Silvers, 2023). For example, pupils who lack trusting relationships with adults in school may not experience school as a safe or welcoming environment, potentially impacting their attendance.

While influential, Maslow's theory has also received significant critique. Research has questioned the rigid ordering of needs, with evidence suggesting that individuals may pursue multiple needs simultaneously or prioritise them differently depending on context (Neher, 1991; Wahba & Bridwell, 1976; Woolfolk, 2016).

Importantly, later developments in Maslow's thinking extended the model to include *self-transcendence*, a motivation to connect with something beyond the self, such as purpose, meaning, or contribution (Koltko-Rivera, 2006; Maslow, 1969). This reconceptualisation may be especially relevant in understanding EBSNA: from this perspective some CYP may not disengage solely due to

unmet lower-tier needs, but because the educational experience lacks personal meaning, purpose, or alignment with their values.

2.4.3 Self-Determination Theory

Self-Determination Theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2012) offers a theoretical lens to interpret the intrinsic and extrinsic motivations that may influence school attendance behaviours. SDT posits that individuals have three core psychological needs - autonomy, competence, and relatedness, which must be satisfied for optimal motivation and psychological well-being.

Niemiec & Ryan (2009) suggest how these needs may be supported in classroom contexts. For example, they suggest that autonomy refers to the degree to which CYP feel in control of their own learning processes and decisions. Competence is defined as an individual's perception of efficacy and success, and relatedness refers to the sense of connection one feels with others and is important for establishing a supportive learning environment.

SDT has been critiqued for its simplicity. For example, Ryan & Deci (2022) state that SDT primarily focuses on individual psychological needs and may not fully account for broader contextual influences such as socioeconomic status, cultural norms, and environmental factors which may impact motivation.

Sheldon et al (2001) expanded upon SDT by empirically testing a broader set of psychological needs drawn from various motivation theories. Their findings reinforced the importance of autonomy, competence and relatedness, as proposed by the SDT (Deci & Ryan, 1985) but also suggested that self-esteem may play a foundational role in well-being. This appears to align with Maslow's (1943) assertion that self-esteem is a core need, potentially warranting its inclusion in revised versions of SDT (Sheldon et al., 2001).

Regarding EBSNA, Morgan and Costello (2023) suggest that CYP who experience difficulties with school attendance do not necessarily lack motivation to attend school. They suggest that pupils may feel psychologically or emotionally unable to attend due to overwhelming anxiety. From this perspective, SDT may offer only a partial explanation for EBSNA. Furthermore, while these pupils may still be motivated, their basic psychological needs may be undermined by internal distress.

2.4.4 Ecological Systems Model

Bronfenbrenner (1979) emphasised how a CYP's development is shaped by multiple nested systems, from family and school (microsystem) to broader societal structures (macrosystem). This perspective aligns well with the multifactorial nature of EBSNA, acknowledging the role of relationships, home-school communication, and wider policy or economic influences (Aubrey & Riley, 2023; Ball, 2012).

Nonetheless, it appears to provide a framework for understanding how EBSNA may emerge through interacting environmental layers, particularly when combined with more constructivist approaches. It also sets the foundation for Section 2.5, which explores specific contributing factors to EBSNA at multiple ecological levels.

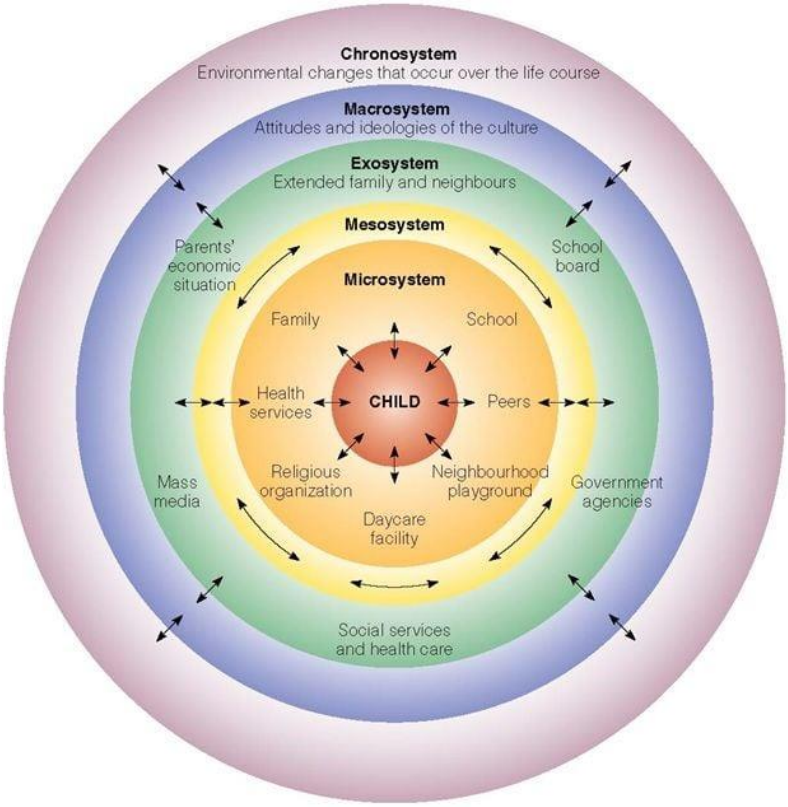


Figure 3: Bronfenbrenner & Morris (2006). From Simply Psychology (2025)

The microsystem refers to the system that sits directly around the learner and contains the factors that exist within the environments in which the learner directly experiences family, education, and peers relations (Anderson et al., 2014). Positive relationships are widely reported to support school engagement such as peer support and parent involvement in education (Elmore & Huebner, 2010;

Harding & Atkinson, 2009), whereas negative experiences like bullying or family conflict may increase non-attendance (Murberg & Bru, 2009). The mesosystem refers to connections between the microsystems for example, education and home (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Aubrey & Riley (2023) suggest that supportive parent-teacher interactions enhance school engagement, whereas conflict or poor communication between home and school may exacerbate anxiety and 'avoidance' behaviours (Havik et al, 2015).

The exosystem refers to wider contextual factors such as government and the media (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Goodman & Gregg (2010) suggest that stressful family circumstances, such as financial difficulties, can indirectly heighten EBSNA risks. Whereas, Green et al (2005) suggest that limited access to support services further compounds challenges. The macrosystem includes societal values, policies, and cultural norms which influence the other systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Ball (2012) suggested that negative attitudes toward mental health and inflexible educational systems may reinforce school non-attendance. Furthermore, Viner et al (2020) suggested that post-pandemic policy changes have also impacted attendance patterns, disproportionately affecting vulnerable pupils. Finally, the chronosystem considers time-related influences, including life transitions and historical events (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007). Popoola & Silvers (2023) proposed that the COVID-19 pandemic has likely influenced all levels of the ecological model, which may be an example of the chronosystem concept.

A common critique of this model is that, in contrast to SDT (Deci & Ryan, 2012), it may overemphasise contextual factors and underplay individual meaning-making, motivation and identity development, offering a predominantly externalised view of development (Tudge et al., 2009).

Nonetheless, Tong & An's (2024) critical review of the model highlights its strengths, particularly its capacity to offer a comprehensive, multi-layered perspective on development that is adaptable across diverse educational contexts. Similarly, Zaatari & Maalouf (2022) suggests that Bronfenbrenner & Morris' (2006) model encourages educators and professionals to consider how factors at multiple ecological levels, can either support or constrain education engagement. It could be argued that this systems-level thinking is especially pertinent in addressing complex phenomena like EBSNA, where contributing influences are rarely confined to a single domain.

The following section reviews the literature on the contributing factors to EBSNA.

2.5 Contributing Factors to Emotionally Based School Non-Attendance

Research such as Archer et al (2003) and Ochi et al (2020) suggest that the factors contributing to and sustaining EBSNA are complex and multifaceted, involving a combination of biological, psychological, social, and systemic influences. These factors impacting school attendance are often described as 'push' and 'pull' factors (Thambirajah et al., 2008) and the British Psychological Society (BPS 2024) highlight the importance of understanding the dynamics between the two sets of factors. This conceptualisation has been endorsed (BPS, 2023) as a useful tool for understanding the underlying motivations behind EBSNA and identifying intervention and support.

Thambirajah et al (2008) suggest that EBSNA is most likely to emerge when pull factors (e.g. feelings of safety or reduced anxiety at home) outweigh the incentives or emotional support associated with attending school. Their model appears to offer a useful starting point for understanding the ambivalence that many CYP may feel towards school and provides practitioners with a framework for identifying contributory factors. However, while the push–pull model may be valuable for highlighting the competing influences on attendance, it may risk oversimplification if used in isolation. Without exploring the subjective meanings that CYP assign to these experiences, there is a danger of reducing complex emotional and contextual factors to binary categories (Havik et al., 2015; Kearney, 2003). In response, Thambirajah et al (2008) advocate for systemic approaches that consider the environments surrounding the CYP when planning supportive interventions.

The following section will explore research in relation to individual factors (child-related), family or home-related factors, education-related factors and wider systemic-related factors that may influence EBSNA. Previous research (e.g. Finning et al., 2020; Thambirajah et al., 2008) have often grouped school influences under the umbrella term 'school-related factors'. However, the current study adopts a broader lens by using the term 'education-related' factors. This framing reflects the intention to explore influences that extend beyond the traditional school environment, including AP, home education, and educational policy that may shape the experiences of CYP experiencing EBSNA.

2.5.1 Individual Related-Factors

2.5.1.1 Mental health difficulties

Mental health difficulties, particularly anxiety and depression, are consistently suggested to be significant risk factors (Ek & and Eriksson, 2013; Finning et al., 2020; Kearney & Bensaheb, 2006; Lester & Michelson, 2024; Thambirajah et al., 2008).

Several international systematic reviews have explored EBSNA, including presentations described as truancy, school phobia, and school refusal. Ek and Eriksson (2013) and Finning et al (2019) highlight a link between emotional challenges, particularly anxiety and depression, and EBSNA. Despite these converging findings, Ek & Eriksson's review relies heavily on older studies, therefore, may not take into consideration the current educational context. Furthermore, both reviews draw on international data, which may not account for contextual differences in educational systems, mental health frameworks and cultural differences towards EBSNA. Nonetheless, their collective findings suggest that anxiety and depression may be salient factors influencing EBSNA across a range of cultural contexts, offering a foundation for understanding these difficulties while also highlighting the need for UK-specific systematic reviews to better capture the breadth and complexity of EBSNA.

In the UK, the perspectives of practitioners and parents have been explored through various methodologies. For instance, Finning et al (2020) conducted focus groups with secondary school staff who identified anxiety as a key driver of non-attendance (see Anxiety Cycle Section 2.4.1). Complementing these findings, Lester and Michelson (2024) surveyed parents and professionals, finding that COVID-19 restrictions exacerbated pre-existing attendance issues and triggered new cases of anxiety among pupils.

Qualitative insights from pupils experiencing EBSNA reveal the emotional toll of traditional schooling for some CYP. For instance, Want (2020) adopted a narrative approach with two pupils and three parents to explore how they perceived their own experiences of EBSNA. Both pupils described intense emotional responses to mainstream education, including fear, stress, and anger. Parents reported observing heightened anxiety, with some CYP experiencing psychosomatic symptoms such as migraines. Notably, both CYP and their families recognised anxiety as central to EBSNA, suggesting the need for interventions that support emotional experiences of education.

While in Want's (2020) study, the small sample and focus on pupils in specific contexts such as PRU or hospital education may limit the findings generalisability, the study appears to reinforce broader findings (Finning et al., 2020; Lester & Michelson, 2024) that anxiety may be a salient factor in EBSNA and highlights the importance of including pupil and family perspectives in understanding these difficulties.

2.5.1.2 Special Educational Needs and Disabilities and Neurodevelopmental Profiles

Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) and neurodevelopmental profiles are often linked with EBSNA (Munkhaugen et al., 2017; Preece & and Howley, 2018; Totsika et al., 2022). Statistics appear to suggest that persistent absence is more prevalent in children with SEND (Children's Commissioner, 2022; DfE, 2023b).

In 2021, the absence rates for students with Education, Health and Care Plans was 13.1% and 6.5% for those receiving SEND support, compared to 3.9% for pupils with no SEND support (DfE. Continuing this trend, the Educational Policy Institute (2023) reported that pupils with Social, Emotional, and Mental Health (SEMH) needs as their primary need missed an average of 9.4 school days in autumn 2022, compared to 4.5 days for their non-SEND peers.

Totsika et al (2022) found that emotional health accounted for 43% of absences in autistic pupils, based on parent-reported data, while Finning et al (2020) reported that practitioners perceived mainstream settings as often unable to support such pupils' needs. These studies may reinforce the view that emotionally unmet needs in school environments can contribute substantially to EBSNA. However, both rely on adult perspectives, omitting the voices of CYP themselves which limits our understanding of how CYP interpret and experience these challenges.

Studies such as Totsika et al (2020) and Finning et al (2020) highlight the potential link between SEND or neurodevelopmental profiles and EBSNA risk but may risk reinforcing a predominantly within-child narrative (Norwich, 2006). It could be argued that such narratives underemphasise the role of environmental and systemic factors, particularly how inflexible and under-resources educational settings may exacerbate emotional distress. This reflects the *SEND Review Green Paper* (DfE, 2022), which acknowledged that many mainstream schools lack the training, expertise, and

capacity to support pupils with SEND effectively. From this standpoint, what is often described as a child's 'inability to cope' (Finning et al., 2020) might instead reflect a school's inability to provide inclusive, responsive provision.

2.5.2 Family and Home-Related Factors

2.5.2.1 Parental Mental Health and Attachment

Early research into EBSNA appear to have placed strong emphasis on parent-child attachment, particularly the role of separation anxiety. Bowlby (1969) foundational work on attachment theory framed separation anxiety as a normative developmental process, but one that could become problematic under certain relational or environmental conditions. Studies such as Eisenberg (1958) and Torma & Halsti (1975) observed CYP 'school phobia' as often exhibiting intense distress at separation from their primary caregivers, with parental overprotection cited as a reinforcing factor. Kearney et al (1995) went further, proposing separation as the "primary psychological mechanism" (p.76) underpinning school phobia.

While early findings offer historical insight, they may risk overemphasising intra-familial dynamics by focusing predominantly on parent–child attachment. Contemporary research has aimed to understand parent styles within broader systemic contexts (Chian, 2022). Drawing on staff and pupil perspectives from mainstream schools, Chian's (2022) study suggested that some staff perceived parenting styles characterised by high anxiety or overprotection as potentially reinforcing EBSNA. These narratives echo earlier concerns about parental over-involvement (Eisenberg, 1958; Torma & Halsti, 1975).

2.5.2.2 Wider Family Environments and Dynamics

Generally more recent studies have shifted toward examining broader systemic factors within families. Fornander & Kearney (2019) used a regression tree analysis in a U.S-based study to examine broader family environmental predictors of EBSNA. Severe absenteeism was linked to low family cohesion, weak emotional expressiveness, and limited recreational and achievement-oriented behaviours. This statistical approach identifies patterns of risk but does not explore the lived experiences of CYP.

In contrast, Beckles (2014) offered qualitative insights from school staff, who perceived some families as creating "barriers" (p.90) to attendance, including disinterest in education or 'chaotic' home circumstances such as parental separation or emotional instability. While the study provides valuable practitioner perspectives, its framing tends to individualise parental behaviours and underplays wider systemic and socioeconomic influences.

Taken together, these studies appear to highlight the importance of the home environment in shaping EBSNA. Quantitative findings (Fornander & Kearney, 2019) statistically link attendance difficulties with low family functioning, while qualitative accounts (Beckles, 2014; Chian, 2022) describe how school staff interpret these dynamics in everyday practice. However, these perspectives, particularly from school staff, may risk pathologising families or attributing blame, without fully accounting for external stressors such as socioeconomic disadvantage or structural limitations within the education system (see Section 2.5.4). Moreover, like the previous section, lack of pupil voice across these studies limits understanding of how CYP themselves interpret these dynamics.

2.5.3 Education-Related Factors

2.5.3.1 Teacher-Student Relationships

Some research suggests that pupils' perceptions of unsupportive teacher relationships may contribute to EBSNA**.** For example, both Chian (2024) and Reed (2021) conducted qualitative studies highlighting how pupils who experienced EBSNA often felt misunderstood or dismissed by staff, which heightened their anxiety and EBSNA. Reed (2021), drawing on the views of 10 autistic CYP, emphasised the need for greater teacher attunement to individual needs to reduce EBSNA. Chian (2024) however, stated that systemic constraints (e.g. time, training) were recognised by staff as impacting their ability to provide responsive support.

Conversely, positive teacher-student relationships have been identified as protective factors that can alleviate EBSNA. Seddon (2024), through interviews with pupils, parents, and staff, found that trusting relationships created a sense of safety and emotional readiness to return to school. Similarly, Chian (2022) identified that feelings of inclusion, acceptance, and recognition of pupils' strengths were underpinned by positive staff relationships and that this was a key factor to sustaining attendance. Both studies highlight the value of a supportive and inclusive school ethos, where relational connection and collaboration between teachers and students is valued.

Crucially, these findings are grounded in pupil views, reinforcing the importance of listening to lived experience when shaping responses to EBSNA. However, both Seddon (2024) and Chian (2022) are doctoral theses. While doctoral theses are subject to academic scrutiny and often apply rigorous methodologies, they are not peer-reviewed in the traditional sense. This may limit their perceived credibility or influence in wider academic and professional discourse. Furthermore, both studies drew on small, context-specific samples, which may restrict the generalisability of their findings. Nonetheless, their contributions offer valuable insights into lived experiences which appear to be often underrepresented in peer-reviewed research, particularly in relation to pupil perspectives on teacher–student relationships in the context of EBSNA.

Further insights are offered by Filippello et al (2019) and Want (2020), in their findings, both of which explored the influence of teacher–student relationships on EBSNA through the lens of SDT (Deci & Ryan, 1985; 2012) (Section 2.4.3). These studies appear to suggest that unsupportive or emotionally distant teacher relationships may undermine pupils' sense of relatedness, contributing to EBSNA. Conversely, when pupils feel understood and supported by staff, their psychological needs can be met, fostering a greater sense of belonging and emotional safety (Ryan & Deci, 2017). However, Filippello et al (2019) used a quantitative design, which, while helpful for identifying correlations, may overlook the nuance of individual lived experiences. Want's (2020) small-scale qualitative study provided rich narratives from pupils, but its limited sample size and context-specific focus constrain generalisability. However, taken together, the findings reinforce the potential value of SDT in explaining how relational dynamics within schools can shape the emotional experiences of CYP with EBSNA.

2.5.3.2 Bullying & Friendship Conflicts

Research suggests that bullying and peer relationship difficulties can be a significant contributory factor in the development of EBSNA for some pupils. Thambirajah et al (2008) highlight how experiences of bullying may lead to heightened anxiety and social withdrawal, factors often associated with avoidant behaviours. Chian (2022) found that pupils identified peer conflict and feelings of social exclusion as triggers for their disengagement from school.

Notably, five out of the six teachers interviewed in Chian (2022)'s study held Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Coordinator (SENDCO) or pastoral roles with a focus on wellbeing. While their insights offered valuable perspectives on emotional and relational contributors to EBSNA, this sample may have placed greater emphasis on pastoral concerns, potentially underrepresenting the perspectives of classroom teachers or other staff who also influence peer dynamics.

Much of the research in this area draws upon small-scale qualitative studies, grey literature, or professional perspectives, which may limit the generalisability of findings. Further research involving a broader range of pupil experiences across diverse settings may be beneficial in deepening understanding of how peer relationships interact with EBSNA.

2.5.3.3 Education Environment and Structure

Research suggests that features of the physical and social school environment may significantly influence the emotional wellbeing of pupils and contribute to EBSNA. A common theme across studies is the anxiety provoked by large, overstimulating spaces and transitions during the school day. For example, Archer et al (2003) and Lauchlan (2003) both identified crowded corridors, canteens, and unsupervised areas such as toilets and playgrounds as common sources of distress. These environmental stressors were particularly problematic during unstructured times like break and lunch periods. While these studies provide useful insight, their age may limit their relevance to current school contexts.

More recent research has expanded the focus beyond physical space to include broader systemic and relational elements. For instance, in their study involving pupil and staff views, Chian (2022), reported that systemic barriers such as limited resources and poor coordination with external agencies can undermine schools' ability to respond effectively to EBSNA. However, they also found that a school climate characterised by inclusion and belonging played a protective role.

Psychological safety is further explored by Halligan & Cryer (2022), who explored the views of Year 11 students in a specialist setting. Pupils described the importance of feeling safe, understood, and connected within the school environment, factors that aligned closely with the supportive conditions highlighted in both Chian (2022) and earlier work by Archer et al (2003). While Halligan and Cryer's (2022) findings offer valuable insight into how CYP experience and manage EBSNA, the context of

specialist provision and older pupils may differ from that of younger cohorts in mainstream settings, where such protective factors may be less consistently embedded. These two studies highlight that while structural features are important, the emotional climate also influenced how CYP experience the school environment.

2.5.3.4 Transitions and Change

Transitions appeared to be identified as critical periods where students are more vulnerable to EBSNA (Archer et al., 2003; Corcoran & Kelly, 2023; King & Bernstein, 2001; Tamyln, 2022). King and Bernstein's (2001) early review identified critical transition point such as starting school or moving from primary to secondary education as risk factors for EBSNA, due to the emotional stress and uncertainty such changes can provoke. More recently, Corcoran and Kelly's (2023) systematic review of ten studies (based on the views of 61 pupils) reinforced that transition-related difficulties remain a prominent theme in EBSNA research, suggesting that these challenges have persisted over the past two decades.

Furthermore, Archer et al (2003) interviewed teachers and professionals to explore CYPs struggles during transitions. Participants described pupils struggling to adjust to unfamiliar environments and new peer groupings, which were seen to increase anxiety and lead to non-attendance. Archer et al.'s study, while influential, may have limited contemporary relevance due to the time elapsed since data collection and potential changes in educational structures and practices since. Nevertheless, its findings, alongside those of the two literature reviews by King & Bernstein (2001) and Corcoran & Kelly (2023), align with a broader body of research linking anxiety to EBSNA (Ek & and Eriksson, 2013; Finning et al., 2020; Kearney & Bensaheb, 2006; Lester & Michelson, 2024; Thambirajah et al., 2008). Together, these studies suggest that transition points may represent particularly sensitive periods in which heightened anxiety increases the risk of EBSNA.

Pupil voice studies point to the value of relational support during transitions. Tamlyn (2022), for example, investigated the narratives of 12 CYP aged 11–13, who described their transition from primary to secondary school as a key trigger for EBSNA, particularly when support from adults and peers was lacking. Tamlyn's findings not only reinforce transitions as risk periods but also emphasise the potential significance of understanding transition experiences from the perspectives of pupils.

2.5.4 Wider Systemic-Related Factors

Socioeconomic status (SES) appears to be a contributing factor in EBSNA. Early work by Attwood and Croll (2006), using data from the British Household Panel Survey alongside interviews with 17 CYP labelled as 'truants,' found that 10 of the participants came from low-SES backgrounds. Although framed within the context of 'truancy', such findings may reflect patterns of emotionally driven absence that align more closely with contemporary understandings of EBSNA.

More recent research has expanded on this connection, exploring how poverty-related stressors may impact emotional wellbeing and school attendance. For example, in a Scottish-based study with secondary-aged pupils, found that CYP from lower-income households were more likely to miss school due to challenges such as housing instability, reduced parental involvement, and financial hardship (Klein et al., 2020). Similarly, Sullivan-Walker et al (2017) identified strong associations between poverty, homelessness, food insecurity, and persistent non-attendance, noting that these conditions can undermine both psychological wellbeing and educational participation. While these studies do not focus exclusively on EBSNA, they highlight how socioeconomic adversity may contribute to EBSNA. This perspective appears to align with ecological models of development (Section 2.4.4), which emphasise the influence of contextual and structural factors on CYP outcomes.

It is important to acknowledge that the correlation between SES and EBSNA is not necessarily causal (Pearl 2012). More targeted research is needed to establish how socioeconomic factors specifically relate to the development of EBSNA. Nonetheless, these studies collectively suggest that pupils facing compounded vulnerabilities may be at greater risk of disengagement due to the emotional strain of these conditions.

2.6 Eliciting Pupil Voice in EBSNA Research

While the previous section explored a range of contributing factors to EBSNA, much of the literature draws primarily from perspectives of parents, educators, and professionals. Whilst offering valuable insights, this emphasis may risk overlooking how CYP themselves interpret and make sense of their experiences. Listening to CYP directly can yield not only rich, nuanced understanding (Prunty et al., 2012; Graham et al., 2018) but also generate practically useful knowledge for professionals and policymakers (Whitty & Wisby, 2007). Furthermore, relying solely on adult perspectives may

inadvertently foreground individual or family-level difficulties, while underrepresenting education-related and systemic factors contributing to EBSNA (Beckles, 2014; Chian et al., 2022).

Eliciting voice from this population can present challenges, due to a range of contextual and emotional factors. Pupils experiencing EBSNA often face high anxiety, communication barriers, and distressing school experiences may make reflection difficult (Hart, 1992; MacConville, 2006). They may have also developed hesitancy or distrust towards educational professionals, particularly if they have previously felt unheard or misunderstood (Clark, 2005; Todd, 2007). Kennan et al (2019) highlight the importance of adult responsibility in addressing these barriers, suggesting that methods for participation must be actively adapted to meet the diverse communication needs of CYP. They identify four interrelated elements: space, voice, audience, and influence, all of which are suggested to be essential for enabling genuine participation.

In response to participation challenges, researchers increasingly advocate for participatory and creative methods that are accessible, developmentally appropriate, and emotionally attuned (Graham et al., 2018; Prunty et al., 2012). In EBSNA research, recent studies have adopted such methods to support authentic pupil expression. For example, Want (2020) used an adapted Narrative Oriented Inquiry approach to explore how CYP and their parents made sense of EBSNA. Using guided narrative interviews and a visual life path tool, the study prioritised participant-led storytelling, allowing CYP to reflect on their experiences in emotionally safe and meaningful ways.

Furthermore, Personal Construct Psychology (PCP**)** tools appear to be increasingly used in educational psychology to support pupil voice in accessible and flexible ways (Butler & Green, 2007; Ravenette, 1999). These tools are rooted in the idea that individuals interpret the world through their own personal constructs (Kelly, 1955) making them particularly suitable for eliciting the subjective experiences of CYP. Ravenette's 1999) "drawing and its opposite" technique and (Moran, 2001) "Ideal Self" Activity demonstrate how visual tasks can elicit dichotomous constructs, helping CYP externalise their thoughts in non-threatening ways.

Williams & Hanke (2007) further adapted this approach to explore school experiences, finding that combining drawing, writing, and discussion enabled neurodiverse pupils to express their school-related needs more comfortably. Building on this, Higgins (2022) explored the perceptions of 10 autistic pupils experiencing EBSNA, using a semi-structured interview and an adapted "Drawing the

Ideal School" activity. Higgins' Reflexive Thematic Analysis highlighted pupils' desire for greater autonomy, positive relationships, flexible routines, interest-based learning, and sensory-friendly environments.

These methods discussed above offer participatory approaches capturing pupil voice in EBSNA research. Building on this conceptual and methodological foundation, the current study draws upon this conceptual and methodological foundation by using an adapted version of the "Drawing the Ideal School activity" (Williams & Hanke, 2007) to explore how CYP experiencing EBSNA envision their ideal and non-ideal educational environments. The activity is designed to elicit dichotomous constructs such as the preferred versus challenging aspects of education through a "drawing and its opposite" format (Ravenette, 2006), its roots underpinned by PCP theory (Kelly, 1955). Further discussion of the Dichotomy Corollary and how the tool was developed and applied in this study is provided in the Methods Section (Chapter 4).

These techniques are often valued for being collaborative, pupil-led, and suitable for CYP with anxiety, communication difficulties, or EBSNA (Beaver, 2011; Strong, 2019; Wade, 2022). Adaptations like prompt cards further support accessibility (Strong, 2019; Wade, 2022). However, some limitations are noted: visual methods may oversimplify complex emotions or be shaped by adult interpretations and if not sensitively facilitated, PCP activities may be perceived as superficial (Burr et al., 2014).

Nonetheless, when used reflexively, these tools can elicit the personal meaning-making of pupils, offering valuable insights into their emotional and educational needs (Burr et al., 2014; Butler & Green, 2007; Higgins, 2022).

Despite their value, such studies discussed are often small-scale and situated within specific contexts, limiting generalisability. Many are located within grey literature, including unpublished theses (Higgins, 2022; Wade 2022, Strong, 2019), which may not be as widely disseminated or cited in policy and practice. Nevertheless, they appear to provide an important foundation for future research that seeks to foreground pupil meaning making in understanding EBSNA. This study builds on that foundation by exploring how secondary-aged CYP with EBSNA envision their ideal and non-ideal educational environments, addressing a continued gap in research that meaningfully includes the perspectives of those whose voices are too often overlooked.

2.7 Summary of Chapter and Rationale for Systematic Literature Review

The literature reviewed suggests that EBSNA is influenced by interrelated factors spanning individual, relational, educational, and systemic domains. Individually, anxiety and emotional distress are consistently identified as core features of EBSNA (Thambirajah et al., 2008; Kearney & Bensaheb, 2006; Finning et al., 2020; Lester & Michelson, 2024), and research often highlights a link with SEND and neurodivergent profiles (Munkhaugen et al., 2017; Preece & and Howley, 2018; Totsika et al., 2022). Relational factors, including teacher-student relationships and peer interactions, appear to also play a role in EBSNA. CYP experiences of bullying, social exclusion, or friendship difficulties have been shown to undermine pupils' sense of belonging and emotional safety in school (Chian, 2022; Holliman et al., 2024; Thambirajah et al., 2008).

Transitions and change, particularly the move from primary to secondary school, are consistently identified as key risk periods during which pupils may be more vulnerable to EBSNA (King & Bernstein, 2001; Archer et al., 2003; Tamlyn, 2022; Corcoran & Kelly, 2023). Systemic and environmental factors, such as large, impersonal school environments, lack of inclusive practices, and inadequate emotional support, have also been highlighted (Archer et al., 2003; Chian, 2022; Halligan & Cryer, 2022). Additionally, socioeconomic disadvantage has been suggested as a potential risk factor, with poverty-related stressors such as housing instability and food insecurity negatively impacting emotional wellbeing and school engagement (Attwood & Croll, 2006; Klein et al., 2020; Sullivan-Walker et al., 2017). Taken together, these findings support the view that EBSNA is a complex, multi-layered issue shaped by the interaction of emotional, relational, and systemic influences.

Despite the recognition of EBSNA as a complex, multi-layered phenomenon (Finning et al., 2019; Thambirajah et al., 2008), the current evidence base appears to remain limited in several key respects. Much of the literature discussed above draws on noncontemporary studies, grey literature, or research that does not focus explicitly on EBSNA distinctively. While these studies offer valuable insights into contributory factors, many rely on adult perspectives or emphasise external risk factors, with relatively few centring the voices of CYP themselves, particularly in relation to how they make sense of and emotionally experience EBSNA.

Given the increasing recognition of pupil voice in informing effective and compassionate educational responses (DfE, 2014a; Lundy, 2007; United Nations, 1989) and the limited research that directly centres the views of CYP experiencing EBSNA, the following section presents a systematic literature review exploring existing studies that capture the perspectives of secondary-aged pupils with EBSNA. This age range was chosen because EBSNA is suggested to be more prevalent during this phase (Elliott & Place, 2019; Gregory & Purcell, 2014; Pellegrini, 2007), and the transition from primary to secondary is recognised as a key risk factor (Archer et al., 2003; King & Bernstein, 2001; Tamlyn, 2022; Corcoran & Kelly, 2023). Furthermore, this age range aligns with the current research aim of understanding how secondary-aged pupils envision and give meaning to their educational experience, particularly in the context of EBSNA.

3 Systematic Literature Review

3.1 Chapter Overview

Building on the previous chapter's exploration of contributory factors to Emotionally Based School Non-Attendance (EBSNA), this chapter presents a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) focused on qualitative studies that centre the voices of secondary-aged pupils experiencing EBSNA. While existing literature offers valuable insight into the emotional, relational, and systemic factors contributing to EBSNA, it remains largely shaped by adult perspectives. Previous chapters highlighted the growing recognition of pupil voice as a critical but underrepresented area in EBSNA research. In response, this review aims to identify and synthesise research that prioritises the perspectives of children and young people (CYP).

The chapter begins by outlining the review aim and questions, followed by the inclusion and exclusion criteria and the search strategy. It then details the data extraction and synthesis process, before presenting a thematic summary of the included studies. Finally, it reflects on the implications of the findings and identifies gaps that inform the empirical strand of the current study.

3.2 Definition of a Systematic Literature Review

SLRs are designed to comprehensively examine existing research, summarise findings, and suggest best practices (Newman & Gough, 2020). Distinct from other types of literature reviews, SLRs aim to minimise bias through transparent and systematic methods for identifying, evaluating and synthesising research (Gough, 2007).

3.3 Focus of the Systematic Literature Review

The present SLR aims to synthesise and critically evaluate qualitative research capturing the views of secondary-aged pupils who experience EBSNA. The following research question for the review will be explored:

"What are the views of secondary school-aged young people on their experiences with Emotionally Based School Non-Attendance?"

Previous reviews have contributed valuable insights into this area. For example, focusing on reintegration Wright (2023) synthesises studies across a broad range, identifying themes such as emotional wellbeing, family dynamics and school support. Corcoran & Kelly (2023), using meta-ethnography, explored school belonging in UK-based studies and generated a conceptual model linking attendance to connectedness and inclusion.

This review builds on these contributions by adopting a more targeted and exploratory approach. Specifically, it narrows the focus to secondary-aged pupils, a group showing to experience higher rates of EBSNA (Elliot & Place, 2019; Gregory & Purcell, 2014) and centres lived experiences, which may differ meaningfully from those in younger aged groups. This choice also aligns with the broader research aims of the thesis, which seeks to understand how secondary-aged pupils envision their ideal and non-ideal educational experiences through a constructivist lens.

This SLR adopt a thematic synthesis, one method suited to identifying descriptive and experiential themes that can inform both theory and practice (Thomas & Harden, 2008). Thematic synthesis enables the exploration of meaning within and across studies (Thomas & Harden, 2008). Unlike standalone reviews such as Corcoran & Kelly (2023), the present SLR is embedded within a broader research review and hands-on research. This method supports the thesis' overarching aim: to amplify pupil voice in a way that reflects personal meaning-making.

In summary, this review contributes a focused and practically grounded synthesis of qualitative literature, enriching understanding of how secondary-aged pupils experience and interpret their EBSNA. It provides a foundation for the later stages of this thesis, which will explore how secondary-age pupils envision their education.

3.3.1 Search Strategy and Terms

In June 2024 a systematic search was conducted across several databases: Web of Science, ERIC (Education Resource Information Centre) and Scopus. These databases were chosen due to their significance in educational and applied psychological research. Additionally, thesis research was accessed through ProQuest. The search terms were formulated following an initial literature review and included commonly used synonyms and alternative spellings to capture a broad scope of relevant

studies such as *"Emotionally Based School Avoidance, persistent absence, school refusal, school avoidance, Emotionally Based School Non-Attendance, and truancy*". These terms were uniformly applied across all databases using Boolean operators 'OR' and 'AND'. Where possible, searches were specifically targeted to titles, abstracts and keywords. A full list of the search terms used in the databases can be found in Appendix T.

3.3.2 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Table 1 outlines the established inclusion and exclusion criteria for the review. The focus on secondary-aged pupils was chosen to align with the aims of the broader thesis, which explores how pupils in this age group envision their educational experiences. Qualitative studies were prioritised to capture the richness of lived experience, with mixed-methods studies included only where qualitative findings were clearly reported and relevant. Studies combining perspectives were excluded unless CYP's views were analysed separately, ensuring pupil voice remained central.

Doctoral theses were included due to their methodological rigour and in-depth exploration, despite not being peer-reviewed. The search was limited to English-language studies published in the UK from 2014 onwards, to ensure contextual relevance and capture the most current evidence base.

Table 1: Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria of the SLR

Study Feature	Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
Sample	Secondary-aged pupils (11-18) experiencing school attendance challenges due to emotional reasons.	Participants under 11 or over 18; studies focused solely on adults' perspectives
Date of publication	Published between 2014 and present	Published before 2014
Focus of study	CYP's personal views of their EBSNA experiences	Studies focusing on school non-attendance for other reasons, such as school exclusion.
Study Design	Primarily qualitative or relevant qualitative strand in mixed methods, with separate young person voice reporting.	Quantitative-only; mixed views without disaggregated pupil perspectives
Research outcome	Peer-reviewed journals and doctoral theses	Non-peer reviewed publications (e.g. books).
Additional Features	English-language, UK-based	Non-English language; non-UK studies

3.3.3 Study selection

Figure 4 illustrates the number of papers initially identified in each database and number of papers excluded during each phase of the screening process. Duplicates were first removed. Subsequently, titles were screened to ascertain clear alignment with the inclusion criteria. If eligibility based on the title was ambiguous, abstracts were reviewed. Eight papers progressed to full-text screening. Appendix U provides a list of the studies excluded during the full-text review phase, noting the specific exclusion criteria that applied.

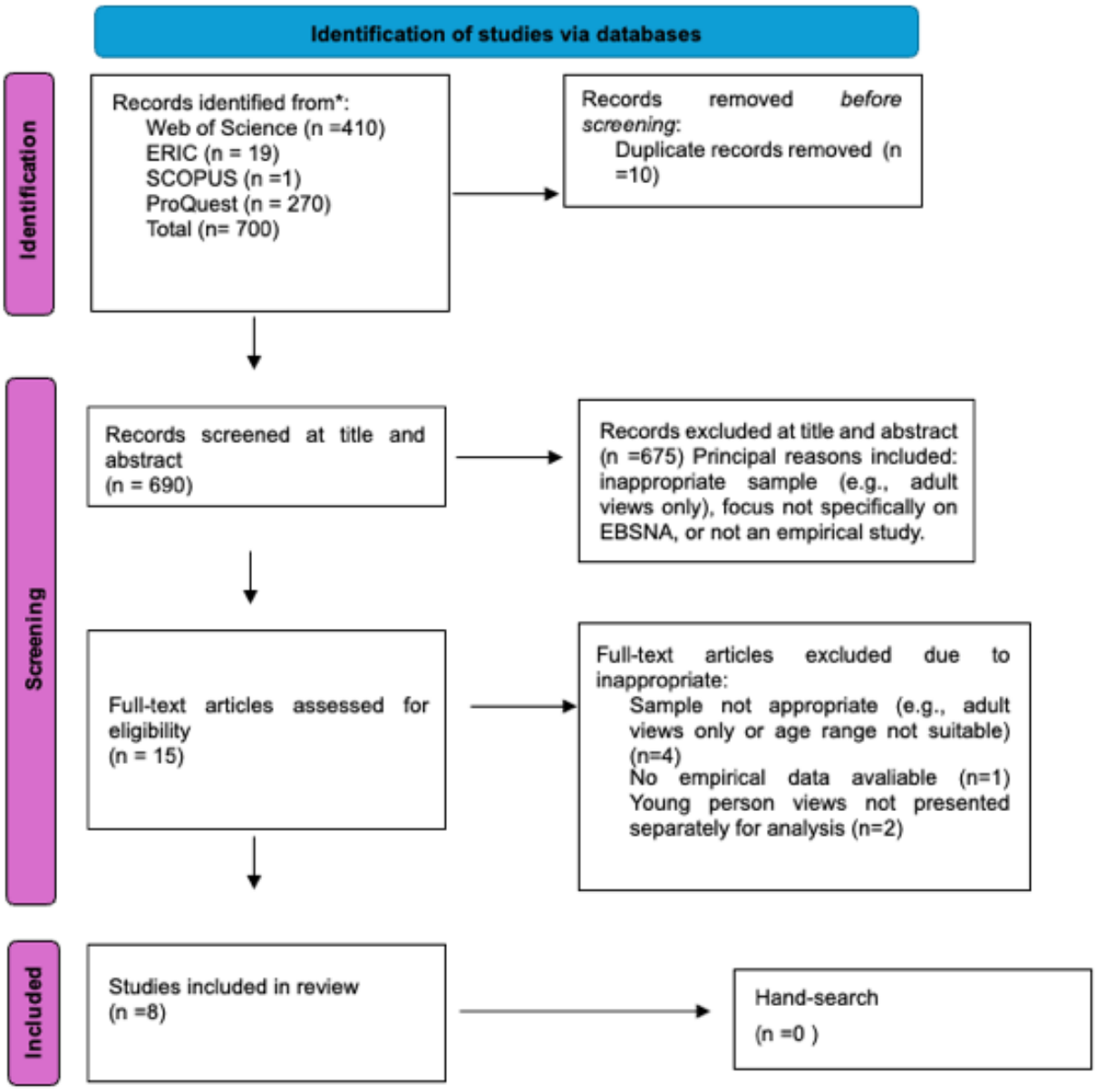


Figure 4: Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Analyses (PRISMA) Flow Diagram

3.3.4 Overview of included studies

A total of eight papers satisfied the inclusion criteria. Information about the eight studies, including descriptions of the sample, data collection and analysis methods, and key findings see Appendix X. This overview offers a comprehensive look at the studies included in the final review.

3.3.5 Sample

All studies reported the age, school year and gender of participants, apart from Gregory & Purcell, (2014), which did not provide participant age or gender. All studies focused on participants of secondary school age. Across all studies, there were a total of 56 participants which were asked their views (approximately 26 male participants and 27 female participants, with three unspecified). Baker and Bishop (2015), Beckles (2014) and James (2015) reported all participants were White British.

Across the studies, average attendance levels varied among participants. Beckles' (2014) study reported attendance levels with 77% to 87% among their participants. How (2015) study noted attendance levels between 78% and 89%. James (2015) study focused on pupils meeting <85% attendance criteria. Baker & Bishop (2015) and Gregory & Purcell (2014) research highlighted prolonged absences but no specific detail. However, Clissold (2018), Want (2020) and Halligan & Cryer (2022) did not specify attendance levels of pupils in their studies.

3.3.6 Methods used to elicit pupil views

A range of qualitative methods were used across the studies to elicit pupil views, with interviews being the primary approach. Gregory & Purcell (2014), Baker & Bishop (2015) and How (2015), solely used semi-structured interviews. Beckles (2014) and James (2015) also incorporated participatory tools. Beckles (2014) incorporated the Ideal School Activity (Williams & Hanke, 2007), with Scaling and Timeline techniques. James (2015) used the School Refusal Assessment Scale (Kearney & Silverman, 1993a) and storyboarding. Clissold (2018) combined unstructured interviews with tools such as All About Me (p.148), a School Timetable (p.149) and the Grid Elaboration Method (Joffe & Elsey, 2014). Want (2020) used narrative interviews supported by a Life Path Tool adapted from the Life Story Grid. Halligan & Cryer (2022) used structured individual interviews and semi-structured group interviews.

3.3.7 Data analysis

Data analysis methods included thematic analysis in Beckles (2014), discourse analysis in Clissold (2018), Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) in Halligan and Cryer (2022, Gregory & Purcell (2014), How (2015) and Baker and Bishop (2015), and narrative-oriented inquiry in Want (2020).

3.3.8 Critical appraisal

The Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP, 2018) checklist for qualitative research was used to assess the quality of the eight studies in this review. Appendix U indicates the outcome of the inclusion and exclusion criteria appraisal. This ten-question checklist evaluates the research methodology's appropriateness and the study findings' validity and utility. CASP is widely recognised in qualitative systematic literature reviews for ensuring transparency (Long et al., 2020).

The purpose of the appraisal was to assess methodological quality, not to exclude studies. In line with recommendations from the Cochrane Handbook (Noyes et al., 2022), numerical scoring was not applied, as such systems are discouraged in qualitative research. Instead, studies were categorised as ‘high’, ‘medium’, or ‘low’ quality based on the number of CASP (2018) criteria met, with emphasis placed on the review of the study’s methodological strengths and limitations (Noyes et al., 2022). Refer to Appendix V for template for CASP (2018) checklist used and Appendix W for CASP outcome on each study.

Studies that met all ten CASP criteria were rated as high quality, studies that fulfilled most criteria were rated medium quality, and studies meeting fewer criteria would have been considered low quality. All studies, except Baker & Bishop (2015), were rated high quality, demonstrating adherence to qualitative research standards. These studies met all appraisal criteria, showing comprehensive adherence in areas such as research aims, methodology appropriateness, research design, recruitment strategy, data collection, ethical considerations, data analysis rigor, and clarity of findings.

Baker & Bishop (2015) was a medium-rated study, needing further methodological or analytical strengthening to enhance robustness (e.g. limited information was provided on managing relationships between the researcher and participants, which would support research integrity and ethical standards).

3.3.9 Data synthesis

Synthesis was conducted using thematic synthesis (Gough, 2007), following guidelines from the Cochrane Handbook for Systematic Reviews (Cochrane training, n.d.). This involved the immersion in qualitative data, initial coding to pinpoint relevant segments, and the development of themes through manual review. This method emphasises hands-on engagement with data to uncover nuances and patterns, facilitating the identification and refinement of themes that address the research question (Gough, 2007). The eight themes identified were: *Relationships with Staff Members, Peer Interactions and Friendships, Wellbeing and Mental Health, Impact of the Learning Environment, Agency and Autonomy, Transition to Secondary School, School Systemic Issues and External Support,* and *Family and Home Environment.* Each will be discussed below.

3.3.10 Research findings

3.3.10.1 Theme 1: Relationships with Staff Members

In all studies, participants highlighted the significance of relationships. CYP particularly emphasised their interactions with teachers and school staff as both risk and protective factors affecting their school attendance. Negative relationships with staff were characterised by descriptors like “strict” (Beckles, 2014; How, 2015; Want, 2020), “scary” (Baker & Bishop, 2015), “grumpy,” and “moody” (Beckles, 2014). In Gregory & Purcell (2014) a pupil described a teacher as “shouty” stating “he would shout, and I never knew why”. Participants in studies such as Beckles (2014) and How (2015) expressed concerns that staff did not care or understand their needs and would “pick on you for no reason”. A participant in James (2015) explained that there was a lack of understanding from adults in school, and a participant in How (2015) described feeling a sense of betrayal by staff members, as they felt unsupported in dealing with peer relationship challenges, which exacerbated their experience of EBSNA.

Participants in Beckles (2014) discussed the low bond between students and teachers, often just knowing their names, which made them feel apprehensive about talking to teachers about their worries. A participant mentioned that each student had a “named person” for adult support, but they were unsure who that person was. Furthermore, students often felt misunderstood and misjudged by their teachers. For instance, a participant in Clissold's (2018) study noted that teachers lacked awareness of their needs, including their mental health challenges and medical diagnoses. Across multiple studies, students reported being unfairly treated and labelled as 'lazy', 'naughty' or a 'drama

queen' by teachers (Baker & Bishop, 2015). Additionally, a participant in Beckles (2014) mentioned that although they did not view themselves as 'bad', this was the perception teachers had of them.

Despite these negative perceptions, some participants shared instances of positive relationships with teachers, describing them as "chilled" (How, 2015), “empathetic” (Want, 2020), “caring”, and “easy to talk to” (Beckles, 2014). Students appreciated teachers who were "happy" (Beckles, 2014) and "funny" (Want, 2020), indicating that such positive interactions could significantly improve their school experience and motivation to attend. A participant in Beckles (2014) study expressed that although they initially found it difficult to discuss reasons for low attendance with staff, the conversation ultimately proved helpful. Participants in Halligan & Cryer (2022) explained that having nurturing adults who understood their needs, gave them opportunities to talk about their concerns, and supported them both academically and emotionally, was beneficial in reducing the impact of EBSNA.

3.3.10.2 Theme 2: Peer Interactions and Friendships

Peer interactions and friendships were a recurring theme in all studies, impacting participants' experiences of EBSNA both positively and negatively. Participants in Beckles (2014) valued their friendships highly, with one noting that their friends provided more support than school staff or family, offering positive advice and help navigating challenges at home. Similarly, in Gregory & Purcell (2014), pupils described the use of technology to maintain friendships during non-attendance, with one participant sharing, “I’m still in touch with friends like texting, the internet and Myspace” These connections appeared to provide a sense of normality and continuity despite being out of school.

Participants in James (2015) and Baker & Bishop (2015) found support in their friendships during school lessons, particularly when sitting next to their best friends. How (2015) highlighted that some friendships appeared to act as a protective buffer against negative school experiences, while Beckles (2014) emphasised the emotional support friendships offered. Some participants in How (2015) described friendships as the most crucial aspect of school, motivating them to attend. This was echoed by pupils in Gregory & Purcell (2014), where one participant described the value of new friendships formed through AP “I go to the home education group. *[name]* is my friend there”

However, other studies, including Clissold (2018) and Baker & Bishop (2015), reported that participants felt excluded from their friends, with difficulties in peer relationships being a significant factor in their EBSNA. A participant in James (2015) felt too afraid to leave the house due to worries about facing peers, and a participant in How (2015) described feeling like an "outcast". Other participants, such as those in Want (2020), felt like they were "floating around groups" which seemed to contribute to their EBSNA.

Pupils across some studies described a feeling of 'difference' compared to their peers. For example, in How (2015) a participant explained that they felt a victim of rejection by their peers and did not feel they belonged in school. Participants also described feelings of loneliness and social isolation, often experiencing sadness and upset (How, 2015). Some expressed that they did not fit in with others (Baker & Bishop, 2015), and these negative emotions during social situations contributed to their non-attendance (James, 2015). Having a sense of social connectedness was a dominant them for participants in Halligan & Cryer (2022) to feel safe in the school setting.

3.3.10.3 Theme 3: Wellbeing and Mental Health

Another dominant theme discussed by participants across the studies was their mental health and well-being, identified in six studies. Participants reported experiencing a range of mental health issues including anxiety (Baker & Bishop, 2015; Clissold, 2018; How, 2015), anger (Want, 2020; Beckles, 2014; Gregory & Purcell, 2014; Baker & Bishop, 2015), stress (Want, 2020; James, 2015), low mood (James, 2015), and depression (Baker & Bishop, 2015).

In Want (2020) and James (2015), participants expressed anger towards the school for failing to provide timely support for their EBSNA. Others, such as those in Beckles (2014), felt frustrated about missing out on learning and the difficulties in catching up. Participants in James (2015) reported frequent engagement with self-harm and suicidal thoughts, stating they "would rather die than go to school". Gregory & Purcell (2014) also found instances where pupils' mental health had deteriorated significantly during extended non-attendance, including reports of self-harming behaviour. Participants in Baker & Bishop (2015) and Clissold (2018) described feeling "scared to go to school" and needing to "put on a smile" while hiding their fear. These negative emotions about school seemed to affect attendance, as noted in Beckles (2014) and Want (2020).

Some participants also described physical symptoms and behaviours related to their distress such as migraines (Want, 2020) or feeling unwell (Beckles, 2014). Anxiety was identified as a cause of non-attendance for participants in Baker & Bishop (2015) and Gregory & Purcell (201) along with other mental health issues such as depression and obsessive-compulsive disorder. Some participants in Baker & Bishop (2015) were prescribed antidepressant medication to support their mood. In Clissold's (2018) study, participants recognised anxiety as a factor but were unsure if it was a cause or a consequence of their EBSNA. Other participants identified feelings of depression, fear, worry, and anger as responses to school attendance (How, 2015; James, 2015; Want, 2020), suggesting these emotions may have contributed to their EBSNA. Participants also discussed physiological responses to anxiety, such as "throwing up" and some reported episodes of paranoia and hallucinations affecting their attendance (How, 2015).

Participants in three of the studies (Baker & Bishop, 2015; Want, 2020; James, 2015) detailed how anxiety and worry disrupted their sleep. A participant in James (2015) reported being "up all night worrying," while another in Want (2020) described feeling "tired and exhausted at the end of the day" due to lack of sleep. A participant in Baker & Bishop (2015) mentioned disruptive sleep patterns made them feel like a "zombie", often leading to them falling asleep at school. Some participants reported going to bed late, preferring to stay up watching videos (Beckles, 2014), which affected their mood and ability to wake up for school. Others described feeling "moody" due to insufficient sleep, which impacted their concentration levels at school (James, 2015).

3.3.10.4 Theme 4: Impact of the Learning Environment

Six studies discussed the learning environment and its impact on participants' experiences of EBSNA. In studies such as Beckles (2014), James (2015), and How (2015), participants highlighted environmental factors that exacerbated their EBSNA, including sensory processing issues due to discomfort with noise levels (Clissold, 2018; James, 2015) and the size of the setting (Clissold, 2018; How, 2015). A participant in How (2015) shared that large groups of people, such as being in assembly, caused them to "feel sick" and described a 'physiological response' when thinking about being in a big hall. Halligan & Cryer (2022) identified a theme where pupils desired more inclusive environments, including calmer spaces, safe areas for when they felt overwhelmed, smaller class sizes, and timeouts to help with self-regulation.

Participants in Beckles (2014) explained that teachers' responses impacted their willingness to attend lessons. They preferred interactive lessons that supported a kinaesthetic and visual learning style, which helped with understanding. However, participants felt that teachers were often unable to meet their needs, leaving them to complete work in a short amount of time with little help. They believed there were not enough teachers to assist everyone who needed support. Participants in Baker & Bishop (2015) felt that teachers did not care about helping them and often tried to assist all students in the same way, which participants considered ineffective.

Some participants in How (2015) suggested that the school system was not aligned with their personal motivations to learn. Participants in Beckles (2014) reported feeling demotivated by lessons they described as "boring" when they only involved reading a book and writing. They stated that if they did not understand the work, they would mess about, chat, or daydream. Participants in James (2015) explained that the work often made them feel stressed and they would never get it right, leading them to scribble out their work and start again, which was demotivating. Participants in Clissold (2018) also shared that difficulties in understanding the work and lack of academic support were contributory factors in their non-attendance.

3.3.10.5 Theme 5: Agency and Autonomy

A theme of control and lack of autonomy was perceived by participants in all studies other than Clissold (2018). Participants in How (2015) described a minimal feeling of control within the school, leading to resentment due to the lack of power and freedom.

Participants in James (2015) and How (2015) reported experiencing limited freedom in school. Some participants spoke about feeling punished and blamed if they were not in school (Baker & Bishop, 2015), and how rigidly enforced school sanctions negatively impacted their attendance (How, 2015). A participant in Want (2020) described feeling like there was a hierarchy of power within the school system and a lack of equality among students, expressing a desire for more balanced relationships with teachers. Similarly, a participant in Beckles (2014) expressed dissatisfaction with being restricted in school. They felt that rules such as restrictions during lunch and break times and the confiscation of mobile phones during these periods, contributed to their unhappiness.

Participants in Beckles (2014) spoke about the lack of opportunities for their voices to be heard, feeling that their views were "shoved to the side" by teachers. Similarly in Baker & Bishop (2015),

participants expressed that they did not feel like they had a choice in school or get a say in decisions regarding their education and support needs. One participant felt that adults seemed to decide the reason for their non-attendance without asking for their input, which contributed to their reluctance to attend school. They felt that teachers publicly questioned them in front of others and singled them out while adults made decisions about them. These participants described how a lack of agency and recognition made students feel disconnected from the school environment, exacerbating their feelings of alienation and contributing to their EBSNA. It appeared that these experiences of being misunderstood and unfairly treated seemed to reinforce their EBSNA.

Participants in Halligan & Cryer (2022) and Beckles (2014) further highlighted the importance of having opportunities for autonomy and choice within their education. For instance, a participant in Beckles (2014) expressed a preference for being able to choose whom they could sit with during lessons and enjoyed having the option to decide who they could work with. Similarly, participants in Halligan & Cryer (2022) valued when adults entrusted them with responsibilities and recognised their maturity, providing them with a sense of control and autonomy within the school environment.

3.3.10.6 Theme 6: Transition to Secondary School

The transition to secondary school and moving schools was referred to in five studies when pupils discussed their experiences with EBSNA. Participants in Baker & Bishop (2015) and Clissold (2018) reported negative experiences directly relating to the transition to secondary school which caused feelings of distress and fear. These negative experiences were described as contributory reasons for non-attendance, for example, a participant in James's (2015) study described these experiences as gradually getting worse each year. Participants in How (2015) expressed fears about moving schools and transitioning to secondary school, primarily due to anxiety about meeting new people. A participant in Want (2020) mentioned that the long commute to secondary school, was a significant reason for their decision to stop attending school. Another participant described the challenges of getting up in the morning in time as "scary".

Contrastingly, Beckles (2014) found that some participants had positive views regarding the transition. These participants reported enjoying aspects such as moving to different lessons and teachers, as well as the opportunity to use modern equipment that was not available in primary school. These positive experiences contributed to a smoother and more enjoyable transition for some students.

3.3.10.7 Theme 7: School Systemic Issues and External Support

Participants across most studies described systemic issues within schools that were perceived to contribute to their EBSNA. Concerns included rigid behaviour policies, ineffective classroom management, and inconsistent enforcement of rules (Beckles, 2014; How, 2015; Baker & Bishop, 2015; Want, 2020). For example, pupils reported being punished for minor infractions or feeling unsupported in classrooms with poor behaviour management (James, 2015).

Although bullying relates to peer dynamics, it is included here due to participants' emphasis on the school's failure to protect them. In several studies, pupils described bullying as a major factor in their non-attendance, compounded by staff inaction or disbelief (Beckles, 2014; Clissold, 2018; How, 2015; Baker & Bishop, 2015). These experiences led to a lack of psychological safety, which Halligan & Cryer (2022) found essential for school engagement. These studies also highlight the significant role that systemic school issues and policies appear to play in shaping CYP's experiences with EBSNA, influencing their attendance and overall well-being.

The role of external services and support systems was also emphasised in three studies (Baker & Bishop, 2015; Beckles, 2014; James, 2015). Participants appeared to suggest that support from external services, such as counselling, general practitioners (GPs), educational psychologists (EPs), home education programs, and child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS), was crucial in managing their EBSNA. Specifically, Beckles (2014) participants expressed that they valued the support from the counselling service, which helped them feel better about attending school.

3.3.10.8 Theme 8: Family and Home Environment

Four studies discussed the influence of the home and family environment on pupils' experiences with their EBSNA. Participants in Beckles (2014), Baker & Bishop (2015), and James (2015) reported a preference for staying at home with family members. One participant in Beckles (2014) faced difficulties due to the responsibility of caring for an ill parent, causing worry about leaving their parent without care.

Other participants, as seen in Beckles (2014), highlighted the strong influence of family members, noting that they played a positive role in encouraging school attendance. These participants found their parents more helpful in motivating them to return to school compared to school staff. A

participant in Baker & Bishop (2015) expressed a strong attachment to their mother, which motivated them to make school attendance easier for her sake.

Participants in Baker & Bishop (2015) and Want (2020) raised concerns about communication between home and school, feeling frustrated that reprimands at school often led to further reprimands at home. Conversely, a participant in Beckles (2014) expressed frustration with what they perceived as the school's limited communication with their family, noting that the school primarily relied on emails or letters rather than arranging meetings to discuss attendance challenges.

Family dynamics also seemed to impact school attendance. For example, a participant in Want (2020) cited family arguments as a reason for their non-attendance, as conflicts at home often led to avoiding school the following day. On the other hand, a participant in James (2015) mentioned that frequent arguments at home increased their school attendance, as they preferred to avoid the home environment.

3.3.11 Methodological Critique of the Review

The SLR was critiqued using Lincoln & Guba (1985) criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Due to limited available studies, the review relied heavily on unpublished literature (i.e., theses). While theses undergo rigorous academic scrutiny, they are not peer-reviewed, which may limit the credibility of the findings. Furthermore, it was sometimes difficult to determine the specific nature of pupils' non-attendance across studies. In several cases, it was not explicitly stated whether the non-attendance was primarily emotionally based, medically related, or linked to other factors. Where pupil needs were not clearly defined, assumptions had to be made based on context or narrative descriptions. This presents a limitation in fully distinguishing EBSNA-related experiences from other forms of non-attendance. However, as outlined in Section 2.1 terminology surrounding EBSNA has evolved over time, and that different types of non-attendance are often recognised and labelled differently across contexts. From this perspective, the precise categorisation may be less critical than understanding the CYP's subjective experience of non-attendance.

The transferability of the review is supported by its focus on UK-based secondary-aged pupils, offering contextual relevance to UK practice, but limiting generalisability to other contexts. As these are often conducted by a sole researcher, dependability may be affected due to potential for

idiosyncratic interpretation, although this is commonly mitigated using reflective research diaries. The use of the CASP (2018) checklist supported appraisal of methodological quality, although critiques note CASP focuses more on reporting than conduct (Garside, 2014). In line with Cochrane guidance, studies were not scored, but qualitatively assessed for rigour (Noyes et al., 2022). However, using a scoring system like the Joanna Briggs Institute Critical Appraisal Checklist may have allowed for a more itemised evaluation of rigour, including factors such as researcher reflexivity and congruence between methodology and research aims (Lockwood et al., 2015).

3.3.12 Systemic Literature Review Summary

The SLR explored the views of secondary-aged pupils about their experiences of EBSNA. The most salient themes across the studies were relationships with staff and peer friendships. These relationships were described as both protective and risk factors influencing attendance. Positive relationships offered emotional support and encouraged engagement with school, while negative relationships contributed to EBSNA. These findings align with SDT (Deci & Ryan, 2012), particularly the basic psychological need for relatedness, and with Maslow's (1943) emphasis on belonging as foundational to wellbeing and motivation.

Mental health was a dominant theme, with participants reporting anxiety, anger, stress, low mood, and depression. Disrupted sleep was commonly cited and appeared to exacerbate emotional distress, again resonating with Maslow's (1943) framework to unmet needs.

Environmental factors such as classroom noise, crowded spaces, and inflexible teaching approaches were frequently identified as triggers for EBSNA. These experiences appeared to lack of autonomy and control, aligning with core tenets of SDT (Deci & Ryan, 1985; 2012).

The home environment also appeared to play a dual role in either supporting or compounding EBSNA. Some pupils described positive reinforcement from parents, while others reported family-related stressors that contributed to EBSNA, reflecting microsystem-level influences in Bronfenbrenner's (1979) framework.

Overall, the SLR highlights the scarcity of research that meaningfully captures lived experiences in secondary-aged pupils experiencing EBSNA. Much of the existing work remains within grey

literature and is under-recognised in mainstream discourse. These findings inform the rationale for the present study.

3.4 Rationale for the Current Research

Pupil voice is increasingly recognised as important in research on EBSNA (Corcoran & Kelly, 2023). However, it remains underrepresented, with many studies continuing to prioritise parental and professional perspective (Norwich, 2006; Ingram, 2013); Rodriguez, 2023). While some include both adult and pupil perspectives (Want, 2020; Chian, 2022), these is a risk that the voices of CYP become overshadowed or interpreted through an adult narrative. This may risks locating the issue within the child or family, while overlooking educational and systemic contributors (Beckles, 2014).

CYP experiencing EBSNA face multiple barriers to participation, including anxiety, extended absence, and communication difficulties (Hart, 1992; Macconville, 2006). Nonetheless, studies show that, when offered emotionally attuned and flexible opportunities, these pupils can share meaningful and constructive insights into their educational experience (Prunty et al., 2012; Graham et al., 2018).

Findings from the SLR further support this rationale. When secondary-aged pupils are provided with space and emotionally attuned methods to share their perspectives, they provide important insight into the lived experience of EBSNA (Section 3.2.11). However, most of these studies are small-scale, qualitative, and situated within grey literature, limiting their impact on policy and practice.

Despite recent policy efforts, such as the *Working Together to Improve School Attendance* (DfE, 2022; 2024), there remains no nationally agreed framework for supporting CYP experiencing EBSNA (Section 1.4.2). Binary understandings of attendance (e.g. authorised vs unauthorised) continue to dominate, potentially oversimplifying pupils' lived experiences (Want, 2020; Education Policy Institute, 2024).

Traditional school systems may contribute to EBSNA, particularly for pupils with unmet social, emotional and sensory needs (Attwood & Croll, 2006). Many are 'pushed' towards EHE, AP or hybrid arrangements as a response to distress rather than active choice (Moffatt & Riddle, 2021; McCluskey et al., 2015; Children's Commissioner, 2022). While these environments may reduce distress, they may raise questions about which features support wellbeing and engagement and

whether such adaptations could inform changes in traditional school systems (Riddell & Weedon, 2014; Moffatt & Riddle, 2021).

International calls for reconceptualising attendance emphasise the need to move beyond narrow compliance metrics towards a broader understanding of engaging and wellbeing (Kearney et al., 20220). This study takes inspiration from this agenda by centring the subjective experiences of pupils whose needs do not appear to be adequately met by dominant educational systems (Centre for Social Justice, 2023).

Building on the work of Higgins (2022), who used a participatory approach to explore how autistic pupils experiencing EBSNA construe school, this study seeks to address a gap in the literature by centring the perspectives of CYP experiencing EBSNA and identifying the changes they believe are needed to create more inclusive, emotionally attuned educational experiences. In doing so, it offers a grounded, participatory contribution to ongoing debates around inclusion, pupil voice, and educational reform. The research questions and approach taken to elicit pupil perspectives within this research will be introduced in Chapter 4.

4 Methodology

4.1 Overview of Chapter

This chapter outlines the methodological approach I used to explore how secondary-aged pupils experiencing Emotionally Based School Non-Attendance (EBSNA) envision their ideal and non-ideal education, and what changes they believe would make education more suitable for them. I begin by restating the research aims and questions, before describing my philosophical stance and then my research design. I explain how the "Drawing the Ideal School" activity (Williams & Hanke, 2007) was adapted as a flexible tool to facilitate discussion about education in its broadest sense. Ethical considerations, recruitment procedures, and participant details are provided, followed by an explanation of how I collected my empirical data and the use of a reflexive thematic analysis to interpret the findings.

4.2 Research Aims & Research Questions

In response to the gaps identified in the literature and SLR, the aim of this study was to explore how secondary-aged pupils experiencing EBSNA envision their experiences of education, with a particular focus on their perceptions around what constitutes an ideal and non-ideal educational environment. Secondly, the study aims to generate practical, pupil-led suggestions for how educational environments can be adapted to better support those experiencing EBSNA. These insights may inform future educational practice and policy by highlighting CYP's perspectives on what may need to change.

To guide the inquiry, the following research questions were developed in alignment with my study's constructivist epistemology and participatory methodology:

RQ1: *How do secondary-aged pupils experiencing EBSNA envision their ideal and non-ideal education?*

RQ2*: What changes do secondary-aged pupils experiencing EBSNA believe are needed to achieve their ideal education?*

4.3 Philosophical Positioning

4.3.1 Ontological and Epistemological Stance

Cohen et al (2022) suggested that researchers must carefully consider their ontological and epistemological foundations when determining their methodological approaches of the research, and these foundations serve as a lens through which the researcher views the world, which can be conceptualised within what is known as research paradigms.

Ontology refers to the "study of being" where researchers establish a position on how things truly exist and operate (Crotty, 2025). The ontological question asks, “What is the nature of reality?”. The ontological positions relating to the nature of reality can be viewed as a continuum, ranging from relativism to realism (Sparkes & Smith, 2013). Realism sees reality as an objective truth that can be known, whereas relativism considers individuals to have their own subjective reality, shaped by their mental constructions and informed by social processes and experiences (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

From these ontological assumptions emerge epistemological ones, which address the nature of knowledge and how we inquire into reality (Cohen et al., 2022). Epistemology asks the question, “What is the nature of knowledge, and what assumptions can we make about the relationship between reality and knowledge?”. Robson (2024) states that recognising researchers’ epistemological position enhances clarity and focus of the knowledge produced, and supports the evaluations of validity, reliability, generalisability, and practical application within the research design.

Cohen et al (2022) state that the ontological and epistemological foundations can be conceptualised within research paradigms. The epistemological spectrum ranges from positivism, which poses a single, objective reality that can be measured and quantified, to interpretivism, which emphasises subjective constructed meanings of reality (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). While there appear to be many paradigms that occupy this spectrum within research methods (Robson, 2024), this research will focus on positivism, post-positivism, and interpretivism, with a particular emphasis on social constructivism and constructivism, which are often associated with the interpretivist paradigm (Scotland, 2012). These paradigms were selected because they appear to represent the core philosophical approaches that are most relevant to educational research and support an articulation of this study’s constructivist stance within the interpretivist framework.

4.3.2 Research Paradigms

4.3.2.1 Positivism and Post-Positivism

Arguably, positivism has long been the 'standard philosophical view' used to make sense of natural and social science (Kincheloe & Tobin, 2009). Positivistic researchers treat the social world as being real and external to the participant. They typically use quantitative methodologies, considered the 'gold standard' of research by some, often involving methods such as Randomised Control Trials or Single Case Experimental Designs (Robson & McCartan, 2015).

The ontological assumption of the positivist paradigm is that one single external, measurable reality exists ('realism'), and it involves the epistemological assumption that objective knowledge is possible (Robson & McCartan, 2015). They suggest this is a deductive approach, beginning from theory from the literature, to build testable hypotheses, identifying and manipulating variables within experiments to confirm or deny theory. Robson & McCartan (2015) also suggest however, that positivist's constant demand for causal associations and explanations risks being overly deterministic and reductionist, describing life in measurable terms rather than accounting for inner human experience. Panhwar et al (2017) further state that educational research is often messy and unquantifiable in terms of data. Positivistic approaches to education research may not always be suitable for capturing the complexity of educational contexts, as educational settings often involve nuanced, subjective experiences that cannot be fully measured through quantitative data alone (Biesta, 2007).

Post-positivism attempts to apply positivistic ethos, while acknowledging real-world research can only claim to know the word imperfectly and probabilistically (Robson & McCartan, 2015). Post-positivists do not believe that the absolute truth will be found (Phillips & Burbules, 2000), they seek to provide the best approximate explanation at that specific time (Kaplan, 2015). Post-positivism generally falls within the realist perspective, with researchers often using quantitative data (Robson & McCartan, 2015).

4.3.2.2 Social Constructivism and Constructivism

Social constructivists argue that research is more complex than traditionally assumed (Kincheloe & Tobin, 2009). Social constructivism is situated within the interpretivist epistemological spectrum, which emphasises the subjective and co-constructed nature of reality (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Kaplan (2015) suggests that ontologically, social constructivism sits within a relativist perspective,

emphasising the subjective nature of reality, shaped by individuals' unique social and cultural contexts.

Interpretivism values the subjective experiences of individuals and the meanings they construct within their social and cultural contexts (Robson & McCartan, 2015). Researchers adopting this perspective often utilise qualitative methods such as ethnography, discourse analysis, and thematic analysis to explore how knowledge is generated through social interactions (Robson & McCartan, 2015). Importantly, the researcher plays an active role in the construction and interpretation of meaning, necessitating a reflexive approach to ensure transparency and awareness of potential biases (Robson & McCartan, 2015).

Social constructivism considers knowledge as co-constructed through social interaction, whereas constructivism focuses on the individual's active role in constructing meaning through personal experiences and cognitive processes (Piaget, 1954; Robson, 2024). Rather than emphasising socially mediated knowledge, constructivist approaches propose that individuals develop unique understandings of the world based on their subjective experiences (Robson & McCartan, 2015).

4.3.3 Ontological and Epistemological Position within this Current Research

In this research, I am interested in the perspectives of CYP experiencing EBSNA, and in how they envision both their ideal and non-ideal educational contexts. My study therefore aligns with a relativist ontology, which allows me to explore different individual realities and recognises that these will vary according to each participant's lived experience. By focusing on the perceptions of these CYP, I place emphasis on personal meaning-making over socially constructed knowledge, positioning the study within a constructivist approach on the interpretive spectrum.

Although my research is grounded in a constructivist paradigm, focusing on how individuals actively construct meaning from their experiences, my own interpretive role introduces elements of social meaning-making during the analysis. Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA), by its nature, requires me to identify similarities (and differences) across participants' accounts, meaning that some co-construction of knowledge takes place at this stage (Braun & Clarke, 2021). However, I do not see this process as fully shifting the study into a social constructivist paradigm, which emphasises socially mediated knowledge from the outset. Instead, I maintain a constructivist stance throughout data collection, while introducing a reflexive, interpretive layer during analysis.

4.4 Research Design

When designing research, one of the decisions involves selecting a quantitative or qualitative approach, or potentially adopting a mixed-methods design that combines elements of both. Each approach offers distinct methodologies and suitability depending on the research aims (Robson & McCartan, 2015). Below, I will compare these approaches, highlighting their relevance and utility for my study.

4.4.1 Quantitative

Tending to be situated within the positivist paradigm, quantitative research designs gather numerical data for statistical analysis with the aim of establishing cause and effect (Coe et al., 2021). These designs often involve structured methodologies, such as experiments, surveys, and quantitative observations, enabling researchers to test hypotheses, measure variables, and generalise findings to larger populations. While positivism traditionally underpins quantitative methods due to its focus on objectivity, replicability, and predictability, quantitative approaches can also be applied within post-positivist paradigms, where researchers acknowledge the complexity of reality and the impossibility of complete objectivity (Robson & McCartan, 2015).

In my research, it was decided that quantitative data would not provide the depth of insight needed to understand the nuanced perspectives of individual participants. Quantitative methods, with their emphasis on numerical data, statistical analysis, and generalisation, may not allow the expression or capture the complexity of subjective experiences fully (Coe et al., 2021). Moreover, this approach would be inconsistent with the chosen philosophical standpoint.

4.4.2 Qualitative

Qualitative research designs focus on collecting rich, descriptive data (Robson & McCartan, 2016). This approach prioritises depth over breadth, enabling researchers to explore complex, subjective realities and gain insights into how participants make sense of their worlds. While qualitative approaches generally sit within the interpretative paradigm (Robson, 2024). My study adopts a constructivist stance, a specific form of interpretivism, which not only prioritises individual meaning-making but also acknowledges that knowledge is constructed through personal experiences and cognitive processes (Kelly, 1955).

A qualitative approach was chosen to align with the constructivist epistemological stance, allowing for subjective data to be collected and prioritising individual voices. The systematic literature review (Chapter 3) highlighted the importance of hearing the voices of CYP themselves and qualitative methods will facilitate this. This study will employ participatory methods, including a drawing-based activity and semi-structured interviews (Section 4.5). They are suggested to be well-suited for exploring complex and nuances phenomena, which encompass individual and contextual factors that are challenging to quantify (Creswell, 2015). These participatory techniques will aim to enable the exploration of participants' individual perceptions through open, flexible, and inclusive approaches that honour their voices and lived experiences.

4.4.3 Research Purpose

Qualitative research typically aligns with descriptive or exploratory approaches (Robson & McCartan, 2015; Robson, 2024).

4.4.3.1 Descriptive Research

Descriptive research seeks to describe individuals, events, trends or patterns within a phenomenon, often focusing on "what is happening?" rather than "why it is happening", or "what could it mean?" (Robson & McCartan, 2015). It typically involves collecting detailed information, often through observations, case studies or longitudinal studies (Robson, 2024).

While descriptive approaches can offer valuable insights into current experiences, Doyle et al (2020) argues that they may lack the analytical depth needed to explore complex meanings or interpretations behind participants' perspectives. My research aims to explore the multiple perceptions of CYP experiencing a complex phenomenon; therefore, a purely descriptive approach may not sufficiently capture the insights needed to understand how pupils envision their ideal and non-ideal education.

4.4.3.2 Exploratory Research

Exploratory research is used to investigate areas where limited knowledge exists, with the aim of generating insights and developing a deeper understanding of complex or emerging phenomena (Creswell, 2015). This approach is often flexible and open-ended, employing qualitative methods to explore participants' perspectives. Common exploratory methods include semi-structured interviews,

focus groups, participatory techniques, case studies, and ethnographic observations, each providing rich, descriptive data that supports the in-depth exploration of subjective experiences (Coe et al., 2021).

This approach aligns with my current study's aim to generate new insights into how CYP envision their ideal and non-ideal educational environments. An exploratory approach provides a valuable framework for engaging with pupils' subjective views and experiences meaningfully through participatory methods.

4.4.4 Personal Construct Psychology

Personal Construct Psychology (PCP; Kelly, 1955; 1991), offers a constructivist framework to explore how individuals make sense of their world. Central in this theory is Kelly's (1991) philosophy of 'constructive alternativism' – the idea that *"*all of our present interpretations of the universe are subject to revision or replacement" (Kelly, 1991, p.28*).* This appears to reflect Kelly's belief that there is no single objective reality, instead, individuals interpret events in potentially infinite ways based on their own experiences. These interpretations, described as 'constructs' are not fixed and evolve when individuals encounter new insights through experiences (Kelly, 1955; 1991).

Central to PCP theory is the fundamental postulate that "a person's processes are psychologically channelised by the ways in which they anticipate events" (Kelly, 1991, p.28). It appears that Kelly (1955) believed that people do not simple react to life, they actively anticipate what will happen, based on how they have made sense of past experiences. Their thoughts, emotions, and behaviours are shaped by this anticipatory system. To explain how individuals develop these anticipations, Kelly (1955) outlined eleven corollaries, which he described as the ways in which people organise, apply and revise their personal meanings about the world. Kelly (1955) likened individuals to "scientists" who attempt to predict and interpret their environment by developing and applying constructs which are mental frameworks used to navigate life. Kelly (1991) defined a personal construct as a way in which an individual interprets the world by identifying how some experiences are similar to each other and different from others. For example, a CYP might group certain school experiences as "safe" and others as "unsafe", creating a personal construct of safe vs. unsafe.

The Dichotomy Corollary (Kelly, 1955; 1991), posits that individuals structure meaning through contrastive dimensions such as 'safe/unsafe' or 'included/excluded', is particularly relevant to the current study's use of ideal and non-ideal education as a way of scaffolding pupil reflections on what supports or hinders their engagement with education.

While PCP holds broader theoretical and epistemological implications (Madill et al., 2000; Mahoney, 1988), it is not used here as the study's theoretical framework. Rather, PCP underpins the design of a participatory visual method - an adapted version of the 'Drawing the Ideal School' activity (Williams & Hanke, 2007), which has previously been applied in EBSNA research by Higgins (2022). In this study, the activity was reframed as the 'Drawing the Ideal Education' activity to better reflect a wider range of learning contexts, including Elective Home Education (EHE) and Alternative Provision (AP), aligned with the diverse realities of pupils experiencing EBSNA. Although Higgins (2022) study was influential in shaping the design of the research and data collection method, it was not included in the SLR due to not meeting the specified inclusion criteria (e.g. the focus was not sufficiently aligned with the aims of the review).

In summary, PCP informed the design of the data collection tool, particularly its use of contrastive reflection, but it is not used to analyse formal constructs or test theory (Kelly, 1955). The approach supports my study's constructivist, participatory aims by offering an accessible and meaningful way for CYP to express their perceptions of education. The design and application of this method are detailed further in Section 4.5.

4.5 Data Collection Methods

4.5.1 Overview of Data Collection

This section outlines the tools and processes I used to gather data from participants in the study. Data collection centred around the 'Ideal Education' activity, which I adapted from the 'Ideal School' Activity (Williams & Hanke, 2007) to reflect a broader range of educational experiences of pupils experiencing EBSNA including non-school based provision such as AP and home-based learning. This activity was supported by semi-structured interviews. I selected all methods to be accessible, pupil-led, and sensitive to the emotional and communication needs of participants.

4.5.2 Data Collection Tools

4.5.2.1 Session Structure and Format

Each participant took part in up to three sessions, each lasting up to 90 minutes. I began each session with rapport-building and verbal/visual explanations of the tasks. See Appendix C for Visual Instruction poster provided to participants. I took field notes during the semi-structured interview (Section 4.5.2.7). I ended each session with an emotional check-out.

4.5.2.2 Context of the "Ideal Education" Activity

I adapted the 'Ideal Education' Activity from Williams & Hanke's (2007) 'Drawing the Ideal School' Activity, which is underpinned by PCP (Kelly, 1955; see Section 4.4.4). The activity was divided into two mains steps:

- **Step 1: Part A)** Exploring participants 'Non-Ideal Education' and **Part B)** Exploring participants 'Ideal Education' (Section 4.5.2.3).
- **Step 2**: The Scaling Activity (Section 4.5.2.4).

4.5.2.3 Step 1: Exploring Non-Ideal and Ideal Education

In **Step 1, Part A**, participants were invited to draw, write, or verbally describe their non-ideal education. Once the activity was complete, I used semi-structured and Socratic questioning to explore their descriptions in greater depth (see Section 4.5.2.5 for details on the Interview Guide). Visual prompt cards were also available to support expression, used flexibly alongside the guide as needed (see Section 4.5.2.6).

Step 1, Part B mirrored this process, with participants asked to draw, write, or verbally describe their ideal education experience. Again, follow-up questions were used to support elaboration.

Participants used a range of methods to express their ideas, including drawing, writing, speaking, or a combination of these. While the visual outputs were not formally analysed, they served as valuable tools to support verbal reflection and engagement. Exemplar drawings are provided in Appendix HH for illustrative purposes.

4.5.2.4 "Ideal Education" Activity - Step 2: Scaling Activity

Locating ideal and non-ideal education on a scale

Participants were first invited to explore their 'non-ideal education' and 'ideal education' by responding to the questions: *"Where would your non-ideal education be?"* and *"Where would your ideal education be?".* They were asked to position each of these on a 0-10 scale (0 = not at all like their ideal/ their worse education they could imagine; 10 = completely like their ideal/ the best education they could imagine; see Appendix L for visual explanation).

Locating current education on a scale

Participants were then asked: *"How you would rate your current education?".* Again participants were asked to put this on the 0-10 scale. Following this, they were asked the question: *"What would move your current education one step higher on the scale towards your ideal education?".* (See Appendix L for visual explanation). This exercise was intended to bridge their ideal and current realities, generating practical, participant-led suggestions for change. It was typically completed in Session Two, although a third session was avaliable where needed.

4.5.2.5 Interview Guide and Socratic Questioning

I used semi-structured questions (see Appendix H and I for the full list) to scaffold reflection during or after each drawing activity. The questions drew on those developed by Moran (2001) and later extended by Williams and Hanke (2005) to supplement the "Ideal School" Activity. Similar questions have also previously been used with pupils experiencing EBSNA (Higgins, 2022). I further adapted these for this study to represent a broader concept of education rather than 'school'. I aimed to strike a balance between maintaining open-endedness to minimise researcher influence, while providing enough structure to facilitate discussion (Patton, 2014).

The questions focused on four domains: environment, people, learning, and structure. They were designed to support elaboration of perceptions and experiences, in relation to different elements of education and were used flexibly depending on each participant's engagement. For example, some CYP spoke freely and covered several areas unprompted, while others required more structured guidance. The questions were colour-coded to align with the visual prompt cards (Section 4.5.2.6).

I used open-ended Socratic questions to deepen participants' exploration of their views and experiences. Elder & Paul (2006) suggested that Socratic questioning facilitates critical thinking, encouraging individuals to reflect on their assumptions and expand on ideas. In this study, such questions were used to support the CYP in developing and articulating their envisions of ideal and non-ideal education. For example, I used prompts such as *"How would you feel if the teacher was [e.g. strict]?"* or *"What would [e.g. strict] look like?"* to encourage reflection. A fellow TEP peer-reviewed the guide, and I adapted it based on feedback for accessibility (see Appendix J for changes to Interview Guide).

4.5.2.6 Visual Prompt Cards

I developed visual prompt cards and introduced them to support with accessibility. These cards featured images aligned with the Interview Guide themes and offered an additional visual method if participants wanted to use them (Appendix K and M).

4.5.2.7 Field Notes as Data

I used field notes as the primary data collection method. I chose this approach because it aligns with participant-centred practice and allows real-time documentation of verbal responses, emotional cues, and contextual impressions (Tessier, 2012). Field notes allowed me to record participants' verbal contributions and note emerging impressions and relational dynamics during sessions, which arguably can lead to more authentic data (Williams & Hanke, 2007). As participants engaged with the 'Ideal Education' Activity, I wrote down their spoken responses in real time. I also recorded their verbal descriptions of any drawing or writing they produced, asking them to clarify or expand where appropriate.

Although less verbatim than audio transcripts, I found that field notes promoted comfort, reflection, and relational safety (Tessier, 2012). I also based my decision on research suggesting that audio recording can heighten self-consciousness or inhibit openness, especially when discussing sensitive topics (Nordstrom, 2015; Rutakumwa et al., 2020). My aim in using field notes was to reduce participant anxiety, avoid the inhibiting effects of recording devices, and support ethically sensitive engagement.

However, this approach had potential limitations. Writing field notes during the sessions may have impacted rapport-building, as the need to look down and write occasionally disrupted eye contact and

may have impacted active listening, potentially affecting the natural flow of interaction (Emerson et al., 2011). It was also challenging to capture all participant responses when participants just solely used speech as their mode of communication.

4.5.3 Pilot Study

Due to difficulties with participant recruitment and the small sample size, I used the first participant as a pilot. Based on this pilot, I introduced changes such as developing the Visual Prompts (discussed in Section 4.5.2.6) to support discussion and incorporating more open-ended questions (e.g., *"What does this look or feel like?"* or *"How would you describe this?").* These adjustments aimed to improve accessibility and avoid leading participants into responses.

4.6 Research Context and Participants

4.6.1 Context of the Local Authority

My research took place in a borough within the West Midlands region. According to the Ministry of Housing Communities and Local Government's (2019) Index of Deprivation, around a quarter of the population lives in the top 20% of most deprived areas nationally. Although this index was published over five years before the research took place, it remained the most up-to-date measure at the time.

The Local Authority (LA) had reported ongoing challenges with attendance and exclusions, particularly among pupils with SEND. There was also increased Education Health and Care Needs Assessment referrals referencing EBSNA challenges. Per Section 1.3, more CYP were accessing AP and EHE often in the context of emotional distress.

At the time of the study, the Educational Psychology Service (EPS) was working closely with schools and families to better understand EBSNA. However, there was no formal EBSNA guidance in place locally. This study was therefore well aligned with the emerging service priorities and aimed to offer insight into CYP perspectives to inform future practice and policy development.

4.6.2 Identification and Recruitment of Participants

I identified and recruited participants in collaboration with the local EPS. I shared a recruitment poster and email (Appendix A) with the EPS team, who then distributed them to linked secondary schools via SENDCOs. The EPS helped disseminate the information through their existing relationships with schools. Additionally, recruitment materials were circulated through Local Authority (LA) teams, including the LA's Attendance Services.

One SENDCO shared the study with eligible families, which led to expressions of interest from parents/carers. Three CYP went on to participate. In another setting, the school's family liaison officer helped facilitate interest from two more CYP. I recruited one further participant through an EP who was already familiar with the family's circumstances. All participants met the inclusion criteria for EBSNA.

Schools initially introduced the study to families. Where parents/carers provided consent, their contact information was shared with me. I then provided both the parent/carer and the participant with information sheets and consent forms.

4.6.3 Setting and Location of the Sessions

Once a parent/carer expressed interest in the study, I contacted them by phone to discuss the research project and go through the parent/carer information sheet (Appendix E). I encouraged them to ask any questions and clarified the nature of the sessions, explaining that this was not a therapeutic intervention, and that my contact would conclude after the research sessions was complete. I also explained ethical considerations, including confidentiality, anonymity, emotional risks, safeguarding, and the right to withdraw (see Section 4.8 for further details). I asked parents/carers to discuss the study with their child to support their understanding of its purpose. To aid these discussions, a CYP-friendly version of the information sheet was provided (Appendix D).

Once parents/carers confirmed the CYP's desire to participate, I arranged the first session through them. Data collection took place at a location chosen by the participant - either at home or within their current educational setting (see Appendix O for details). Before the sessions, I obtained written consent from the parent/carer and the CYP (see Appendix D and E for consent forms). I also gave the CYP a copy of the information sheet and invited any questions they had before commencing.

Two participants preferred to have their parent nearby during the sessions, while others opted to have a parent in the next room. In school-based settings, a key member of staff was available if needed, but all participants in settings chose not to have an adult immediately present.

4.6.4 Participants and Sampling

I used purposive sampling to recruit participants, which is well-suited for identifying individuals with direct experience of the phenomenon under study (Creswell et al., 2015). Participants were selected based on their relevance to the research aims, their availability, and referrals from trusted contacts within the LA.

In line with qualitative research principles, I aimed for sampling adequacy and appropriateness (Braun & Clarke, 2021), prioritising the depth and richness of insight over generalisability (Small, 2009). The sample size was informed by comparable PCP tool-based studies (e.g., Higgins, 2022; Morgan-Rose, 2015; Strong, 2019; Wade, 2022), which typically involved 5 to 14 participants.

As this study focused on CYP experiencing EBSNA, I applied further eligibility criteria (see Table 2), specifically targeting those classified as "severely absent" (i.e., ≤50% attendance; DfE, 2024). Recruitment was understandably challenging, reflecting the known barriers this group faces such as high anxiety, communication needs, and extended periods of absence from education (Gregory & Purcell, 2014; Thambirajah et al., 2008).

4.6.4.1 Participant Eligibility Criteria

The inclusion and exclusion criteria for this study was carefully selected to ensure the participants' experiences aligned with the study's aims. The criteria and rationale are outlined in Table 2.

Table 2: Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria for Participants, with Rationale

Inclusion criteria	Exclusion criteria	Rationale
CYP aged between 11 and 16 years.	CYP younger than 11 or older than 16 years.	EBSNA is more commonly reported among secondary-aged pupils, particularly following the transition to secondary school DfE, 2024; Elliott & Place, 2019; Havik et al., 2015
CYP currently finding it difficult to attend school due to emotional reasons.	CYP whose non-attendance is due to other reasons (e.g., exclusion, long-term illness, or travel).	The study aimed to explore the lived experiences of CYP presenting with EBSNA, specifically those whose barriers to school attendance are emotionally based.
CYP with a school attendance of 50% or less.	CYP with attendance above 50%.	The threshold reflects the (DfE, 2024) distinction between 'persistent absence' and 'severe absence' (see Section 4.6.4). Focusing on this group allows for deeper exploration of the experiences of CYP who may face more entrenched barriers to school attendance (Wright, 2023).

4.6.4.2 Participant Withdrawal and Incomplete Data

I encountered challenges in both recruiting and retaining participants, largely due to the high levels of anxiety and complex contextual factors affecting this population. As a result, one young person withdrew before completing data collection, and another participant was only able to provide a partial dataset.

4.6.4.3 Final Participant Sample

The final sample comprised of six participants who met the inclusion criteria (Table 3). The group included two males and four females, aged between 12 and 15 years. All participants were enrolled in one of three mainstream secondary schools within the borough. Five participants had attendance rates between 0–50% for the current academic year, classifying them as "severely absent" in line with DfE (2024) guidelines. One participant had an attendance rate of 60%. Although this was slightly

above the original inclusion threshold, I only became fully aware of their attendance data during the first session. At that point, I judged it would have been unethical to exclude the participant, especially given their clear alignment with the spirit of the study and their willingness to engage.

For brief information about each participant, including their selected pseudonyms and pre-study attendance data (Table 3). Additional information (Appendix N and O) and brief pen portraits (P) are available to support reflective insights into each participant's engagement in the sessions and the relational dynamics that may have influenced the data collection.

Table 3: Demographic Information of Participants

Chosen Pseudonym	**Age & Year Group**	**Gender**	**Ethnicity**	**Pre-study attendance percentage**
Bella	15 (Year 11)	Female	White British	0%
Batman	15 (Year 10)	Female	White British	21%
Summer	12 (Year 8)	Female	White British	30%
Stitch	13 (Year 9)	Female	White British	28%
Harry	13 (Year 9)	Male	White British	60%
DMR	12 (Year 8)	Male	White British	40%

4.6.4.4 Consideration of SEND in Participant Profiles

While some participants disclosed information relating to Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) and/or diagnoses, this study did not foreground or categorise pupils based on this information within the main analysis. Where participants chose to share such information and provided informed consent for its inclusion, it is presented in Appendix N (participant information) and considered reflectively in the pen portraits in Appendix P.

I acknowledge that existing research highlights a link between SEND, neurodevelopmental profiles, and EBSNA as discussed in contributory factors to EBSNA (Section 2.5). However, the decision not to focus explicitly on SEND or neurodevelopmental profiles in the main findings was both ethical and methodological. Ethically, I aimed to avoid reinforcing deficit-based narratives or framing

participants primarily through diagnostic categories. Instead, this study sought to centre pupil voice and understand how individuals envision meaning around their educational experiences. Methodologically, the aim was not to compare differences based on SEND status, but to explore how pupils experiencing EBSNA envision their non-ideal and ideal education, as well as the changes they would make to improve their educational experience, regardless of any formal identification of SEND. This decision aligns with the study's constructivist stance, which prioritises individual meaning making and the subjective perspectives of young people over externally defined classifications.

4.7 Data Analysis

4.7.1 Selection of Analytical Approach

When selecting the data analysis method, I considered several qualitative approaches to ensure alignment with my study's aims and epistemological stance. Since this research explores (1) how secondary-aged pupils experiencing EBSNA envision their ideal and non-ideal education (RQ1), and (2) what changes they believe are needed to achieve their ideal education (RQ2), I needed a method that could capture both individual meaning-making and shared thematic patterns. Initially, I explored Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), Grounded Theory (GT), and Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) in relation to their suitability for my constructivist orientation. Below, I outline the strengths and limitations of each before presenting my rationale for choosing RTA.

4.7.2 Alternative Qualitative Approaches Considered

4.7.2.1 Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

According to Smith (2011), IPA focuses on the detailed exploration of lived experience from an idiographic perspective. However, Larkin & Thompson (2011) noted it is less suited to studies seeking broad patterns across participants. Given my aim to identify patterns across participant's perceptions of their ideal and non-ideal education rather than analysing individual experiences in depth, I determined that IPA was not the best fit.

4.7.2.2 Grounded Theory

Charmaz (2006) describe GT as an inductive methodology aimed at developing theory from emerging data, explaining that the research involves constant comparison and theoretical sampling. While GT

is valuable for building explanatory models (Robson & McCartan, 2015), my study was not focused on generating a new theory. Rather, I aimed to explore how CYP make meaning of their educational experience and to identify insights into their perspectives on change. For that reason, I ruled out GT.

4.7.3 Reflexive Thematic Analysis

I used RTA (Braun & Clarke, 2021; 2024) to analyse and interpret the dataset. Braun and Clarke (2021) suggested that RTA is well suited to qualitative research paradigms, emphasising the subjectivity and reflexivity of the researcher in meaning-making. Within RTA, meaning is actively constructed through the researcher's interpretative engagement with the data rather than being seen as an objective truth waiting to be discovered (Braun & Clarke, 2021). This perspective aligns with my constructivist paradigm, which assumes that social properties are human constructs shaped through interaction and interpretation (Robson & McCartan, 2015, Section 4.2.2).

Braun and Clarke (2021) described a six-phase process for RTA, in which the researcher immerses themselves in the data and systematically identifies themes that capture meaningful patterns within the "data items" (p.6), providing insight into the research questions. The phased approach is not meant to be followed linearly and rigidly; rather, the six phases can blend and interact throughout the analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

4.7.3.1 Rationale for using Reflexive Thematic Analysis

I chose RTA because it combines clarity (Nowell et al., 2017), flexibility (Braun & Clarke, 2021) and has a strong emphasis on reflexivity (Jamieson et al., 2023; Lazard & and McAvoy, 2020). Unlike earlier thematic analysis approaches, which have been critiqued for lacking methodological clarity (Nowell et al., 2017), RTA offers a "structured yet flexible framework" (Braun & Clarke, 2021, p.3) that supports transparent and adaptable analysis. It has been suggested to be well-suited to interdisciplinary fields such as education (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017) and to explore complex, phenomena (Finlay, 2024).

In my study, I applied RTA to explore broad patterns in how pupils envision their ideal and non-ideal education (RQ1). A smaller-scale RTA was then used to explore the specific changes pupils believed were needed (RQ2). This flexibility allowed me to tailor the analytical process to differing aims of each RQ.

A key strength of RTA is its emphasis on reflexivity throughout the research process. Braun & Clarke (2021, 2024) emphasise that researchers play an active role in meaning-making, rather than acting as neutral observers. I used a research diary throughout the data analysis (see Appendix Z for samples) to support on-going reflection and acknowledge how my own values and assumptions may have shaped the data analysis process.

Finally, previous studies exploring the experiences of CYP with anxiety have used RTA effectively (Higgins, 2022; Strong, 2019; Wade, 2022). Higgins (2022) noted the risk that RTA might minimise individual voices but argued that it can still highlight shared meanings while preserving nuance. In line with (Terry et al, 2017), I addressed this by including rich participant quotations and noting areas of divergence to enhance qualitative rigour.

4.7.3.2 Reflexive Thematic Analysis Across RQ1 and RQ2

RTA (Braun & Clarke, 2021, 2024) was used to analyse the full dataset, with separate but connected analyses conducted for each RQ. RQ1 focused on how secondary-aged pupils experiencing EBSNA envision their ideal and non-ideal education, while RQ2 explored the practical changes pupils felt were needs to move closer to their ideal education. Given the differing purposes of each section of the "Ideal Education" Activity and subsequent RQs, broad imaginings versus specific recommendations, I chose to conduct separate RTAs. Braun and Clarke (2021) highlight that when RQs have distinct aims, conducting separate analyses can allow for deeper, more focused interpretation of each dataset. Therefore, following the first RTA on dataset 1 (Part 1 of the Ideal Education Activity), I employed a secondary, smaller-scale RTA which was conducted for RQ2 (Part 2 of the Ideal Education Activity) to ensure that participants' practical suggestions were not overshadowed by more conceptual themes.

For both analyses, I followed Braun & Clarke's six-phase approach reflexively and iteratively. RQ1 coding was predominantly inductive, allowing themes to emerge organically from the data. However, some deductive elements were also present. For example, Stage 2 of the RTA process involved working within an ideal vs. non-ideal framework, which introduced a deductive lens shaped by the dichotomous structure of the activity. While I did not code for constructs in the formal PCP sense, the notion of dichotomous poles, drawn from PCP (Kelly, 1955) informed my interpretive lens,

particularly in making sense of how participants envisioned education when it was working well versus when it was not.

RQ2 coding remained largely inductive, focusing on practical changes that participants believed would move them closer to their ideal. While links to PCP were less explicit here, the focus on bridging perceived realities and ideal visions continued to reflect the broader values of participant-led meaning-making.

Although the two RQs were analysed separately, their findings were brought together in the presentation of results at the end to support a cohesive narrative for the reader. This decision was made to reflect how participants' perceptions of ideal and non-ideal education (RQ1) often closely aligned with the changes they felt were needed (RQ2). Presenting the findings in an integrated format appeared to allow for clearer links between participants' envisioning of education and their practical suggestions for improvement, while preserving the distinct analytical processes used for each question.

In line with the flexible and interpretive nature of RTA and my constructivist epistemology, I also developed overarching themes that synthesised shared patterns of meaning across both RQ1 and RQ2 datasets. Braun & Clarke (2024) emphasise that themes are constructed, not found as "patterns of shared meaning, organised around a central concept or idea" (p. 613). The use of overarching themes was therefore an interpretive decision, grounded in the overlap between the two datasets and reflective of the co-constructed, meaning-making process that underpins RTA. This also supported the subsequent discussion of findings by enabling a more coherent synthesis across both research questions (to be discussed further in Section 5.3 of findings).

4.7.4 Process of Reflexive Thematic Anaysis

As discussed above, RTA was applied to both datasets. The following stages were guided by Braun & Clarke (2021). Examples of each stage of the RTA for each RQ are provided in Appendices BB-FF.

4.7.4.1 Step 1: Familiarisation with the Data

I immersed myself in the data by reading transcripts, reviewing participant drawings (see Appendix HH for examples), and maintaining a reflexive journal (Braun & Clarke, 2021; see Appendix Z for

examples). I typed up field notes (see Appendix AA for example) and imported them into NVivo for organisation. Reflexive notes and insights were logged electronically. I revisited the data multiple times, taking breaks to maintain fresh perspectives (Braun & Clarke, 2021). For both datasets, this stage helped develop a grounded understanding of participant perspectives and supported the emergence of initial insights.

4.7.4.2 Step 2: Generating Initial Codes

For RQ1, I conducted coding in NVivo, identifying relevant features of the data and organising them into initial codes (Braun & Clarke, 2021). This process allowed for a structured yet flexible approach to meaning making, ensuring that both explicit (semantic, e.g., when participants directly described aspects of ideal/non-ideal education) and underlying (latent, e.g., recognising patterns in how participants framed their educational experiences) meanings were captured (Braun & Clarke, 2021). I initially coded the data in relation to the dichotomous poles of ideal vs. non-ideal education, following the structure of the interview guide. After producing the initial codes, I revisited and refined them to ensure comprehensive data coverage, while also reviewing and merging overlapping codes to enhance clarity and coherence. For RQ2, which had a smaller and more practical focus, coding remained largely inductive, identifying concrete suggestions for educational adaptations. Appendices DD (RQ1) and EE (RQ2) provide a breakdown of the initial codes and examples of merged codes.

4.7.4.3 Step 3: Searching for Themes

I clustered the codes into broader themes that reflected shared patterns of meaning (Braun & Clarke, 2021). I did not treat ideal and non-ideal envisions as separate themes but instead organised them into central concepts to avoid fragmenting participant narratives. I printed out the code extracts from NVivo and physically sorted and arranged them to support the development of themes. To ensure rigour and coherence, I flagged any codes that did not initially fit within a theme for further review. For RQ2, I focused the clustering process on categorising practical recommendations. As with RQ1, I printed and sorted extracts manually, which helped refine the thematic structure. This process was iterative, ensuring that the final themes captured meaningful patterns rather than merely summarising responses.

4.7.4.4 Step 4: Developing and Reviewing Themes

I reviewed and refined the themes, merging, collapsing, or discarding some based on their coherence and relevance to the research questions. I maintained reflexivity and critical engagement throughout this process to ensure that the themes accurately represented the data. Appendices BB & CC provide examples of how the themes for RQ1 evolved and were refined, while Appendices EE & FF present the equivalent process for RQ2.

4.7.4.5 Step 5: Defining and Naming Themes

I then named and clearly defined the themes to ensure they reflected analytic meaning rather than simply summarising content (Braun & Clarke, 2021). As my engagement with the data deepened, I also introduced subthemes. I created separate thematic maps for RQ1 and RQ2. As the themes were refined, I made amendments to ensure internal consistency and clear distinctions between them (see Appendix BB (stage 4 and 5) for refinement of thematic map for RQ1).

Throughout this phase, I gathered feedback from my supervisor and fellow TEPs to support rigour. To enhance transparency and coherence, I developed multiple versions of the thematic maps to reflect how my thinking evolved during this stage (Braun & Clarke, 2021). This feedback was instrumental in further refining the theme labels to ensure they accurately captured the underlying meanings in the dataset. In line with Byrne's (2022) suggestion that themes should form a coherent narrative aligned with the dataset and RQs, I made further adjustments to strengthen the connections between themes and ensure a meaningful interpretation of the participants' experiences.

After conducting separate RTAs for RQ1 and RQ2, I re-engaged reflexively with the full dataset, reviewing the thematic maps and coded extracts across both questions. In line with Braun and Clarke's (2021) emphasis on researcher reflexivity and the active, situated construction of meaning, I identified strong conceptual overlaps between the two datasets. This prompted an additional interpretative process in which I mapped the subthemes side-by-side and constructed four overarching themes that appeared to reflect shared values, needs, and domains of meaning across both RQs. This step was consistent with my constructivist epistemology, recognising that themes are not "found" but constructed through iterative engagement with the data and theoretical positioning (Braun & Clarke, 2024). To support transparency, I developed a table evidencing the number of participants which contributed to each theme (see Appendix GG). These overarching themes helped to structure the end

of the findings chapter and informed the organisation of the discussion chapter (see Table 6 for overarching themes).

4.7.4.6 Step 6: Writing the Report

The findings from RQ1 and RQ2 were written up together, organised under the overarching themes across RQ1 and RQ2. This decision was based on the strong alignment between participants' practical suggestions (RQ2) and their envisioned elements of ideal and non-ideal education (RQ1). Presenting the findings in an integrated way was considered the most coherent and accessible structure for the reader (see Section 5.3.5 for a summary of findings and a justification for the use of overarching themes in the discussion stage).

4.8 Ethical Considerations

4.8.1 Ethical Approval

To conduct and recruit participants for the study, I obtained ethical approval from the University of Nottingham's Research Ethics Committee on 9th July 2024 (Appendix R). Prior to commencing the research, an ethical review form was completed, detailing the planned research procedures, addressing ethical considerations, and outlining potential risks to the research process and participants, along with corresponding mitigation measures.

During the recruitment, data collection, and analysis I adhered to ethical standards as outlined in the *Code of Ethics and Conduct* (British Psychological Society, 2021) and the *Standards of Conduct, Performance and Ethics* (Health and Care Professions Council, 2024). In the following section will discuss key ethical considerations within my research and how I addressed these.

4.8.2 Consent & Withdrawal

Informed consent for participation in the research was obtained individually from both parents/carers and CYP (Appendix D and E). An initial phone conversation was held with each family, during which I clearly outlined the purpose and nature of the research. This verbal explanation was supported by written information sheets tailored for both parents/carers and CYP (Appendices D and E), ensuring participants had accessible and age-appropriate details about the study before providing consent.

4.8.3 Confidentiality, Anonymity and Data Protection

All participants and their parents/carers were assured of confidentiality and anonymity throughout the research process. Field notes taken during sessions were transcribed immediately after each session, and the original handwritten notes were securely disposed of via shredding. Electronic records were stored in a password-protected file accessible only to me. All identifying details including participant names, school names, and references to individual teachers or family members were anonymised using pseudonyms or general descriptors (e.g., "School X"). Where possible, participants selected their own pseudonyms, giving them the option to recognise their own contributions in the final report.

All participants and families were made aware that safeguarding procedures would be followed in accordance with ethical guidelines. In the event of any disclosures that raised concerns for the safety or wellbeing of the participant or others, I was obligated to take appropriate steps to ensure their protection, in line with agreed safeguarding protocols.

4.8.4 Participant Safety and Risk of Harm

To help participants feel safe and comfortable, they were given the option to choose a location for their sessions that best suited their preferences (e.g., home or educational provision). When sessions took place in school settings, I ensured the room had a glass-panelled door for visibility and that a key staff member was available for support nearby. For home-based sessions, a parent or carer remained accessible throughout, either in the same room or nearby, depending on the participant's choice.

To build trust, I provided an information sheet featuring a photo of myself and introduced both my role as the researcher and the research process in accessible, child-friendly terms (see Appendix E). Given the emotionally sensitive nature of the topic, I recognised that reflecting on ideal and non-ideal educational experiences could be challenging, especially for CYP experiencing EBSNA as discussed in Section 2.6. Although the activity did not explicitly ask about school non-attendance, participants often referred to it spontaneously when discussing their current or past experiences. Such reflections could potentially evoke distress or discomfort.

To mitigate emotional risk, I made it clear to all participants that they could pause or stop the session at any time and offered regular comfort breaks. Participants were reminded throughout the process of their right to withdraw at any time, without consequence. Immediate access to a known adult also mitigated emotional risk.

At the end of each session, I provided participants with a debrief document (see Appendix F for an example), which included my contact details, my research supervisor's details, and information about sources of emotional support if required. This was sent via the participant's preferred method (parent/carer's email, or in a sealed letter via post or school reception). A separate debrief letter was also sent to parents/carers (Appendix G).

4.8.5 Researcher Safety and Risk of Harm

Some sessions took place in participants' homes, which presented a low level of risk associated with entering unfamiliar environments and meeting individuals previously unknown to me. To mitigate this, all sessions were held in communal areas such as the living room or kitchen, and I followed the lone-working policy outlined for my role as a TEP. This included using the Educational Psychology Service's buddy system: I informed a colleague of the session location, arranged a check-in at an agreed time and provided a follow-up message after each visit to confirm my safety.

4.9 Increasing Research Rigour and Trustworthiness

This section is informed by the work of Lincoln & Guba (1985) who argued that the rigour of qualitative research should not be judged by traditional scientific criteria such as reliability or validity, but rather by the concept of *trustworthiness.* According to Lincoln & Guba, trustworthiness is determined through four key criteria: *credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.* Reflexivity is also recognised as an essential underpinning for maintaining research integrity, therefore, a section on reflexivity is also included here (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

4.9.1 Credibility

Lincoln and Guba (1985) identified credibility as the cornerstone of trustworthiness, achieved through sustained engagement, methodological rigour, and commitment to the research topic, in this case,

EBSNA. I established credibility by conducting an in-depth exploration of the literature and developing a SLR, which helped refine my RQs based on identified gaps.

Despite the challenges of recruiting pupils from a hard-to-reach population, I remained committed to inclusion. I employed flexible and ethically sensitive recruitment strategies, collaborating closely with EPs and key educational staff to access potential participants.

Prolonged engagement across multiple sessions supported the development of trust and rapport, which helped facilitate the collection of rich and authentic data (Adler, 2022). I further enhanced credibility through triangulation strategies. Methodological triangulation involved combining visual data (see Appendix HH for exemplar drawings provided by participants) with verbal reflections to broaden narrative insight, I used peer debriefing and supervision to cross-check interpretations and maintain analytical flexibility (Patton, 1999; Spall, 1998). I also used informal member checking by summarising participants' contributions back to them to ensure their views were accurately represented.

4.9.2 Transferability and Reflexivity

To support transferability, I provided thick description (Korstjens & Moser, 2018) **,** offering detailed contextual information about participants without compromising confidentiality. I used a 'Participant Demographic and Background Information Form' (Appendix S) to record key characteristics such as attendance rates, EBSNA profiles, and background details. A summary of participant information is also included in Appendix N.

Although qualitative research is not intended to produce generalisable findings, providing rich detail allows readers to assess how the insights may apply to similar contexts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In addition, all templates and resources are included in the appendices (e.g., consent forms, interview guides, prompt cards). These promote transparency by offering a clear audit trail that others can evaluate, replicate, or adapts (Slevin & Sines, 1999).

Reflexivity was embedded throughout the research. A form of "intellectual honesty" (Adler, 2022, p. 601), reflexivity required me to critically reflect on my positionality and influence. I maintained a reflexive research diary (Appendix Z) to document reflections on my role, emotional reactions, and potential biases during data collection and analysis.

4.9.3 Dependability

Dependability refers to the consistency and stability of the research process over time (Korstejens & Moser, 2018). To address this, I clearly documented each stage of the data collection and analysis process, including adaptations made in response to participant needs (e.g., offering multiple sessions, choice of expression method, use of visual prompts).

I maintained an audit trail to ensure that methodological decisions were traceable. Ongoing supervisory discussions and peer feedback further supported critical reflection and maintained the transparency and logic of the research design.

4.9.4 Confirmability

Confirmability is concerned with ensuring that findings are shaped by participants rather than researcher bias (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I supported confirmability by systematically storing all field notes, drawings, and contextual data. These were revisited throughout the analysis to ensure alignment with participant voice.

Interpretive decisions were discussed regularly with supervisors and TEP peers to challenge assumptions and reduce potential bias. Data excerpts and visuals are included in Appendices BB-FF to provide a clear evidential chain from raw data to final thematic interpretations during data analysis.

5 Findings

5.1 Overview

This chapter will present the themes generated by the data analysis process in relation to the research questions:

- ***RQ1****: How do secondary-aged pupil experiencing EBSNA envision their ideal and non-ideal education?*
- ***RQ2:*** *What changes do secondary-aged pupils experiencing EBSNA believe are needed to achieve their ideal education?*

A thematic map and summary table for each RQ will introduce the key themes developed from the data analysis process. I will firstly introduce the findings from RQ1, followed by the findings from RQ2. Participant quotes are used to illustrate each theme. Where necessary, minor edits (shown in square brackets) have been made for clarity and confidentiality (Lingard, 2019).

5.2 Findings for Research Question 1

How do secondary-aged pupils experiencing EBSNA envision their ideal and non-ideal education?

Four overarching themes and nine subthemes were identified in relation to RQ1. Each theme captures distinct, yet interconnected aspects of participants' envisions of their ideal and non-ideal education. Table 4 introduces each theme and provides a description of each. Figure 5 presents a thematic map illustrating the relationships between themes.

Table 4: Summary of Themes Relation to RQ1

Theme	Summary
1. **The role of Educational Structure**	Captures participants' perceptions of workload, pace, timetabling and transitions. Ideal education was often described as paced and manageable, allowing time for consolidation and rest, whereas non-ideal education was associated with overwhelming workload (such as homework), limited breaks and lack of flexibility.
2. **Autonomy, Privacy, and Educational Rules**	Captures participants' perceptions of autonomy and fairness in educational settings, including experiences of personal space, independence and education rules. Ideal education was associated with respectful boundaries, opportunities for pupil autonomy, and rules perceived are fair and consistent. Non-ideal education was described as overly controlling, lacking in trust, and restrictive of pupils' sense of agency or individuality.
3. **Emotional and Psychological Safety**	Captures how participants perceived emotional and psychological safety in education through their relationships, physical environments and sensory experiences. Ideal education was described as calm, predictable, and supportive, characterised by kind adults, understanding peers and sensory comfort. Non-ideal education involved feelings of anxiety, overstimulation, social disconnection or being misunderstood by others.
4. **Learning Preferences and Future Aspirations**	Captures participants' perceptions of meaningful learning, including preferred learning styles, interests, and aspirations for the future. Ideal education was described as engaging, relevant, and flexible, with opportunities for creative, hands-on, or interest-based learning linked to personal goals. Non-ideal education was perceived as rigid, irrelevant, or mismatched to pupils' strengths, making learning feel disengaging or purposeless.

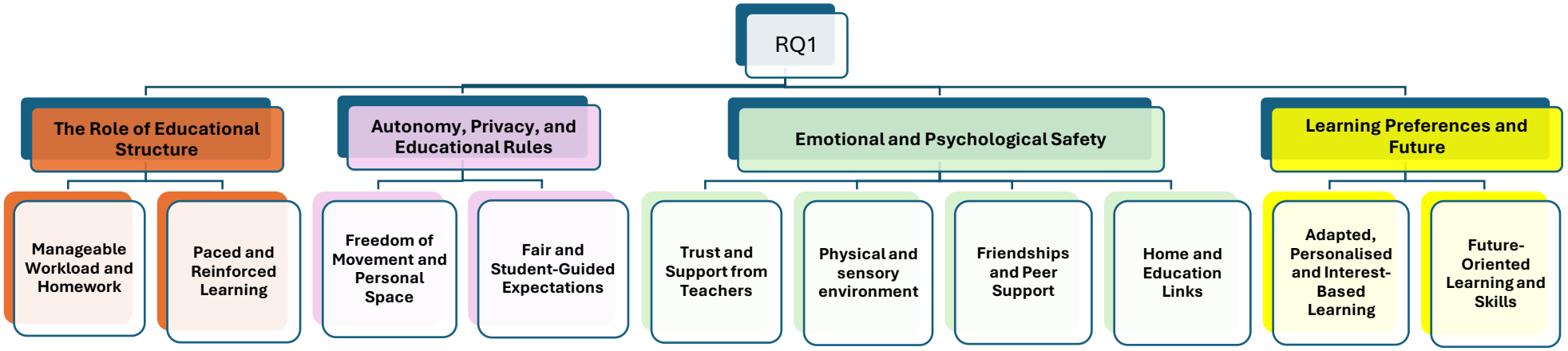


Figure 5: Thematic Map Displaying the Themes and Subthemes for RQ1

5.2.1 Theme 1. The Role of Educational Structure

This theme reflects participants' perspectives on how education is structured and how this affects their engagement and well-being. When discussing their ideal and non-ideal education, several participants described how educational demands and expectations influenced their ability to engage. A preference emerged among some for a more flexible and accommodating structure, which they associated with reduced stress and anxiety. This theme comprised of two subthemes: ***1.*** *Manageable Workload and Homework* and *2. Paced and Reinforced Learning*

5.2.1.1 Subtheme 1.1: Manageable Workload and Homework

Homework was frequently mentioned as a source of pressure and stress when deadlines were tight or when it extended into personal time. Some participants viewed homework as unnecessary and contributing to disengagement: In describing their non-ideal education, participants highlighted:

"Having to do homework over the weekend...short deadlines that cause stress" (Bella)

Conversely, participants described their ideal education as one where homework was minimised or eliminated, suggesting a distinction between home and education life:

"No homework – home is for home and chill...it doesn't make sense at home; it causes me stress" (Harry)

These perspectives appeared to suggest that for some pupils experiencing EBSNA, homework may be a source of stress and that boundaries between education and home may impact their emotional wellbeing and education engagement.

5.2.1.2 Subtheme 1.2: Paced and Reinforced Learning

Some participants described the pace of learning in mainstream education as too fast, making it difficult to absorb material. When describing their ideal education, they expressed a preference for slow-paced learning, allowing for retention of information, with more opportunities for repetition and overlearning:

"...would be going slower and my brain would be able to take it in slower. If too fast, I can't take in a bunch of things" (DMR)

'There would be overlearning, so basically teachers help you overlearn stuff ... like recapping things you are stuck at or forget. If you need extra support, then you have it. They speak slowly…it's easier to understand" (Stitch)

In describing their ideal education, participants emphasised the desire for built-in and flexible breaks to manage cognitive overload and emotional regulation throughout the day. For example,

"Learning takes place every day with breaks throughout" (Batman)

Similarly, some participants described their non-ideal education as one where they would be expected to stick to a structured timetable without opportunities for breaks or flexibility:

"Doesn't feel like you have a break...with long lessons...you can't take a minute break. You can't ask for a break. Some days, your lessons are back-to-back" (Bella)

Some participants also appeared to express frustration, within their non-ideal education, at the number of education days and perceived long hours. For example,

"Attending 5 days a week, all day" (Batman)

"Six days a week you would have lessons on" (Bella)

5.2.2 Theme 2: Autonomy, Privacy, and Educational Rules

This theme reflects how participants perceived their ability to exercise control over their environment and influence rules in their education. The data appears to suggest that participant's perceived restrictions on movement, self-expression, and decision-making were linked with frustration and anxiety. This theme is comprised of two subthemes: 1. *Freedom of movement and personal space* and 2. *Fair and Student-Guided Expectations*

5.2.2.1 Subtheme 2.1 Freedom of Movement and Personal Space

A strong emphasis was placed on having autonomy over movement within education. Many participants envisioned an ideal education where there were no restrictions on meeting their basic needs (e.g. using the toilet, eating or getting a drink freely):

"Keep everything open - open doors, toilets in every room… toilets are open" (Harry)

"You can go fill your water bottle up …go to toilet, eat or drink when you want, without asking" (Stitch)

Some participants explicitly linked school-based restrictions with their emotional wellbeing, such as limited access to toilets during lessons, which was associated with increased anxiety. Within their ideal education, this freedom appeared to be linked to a greater sense of calm and control:

"Knowing everything is open relaxes you and you are not worried about how to get out – anxiety is reduced when I am free and can move around without all the doors and toilets locked" (Harry)

In contrast, non-ideal education was described as involving perceived distressing restrictions, particularly in relation to basic facilities such as toilet access:

"You're not allowed to go to the toilet whenever you want, which is really bad… They recently started to lock toilets unless it's break time, it does makes you nervous" (DMR)

One participant described feeling "trapped" due to locked doors and limited access to toilets, which he connected to experiences of panic attacks:

"it makes you feel trapped… we don't have key cards… scheduled toilet breaks – this actually gave me panic attacks… feels horrible… I have anxiety about going in there, I worry all day and can't concentrate because the doors are locked… I just can't go to the toilet" (Harry)

This appears to suggest that restricted access to basic facilities may not only be a practical barrier, but also contribute to significant emotional distress and dysregulation, particularly for pupils experiencing EBSNA. Across participant accounts, freedom to meet basic needs without seeking permission was consistently linked with feelings of safety, calm and reduced anxiety.

In addition to toilet access, several participants described their ideal education as one where they could control who enters their learning space:

"There is a sign on the door, saying when you can come in" (Batman)

"You can be inside if you want [a room to learn]. There are no bullies there" (Stitch)

Some participants also discussed the desire to have control over which room they want to go in, particularly emphasising the ability to choose if they want to go to a more calming environment:

"You can pick and choose...You can decide which room you want to go in and can go in the calm room when you want. I've got the freedom I deserve" (Stitch)

These narratives may reflect a broader desire for autonomy and agency within the educational environment, where participants felt more in control.

5.2.2.2 Subtheme 2.2. Fair and Student-Guided Expectations

Participants described uniform policies, rules and autonomy as central to their ideal and non-ideal education.

Some participants expressed a desire for greater influence over the rules within their educational experience. In their ideal education, some suggested having no formal rules, while others emphasised the importance of self-directed rules that made sense to them:

"There aren't really rules" (Bella)

"I follow my own that make sense to me" (DMR)

These responses may reflect a desire for increased autonomy and ownership over behaviour expectations, where participants feel more invested in rules that align with their values and lived experiences.

A prominent theme within participants' discussions was the perception of a uniform as being restrictive, particularly in relation to comfort. Many described their ideal education as one where they could express themselves through clothing choices:

"I make the rules there, you can wear whatever you want, this would always be comfy clothes" (Batman)

For some pupils, comfortable clothing appeared to link with perceived better concentration and focus:

"...comfort clothes which help me feel nice and concentrate better… no rules but 'No uniform'" (Harry)

"We can learn better if we are comfy, the tie is really annoying, I can't focus on teacher because uniform is not comfy, or you're sorting the tie out because its round your neck weird" (Summer)

This suggests that comfort in clothing is not merely a preference, but a factor participants perceive as directly impacting their ability to concentrate and engage in learning.

When discussing non-ideal educational experiences, participants seemed to perceive strict uniform policies as undesirable:

"You can't wear coats, even if it was cold" (Batman)

"You are not allowed to wear leggings or crocs, which make me feel comfier" (Stitch)

One participant appeared to link uniform policies to a broader sense of lack of autonomy and rights, particularly in relation to personal comfort and periods:

"If you are on your period and can't wear leggings it's not very nice. Girls want to feel comfy when they are on their period" (Summer)

This highlights how uniform policies, when not adaptable to individual needs, may particularly disadvantage some pupils and contribute to discomfort or distress during already sensitive times.

Furthermore, one participant described their ideal education as one in which they could express themselves more freely, including the use of swearing in certain contexts:

"I would be allowed to express myself with some swear words if I'm angry, but not in every sentence. I would get in trouble if I used it all the time." (Bella)

Some participants discussed their non-ideal education as one where the rules were imposed on students without their input, contributing to a perceived sense of unfairness. It appeared that decisions about education regulations were made solely by school leaders, with no opportunity for pupils' to voice their perspectives. For example, one participant reported:

"The headteacher decides the rules, we don't have any input" (Summer)

These findings may point to a perceived power imbalance between staff and pupils, where participants feel that rules are created without meaningful consultation or flexibility. Participants provided specific examples of rules that they felt were unjust, overly restrictive or limited social interactions with others:

"*You are put into groups you don't want to be in" (Batman)*

"No talking in corridors, even just talking to your friend quietly, you are only allowed to walk one way" (Harry)

Some participants seemed to feel that rules were enforced without consideration of individual circumstances of pupils, particularly when it came to attendance policies:

"You would be punished if you didn't go into school, teachers wouldn't ask why you are not going or try to understand" (Batman)

Participants also appeared to be frustrated about the language and tone used to enforce the rules by teachers:

"I hate it when they say, 'It's not an ask, it's a command'. It makes me not want to do it" (*Summer)*

This may suggest that the tone in which rules are communicated may play a role in how students experience authority, potentially impacting their motivations and emotional responses.

Taken together, participants' perceptions appear to suggest a preference for student-guided expectations that are responsive, respectful, and centred around comfort, fairness, and self-expression.

5.2.3 Theme 3. Emotional and Psychological Safety

Participants highlighted the importance of relationships, environmental comfort and peer support in shaping their educational experience. Many described positive, trusting relationships with teachers and peers as essential in their ideal education. Furthermore, the sensory and physical environment also appeared to be recognised by pupils as important in creating emotional and psychological safety in education. This theme is comprised of four subthemes: 1. *Trust and support from teachers*, 2. *Physical and sensory environment*, 3. *Friendships and Peer Support* and 4. *Home and Education Links*

5.2.3.1 Subtheme 3.1. Trust and Support from Teachers

Teacher relationships were a central feature across participants' descriptions in both the ideal and non-ideal education. In their non-ideal education, some participants perceived teachers as disrespectful. Some expressed that teachers did not listen to pupils and instead resort to shouting, which in turn appears to influence students' sense of emotional well-being:

"They scream at me…. for not doing work… most teachers would be shouting at me" (DMR)

"*When they are like this, it makes me sad" (Stitch)*

Some participants appeared to envision teachers in their non-ideal education as inattentive or emotionally unavailable:

"Teachers wouldn't support you. Teachers are chatting to themselves and ignoring you" (Batman)

"It makes me feel I'm not important, the teacher doesn't recognise me, I brush it off, but I don't like it at all" (DMR)

These reflections suggest that some pupils may experience emotional disengagement from teachers as a form of relational exclusion, contributing to feelings of invisibility or low self-worth in the setting. This appears to point to the role of relational presence in shaping how pupils experience emotional and education safety.

Several participants expressed discomfort or frustration when they felt that teachers were not listening to them or did not care about their experiences:

"They don't listen to me" (Summer)

"Not really caring" (Harry)

This appears to suggest that the participants perceived emotional attunement (e.g. being listened to and cared for) as important to them.

When describing their ideal education, some participants spoke about specific teachers from their previous or current educational settings, describing them in ways that appeared to convey a sense of dislike towards their teaching persona, perceived as inauthentic:

"She's really fake, always smiles at me, but not really smile, very grumpy" (Stitch)

"Her attitude is bad...its fake" (Harry)

These responses appear to suggest that pupils may be highly attuned to perceived inauthenticity in adult behaviour, and that relational genuineness may be key to establishing trust.

In one participant's non-ideal education description, they outlined a sense of distrust towards the teachers, particularly concerning their response to a medical need. The participant seemed frustrated that the teachers did not acknowledge or respond appropriately to their medical condition:

"I'm epileptic… once I was left on my own, I felt dizzy and sick, I needed to go home I was going to have a fit, they don't listen to me" (Stich)

This account appears to illustrate how unmet medical needs in education can undermine pupils' trust and sense of safety, particularly when pupils feel disbelieved or dismissed.

Several participants appeared to emphasise a sense of injustice in how teachers treated pupils, particularly concerning perceived favouritism and unfairness. When describing their non-ideal education, some participants expressed the belief that some teachers consistently sided with certain students over others, regardless of the situation:

"Teachers always go on their side… even when I'm not doing anything it's just that the teacher always sides on them" (DMR)

There also appeared to be a strong perception that favouritism was both noticeable and unfair, with some participants suggesting that teachers were unaware that pupils recognised this behaviour:

"Teachers have their favourites… teachers don't realise that you all know, it's not fair when they choose favourites… they are treating children differently in terms of fairness" (Bella).

Another participant described a sense of powerlessness within their non-ideal education, suggesting that they felt unable to challenge or change aspects of their experience:

"the worst thing is that I feel powerless and just have to sit there and take it, but it's really hard to do that" (Harry)

This comment appears to reflect a sense of disempowerment, where some pupils feel unable to influence or change relational dynamics within the classroom.

In contrast, when discussing their ideal educational experiences, participants described teachers as engaging positively with pupils and possessing attributes that were perceived as supportive and encouraging. Participants appeared to value kindness, approachability and a student-centred approach used by teachers. For example:

"There would be lots of nice teachers like Mrs [name] and Mrs [name], they would be friendly, approachable, kind and lovable" (Stitch)

"Kinder teachers who say it calmly and then let you do it yourself" (Harry)

This type of positive teacher interaction seemed to contribute to pupils' feeling comfortable, valued and emotionally supported:

"They make me feel relaxed when I'm with them, they are thoughtful. They make you feel happy and good about yourself" (Stitch)

Some participants described the type of support that they would receive from teachers in their ideal education, appearing to highlight the importance of responsiveness, guidance and encouragement:

"The perfect teacher would look like…[they] actually answer you when you put your hand up…so you are getting help when you need it" (DMR)

"They guide you and support you in a nice way" (Harry)

Another key aspect of an ideal teacher as described by one participant was their ability to provide praise which appeared to make the pupil feel a sense of happiness:

"The teachers guide you with positive praise, making me feel happy" (Stitch)

Some participants also expressed undesirable teacher characteristics in their ideal education:

"They are not selfish, and they realise it's not just about them" (Stitch)

"I wouldn't have to worry about seeing bad or nasty teachers" (Bella)

A reoccurring theme among participants appeared to be the removal of 'shouting' or 'nagging' by teachers in their ideal education:

"They don't shout or nag at you" (Stitch)

They won't keep nagging you" (Harry)

These responses appeared to suggest that participants valued learning environments where teachers did not rely on shouting to manage student behaviours.

When describing their ideal education, a participant discussed teachers understanding pupils' individual needs and using interest-based conversations to create a sense of comfort:

"They would talk about cats first, to help me feel comfortable. Then naturally morph into something else, like the stuff we have to talk about" (Bella)

"My therapy dog…. love talking about pets" (DMR)

These moments of shared interest appeared to function as relational bridges, gentle entry points for connection that helped pupils feel more relaxed and open to engagement.

Furthermore, when discussing medical challenges, one participant seemed to highlight the importance of trust between teachers and pupils, suggesting that in their ideal education teachers would trust pupils' self-assessment of their own needs:

"You wouldn't need to justify why you are not doing something… they would know you're being genuine… if I had a migraine, they would know I can't do work… I need to sleep it off" (Bella)

This seems to reflect a desire for trust-based relationships, where pupils' subjective experiences and needs are accepted without interrogation.

One participant described a desire to be understood by teachers, valuing recognition and acceptance of pupils' authentic self. In their ideal education, teachers appeared to be envisioned as understanding diverse needs and creating spaces where pupils feel accepted without needing to change. They described feeling comfort and validation when teachers showed understanding, using their Autism diagnosis as an example of support for neurodiverse students:

"They understand you; we are all diverse and different… they accept you for you, you can be yourself and comfortable. They understand me for who I am and understand children with autism and what they can do to help us" (Stitch)

This account appears to highlight the role of neuro-affirming practices in fostering belonging, where acceptance of difference contributes to emotional security and authentic self-expression.

Together, these narratives suggest that emotional and psychological safety may be closely tied to the quality of teacher-student relationships, with authenticity, fairness, and understanding emerging as central features of ideal educational environments.

5.2.3.2 Subtheme 3.2. Physical and Sensory Environment

The physical environment was raised as important for many participants, particularly concerning how well the setting adjusts the environment to meet their sensory needs. Participants referred to numerous environmental elements that either positively or negatively influenced their educational experience.

Some participants appeared to express a preference for their education setting to be located nearby, emphasising the importance of avoiding long commutes and crowded transportation:

"Nearby so don't have to travel far, I don't like crowded buses [or] walking either…" (Harry)

These responses suggest that participants appeared to envision the journey to school, particularly when crowded or overstimulating as a barrier to accessing education comfortably.

Some participants described their ideal education environment as small, structured and easy to navigate, highlighting the importance of knowing where everything is and feeling a sense of predictability in their surroundings:

"there would be small rooms" (Stitch)

"I know where everything is at home, compared to school" (Batman)

For most participants, an ideal educational environment appeared to be characterised as calm and comfortable, featuring soft furnishings, accessible equipment, and sensory regulation items. Some participants emphasised the importance of comfort in supporting their ability to focus and feel at ease:

"There would be a comfy sofa in the room. I would have a furry rug on the floor, not an itchy rug or thin, something soft and furry. I would have a blanket" (Bella)

"A relaxed environment, not hard chairs, comfy chairs make me more relaxed… Bean bags and stuff like that are helpful" (Harry)

For some participants, their sense of physical comfort appeared to be directly linked to their ability to concentrate and engage in learning:

"I can't concentrate because they [chairs] are so not comfy… Being comfy helps me learn better" (Harry)

For some participants comfort appeared to be envisioned as fundamental to their capacity to relax, regulate, and engage, rather than a superficial preference.

These responses appeared to suggest that participants valued an environment designed to promote comfort, sensory regulation, and predictability. They perceived this environment as supporting cognitive focus, which may help CYP learn better.

Many participants described an ideal educational environment as quiet and not overcrowded, suggesting that a calm atmosphere may be important for their well-being and ability to learn:

"Somewhere not too loud" (Batman)

"Calm rooms, quiet areas…with not lots of people" (Stitch)

For some participants, the lack of noise seemed to be especially significant, as it was believed to improve focus and concentration:

"Just silence…easier to focus on the work when it's silent rather than lots of random noises" (Harry)

Whereas other participants described a preference for a specific sound they found comforting or regulating, rather than complete silence:

"Music is on through earphones" (Batman)

"Poppers, or things that make a nice noise, like a clicky noise" (Stitch)

Participants also emphasised the importance of having autonomy over the physical environment, particularly concerning lighting preferences:

"No windows, no real sunlight, just a dim yellow light. It helps with my eyes. I would have less migraines because of the dim light" (Bella)

"Changing mood lights, makes me feel calm, not bright lights everywhere" (Harry)

Additionally, sensory elements such as smell were also identified as potentially contributing to a calming and supportive environment:

"Fruity smells. Could have fruit smells in little spray bottles…this sometimes might be nice to help you feel calmer" (Stitch)

The use of sensory elements such as mood lighting and calming scents appeared to be envisioned as mechanisms to enhance regulation and create emotionally safe learning spaces.

Many participants described animals as a source of comfort and emotional support in their ideal education. Pets were described as key members of their educational environment, with participants expressing that animals could help reduce anxiety, ease feelings of depression, and positively impact well-being.

"I can bring my cat which helps with my anxiety. Cats can be therapy cats that help me anxiety and depression…which would make me happy" (Stitch)

"I would have my dogs, helps me feel distracted…the negative thoughts not coming in my head" (DMR)

Participants appeared to envision animals as a source of co-regulation and emotional grounding, offering a form of support not always available through staff or peers.

However, some participants also appeared to recognise the balance between the emotional benefits of having animals in their ideal education and the potential challenges that could arise. They acknowledged that while pets were supportive, they could also contribute to stress or distraction for some pupils:

"I would feel happy, sometimes stressed because of the cats, but it's ok" (Bella)

"If I was surrounded with pets, would be so distracted, in a bad way, wouldn't be able to learn, so just one pet, my therapy dog is fine" (DMR)

These responses may suggest that while animals were viewed as valuable for emotional well-being for some participants, they also recognised the need for balance, ensuring that pets provided comfort without negatively impacting focus or increasing stress in their ideal educational environment.

In contrast, some participants described their non-ideal educational environment as unpredictable and subject to frequent changes. The lack of consistency appeared to be a source of stress and difficulty:

"I can't cope with loads of changes…when they keep changing, can't keep up with things" (DMR)

"So annoying that lessons keep changing all the time, changing students that are in the lesson with me" (Stitch)

These environments were often envisioned as dysregulating, particularly when changes were unexpected or when routines lacked visual ques.

Some participants also referenced specific characteristics of educational buildings and learning spaces, describing them as physically demanding and difficult to navigate:

"High up, 4th floor" (Bella)

"in a big building, lots of stairs no elevator that you can use unless your disabled, they expect you to walk up the big stairs, it's still really tiring then you can't find the classroom, it's such a tiring day" (Summer)

Additionally, some participants described how the structure of their non-ideal educational setting could lead to physical symptoms such as exhaustion or nausea, making them feel like they want to go home:

"It's bad and makes students just want to be at home all the time. Don't know anyone there it makes you feel sick, you just want to go home, it makes you feel bad" (Batman)

Further contributing to the challenges of their non-ideal educational environments, participants described crowded spaces as a source of discomfort and anxiety, particularly due to sensory overload and fear of getting lost:

"It's scary with all the crowds of people, feel like I am going to get lost, doesn't feel safe… people with autism see things differently… being outside in crowds makes me anxious" (Stitch)

The overwhelming presence of loud noises, constant talking, and crowded spaces was also described as making it difficult to focus and feel comfortable:

"There are loud people. The place is crowded. People talking all the time so you can't hear" (Batman)

"Vision is blurry, it's loud. There is 60 plus children and it's overwhelming" (Bella)

For some participants, physical closeness and crowded classrooms contributed to feelings of claustrophobia and distress:

"… all these teachers together, I wouldn't like it, it would be really crowded, making me feel claustrophobic it's hard. Pupils are really close to you (Harry)

When describing their non-ideal education, several participants highlighted that the lack of access to sensory supports heightens their distress, particularly in relation to loud and unpredictable noises:

"Not allowed to wear my ear plugs to help with the noise, you can hear loud and scary bells, every time a lesson change the big bells are ringing, there would be no engage [SEN support area] or quiet area to go to" (Harry)

"No music or headphones allowed" (Batman)

Additionally, unexpected or repetitive noises were described as particularly distressing:

"Some of them are really loud, naughty and distracting. It would be where there are people banging walls all the time, chucking chairs or desks, really loud and scary" (Stitch)

"Like chew really loudly on purpose… tap on [the] desk with nails… I can't concentrate… moving chairs all the time it echoes in my ears when people are just constantly talking, I can't concentrate" (Summer)

Without access to self-regulation tools, participants appeared to envision routine environment stimuli such as bells and crowded corridors as intrusive and even frightening.

Some participants described what they perceived as unpleasant smells contributing to their discomfort in their non-ideal educational settings. There appeared to be a particular emphasis on unclean environments and strong food-related odours, which were perceived as distracting or unpleasant:

"The classrooms are dirty, dirty tables, cooked food smell, smell of food from the canteen coming into the classroom it's hard to concentrate, makes me feel sick" (Harry)

Unpleasant or intense smells appeared to perceive not just as discomfort, but as disruptions to focus and wellbeing, reinforcing the role of sensory sensitivity in educational experience.

Overall, participants appeared to envision their ideal educational environments as those that actively supported sensory regulation, autonomy and predictability.

5.2.3.3 Subtheme 3.3. Friendships and Peer Support

A subtheme of friendships and peer support emerged across the data, with some participants describing friendships as an important factor in their educational experience. In their ideal education, some participants envisioned supportive peers being present during both academic activities and free time:

"I would have a friend, that I am really close to – I know very well from young, and they know how to be around me" (Bella)

"Break time and lunch time I would see my friends" (Harry)

Participants also described specific qualities they valued in friendships:

Friends are someone [who] can put up with me, not judgy, good sense of humour, easy to get along with. don't have to always speak to them, they are not too much" (Harry)

For some participants, friendships were also seen as a source of understanding and regulation, particularly in relation to neurodiversity:

"My family think I have ADHD, I can't control it, some of my friends I give permission to tell me firmly to help me. Just like "shh down a bit" its ok then" (Summer)

Participants also emphasised that shared interests may play a role in forming relationships, as they appreciated friends who engaged in conversations about topics they enjoyed:

"People who let me talk about my interests" (DMR)

Participants appeared to envision meaningful friendships as those rooted in mutual understanding and emotional tolerance, in which they could be accepted without pressure to mask or overexplain.

Additionally, participants described how, in their ideal education, they would have peer support groups where they could talk about their feelings and experiences, creating a supportive network:

"Being able to share how I feel and talk things through is good, I also would like a group thing, others with anxiety and be good to talk and relate to them. It would have support groups; this would feel good" (DMR)

The preference for texting and using technology to communicate rather than face-to-face interactions emerged as a shared envision among several participants. Some expressed that being able to stay connected with friends through texting was an important part of their ideal education:

"Able to connect and text with friends, talk to them at home…speak to friends at any point by text" (Batman)

Other participants described how texting during break times provided a way to maintain close friendships and coordinate social interactions outside of structured school settings:

"I would communicate through texting during the break times… we can arrange to meet at one of our houses… parents would go in another room… we would interact daily when we are both free" (Bella)

Several participants appeared to envision digital communication as a preferred form of interaction in their ideal education, allowing them to maintain connections while reducing the social demands often associated with in-person interactions.

In contrast, some participants spoke about their non-ideal educational environment as being surrounded by unfamiliar or disliked peers, which appeared to contribute to feelings of discomfort and unease:

"Annoying kid between me and my friend so I can't be with my friend" (DMR)

"You would be asked to work in groups all the time… people that don't know me would be there… can't get anything done… feel uncomfortable" (Harry)

For some participants, the unpredictability of the social environment is described as creating anxiety or even physical symptoms, making it difficult to focus or feel at ease in their education:

"Changing students that are in the lesson with me… I don't know them very well, which makes me nervous… don't like the feeling… don't know how to act… makes me feel really sick" (Summer)

Being surrounded by large groups of unfamiliar people was also described as intimidating and overwhelming, particularly when crowds included older or younger students:

"I don't like it when there is a lot of people… feel like they are going to trample on me… especially if they are older, that's scary… all years together… year 7s are stressful" (Summer)

Participants appeared to envision unfamiliar social contexts not just as emotionally stressful but also as physically dysregulating.

Some participants also expressed that in their non-ideal education, they felt unsupported and unwanted:

"People there wouldn't support you" (Batman)

"Loose friendship group so do not have any friends. I'm meeting new people every day. Meeting people who do not talk much, difficult to start conversations with them" (Bella)

A key concern raised by some participants was the presence of bullies in their non-ideal education, which appeared to contribute to feelings of fear and distress:

"Don't want to be with bullies, being around them isn't nice. It's scary" (Bella)

"Afraid that bullies are going to come in all the time, makes me feel really uncomfortable, makes me feel really sick. Don't know how to act when they are there. I feel nervous" (Stitch)

Bullying appeared to be envisioned as a pervasive threat to emotional and psychological safety with some participants describing strong physiological and emotional reactions to the presence or anticipation of bullies.

Overall, participants appeared to envision peer relationships as vital element of their educational experiences, with safety, familiarity and shared understanding forming the foundation of supportive friendships. Conversely, social unpredictability and negative peer interactions were often perceived as distressing.

5.2.3.4 Subtheme 3.4. Home and Education Links

Some participants described the influence of parents in their ideal education, potentially emphasising the importance of strong communication between home and education. For these participants, it appeared that they recognised the value parental involvement had on their learning and the role teachers played in maintaining open and supportive communication with parents:

One participant appeared to envision an ideal education where parents played an active role in academic support:

"My mum and dad would be there. My mum and dad would help me with my work, whoever is best at the subject we are doing" (Bella)

Additionally, the teacher-parent relationship was perceived as essential for understanding and supporting some participants:

"The teacher would interact with mum and dad. They would communicate about how I'm doing…They would tell the teacher if I wasn't doing my work. The teacher would get to know me, through talking to them, without me actually having to always talk to them. It's important that they talk to each other. My mum would communicate with them when I'm not very well" (Bella)

Bella appeared to envision the home-school relationship as a relational bridge, allowing the teacher to understand her needs without direct pressure on her to self-advocate, particularly when unwell or dysregulated.

For some, communication between home and education was seen as important for enabling flexibility and adaptability in education:

"Home-school communication is important… teachers and parents who know me can meet to think about what needs changing… my mum will tell them, and they won't make a fuss… we just let them know when I don't feel up to coming in" (Harry)

Harry appeared to envision open communication between home and school as a mechanism for ensuring flexibility and emotional validation, particularly when traditional attendance expectations felt unmanageable.

Another participant described a preference for parents to communicate with the education staff about pupil well-being without any pressure felt by the pupil:

"They just send a message if you are not in, and they check in with your parents, and parents just say they are feeling anxious so please let them be excused" (Stitch)

These responses appear to suggest that participants perceive indirect communication via trusted adults as a preferred method of expressing emotional needs or requesting adjustments.

Overall, participants appeared to envision strong home-school links as a foundation for responsive and empathetic educational experiences, where needs could be shared, understood and accommodated without conflict or pressure.

5.2.4 Theme 4. Learning Preferences and Future Aspirations

The final theme emerging from the data was interpreted as learning preferences and future aspirations of the participants. Participants discussed the importance of adapting learning to pupils' personal styles and ensuring flexibility to meet individual needs. The use of technology was also highlighted, with varied perspectives on online learning. Additionally, participants appeared to emphasise that interest-related learning played a significant role in increasing motivation and engagement. This theme comprised of two subthemes: 1. *Adapted, Personalised and Interest-Based Learning*, and 2. *Future-Oriented Learning and Skills*

5.2.4.1 Subtheme 4.1 Adapted, Personalised and Interest-Based Learning

Participants described a variety of learning environments that they perceived as accommodating their needs. When describing their ideal education, participants seemed to discuss the importance of flexibility in education, with learning taking place in different settings, such as at home or in outdoor learning centres.

"Ideal education is at home. Being at home feels good, more warm, less people and quieter than school" (Batman)

"Education would be at home" (Bella)

However, others seemed to express a preference for a more conventional school environment, with some highlighting whether they preferred learning indoors over outdoors:

"Definitely inside not outside education" (Harry)

Participants also shared varied perspectives on online learning, with some advocating for its inclusion in their ideal education:

"There would be online learning" (Bella)

"Online learning" (Batman)

Whereas other participants clearly stated that they would not want online learning:

"[I] wouldn't like it to be online – because everyone can mess about" (DMR)

Participant's that did state a preference for the option for online learning, there was a difference in preference regarding the level of teacher involvement in online learning. One participant preferred self-directed learning through online platforms, rather than live teacher instruction:

"Not live teaching talking, but websites that I can go on" (Batman)

Participants appeared to envision flexibility in where and how learning takes place, including home, online, and outdoor environments.

In contrast, another participant valued having a teacher available for support, but preferred non-visual communication:

"This would be directed and made by the teacher… a teacher online that helps every day… I would know their voice… we would talk on the phone or through email… not on videocall as this makes me feel more comfortable" (Bella)

Bella appeared to envision teacher support as valuable, but only when delivered in a way that respected her sensory boundaries and communication preferences such as avoiding video calls.

A desire for learning to be adapted to suit personal learning styles, strengths, and interests emerged across the data. Some participants appeared to express opportunities to be creative in learning:

"I'm good at telling stories it allows me to be creative" (DMR)

"I'd like to do more Art…they let you draw, and use colour pens, it doesn't feel like you are doing work because it's fun and relaxing" (Stitch)

These perceptions may suggest that when learning is emotionally low-pressure and allows for autonomy and expression, it may be more likely to be envisioned as part of their ideal education.

Participants also highlighted specific teaching styles that helped them understand and retain information more effectively:

"They explain things through demonstrating or watching things" (Stitch)

"more practical – that's how I learn better. Doing it yourself is best, I wish subjects had more hands-on stuff" (Harry)

Additionally, participants spoke about specific techniques and resources that would enhance engagement in their ideal education:

"If I had a laptop that would be better" (DMR)

"Maybe like 3D virtual headsets. Learn about history through 3D headsets" (Harry)

Participants expressed a preference for engaging with topics that were meaningful to them and felt that their ideal education would focus on subjects they found relevant and enjoyable:

"Would learn about things that I'm interested in or things that are important for me to learn" (Bella)

Participants also identified specific interests they would like to explore within their education:

"Would love if we would learn about animals… how animals react to different things" (DMR)

"Do subjects that you like or activities that you like and feel good at… like trampolining or outdoor stuff like zipline" (Stitch)

In contrast, participants described their non-ideal education as learning that felt uninteresting or lacked purpose. Some referred to specific subjects they found disengaging*:*

"I'd be doing a lot of history that doesn't matter… get bored of it and go to sleep" (DMR).

"I would be doing maths all the time… it's boring and not interesting and I'm not good at it" (Stitch).

When describing their non-ideal education, several participants appeared to express frustration about certain ways of teaching that did not suit their individual needs such as teachers using pre-made PowerPoints:

"Worse is when they have pre-made PowerPoints… not interesting at all… so it's really hard" (Harry)

Participants' appeared to envision this mode of teaching as impersonal and disengaging, particularly when pupils' individual needs were not acknowledged.

Some participants also discussed subjects they perceived as irrelevant or unrelatable, expressing frustration over content that felt unnecessary to their lives and future aspirations:

"Doing things that don't matter like angles… useless… not going to really use it… timetables I get… unless going to be a maths teacher you don't need to do it all" (Summer)

Their descriptions of a non-ideal education often included specific subjects, with a common mention of excessive amounts of maths lessons:

"We would be doing English and maths lessons all day – back-to-back" (Bella)

"I'd be doing maths every day, I don't like that. It's hard and it doesn't make sense" (Harry)

Additionally, some participants perceived a one-size-fits-all approach to learning, which they felt failed to accommodate individual needs:

"They assume everyone learns the same…treat everyone the same… when they shouldn't… children learn differently" (Bella).

The perception that "everyone is treated the same" appeared to be perceived as unfair and invalidating, particularly for pupils who felt they required differentiated support or alternative methods of processing instructions.

For some, this lack of individualised support led to feelings of anxiety and stress, particularly when learning felt overwhelming, or instructions were unclear to the students:

"Not giving enough information so you can't understand the learning" (Batman)

"It makes you feel like you are panicking… they write brief instructions… then rub it off really quickly… I can't take it in that fast… there is no time to process information" (Bella)

Some participants also described the mismatch between their perceived abilities and expectations placed on them by teachers:

"I also don't like it when they put me higher up [lessons] than I should be, this is the worst, I was put in higher up and I just didn't understand it (DMR)

Overall, participants appeared to envision personalised, flexible, and interest-based learning as vital to emotional comfort and engagement, particularly when learning could be adapted to their individual styles and preferences.

5.2.4.2 Subtheme 4.2 Future-Oriented Learning and Skills

A theme of future-oriented and career-related learning emerged across multiple participants' data. Linking with the previous subtheme on interest-related learning, some participants described their ideal education as one that is relevant to their future careers and aspirations:

"I would have the opportunity to go to a small centre where you can learn about animals such as dogs, rabbits and turtles" (Bella)

"I would love to learn… how to train dogs… ideal job would be teaching people to teach dogs… I would want to learn about this in school" (DMR)

Participants also identified specific skills they believed were essential for their future careers and independence:

"Learning about things we need to know – money management, how to open a bank… finance stuff… how do you make money from your job" (DMR)

For some participants, having clear goals and personalised learning plans was seen as a crucial part of an ideal education:

"I work towards engineering goals – there is teacher has a plan for me in terms of work – but I get to choose what things I learn about too" (Harry)

"Teachers push you to the goals that you want… but only a little bit… they know me well and only push when it's a subject I feel comfortable with" (Stitch)

When learning was scaffolded around their future aspirations, with sufficient but not excessive encouragement, participants appeared to envision this as supportive and respectful of their autonomy.

One participant described how exposure to specialists and real-world learning opportunities would make education more engaging and relevant:

"In terms of teachers - Someone who is focusing on what we meant to be doing, passionate about the subject. Doesn't really matter who is teaching me just need to be good at teaching and passionate – doesn't matter who they are. Specialist teachers would be better" (Harry)

The value placed on passionate, subject-specialist teachers may reflect a perception of education as something that should feel relevant, expert-led, and inspiring. Participants appeared to envision ideal education as that which helps prepare them for meaningful futures, aligning learning with personal interests and real-world aspirations.

In contrast, some participants described their non-ideal education as one that failed to align with their interests or future aspirations, often perceiving lessons as irrelevant or lacking practical applications:

"Doing things that don't matter like angles… pointless" (Summer)

"Loads of maths… pointless because I can have a calculator… no purpose to it" (DMR)

Non-ideal learning was frequently described as irrelevant or outdated, particularly when it involved abstract maths or note memorisation without application to everyday life.

Some participants also appeared to express frustration with an education system that they do not believe adapts to their individual needs, particularly in relation to tests and assessment pressures:

"I get nervous during tests; teachers keep coming over like I'm cheating. That's why I don't do tests. I just know I'll fail anyway" (DMR)

Overall, participants appeared to envision their ideal education as one that not only reflects their interests but equips them with practical, relevant skills for the future, supporting their aspirations and self-directed goals.

5.3 Findings for Research Question 2

What changes do secondary-aged pupils experiencing EBSNA believe are needed to achieve their Ideal Education?

Building on the insights discussed in relation to RQ1, RQ2 explores the specific changes that the participants believe are necessary to move their current educational experience closer to their ideal education. While many themes overlap across both questions, RQ2 offers additional depth by suggesting practical, pupil-led suggestions for making education more accessible engaging and supportive for pupils experiencing EBSNA as viewed by the participants. Some suggestions were emphasised as key priorities by the participant and may therefore also appear in response to RQ1.

The analysis linked to RQ2 generates further insight how CYP experiencing EBSNA believe education could be improved. Four overarching themes emerged from the data, each containing multiple subthemes that reflect the specific changes participants felt were necessary for their education to be more suitable to their wants and needs. It is important to note that while some themes are supported by many participants, others are grounded in contributions from only a small number. All themes were represented by at least two participants and were included where they offered particularly valuable insights (see appendix FF for example of the process and Appendix GG-b for participant contributions to theme development).

Table 5 provides a summary of each theme, and Figure 6 presents a thematic map illustrating the relationships between themes.

Table 5: Summary of Themes Relating to RQ2

Theme	Summary
1.Educational Environment and Structure	Participants expressed a desire for quiet, less crowded environments. They suggested changes in the structure of the day, including later start times and reduced transition between lessons. Many wanted an educational structure where they didn't need to move around much. Pupils also highlighted the importance of calm, comfortable physical spaces, suggesting soft seating, familiar people and pets as ways to create more comfortable atmosphere.
2.Teacher-Student Relationships	Participants expressed a desire for supportive, understanding teachers who recognise and respond to individual needs, including neurodivergent profiles. They also highlighted the importance of removing unkind, overly strict, or 'shouting' teachers from their learning environments.
3.Student Autonomy and Participation	Participants wanted greater involvement in rulemaking and decision-making within their learning environments, including rules that make sense to them. They also valued autonomy over how they learn, expressing a preference for materials and adaptations that suit their individual learning styles without making them feel different from others.
4.Future Aspirations and Career-Related Learning	Participants expressed a desire for education that supports their longer-term goals, such as progressing to college or specific careers. They emphasised the importance of having access to the right kind of teaching and learning to help them move towards these aspirations.

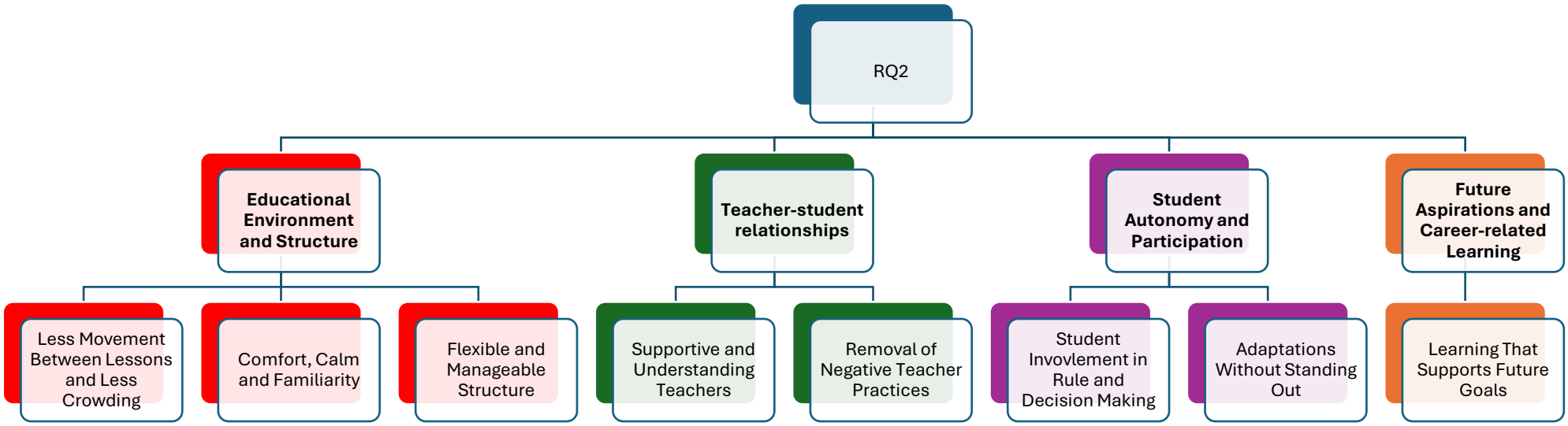


Figure 6: Thematic Map Displaying the Themes and Subthemes for RQ2

5.3.1 Theme 1. Educational Environment and Structure

This theme comprised of three subthemes: 1. *Less Movement Between Lessons and Less Crowding,* 2. *Comfort, Calm and Familiarity* and 3. *Flexible and Manageable Structure*

5.3.1.1 Subtheme 1.1: Less Movement Between Lessons and Less Crowding

Several participants emphasised the importance of learning environments that felt less crowded and overwhelming. For some, this meant having fewer people in the classroom, for others, it involved reducing the amount of physical movement required between lessons:

"Less people" (Batman)

"Cutting down transition time between getting to other lessons…classes should be closer together…building should be structured so that same sets in the same building" (DMR)

These changes appeared to reflect a desire for more contained learning spaces, with less social overload.

5.3.1.2 Subtheme 1.2: Comfort, Calm and Familiarity

Some participants emphasised the importance of feeling physically and emotionally comfortable in their learning environment, providing suggestions on what this may look like including seating, people and pets:

"A calm environment" (Bella)

"My mum and dad would be there. I could have my cats there, and be able to talk about them" (Bella)

These reflections appear to suggest a desire for environments that reduce sensory discomfort and emotional stress, with familiarity and trusted relationships play a key role for pupils experiencing EBSNA.

5.3.1.3 Subtheme 1.3: Flexible and Manageable Structure

Some participants expressed a preference for a learning structure that felt less pressured and more adaptable to their needs including adjustments to the start time of the day and duration of lessons:

"Later start, so not stressed in the morning getting to school early, this would be help" (Harry)

"If the lessons were shorter…have a variety of lessons in, not just like a whole two hours of maths" (DMR)

These suggestions appear to reflect a more flexible approach to timetabling, which may support reduced anxiety and increased engagement, particularly when rigid or extended schedules are challenging.

5.3.2 Theme 2: Teacher-Student Relationships

This theme comprises of two subthemes: 1. *Supportive and Understanding Teachers* and 2. *Removal of Negative Teacher Practices*

5.3.2.1 Subtheme 2.1: Supportive and Understanding Teachers

Several participants appeared to stress the need for more supportive and understanding teachers who are attuned to pupils' individual needs and challenges:

"Teachers who are nice to children who are anxious or struggle to cope" (Stitch)

"They understand me for who I am, that I don't need to change and they understand children with Autism and what they can do to help us" (Stitch)

These perspectives may suggest that relational safety and emotional understanding are key components to an ideal educational experience for pupils experiencing EBSNA.

5.3.2.2 *Subtheme 2.1: Removal of Negative Teacher Practices*

Several participants emphasised the need for the removal of negative teacher attributes such as being overly strict or unkind:

"Less strict teachers, kinder, let you do things yourself" (Batman)

"Get rid of bad teachers, the ones that shout and nag and are unkind to you" (Stitch)

These perspectives appear to suggest the importance of safe adult-pupil interactions in the learning environment for pupils experiencing EBSNA.

5.3.3 Theme 3: Student Autonomy and Participation

This theme comprises of two subthemes: 1. *Student Involvement in Rule and Decision Making* and 2. *Adaptations Without Standing Out*

5.3.3.1 *Subtheme 3.1: Student Involvement in Rule and Decision Making*

Some participants appeared to express a dislike for current education rules and a general lack of pupil input, and expressed a desire to be involved in the decision-making process:

"Students decide the rules, they would have a survey to get the views of pupils to fill in" (Batman)

"Getting rid of rules that don't make sense like not allowed chewing gum or no talking" (Batman)

These comments suggest that for some pupils, having a voice in educational policies is important. A more collaborative environment, where pupils are involved in decision-making, may help pupils feel respected and valued, and promote a sense of fairness within the educational setting.

5.3.3.2 Subtheme 3.2: Adaptations Without Standing Out

Several participants expressed a desire for learning experienced that are tailored to pupils needs and preferences, without making them feel excluded or noticeably different from others:

"Would prefer to use a laptop, as writing takes too long. Typing would be quicker and feel more normal, not different from others" (DMR)

"More practical style questions, hands-on activities" (Harry)

These responses may suggest the importance of inclusive personalisation, where adaptations are seen as standard rather than exceptional, helping pupils to feel both supported and part of the group.

5.3.4 Theme 4: Future Aspirations and Career-Related Learning

This theme comprises of one subtheme: *Learning That Supports Future Goals*

5.3.4.1 Subtheme 4.1. Learning That Supports Future Goals

Although mentioned by fewer participants, aspirations for the future appeared to emerge as a meaningful area of focus. Several pupils expressed a desire for accessing the right kind of learning to reach specific goals or career progressions:

"The learning would help me to get to college" (Bella)

"More specialist [teachers]" (Harry)

These perspectives may suggest that for some pupils, specialist teaching is not just a preference but a pathway, one that can help bridge their current education and their longer-term goals. Furthermore, pupils expressed a desire for learning that feels meaningful and relevant to their future.

5.3.5 Summary of Findings and Overarching Themes

In line with the reflexive approach to thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2024), this study did not aim to passively 'discover' themes but engaged in an active, situated process of constructing meaning from participants' contributions. As Braun & Clarke (2024) explain, RTA involves the development of themes as "patterns of shared meaning, organised around a central concept or idea" (p.613), rather than as summaries of topics. This framing supports broader, overarching interpretations where thematic insights from across the dataset can be meaningfully integrated. Although two distinct RQs guided this study, the themes and subthemes were found to be closely interrelated. This reflected Braun & Clarke's (2024) emphasis on the flexible, recursive, and data-responsive nature of RTA, which "requires situated and reflexive researcher engagement" (p.612). Overarching themes were therefore developed to synthesise insights from both RQs. This integrated approach was chosen to enhance coherence, reduce repetition, and support a more meaningful interpretation in the discussion chapter. Table 6 presents the overarching themes and the corresponding RQ1 and RQ2 themes that informed their construction.

Table 6: Summary of Key Themes (RQ1 and RQ2) and Overarching Themes

RQ1 (Pupil Envisions of ideal and non-ideal education)		**RQ2: (Pupil Suggested Changes)**		**Overarching themes (RQ1 and RQ2)**
Themes	**Subthemes**	**Themes**	**Subthemes**	
The Role of Educational Structure	Manageable workload and homework; Paced and reinforced learning	Educational Environment and Structure	Less Movement between lessons and less crowding; Comfort, calm and familiarity; Flexible and manageable structure	**1. Educational Structures**
Emotional and Psychological Safety	Trust and support from teachers; Physical and sensory environment; Friendship and peer support; Home and education links	Teacher-Student Relationships	Supportive and understanding teachers; Removal of Negative teacher practices	**2. Relational Safety and Emotional Support in Education**

Autonomy, Privacy, and Educational Rules	Freedom of movement and personal space; Fair and student- guided expectations	Student Autonomy and Participation	Student involvement in Rule and decision making; Adaptations without standing out	**3. Autonomy, Fairness, and Pupil Voice**
Learning Preferences and Future Aspirations	Adapted, personalised and interest-based learning; Future orientated learning and skills	Future Aspirations and Career-Related Learning	Learning that supports future goals	**4. Purposeful and Personalised Learning**

6 Discussion

In this study, I explored how secondary-aged pupils experiencing Emotionally Based School Non-Attendance (EBSNA) envision their education, using a participatory tool I developed. The tool was inspired by Personal Construct Psychology (PCP; Kelly, 1955) and adapted from Williams & Hanke (2007)'s 'Ideal School' activity. A total of six participants took part in the study, and the data was analysed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) to explore participants' envisions of education and to consider participants' practical suggestions for aligning their current educational experiences more closely with their ideals.

This chapter discusses the key findings in relation to the two research question (RQ)s and existing literature. RQ1 explored how pupils experiencing EBSNA envisioned their ideal and non-ideal educational experiences, while RQ2 focused on the practical changes they felt were needed to move closer to their ideal. Findings were organised into four overarching themes: *Adaptive Educational Structures*, *Relational Safety and Emotional Support*, *Autonomy, Fairness, and Pupil Voice*, and *Purposeful and Personalised Learning*, each synthesising subthemes across both RQs to reflect shared domains of meaning (as discussed in Section 5.3.5).

The discussion interprets each theme in relation to relevant theory and prior research, followed by a consideration of methodological strengths and limitations of this study. The chapter concludes with implications for Educational Psychology (EP) practice and future research, and a summary of the study's overall contribution to understanding meaningful educational engagement for pupils experiencing EBSNA.

6.1.1 Overarching Theme 1: Educational Structures

Education structures emerged as an overarching theme in relation to participant narratives. In response to RQ1, participants appeared to envision ideal educational structures that featured manageable workloads, paced learning that aligned with individual needs, and opportunities to revisit and reinforce learning (Section 5.2.1). In relation to RQ2, participants offered practical suggestions that appeared to echo these visions. They called for reduced transitions between

lessons, calmer and less crowded physical environments, and increased flexibility within the school day (Section 5.3.1).

These findings build on earlier research such as Attwood and Croll (2006), who noted that perceived rigid school routines and tightly packed schedules could contribute to emotional strain, particularly for pupils with inconsistent attendance. Although their study predated the current policy landscape, it similarly highlighted the impact of school structures on pupil wellbeing. The current study extends this by identifying more granular elements such as transitions, movement between spaces, and homework as potentially overwhelming for pupils experiencing EBSNA.

Moffatt and Riddle's (2021) research, which explored the experiences of graduates from flexi-schooling settings, found that flexible pacing and personalised structures were beneficial during periods of emotional or familial stress. While their study did not focus on EBSNA specifically, similar patterns emerged in the current findings. Participants in the current study valued reduced pressure, autonomy, and personalised pacing features which were described in Moffatt and Riddle's (2021) study, highlighting that these factors hold international relevance. The findings of the present study appear to suggest that integrating these features more proactively within mainstream settings may have preventative value for pupils experiencing EBSNA.

Importantly, this current research took place in the context of policy developments such as the SEND Code of Practice (Department for Education, DfE, 2014) and national mental health guidance (DfE, 2017), both of which emphasise inclusive support for CYP with additional needs and emotionally supportive practices at a whole-school level. Yet, the accounts of participants in this study (Section 5.3.1) suggest that certain aspects of school structure may still fall short of meeting the emotional needs of pupils with EBSNA, suggesting a need for specific policy to support these pupils.

Homework was frequently identified as a source of stress in the current study (Section 5.2.1.1). Some participants envisioned their ideal education as one in which a clear boundary existed between home and school life. These reflections align with Want (2020), who found that homework contributed to pupil and parental anxiety from their participants' perspectives.

Similarly, Higgins (2022) reported that Autistic pupils viewed homework as unfair and conceptually confusing, particularly due to blurred boundaries between school and home life.

While Higgins focused specifically on Autistic pupils and Want's participants were situated in alternative or medical provision, the present study suggests that difficulties with homework may extend more broadly across a range of EBSNA contexts. Taken together, these studies highlight how emotionally vulnerable pupils in diverse settings including mainstream, alternative, and home-based education may experience homework as emotionally taxing. The findings from the current study therefore contribute to a growing body of evidence suggesting that reducing or significantly adapting homework expectations may benefit a wider group of learners at risk of emotional disengagement from education.

6.1.2 Overarching Theme 2: Relational Safety and Emotional Support

Relational safety and emotional support emerged as an overarching theme in relation to participant narratives. In relation to RQ1, participants appeared to value emotionally attuned relationships with teachers, trusted peer connections, and calm, sensory-safe environments (Section 5.2.3). In response to RQ2, their suggestions for change focused primarily on participants desire to have supporting and understanding teachers, and the removal of perceived negative teacher practices (Section 5.3.2).

Teacher–student relationships were consistently prioritised across all six participants and both research questions. Participants described ideal teachers as "kind," "positive," "thoughtful," and "lovable," while non-ideal teachers were described as "ignoring you" or making you feel "unimportant" (Section 5.2.3.1). These descriptions appeared to reflect a preference for warmth, emotional congruence, and feeling valued. These ideals reflected tangible desires for relational change in current settings (Section 5.3.2).

These findings appear to support patterns identified in this study's systematic literature review (SLR), where perceived emotionally detached behaviours such as being "moody" (Beckles, 2014) or "scary" (Baker & Bishop, 2015) were linked to anxiety and withdrawal. This recognition of emotional tone within teacher–pupil interactions is also evident in the current study. For example, participant "Stitch" described a teacher who "*always smiles at me, but not*

really smile, very grumpy" (p.103), illustrating how pupils experiencing EBSNA may place value on teacher authenticity.

Building on existing pupil voice literature (Beckles. 2014; How, 2015; Want, 2020; Baker and Bishop, 2015), this provides insight into how pupils experiencing EBSNA may emotionally interpret everyday interactions with teachers, and how these interpretations may shape their sense of safety and connection with education. Reed (2021) found that teacher relationships were a dominant theme among Autistic pupils, while Chian (2022) found that although staff recognised the importance of relationships, they cited barriers such as limited time and training. Considering the findings of Chian (2022), systemic constraints may inhibit staff from providing the kind of relational support pupils describe in this current study.

The concept of interconnectivity, proposed by Halligan and Cryer (2022), also resonates with this studies' findings (Section 5.1.2). Interconnectivity refers to emotional connection with trusted adults, peers, and the environment. Participant "Stitch" described ideal teachers as those who "*understand me for who I am… and understand children with Autism"* (p.128) suggesting that acceptance and identity-affirming relationships may be key aspects of emotional safety. The current study offers insight into what interconnectivity may look like in practice namely, teachers who respond without judgement and understand individual needs.

Self-Determination Theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 1985; 2012) may provide a useful framework for considering teacher-student dynamics. The need for relatedness appeared to be met through gestures such as being emotionally acknowledged or engaged through shared interests. For example, participant "Bella" described, "*They would talk about cats first, to help me feel comfortable. Then naturally morph into something else, like the stuff we have to talk about*." (p.106). This may indicate that informal, interest-based conversations can serve as emotionally safe entry points for pupils with EBSNA, which through the lens of SDT may ultimately lead to increased pupil motivation in education. Arguably, other sections of the findings can also be considered through the lens of SDT, for example the need for relatedness was also demonstrated in the findings relating to peer relationships (Section 5.2.3.3), the need for autonomy can be seen in relation to the desire for personalised learning (Section 5.2.4.1) and the need for competence in future-orientated learning (Section 5.2.4.2). From this perspective,

motivation to engage with learning for pupils with EBSNA may be impacted by unmet needs in relation to relatedness, autonomy and competence.

Peer relationships were also highlighted as important in relation to RQ1 (Section 5.2.3.3). Participants described friendships as a key source of emotional support, not only in academic contexts but also during unstructured times and in home-based learning. For example, participant "Bella" described maintaining friendships even while learning at home. These findings build on previous research (e.g., Beckles, 2014; Want, 2020), which identified peer support as a protective factor in EBSNA, demonstrating that although CYP experiencing EBSNA value friendships, regardless of whether they are being educated in physical proximity to peers.

Some participants described using digital communication to maintain friendships (e.g. p.115, "Bella"). This appeared to offer emotional safety and autonomy, particularly when in-person interaction felt overwhelming. This finding builds on Thompson et al (2021), who identified digital platforms as valuable for maintaining connection during the COVID-19 pandemic. The current study suggests this may extend beyond the pandemic, especially for pupils with EBSNA. When considering these findings in light of Corcoran and Kelly (2023), they appear to support their conceptual framework developed through a SLR of research exploring secondary-aged pupils experiencing of EBSNA, which foregrounded connectedness and belonging as central to the educational experience of pupils at risk of disengagement. The use of digital communication to maintain peer relationships may be one way that pupils with EBSNA seek to sustain a sense of connection and belonging both within traditional school settings and in alternative or home-based environments.

Peer conflict and bullying were described as emotionally and physically distressing. Participant "Stitch" shared, "*I'm afraid that bullies are going to come in all the time…it makes me feel really sick*" (p.116), highlighting the ongoing sense of fear and somatic impact associated with these experiences. These accounts appear to align with literature identifying peer rejection as a contributor to EBSNA (Thambirajah et al., 2008; Want, 2020), highlighting that peer relationships can also have a negative impact on the experiences of pupils with EBSNA.

Aubrey & Riley (2023) and Havik et al (2015) suggested the varying impact that the quality and nature of home-school relationships can have on school engagement. Want (2020) and James (2015) found that while some pupils experiencing EBSNA valued collaborative home-school relationships, others described tensions, particularly when school communication resulted in duplicated reprimands or emotional discomfort at home. In this study, some participants discussed home–education links, describing how parent–teacher communication supported emotional safety, particularly when it reduced pressure on pupils to self-advocate. For example, participant "Bella" shared that ideally, *"They would communicate about how I'm doing… without me actually having to talk to them*" (p.117).

Bronfenbrenner (1979) provides a perspective from which to consider these insights relating to the systems around the child. Within a child's mesosystem, the interactions between systems can impact development. These findings suggest that home-education links may either support or disrupt (Want, 2020; James, 2015) emotional safety and that more sensitive, pupil-informed approaches may be needed across educational provisions.

Participants in the current study described the perceived emotional impact of the physical layout in educational settings. Some envisioned ideal environments as physically close, low, and familiar, with preferences for smaller and more predictable spaces (Section 5.2.3.2). These descriptions appear to resonate with pupil voice literature such as Clissold (2018) and How (2015), which outlined the challenges of navigating large, impersonal school environments in the context of EBSNA. Hence, the current findings support existing literature in the suggestion that personable and contained spaces may be most appropriate for CYP experiencing EBSNA.

Some participants also envisioned calm, sensory-safe environments as part of their ideal education. Sensory adaptations such as mood lighting, smaller spaces, or the use of headphones were described as emotionally regulating. This builds on Higgins' (2021) research, who identified similar preferences among Autistic pupils, suggesting that these needs may also be relevant to pupils with EBSNA more broadly. This theme appears to align with Halligan and Cryer (2022), who found that low-stimulation environments with access to quiet spaces were highly valued by pupils with EBSNA.

Some participants also described pets as part of their ideal educational environment (p.110). This finding aligns with Higgins (2021) and Morgan-Rose (2015) which highlight how animals may be experienced as emotionally safe companions within education. These accounts suggest that animals may offer emotional regulation and grounding to CYP experiencing EBSNA.

This desire for emotionally safe companions was demonstrated further in this study, highlighting how emotional meaning was attached not only to the sensory environment but also to relational comfort. For example, participant "Bella" described an ideal space where "*my mum and dad would be there and I could have my cats there*" (p.127), suggesting that physical comfort and emotional security may be closely linked.

Bowlby's (1969) attachment theory offers one interpretive lens for understanding these accounts. "Bella's" envisionment may reflect a desire for co-regulation through the presence of familiar attachment figures, where physical proximity to caregivers supports psychological security. This may suggest that for some pupils, the boundary between home and education needs to be more fluid to allow for emotional containment. However, this finding contrasts with other participants' reflections on homework (discussed in Section 6.1.1), where clear separation between school and home was preferred. Together, these perspectives emphasise the complex and individualised nature of emotional boundaries in the context of EBSNA.

6.1.3 Overarching Theme 3: Autonomy, Fairness, and Pupil Voice

Autonomy, fairness, and pupil voice emerged as a key overarching theme across participants' accounts. In relation to RQ1, pupils envisioned ideal educational environments that allowed freedom of self-expression and movement, respect for personal space, and fair, student-informed expectations and rules (Section 5.2.2). In response to RQ2, participants suggested practical changes that included greater involvement in decision-making and access to reasonable adaptations without feeling singled out from their peers (Section 5.3.3).

Participants appeared to envision an ideal education where rules and behavioural expectations were co-constructed, flexible, and attuned to pupils' needs, contrasting with unfair or emotionally uncomfortable rule-making approaches as described in participant's non ideal

education accounts (Section 5.2.2.2). These envisionments appear to align with policy guidance which promotes pupil involvement in decision-making (DfE, 2014; United Nations, 1989), however practical suggestions from participants in this study appear to suggest that this is not consistently experienced in practice (Section 5.3.3).

These findings align with research by Graham et al (2018) and Partovi (2014), which suggest that participatory decision-making supports wellbeing and engagement. However, these studies were conducted in mainstream contexts. The current study builds on this literature by showing how emotionally vulnerable pupils, such as those experiencing EBSNA, may attach emotional meaning to the ability to influence rules. In line with Beckles (2014), How (2015), and Want (2020), the findings suggest that rigid or arbitrary rules may exacerbate emotional distress and disconnection from education. The emphasis on participation and fairness in this study suggests that, for pupils experiencing EBSNA, feeling heard and treated justly may be key components of emotional safety.

This preference for fairness and self-expression extended into how participants envisioned uniform policies. Several participants in the current study described feeling more comfortable when allowed to wear their own clothes (p.100). This mirrors Higgins' (2022) findings with Autistic pupils, who found that participants felt restricted on prohibitions on dyed hair or preferred clothing, and that uniform restrictions also contributed to sensory discomfort for some pupils. The current study extends findings of Higgins (2022) highlighting how gendered experiences may intersect with emotional comfort. For example, participant "Summer" shared, *"If you are on your period, you can't wear leggings… girls want to feel comfortable when they are on their period"* (p.101).

Participants in the current study also described access to toilets, food, and water as key to their ideal educational experience (Section 5.2.2.1). These were seen not as privileges but as non-negotiable needs. Participant "Harry" described the lack of access "*actually gave me panic attacks…I can't concentrate"* (p.98). These accounts suggest that when basic needs are restricted, it can trigger emotional distress. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943) may assist in interpreting these findings, suggesting that without meeting foundational physiological needs, educational environments are unlikely to meet higher-level needs such as those relating to

belonging and esteem. This perspective of these findings suggests that for pupils experiencing EBSNA, insufficient access to toilet, food and water may not only have detrimental emotional impacts but also restrict potential for learning.

6.1.4 Overarching Theme 4: Purposeful and Personalised Learning

This overarching theme explores how participants appeared to envision their ideal education as meaningful, individually tailored, and relevant to their lives. This section discusses flexibility in learning settings, personalised teaching approaches, and learning that connects to real-life experiences and future aspirations.

In relation to RQ1, participants described diverse preferences for learning settings, including home-based education, online tutoring, mainstream schools, and outdoor environments (Section 5.2.4.1). These insights build on prior research that highlights the importance of personalised and flexible approaches (e.g., Beckles, 2014; Parsons & Lewis, 2009; Moffatt & Riddle, 2021), and support Kearney et al's (2022) call for adaptive reform to educational access which supports the needs of all learners.

While prior research reported pupil dissatisfaction with mainstream school settings (e.g. Clissold, 2018; Beckles, 2014), few offered detailed accounts of the types of alternative environments CYP desired instead. For instance, Clissold (2018) highlighted pupils' difficulties with undifferentiated teaching and a lack of academic support, and Beckles (2014) noted disengagement when teaching lacked interactivity or relevance. However, these studies focused primarily on what was not working within school, rather than exploring pupils' positive visions of how education could be delivered differently. The current findings contribute to this gap by offering pupil-defined visions of where and how they feel most able to engage.

Participants also expressed a preference for teaching methods that were creative, practical, and responsive. Passive formats such as PowerPoint presentations were viewed as less engaging, while practical activities, stories, videos, and visual aids were preferred (Section 5.2.4.1). These findings are consistent with Beckles (2014) and Clissold (2018), who found that pupils experiencing EBSNA were more engaged by interactive and differentiated teaching methods.

This focus on teaching methods is less prominent in Attwood and Croll's (2006) work. Their interviews with older pupils who had become 'persistent truants' revealed generally positive views of the school curriculum, with many describing lessons as "interesting" "useful" and opportunities where they "learnt a lot" (p. 480). The timescale between these potentially contrasting findings could be interpreted to suggest that CYP experiencing EBSNA's experience of teaching and/or the curriculum has evolved in recent years. However, this is a tentative comparison, particularly due to the variance in framing and the nature of participants between this study and Attwood and Croll's (2006).

In relation to RQ2, participants spoke about the importance of learning that supports their goals and real-world needs (Section 5.3.4.1). This appears to suggest a desire for education to support independence and life preparation. Similarly, participants discussed needing support to access college and envisioned learning that was interest-led. This apparent desire potentially aligns with Maslow's reconceptualisation of his hierarchy of needs (Maslow, 1969; Koltko-Rivera, 2006). His reconceptualisation acknowledged a need beyond the self, such as purpose, meaning or contribution, termed self-transcendence. The desire of participants in this study to be educated in a way that supports life preparation and future goals appears to resonate with this concept. However, Maslow's hierarchy places self-transference at the peak of needs, requiring all others to be satisfied before this can be attained, which may not be reflective of the experiences of the participants. However, research has suggested that individuals may pursue multiple needs simultaneously or prioritise them differently depending on context, which may explain this discrepancy (Wahba & Birdwell, 1976; Woolfolk, 2016; Neher, 1991).

Moreover, the desire for education to support long-term aspirations is explicitly referenced in national policy. The SEND Code of Practice (DfE & DoH, 2015, Sections 8.7 and 8.31**)** calls for education to support high aspirations around employment and independence, beginning from Year 9. It highlights the importance of planning pathways that identify pupils' strengths and prepare them for adulthood including work-based skills and real-life competencies. These findings potentially confirm the relevance of these policy aspirations to CYP experiencing EBSNA.

From a constructivist perspective, these findings may offer insight into how pupils with EBSNA make meaning from education (Biesta, 2008) in relation to their own experiences, preferences, and imagined futures. They appear to suggest that for these pupils, access to learning may be enhanced when the curriculum is responsive to their goals and lived realities, not only reducing disengagement but also affirming the personal and future-oriented value of education.

In summary, this section has explored the findings in relation to existing literature and psychological theory, addressing the two RQs (Section 4.2). The findings contribute to the increasing body of research exploring pupil voice to understand EBSNA, particularly studies that utilise participatory approaches to elicit pupil voice (Beckles, 2014; Clissold, 2018; Higgins, 2022). While generally aligning with existing literature, much of the current research remains located in the grey literature and is based on small samples, which this study helps to reinforce by offering reoccurring insights across participants. However, unlike many other existing study's findings in the current study provide concrete examples of adaptations and approaches from pupils' perspectives that may support educational engagement, extending beyond abstract recommendations into practice-relevant detail. Although established psychological theory such as SDT (Deci & Ryan, 1985), Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems theory (1979) and Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943; 1969) appear to offer valuable interpretive lenses, the diversity of pupil experiences suggests that no single theory fully accounts for the complexity of EBSNA. Furthermore, while the findings resonate with policy intentions around inclusion and wellbeing (DfE, 2014; DfE, 2017), they also highlight gaps between policy and practice, and appear to reinforce calls for more explicit policy and reform to address and support the needs of pupils experiencing EBSNA.

6.2 Possible Implications of Study

The overarching themes discussed above highlight how pupils experiencing EBSNA envision education and identify the changes they believe are needed to support their engagement and wellbeing. Considering these findings and existing literature, this section considers the implications for practice, with a particular focus on schools and Educational Psychology

Services (EPS). These implications are intended to inform more inclusive, participatory and emotionally attuned approaches to support CYP experiencing EBSNA.

6.2.1 Implications for Educational Settings

Educational settings could use these practical suggestions to inform practice for pupils experiencing EBSNA. The suggestions provided by participants highlight the need for emotionally attuned, flexible, and inclusive educational environments.

Participants suggest the need for adaptable timetabling and routines to support regulation and accessibility. Participants suggested that reduced transitions, soft starts, later start times, and shorter lessons would help create a calmer, more predictable day. Overarching Theme 1: Educational Structure (Section 6.1.1) reflects Moffatt & Riddle's (2021) findings on the benefits of flexible pacing for pupils under stress. Such system-level adaptations may help reduce feelings of overwhelm for pupils experiencing EBSNA and foster engagement.

Homework expectations may be considered for pupils experiencing EBSNA, as homework was consistency described as a source of stress (Section 6.1.1). Pupils envisioned a clear boundary between home and school life, echoing concerned raised by Want (2020) and Higgins (2022) that homework can create emotional strain and blur important recovery spaces, particularly for those with additional challenges.

The study discussed the centrality of emotionally congruent teacher-pupil relationships (Section 6.1.2). Investing in training on emotional congruence, neurodiversity, trauma-informed practice and reflective listening could help foster environments where pupils feel seen, valued and safe (Popoola & Silvers, 2023), which may be supportive to pupils experiencing EBSNA. Training staff in these areas may support teachers' development and the application of inclusive, empathetic responses to distressed behaviour.

The findings suggest that the physical and sensory learning environment is also key (Section 5.2.3.2). Participants described preferences for smaller, quiet, and familiar spaces, with some highlighting the regulating role of sensory supports (e.g., pets, headphones, mood lighting). This was supported by previous findings (e.g. Clissold, 2018; How, 2015) and suggests the

need for dedicated calm spaces and sensory considerations across the school environment for pupils experiencing EBSNA. Ensuring dignified access to basic psychological needs (e.g. toilets) was also highlighted as a basic, yet sometimes unmet need that can impact psychological safety and learning (Maslow, 1943). Furthermore, the findings suggest that educational settings should consider flexible uniform policies to support comfort, concentration and female health (Section 5.2.2.2).

Participants envisioned ideal education systems where rules were co-constructed, and students had influence over decisions (Section 5.2.2.2). This desire for fairness and agency aligns with the UNCRC (1989), the SEND Code of Practice (DfE & DoH, 2015), and research by Graham et al (2018) and Partovi (2014). Embedding student voice in school governance and classroom rules may enhance emotional safety and connection for pupils experiencing EBSNA.

Participants valued creative, hands-on, and relevant learning over passive delivery (Section 5.2.4.1). They wanted education that supported their interests and future goals, including life skills such as money management. These findings build on Beckles (2014), Clissold (2018), and Biesta (2009), and highlight the perceived importance of meaningful, future-oriented learning. Based on these findings, curriculum planning should include space for life skills, interest-based topics, and practical learning to increase engagement and perceived relevance.

In addition, participants stressed the importance of inclusive normalised adaptations (Section 5.3.3.2). They did not want to feel different or singled out, but valued tools like laptops or differentiated tasks when presented as standard practice. This suggests the universal design for learning could be an effective framework for supporting EBSNA.

6.2.2 Implications For Educational Psychologists

This study contributes to a growing body of work that suggests that EBSNA may reflect systemic misalignment (Kearney & Silverman, 1993; Thambirajah et al., 2008), in which aspects of traditional school structures, relationships, and expectations fail to meet pupils' emotional needs (Moffatt & Riddle, 2021; McCluskey et al., 2015). EPs, with their expertise in psychological theory and systems thinking (DfE, 2023), are well positioned to support more

emotionally attuned and inclusive approaches to education (Jones & Atkinson, 2021; Carroll, 2015; Pellegrini, 2007).

Systemic Change

The findings reinforce the value of EPS teams in supporting educational settings to move beyond individualised or medicalised understandings of EBSNA (Kearney & Silverman, 1993; Thambirajah et al., 2008). EPs can help develop systemic formulations that consider push and pull factors and promote collaborative, contextual understanding (Morgan & Costello, 2023; West Sussex EPS, 2018). This aligns with Kearney et al's (2022) call to reconceptualise attendance through broader engagement frameworks.

The current study highlights how inflexible routines, unregulated transitions, and unmet basic needs may contribute to pupil distress (Section 6.1.1 & 6.1.2). These findings appear to imply that it may be helpful for EPs to systemically support educational settings in reviewing daily structures to increase predictability and accessibility. This may involve consultation around timetables, transitions, and physical environments, in line with inclusive practice guidance (DfE & DoH, 2015).

Relational Practice and Emotional Safety

Participants described ideal teachers as emotionally congruent, kind, and understanding, reinforcing the central role of relational safety in engagement (Section 5.2.3.1). The findings suggest a need for EPs to support educational settings in embedding relational practices, such as emotion coaching, trauma-informed approaches, and restorative conversations (West Sussex EPS, 2022).

Given the emotional complexity of EBSNA, it may also be helpful for EPs to offer school staff supervision and reflective spaces, which can promote emotional attunement and resilience. This appears particularly relevant considering participants' reported feelings of powerlessness and disconnection, as well as Chian's (2024) finding that staff value relationships but often lack time or support to maintain them.

Centring Pupil Voice

The findings also suggest that a lack of autonomy and fairness in rules and decision-making can undermine pupils' emotional safety and engagement (Section 6.0.2). EPs can support participatory planning approaches that centre pupil voice, using creative and constructivist tools that allow CYP to express their views in accessible ways. This reflects policy commitments to participation (UNCRC, 1989; DfE & DoH, 2015), while addressing the gap between policy and pupil experience.

Planning for Purposeful and Future-Orientated Learning

Pupils in this study envisioned education that was relevant to their lives, practically useful, and aligned with their goals (Section 6.1.4). The findings suggest that EPs could support schools and local authorities to ensure that preparation for adulthood (DfE & DoH, 2015) includes meaningful, pupil-informed learning pathways.

This may involve collaborative planning with educational settings, families, and alternative providers to ensure that learning experiences reflect pupils' interests and strengths. Supporting flexible, future-oriented education in this way may help build a stronger sense of purpose and direction for CYP at risk of disengagement.

6.3 Methodological Critique

This section evaluates the strengths and limitations of the current study across different stages of the research process, including the recruitment and sample, data collection, and data analysis.

6.3.1 Sample

A sample of six secondary-aged pupils, attached to three different mainstream settings participated in the research. Although qualitative research does not strive for data saturation and generalisability (Braun & Clarke, 2021), and instead aims to generate in-depth, meaningful insights (Small, 2009), this sample size sits at the lower end of previous research using similar designs (Higgins, 2022; Morgan-Rose, 2015; Connelly, 2018; and Strong, 2019), which ranged

from 5 to 14 participants. A larger sample may have provided offered a broader range of perspective on the experiences of CYP presenting with EBSNA, potentially strengthening the contribution to the existing literature base.

In relation to "sample appropriateness" (Braun & Clarke, 2021, p168), careful consideration was given to participant inclusion. CYP were eligible if they were out of school for at least 50% of the time, aligning with the DfE's (2023) definition of "persistent absence". This criterion ensured that participants had a sustained experience of EBSNA. Despite the small size, the sample was diverse in terms of age, gender and educational arrangements which enhanced the richness and nuance of the data collected. One participant however had slightly above the 50% threshold (60%). While still presenting with emotionally driven attendance challenges, their inclusion may have slightly diluted the shared intensity of experience across the sample.

Participant recruitment was notably challenging. While initial gatekeepers (typically SENDCOs) agreed in principle to support the project, there was multiple instances of low or no response, limited follow-up, and participants withdrawing due to anxiety or other mental health difficulties. Anecdotally, it appeared that SENDCOs found it difficult to engage CYP and families who were no longer actively attending school or who were not present for extended periods. This challenge highlights the wider systemic difficulties in assessing the voices of pupils experiencing EBSNA, an issue that may reflect the very barriers to engagement being studied. Once contact was made with families directly, participation became smoother, and families were generally open and responsive to communication.

Although qualitative research does not seek generalisability, transferability of interpretations can be strengthened through the provision of thick description and contextual detail (Lincoln & Guba, 1994). To support this, a demographic questionnaire was included within the consent process (Appendix S), collecting data on age, gender, ethnicity, presentation of EBSNA and education context. This was designed to provide sufficient contextualisation to support interpretation of the findings.

6.3.2 Data collection

The drawing element of the 'Ideal Education' activity proved less effective than anticipated, echoing Higgins' (2022) reflections in her study using PCP tools with neurodiverse pupils experiencing EBSNA. In several cases, the prompt to "draw what your ideal/ non-ideal education looks like" – purposefully framed to avoid the word 'school', to support a holistic view of education, appeared too abstract or unfamiliar. As a result, participants often needed earlier verbal prompting than planned, with most choosing to respond verbally rather than engaging with the drawing activity.

This suggests that while creative methods may reduce pressure and support engagement, particularly with anxious participants (Strong, 2019; Wade, 2022), they may require further scaffolding. This may be especially true for CYP who have spent significant time out of education and may be less confident with open-ended or imaginative tasks.

Another important consideration was the presence of families during the home sessions. While their involvement appeared to increase pupil comfort and reduce anxiety, it may also have influenced how pupils shared their views. At times, the parent/carer contributed comments to the discussions, which required careful navigation. I attempted to mitigate this by addressing questions directly to the pupil and, where needed, gently prompting with phrases such as, "others might feel differently, what do you think?". Nevertheless, the co-presence of a parent/carer may have subtly shaped the data and should be acknowledged as a potential influence on participant responses.

The structure and phrasing of the interview prompts may also have influenced the findings. For example, most participants spoke in detail about education rules, an area that was directly prompted within the schedule, which later formed part of a theme within the findings. This raises questions about the extent to which the participants' perspectives were emergent versus guided, and whether alternative perspectives may have risen if the interview had been more unstructured. While this is a limitation, the prompts were carefully designed to relate to educational themes and to remain as open as possible. Participants were also given space to diverge from where not appropriate.

Field notes were used during the interviews instead of audio recordings which was justified in Section 4.5.2.7 and an example can be found in Appendix AA. This approach was designed to prioritise the emotional comfort of participants, many of whom were navigating heightened anxiety and social communication differences. In practice, the absence of such recording devices I believed eased social pressure, for example, participants were able to focus on drawing, writing or conversation without the added self-consciousness that may come with being recorded. From my perspective, the use of field notes also contributed to a more relaxed dynamic. At times, note-taking naturally reduced the amount of sustained direct eye contact, which I believed helped some participants feel less socially scrutinised and more at ease during the session.

This method also appeared to align with the flexible, participant-led nature of the sessions. Many participants alternated fluidly between drawing, writing, and verbal discussion. The pace of the sessions allowed for the concurrent notetaking, and the semi-structured style of questioning meant that I could generally keep up with recording in real time. In this sense, the field notes become part of a responsive, less directive approach that fits with the ethos of the research.

While parent/carers were present during some of the sessions, a decision made to support participant engagement, field notes also helped uphold the ethical stance of prioritising the CYPs voice. During sessions where parent/carers were vocal during discussions, audio recordings may have blurred the boundaries of whose voice was captured and potentially over-amplified parental input. In contrast, using field notes allowed me to filter and centre the contributions made by the CYP more deliberately, in keeping with the research aims and ethical consent procedures discussed in Section 4.8.

However, this approach had limitations. Writing notes in real time inevitably may have introduced some selectivity, shaped by my own judgement and unconscious biases around what seemed significant in the moment. There is a risk that subtle or important phrases may have been missed, paraphrased, or unintentionally framed through my interpretative lens. Although I added reflective annotations immediately after each session to help perceived context and clarify meaning (see Appendix BB; stage 1), the lack of verbatim transcription meant that some

nuances or participant expressions may have been lost. Audio recordings and full transcriptions may have offered greater precision and reliability, particularly in capturing tone, pauses, and spontaneous comments that may have been further valuable during the data analysis.

Nevertheless, I remain confident that this approach was the most appropriate for this specific participant group in this research context. My decision was not only based on ethical and emotional considerations but also grounded in my desire to co-construct meaning in a way that felt safe and enabling for the participants. The immediacy of field notes, combined with visual and written data from participants, appeared to produce a dataset that reflected their perspectives in a way that balanced ethical sensitivity with methodological rigour.

6.3.3 Data analysis

One potential limitation of this study may lie in the decision to conduct two separate Reflexive Thematic Analyses (RTA), one for each research question (RQ). While this was aligned with Braun & Clarke's (2022, 2024) recommendation to tailor the analysis to distinct RQs and their underlying purposes, it may have unintentionally led to fragmentation of meaning across the data set. Narratives that spanned both RQ1 and RQ2 may have been artificially separated, potentially limiting the development of a more holistic understanding of pupil experience. Moreover, by structuring the findings around two RTA, there is a risk that the reader may interpret the data as more compartmentalised than it was in practice. Some themes, such as autonomy and relational safety, were deeply interwoven across both envisions of education and pupil-led suggestions for change. While the dual-analysis approach helped to prove clarity and focus, it may also have constrained the interpretation of more fluid, overlapping narratives within the data (See appendix Z, F for reflective diary entries).

Reflexively, I considered how my own assumptions, expectations and identify may have shaped interpretation (see extracts from Reflective Diary, Appendix Z). Regular supervision and critical engagement with Braun & Clarke's (2021) six-phase process helped to ensure that the interpretations were grounded in the data, rather than imposed upon it. Nonetheless, the subjective nature of RTA (Braun & Clarke, 2021), while acknowledged and valued, remains a potential limitation in terms of transparency and replicability.

6.4 Suggestions for Future Research

Some participants expressed difficulty imagining what an "ideal" education might look like. This may reflect limited exposure to diverse or alternative educational environments, which in turn may have constrained their ability to envision possibilities beyond their current or past school experiences. Future research could explore ways to scaffold pupil responses during participatory tools like the "Ideal Education" activity. One practical recommendation is the development of scenario cards, further visual prompts, or example-based stimuli drawn from existing literature and alternative educational settings (such as the findings discussed in this study). These could help CYP explore a broader range of educational possibilities, especially when they are unsure how to engage with abstract or open-ended tasks. Such prompts could be co-designed with CYP and professionals to ensure relevance, sensitivity, and accessibility. Future research could also include the development of an online version of the activity for CYP experiencing EBSNA who do not feel able to engage in face-to-face sessions.

In applied settings, these materials may also support EPs and other practitioners using the "Ideal Education" activity tool in more time-limed contexts. While this study allowed for extended sessions and in-depth exploration, real-world practice may require more concise but effective facilitation methods. Structured prompts may help elicit rich pupil voice when time or emotional capacity is limited.

Furthermore, due to the limitations of the current study, future research could broaden the sample by including a larger number of participants from a wider range of educational settings, geographical areas and ethnic backgrounds. While this study included some variation in provision, all participants were linked to three mainstream schools within a single local authority, and all identified as White British. This lack of ethnic diversity is notable given that approximately 17% of the local population identify with an ethnic group other than White British, according to local authority statistics from the area in which the study took place. This raises questions about representation and the potential for unseen biases in how pupils experiencing EBSNA may be identified, supported or recruited into research.

Previous research has identified that CYP from certain ethnic backgrounds are not always identified as needing support in the same way as other groups, particularly within Social Emotional and Mental Health categories (Strand & Lindorff, 2021; Strand & Lindsay, 2009). which as discussed in Section 2.5.1.2 can be closely linked to EBSNA (The Educational Policy Institute, 2023). Therefore, future research could also explore possible systemic barriers to participation. For example, some families from ethnic minority backgrounds may have less access to research opportunities due to language barriers, limited outreach, or weaker links with schools and services. Collaborating with community organisations and adopting an intersectional lens, considering ethnicity alongside factors such as socio-economic status, gender, and language background could further enhance the inclusivity and relevance of EBSNA research.

7 Conclusion and Original Contribution

This thesis set out to explore how secondary-aged pupils experiencing EBSNA envision their ideal and non-ideal education, and what changes they believe are needed to move towards their ideal. Grounded in a constructivist paradigm and informed by Personal Construct Psychology (Kelly, 1955), the research employed a participatory, pupil-led methodology using the bespoke "Ideal Education" activity, adapted from Williams and Hanke (2007). Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA; Braun & Clarke, 2022; 2024) was used to interpret pupil-generated data, which included drawings, reflective dialogue, and scaling activities.

The dichotomous nature of the "Ideal Education" activity supported the elicitation of opposing constructs (e.g., ideal vs. non-ideal), enabling insights into what pupils envision as both supportive and challenging within education. Through RTA, four overarching themes were identified: *Adaptive Educational Structures*, *Relational Safety and Emotional Support*, *Autonomy, Fairness, and Pupil Voice*, and *Purposeful and Personalised Learning*. These synthesised subthemes across both RQs, reflecting shared domains of meaning within participant's constructions.

By foregrounding pupil voice using a constructivist and participatory method, this study offers a deeper understanding of the relational and systemic factors that may shape pupils

experiencing EBSNA experience of education. The findings demonstrate that pupils were able to articulate in a variety of ways e.g. through their own words, written and visual representations, their perceived features of an ideal or non-ideal education. Therefore, highlighting how meaningful engagement with pupils' perspectives can provide insight into insights into supportive educational practices.

The findings of this study hold implications for educational settings and EPs, including the need for emotionally attuned, flexible environments, relationally safe practices and participatory, pupil-informed approaches to planning and curriculum design. EPs are well positioned to support systemic change by facilitating these approaches and promoting inclusive, contextually grounded understanding of EBSNA through training, consultation, supervision and reflective practice (DfE, 2023a; Jones & Atkinson, 2021; Pellegrini, 2007).

While the sample was small and context-specific, the rich, interpretative insight generated offers transferable implications. Future research could extend these findings across varied educational settings to enhance the understanding of how EBSNA is experienced and to further explore contextually grounded support strategies. Furthermore, future research could explore additional ways to scaffold responses during participatory activities to support accessibility for those who may require additional support, this may also include the development of an online version of the activity for CYP experiencing EBSNA who do not feel able to engage in face-to-face sessions.

Ultimately, this study highlights the value of listening to CYP experiencing EBSNA, not only as a means of understanding distress, but as a pathway towards more equitable, accessible and relational education systems that work *with* the learner. This study makes an original contribution by adapting and applying the "Ideal Education" activity to elicit the voices of pupils experiencing EBSNA using participatory methods. It offers new insights into how these pupils envision supportive and challenging aspects of education and identifies practical changes that schools and services might consider in response. By presenting a thematic synthesis of pupil perspectives, the study contributes to a growing body of pupil voice research. Furthermore, by integrating visual and dialogic methods with RTA, the study demonstrates a flexible and ethically sensitive approach to engaging CYP in research relating to EBSNA.

8 References

Adler, R. H. (2022). Trustworthiness in Qualitative Research. *Journal of Human Lactation*, *38*(4), 598–602. https://doi.org/10.1177/08903344221116620

Anderson, J., Boyle, C., & Deppeler, J. (2014). *The Ecology of Inclusive Education: Reconceptualising Bronfenbrenner*.

Archer, T., Filmer-Sankey, C., & Flether-Campbell, F. (2003). *school phobia and school refusal: Research into causes and remedies*. National Foundation for Educational Research.

Atkinson, C., Thomas, G., Goodhall, N., Barker, L., Healey, I., Wilkinson, L., & Ogunmyiwa, J. (2019). Developing a student-led school mental health strategy. *Pastoral Care in Education*. https://doi.org/10.1080/02643944.2019.1570545

Attwood, G., & Croll, P. (2006). Truancy in secondary school pupils: Prevalence, trajectories and pupil perspectives. *Research Papers in Education*, *21*(4), 467–484. https://doi.org/10.1080/02671520600942446

Aubrey, K., & Riley, A. (2023). *Education Theories for a Changing World*. SAGE Publications.

Baker, M., & Bishop, F. L. (2015). Out of school: A phenomenological exploration of extended non-attendance. *Educational Psychology in Practice*, *31*(4), 354–368. https://doi.org/10.1080/02667363.2015.1065473

Ball, S. J. (2012). *Global Education Inc.: New Policy Networks and the Neoliberal Imaginary*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203803301

Barber, T. (2009). Participation, citizenship, and well-being: Engaging with young people, making a difference. *YOUNG*, *17*(1), 25–40. https://doi.org/10.1177/110330880801700103

Beaver, R. (2011). *Educational Psychology Casework: A Practice Guide Second Edition*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Beckles, C. (2014). An exploration of the perceptions and experiences of non-attenders and school staff within a secondary school context [Doctoral, UCL Institute of Education]. In *Doctoral thesis, UCL Institute of Education.* https://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/id/eprint/10021662/

Berg, I., Nichols, K., & Pritchard, C. (1969). SCHOOL PHOBIA - ITS CLASSIFICATION AND RELATIONSHIP TO DEPENDENCY. *Berg, I., Nichols, K., & Pritchard, C. (1969). School Phobia—Its Classification and Relationship to Dependency. Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, *10*(2), 123–141.

Biesta, gert. (2008). Good education in an age of measurement: On the need to reconnect with the question of purpose in education | Educational Assessment, Evaluation and Accountability. *JISC Collections*, *21*(2), 33–46. https://doi.org/doi.org/10.1007/s11092-008-9064-9

Biesta, G. (2007). Why “What Works” Won’t Work: Evidence-Based Practice and the Democratic Deficit in Educational Research. *Educational Theory*, *57*(1), 1–22. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-5446.2006.00241.x

Billington, T. (2006). *Working with Children: Assessment, Representation and Intervention*. 1–192.

Bowlby, J. (1969). The Bowlby-Ainsworth attachment theory. *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, *2*(4), 637–638. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0140525X00064955

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2021). *Thematic Analysis*. Sage. https://us.sagepub.com/en-us/nam/thematic-analysis/book248481

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2024). Supporting best practice in reflexive thematic analysis reporting in Palliative Medicine: A review of published research and introduction to the Reflexive Thematic Analysis Reporting Guidelines (RTARG). *Palliative Medicine*, *38*(6), 608–616. https://doi.org/10.1177/02692163241234800

British Psychological Society. (2021). *Code of Ethics and Conduct | BPS*. British Psychological Society. https://www.bps.org.uk/guideline/code-ethics-and-conduct

Broadwin, I. T. (1932). A contribution to the study of truancy. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, *2*(3), 253–259. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1939-0025.1932.tb05183.x

Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). *The Ecology of Human Development: Experiments by Nature and Design*. Harvard University Press.

Bronfenbrenner, U., & Morris, P. (2007). The Bioecological Model of Human Development—Bronfenbrenner—Major Reference Works—Wiley Online Library. *Handbook of Child Psychology*, *1*(1). https://doi.org/doi.org/10.1002/9780470147658.chpsy0114

Burr, V., King, N., & Butt, T. (2014). Personal construct psychology methods for qualitative research. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, *17*(4), 341–355. https://doi.org/10.1080/13645579.2012.730702

Butler, R. J., & Green, D. (2007). *The Child Within: Taking the Young Person's Perspective by Applying Personal Construct Psychology*. John Wiley & Sons.

Byrne, D. (2022). *A worked example of Braun and Clarke's approach to reflexive thematic analysis* (Vol. 56). https://doi.org/10.1007/s11135-021-01182-y

CASP. (2018). *CASP Checklists—Critical Appraisal Skills Programme*. CASP - Critical Appraisal Skills Programme. https://casp-uk.net/casp-tools-checklists/

Charmaz, K. (2006). *Constructing Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide through Qualitative Analysis*. SAGE.

Chian, L. S. (2022). *Doctorate in Professional Educational Child and Adolescent Psychology* [UCL Institute of Education]. https://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/id/eprint/10153415/1/Chian_10153415_thesis_sig_removed.pdf

Children's Commissioner. (2022). *Where are England's Children? Interim findings from the Children's Commissioner's Attendance Audit*. Where Are England's Children? Interim

Findings from the Children's Commissioner's Attendance Audit. R. https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/resource/where-are-englands-children-interim-findings-from-the-childrens-commissioners-attendance-audit/

Clark, A. (2005). Listening to and involving young children: A review of research and practice. *Early Child Development and Care*, *175*(6), 489–505. https://doi.org/10.1080/03004430500131288

Clissold, K. (2018). *A qualitative exploration of pupil, parent and staff discourses of extended school non-attendance* [D_ae, University of Birmingham]. https://etheses.bham.ac.uk/id/eprint/8817/

Cochrane training. (n.d.). *Cochrane Handbook for Systematic Reviews of Interventions*. Retrieved 30 July 2024, from https://training.cochrane.org/handbook

Coe, R., Waring, M., Hedges, L. V., & Ashley, L. D. (2021). *Research Methods and Methodologies in Education*. SAGE.

Cohen, L., Manion, L., & Morrison, K. (2002). *Research Methods in Education*.

Cohen, L., Manion, L., & Morrison, K. (2022). *Research Methods in Education*. Research methods in education. https://thuvienso.hoasen.edu.vn/bitstream/handle/123456789/10352/Contents.pdf?sequence=1

Corcoran, S., & Kelly, C. (2023). A meta-ethnographic understanding of children and young people's experiences of extended school non-attendance. *Journal of Research in Special Educational Needs*, *23*(1), 24–37. https://doi.org/10.1111/1471-3802.12577

Creswell, J. (2015). *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches* (Vol. 16). https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/1524839915580941

Crotty, M. (2025). *The Foundations of Social Research*. SAGE Publications Ltd. https://us.sagepub.com/en-us/nam/the-foundations-of-social-research/book207972

Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (1985). The general causality orientations scale: Self-determination in personality. *Journal of Research in Personality*, *19*(2), 109–134. https://doi.org/10.1016/0092-6566(85)90023-6

Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R., M. (2012). Self-determination theory. *Handbook of Theories of Social Psychology*, *1*(20), 416–436.

Department for Education. (2014). *SEND code of practice: 0 to 25 years*. GOV.UK. https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/send-code-of-practice-0-to-25

Department for Education. (2017). *Transforming Children and Young People's Mental Health Provision: A Green Paper*. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a823518e5274a2e87dc1b56/Transforming_children_and_young_people_s_mental_health_provision.pdf

Department for Education. (2019, April 2). *Children not in school*. GOV.UK. https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/children-not-in-school

Department for Education. (2020). *Pupil absence in schools in England: Autumn term, Autumn term 2019/20*. https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/pupil-absence-in-schools-in-england-autumn-term/2019-20-autumn-term

Department for Education. (2022a). *The link between absence and attainment at KS2 and KS4, Academic year 2018/19*. https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/the-link-between-absence-and-attainment-at-ks2-and-ks4/2018-19

Department for Education. (2022b, March 29). *SEND review: Right support, right place, right time*. GOV.UK. https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/send-review-right-support-right-place-right-time

Department for Education. (2023a). *Educational psychology services: Workforce insights and school perspectives on impact*. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/649c4a4406179b00113f7498/Educational_Psychology_services_-_Workforce_insights_and_school_perspectives_on_impact.pdf

Department for Education. (2023b). *Pupil absence in schools in England, Academic year 2021/22*. https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/pupil-absence-in-schools-in-england/2021-22

Department for Education. (2024a). *Elective home education, Autumn term 2024/25*. https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/elective-home-education/2024-25-autumn-term

Department for Education. (2024b). *Schools, pupils and their characteristics, Academic year 2023/24*. https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/school-pupils-and-their-characteristics/2023-24

Department for Education. (2024c). *Working together to improve school attendance*. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/65f1b048133c22b8eecd38f7/Working_together_to_improve_school_attendance__applies_from_19_August_2024_.pdf

Department for Education. (2025a). *Alternative provision*. GOV.UK. https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/alternative-provision

Department for Education. (2025b). *Pupil absence in schools in England, Academic year 2023/24*. https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/pupil-absence-in-schools-in-england/2023-24

DfE. (2014). *SEND code of practice: 0 to 25 years*. GOV.UK. https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/send-code-of-practice-0-to-25

Doyle, L., McCabe, C., Keogh, B., Brady, A., & McCann, M. (2020). An overview of the qualitative descriptive design within nursing research. *Journal of Research in Nursing: JRN*, *25*(5), 443–455. https://doi.org/10.1177/1744987119880234

Education Policy Institute. (2024). *Annual Report 2024: SEND*. Education Policy Institute. https://epi.org.uk/annual-report-2024-send-2/

Eisenberg, L. (1958). School phobia: A study in the communication of anxiety. *American Journal of Psychiatry*, *114*(8), 712–718. https://doi.org/10.1176/ajp.114.8.712

Ek, H., & and Eriksson, R. (2013). Psychological Factors Behind Truancy, School Phobia, and School Refusal: A Literature Study. *Child & Family Behavior Therapy*, *35*(3), 228–248. https://doi.org/10.1080/07317107.2013.818899

Elder, L., & Paul, R. (2006). *The art of Socratic questioning*. Foundation for Critical Thinking.

Elliott, J. G., & Place, M. (2019). Practitioner Review: School refusal: developments in conceptualisation and treatment since 2000. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, *60*(1), 4–15. https://doi.org/10.1111/jcpp.12848

Elmore, G. M., & Huebner, E. S. (2010). Adolescents' satisfaction with school experiences: Relationships with demographics, attachment relationships, and school engagement behavior. *Psychology in the Schools*, *47*(6), 525–537. https://doi.org/10.1002/pits.20488

Emerson, R. M., Fretz, R. I., & Shaw, L. L. (2011). *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes, Second Edition*. University of Chicago Press. https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226206868.001.0001

Etherington, K. (2004). *Becoming a Reflexive Researcher—Using Our Selves in Research—Google Books*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers. https://www.google.co.uk/books/edition/Becoming_a_Reflexive_Researcher_Using_Ou/koATh9uSpIkC?hl=en&gbpv=1&dq=Etherington+(2004&pg=PA3&printsec=frontcover

Filippello, P., Buzzai, C., Costa, S., & Sorrenti, L. (2019). School Refusal and Absenteeism: Perception of Teacher Behaviors, Psychological Basic Needs, and Academic Achievement. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *10*. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.01471

Finlay, L. (2002). Negotiating the swamp: The opportunity and challenge of reflexivity in research practice. *Qualitative Research*, *2*(2), 209–230. https://doi.org/10.1177/146879410200200205

Finlay, L. (2024). *Qualitative Research: The "good," the "bad," the "ugly"*. *14*.

Finning, K., Ford, T., Moore, A, D., & Ukoumunne, C, O. (2020). Emotional disorder and absence from school: Fndings from the 2004 British Child and Adolescent Mental Health Survey. *European Child & Adolescent Psychiatry*, *29*(2), 187–198. https://doi.org/doi.org/10.1007/s00787-019-01342-4

Finning, K., Ukoumunne, C, O., Ford, T., Danielson-Waters, E., Shaw, L., Romero De Jager, I., Stentiford, L., & Moore, A, D. (2019). Review: The association between anxiety and poor attendance at school – a systematic review—Finning—2019—Child and Adolescent Mental Health—Wiley Online Library. *Child and Adolescent Mental Health*, *24*(3), 205–216. https://doi.org/10.1111/camh.12322

Fornander, M. J., & Kearney, C. A. (2019). Family Environment Variables as Predictors of School Absenteeism Severity at Multiple Levels: Ensemble and Classification and Regression Tree Analysis. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *10*. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.02381

Franklin, A., & Sloper, P. (2009). Supporting the Participation of Disabled Children and Young People in Decision-making. *Children & Society*, *23*(1), 3–15. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1099-0860.2007.00131.x

Garside, R. (2014). Should we appraise the quality of qualitative research reports for systematic reviews, and if so, how? *Innovation: The European Journal of Social Science Research*, *27*(1), 67–79. https://doi.org/10.1080/13511610.2013.777270

Gersch, I., Dowling, F., Panagiotaki, G., & Potton, A. (2008). Listening to children's views of spiritual and metaphysical concepts: A new dimension to educational psychology practice? *Educational Psychology in Practice*, *24*(3), 225–236. https://doi.org/10.1080/02667360802256782

Goodman, A., & Gregg, P. (2010). *Poorer children's educational attainment: How important are attitudes and behaviours?* (pp. 79–92). Joseph Rowntree Foundation. https://doi.org/10.1920/ps.ifs.2024.0991

Gough, D. (2007). Weight of Evidence: A framework for the appraisal of the quality and relevance of evidence. *Research Papers in Education*, *22*(2), 213–228. https://doi.org/10.1080/02671520701296189

Graham, A., Truscott, J., Simmons, C., Anderson, D., & Thomas, N. (2018). Exploring student participation across different arenas of school life. *British Educational Research Journal*, *44*(6), 1029–1046. https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.3477

Green, H., McGinnity, A., Meltzer, H., Ford, T., & Goodman, R. (2005). *Mental Health of Children and Young People in Great Britain* [Dataset]. https://doi.org/10.1037/e557702010-001

Gregory, I. R., & Purcell, A. (2014). Extended school non-attenders' views: Developing best practice. *Educational Psychology in Practice*, *30*(1), 37–50. https://doi.org/10.1080/02667363.2013.869489

Griffin, N., Wistow, J., Fairbrother, H., Holding, E., Sirisena, M., Powell, K., & Summerbell, C. (2022). An analysis of English national policy approaches to health inequalities: 'Transforming children and young people's mental health provision' and its consultation process. *BMC Public Health*, *22*(1), Article 1. https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-022-13473-6

Guba, E. G., & Lincoln, Y. S. (1994). Competing paradigms in qualitative research. In *Handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 105–117). Sage Publications, Inc.

Halligan, C., & Cryer, S. (2022). Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA): Students' Views of What Works in a Specialist Setting. *Continuity in Education*, *3*, 13–24. https://doi.org/10.5334/cie.38

Harding, E., & Atkinson, C. (2009). How EPs record the voice of the child. *Educational Psychology in Practice*, *25*(2), 125–137. https://doi.org/10.1080/02667360902905171

Hart, R. (1992). Children's Participation: From Tokenism To Citizenship. *Innocenti Essays*, *4*.

Hatton-Corcoran, S. (2023). *Extended School Non-Attendance: Pupil Experiences and Development of a Local Authority, Multi-Agency Approach to Supporting Regular Attendance*. https://research.manchester.ac.uk/en/studentTheses/extended-school-non-attendance-pupil-experiences-and-development-

Havik, T., Bru, E., & Ertesvåg, S. K. (2015). School factors associated with school refusal- and truancy-related reasons for school non-attendance. *Social Psychology of Education*, *18*(2), 221–240. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11218-015-9293-y

Health and Care Professions Council. (2024). *Standards of conduct, performance and ethics*. Health and Care Professions Council. https://www.hcpc-uk.org/standards/standards-of-conduct-performance-and-ethics/

Higgins, M. (2022). *The Ideal School: Exploring the perceptions of autistic students experiencing*. Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust and The University of Essex.

Hobbs, D., Lister, S., Hadfield, P., Winlow, S., & Hall, S. (2000). Receiving shadows: Governance and liminality in the night-time economy[1]. *The British Journal of Sociology*, *51*(4), 701–717. https://doi.org/10.1080/00071310020015334

Hodkinson, A. (2010). INCLUSIVE AND SPECIAL EDUCATION: Inclusive and special education in the English educational system: historical perspectives, recent developments and future challenges. *British Journal of Special Education*, *37*(2), 61–67. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8578.2010.00462.x

Holliman, A. J., Bastaman, A. S., Wu, H. S., Xu, S., & Waldeck, D. (2024). Exploring the experiences of international Chinese students at a UK university: A qualitative inquiry. *Multicultural Learning and Teaching*, *19*(1), 7–22. https://doi.org/10.1515/mlt-2022-0020

How, K. (2015). *Exploring the experiences and perceptions of Key Stage 4 students whose school attendance is persistently low* [Dedcpsy, University of Sheffield]. https://doi.org/10/1/Final%20thesis%20pdf%20with%20all%20appendices%20-%20Karen%20How.pdf

Hyland, K. (2002). Authority and invisibility: Authorial identity in academic writing. *Journal of Pragmatics*.

James, E. L. (2015). *Pupil voice in school non attendance: Exploring the perceptions of pupils, whose attendance is below 85%* [University of Birmingham]. https://etheses.bham.ac.uk//id/eprint/7027/1/James16ApEd%26ChildPsyD_vol_1_Redacted.pdf

Jamieson, M. K., Govaart, G. H., & Pownall, M. (2023). Reflexivity in quantitative research: A rationale and beginner's guide. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, *17*(4), e12735. https://doi.org/10.1111/spc3.12735

Joffe, H., & Elsey, J. W. B. (2014). Free association in psychology and the grid elaboration method. *Review of General Psychology*, *18*(3), 173–185. https://doi.org/10.1037/gpr0000014

Johnson, A. M., Falstein, E. I., Szurek, S. A., & Svendsen, M. (1941). School phobia. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, *11*(4), 702–711. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1939-0025.1941.tb05860.x

Jones, L., & Atkinson, C. (2021). A Framework for Developing Educational Psychologists' Consultation Practice. *Educational Psychology Research and Practice*, *7*(2).

Kaplan, D. (2015). The future of quantitative inquiry in education: Challenges and opportunities. *The National Academy of Education*, *1*(2).

Kearney, C. A. (2003). Bridging the gap among professionals who address youths with school absenteeism: Overview and suggestions for consensus. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, *34*(1), 57–65. https://doi.org/10.1037/0735-7028.34.1.57

Kearney, C. A., Benoit, L., Gonzálvez, C., & Keppens, G. (2022). School attendance and school absenteeism: A primer for the past, present, and theory of change for the future. *Frontiers in Education*, *7*, 1044608. https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2022.1044608

Kearney, C. A., & Bensaheb, A. (2006). School Absenteeism and School Refusal Behavior: A Review and Suggestions for School-Based Health Professionals. *Journal of School Health*, *76*(1), 3–7. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1746-1561.2006.00060.x

Kearney, C. A., Lemos, A., & Silverman, J. (1995). School refusal behavior. *Clinical Handbook of Anxiety Disorders in Children and Adolescents*, *10*(1), 19–52.

Kearney, C. A., & Silverman, W. K. (1993a). Measuring the function of school refusal behavior: The School Assessment Scale. *Journal of Clinical Child Psychology*, *22*(1), 85–96. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15374424jccp2201_9

Kearney, C. A., & Silverman, W. K. (1993b). Measuring the Function of School Refusal Behavior: The School Refusal Assessment Scale. *Journal of Clinical Child Psychology*. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15374424jccp2201_9

Kelly. (1991). *The Psychology of Personal Constructs: Volume One: Theory and Personality*. https://www.routledge.com/The-Psychology-of-Personal-Constructs-Volume-One-Theory-and-Personality/Kelly/p/book/9780415037976

Kelly, D., & Gray, C. (2000). *Educational psychology services (England): Current role, good practice and future directions : the research report*. Department for Education and Employment. http://dera.ioe.ac.uk/12356/1/epwg%20research%20report.pdf

Kelly, G. (1955). *The psychology of personal constructs* (Vol. 1). Norton.

Kennan, D., Brady, B., & Forkan, C. (2019). Space, Voice, Audience and Influence: The Lundy Model of Participation (2007) in Child Welfare Practice. *Practice*, *31*(3), 205–218. https://doi.org/10.1080/09503153.2018.1483494

Kincheloe, J. L., & Tobin, K. (2009). The much exaggerated death of positivism. *Cultural Studies of Science Education*, *4*(3), 513–528. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11422-009-9178-5

King, N., J., & Bernstein, G. A. (2001). School Refusal in Children and Adolescents: A Review of the Past 10 Years. *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry*, *40*(2), 197–205. https://doi.org/10.1097/00004583-200102000-00014

Klein, M., Sosu, E. M., & Dare, S. (2020). Mapping inequalities in school attendance: The relationship between dimensions of socioeconomic status and forms of school absence. *Children and Youth Services Review*, *118*, 105432. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2020.105432

Knight, L. K., & Depue, B. E. (2019). New Frontiers in Anxiety Research: The Translational Potential of the Bed Nucleus of the Stria Terminalis. *Frontiers in Psychiatry*, *10*. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyt.2019.00510

Koltko-Rivera, M. E. (2006). Rediscovering the Later Version of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs: Self-Transcendence and Opportunities for Theory, Research, and Unification. *Review of General Psychology*, *10*(4), 302–317. https://doi.org/10.1037/1089-2680.10.4.302

Korstjens, I., & Moser, A. (2018). Series: Practical guidance to qualitative research. Part 4: Trustworthiness and publishing. *European Journal of General Practice*, *24*(1), 120–124. https://doi.org/10.1080/13814788.2017.1375092

Larkin, M., & Thompson, A. R. (2011). Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis in Mental Health and Psychotherapy Research. In *Qualitative Research Methods in Mental Health and Psychotherapy* (pp. 99–116). John Wiley & Sons, Ltd. https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119973249.ch8

Lauchlan, F. (2003). Responding to Chronic Non-attendance: A review of intervention approaches. *Educational Psychology in Practice*, *19*(2), 133–146. https://doi.org/10.1080/02667360303236

Lazard, L., & and McAvoy, J. (2020). Doing reflexivity in psychological research: What's the point? What's the practice? *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, *17*(2), 159–177. https://doi.org/10.1080/14780887.2017.1400144

Lenhoff, S. W., & Pogodzinski, B. (2018). School Organizational Effectiveness and Chronic Absenteeism: Implications for Accountability. *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk (JESPAR)*, *23*(1–2), 153–169. https://doi.org/10.1080/10824669.2018.1434656

Lester, K. J., & Michelson, D. (2024). Perfect storm: Emotionally based school avoidance in the post-COVID-19 pandemic context. *BMJ Mental Health*, *27*(1). https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjment-2023-300944

Lewis, S. (2015). Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches. *Health Promotion Practice*, *16*(4), 473–475. https://doi.org/10.1177/1524839915580941

Lincoln, Y., & Guba, E. (1985). Naturalistic inquiry. *Sage Publications*, *1*(1).

Lockwood, C., Munn, Z., & Porritt, K. (2015). Qualitative research synthesis: Methodological guidance for systematic reviewers utilising meta-aggregation. *JBI Evidence Implementation*, *13*(3), 179. https://doi.org/10.1097/XEB.0000000000000062

Long, H. A., French, D. P., & Brooks, J. M. (2020). Optimising the value of the critical appraisal skills programme (CASP) tool for quality appraisal in qualitative evidence synthesis. *Research Methods in Medicine & Health Sciences*, *1*(1), 31–42. https://doi.org/10.1177/2632084320947559

Lundy, L. (2007). 'Voice' is not enough: Conceptualising Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. *British Educational Research Journal*, *33*(6), 927–942. https://doi.org/10.1080/01411920701657033

Macconville, R. M. (2006). *Looking at Inclusion: Listening to the Voices of Young People* (pp. 1–168).

Madill, A., Jordan, A., & Shirley, C. (2000). Objectivity and reliability in qualitative analysis: Realist, contextualist and radical constructionist epistemologies. *British Journal of Psychology*, *91*(1), 1–20. https://doi.org/10.1348/000712600161646

Maguire, M., & Delahunt, B. (2017). Doing a thematic analysis: A practical, step-by-step guide for learning and teaching scholars. *All Ireland Journal of Higher Education*, *9*(3), Article 3. https://doi.org/10.62707/aishej.v9i3.335

Mahoney, M. J. (1988). Constructive Metatheory: 1. Basic Features and Historical Foundations. *International Journal of Personal Construct Psychology*, *1*(1), 1–35. https://doi.org/10.1080/10720538808412762

Maslow, A. H. (1943). A Theory of Human Motivation. *Psychological Review*, *50*(4), 370–396.

Maslow, A. H. (1969). Various meanings of transcendence. *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, *1*(1), 55–56.

May, D., R., Gilson, R., L., & Harter, L., M. (2004). The psychological conditions of meaningfulness, safety and availability and the engagement of the human spirit at work. *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology. Wiley Online Library*. https://bpspsychub.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1348/096317904322915892?c.

Moffatt, A., & Riddle, S. (2021). Where are they now? Flexi school graduates reflect on their experiences of alternative education. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, *25*(13), 1463–1474. https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2019.1615564

Moran, H. (2001). Who Do You Think You Are? Drawing the Ideal Self: A Technique to Explore a Child's Sense of Self. *Clinical Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, *6*(4), 599–604. https://doi.org/10.1177/1359104501006004016

Morgan, F., & Costello, E. (2023). *Square Pegs: Inclusivity, compassion and fitting in - a guide for schools*. Crown House Publishing Ltd.

Munkhaugen, E. K., Gjevik, E., Pripp, A. H., Sponheim, E., & Diseth, T. H. (2017). School refusal behaviour: Are children and adolescents with autism spectrum disorder at a higher risk? *Research in Autism Spectrum Disorders*, *41–42*, 31–38. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.rasd.2017.07.001

Murberg, T. A., & Bru, E. (2009). The relationships between negative life events, perceived support in the school environment and depressive symptoms among Norwegian senior

high school students: A prospective study. *Social Psychology of Education*, *12*(3), 361–370. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11218-008-9083-x

Neher, A. (1991). Maslow's Theory of Motivation - Andrew Neher, 1991. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, *31*(3). https://doi.org/doi-org.nottingham.idm.oclc.org/10.1177/0022167891313010

Newman, M., & Gough, D. (2020). Systematic Reviews in Educational Research: Methodology, Perspectives and Application. In O. Zawacki-Richter, M. Kerres, S. Bedenlier, M. Bond, & K. Buntins (Eds.), *Systematic Reviews in Educational Research: Methodology, Perspectives and Application* (pp. 3–22). Springer Fachmedien. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-27602-7_1

Niemiec, C. P., & Ryan, R. M. (2009). Autonomy, competence, and relatedness in the classroom: Applying self-determination theory to educational practice. *Theory and Research in Education*, *7*(2), 133–144. https://doi.org/10.1177/1477878509104318

Nordstrom, S. N. (2015). Not So Innocent Anymore: Making Recording Devices Matter in Qualitative Interviews. *Qualitative Inquiry*, *21*(4), 388–401. https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800414563804

Norwich, B. (2006). Dilemmas of inclusion and the future of education. In *Included or Excluded?* Routledge.

Nowell, L. S., Norris, J. M., White, D. E., & Moules, N. J. (2017). Thematic Analysis: Striving to Meet the Trustworthiness Criteria. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, *16*(1), 1609406917733847. https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406917733847

Noyes, J., Booth, A., Cargo, M., Flemming, K., Harden, A., Harris, J., Gardside, R., Hannes, karin, Pantoja, T., & Thomas, J. (2022). *Cochrane Handbook for Systemic Reviews of Interventions*. Chapter 21: Qualatative Evidence. https://training.cochrane.org/handbook/current/chapter-21

Ochi, M., Kawabe, K., Ochi, S., Miyama, T., Horiuchi, F., & Ueno, S. (2020). School refusal and bullying in children with autism spectrum disorder. *Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and Mental Health*, *14*(1), 17. https://doi.org/10.1186/s13034-020-00325-7

Panhwar, H., A., Ansari, S., & Shah, A., A. (2017). Post-positivsm: An effective paradigm for social and educational research. *International Research Journal of Arts and Humanities*, *45*(45), 253–259.

Parker, l, & Foster, J. (1995). *Carrying out investigations in psychology: Methods and statistics.* Wiley-Blackwell.

Parsons, S., Lewis ,Ann, Davison ,Ian, Ellins ,Jean, & and Robertson, C. (2009). Satisfaction with educational provision for children with SEN or disabilities: A national postal survey of the views of parents in Great Britain. *Educational Review*, *61*(1), 19–47. https://doi.org/10.1080/00131910802684755

Patton, M. Q. (1999). Enhancing the quality and credibility of qualitative analysis. *Health Services Research*, *34*(5 Pt 2), 1189–1208.

Patton, M. Q. (2014). *Qualitative Research & Evaluation Methods: Integrating Theory and Practice*. SAGE Publications.

Pearl, J. (2012). *The Causal Foundations of Structural Equation Modeling:* Defense Technical Information Center. https://doi.org/10.21236/ADA557445

Pellegrini, D. W. (2007). School Non-attendance: Definitions, meanings, responses, interventions. *Educational Psychology in Practice*, *23*(1), 63–77. https://doi.org/10.1080/02667360601154691

Phillips, D. C., & Burbules, N. C. (2000). *Postpositivism and Educational Research*. Rowman & Littlefield.

Piaget, J. (1954). *The Construction Of Reality In The Child*. Routlege. https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/mono/10.4324/9781315009650/construction-reality-child-jean-piaget

Popoola, M., & Silvers, S. (2023). *Maslow, relationships and square pegs. Square Pegs: Inclusivity, compassion and fitting in; A guide for schools.* https://www.independentthinkingpress.com/books/teachingskills/square-pegs-inclusivity-compassion-and-fitting-in-a-guide-for-schools/

Preece, D., & and Howley, M. (2018). An approach to supporting young people with autism spectrum disorder and high anxiety to re-engage with formal education – the impact on young people and their families. *International Journal of Adolescence and Youth*, *23*(4), 468–481. https://doi.org/10.1080/02673843.2018.1433695

Prunty, A., Dupont, M., & Mcdaid, R. (2012). Voices of students with special educational needs (SEN): Views on schooling. *Wiley Online Library*, *27*(1), 29–36. https://doi.org/doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9604.2011.01507.x

Rae, T. (2020). *Understanding & Supporting Children & Young People with Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA)*. Hinton House Publishers Limited.

Ravenette, T. (1999). *Personal construct theory in educational psychology: A practitioner's view.* Whurr.

Reed. (2021). *"I had no control over myself or my education": Mainstream school refusal from the perspectives of young people on the autism spectrum* [Canterbury Christ Church University]. https://repository.canterbury.ac.uk/download/58307ce41d0fa2718bd86619423907e975f892e29d9a60b47ee3f5056010d335/2090644/P.Reed%20MA%20by%20Research%20Final%20Thesis%20Amended.pdf

Rettig, M., & Crawford, J. (2000). *Getting past the fear of going to school* (Vol. 65). The Education Digest. https://www.proquest.com/openview/aedeaad49c8396c8d09d1cec0ab47aa0/1.pdf?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=25066

Robson, C. (2024). *Real World Research*. John Wiley & Sons.

Rutakumwa, R., Mugisha, J. O., Bernays, S., Kabunga, E., Tumwekwase, G., Mbonye, M., & Seeley, J. (2020). Conducting in-depth interviews with and without voice recorders: A comparative analysis. *Qualitative Research*, *20*(5), 565–581. https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794119884806

Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2022). Self-Determination Theory. In F. Maggino (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of Quality of Life and Well-Being Research* (pp. 1–7). Springer International Publishing. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-69909-7_2630-2

Scotland, J. (2012). Exploring the Philosophical Underpinnings of Research: Relating Ontology and Epistemology to the Methodology and Methods of the Scientific, Interpretive, and Critical Research Paradigms. *English Language Teaching*, *5*(9), Article 9. https://doi.org/10.5539/elt.v5n9p9

Seddon, C. (2024). *'I think the school listened…and they were flexible enough to act on it'. Emotionally based school avoidance: An exploration of factors contributing to positive outcomes for secondary school children* [Doctoral, University of Essex]. https://repository.essex.ac.uk/37859/

Sheldon, K. M., Elliot, A. J., Kim, Y., & Kasser, T. (2001). What is satisfying about satisfying events? Testing 10 candidate psychological needs. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *80*(2), 325–339. https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.80.2.325

Slevin, E., & Sines, D. (1999). *Enhancing the truthfulness, consistency and transferability of a qualitative study: Utilising a manifold of approaches*. https://www.proquest.com/openview/f6ac811c0ca0ba13cd3f91a063a117fd/1?cbl=33100&pq-origsite=gscholar

Small, M. L. (2009). `How many cases do I need?': On science and the logic of case selection in field-based research. *Ethnography*, *10*(1), 5–38. https://doi.org/10.1177/1466138108099586

Smillie, I., & Newton, M. (2020). Educational psychologists' practice: Obtaining and representing young people's views. *Educational Psychology in Practice*, *36*(3), 328–344. https://doi.org/10.1080/02667363.2020.1787955

Smith, J. A. (2011). Evaluating the contribution of interpretative phenomenological analysis. *Health Psychology Review*, *5*(1), 9–27. https://doi.org/10.1080/17437199.2010.510659

Spall, S. (1998). Peer Debriefing in Qualitative Research: Emerging Operational Models. *Qualitative Inquiry*, *4*(2), 280–292. https://doi.org/10.1177/107780049800400208

Sparkes, A., & Smith, B. (2013). *Qualitative Research Methods in Sport, Exercise and Health*. From Process to Product.

Strand, S., & Lindorff, A. (2021). Ethnic Disproportionality in the Identification of High-Incidence Special Educational Needs: A National Longitudinal Study Ages 5 to 11. *Exceptional Children*, *87*(3), 344–368. https://doi.org/10.1177/0014402921990895

Strand, S., & Lindsay, G. (2009). Evidence of Ethnic Disproportionality in Special Education in an English Population. *The Journal of Special Education*, *43*(3), 174–190. https://doi.org/10.1177/0022466908320461

Strong, E. (2019). *We do have a voice: Using a personal construct psychology technique to explore how children and young people with selective mutism construct their current and 'ideal' selves* [School of Education College of Social Sciences University of Birmingham]. https://etheses.bham.ac.uk//id/eprint/9559/13/Strong2019ApEd%26ChildPsyDVolume1_Redacted.pdf

Sullivan-Walker, M. E., Rock, M. L., & Popp, P. A. (2017). Meeting the needs of students with disabilities experiencing homelessness: Federal, community, and educator roles. *Preventing School Failure: Alternative Education for Children and Youth*, *61*(2), 155–162. https://doi.org/10.1080/1045988X.2016.1228596

Tamlyn, G. (2022). *An exploration of the narratives of young people who have experienced Emotional Based School Avoidance* [University of East London]. https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/541340289.pdf

Terry, G., Hayfield, N., Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2017). *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research in Psychology*. SAGE.

Tessier, S. (2012). From Field Notes, to Transcripts, to Tape Recordings: Evolution or Combination? *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, *11*(4), 446–460. https://doi.org/10.1177/160940691201100410

Thambirajah, M. S., Grandison, K. J., & De-Hayes, L. (2008). *Understanding School Refusal: A Handbook for Professionals in Education, Health and Social Care*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

The Association for Child and Adolescent Mental Health. (2023). *The association between anxiety and poor school attendance*. ACAMH. https://www.acamh.org/research-digest/the-association-between-anxiety-and-poor-school-attendance/

The British Psychological Society. (2024). *Can't, not won't: Rethinking school avoidance*. BPS. https://www.bps.org.uk/psychologist/cant-not-wont-rethinking-school-avoidance

The Centre for Social Justice. (2025, April 24). School exclusions hit new record highs. *The Centre for Social Justice*. https://www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/newsroom/school-exclusions-hit-new-record-highs

The Educational Policy Institute. (2023). *Examining post-pandemic absences in England*. Education Policy Institute. https://epi.org.uk/publications-and-research/examining-post-pandemic-absences-in-england-2/

Thomas, J., & Harden, A. (2008). Methods for the thematic synthesis of qualitative research in systematic reviews. *BMC Medical Research Methodology*, *8*(1), 45. https://doi.org/10.1186/1471-2288-8-45

Thompson, J., Spencer, G., & Curtis, P. (2021). Children's perspectives and experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic and UK public health measures. *Health Expectations*, *24*(6), 2057–2064. https://doi.org/10.1111/hex.13350

Todd, L. (2007). *Partnerships for inclusive education: A critical approach to collaborative working*. Routledge.

Tong, P., & An, I. S. (2024). Review of studies applying Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory in international and intercultural education research. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *14*(1). https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2023.1233925

Torma, S., & Halsti, A. (1975). Factors contributing to school phobia and truancy. *Psychiatria Fennica*, 209–220.

Totsika, V., Liew, A., Absoud, M., Adnams, C., & Emerson, E. (2022). Mental health problems in children with intellectual disability. *The Lancet Child & Adolescent Health*, *6*(6), 432–444. https://doi.org/10.1016/S2352-4642(22)00067-0

Tudge, J. R. H., Mokrova, I., Hatfield, B. E., & Karnik, R. B. (2009). Uses and Misuses of Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Theory of Human Development. *Journal of Family Theory & Review*, *1*(4), 198–210. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1756-2589.2009.00026.x

United Nations. (1989). *Convention on the Rights of the Child.* UNICEF UK. https://www.unicef.org.uk/what-we-do/un-convention-child-rights/

Wade, R. (2022). *My Ideal School: Using a Personal Construct Psychology Technique to Explore and Understand the School Constructs of Children and Young People Identified as Having Selective Mutism* [University of East Anglia]. https://ueaeprints.uea.ac.uk/id/eprint/89364/1/2022WadeREdPsyD.pdf

Wahba, M., & Bridwell, L. (1976). Maslow Reconsidered: A review of research on the Need Hierarchy Theory. *Organisational Behaviour and Human Performance*, *15*(2), 212–240.

Want, H. (2020). *A Narrative Oriented Inquiry into emotionally based school avoidance: Hearing the voices of young people and their parents* [Thesis, Nottingham University]. https://eprints.nottingham.ac.uk/61218/

West Sussex Educational Psychology Service. (2022). *Emotionally Based School Avoidance: Good practice guidance for schools and support agencies*. https://schools.westsussex.gov.uk/Page/10483

Whitty, G., & Wisby, E. (2007). Whose voice? An exploration of the current policy interest in pupil involvement in school decision-making. *International Studies in Sociology of Education*. https://doi.org/10.1080/09620210701543957

Williams, J., & Hanke, D. (2007). 'Do you know what sort of school I want?': Optimum features of school provision for pupils with autistic spectrum disorder. *Good Autism Practice (GAP)*, *8*(2), 51–63.

Woolfolk, A. (2016). *Educational psychology* (Thirteenth edition, global edition). Pearson Education Limited.

Wright, S. (2023). *"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.* [University of Nottingham]. https://eprints.nottingham.ac.uk/76505/1/Sophie%20Wright%20Final%20Thesis.pdf

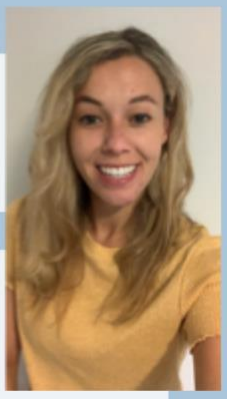
Zaatari, W., & Maalouf, I. (2022). How the Bronfenbrenner Bio-ecological System Theory Explains the Development of Students' Sense of Belonging to School? *SAGE Open*, *12*(4), 21582440221134089. https://doi.org/10.1177/21582440221134089

9 Appendices

Appendix A: Recruitment Poster

University of Nottingham
UK | CHINA | MALAYSIA

PARTICIPANTS NEEDED



THE RESEARCHER

My name is Katie.
I am currently a Trainee Educational Psychologist at the University of Nottingham and [redacted] Educational Psychology Services.

ABOUT THE RESEARCH

- I am doing research with young people who find it hard to attend school due to emotional reasons such as anxiety.
- I am really interested to hear the views of young people and see how their education could be improved.

WHAT WOULD IT INVOLVE?

- Participants will be invited to draw and talk about their 'Ideal Education' and 'Non Ideal Education'.
- After the session, the information the participants give will be anonymised for research purposes.

TO GET IN TOUCH

For more information, or to take part in the study please contact me via email **katie.hughes@nottingham.ac.uk**

ETHICAL APPROVAL NUMBER.....

Appendix B: Initial Recruitment Letter to Local Authority Stakeholders

Letter to Educational Psychologists, School Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Coordinators and other Local Authority teams such as Attendance Team, Mental Health Leads, staff of Blue Sky Group)

Current title of research "The personal constructs of young people experiencing Emotionally Based School Non-Attendance: The Ideal Education"

My name is Katie Hughes and I am a trainee Educational Psychologist on placement with [SERVICE name] Educational Psychology Service. I am also a postgraduate research student at the University of Nottingham am currently planning a research project about the views of young people presenting with Emotionally Based School Non-Attendance. This research will form part of my qualifying Doctorate in Educational Psychology.

You have been sent this information sheet in the hope that you may be able to help me recruit participants for my research.

Purpose and details of the study
This research project will aim to explore how young people experiencing Emotionally Based School Non-Attendance (EBSNA) construct their ideal and non-ideal education. I want to reach participants who are presenting with entrenched EBSNA, as I think it is important that we hear their views on making education better suited to them, as well as others with similar needs. It is hoped that findings will increase knowledge and understanding of the lived experiences of young people experiencing EBSNA and may help to further develop the role of educational settings and professionals supporting them. The present study aims to empower young people by positioning their voices centrally to inform interventions and practices to support their educational well-being.

I am hoping to recruit 6-10 participants who are presenting with EBSNA. The current study seeks to utilise a tool, inspired by the PCP-based 'Ideal School' activity (Hanke and Williams, 2007), which has been adapted and named the 'Ideal Education' by the researcher to elicit important factors for the young person's education. The sessions will be conducted within an environment of the young person's chosen such as at home, school or another preferred location.

To be involved in the research participants should fit this criteria:
• Young people will be aged between 11-16 years old.
• Young people will identify themselves as finding it difficult to attend school due to emotional reasons.
• Young people who have an attendance of 50% or less.
• There will not be an alternative reason for absence e.g., fixed term or permanent exclusion, long-term illness or a trip abroad.

If you know of any young people who fit the above brief for this study, and may be willing to take part, I would be really grateful if you could contact me directly to let me know. My email address is at the bottom of the page.

Following this, I will then provide you with a copy of the Parent and Young person Information Sheets to distribute to parents/carers. You will not be required to do anything else after this point as I will then liaise directly with parents to arrange the sessions.

If you have any questions about the research project or would like to discuss it further, please feel free to contact me on XXXXXXXXXXX

Appendix C: Participant Instruction Poster

Ideal Education Activity

1 I will ask you to draw your 'Non-Ideal' Education, and afterwards, I will ask you to draw your 'Ideal' Education

I will prompt you on what you could draw such as.....

PEOPLE

LEARNING

STRUCTURE

ENVIRONMENT

We can then talk about your drawings and I will write some of the words you say down....

2 You will then be shown a scale like the one below, I will ask you some questions and I will ask you to mark on your scale what your answers are

Appendix D: Young Person Information Sheet and Consent Form

Ethics Approval Number: S1610R

Researcher: Katie Hughes (Trainee Educational Psychologist)
[E-mail]- katie.hughes@nottingham.ac.uk

Supervisor: Dr Nicholas Durbin
[e-mail] nicholas.durbin@nottingham.ac.uk

Title of project: Using a Personal Construct Psychology technique to explore and understand the constructs of young people experiencing Emotionally Based School Avoidance:

"My Ideal Education"

Participant Information Sheet and Consent form

My name is Katie

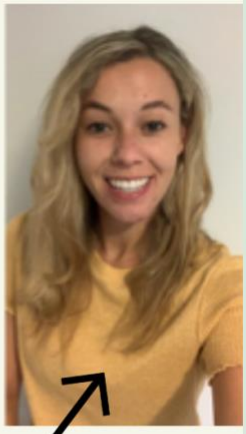
I am doing a research study to find out the views of young people who find it difficult to go to school.

I am asking you to be a part of the study because I am interested in hearing your views about how you are finding your education at the moment.

I want to know what you would say would be your 'ideal education' and 'non-ideal education'.

Your views are important and by sharing these you may help make education become better for you, as well as other young people who are also finding it difficult to go into school.

Participation in this study is totally voluntary and you are under no obligation to take part. You are free to withdraw at any point before or during the study.



This is what I look like

Study Information Sheet

This information sheet tells you what I will ask you to do if you decide to take part in the study. Please read it so that you can make up your mind about whether you want to take part or not.

If you do say you want to take part in the study but change your mind later, that's okay. Just let me or your parent/carer know at any time.

If you have any questions, feel free to ask me, a key adult, your family, or someone who looks after you.

What will happen if you say you want to be in the study?

If you decide to participate in my study, we'll arrange to meet either at your school, home or a local authority office. Which ever you are most comfortable meeting at. You'll be with your parent or carer, but they can stay outside of the room if you wish. It's up to you! We'll have one or two sessions, each lasting no more than 90 minutes. We'll take breaks when needed, and you can end the session whenever you would like to.

During these meetings, I'll ask you to imagine two kinds of education: one that you wouldn't like (your "non-ideal education") and one that you would like (your "ideal education"). I will ask you to draw these imaginary educations and then we can talk about them a bit. You can share your thoughts through drawing, writing or just talking with me - and I can do the writing bit!

I will then ask you to think about and rate where your current education is in relation to your 'ideal' and 'non ideal' education. Then, I will invite you to suggest ways your current education could change to become more like your ideal education. Your ideas will help us understand how to improve education for young people like you.

Will anyone else know what you say in the study?

I want you to know that anything you share with me during the study will be kept private. However, if you talk about someone hurting you, or if you mention hurting yourself or someone else, I may need to tell someone to make sure you and other people are safe.

All the information I have about you from the study will be stored securely, and I'll take great care of it. It will be stored in compliance with the Data Protection Act. When I write a report about the study to share with others, I won't use your real name. Instead, I'll use a fake name to keep your identity confidential. Your privacy is my top priority.

<u>If you have decided that you want to take part in the sudy, the next sheet is a consent form to fill in to say that you would like to.</u>

<u>If you need more time to think about it, that is okay.</u>

If you have any complaints about the study, please contact:

Stephen Jackson (Chair of Ethics Committee)

stephen.jackson@nottingham.ac.uk

Young Person Consent Form

Title of Project: Using a Personal Construct Psychology technique to explore and understand the constructs of young people experiencing Emotionally Based School Avoidance:

Ethics Approval Number: S1610R

Researcher: Katie Hughes **[e-mail]** katie.hughes@nottingham.ac.uk

Supervisor: Dr Nicholas Durbin **[e-mail]** nicholas.durbin@nottingham.ac.uk

Dear_____

Please make sure you have read (or listened to) the Information Sheet before filling in this form. Please read (or listen to) the statements below and put a circle around 'yes' or 'no' that you most agree with then sign your name at the bottom of the page if you are happy to take part in Katie's project. Please answer these questions independently.

- **Have you read and understood the Information Sheet?**
  YES/NO
- **Have you had the opportunity to ask questions about the study at any point?**
  YES/NO
- **Have all your questions been answered satisfactorily?**
  YES/NO
- **Do you understand that you are free to withdraw from the study?**
  YES/NO
- **I give permission for my data from this study to be shared with other researchers provided that my anonymity is protected.**
  YES/NO
- **Do you agree to take part in the study?**
  YES/NO

Young person signature *Date*

Appendix E: Family Information Sheet and Consent Form

Ethics Approval Number: S1610R

Researcher: Katie Hughes (Trainee Educational Psychologist)
[E-mail]- katie.hughes@nottingham.ac.uk

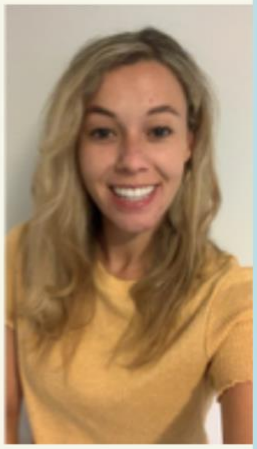
Supervisor: Dr Nicholas Durbin
[e-mail] nicholas.durbin@nottingham.ac.uk

Title of project: Using a Personal Construct Psychology technique to explore and understand the constructs of young people experiencing Emotionally Based School Avoidance:

"My Ideal Education"

Family Information Sheet and Consent form

My name is Katie



Why I am doing research?

I am a Trainee Educational Psychologist, studying for a Doctorate in Educational Psychology at the University of Nottingham. I am also on placement with [redacted] Educational Psychology Service.

I have the opportunity to do a research study. I am interested in hearing the views of young people who find it difficult to go to school.

I am interested in hearing young people's views about how they are finding their education at the moment, who may be spending a lot of time out of school.

What does the research involve?

I want to know what their 'ideal education' and 'non-ideal education'. I believe their views are very important and by sharing these they may help make education better for them, as well as other young people who are also finding it difficult to go into school.

Study information sheet

Every young person thinking about taking part in the study will have an information sheet with all the information on what to do.

Participation in this study is totally voluntary and your child is under no obligation to take part. If your child says they want to take part in the study but changes their mind later, that is okay. They can let me know at any time, or they can let you know as a parent/carer.

If you or your child have any questions, feel free to ask me. You can also email me at (katie.hughes@nottingham.ac.uk)

What will happen if your child takes part in the study?

If your child decides to participate in my study, we'll arrange to meet either at school, your home or a local authority office. Which ever you are both most comfortable meeting at. If you child wishes, they can ask their parent/carer to stay in the room or wait outside if they prefer.

We will have one or two sessions, each lasting no more than 90 minutes. We'll take breaks when needed, and the session can be ended by the child or parent at any time.

During these meetings, I'll ask your child to imagine two kinds of education: one that they wouldn't like (the "non-ideal education") and one that they would like (the "ideal education"). I will ask your child to draw these imaginary educations and then we will talk about them a bit. They can share their thoughts through drawing, writing or just talking with me. I can do the writing bit if need be!

I will then ask your child to think about and rate where their current education is in relation to their 'ideal' and 'non ideal' education. Then, I will invite them to suggest ways their current education could change to become more like their ideal education. Their ideas will help us understand how to improve education for young people with similiar challenges to themselves.

Will the data be confidential?

Yes! Anything your child shares during the session will be treated as confidential. A pseudonym (or fake name) will be used rather than their actual name meaning that they will not be identifiable at any point during the data collection, analysis or write up stages.

I will be the only person who has direct contact with your child.

All names mentioned during the session such as teachers, family members or other professionals will all be given pseudonyms “fake names” too, or just general labels like ‘teacher’ or ‘friend’.
If for any reason, I am concerned about your child’s or others’ safety and/or well-being during the sessions, I am obliged to follow [redacted]s Educational Pscyhology Service’s Safeguarding policy, and report such information, but I would inform both you and your child before doing this.

How will the research be reported?

Doctoral Thesis report - This research study will be written into a 40,000 word doctoral thesis report for the University of Nottingham, which will be published, in full, online on the e-theses database, however responses will be anonymised to ensure participant confidentiality.

Reporting to the Educational Psychology Service - A short presentation and summary may be presented to the service. Responses will be anonymised to ensure participant confidentiality.

Reporting to participants - Young people who take part in the research will receive a personalised letter to thank them for taking part and this will also include a short summary of the findings from their sessions.

Overall findings - it will also be possible for you and/ or your child to recieve a follow up report after completion of the project summarising key findings and overall conclusions from the research if you wish.

What will happen to my child's data?

The data from the drawings and responses produced in this activity will be stored securely in a locked drawer when not being used and will only be accessible by myself or my research supervisor. They will also be scanned and saved onto an encrypted USB memory stuck, so the original copies can be returned to your child if they would like to keep them.

All research data will be stored securely in adherence to the 1998 Data Protection Act for 10 years, after which all electronic data will be deleted and hard copies will be shredded.

What are the benefits and/ or risks of my child participating?

Benefits

- Your child will be able to share their views about their education using drawing, writing and speaking tasks.
- The information they share will help Educational Psychologists and schools to understand more about Emotionally Based School Avoidance and will help to plan future support in this area.
- The findings will contribute to the small amount of research hearing the views of young person presenting with Emotionally Based School Avoidance.

Potential Risks

- Your child may be thinking about difficult experiences they have had or are having with school. However, to reduce the risk of distress, an imaginary 'education' is being explore instead of 'school'. The purpose and nature of the sessions will be framed positively and openly so that your child feels empowered to share their views. I will be sensitive and vigilant to any changes in body language or mood, and will offer a break, parental comfort or can continue the session at any time if your child appears distressed. They can choose to terminate the session at any time without a need for justification.

If you and your child have decided that you want to take part in the study, the next sheet is a consent form to fill in to say that you are happy for your child to take part.

I will then get in touch with you to arrange an initial meeting and to ensure your child is still wanting to participate. Your child will also have their own information sheet to read and consent form to fill in.

Thank you for taking time to read this information.

If you have any complaints about the study, please contact:

Stephen Jackson (Chair of Ethics Committee)

stephen.jackson@nottingham.ac.uk

Parent/Carer Consent Form

Title of Project: Using a Personal Construct Psychology technique to explore and understand the constructs of young people experiencing Emotionally Based School Avoidance:

Ethics Approval Number: S1610R

Researcher: Katie Hughes [**e-mail]** - katie.hughes@nottingham.ac.uk

Supervisor: Dr Nicholas Durbin **[e-mail]** nicholas.durbin@nottingham.ac.uk

Dear parent/carer of _____

Please make sure you have read the Information Sheet before filling in this form. Please read the statements below and put a circle around 'yes' or 'no' that you most agree with then sign your name at the bottom of the page if you are happy for your child to take part in Katie's project. **Please answer the questions independently.**

- **Have you read and understood the Information Sheet?**
  YES/NO
- **Have you and your child had the opportunity to ask questions about the study at any point?**
  YES/NO
- **Have all your questions been answered satisfactorily?**
  YES/NO
- **Do you understand that your child is free to withdraw from the study at any time?**
  YES/NO
- **I give permission for my child's data from this study to be shared with other researchers provided that my anonymity is protected.**
  YES/NO
- **Do you agree for yor child to take part in the study?**
  YES/NO

Parent/Carer signature *Date*

Appendix F: Exemplar Debrief Letter to Participant

University of Nottingham
UK | CHINA | MALAYSIA

Thank you

Dear Bella*

I just wanted to say a HUGE thank you for taking part in my research project. I really value the time and thought you gave to my study!

I am hoping that this research will support young people like you who find it tricky to go to school. Now that you have taken part in the study, I will carefully look over the drawings and responses you shared with me. I will use what you told me to think about how we can improve schools and help young people like you feel more comfortable attending in the future.

I hope you enjoyed taking part in the sessions, if anything has worried you about the sessions please do speak to your mum or member of staff in school and they can pass this on to me. If you would like extra support, there is a link at the bottom of this letter for a charity called Kooth, which offers free, safe, and anonymous support for young people. I can also provide your Mum with information about other support services if needed.

Once I have finished writing up the findings of this study, I can send a copy to your Mum so you can read them if you'd like to. I will contact your Mum to check if you would like this, so let them know if you are interested.

A brief summary of the information you shared on the next page!

Thank you again for your fantastic contribution to this project–it means a lot to me!

Best wishes

Katie Hughes

kooth

get free, safe and anonymous support online (this is for young people)
The link for the website is - https://www.kooth.com/

What you don't want in education (Non-Ideal Environment)

Lack of Breaks: I don't like long lessons without opportunities to move around or take breaks.

Bullying and Unsafe Environment: I feel unsafe or unsupported when I'm around peers who bully or don't make me feel comfortable.

Unfair Treatment: I don't like it when teachers favour certain pupils or treat others unfairly.

Strict Rules: I find it difficult when there's no flexibility for breaks or working with my peers.

Lack of Support: I struggle when teachers don't help me when I need it, give unclear instructions, or expect me to handle an overwhelming amount of work.

Overwhelming Environment: I feel uncomfortable in noisy, crowded classrooms with bad smells and extreme temperatures.

Unrealistic Expectations: I don't like having weekend homework, short deadlines, or being treated as though everyone learns the same way.

Negative Teacher Behaviours: I find it upsetting when teachers shout, dismiss me, or show a lack of respect or understanding.

What you do want in education (Ideal Environment)

Home-Based Learning: I would like a cosy, comfortable setting at home with a sofa, blanket, and furry rug.

Cats: Having cats and pictures of cats around me would create a calming atmosphere.

Low Sensory Stimulation: I need dim lighting, minimal smells, and no harsh sunlight to avoid migraines.

Close Relationships: I want my family to be present for support and one trusted friend to communicate with during breaks.

Supportive Online Learning: I would have a consistent teacher who understands me and communicates with me via email or voice call (no video).

Flexible Timetable: I'd have lessons from Tuesday to Friday, allowing for brain breaks or time out when I need it, without being questioned.

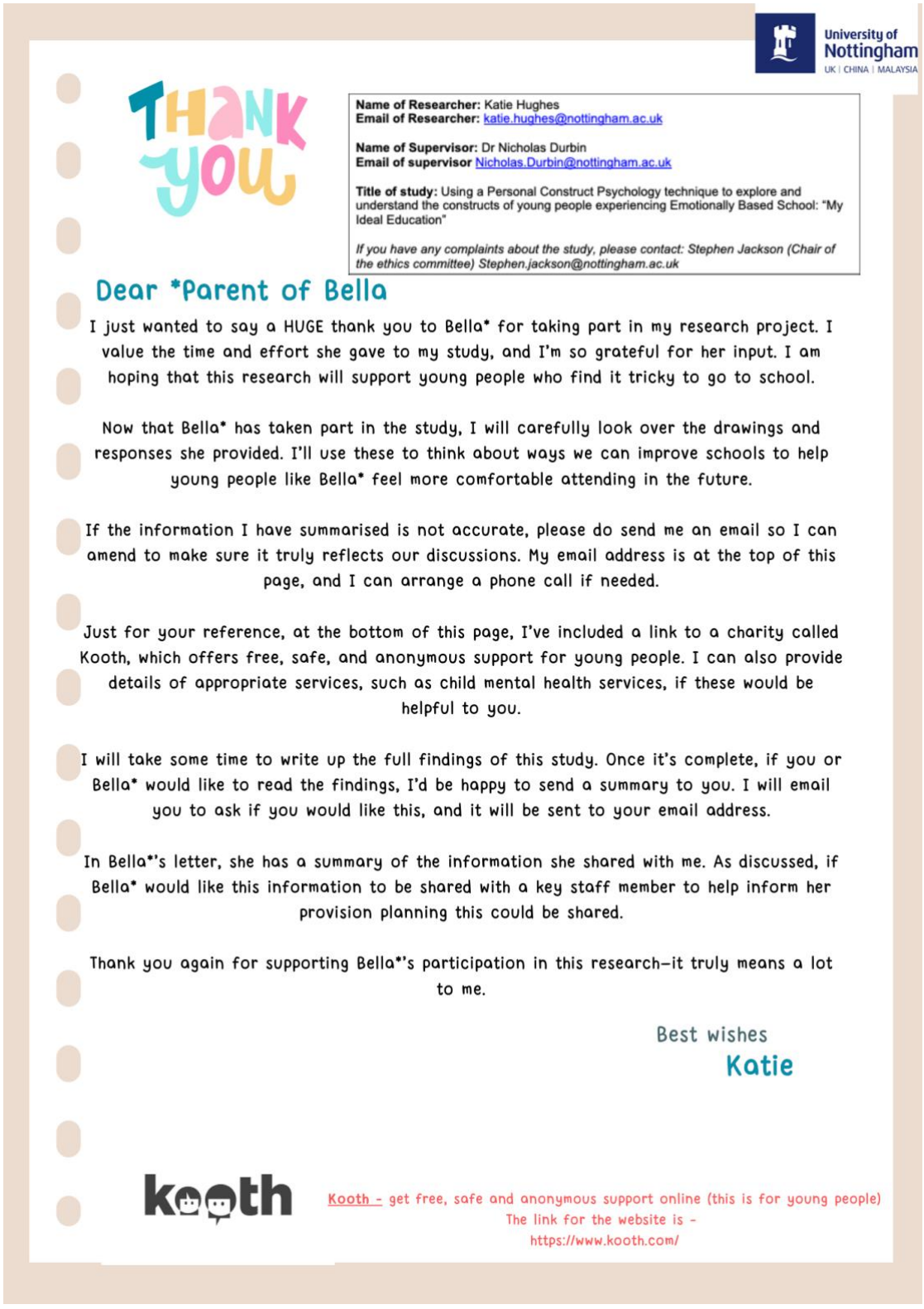
Interest-Based Curriculum: I'd focus on personal interests, like nature and animals, and practical skills that are useful for me.

Animal Care Opportunities: I'd love to do hands-on learning at a centre with animals like dogs, rabbits, and turtles.

Relaxed Rules: I'd have the flexibility to chew gum, express my emotions, and have background noise (like familiar YouTube videos) if it helps me concentrate.

Supportive and Understanding Environment: I wouldn't want harsh or strict teachers. I'd like supportive marking and feedback, with teachers getting to know me and understanding what I want to share.

Appendix G: Exemplar Debrief Letter to Family



University of Nottingham
UK | CHINA | MALAYSIA

THANK YOU

Name of Researcher: Katie Hughes
Email of Researcher: katie.hughes@nottingham.ac.uk

Name of Supervisor: Dr Nicholas Durbin
Email of supervisor Nicholas.Durbin@nottingham.ac.uk

Title of study: Using a Personal Construct Psychology technique to explore and understand the constructs of young people experiencing Emotionally Based School: "My Ideal Education"

If you have any complaints about the study, please contact: Stephen Jackson (Chair of the ethics committee) Stephen.jackson@nottingham.ac.uk

Dear *Parent of Bella

I just wanted to say a HUGE thank you to Bella* for taking part in my research project. I value the time and effort she gave to my study, and I'm so grateful for her input. I am hoping that this research will support young people who find it tricky to go to school.

Now that Bella* has taken part in the study, I will carefully look over the drawings and responses she provided. I'll use these to think about ways we can improve schools to help young people like Bella* feel more comfortable attending in the future.

If the information I have summarised is not accurate, please do send me an email so I can amend to make sure it truly reflects our discussions. My email address is at the top of this page, and I can arrange a phone call if needed.

Just for your reference, at the bottom of this page, I've included a link to a charity called Kooth, which offers free, safe, and anonymous support for young people. I can also provide details of appropriate services, such as child mental health services, if these would be helpful to you.

I will take some time to write up the full findings of this study. Once it's complete, if you or Bella* would like to read the findings, I'd be happy to send a summary to you. I will email you to ask if you would like this, and it will be sent to your email address.

In Bella*'s letter, she has a summary of the information she shared with me. As discussed, if Bella* would like this information to be shared with a key staff member to help inform her provision planning this could be shared.

Thank you again for supporting Bella*'s participation in this research–it truly means a lot to me.

Best wishes
Katie

kooth

Kooth - get free, safe and anonymous support online (this is for young people)
The link for the website is -
https://www.kooth.com/

Appendix H: Prompt Interview Guide "Ideal Education" Activity - Non-Ideal Education

Instruction: Draw, write and/or talk about your non-ideal learning environment.

PEOPLE

- Who is there?
- How many people are there?
- What are their personalities like?
- Who is teaching you?
- What are the people in this space like?
- How do they act towards you and others?
- How do you feel around them?
- Who do you spend your time with? (e.g. free time, learning time)

ENVIRONMENT/ SETTING

- What does the setting look like?
- Where is it located?
- What can you see, smell, hear, touch, or taste there?
- How does it make you feel?
- How often would you need to go there?
- What would happen if you didn't go on some days?

LEARNING

- What are you learning?
- How are you learning?
- Where are you learning?
- What does the learning space look like?
- How do you feel in this learning space?
- Who decides what and how you learn?
- What activities are you doing? What are you doing when you're learning?

STRUCTURE

- Who decides what you do?
- Are there any rules?
- Do you have any choice in the decisions or rules being made? What choices would you make?
- How do you feel about these rules?
- Are there individual goals in this place? Are you working towards anything?
- Can you describe what you like to do during free time? Is this your choice or is it decided for you?
- Do you have support, and how does it feel?

Last question for non-ideal education - What is your least favourite thing in this place?

Appendix I: Prompt Interview Guide - "Ideal Education" Activity - Ideal Education

Instruction: Draw, write and/or talk about your ideal learning environment.

PEOPLE

- Who is there?
- How many people are there?
- What are their personalities like?
- Who is teaching you?
- What are the people in this space like?
- How do they act towards you and others?
- How do you feel around them?
- Who do you spend your time with? (e.g. free time, learning time)

ENVIRONMENT/ SETTING

- What does the setting look like?
- Where is it located?
- What can you see, smell, hear, touch, or taste there?
- How does it make you feel?
- How often would you need to go there?
- What would happen if you didn't go on some days?

LEARNING

- What are you learning?
- How are you learning?
- Where are you learning?
- What does the learning space look like?
- How do you feel in this learning space?
- Who decides what and how you learn?
- What activities are you doing? What are you doing when you're learning?

STRUCTURE

- Who decides what you do?
- Are there any rules?
- Do you have any choice in the decisions or rules being made? What choices would you make?
- How do you feel about these rules?
- Are there individual goals in this place? Are you working towards anything?
- Can you describe what you like to do during free time? Is this your choice or is it decided for you?
- Do you have support, and how does it feel?

Last question for Ideal education - What is your favourite thing in this place?

Appendix J: Enhancements to the Prompt Interview Guide Following Peer Supervision

Changes to the Prompt Interview Guide following peer supervision with TEP

Following the session with a TEP colleague, the following amendments were made to the Prompt Interview Guide

1. *Reordering of Sections - Reordered sections to begin with 'People' instead of 'Environment', as through discussion, we felt participants may find it easier to think about people first before describing the setting without a clear structure.*

2. *Ensuring Questions are as Open as Possible - We reflected on whether questions were fully open-ended to encourage richer responses, promote a more detailed answer and reduce likelihood of researcher influences. Questions changed:*

- *From 'Do you have rules in this place?' to 'Are there rules in this place? If so, who makes them? How do you feel about them?'*

- *From 'Who do you spend your time with?', revised to 'Who do you spend most of your time with? What do you do together?'*

- *From 'What happens during free time?' to 'Can you describe what you like to do during free time? Is this your choice or is it decided for you?'*

- *From 'How do the people in this space behave?' to ‘'What are the people in this space like? How do they act towards you and others?'*

Appendix K: The "Ideal Education Activity" Section 1: Exemplar Prompt Cards

Appendix L: The "Ideal Education Activity" Section 2: Scaling Task Instructions

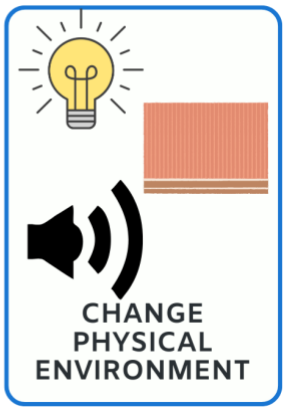
Here is a scale, mark on the scale

1. Where your 'non ideal education would be?'
2. Where your 'ideal education' would be?
3. How you would rate your current education (what that involves now)

Final question:

- What would move your current education one step up the scale towards your ideal education?

Appendix M: The "Ideal Education" Activity: Section 2: Exemplar Prompt Cards



Appendix N: Participant Background Information

Participant demographic and background information was recorded to contextualise participants' educational experiences.

Participant pseudonym	Location of sessions	Age and year group	Gender	Ethnicity	SEND & medical needs	Pre-study attendance percentage	Educational background and attendance challenges shared by parent/carer or key adult
Bella	Home – parent in proximity	15 (Year 11)	Female	White British	Autism, Epilepsy	0%	Not attending any provision. Full time at home. School sending home tasks to complete. Attendance started declining from the transition to secondary school, has not been in a classroom for 3 years.
Batman	Home – parent not in proximity	14 (Year 10)	Female	White British	No information provided	21%	Year 9 emotional health concerns, attendance dropped to 90%. Year 10 brief return to school, anxiety idenfitied by GP, concerns raised. Currently at home at all times, completing tasks at home.
Summer	One session took place at local sports facility – parent or staff	13 (Year 8)	Female	White British	Self-reported possible Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD; not diagnosed)	30%	Attendance has been inconsistent due to emotional health challenges since transitioning to secondary school. Currently attends a sports provision once a week. Following the first research session, a two-month period of non-attendance began at both school and the sports facility, with the total duration of absence

	member not in proximity						remaining unclear. The second research session did not take place due to young person absent from educational settings due to reported mental health challenges.
Stitch	Mainstream secondary school – parent not in proximity	13 (Year 9)	Female	White British	Autism	28%	Experiencing anxiety around school environment led to a provision plan put in place, including attendance for only morning sessions. Following the sessions, it was reported that the young person moved to Home Elective Education full time.
Harry	Home – parent in proximity	13 (Year 9)	Male	White British	No information provided	60%	Intermittent school attendance based on anxiety. Declining attendance since primary school.
DMR	One session in mainstream secondary school One session at home – parent not in proximity	12 (Year 8)	Male	White British	Severe Panic Attacks	40%	Experiencing anxiety around school environment led to a provision plan put in place, including attendance for 2 hours per day. Intermittent attendance following described panic attacks both in and outside of school resulting in reduced attendance.

Appendix O: Summary of Session Context for Each Participant

A separate table summarising session context (e.g., number of sessions, methods used, environment) was included to promote transparency regarding data generation processes, in line with good practice guidance for qualitative research Braun & Clarke (2022).

Pseudonym	**Number of sections completed (*Non-Ideal, Ideal education and scaling)***	**Number of Sessions and Dates**	**Use of Prompt Cards**	**Method of Data Generation (e.g. Drawing, Writing, Verbal)**	**Notes on Session Context**
Bella	All sessions completed.	3 sessions	No	Drawing, Writing, Verbal	Sessions completed at home with parent present in proximity; presence of family pets (cats) appeared to support participant comfort.
Batman	All sessions completed.	2 sessions	Yes (initially used in Section 1 but opted out afterwards)	Drawing, Writing, Verbal	Sessions completed at home; parent present in the house but not in the room; presence of family pets noted as supportive.
Summer	Only Non-Ideal Education	1 session	No	Drawing, Writing, Verbal	Session conducted at a local sports provision facility; key adult present at venue but not in the session room. *Second session could not occur due to participant's non-attendance.
Stitch	All sessions completed.	2 sessions	Yes (initially used in Section 1 but opted out afterwards)	Drawing, Writing, Verbal	Sessions completed in mainstream school during morning attendance; key adult nearby but not in immediate session space.

Harry	All sessions completed.	2 sessions	No	Verbal only	Sessions conducted at home with parent immediately present and occasionally engaging in conversation.
DMR	All sessions completed.	2 sessions	No	Verbal only	One session conducted at mainstream school; one session at home. Parent present but not in the immediate session space.

Appendix P: Pen Portraits of Each Participant, Researcher Brief Reflections on Engagement & Context of Sessions

(Participant 1) ***Bella*** *is a 15-year-old (Year 11) female who had not been in a classroom for three years and was being educated at home with remote school tasks. One session was postponed due to emotional distress (see Reflections, Appendix Z, a). She was highly engaged in drawing and discussion. Her mother and pets were present, which appeared to support her emotional comfort.*
(Participant 2) ***Batman*** *is a 14-year-old (Year 10) female who was completing schoolwork at home due to ongoing anxiety. She was more comfortable writing than speaking, and the visual prompts seemed to support her communication. Although reserved, she shared thoughtful reflections during the interview, often with the companionship of her cats nearby.*
(Participant 3) ***Summer*** *is a 13-year-old (Year 8) female who attended a weekly sports provision as her main form of education. During the task, she initially drew her ideal education instead of her non-ideal, which raised considerations about the accessibility and clarity of the task. However, she responded well to gentle redirection and engaged meaningfully when provided with prompts. A second session could not be completed due to reported anxiety and instability at home.*
(Participant 4) ***Stitch*** *is a 13-year-old (Year 9) female who attended school on a part-time basis. She was highly engaged in both drawing and discussion and appeared to lead the sessions with enthusiasm. Her descriptions were vivid and detailed, often linking her ideas to past experiences. It was later reported by her school that she had transitioned to EHE shortly after the sessions.*
(Participant 5) ***Harry*** *is a 13-year-old (Year 9) male who was experiencing fluctuating school attendance due to anxiety. Although he initially engaged with the drawing task, he soon chose to focus on verbal discussion only. His parent was present (see Reflective Diary, Appendix Z, d).*
(Participant 6) ***DMR*** *is a 12-year-old (Year 8) male who attended school for limited hours a day due to anxiety and had experienced panic attacks in and out of school. He began with the drawing task but soon opted for verbal discussion, which he engaged with more confidently. Sessions were split between home and school. DMR appeared more focused during the in school session compared to the home session. This appeared to be due to distractions at home (e.g. siblings, pets).*

Appendix Q: Template of Participant Evaluation Form

Evaluation of Katie's Research Project:

"Using a Personal Construct Psychology technique to explore and understand the constructs of young people experiencing Emotionally Based School Non-Attendance"

Young person pseudonym: _____
Date: _____

Please read the following statements about the session(s) you had and use the rating scale to indicate how much you agree of disagree with each one (1 = strongly disagree, 10 = strongly agree)

1. I enjoyed doing Katie's research sessions

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

2. The drawing part allowed me to shared my views best

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

3. The writing part allowed me to share my views best

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

4. The speaking part allowed me to share by views best

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

5. I felt Katie understood, respected and valued by views

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

If you can, please write down your response to each of these questions:

6. My favourite part of the activity was
_____
_____
7. My least favourite part of the activity was
_____
_____
8. If I did the research sessions again, I would change or do differently
_____
_____

9. Would you like a copy of your drawings and writing from the session to keep: (please circle your answer)

YES NO

10. I would like Katie to do me a written summary about what I shared in the sessions:

YES NO

11. I am still happy for Katie to write about the session we had in her research for her Thesis:

YES NO

Thank you for taking part in my research and for completing the evaluation form!
Katie ☺

Appendix R: Ethical Approval from the University

The University of Nottingham
UNITED KINGDOM · CHINA · MALAYSIA

School of Psychology
The University of Nottingham
University Park
Nottingham
NG7 2RD

tel: +44 (0)115 846 7403 or (0)115 951 4344

SJ/tp

Ref: S1610R

Tuesday 9th July 2024

Dear Katie Hughes & Dr Mark Izzard-Snape

Ethics Committee Review

Thank you for submitting an account of your proposed research 'The personal constructs of young people experiencing Emotionally Based School Avoidance: The Ideal Education'

That proposal has now been reviewed and we are pleased to tell you it has met with the Committee's approval.

However:
Please note the following comments from our reviewers.

Reviewer One:

- Consent forms require a date and signature (+ date) of the researcher (see template).

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 S: Participant Demographic and Background Information Form

(Gathered from parent/carer or key adult)

Young person's Pseudonym	
Gender	
Age	
Year Group/Setting	
Ethnicity	
First Language	
Location of sessions	
Onset of needs in relation to Emotionally Based School Non-Attendance	
Percentage of school attendance (this year/previous years)	
What the young person's education looks like currently?	

Appendix T: Search Terms Used in Systematic Literature Review

Terms used in database searches

child* OR young per* OR youth OR teen* OR adolescen* OR pupil OR student*	voice* OR view* OR construct* OR personal construct OR experience OR narrative OR perspective* OR qual*	EBSNA OR Emotionally Based School Non-Attendance OR persistent absen* OR school refusal OR school avoidance OR non attend* OR emotionally based non-attendance OR EBSNA OR truant*

Note. The asterisk (*) ensures the inclusion of all suffix variations of a word, for example, young per* would include young person and young people.

Appendix U: Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria Appraisal in Systemic Literature Review

Author/s	Does the study identify participants who have experience of attendance difficulties that are not attributed to solely truancy?	If other views incorporated, are pupil views analysed seperately?	Do the young people illicit views of their EBSNA?	Are the young people at secondary school age (only)?	Is the study a qualitative and/or mixed methods design?	Is the study written in English?	Is the study conducted in the UK?	Is the study published 2014 or after?	Include or excluded? [including main reason for exclusion)
Beckles (2014)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	Included
Clissold (2018)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	Included
James (2015)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	Included
Aucott (2014	✓	✗	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓	Excluded (inappropriate sample- pupil participants were primary school age)
Gray et al (2023)	?	✗	?	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	Excluded (pupil views not separated from adult

									voice during analysis stage)
Want (2020)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	Included
Baker & Bishop (2015)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	Included
Hagon et al (2022)	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	Excluded (pupil views not separated from adult voice during analysis stage)
Halligan & Cryer (2022)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	Included
How (2015)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	Included
Kljakovic et al (2021)	?	✓	?	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	Excluded (inappropriate sample – school staff views)
Carroll (2015)	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓	✓	✓	Excluded (no empirical data)
Wright (2023)	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓	Excluded

									(inappropriate sample – primary aged pupil participants)
Gregory & Purcell (2014)	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	Included
Brede et al (2017)	✗	✓	✗	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓	Excluded (inappropriate sample and focus – based on school exclusions and reintegration)

Appendix V: Template for CASP (2018) checklist for Qualitative Research

NOTE: During critical appraisal, never make assumptions about what the researchers have done. If it is not possible to tell, use the "Can't tell" response box. If you can't tell, at best it means the researchers have not been explicit or transparent, but at worst it could mean the researchers have not undertaken a particular task or process. Once you've finished the critical appraisal, if there are a large number of "Can't tell" responses, consider whether the findings of the study are trustworthy and interpret the results with caution.

Section A Are the results valid?	
1. Was there a clear statement of the aims of the research?	☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Can't Tell
CONSIDER: • *what was the goal of the research?* • *why was it thought important?* • *its relevance*	
2. Is a qualitative methodology appropriate?	☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Can't Tell
CONSIDER:	

• *If the research seeks to interpret or illuminate the actions and/or subjective experiences of research participants* • *Is qualitative research the right methodology for addressing the research goal?*	
3. Was the research design appropriate to address the aims of the research?	☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Can't Tell
CONSIDER: • *if the researcher has justified the research design (e.g., have they discussed how they decided which method to use)*	
4. Was the recruitment strategy appropriate to the aims of the research?	☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Can't Tell
CONSIDER: • *If the researcher has explained how the participants were selected* • *If they explained why the participants they selected were the most appropriate to provide access to the type of knowledge sought by the study* • *If there are any discussions around recruitment (e.g. why some people chose not to take part)*	
5. Was the data collected in a way that addressed the research issue?	☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Can't Tell

CONSIDER: • *If the setting for the data collection was justified* • *If it is clear how data were collected (e.g. focus group, semi-structured interview etc.)* • *If the researcher has justified the methods chosen* • *If the researcher has made the methods explicit (e.g. for interview method, is there an indication of how interviews are conducted, or did they use a topic guide)* • *If methods were modified during the study. If so, has the researcher explained how and why* • *If the form of data is clear (e.g. tape recordings, video material, notes etc.)* • *If the researcher has discussed saturation of data*	
6. Has the relationship between researcher and participants been adequately considered?	☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Can't Tell
CONSIDER: • *If the researcher critically examined their own role, potential bias and influence during (a) formulation of the research questions (b) data collection, including sample recruitment and choice of location* • *How the researcher responded to events during the study and whether they considered the implications of any changes in the research design*	
Section B: What are the results?	
7. Have ethical issues been taken into consideration?	☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Can't Tell

CONSIDER: • *If there are sufficient details of how the research was explained to participants for the reader to assess whether ethical standards were maintained* • *If the researcher has discussed issues raised by the study (e.g. issues around informed consent or confidentiality or how they have handled the effects of the study on the participants during and after the study)* • *If approval has been sought from the ethics committee*	
8. Was the data analysis sufficiently rigorous?	☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Can't Tell
CONSIDER: • *If there is an in-depth description of the analysis process* • *If thematic analysis is used. If so, is it clear how the categories/themes were derived from the data* • *Whether the researcher explains how the data presented were selected from the original sample to demonstrate the analysis process* • *If sufficient data are presented to support the findings* • *To what extent contradictory data are taken into account* • *Whether the researcher critically examined their own role, potential bias and influence during analysis and selection of data for presentation*	
9. Is there a clear statement of findings?	☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Can't Tell

CONSIDER: • *If the findings are explicit* • *If there is adequate discussion of the evidence both for and against the researcher's arguments* • *If the researcher has discussed the credibility of their findings (e.g. triangulation, respondent validation, more than one analyst)* • *If the findings are discussed in relation to the original research question*	
Section C: Will the results help locally?	
10. How valuable is the research?	☐ Yes ☐ No ☐ Can't Tell
CONSIDER: • *If the researcher discusses the contribution the study makes to existing knowledge or understanding (e.g., do they consider the findings in relation to current practice or policy, or relevant research-based literature* • *If they identify new areas where research is necessary* • *If the researchers have discussed whether or how the findings can be transferred to other populations or considered other ways the research may be used*	

Appendix W: Quality Appraisal Process for the Systemic Literature Review using CASP (2018)

Author(s)/ Year	Was there a clear statement of the aims of the research?	Is a qualitative methodology appropriate?	Was the research design appropriate to address the aims of the research?	Was the recruitment strategy appropriate?	Was the data collected in a way that addressed the research issue?	Has the relationship Yes between researcher and participants been adequately considered?	Have ethical issues been taken into consideration?	Was the data analysis sufficiently rigorous?	Is there a clear statement of findings?	How valuable is the research?	CASP outcome (High/ Medium/ low)
Beckles (2014).	Yes – clear statement of aims.	Yes, a qualitative methodology is appropriate as it allows for an in-depth exploration of personal experiences and perceptions	Yes, the research design was appropriate. Semi-structured interviews were used to gather detailed narratives for pupils experiencing EBSNA aligning well with the study's aims.	Yes, the recruitment strategy was appropriate. The study recruited 12 pupils.	Yes, data collection was well-suited to the research issue. The researchers justified the use of semi-structured interviews to allow for in-depth exploration while maintaining flexibility. The methods were made explicit, with an interview guide likely used to ensure consistency.	Yes, the researchers critically examined their roles and potential biases - in particular in relation to her social constructivism stance to the researcher and potential subjectivity in analysis of the data.	Yes, Ethical approval was obtained and included in the article. Ethical issues such as informed consent, confidentiality, and minimising harm/risk to participants (e.g. sensitivity to participants' experiences) were considered in depth.	Yes, the data analysis was rigorous. RTA was used to identify key themes	Yes, the study provided a clear statement of findings	Yes, the research is valuable for understanding EBSNA. It provides detailed insights into the experiences of EBSNA	High
Clissold (2018).	Yes, the study aimed to examine the construction of reasons for EBSNA by pupils and others.	Yes, a qualitative methodology	Yes, the research design involved examining discourses through qualitative methods,	Yes, the study included participants who were directly involved with ESNA	Yes, the data collection methods were suitable for addressing the research issue. Interviews were conducted	Yes, this was explored in the study.	Ethical issues are discussed briefly.	Yes, it appears that the analysis process was rigorous.	Yes, the study provided a clear statement of findings	Yes, the research is valuable for understanding EBSNA.	High
James (2015).	Yes, the study aimed to explore the	Yes, a qualitative methodology is	Yes, the research design, using detailed case studies and	Yes, the recruitment strategy included pupils	Yes, data collection was suitable. The study used the	Yes, the researchers critically examined their	Yes it states ethical controls were put in place that are relevant to	Yes -In-depth analysis methods	Yes, the study provided a clear statement of findings,	Yes- The research is valuable for understandi	High

	perceptions of pupils with attendance below 85%, focusing on their lived experiences of EBSNA.	appropriate as it allows for in-depth exploration of the pupils' perspectives and personal experiences with EBSNA.	semi-structured interviews, was appropriate for capturing the nuanced experiences of the pupils.	with low attendance and others.	School Refusal Assessment Scale (SRAS) and semi-structured interviews. The methods were justified as they provided both structured and flexible data collection. Methods were explicitly detailed, including the use of interview schedules.	roles and potential biases - including their subjective analysis of the results. Reflections were given on how the researchers epistemological stance may influence the research.	appropriate governing ethical bodies including informed consent, confidentiality, and sensitivity to participants' experiences. These were explored in depth in the study. Respect and sensitivity was given to vulnerable group of participants which include rapport building etc.	were described. They used Braun and Clarke's six stage process using thematic analysis.	illustrating the importance of social relationships and trust in supporting pupils with EBSNA. Implications of findings were provided.	ng EBSNA. It offers detailed insights into the experiences of pupils with low attendance	
Want (2020).	Yes, the study aimed to explore the narratives of young people and their parents regarding their experiences with EBSNA and their perceptions of the future.	Yes, a qualitative methodology is appropriate for this research as it allows for an in-depth exploration of personal stories and experiences related to EBSA, providing a rich understanding of the participants' perspectives.	Yes, the research design used an adapted version of Hiles and Cermák's Narrative Oriented Inquiry model, which is suitable for capturing the complexities of personal narratives and understanding the multifaceted nature of EBSA.	Yes, the recruitment strategy was appropriate. The study included 2 secondary-aged young people and 3 parents experiencing EBSNA	Yes, the data collection methods were well-suited to the research issue. The interviews were conducted in settings comfortable for participants, allowing them to share their stories freely. Guided narrative interviews supported by a visual life path tool were used, allowing for a deep exploration of participants' experiences.	Yes, the researchers discussed their role and potential biases including their influence of their epistemological stance they took.	Yes, ethical approval was stated. Relevant ethical considerations included informed consent, confidentiality, and sensitivity to participants' experiences. Details were provided with all. Consent was obtained from both families and young people individually. issues relation to data protection were addressed.	Yes, data analysis was rigorous. The researcher used both holistic-form analysis and categorical-content analysis to systematically identify key themes and patterns within the narratives.	Yes, the study provided a clear statement of findings, identifying key themes	Yes, The research is valuable for understanding EBSNA.	High

Baker & Bishop (2015).	Yes, the study clearly stated its aim to explore the lived experiences of individuals who have experienced EBSNA.	Yes, a qualitative methodology is appropriate because it allows for an in-depth exploration of subjective experiences and personal meanings, which are essential for understanding complex phenomena like extended EBSNA	Yes, the phenomenological research design was appropriate.	Yes, the recruitment strategy was appropriate as it focused on selecting individuals who had directly experienced EBSNA.	Yes, data were collected through in-depth interviews, which are suitable for phenomenological research. This also had prompts by a topic guide designed to permit participants to tell their own stories	This is not clear in the study.	Yes - Some ethical considerations have been discussed such as pseudonym have been used to ensure confidentiality, written informed consent from young people's parents as they were under the age of 16 and informed assent from young people individually. Reference to potential power between researcher/participant. No reference to approval sought from ethics committee.	Yes, there is a description of the data analysis which suggests it was likely rigorous. It identified involvement with systematic coding and thematic analysis to identify key themes and patterns in the data. The discussion is a reflective account of the findings.	Yes, the study provided a clear statement of findings, outlining the key themes and insights derived from the participants' experiences.	The research is valuable to my systematic literature review on EBSNA. It offers in-depth, qualitative insights into EBSNA	Medium
Halligan & Cryer (2022).	Yes, the study clearly aimed to explore the views of students with EBSA on what support strategies work for them in a specialist setting.	Yes, although uses mixed methods approach - the qualitative section is appropriate for capturing detailed and nuanced views of students,	Yes, the study employed a mixed-methods approach, as part of the Qualitative design - Semi-structured Interviews. Conducted with students to gather qualitative data about their experiences and views on what	Yes, details about how the participants were recruited (opportunity sampling, year 11) There was no information to why these were selected. The recruitment of students with EBSA from a specialist setting ensured that the findings	Yes, data were collected through methods that facilitated detailed exploration of students' views.	Yes, the researchers' reflective approach and establishment of rapport with participants ensured that the data collected were genuine and reliable, which is crucial for translating findings into practice.	Some ethical considerations in relation to consent and confidentiality were explored. It does not state if approval was gained.	Yes, detailed were included how the analysis took place for both Quan and qual methods.	Yes, two themes were generated from the data and discussed in the discussion part of the article. The study discusses potential of transferability no generalisability. Issues in terms of internal	Yes, the paper will be valuable for SLR as it gives information on The specific needs and preferences of young people with EBSA,	High

		which can provide rich insights for practical application in educational settings	worked for them in the specialist setting	are directly applicable to similar contexts,					validity was discussed		
How (2015).	Yes – participants experiences of EBSNA.	Yes, a qualitative methodology, particularly interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), is appropriate for this study because it allows for in-depth exploration of students' personal experiences and perceptions.	Yes interviews were used and were appropriate to collect unique experiences of EBSA participants in relation to the research questions.	Yes, the recruitment strategy was appropriate.	Yes all justified in relation to data collection. Interview schedule justified.	Yes, this is discussed briefly.	Yes, the recruitment strategy was appropriate. The study would include Key Stage 4 students with persistently low attendance, ensuring that the participants were directly relevant to the research question and could provide valuable insights into their experiences.	Yes, In-depth information is given about how the data was analysed.	Yes, there is a clear discussion of findings.	Yes, the study directly addresses the views of young people with emotionally based school avoidance on their non-attendance	High
Gregory & Purcell (2014)	Yes, Explored the participants experiences of primary school, their current situation and hopes for the future.	Yes, a qualitative methodology, particularly IPA is appropriate for this study because it	Yes interviews were used and were appropriate to collect unique experiences of EBSA participants in relation to the	Yes recruitment strategy stated, 3 pupils alongside their parents.	Yes, Semi-structured interviews.	This does not seem to be discussed.	This is hard to identify.	Yes IPA analysis – appropriate for the SLR.	Yes, there is a clear discussion of findings.	Yes, the study directly gives insight into lived experience of EBSNA from pupils	High

		allows for in-depth exploration of students' personal experiences and perceptions.	research questions.							perspectives.	

Appendix X: Summary Table of Included Studies in Systemic Literature Review

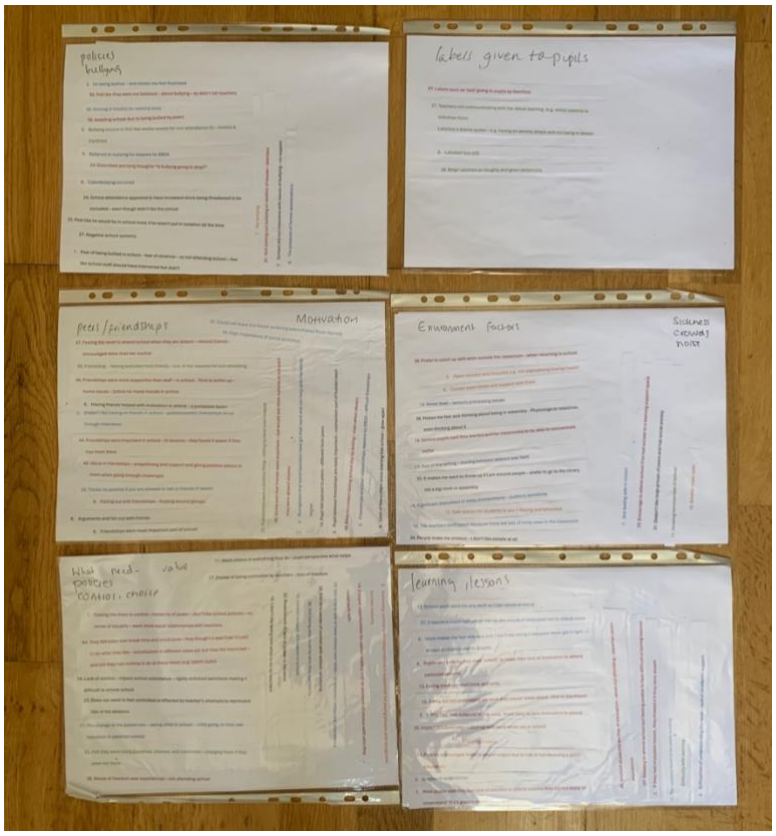
Author/Year/Title	Sample	Topic (relevant to review question)	Methodology and data collection	Main themes identified by authors
Beckles (2014). Exploring experiences and perception of key staff 4 students whose school attendance is low.	12 secondary pupils (Yr 8 & 9, 6M, 6F), 87-77% unauthorised absences	What are the perceptions and perceived experiences of pupils during the early stages of their school nonattendance? What are the perceived experiences of the type of support pupils have been offered or used since experiencing attendance difficulties?	Semi-structured interviews, Thematic Analysis Utilised personal construct psychological visuals and solution brief therapy tools	• 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
Clissold (2018). A qualitative exploration of pupil, parent and staff discourses of extended school non-attendance.	10 participants: 3 pupils (1M, 2F, 15-16yrs), 4 parents (4F), 3 staff (3F), All White British	How do young people, parent/carers and educators construct the reasons for extended school non-attendance?	Unstructured interviews, discourse analysis Interviews conducted alongside other tools to facilitate participants in talking about reasons for ESNA. (All About me, School	• Negative school experiences • Mental health • Lack of understanding • Support and provision

			timeline and Grid elaboration method).	
James (2015). Pupil voice in school non attendance: exploring the perceptions of pupils, whose attendance is below 85%.	6 pupils (3M, 2F, 1 not stated), aged 12-15, <85% attendance + 2 key workers Plus 2 key workers	How do individuals who are not currently meeting the government targets for attendance, construe school and school attendance?	Semi structured interviews with PCP (triadic elicitation, laddering, reparatory grid)	• Not feeling safe in school • Experiencing mental health difficulties • Poor quality of sleep • Difficulties with peers
Want (2020). A Narrative Oriented Inquiry into Emotionally Based School Non-Attendance: hearing the voices of young people and their parents.	2 pupils (1M, 1F) Y10 White British 1 at PRU (75%) 1 at home (0%) + parents	How do the young people understand their experiences of EBSNA?	Narrative interviews with life path tool (adapted from life story grid) Narrative oriented inquiry	• 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
Baker & Bishop (2015). Out of school:	4 secondary pupils (11-16 yrs,	How do children who have been absent long term from	Semi-structured interviews IPA	• Initial school experiences

a phenomenological exploration of extended non-attendance.	2F, 2M), attendance difficulties lasting at least 1 school term	school make sense of their experience?		• 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
Halligan & Cryer (2022). Emotionally Based School Non-Attendance (EBSNA): Students' Views of What Works in a Specialist Setting	19 participants (approx 10M, 9F), Year 11, aged 15/16	What are the protective factors in school attendance?	Semi-structured interviews IPA	• Interconnectivity – nurturing adults, understand emotionally, autonomy and independence is supported, adults facilitate peer relationships, understand academically • Psychologically saftey – calmer exam times, smaller, no bullying, open-minded and inclusive and timeouts allowed
How (2015). Exploring the experiences and perceptions of Key Stage 4 students whose school attendance is persistently low.	5 low-attending pupils in Year 11 (3M, 2F), attendance 78%-89% in Yr 10	Aimed to explore the participants' lived experiences.	Semi-structured interviews and IPA analysis.	• 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
Gregory & Purcell (2014)	3 secondary-aged pupils (age not specified), pupils were either registered for Elective Home Education, or recieving support from a Home Tuition Service. + 5 parents	Aimed to explore participants experiences of their primary school experiences, their current situation and hopes for the future	Semi-structured interviews, and IPA analysis.	• Medical conditions and use of medication. • Experiences within the school environment. • Emotional distress, low self-confidence and self-harm. • Limited opportunities for CYP's voice to be heard. • Aspirations and Future plans

Appendix Y: Systemic Literature Review, Raw Data Initial Coding Development



Appendix Z: Excerpts From Reflective Journal

A) October 2024 – Data Collection

"This session in particular was emotionally challenging. The young person on arrival was visibly distressed, hiding under a blanket. Through careful discussion with them and their parent, it became clear that they wanted to take part in the research but felt deeply frustrated with the education system, feeling unseen and unsupported. This moment reaffirmed the importance of my study and strengthened my confidence in its relevance. It reminded me why hearing the voices of pupils experiencing EBSNA, especially those whose perspectives often go unheard is so necessary. Moving forward, and on discussion with my supervisor, I plan to include a debrief letter with a participant summary that outlines key themes and suggestions from their input. This will only be shared with the young person, for them to pass on if they wish, in order to maintain confidentiality and respect their autonomy"

B) October 2024 – Data Collection

"Finally, I have secured two participants for the study. At one point, I began to question whether this research would be feasible at all and even considered whether a shift to a case study design might be necessary. Although reaching this stage has been challenging, I feel genuinely grateful to have two participants who are not only suitable but enthusiastic about taking part.

C) October 2024 – Data Collection

"Reflecting on process with the first participant took multiple sessions, including one rescheduled due to anxiety. This is reminding me of the time and emotional investment required when working with emotionally vulnerable young people. I've noticed my own instinctive urge to offer more support, which is prompting me to reflect carefully on the distinction between my role as a researcher and my identity as a Trainee Educational Psychologist. Navigating these ethical boundaries has been complex particularly when families express a desire for additional input or guidance. I'm learning that it is vital to be clear and transparent about my role from the outset. As much as I want to be helpful, I must ensure I do no harm or inadvertently raise expectations of ongoing support that I am not in a position to provide within the remit of this research"

D) November 2024 – Data collection

"During this session, the participant requested that their mother remain in the room, which appeared to provide emotional comfort and reduce anxiety. At times, when the participant needed longer to think, the parent offered suggestions. I noticed that the terms "ideal" and "non-ideal" education were initially quite abstract for the young person, and it was sometimes difficult for them to remember which was which across activities. Prompts were provided to support this navigation, as at times, the participant discussed their ideal during the non-ideal activity. I became increasingly aware that the parent may have been influencing the data, particularly through suggestions that the young person seemed to adopt. To try to reduce this, I used phrases such as, "Those are some ideas, but what do you think?" to refocus the conversation toward the young person's own perspective. During note-taking, I made a conscious effort to capture only the participant's words, being mindful not to let the parent's input shape the narrative or data collected".

E) January 2025 - Terminology Shift: From EBSA to EBSNA

"As my thesis progressed, I became increasingly aware of how the terminology I used shaped the framing of the issue I was investigating. Although I initially used the term Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA) throughout my planning and early writing, I made a conscious decision during the later stages to shift to Emotionally Based School Non-Attendance (EBSNA). This was driven by a growing discomfort with the potential for "avoidance" to imply blame or deficit within the child or young person. In addition to reviewing terminology during the review of the literature review stage, I also found that in conversations with families and young people, using the term EBSA felt increasingly uncomfortable. Saying that a young person was "avoiding school" did not reflect how they or their families described their experience and it felt, at times, subtly blaming. I noticed that using EBSNA instead felt more respectful, as it placed the emphasis on the fact of non-attendance without implying intent, failure, or deficit within the young person".

F) Data Analysis (January – February 2025)

"As I begin the coding process, I find myself wanting to jump to themes too quickly especially when certain patterns feel familiar or align with what I expect to find. I consciously slow myself down and stay close to the data, reminding myself that my role is to make space for participants' meanings, not to impose my own too early. I also notice moments where I question whether I am interpreting the data or simply describing it, particularly when coding emotionally charged content. This prompts me to revisit Braun and Clarke's guidance on reflexive thematic analysis and to accept that my subjectivity is part of the process, as long as it's acknowledged. I am writing memos alongside codes to track my assumptions and reactions, which helps me remain transparent and reflexive. I will type these up later and make sure I revisit them along the process".

"As I move through the coding process, I begin to notice that some participants' voices come through more strongly than others, either because they shared more in sessions or because their words resonate closely with my own values and professional beliefs. I start to question whether I am unintentionally giving more weight to these voices during analysis. It's challenging to hold all participants' contributions equally when some narratives feel more emotionally compelling or personally meaningful. I am reminding myself to stay reflexive, I revisit quieter transcripts and ask myself whether I am overlooking nuance. Revisiting the data appears to be helping me hold participants' narratives more equally".

"As I analyse the data separately for RQ1 and RQ2, I begin to question whether this was the best decision. While the separation initially felt purposeful reflecting the distinct aims of exploring pupils' ideal/non-ideal education (RQ1) and their suggestions for change (RQ2), I'm noticing that much of the data overlaps. Participants often talk about what they want by describing their ideal education, rather than explicitly suggesting changes, which makes the boundary between RQ1 and RQ2 feel more blurred than expected. I start to wonder if analysing the data together as one cohesive whole might have offered a more integrated understanding. However, I also worry that doing so could risk misrepresenting participants' intent or oversimplifying the nuance between envisioning and suggesting. I am making a note to reflect carefully on how I present the findings, aiming to balance fidelity to the dataset with clarity and accessibility for the reader, particularly in the discussion chapter".

Appendix AA: Participant Transcript Example

(participant DMR)

Non-Ideal education

Well I'm thinking about last school I was in they were very offensive to me, in a way, I died my hair and Mr E the headteacher said I couldn't have my hair dyed, so I said well other 2 girls have it, and he said well they are girls so it's fine, - it's a free world, my parents say what I can and can't do, so I don't understand, it wasn't fair that the others girls had it and I couldn't. It's just not fair

I remember the first time I realised I had anxiety, I didn't tell anyone as I was afraid people would call me a liar, I remember I used to play with friends a lot and they knocked on my door, and said are you coming out, I said no, and they said why it would be fun, and I realised I had anxiety, it feels like I can't do things that other people can do, I realised it was there all the time but that was the first time I noticed it. Anxiety doesn't give you a warning, you have to notice it before it gets too big.

I haven't got sympathy – don't help people because I'm scared I will get it wrong – I always change how I am with people to fit in so like I was attention seeker in year 4 and got into lots of fights, then I was a musician, but basically being different puts spotlight on you so now I try to blend in – I started therapy at the time I was starting fights

The longer I leave it [away from school] the harder it is to come back. That's what the anxiety does to you. This is me. If I'm away from education then it makes it harder, the anxiety doesn't go away, just have panic attacks and makes me worse. It's harder to go back.

In my worse education it would be where there is a bunch of teachers, like a group of teachers in one room together just talking – they make you feel like they going to keep checking on you, makes me nervous, it would be when people being constantly searched in school, that would make me nervous too even though I have nothing on me, it makes me nervous just in case someone planted something there, or I forget and brought something, just hate that feeling, scary and feels bad when they just constantly checking up on you – makes me nervous

When they scream at me, that would be the worse, for not doing work when if they didn't spend so much time screaming at me they would get through the lesson, they just missing lessons screaming at people about different things, most teachers would be shouting at me, saying I'm not doing work, and when they scream at me I would react and shout back when I won't let someone shout at me like that it's just rude when they do that – someone screaming at me would be the worst thing

If I've got to do loads of tests, I'm always afraid that teachers is coming round think I'm cheating and checking on me all the time it makes me nervous, like they just keep coming, this is the main reason why I don't do tests because they make me nervous, and I know I'll just fail anyway. When they are just constantly testing you on everything – this is so annoying

The worse would be big classrooms lots of people in them, teachers just chatting in groups, there is an annoying kid who bosses everyone and tells off everyone, teachers always goes on their side – I don't like it they are noisy and in my business all the time, even when I'm not

doing anything it's just that the teacher always sides on them and doesn't actually listen or understand you

I'm sat in the front which would be the worse – annoying kid between me and my friend so I can't be with my friend, for example, if I ask someone what's the answer to question A – the annoying kid says that you shouldn't be talking, but actually the teacher lets you talk quietly and if it's about work – so it doesn't make sense, I'm saying it quiet but the bossy kid just always telling you what to do even if you are doing it right

The worse bit for me is when teacher sides with 1 person because they are smarter, it makes me feel I'm not important, teacher doesn't recognise me – I just brush it off, but I don't like it at all

The worse would be I'm actually afraid of being myself here – everyone doesn't agree with me and the way I am – I lie to myself to fit in – I tried being a fighter, a musician, depends on who I'm with – so in this place I can't be myself I have to lie to myself, I don't draw a lot of attention, because being different draw attention [now]

People who in your business I really don't like, that's the worse, I like staying low profile and they make you not low profile- just makes a scene

I would be sitting in front in my worse education – feeling like the teacher is always watching me, without any music allowed – I can't live without music, that when my ADHD is the most active -is when I can't listen to music [young person just checks headphones listens 1 sec and carry's on]. Can't concentrate without it – without music I can't focus and keep up with the work so that would be the worse if I couldn't have my music

The classroom is very tiny, tables are close together, sitting away from my mate, can't learn in our own tables, they merge in twos or fours together – sat at front,

Sounds would bother me without music in, but music helps me not bothered about sounds – so sounds don't matter really to me with it on – with is good

I'm scared of spiders so if loads of spiders like tarantulas around would be really scary.

Id be doing a lot of history that doesn't matter – no purpose with it, don't need to learn it because it was in the past so why do we need to learn now, get bored of it and go to sleep
If certain teachers Mr E teaches it then yes id love that because he makes every lesson fun, even made geography fun which I thought wasn't possible so I think I was wrong you can make it fun, it depends on teacher, but I can't imagine history being fun so seems pointless
Mr E is the goat

I'd be doing loads of maths again it's pointless because I can have a calculator with me all the time in real life, so I don't get why we do it, no purpose to it, I see purpose in drama I feel good at it and I see the point in it

I can't cope with loads of changes, I don't like changes, when they keep changing, can't keep up with things, when changing the way you are learning all the time, my worse. Like if they say we are going to learn [this] and then next week [that] and it keeps changing, hard to understand it , the teacher should be sticking to lesson and not screaming at you, the worse would be if they said they are going to test how you react to changes in how we teaching to

see what is your best learning style, I just know that would put me on edge the whole time, I would hate that

My worse is if I'm not allowed to bring therapy dog – they don't let me, but I guess I would be distracted as sometimes dog distracts me, but also helps me – so I do get it through but yeah

What I would love to learn to do is how to train dogs – that's what I would like, I want to be offered a place to train them, when I'm 14.

You're not allowed to go to the toilet here – whenever you want which is really bad, I don't have to ask parents to go to the toilet at. Home, so I don't understand why I have to ask to go to the toilet here, they lock them so when you need them you can't go, Recently started locking toilet unless break time – I don't like that because if I need to go – I need to – no point keeping them locked, that's just bad it does make you nervous

Generally I don't follow rules, I follow my own that make sense to me, stay low profile and only talk to best friends, but somehow people do know who I am

If there were loads of clowns that would be scary here.

My worse education would be that teacher expects you to simplify it yourself when it's too complex, like I don't understand it but they want you to simplify it yourself, they say 'simplify it' you do it, I can copy things, but I can't write very well, I also don't like it when they put me higher up [lessons] that I should be, this is the worse, I was put in higher up and I just didn't understand it and they just say simplify it yourself, I'm not good at it so refused to go, I know I can't keep up with it if they put me too high in lessons- they don't listen though, they just don't understand me

Ideal Education

I like cooking -feels rewarding – don't want to miss that, learn a lot more when not a lot of information is coming at me, if lessons are not very efficient then I just become bored
My dog is a therapy dog but also distracts me in school, I'd love for him to come to school, but actually maybe it would distract me

Swimming helps so I would be able to do swimming every day, Swimming – can't hear the negative thoughts, so like the anxiety in me stops not all the time but sometimes it can take it away.
I'm good at telling stories – easier to type on laptop so much easier than writing which then means I can't take the information someone said in – I can't write and concentrate the same time, as I'm rubbish at it
Other things that stops the anxiety coming in is gaming, this distracts me.
And also my dogs [names]– helps me feel distracted – so the negative thoughts not coming in my head

I'm allowed to have my friend sitting next to me to help me.
Teachers are not saying you're not working hard enough – even when I feel like I am, which frustrates me.

I would love if we would learn about animals, I love learning about animals, how animals react to different things – I love learning about crabs, crabs really like bacon, and I like bacon. For the summer I'm going to live with Mr crabs [cartoon character] …I think of myself as Mr crabs, I want to be rig him the same as him, I'm forced to like dogs. Would love to learn about sharks, most people are afraid of sharks, because big teeth and would eat them, but only attack in certain situations. Learn different factors and how you work with them.
I would really want to learn how to train them – then be able to teacher them, get a chance to teach younger kids to learn about them – have a course on this. Like a week course, learn about how dogs and other animals act.

Would volunteer to get the skills I need – I'm looking at volunteering at a dog place right now. This would feel good as I know what I am doing.

Not a religious school – some people don't believe in God – some people don't care as much about R.E and things like that, which I don't really get it. So wouldn't need to do things we don't get.

It would be amazing if I was allowed my therapy dog to come in – it feels good, it does feel like I'm able to stay in control, a dog won't touch someone that isn't there, so if someone isn't there [participants points to an imaginary friend], a dog can't lie to you to say someone isn't there – can't sit on someone's knee who is not there – so I feel calmer, I know sometimes I feel like there is someone there but other people tell me there isn't.

I can write a lot of stories – about a youtuber, based off clown piece – mind craft youtuber, writing stories about characters inspired by me things that I like, things that I have seen you, dogs help me concentrate and feel more creative, a dog in the story, so helps me relate to them. I like mind craft, writing about stories about characters who are similar to me.

People who let me talk about my interests – not people who don't care about me.

Able to just experience to talk about in learning – had two dogs before these two. Able to share my experiences about the dogs with friends and also using my experiences to help people learn about them.

Things told in a story – like geography so it's easier to understand and listen to.
Ideal job – would be teaching job about dogs, or teaching people or teaching people to teach dogs. So I would want to learn about this in school.
Combine swimming with teaching dogs. In my ideal education, wouldn't like it to be online – because everyone can mess about, can just go on my phone, Noone would be able to physically be stopping you.

If I was surrounded with pets, would be so distracted, in a bad way, wouldn't be able to learn, so just one pet – my therapy dog is fine.
Able to sit next to my friend, well I'm able to use my own techniques,
In primary school, I would use my own working out – then come to the right answer, but they said you can't do that – taking 10 mins off your golden time – have to use specific technique…no you're not on my level, but I am.

Somewhere I can use my own techniques to help answer questions not the ones that people give me, and I don't think is the best way of doing it and I don't understand it sometimes.

Teachers going to fast – so ideal would be going slower and my brain would be able to take it in slower, if too fast – can't take a bunch of things – the perfect teacher would look like…he or she actually answers you why you put your hand up, so you're getting help when

Go into school – more of a break – reason I do 2 hours it's not really coming at me all at once, not learning about loads of different things –

Important to learn a bunch – as much as I hate it, need a bit of history, need to learn, bunch of maths, but feel like they exaggerate how much we need maths – can use calculator or phone – to help me as I have this in real life – algebra doesn't make sense –

Learning about how businesses work and things like that I Would like.
Learning about things we need to know – money management, how to open a bank…finance stuff, saving money all important so want to know about this, how do you make money from your job …

Sweet treats and cakes avaliable at break times and things like that which makes it feel nice and people want you to be there.
I do like talking on a one to one with a therapist or something. Being able to share how I feel and talk things through is good. But I also would like a group thing, like people who are going through the same, others with anxiety and it would be good to talk and relate to them. It would have support groups. This would feel good, I think.

Learn best with my best friend – B – he is now getting home schooled. I can't ever see him again. Talking about things you like with him – love talking about pets…talk about our friends, our primary school – experiences of that….

Have a slower start in the morning – starting education at 10 – go 10-12 don't have to get up really early…time to relax, and sit on bed for a few hours…play some games to calm down, rather than going straight to learn.

The teacher is always late – the teachers show other people's slide shows or PowerPoint presentations. When I say help, they don't help – they are not trying to help, I would try to get as much knowledge from that a possible …but it would be hard.
My current education – learning a lot about the subjects I do on that day – but variety is not very much – not very good at all.

<u>Scaling</u>
if the lessons would shorter – so fit more things in and have a variety of lessons in not like a whole two hours of maths
Cutting down transition time between getting to other lessons - I get why it is there…if we didn't cut time between lessons how would we be able get to different parts of the school….so classes closer to together, half of the school top set, and bottom half lower sets…so wouldn't have to travel really far to get to next lessons. Building with same things for you…. would stay in the same building for my sets. Try to be in similar sets – and the building has the same sets.

Something that I didn't get …I would tell myself I'm not good at English because couldn't write fast – so when I was moved up…bottom set English, middle set English. Prefer to be allowed to have a laptop – typing instead of writing. As takes too long with writing…speed of writing isn't very good so If I had a laptop that would be better and not feel different to everyone else, like it's just normal.

Appendix BB: (RQ1) Reflexive Thematic Analysis Process Example

(Example - Participant Bella)

RTA (RQ1) Example Stage 1:Familiarisation with the Data

Steps.

1. ***Read and re-read the data to become deeply familiar with patterns and meanings***
2. ***Write down personal biases, assumptions, and reflection***

Example annotations to get familiar with the data

Annotations

[1] Feeling I can relate - experience of bullying, helping me to understand perspective of the importance of not bulling in education

[2] why is witnessing emotional distress in peers is particularly distressing? could this be a trauma-informed perspective where emotional outbursts / upset by pupils are triggering for the student

[3] sense of fear in education?

[4] feeling of being misunderstood by teachers

[5] Feeling not understand, not heard - suggests these are important aspects to the teacher-student relationship for this pupil, feeling like there is a sense of injustice/unfairness?

[6] Does this pupil not believe in rules? are these rules specifically different to others, or is it the idea of rules...are these rules more strict than others, does the student see the point in these rules? what makes these rules come up for the student.

[7] suggests that she wants to work in groups/pairs - does she recognise this type of working? or is comfort/support?

[8] Lack of support from teachers - is this based on previous experience or is this what pupil imagines would be not very nice?

[9] Again, feeling sense of injustice in the system? no support when needed?

Example Initial reflections on the dataset

Example – participant 'Bella'. reflections

Non Ideal Education

- School described as emotionally unsafe (bullying, lack of autonomy, feeling unheard)—does this shape their perception of education as a whole?
- specific about not wanting bullies in education - is there previous experience of bullying? consequence of this?
- Use of 'fair' repeatedly- is this a personal construct around education? —does this suggest a core construct around justice, fairness, and equality in education? Is fairness linked to support, discipline, or student-teacher relationships?
- use of the word 'support' numerous times is this a personal construct around teachers?
- Frustration around lack of control in school—rules, discipline, social interactions. But at the same time, wants structure in consequences (e.g., teachers should regulate behaviour like swearing *in ideal*
- not seeing the value in specific consequences e.g. detention
- realise that students learn differently - and do not feel teachers cater towards this difference
- -is there a link with neurodiversity - managing sensory environment to support learning (food, lighting, noise)
- Does rigidity in rules (e.g., seating, talking, asking for help) create a sense of helplessness?

Ideal Education

- The participant expresses a desire for autonomy in learning, yet at the same time, they want an authority figure (teacher, parent) to have some level of control-for example, expecting teachers to be informed when they are not completing work or if they swear too much. Does this raise questions about their relationship with structure, accountability, and boundaries in learning/their education - is this about knowing that someone is watching over them in a supportive way rather than enforcing discipline?
- Teachers should be approachable, interested, and adaptive rather than just authoritative?
-Emotional connection before learning - links to trust in relationships?
-is there a link with neurodiversity - managing sensory environment to support learning (food, lighting, noise) - is control over the sensory environment key to their ability to engage with learning?
- sense of attachment to mother (also noticed during the visit) is this impacting her ability to think broadly about learning environment? link with push/pull factors away from home to educational provision?
- cats as a protective factor - sense of comfort? mechanism to support social interaction?
- a sense of wanting to feel calm?
- motivation and feeling good? constructs 'to best learn'
- viewing teachers as supporting learning but also emotional saftey, ability to talk about interests
- Cats as an icebreaker for social connection (links to how teachers should engage first through interests before shifting to academic content).
- non ideal discusses inablity to work in groups or pairs - but ideal YP seems to want specific relationships - does she also want to choose these working groups?

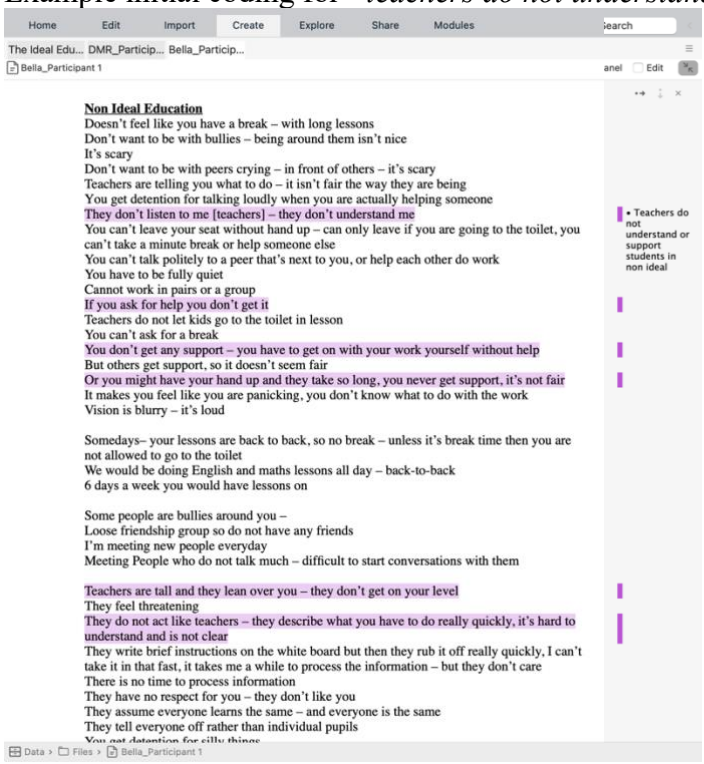
- having flexibility in social interactions seem important
- Prefers text-based social interactions, but also wants a close friend - does this suggest a need for predictable, low-pressure socialising?
- Selective relationships over forced group work - preference for structured but chosen interactions?

Stage 2: Initial coding

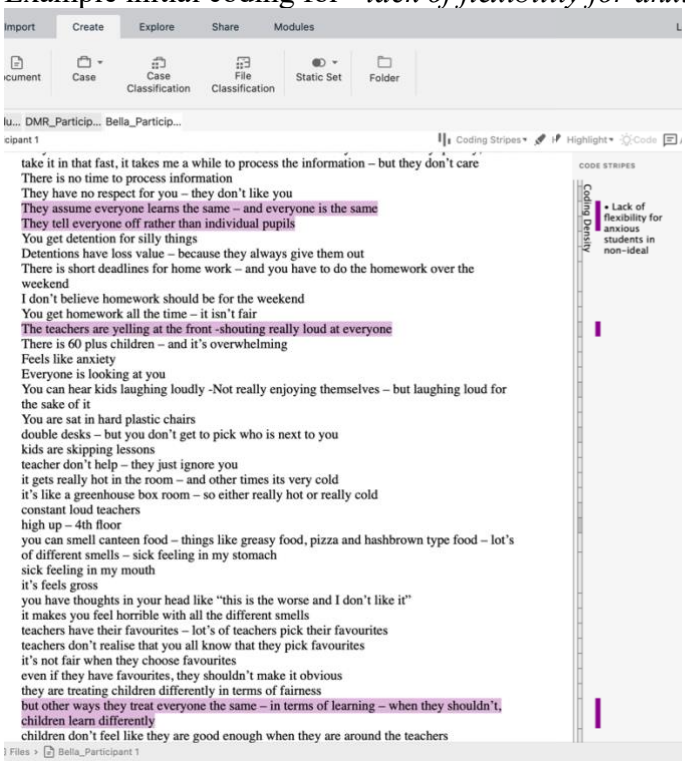
Example - Participant Bella*

Example initial coding using Nvivo:

Example initial coding for *"teachers do not understand of support students in non-ideal"*

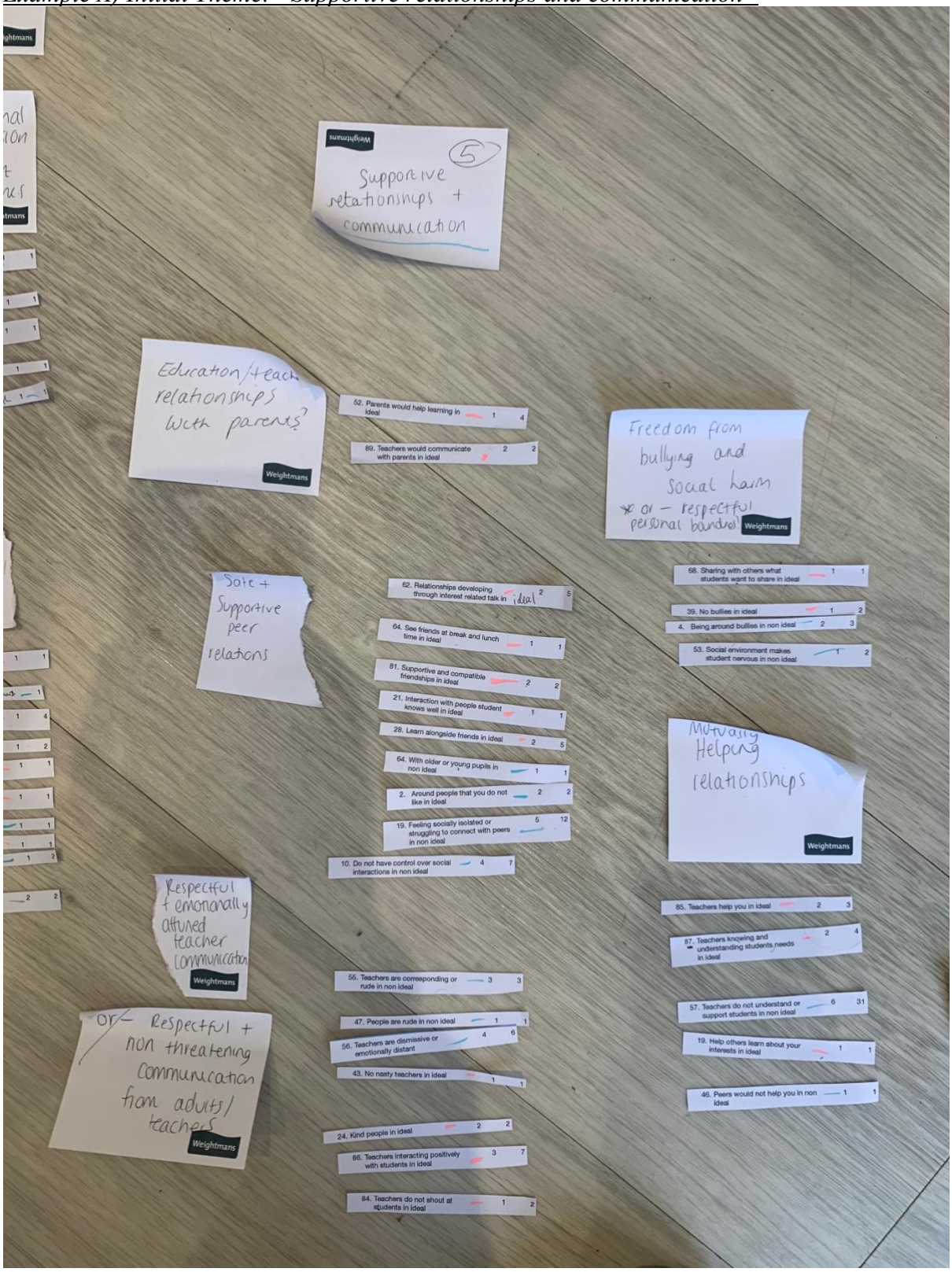


Example initial coding for *"lack of flexibility for anxious students in non-ideal"*

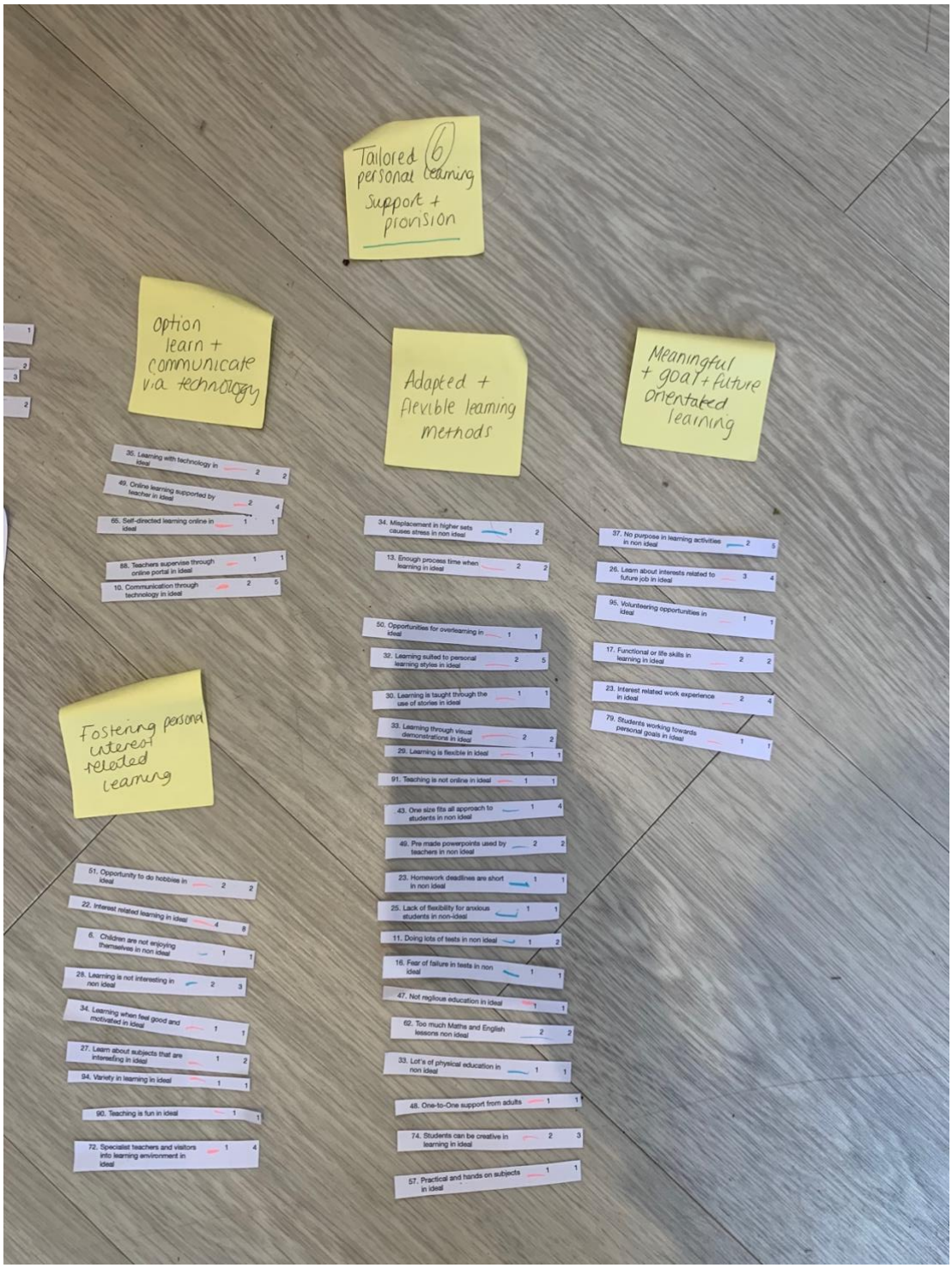


Stage 3: RQ1 Example Initially developed themes

Example A) Initial Theme: "Supportive relationships and communication"



Example B Initial Theme: "Tailored Personal Learning and Supportive Provision"

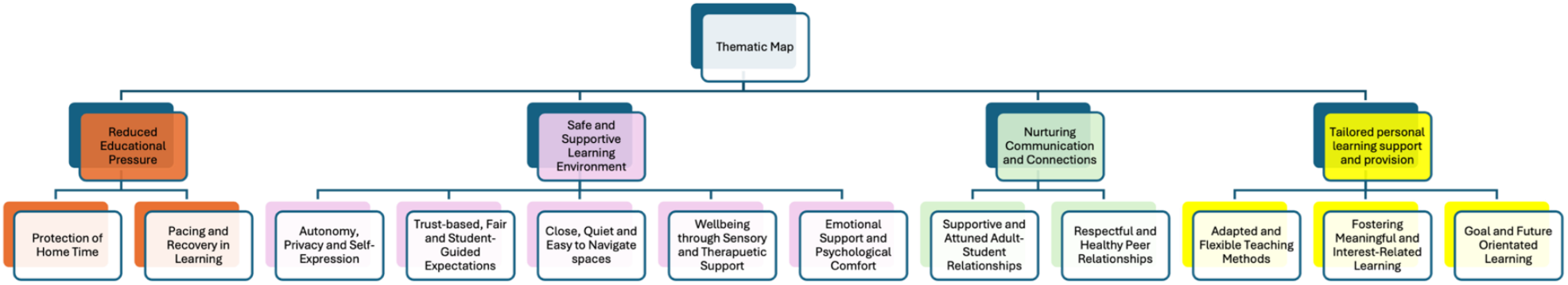


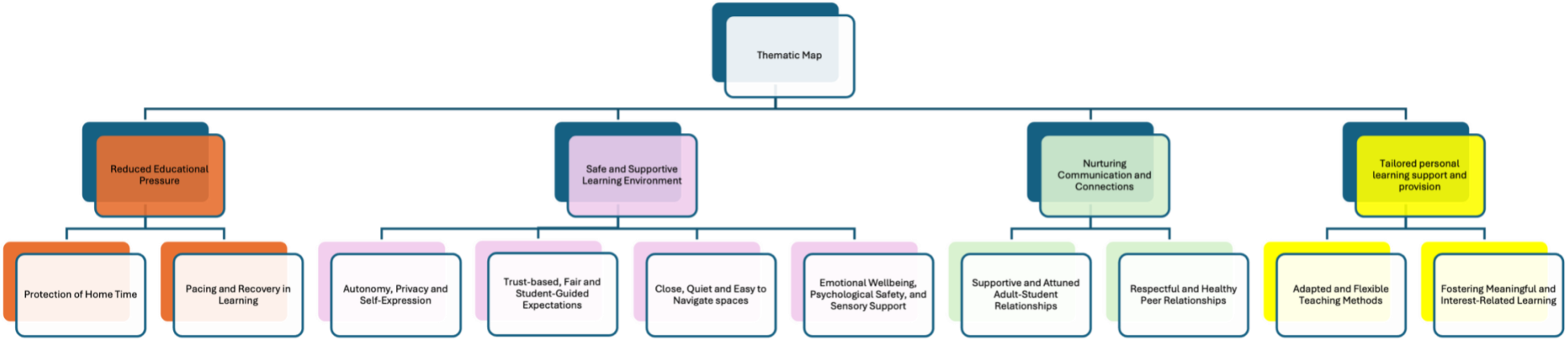
Appendix CC: Example of Coding Process From Raw Data to Final theme for RQ1

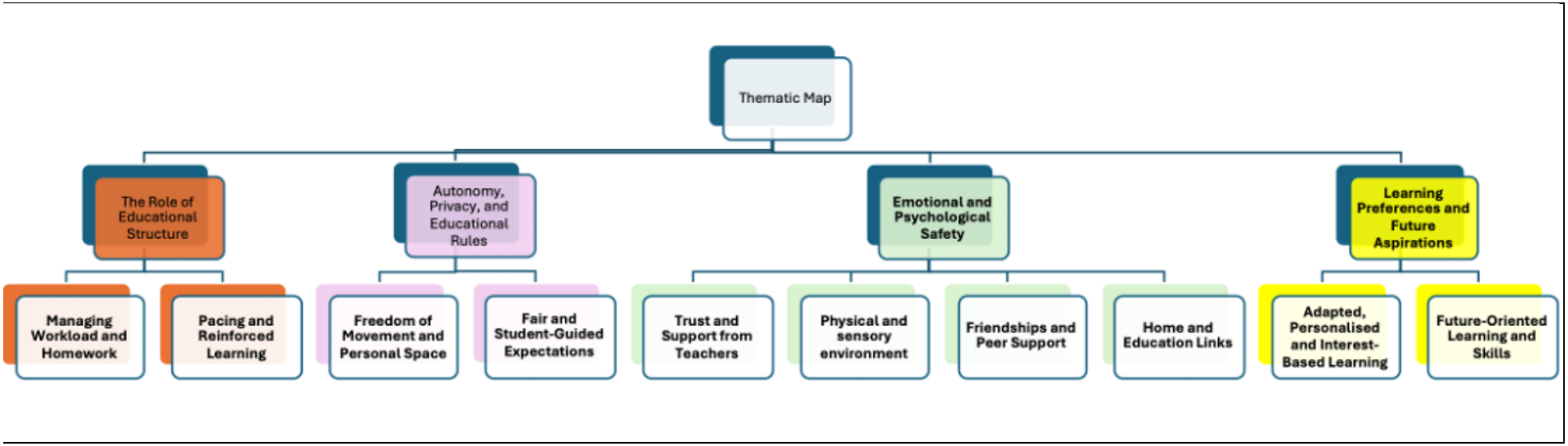
This table illustrates how a participant quote was initially coded, grouped into a subtheme, and later integrated into a broader theme as part of the RTA. It also includes an example of how the dichotomous constructs (e.g., "Ideal" and "Non-Ideal") were developed to support interpretation, drawing on Personal Construct Psychology as a participatory elicitation tool.

Theme	Subtheme	Code	Exemplar quotes
The Role of Educational Structure and workload	Managing workload and homework	Home is for Rest and Personal Time, Not Homework (ideal)	*"No homework – home is for home – and chill – school work can be in school. So I would get rid of homework as doesn't make sense to have it at home, this causes me stress" – Harry*
		Lot's of homework at home (non ideal)	*" Giving homework all the time" Batman* *" There is short deadlines for home work – and you have to do the homework over the weekend, I don't believe homework should be for the weekend" Bella*
	Pacing and reinforced learning	Slower paced learning (in ideal)	*"so ideal would be going slower and my brain would be able to take it in slower, if too fast – cant take a bunch of things" DMR* *" There would be overlearning there – so basically teachers help you overlearn stuff when you need it. It's like recapping things you are stuck at or forget, away from others, need extra support then you have it then. Teachers would speak slowly and it's easy to understand the work then" Stitch*
		Flexible breaks for recovery (in ideal)	*" Learning takes place everyday with breaks throughout the day" Batman* *" Learning would take place Tuesday – Friday, but not on Mondays as Mondays I struggle." Bella* *" Like if I have a migraine, they would know I can't do work, I would need a break and to sleep it off" Bella*
		Rigid schedule and lack of breaks in non ideal	*" Doesn't feel like you have a break – with long lessons… you can't take a minute break… You can't ask for a break. Some days– your lessons are back to back, so no break – unless it's break time then you are not allowed to go to the toilet" Bella*
		Overloaded education schedule in non ideal	*" Attending 5 days a week, 8 .45am– 3.15pm" Batman* *" 6 days a week you would have lessons on" Bella*

Stage 4 and 5: RQ1: Example of Thematic Map Iterations (draft 1-3)




Thematic Map
Reduced Educational Pressure
Protection of Home Time
Pacing and Recovery in Learning
Safe and Supportive Learning Environment
Autonomy, Privacy and Self-Expression
Trust-based, Fair and Student-Guided Expectations
Close, Quiet and Easy to Navigate spaces
Emotional Wellbeing, Psychological Safety, and Sensory Support
Nurturing Communication and Connections
Supportive and Attuned Adult-Student Relationships
Respectful and Healthy Peer Relationships
Tailored personal learning support and provision
Adapted and Flexible Teaching Methods
Fostering Meaningful and Interest-Related Learning


Thematic Map
The Role of Educational Structure
Autonomy, Privacy, and Educational Rules
Emotional and Psychological Safety
Learning Preferences and Future Aspirations
Managing Workload and Homework
Pacing and Reinforced Learning
Freedom of Movement and Personal Space
Fair and Student-Guided Expectations
Trust and Support from Teachers
Physical and sensory environment
Friendships and Peer Support
Home and Education Links
Adapted, Personalised and Interest-Based Learning
Future-Oriented Learning and Skills

Appendix DD: RQ1: Initial coding of the whole dataset (Stage 2 of RTA)

In Stage 2 of the RTA, the dataset was coded following the approach outlined in the data analysis section. The dichotomous structure of the interview guide guided the initial coding process, categorising data items based on their reference to either an ideal or non-ideal education. The initial codes identified through this process are presented below.

Each time a relevant data segment related to the research question was identified, it was either assigned a new code or grouped under an existing one. As discussed in the methods section, codes were generated at both semantic and latent levels, using a combination of deductive and inductive approaches to capture both explicit and underlying meanings related to ideal and non-ideal education.

Name
Ideal Education
Access to animals or pets in ideal
Autonomy to regulate learning environment to suit sensory needs in ideal
Being around friends in ideal
Choosing peer relations in ideal
Classroom Proximity for Smoother Transitions in ideal
Communicate with friends through text in ideal
Confrontable physical environment in ideal
Emotional expression and structured peer support in ideal
Emotional safety, confidence, and respect in ideal
Exposure to Experts and Real-World Learning in ideal
Flexible and Personalised Learning Environments in Ideal
Flexible breaks for recovery in ideal
Freedom to move around without restrictions
Friendships developing through interest related talk in ideal
Future-Oriented and Career-Related Learning in Ideal
Home is for Rest and Personal Time, Not Homework in ideal
Interaction with people student knows well in ideal
Interest related learning in ideal
Learning is flexible in ideal
Learning suited to personal learning styles in ideal
Learning with technology in ideal
No bullies in ideal
No Harsh or Shouting Teachers in ideal
No uniform in ideal
Not questioning attendance in ideal

Name
Parental Involvement in Education in ideal
Proximity of education close to home in ideal
Quiet and relaxed environment in ideal
Shorter lessons in ideal
Slower Paced Learning in ideal
Small, structured, and easy-to-navigate learning environment in ideal
Student participation in rule-making and fair boundaries in ideal
Students can be creative in learning in ideal
Students can express themselves in ideal
Supportive and compatible friendships in ideal
Teachers help you in ideal
Teachers interacting positively with students in ideal
Teachers knowing and understanding students' needs in ideal
Toilets always accessible without restrictions in ideal
Trust between teachers and students in ideal
Use of phones for learning & communication is allowed in ideal
Variety in learning in ideal
Non-Ideal Education
Being around bullies in non-ideal
Children are not enjoying themselves in non-ideal
Clowns in non-ideal
Disorientation and difficulty finding things in non-ideal
Education is top floor of a building in non-ideal
Education location feels inaccessible or too far away in non-ideal
Emotional distress, insecurity and lack of psychological saftey in non-ideal
Fear and Stress Around Assessments in non-ideal
Feeling powerless in non-ideal
Feeling socially isolated or struggling to connect with peers in non-ideal
Feeling Unwanted or Unsupported by Peers in non-ideal
Ineffective and unfair discipline practices in non-ideal
Invasion of space and surveillance in non-ideal
Lack of Curriculum Balance and Subject Flexibility in Non-Ideal

Lack of flexibility for anxious students in non-ideal
Lack of sensory supports and overwhelming sensory environment in non-ideal
Lack of trust from teachers in non-ideal
Learning is not interesting or purposeful in non-ideal
Learning is overwhelming or unclear in non-ideal
Lots of homework at home in non-ideal
Misplacement in higher sets causes stress in non-ideal
Overloaded school schedule in non-ideal
Overwhelming noise and distractions in non-ideal
Physical environment is uncomfortable in non-ideal
Premade PowerPoints used by teachers in non-ideal
Restricted Toilet Access & Associated Anxiety in non-ideal
Rigid schedule and lack of breaks in non-ideal
Rules restricting communication & expression in non-ideal
Sitting in the front of the classroom in non-ideal
Teachers are corresponding or rude in non-ideal
Teachers are dismissive or emotionally distant
Teachers do not understand or support students in non-ideal
Uncomfortable and restrictive uniform policy in non-ideal
Uncontrollable Social Environment in non-ideal
Unpredictable environment and change in non-ideal
Stress and Mismatch in Learning Pathways in non-ideal

Appendix EE: RQ2: Stage 2 RTA: Initial Coding of Participant Responses (Whole Data-Set)

Emerging Theme	Participant Quotes
Smaller and less crowded environment	"Less people, better rules." (Batman) "Cutting down transition time between getting to other lessons." (DMR) "Building should be structured so that same sets stay in the same building." (DMR)
Calm and comfortable learning spaces	Comfy chairs – so my back isn't hurting." (Harry) "No uniform – so feel more comfy." (Harry) "Calm environment." (Bella)
Flexible scheduling	"Late start – so not stressed in the morning." (Harry) -"Shorter lessons – more variety." (DMR)
Kind, understanding teachers	Less strict teachers – kinder." (Batman) "Nice teachers who are understanding." (Stitch) "Teachers understand me for who I am." (Stitch)
Negative teacher behaviours to avoid	"Get rid of bad teachers – shout and nag." (Stitch
Student voice and rule-making	Student decides rules – survey pupils." (Batman) "Get rid of rules that don't make sense." (Batman) "Shorter rules that make sense." (Batman)
Independence through resources	Prefer to have a laptop – faster typing, feel normal." (DMR)
Future-focused learning	Learning would help me get to college." (Bella)
Practical learning approaches	More practical style questions – hands-on activities." (Harry

Appendix FF: RQ2: Reflexive Thematic Analysis, Summary of Initial Themes & Subthemes

This document presents the thematic analysis of participant responses regarding the changes they believe are necessary to improve their current educational experience. The data has been analysed to identify common themes and subthemes across participants while maintaining the integrity of individual perspectives.

Theme 1: Educational Environment and Structure

Subtheme 1.1: Smaller Class Size and Less Crowding

- "Less people, better rules." (Batman)
- "Cutting down transition time between getting to other lessons – classes should be closer together." (DMR)
- "Building should be structured so that same sets stay in the same building to reduce travel between lessons." (DMR)

Subtheme 1.2: A Calmer and More Comfortable Learning Space

- "Comfy chairs – so my back isn't hurting." (Harry)
- "No uniform – so feel more comfy." (Harry)
- "My favourite bit about this education would be that it is a calm environment." (Bella)

Subtheme 1.3: Flexible Scheduling and Pacing

- "Late start – so not stressed in the morning getting to school early, this would help." (Harry)
- "If the lessons were shorter – so fit more things in and have a variety of lessons in, not like a whole two hours of maths." (DMR)

Theme 2: Teacher-Student Relationships

Subtheme 2.1: Supportive and Understanding Teachers

- "Less strict teachers – kinder (would be the opposite of that) teaches you calmly and then let you do it yourself." (Batman)
- "Main one is that make sure we have nice teachers, teachers who are nice to children who are anxious or struggle to cope." (Stitch)
- "They understand me for who I am, that I don't need to change and they understand children with autism and what they can do to help us." (Stitch)

Subtheme 2.2: Removal of Negative Teacher Practices

- "Get rid of bad teachers, the ones that shout and nag and are unkind to you." (Stitch)

Theme 3: Student Autonomy and Participation

Subtheme 3.1: Student Involvement in Rule-Making

- "Student decides rules – they would have a survey to get the views of pupils to fill in." (Batman)
- "Getting rid of rules that don't make sense like not allowed chewing gum or no talking." (Batman)
- "Shorter rules that make sense." (Batman)

Subtheme 3.2: Independence in Learning and Resources

- "Would prefer to be allowed to have a laptop – typing instead of writing. As takes too long with writing… speed of writing isn't very good, so if I had a laptop that would be better and not feel different to everyone else, like it's just normal." (DMR)

Theme 4: Future Aspirations and Career-Related Learning

Subtheme 4.1: Relevance to Future Goals

- "The learning would help me get to college." (Bella)
- "More specialist [teachers]" (Harry)

Subtheme 4.2: Practical and Hands-On Learning Approaches

- "More practical style questions – hands-on activities." (Harry)

Appendix GG: Participant Contributions to Theme Development

GG-a: Participant Contributions to Theme Development (Research Question 1)

Theme	Participant "Bella"	Participant "Batman"	Participant "Summer"	Participant "Stitch"	Participant "Harry"	Participant "DMR"
The Role of Educational Structure	✔	✔		✔	✔	✔
Emotional and Psychological Safety	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔
Autonomy, Privacy, and Educational Rules	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔
Learning Preferences and Future Aspirations	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔

GG-b: Participant Contributions to Theme Development (Research Question 2)

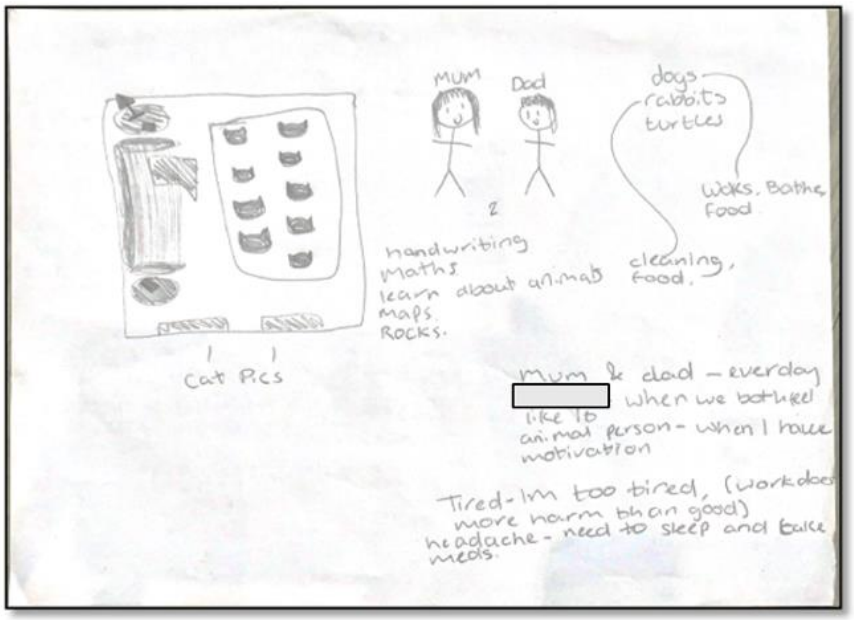
Theme	Participant "Bella"	Participant "Batman"	Participant "Stitch"	Participant "Harry"	Participant "DMR"
Educational Environment and Structure	✔	✔		✔	✔
Teacher-Student Relationships		✔	✔	✔	
Student Autonomy and Participation		✔		✔	
Future Aspirations and Career-Related Learning	✔			✔	

(*Note: Participant "Summer" was not included in Research Question 2 due to only partial data being collected – Session 1 only.*)

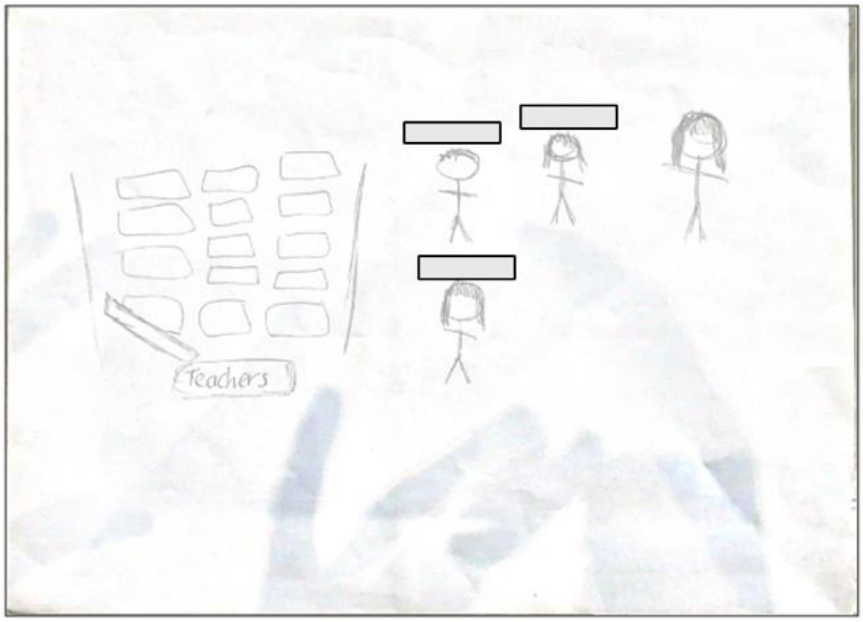
Appendix HH: Example of Participant Drawings (Ideal & Non-Ideal Education Activity)

*Example 1. Participant Bella**

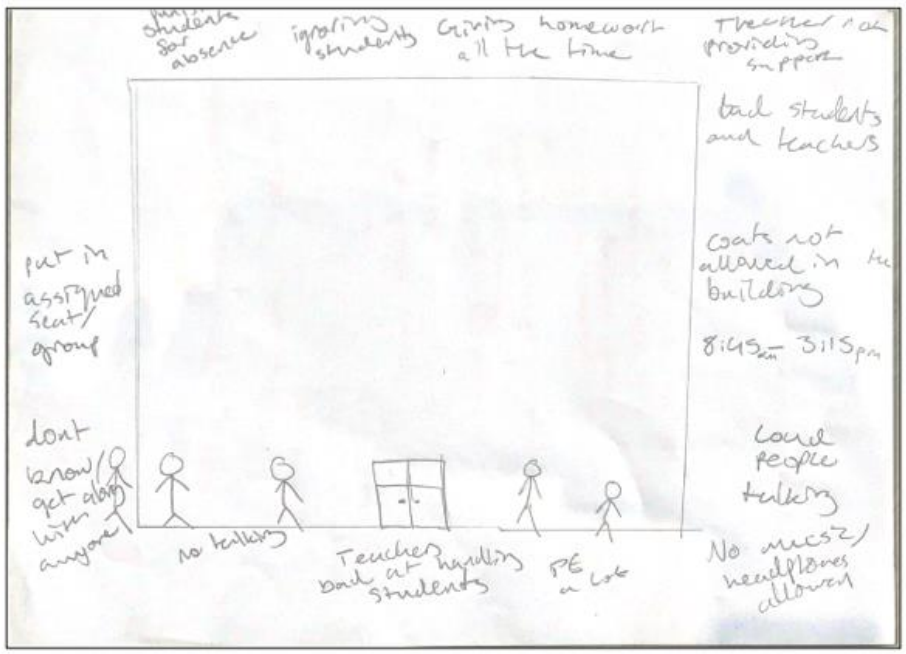
*Example 1. Participant Bella** Ideal Education



*Example 1. Participant Bella** Non- Ideal Education



*Example 2. Participant Batman**

Participant Batman Ideal Education*

Participant Batman Non- Ideal Education*