The Ideal School: Exploring the perceptions of autistic students experiencing Emotionally Based School Non-Attendance (EBSNA)

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Abstract

Persistent absence from school is associated with poor academic outcomes, increased risk of mental health difficulties and limited employment opportunities in adult life (Department for Education, [DfE] 2020; West Sussex County Council, [WSCC] 2018). Statistics indicate that school absence is increasing, and young people with Special Educational Needs, including autistic students, are at increased risk of experiencing attendance difficulties (DfE, 2019). Currently there is a lack of research eliciting the views of autistic students who face barriers to attendance. This research therefore aims to explore the perceptions of 10 autistic students experiencing Emotionally Based School Non-Attendance (EBSNA) and to identify factors that might support their attendance. Participants engaged in the Drawing the Ideal School activity (Williams & Hanke, 2007), underpinned by Personal Construct Psychology (Kelly, 1955) and a semi-structured interview in which they described an ideal and non-ideal school and completed a solution-focused scaling activity. Reflexive Thematic Analysis indicated that participants perceived adults to control all decisions at school and expressed a desire for increased choice and autonomy. Additional factors identified in an ideal school that might support attendance were positive relationships with staff and students, increased flexibility within the school day, personalised learning tailored to their interests and a calm, comfortable and well-resourced environment that was adjusted to meet their sensory needs. Despite describing challenging school experiences, all participants were motivated to attend a school that met their needs, however this was deemed unrealistic by participants who perceived themselves as having little impact on the running of schools. The research provides a unique insight into how school is perceived by autistic students experiencing EBSNA and provides recommendations for realistic and reasonable adjustments that might promote their attendance.

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“Nothing any good comes easy”

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1. Introduction

1.1 Overview

This thesis is concerned with the topic of attendance difficulties in autistic young people and aims to identify their perceptions of school and the potential changes that may support attendance. The introductory chapter explores the current issue and prevalence of Emotionally Based School Non-Attendance (EBSNA), before discussing challenges surrounding the history, terminology and conceptualisation of school attendance difficulties, which remains a significant area of debate. The causes of attendance difficulties are briefly explored, with reference to the heterogeneous nature of the issue and the impact of individual, family and school contexts. The chapter concludes by discussing the increased prevalence of EBSNA in autistic students and the specific challenges faced by this group in relation to their school attendance, with recognition of the importance of gaining students' views.

1.2 Context

Compulsory school attendance for children aged between five and ten was introduced following the 1880 Education Act. By 1944, school was compulsory for all children up to the age of fifteen and in 2015, the minimum age to leave school was raised to 18 (UK Parliament, n.d.). It has been widely acknowledged that persistent attendance difficulties contribute to poor academic outcomes, increased risk of mental health difficulties and limited employment opportunities in adult life (Department for Education [DfE], 2020; West Sussex County Council [WSCC], 2018). Moreover, Kearney (2003) highlighted the increased likelihood of economic challenges and social isolation in adulthood following school attendance difficulties.

Given the negative outcomes associated with non-attendance, improving attendance remains both a local and national priority in the UK. The DfE (2020) highlights the responsibility of education settings in promoting attendance and ensuring all pupils have access

to full-time education. Education settings are required to maintain attendance records and implement early intervention in response to patterns of absence, including informing their Local Authority (LA) of unauthorised absence after 10 continuous days. Under Section 444 of The Education Act (1996), parents and carers also have a legal responsibility to ensure their child's regular attendance at school and those failing to do so are subject to prosecution, including a penalty notice and potential court order. Ofsted (2022) encourages LAs to use parenting contracts, parenting orders, penalty notices and ultimately prosecution, 'using supportive measures alongside sanctions to change parental behaviour.' Despite a government drive to improve attendance, research suggests that the efficacy of parental sanctions is limited and does not contribute to behaviour change; whilst parental prosecutions increased, attendance levels did not (Epstein et al., 2019). Moreover, the use of parental sanctions implies that parents are to blame for non-attendance and overlooks the importance of more nuanced intervention, including wider systemic change (British Psychological Society [BPS], 2017). By viewing parents and young people as the problem-holders, the impact of the school environment continues to be disregarded as a contributing factor to non-attendance (Pellegrini, 2007), highlighting the need for research that explores young people's perceptions of school.

In June 2022, the Department for Education published proposed plans to improve school attendance which included a national threshold for parental fines following five days of unauthorised absence within a term. Parental responses to the consultation indicated dissatisfaction at the proposed changes, amidst concerns that parents were continuing to be blamed for their child's absence without acknowledgement of individual circumstances (Not Fine in School, 2022; Square Peg, 2022). In the context of more stringent measures and threats of fines, parents and carers may feel increased pressure to send their children to school. It is argued that this may increase the likelihood of school-based trauma, masking and students feeling unable to cope with the challenges of school. The government proposals may therefore

increase attendance levels for students experiencing attendance difficulties, however this is likely to be at the detriment of their emotional wellbeing, ability to attend to lessons and ability to engage with learning.

1.3 Prevalence of attendance difficulties

The true prevalence of attendance difficulties is difficult to identify due to inconsistencies in conceptualisations and definitions of school non-attendance behaviour. The literature initially suggested that school non-attendance affects between 1-5% of the school population, with higher prevalence amongst secondary age students (Elliott & Place, 2019; Gregory & Purcell, 2014; Pellegrini, 2007). School attendance difficulties do not appear to be correlated to sex, race or gender, although incidences increase significantly in adolescence (Pellegrini, 2007). Whilst it is difficult to reliably identify prevalence rates, the DfE provides annual attendance statistics and defines persistent absence as missing 10% or more of school sessions (DfE, 2019). The most recent statistics indicate that rates of persistent absence are increasing each year from 10.9% in 2018 to 12.1% in 2021 (DfE, 2021). Currently, schools are responsible for deciding whether an absence is authorised or unauthorised but there is not an attendance code that recognises emotional difficulties or the considerable complexities underlying non-attendance (Kearney, 2003, Millar, 2020). Given these challenges, it is therefore important that national statistics are interpreted with caution as they are unlikely to provide the most accurate measures of the extent of attendance difficulties.

Further contributing to difficulties estimating the scale of the problem is the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, which resulted in school closures and extended absence for a significant proportion of young people, due to illness and self-isolation policies (DfE, 2021). The most recent government figures relate to the Spring term of 2021, however the Covid-19 lockdown during this period impacted the ability to estimate persistent absence and it is

therefore difficult to ascertain accurate attendance rates since the onset of the pandemic or to compare data to previous years. Despite the lack of formal statistics from the DfE however, it is widely recognised that Covid-19 has negatively impacted school attendance, particularly since EBSNA is understood to be exacerbated by periods of absence (Oxfordshire County Council, 2020).

An interim report from the Children's Commissioner's Attendance Audit (2022) confirmed this, raising concerns about the significant number of young people missing from education. The report indicated that ineffective methods of obtaining attendance data has resulted in many LAs being unable to provide estimates of the number of children missing school. Nonetheless, available data portrayed a concerning picture, with estimates of 1.8 million students (22% per cent) missing more than 10% of school sessions in the 2021 Autumn term, and 125,000 (1.5%) missing over half of their sessions in the same period.

This data is consistent with reports from parents, carers and education staff of increased levels of non-attendance following the re-opening of schools after lockdown, which many parents and staff associated with increased health, social and academic anxiety (Millar, 2020; Rees, 2022). Moreover, the Children's Commissioner's report (2022) confirms data published by Education Datalab (2021), which suggested that over 20% of primary pupils and 30% of secondary pupils were persistently absent, compared to 10.3% persistently absent prior to the pandemic. Whilst it was recognised that non-attendance rates have been elevated by Covid-19 illness and self-isolation, the Children's Commissioner emphasised the huge number of children continuing to persistently miss education, which has been exacerbated by the pandemic, including children who have *"never interacted with the education system that we know nothing about"*.

This report, alongside media coverage, has raised awareness of the magnitude of the issue of non-attendance within the current climate. The government has committed to finding

the young people missing from education by *"driving up attendance and addressing barriers to attendance",* which is hoped to be achieved through a home-education register, live attendance trackers, a network of attendance advisors and increased uniformity across attendance codes (Whittaker, 2022). Nonetheless, there are concerns that rigid attendance policies will continue to overlook the impact of anxiety and mental health and maintain a culture where parents report feeling forced to send their child to school despite their difficulties (Not Fine in School, 2022). Without addressing the underlying causes of non-attendance, including the impact of the school environment, there is unlikely to be considerable change in the scale of the problem, which highlights the need to understand young people's perceptions of school and their experiences of non-attendance.

1.4 Defining and conceptualising school attendance

1.4.1 Terminology

Historical background

The terminology used to describe school attendance difficulties is subject to extensive debate, with the literature indicating a broad variety of definitions, often used interchangeably and without precision (James, 2015; Thambirajah et al., 2008). The inconsistencies in definitions have prevented a shared understanding of the behaviour (Elliott, 1999), with Kearney (2003) referring to a 'fractured state of terminology' in relation to school attendance difficulties. This was supported by Archer et al. (2003), who found there was no consensus in terminology amongst education staff when describing attendance difficulties. Whilst there have been multiple attempts to define and conceptualise the problem, there remains little agreement on a definition to describe the heterogeneous nature of the presenting behaviours. The absence of a universally accepted definition has contributed to the difficulty estimating the true

prevalence of the problem, as well as limiting understanding of the wide range of non-attendance behaviours and consequently reducing the likelihood of appropriate intervention.

Attempts to define school attendance difficulties have been prevalent for almost a century, with Broadwin (1932) and Partridge (1939) proposing the term ‘psychoneurotic truancy’ to describe young people who appeared anxious and depressed whilst committing ‘delinquent truancy’. Although outdated, this term was the first to acknowledge the role of anxiety in contributing to attendance difficulties, moving away from the traditional view of school non-attendance as criminal behaviour (Kearney, 2003). An additional term used to describe school non-attendance was school phobia (Johnson et al., 1941), which identified anxiety, hypochondria and mother-child overdependence as causing a fear of school, however it has since been argued that alongside overlooking the role of the environment, school phobia implies psychopathology and a within-child explanation (King & Berstein, 2001; Pellegrini, 2007). Following this, Berg et al. (1969) introduced the term ‘school refusal’, based upon research exploring the history of 29 young people with significant attendance difficulties. Interviews with young people and their parent resulted in the identification of four characteristics of school refusal:

1. Severe difficulty attending school often amounting to prolonged absence
2. Severe emotional upset shown by symptoms such as excessive fearfulness, undue tempers, misery or complaints of feeling ill without obvious organic cause on being faced with the prospect of attending school
3. Staying at home with the knowledge of parents
4. Absence of significant anti-social disorders such as stealing, lying, wandering, destructiveness and sexual misbehaviour

Categorisation of attendance difficulties

The term school refusal gained acceptance in the following years and has been widely used across the literature. Despite this, the persistent complexity of defining school attendance difficulties has resulted in further attempts to categorise the behaviour. Kennedy (1965) suggested categorising school non-attendance into Type 1 children, who presented with an acute episode of school refusal behaviour and Type 2 children who experienced a gradual onset of school refusal involving multiple episodes. This was reinforced by Young et al., (1990) who aimed to categorise school attendance difficulties based on internalising and externalising behaviour. Attendance difficulties associated with internalising behaviours such as anxiety, sadness or distress were categorised as school refusers, whilst those with externalising behaviours such as antisocial behaviour and lack of motivation to attend school were categorised as truants (Elliott & Place, 2019). The distinction between school refusers and truants has been central to the debate regarding the conceptualisation of attendance difficulties (Lauchlan, 2003), with some researchers and LAs continuing to recognise the distinction in their definitions (Shilvock, 2010; Staffordshire County Council, 2020). Moreover, although not classified as a mental disorder, the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Health Disorders distinguishes between school refusal and truancy.

Despite this, the extent to which school attendance behaviour can be classified into discrete groups remains an area of contention. Kearney (2008) argued that there is significant overlap between internalising and externalising behaviour, rendering the distinction meaningless. This supports Egger et al. (2003) who found that the categorisation of young people as either truants or school refusers varied each day depending on their behaviour, with many young people meeting the criteria for both categories. These findings emphasise the complex nature of attendance difficulties and suggest that a distinction between types of non-attendance overlooks the complexity of the wide range of behaviours and risks becoming

reductionist. Moreover, research indicates that young people categorised as truants were less likely to be treated sympathetically, with teachers less committed to supporting their needs, (Armstrong et al., 2011), suggesting that continued categorisation and distinctive labels may prevent young people from accessing appropriate support.

A continuum of attendance difficulties

Kearney (2001) reviewed research exploring the prevalence, classification and risk factors associated with attendance difficulties and concluded that there was little evidence for discrete categories of non-attendance. This informed the development of a continuum which was intended to provide a more helpful way of conceptualising attendance difficulties. School refusal was therefore reconceptualised as an umbrella term to refer to a child-motivated refusal to attend school or difficulty remaining in classes. The term was designed to subsume previous categorical descriptions of the behaviour, with the continuum including a wider range of behaviours including truancy, psychoneurotic truancy, school refusal and school phobia. This definition became widely accepted as it accurately reflected the heterogeneous nature of school refusal and ensured all types of behaviour were included.

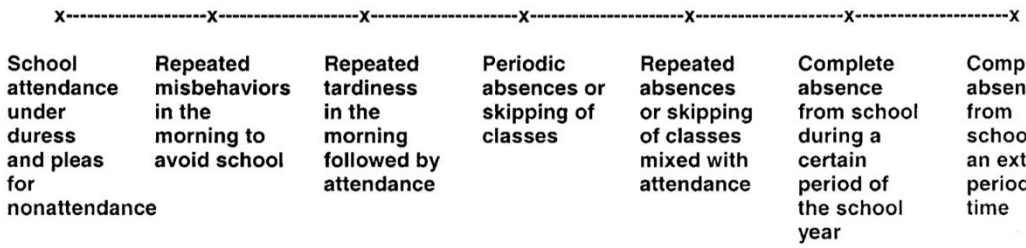


Figure 1. Continuum of school refusal behaviour on the basis of attendance, informed by Kearney's (2001) review. From *School Refusal Behaviour in Youth: A Functional Approach to Assessment and Treatment* (Kearney, 2001).

Whilst Kearney's definition contains the entire spectrum of school attendance difficulties, the term 'refusal' has received increasing criticism for suggesting a wilful choice in non-attendance and for locating the problem within the child. Instead, terms such as chronic

non-attendance (Lauchlan, 2003), problematic absenteeism (Kearney, 2008) and school non-attendance (Thambirajah et al. 2008) have been suggested to avoid pathologising attendance difficulties. Furthermore, Pellegrini (2007) advocated for neutral terminology, proposing the term 'extended school non-attendance', to avoid making inferences about the reasons underpinning behaviour. By avoiding terms that locate the cause of non-attendance within young people, Pellegrini (2007) hoped to shift the focus away from a within-child approach, towards recognising the wider impact of the family context, school environment and systemic factors.

Emotionally Based School Avoidance

A move away from the term 'refusal' led WSCC (2018) to revise their previous 2004 guidance and introduce the phrase 'Emotionally-Based School Avoidance' (EBSA). Their previous use of the term 'refusal' implied young people had control over their attendance and detracted from environmental factors contributing to their difficulties (Pellegrini, 2007; WSCC, 2018). The term EBSA aimed to reduce the within-child focus whilst highlighting the emotional challenges associated with attending school (WSCC, 2018). According to guidance, indicators of EBSA include a wide spectrum of behaviours, ranging from reluctance to attend certain lessons to prolonged periods of absence.

Guidance relating to EBSA highlights the emotional component of school attendance difficulties, particularly the impact of anxiety, whilst also recognising the multiple systemic factors that contribute to attendance difficulties (Tower Hamlets Educational Psychology Service, 2021; WSCC, 2018). EBSA is understood to occur when risk factors exceed resilience, meaning the 'push' factors that encourage school attendance are exceeded by the 'pull' factors promoting school avoidance (Thambirajah et al., 2008; WSCC, 2018). The broad range of behaviours recognised within EBSA has led to a significant proportion of LAs adopting the

term or the similar term Emotionally Based School Non-Attendance (EBSNA). Despite this, it has been argued that the use of 'avoidance' within EBSA upholds the narrative that young people have a choice in their non-attendance, suggesting that EBSNA may be more appropriate terminology.

Current position - Emotionally Based School Non-Attendance

Whilst it has been argued that the term EBSNA makes inferences about causality by suggesting that emotions underpin attendance difficulties, the author values the focus on emotions rather than behaviour, as well as the wide range of presentations included within the EBSNA definition (Solihull Community Educational Psychology Service, [SCEPS] 2020).

Table 1

Range of presenting behaviours within EBSNA

- Periods of prolonged absence
- Persistent lateness
- Parent/carer is unable to support child to attend school
- Identifiable patterns within non-school attendance e.g. specific days, subjects, staff members
- Providing minor reasons for school absences
- CYP[1] experiences anxiety in relation to home factors e.g. parental separation, divorce, conflict, loss, bereavement
- CYP displays greater reliance upon family members e.g. separation anxiety, increased proximity

[1] Child/young person

- Concerns around academic progress due to non-school attendance / missed education
- CYP displays increased anxiety in relation to their learning and/or poor self-concept as a learner
- Low self-esteem and/or lack of confidence
- Struggling in relation to peer relationships and/or social situations
- Physical signs of stress believed to be linked to stress (e.g. stomach ache, sickness, headache) or complaining of feeling ill.
- Displays of emotional dysregulation and/or distress

School attendance difficulties are clearly a multi-faceted and heterogeneous concept involving complex interactions between the systems surrounding a child. As highlighted, the issue has traditionally been understood through the medical model of disability, pathologising and locating difficulties within the individual. This is reflected in the discourse and language that was commonly used to describe attendance difficulties including psychoneurotic truancy, school phobia and school refusal, implying an internal problem and placing blame on the young person. Unlike earlier research, the current study frames attendance difficulties within a social model of disability, recognising that an individual's needs are the result of the way society and systems are organised, rather than an individual impairment (Goodley, 2001).

With this in mind, the researcher aligns with terminology that avoids locating the problem internally and instead acknowledges the emotional and systemic influences on non-attendance. The researcher acknowledges benefits of neutral terms such as extended non-attendance, however use of 'extended' implies non-attendance for a significant period, whereas the current research aimed to explore a wide range of attendance difficulties, including young people who experience anxiety about attending school or find it difficult to attend on particular days.

It is recognised that there are a wide variety of terms used to describe non-attendance behaviour, with different individuals and groups expressing a preference for particular terms (see Appendix H for further reflections). At the time of writing, EBSA and EBSNA were the most widely accepted and understood terminology amongst EPs and across EP literature, with a significant number of LAs referring to the term in their guidance and policies. Although often used interchangeably, the term 'non-attendance' (EBSNA) was selected over 'avoidance', (EBSA) as young people report they do not have a choice in their non-attendance (CSEPS, 2020). EBSNA recognises school non-attendance as an emotional response to the school environment, rather than a choice or a refusal made by a young person and was therefore deemed the most appropriate term to be used throughout this research.

1.5 Factors affecting EBSNA

The factors underlying and maintaining EBSNA are complex and multi-faceted and include biological, psychological, social and systemic factors, linked to the individual, family and school systems (Ochi et al., 2020; Thambirajah et al., 2008). Kearney and Silverman (1993) originally proposed four functions of 'school refusal' which include avoiding uncomfortable feelings associated with attending school; avoiding stressful social situations; reducing separation anxiety or seeking attention; and pursuing rewarding experiences outside of school. The literature further identifies individual factors, family factors and school factors as contributing towards EBSNA (Archer et al., 2003) and the combination of these factors have been referred to as 'push or pull factors', either pushing a child towards attending school or pulling a child away from attending school. EBSNA is most likely to occur when pull factors supersede push factors (Thambirajah et al., 2008).

1.5.1 Individual factors

As highlighted, EBSNA is commonly viewed as a within-child problem, assessed through diagnostic interviews and self-report questionnaires such as the School Refusal Assessment Scale [SRAS] (Kearney & Silverman, 1993), which was used to explain, medicalise, and treat attendance difficulties. The narrative of EBSNA as an individual problem has been further supported through the historic referral of young people to specialist clinics for school absenteeism and psychiatric diagnoses assigned to those struggling to attend school (Kearney & Albano, 2004). Within the EBSNA literature, various individual factors have been identified as increasing the risk of attendance difficulties, including a child's temperament; fear of failure; physical illness; age (increased risk at transition points); learning difficulties including Autism Spectrum Condition (ASC); separation anxiety and impact of trauma and mental health difficulties (WSCC, 2018, Tower Hamlets EPS, 2021). Moreover, anxiety is considered a key feature of EBSNA that contributes to the maintenance of the difficulty over time (Kearney & Bensaheb, 2006; Thambirajah et al., 2008). Young people are reported to experience anxious thoughts and feelings around attending school, related to social situations, fear of rejection, bullying, academic difficulties, the sensory environment (Suffolk County Council, n.d.), and more recently, health anxieties including Covid-19 (Rees, 2022). The association between EBSNA and anxiety further contributes to the discourse of EBSNA as an individual clinical problem that requires treatment and change within the young person.

1.5.2 Family and home factors

Alongside individual factors, there is an association between family and home influences and school attendance. EBSNA guidance indicates that traumatic events; separation, loss or changes in family dynamics; parental health needs, overprotective parenting; domestic violence; family stress; a family history of EBSNA; young carer responsibilities and

controlling parenting are risk factors for EBSNA. The emphasis on family and home factors as contributing to EBSNA is reflected in national and legal frameworks, whereby systemic factors are overlooked and parents are held accountable for their child's school attendance (Pellegrini, 2007). Research indicates that school staff often associate EBSNA with ineffective parenting, disorganisation and chaotic home environments with increased levels of conflict (Beckles, 2014; Kearney & Silverman, 1993). This was supported by Dalziel and Henthorne (2005), who explored the impact of parenting skills on attendance and noted that parental attitude, capacity and acceptance of support affected how parents addressed non-attendance. Nonetheless, Kearney (2008) highlighted that a correlation between family factors and EBSNA does not imply causality and suggested a bidirectional relationship, whereby the EBSNA behaviour contributes to the functioning of the family, as well as the functioning of the family contributing to EBSNA.

1.5.3 School and environmental factors

An alternative discourse to the within-child and family model recognises the wider influence of school and environmental factors on attendance and avoids locating the problem within the young person or their family. Following interviews with female students previously deemed 'school refusers', Stroobant and Jones (2006) concluded that non-attendance *'may be a perfectly rational and adaptive response by a distressed individual to an aversive school environment'* (p.213). This was further supported by Thambirajah et al. (2008) who argued that a holistic approach to understanding non-attendance should account for school factors as well as family and individual factors. School risk factors for EBSNA included difficult relationships with teachers, bullying, social isolation, a fear of failure and lessons perceived as boring with constant writing and copying (Havik et al., 2014; Malcolm et al., 2003). Amongst the various school factors identified as contributing to EBSNA, bullying was one of the most common

(WSCC, 2018) and reportedly led to an increase in parentally approved absences. Negative interactions between parents and staff, inconsistent behaviour and attendance policies, large class sizes and rigid management styles were also associated with high numbers of 'school refusers' (Malcolm et al., 2003).

In the context of EBSNA, it appears that an eco-systemic approach (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), that recognises the bidirectional interactions between individual, family and school factors is the most helpful framework for understanding attendance difficulties.

1.6 Autism and EBSNA

Additional individual factors that contribute to EBSNA include neurodevelopmental conditions such as ASC[2], described as a highly diverse, lifelong developmental disability which affects how people communicate and interact with the world (National Autistic Society [NAS], 2022). The Autism Education Trust (2021) argue that rather than identifying autism as a deficit, it should be understood through a social model of disability as a neurological difference in brain development. Statistics indicate that autism affects around 1% of the population, however it is argued that underdiagnosis in females may mask the true proportion (Mandy, 2019). Statistics show that persistent absence is more prevalent in children with Special Educational Needs (SEN), including those with social communication difficulties and ASC (DfE, 2019). In 2021, the absence rates for students with an Education Health and Care Plan (EHCP) was 13.1% and 6.5% for those receiving SEN support, compared to 3.9% for pupils with no SEN.

Munkhaugen et al. (2017) studied 'school refusal behaviour' in autistic students in Norway and found a higher rate of teacher-reported 'school refusal' compared to non-autistic students. Possible explanations for the higher levels of EBSNA amongst autistic students

[2] The term Autism Spectrum Condition (ASC) is used throughout this thesis as opposed to Autism Spectrum Disorder, which aligns with the medical model of disability. In addition, the term 'autistic' is used as opposed to 'with autism'. Whilst it is recognised that all individuals have different preferences, research indicates that autistic adults and their families preferred the term 'autistic' as they viewed autism as a core part of their identity (Kenny et al., 2015). Similar preferences were noted when the researcher engaged with the autistic community during the recruitment and data collection phase of the thesis. See Appendix H for researcher's reflections.

include the association between ASC and social anxiety, sensory processing difficulties, an increased vulnerability for stressful school situations and difficulties managing change in the school environment (Munkhaugen et al. 2017; Preece & Howley, 2018; WSCC, 2018).

Within the UK context, Totsika et al. (2020) conducted a comprehensive study requiring the parents of 486 autistic students to indicate which days their child missed school over a one-month period. Parents selected from a list of 15 reasons from the School Non-Attendance Checklist in which non-attendance was categorised into non-problematic absence, school refusal, truancy, school withdrawal and school exclusion. Results indicated that 'school refusal' behaviour accounted for 43% of absences, a figure significantly higher than the 10% threshold for persistent absence stipulated by the DfE. In comparison, DfE data reported that persistent absence in the same academic year across all students in England was 10.8% and 17.3% for autistic students. This discrepancy is likely explained by national attendance data only classifying students as autistic if ASC is the primary need on their EHCP, meaning a proportion of autistic pupils with comorbid diagnoses are overlooked in the DfE data. Totsika et al's., (2020) findings suggest that the true prevalence of persistent absence in autistic pupils is significantly higher than reported by the DfE and provides a strong rationale for exploring EBSNA within the autistic community. Moreover, consistent with previous research, a correlation was identified between incidences of 'school refusal' in autistic students and older age, highlighting the importance of conducting EBSNA research with secondary-age pupils.

1.7 The Educational Psychologist role in supporting EBSNA

Despite the significance of the school environment in affecting attendance patterns and the importance of an interactionist approach, the dominant discourse surrounding EBSNA remains largely focused on individual and home factors. Interestingly, Malcolm et al. (2003) found that compared to teachers, young people and their parents were more likely to cite school-based

reasons for EBSNA than individual or family factors. With teachers attributing EBSNA to individual and family factors (Malcolm et al. 2003), schools risk overlooking their role in precipitating and maintaining EBSNA and may lack agency in affecting change (Pellegrini, 2007). An understanding of the interaction between EBSNA and the school environment is therefore considered essential to promoting change and alternative narratives (Place et al., 2000), signifying a potential role for Educational Psychologists (EPs) in supporting schools to understand EBSNA and adapt their environment accordingly.

EPs have been identified as well positioned to support EBSNA due to their scope for working across individual, group and organisational levels (Carroll, 2015). A key element of the role involves supporting successful inclusion of children within mainstream settings (The Children and Families Act, 2014), which extends to supporting students experiencing attendance difficulties. Whilst individual and family factors undoubtedly contribute to EBSNA, school staff are the gatekeepers to pupils accessing a supportive school environment. Despite this, changes in funding, austerity measures (Beckles, 2014) and the impact of Covid-19 are likely to have placed increased pressure on schools to provide more EBSNA support with fewer resources. As a result, support for students experiencing EBSNA is often implemented once the behaviour has become entrenched and is consequently more difficult to change (Beckles, 2014).

EPs have the capacity to support schools with these challenges by working systemically to promote whole-school change; challenging common perceptions of EBSNA and facilitating alternative discourses about this population amongst school staff (Carroll, 2015; Pellegrini, 2007). This includes supporting education settings to recognise the school and environmental factors which impact EBSNA and encouraging schools to adapt their environment in response to the views and needs of young people (Beckles, 2014; Pellegrini, 2007). EPs have opportunities to work closely with schools and young people at an early stage to identify the

'push and pull' factors predicating and maintaining EBSNA and to help schools implement preventative and early intervention approaches to improving attendance (Elliott & Place, 2019).

1.8 Gaining students' views

To gain an in-depth understanding into how attendance could be improved, there is a need to ask young people directly about their attendance experiences and hopes for support. Both locally and nationally there has been an espoused shift towards hearing young peoples' voices and placing increased value on their views and opinions, however this does not appear to be reflected in the literature (Beckles, 2014). Currently, a large body of non-attendance research relies on parental and professional opinions relating to EBSNA, with little opportunity for young people to share their perspectives. As highlighted, education staff overlook the impact of school factors on attendance, instead attributing individual and home factors to EBSNA, which is likely to influence the effectiveness of available support. Furthermore, whilst schools may believe they are implementing effective support for attendance difficulties, without listening to young people's perceptions, it is difficult to identify the effectiveness of any changes.

Autistic students face additional barriers to sharing their views due to the cognitive and linguistic demands of traditional research methods. This has led to assumptions that autistic individuals may be unable to share their ideas, however evidence suggests that various verbal and non-verbal activities are successful in eliciting views and ideas, further highlighting the need to engage this group in research to understand their perceptions and experiences of non-attendance (Fayette & Bond, 2018; Milton, 2019; Moyse, 2020; Williams & Hanke, 2007).

1.9 Conclusion

Discrepancies regarding the terminology and conceptualisation of attendance difficulties have made it difficult to estimate the true epidemiology across the UK. Despite this, recent reports suggest that EBSNA is becoming increasingly prevalent, particularly for autistic students who are at increased risk of experiencing attendance difficulties. Despite complex and multifaceted explanations for attendance difficulties, the problem has historically been located within the child, however EBSNA is best understood as the result of multiple interacting factors, including individual, family and school influences. There is a wealth of literature examining the individual, clinical characteristics and family factors affecting EBSNA, and whilst increasingly recognised as a risk factor, further research is required that seeks to understand the role of the school environment. It is argued that EPs are well-placed to identify, explore and share the environmental factors that both perpetuate and reduce the risk of EBSNA for autistic students.

2. Systematic literature review

2.1 Purpose

The purpose of this chapter is to present a systematic review of the literature to identify how autistic students who experience EBSNA perceive school and the factors which affect their attendance. The literature review aims to understand and explore the interaction between the school environment and EBSNA and to identify whether any existing literature explores the perspectives of young people with attendance difficulties and an autism diagnosis. Whilst the views of teachers, professionals and parents help shape the understanding of EBSNA, there is increasing recognition of the importance of prioritising young people's voices (DfE, 2014), and the current literature review therefore focuses solely on the views and perspectives of young people.

2.2 Literature review question

1. What are the experiences and perceptions of school for autistic secondary-age students experiencing EBSNA?

2.2.1 Literature review search strategy

Following a scoping review to isolate key terms, an initial search was conducted on 18th December 2021 covering psychology and education databases; PsycInfo and Education Resource Information Centre (ERIC) via EBSCO host. A search of grey literature was also conducted through ETHOS and an advanced Google search. Table 2 shows the search terms for the initial search.

Table 2

Search terms used in the literature search for Question 1

Subject mapping terms	Key word search terms	Rationale
1. "Emotionally-based school*"	OR school refus* OR extended non-attend* OR persistent non-attend* OR school non-attend* OR school phobia OR EBSNA OR EBSA OR PSNA OR absen*	As identified in the literature, there are multiple interchangeable terms used for attendance difficulties
AND		
2. "Autism Spectrum Condition"	OR Autism Spectrum Disorder OR autism* OR autistic* OR neurodivergent OR asperger*	There are multiple ways of referring to Autism Spectrum Condition

2.2.2 Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Table 3

Inclusion and exclusion criteria for the search 1

Inclusion	Exclusion	Rationale
Question 1 search		
1. Publication date Year of publication 2003– 2022.	Papers published prior to 2003.	Studies should be related to recent and current practice. Kearney's 2003 paper first identified 'school refusal' as a spectrum of behaviours.
2. Location Studies conducted in the UK.	Studies conducted outside of the UK.	Studies were sought that related specifically to UK educational contexts.
3. Participants Studies include the views of secondary-age (11-16) young people with attendance difficulties and with a diagnosis of ASC.	Studies do not include the views of secondary-age (11-16) young people with attendance difficulties (e.g. they relate to primary school age or views of parents or professionals).	The author aimed to understand the views of autistic secondary-age young people with attendance difficulties as EBSNA is most prevalent in this age group.

4. Study focus Studies were included if they explored the views of young people. Studies included if they related to experiences and views of school.	Studies focusing on young people who do not have an autism diagnosis. Opinion pieces or studies describing correlations that do not include the views of young people.	In line with the SEN Code of Practice (2014), the literature review aimed to identify and understand young people's views and perceptions about school.
5. Study type Peer-reviewed journals and doctoral theses.	Books or magazines.	Peer-reviewed journal articles and doctoral theses.

The subject heading search terms were combined with equivalent key word search terms using OR. The two search terms were then combined using AND. The following filters were applied; 'academic journal', 'dissertation' '2003-2022' and 'English'. Following the application of the exclusion criteria, this led to a total of 52 papers (PsycInfo), 34 papers (ERIC) and 27 papers (grey literature) remaining (see Appendix A for details). Upon reading the titles and abstracts of these papers, most focused on correlations between ASC and attendance or explored professional and parental opinions. The search returned one study which met the inclusion criteria and is discussed below.

2.3 Q1: What are the experiences and perceptions of school for autistic secondary-age students experiencing EBSNA?

Moyse (2020) was the only study identified which explored the experiences of autistic young people with attendance difficulties from their perspective. The study investigated the experiences of ten autistic girls, aged between 11-16 who were not attending school. Alongside analysing quantitative secondary data consisting of NHS records, Moyse (2020) worked collaboratively with participants to generate timelines of their absence, as well as utilising

Personal Construct Psychology (PCP) methods such as the 'Drawing the Ideal School' activity (Williams & Hanke, 2007). Thematic analysis of interviews and participatory methods revealed that far from rejecting education, the girls wanted to attend school but were prevented by a lack of understanding, support and care. The girls in this study reported an absence of individualised support, overwhelming school environments, limited autonomy, bullying and abuse from teachers and peers, staff who disbelieved or overlooked their needs and feelings of anxiety when faced with attending school. The autistic females in this study found group tasks unmanageable, largely due to uncooperative and disruptive peers which may be indicative of the specific social challenges associated with ASC. This is important when considering the most effective learning environments for autistic students with attendance difficulties.

Moyse (2020) concluded that prioritising pupil wellbeing was the most influential factor in ensuring school attendance in this group of autistic females. Responses from the Ideal School activity identified 'people' as the most common theme, suggesting that the attitudes and approaches of staff and peers were the key factor in supporting wellbeing and positively influencing school experiences. Participants hoped for fair and kind staff with an understanding of autism and the ability to meet their individual needs. The study highlighted the importance of autistic-led staff training that ensured students' needs were recognised, understood and accommodated for. Moreover, participants' sought a sense of belonging with "genuine friends" who did not discriminate and viewed them as "a person not as a diagnosis". Moyse (2020) ensured the research was collaborative and accessible by recruiting an autism advisory group to advise on the design of the research, which suggests that the Ideal School task and life charts were appropriate and effective methods of data collection. These findings highlight the importance of the relational aspect of school and suggest that improvements in peer and staff relationships are likely to contribute to improved attendance.

Moyse (2020) offered an insight into the perceptions of autistic females who experienced attendance difficulties and findings indicated the unsuitability of the school environment in meeting their needs, resulting in deteriorating mental health and the gradual onset of absence. The study focused solely on the experiences of autistic girls whose voices are reported to be less salient within research, highlighting a gap in the literature for understanding the interacting effects of autism and EBSNA for a wider population of autistic students. Whilst Moyse' (2020) research provided an insight into the school experiences of a small group of autistic females experiencing attendance difficulties, additional research was required as a single study did not provide enough information to answer the intended literature review question. Two further literature searches were therefore conducted which focussed separately on autistic students and students experiencing EBSNA. The additional literature searches were informed by the following two questions.

2.4 Additional literature review questions

2. What are the experiences and perceptions of school for secondary-age students experiencing EBSNA?
3. What are the experiences and perceptions of school for secondary-age autistic students?

Table 4

Search terms used in the literature search for Question 2.

Subject mapping terms	Key word search terms	Rationale
1. "Emotionally-based school*"	OR school refus* OR extended non-attend* OR persistent non-attend* OR school non-attend* OR school phobia OR EBSNA OR EBSA OR PSNA OR absen*	As identified in the literature, there are multiple interchangeable terms used for attendance difficulties
AND		
2. View*	OR perspective* OR experience* OR attitude* OR perception* OR voice OR opinion*	The search focused on identifying individual views and opinions rather than reporting statistics.

Table 5

Search terms used in the literature search for Question 3.

Subject mapping terms	Key word search terms (in Title)	Rationale
1. "Autism Spectrum Condition"	OR Autism Spectrum Disorder OR autism* OR autistic* OR neurodivergent OR asperger*	There are multiple ways of referring to Autism Spectrum Condition
AND		
2. View*	OR perspective* OR experience* OR attitude* OR perception* OR voice OR opinion*	The search focused on identifying individual views and opinions rather than reporting statistics.
AND		
3. School*	OR school environment OR school experience OR education*	The search focused on experiences of school and the school environment.

The subject heading search terms were combined with equivalent key word search terms using OR. The separate search terms were then combined using AND. The following filters were applied; 'academic journal', 'dissertation', '2003-2022' and 'English'. This led to a total of 148 papers (PsycInfo), 9 papers (ERIC) and 3 theses (ETHOS) for Question 1 and 133 papers (PsycInfo), 17 papers (ERIC) and 75 theses (ETHOS) for Question 2. Duplicate articles were removed and the inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied to the titles, abstracts or full texts of the remaining articles.

2.5 Inclusion and exclusion criteria

Table 6

Inclusion and exclusion criteria for searches 2 and 3

Inclusion	Exclusion	Rationale
Question 1 search		
1. Publication date Year of publication 2003– 2022.	Papers published prior to 2003.	Studies should be related to recent and current practice. Kearney's 2003 paper first identified school refusal' as a spectrum of behaviours.
2. Location Studies conducted in the UK.	Studies conducted outside of the UK.	Studies were sought that related specifically to UK educational contexts.
3. Participants Studies include the views of secondary-age (11-16) young people with attendance difficulties.	Studies do not include the views of secondary-age (11-16) young people with attendance difficulties (e.g. they relate to primary school age or views of parents or professionals).	The author aimed to understand the views of secondary-age young people with attendance difficulties as EBSNA is most prevalent in this age group.
4. Study focus	Opinion pieces or studies describing correlations that do	In line with the SEN Code of Practice (2014), the literature

Studies were included if they explored the views of young people. Studies included if they related to experiences and views of school.	not include the views of young people.	review aimed to identify and understand young people's views and perceptions about school.
5. Study type Peer-reviewed journals and doctoral theses.	Books or magazines.	Peer-reviewed journal articles and doctoral theses.
Question 2 search		
1. Publication date Year of publication 2003 – 2022.	Papers published prior to 2003.	Studies should be related to recent and current practice.
2. Location Studies conducted in the UK.	Studies conducted outside of the UK.	Studies were sought that related specifically to UK educational contexts.
3. Participants Studies include the views of secondary-age (11-16) autistic young people.	Studies do not include the views of secondary-age (11-16) autistic young people (e.g. no autism diagnosis, primary school age or views of parents or professionals).	The author aimed to understand the views of secondary-age autistic young people as EBSNA is most prevalent in this age group.
4. Study focus Studies included if they explored the views of young people. Studies included if they related to experiences and views of school.	Opinion pieces or studies describing correlations that do not include the views of young people.	In line with the SEN Code of Practice (2014), the literature review aimed to identify and understand young people's views and perceptions about school.
5. Type of paper Peer-reviewed journals and doctoral theses.	Books or magazines.	Peer-reviewed journal articles and doctoral theses.

The literature relating to EBSNA and autism has previously been dominated by parental and staff perspectives, with an absence of young people's views. Within the literature searches,

many studies presented young people's views in combination with parental and professional views. Studies were excluded from the literature review when the young person's voice could not be distinguished from parents or professionals. Whilst the triangulation of information from parents, professionals and young people offers value, James (2015) argues that it risks young people's views being overshadowed and since this research aimed to advocate for the voices of young people, the literature review presents findings related solely to young people's views. See Appendix A - C for further details of the systematic literature review process.

In line with inclusion and exclusion criteria, articles were excluded upon reading the title, abstract or full text (see Appendix B). Once the inclusion and exclusion criteria had been applied, 10 studies remained from Search 2 and 7 studies remained from Search 3, with a total of 17 studies which met the inclusion criteria for critical analysis. The remaining articles were reviewed using the Specialist Unit for Reviewing Evidence (see Appendix C). The 17 papers included 8 doctoral theses and 9 journal articles. All studies were qualitative and used a range of approaches and techniques to elicit data including semi-structured interviews and PCP tasks.

2.6 Q2: What are the experiences and perceptions of school for secondary-age students experiencing EBSNA?

2.6.1 Introduction

As outlined in Chapter 1, a wide range of terminology is used to describe attendance difficulties, which presents further challenges when reviewing the literature. Since various terms are used inconsistently and interchangeably (Elliott, 1999), there remains little consensus or shared understanding of the nature of attendance difficulties. Authors therefore use different definitions and parameters for what constitutes attendance difficulties, and it is important to note that their findings may not be referring to the same behaviours. The term EBSNA has been selected for this study due to its broad definition of non-attendance and the current

literature review will therefore include studies that use any relevant definitions and categories of non-attendance including truancy, young people attending school but finding it difficult to remain and those attending alternative provisions after experiencing EBSNA at their mainstream school. It is important to note that these groups may not be represented in earlier research which uses a narrower definition for attendance difficulties. Searches from Question 2 resulted in three journal articles and seven theses which will be considered in the following section.

2.6.2 Reasons for attendance difficulties

Various studies have aimed to identify the reasons for attendance difficulties, however many failed to meet the inclusion criteria and overlooked young people's views (Archer et al., 2003; Malcolm et al., 2003). The following section identifies key factors that contributed to attendance difficulties from young people's perspectives. Across the literature, young people recalled their attendance difficulties beginning at key transition points such as the transition to secondary school or transfer to a new school. This generally appeared to be a gradual process, whereby their attendance declined over time (Baker & Bishop, 2015; Gregory & Purcell, 2014; Want, 2020).

Bullying and social isolation

Across the ten studies, bullying and social isolation were commonly described as influencing attendance patterns, particularly when joining a new school (Baker & Bishop, 2015; Clissold, 2018; How, 2015; James, 2015; Shilvock, 2010). Semi-structured interviews with five young people in Year 11 revealed that worries about being bullied constituted a major barrier to school attendance, with participants feeling fearful about attending school due to threats of physical and emotional abuse. Moreover, findings indicated that little intervention

from school staff led to students accepting bullying as part of school life, with any systemic anti-bullying attempts deemed futile. Alongside bullying, participants described feeling socially isolated or "outcasted" by peers, which further affected their ability to attend school (How, 2015).

These findings are consistent across the literature; semi-structured interviews with 12 students experiencing attendance difficulties confirmed that staff did not take bullying seriously, increasing the likelihood of avoiding school (Beckles, 2014). Participants were part of a non-clinical sample based on Berg's (1969) definition of school refusal which excluded truants, meaning the sample may not have been representative of the wide spectrum of non-attendance behaviours. Despite this, studies with less stringent exclusion criteria for attendance difficulties also identified bullying and social isolation as key predicators of attendance difficulties (Gregory & Purcell, 2014; James, 2015; Want, 2020), with one participant explaining "*last year I didn't wanna come in because of bullies".* Whilst it would be simplistic to propose a cause-and-effect relationship between bullying and EBSNA, the issue clearly plays a significant role in the development of attendance difficulties from the perspective of young people.

Mental health difficulties

Participants mentioned feeling sick, fearful and anxious about attending school due to the perceived inevitability of bullying and social exclusion; however additional reasons, such as fear of teachers or being punished at school also contributed to feelings of anxiety (Beckles, 2014; Clissold, 2018; Gregory & Purcell; 2014; How, 2015; Shilvock, 2015). In Baker and Bishops' (2015) study, four participants had received Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) input and three had received anti-depressants, highlighting the prominence of mental health needs within this group. Despite this, it remains challenging to determine

whether mental health needs were a contributory factor in attendance difficulties or whether low attendance contributed to mental health difficulties. In Beckles (2014) study, participants described emotions such as worry, anger and depression and reported worrying about bullying and staff reprimands.

Furthermore, utilising the School Refusal Assessment Scale (SRAS) and semi-structured interviews, James (2015) explored the perceptions of five young people with attendance below 85%. Findings indicated that psychological difficulties including feeling paranoid, worried and anxious affected students' attendance. Alongside anxiety about bullying, participants referred to the unpredictable nature of the school environment and particular places in school which increased their anxiety such as busy communal areas. This is consistent with previous conceptualisations of attendance difficulties as being underpinned by anxiety, however these findings move from locating causal factors within the individual and instead highlight students' responses to the school environment. This further indicates the value of gaining students' views as whilst schools may be implementing changes to reduce students' anxiety, the effectiveness of this support cannot be evaluated without listening to students' perceptions and experiences.

Environmental factors

Whilst these studies offer useful insights into potential causes of attendance difficulties, none aimed to specifically identify the reasons for non-attendance. Addressing this gap, Clissold (2018) used participatory methods to explore how three young people constructed their reasons for non-attendance. Participants completed a timeline of their school history with their parent, in addition to the Grid Elaboration Method in which they wrote or drew something that they associated with the reasons for EBSNA. Similar to Want (2020), two participants recalled a gradual decrease in their attendance, however one participant described the rapid

onset of EBSNA, which emphasises the heterogeneity in attendance experiences. In line with previous research, friendships issues were identified as a precipitating factor to EBSNA, described as a stressor which resulted in 'push' factors outweighing 'pull' factors and leading to non-attendance. Additional reasons for attendance difficulties included a lack of appropriate support, environmental factors such as noise, perceived irrelevance of the curriculum and mental health difficulties. It is important to note that one participant had a diagnosis of ASC and all participants were required to have CAMHS involvement to participate, meaning the sample was likely to represent a specific subgroup of young people who experienced mental health difficulties. Consequently, although their experiences differed, anxiety was discussed by all participants; some identified anxiety as a predisposing factor, whilst others recognised anxiety as a maintaining factor in the EBSNA cycle. One participant cited specific challenges related to their ASC, including feeling misunderstood and experiencing persistent anxiety compared to their neurotypical peers, supporting previous research which identifies autistic individuals as being at increased risk of EBSNA (DfE, 2020; Totsika et al., 2020).

A lack of understanding and support from school were common reasons for the onset of EBSNA amongst participants in Clissold's (2018) study. One participant described "*not being cared about as an individual*" and recalled delayed, inconsistent support and a lack of suitable provision. Limited reference was made to individual or home factors as reasons for EBSNA, which may suggest that young people perceive school and environmental factors to be the leading cause of their attendance difficulties. It is possible, however, that the presence of their parent during the interview process resulted in participants minimising the impact of personal or family factors on their attendance behaviours.

Home and family factors

The impact of home and family factors on attendance was illustrated in Shilvock's (2010) study with three secondary-age girls experiencing attendance difficulties. The use of PCP methods, including open-ended questions, Q-sort statements, Salmon lines and a sentence completion task provided a unique way for participants to share the factors influencing their attendance. Several school risk factors were identified, including feelings of boredom, viewing the curriculum as pointless, academic difficulties and a lack of support. Alongside environmental factors, all participants had caring responsibilities which largely explained their absence. Participants described challenging family circumstances and a preference to stay at home to ensure the safety of their parents. Narratives included feeling "worried", "paranoid" and "scared" about going into school and leaving their parent, whereas staying at home eased feelings of anxiety and unpredictability. Participants were identified by staff as having an 'emotional component' to their non-attendance and this potentially subjective definition may explain the similar profiles of the three participants, since more traditional 'school refusers' or 'truants' were excluded. Despite this, Beckles (2014) also identified caring responsibilities as a risk factor for two participants amongst a wider sample of non-attenders, with one young person stating, *"I have to look after my mum if she's extremely ill".* Both studies illustrate how home factors can impact attendance, however young people did not identify a single cause of attendance difficulties; instead, a combination of individual, home and school factors led to the development of EBSNA.

A combination of interacting factors

The influence of home and family factors was further examined by James (2015), also using PCP techniques to gain the views of five young people experiencing persistent absence. Conversely to Shilvock (2010), findings indicated that home and family factors generally did not contribute to young people's attendance difficulties. One participant indicated that

problems at home motivated her to attend school, as it offered the opportunity to "get a break". This was in stark contrast to the girls with caring responsibilities who spent their time at school preoccupied with worries about their parents (Shilvock, 2010). The disparity in findings may be explained by the different samples; participants in Shilvock's study were selected by staff if their non-attendance was deemed emotionally based, whereas any young people with attendance below 85% participated in James' (2015) study, therefore including a wider range of attendance difficulties. Other participants within James' (2015) sample confirmed that home factors did not influence their attendance and for those who did experience family issues, these were not viewed as a significant factor in their difficulties attending school. Instead, not feeling safe in school; mental health difficulties; poor sleep; challenges with peers; lack of understanding from adults; inappropriate teaching styles and poor classroom management were cited by multiple participants as reasons for their non-attendance.

This is consistent with Gregory and Purcell (2014) who utilised semi-structured interviews with three young people and concluded that attendance difficulties are a complex phenomenon without a single contributing factor. As mentioned in Chapter 1, school staff consider individual and home factors to be the key reason for EBSNA (Archer et al., 2003; Malcolm et al., 2003), contributing to the narrative that EBSNA is a within-child or family problem. The literature presented in this section, however, has indicated that young people perceive a combination of factors, and particularly school and environmental factors, to lead to the development of EBSNA.

2.6.3 Experiences of EBSNA

Academic demands

Research exploring pupils' experiences of EBSNA indicated that academic demands impacted and maintained their non-attendance. Beckles (2014) utilised semi-structured interviews and a timeline activity with a non-clinical sample of twelve pupils in a school deemed as having poor attendance. A strength of the research lies in the adaptation of the methodology following a pilot interview, which improved the accessibility and length of the interview. Findings indicated that students were more motivated to attend school when lessons were enjoyable and involved interactive, kinaesthetic and visual learning. Unenjoyable lessons focused on reading and writing, were too fast-paced, with limited time to complete tasks and an expectation to "catch up" on missed work. For some pupils, contributing publicly to large groups felt "embarrassing" and caused anxiety and avoidance of lessons (Gregory & Purcell, 2014). In contrast, opportunities for paired learning were valued amongst young people and without interactive activities, participants reported that they would "mess around", "chat" or "daydream". These findings are supported by James (2015) who found that opportunities to talk with peers and a choice of different activities increased motivation to attend lessons, which implies that adaptations to the school environment and structure may contribute to improved attendance. This contrasts with Moyse's (2020) findings, which identified autistic females as finding group tasks challenging and a barrier to attendance, highlighting a difference in the experiences of autistic compared to non-autistic students.

Relationships with staff

Another key theme identified across the literature was the impact of relationships with staff, whereby poor pupil-teacher relationships were associated with increased risk of EBSNA (Baker & Bishop, 2015; Beckles, 2014; How, 2015). Teachers who were deemed strict, who shouted and did not offer praise led to increased anxiety levels amongst pupils, consequently reducing their motivation to attend school (Beckles, 2014; Billington, 2018; How, 2015).

Similarly to autistic females in Moyse (2020) study, pupils described experiencing a power imbalance, illustrated by staff speaking to them like “children” or “babies” and enforcing extensive rules and restrictions that served to maintain inequality (Beckles, 2014, Want, 2020). Across the literature, pupils reported a lack of connection with teachers and feeling as though staff did not take the time to get to know them or care about them (Baker & Bishop, 2015; Beckles, 2014; James, 2015), implying that relational aspects of school are significantly linked to attendance.

A sense of not feeling listened to was commonly experienced by young people presenting with EBSNA (Baker & Bishop, 2015; Beckles, 2014; Billington, 2018; Gregory & Purcell, 2014). Pupils described their experiences of being ignored, disbelieved and “shoved aside” (Beckles, 2014), as well as being publicly questioned about their absences, further reinforcing their narrative of uncaring staff who did not attempt to understand their difficulties. This was consistent across studies; Billington (2018) reported that students felt misunderstood and judged by teachers and expressed frustration that staff did not ask for their opinions. All students reported a lack of opportunities to talk, be listened to or have their views valued at school. These school experiences contrast with their experience of the Active Listening methodology used in Billington’s research, which supported participants to feel heard and have their views recognised. Within this study, participants were also invited to comment on their narratives five months after the initial interview, further demonstrating their value in the research process. The opportunity to talk and feel listened to during the interview process juxtaposes their negative experience of school and it is therefore unsurprising that participants were keen to share their experiences of not being listened to at school. Additionally, the Active Listening methodology was positively received and the techniques are likely to have supported participants to recount their experiences more openly, adding credibility to the findings.

Use of language

The language used to describe attendance difficulties was central to young people's negative experiences of EBSNA (Baker & Bishop, 2015; Billington, 2018). Participants described being labelled by staff; terms such as "naughty", "lazy", "arrogant" and "refuser" were regularly used, with one pupil labelled a "drama queen" following an anxiety attack (Baker & Bishop, 2015). This illustrates the continued assumption of EBSNA as an internal problem and overlooks students' accounts of the school environment negatively affecting their attendance. In contrast to previous research, all participants in Billington's (2018) study were identified as 'truants.' The consistency in findings between these proposed subgroups therefore refutes attempts to distinguish between categories of non-attendance, as participants from both studies shared similar experiences of being labelled.

Lack of support

As highlighted previously, a lack of support to manage bullying and limited assistance in lessons often contributed to the initial onset of EBSNA. This support did not improve as pupils' attendance difficulties developed, with young people reporting delayed, fragmented and inappropriate support to manage their attendance (Baker & Bishop, 2015; Beckles, 2014; Shilvock, 2010). Strategies such as 'exit cards' to leave lessons were only useful when all staff were made aware of the young person's needs, meaning the strategy was not consistently effective. Moreover, young people agreed that school staff did not work collaboratively and failed to consider their views when forming strategies or intervention plans (Beckles, 2014). Further supporting these findings, Baker and Bishop (2015) indicated that all five participants shared negative support experiences and described significant delays of several months between the onset of their EBSNA and receiving support. Both Baker and Bishop (2015) and Shilvock (2010) described the challenges young people faced when transitioning back to school

after a period of absence. Any support upon return was brief, before pupils were expected to resume a full timetable (Baker & Bishop, 2015). Moreover, poor relationships with teachers resulted in fear of asking for help and pupils concealing their difficulties to avoid the risk of judgment or negative consequences (Baker & Bishop, 2015; Beckles, 2014; How, 2015). As such, delays in support may be linked to staff failing to recognise the extent of pupils' difficulties and these findings suggest that early intervention principles alongside collaborative open conversations between pupils and staff would contribute to more effective support.

2.6.4 Supportive factors

School experience

The studies discussed so far have focused on the factors influencing EBSNA and the difficulties experienced by young people. Identifying a gap in the research and moving away from a problem-focus, Smith (2020) utilised an Appreciative Inquiry approach to explore the existing strengths in school systems that support young people with attendance difficulties. Unlike earlier studies, the sample included young people across all subcategories of non-attendance who met the criteria for Persistent School Non-Attendance (PSNA), therefore encapsulating a wide range of experiences. Smith (2020) utilised a PCP technique which involved young people completing the Ideal School task alongside scaling questions and semi-structured interviews. Triangulation of findings indicated two main themes that supported attendance: positive relationships and positive learning experiences. Consistent with previous research, positive learning experiences involved lessons that built upon strengths and interests, utilised creative methods and enabled group working. These lessons were deemed interesting and enjoyable and consequently increased motivation to attend school. Additional supportive factors at school included increased academic support, a manageable workload, and the opportunity to catch up on tasks missed due to absence, whilst access to safe spaces reduced

anxiety for some young people. Supporting existing research, participants emphasised the need for staff to understand the use of exit cards to avoid students feeling "trapped" in lessons. These findings indicate that aspects of the school environment can positively influence attendance, however it remains vital that strategies are acknowledged and used consistently by all staff.

The Appreciative Inquiry methodology included solution-focused interviews and an Ideal School task, which facilitated discussions around potential improvements to the school environment. Students suggested that enhanced positive learning experiences, enhanced positive relationships and feeling comfortable in school would support their attendance. To feel comfortable in school, participants required a safer environment that was more spacious and less crowded, with separate areas for different year groups. Students also expressed a desire for more comfortable uniforms that allowed self-expression; shorter lessons; longer breaks to eat and use the toilet and more opportunities to relax. These findings are unique to Smith (2020), and it is possible that the solution-focused methodology, the opportunity to record ideas through drawing and a clear focus on positive change may have resulted in these findings.

Additional supportive factors at school included access to extra-curricular activities such as computing, drama and homework club (James, 2015; Shilvock, 2010). Other students enjoyed moving classrooms for different lessons, having access to newer equipment and facilities compared to primary school and being taught by a diverse range of teachers (Beckles, 2014), further emphasising the role of the school environment in supporting attendance.

Enhanced positive relationships

School staff

Since negative relationships with school staff were a key predictor of attendance difficulties, it is unsurprising that young people sought positive relationships with approachable and available trusted adults (Smith, 2020). Spending time listening, getting to know students and attempting to understand the reasons behind their attendance difficulties were deemed important qualities in staff. Additionally, adults perceived as kind, welcoming, funny, understanding, and supportive were likely to increase students' motivation to attend school. In the context of learning, students valued fair but flexible staff with a "laid-back" teaching style. As detailed in previous studies, teachers who made adaptations and advocated for young people were considered most supportive.

These findings corroborate with earlier studies in which young people communicated a need for better relationships with teachers (How, 2015), characterised by increased respect, understanding and empathy (Baker & Bishop, 2015; James, 2015; Want, 2020). Many participants sought relationships with adults who listened and enabled a sense of connection and belonging, ultimately increasing their feelings of safety (Billington, 2018). These findings suggest that staff qualities and attitudes cannot be overlooked when working to improve attendance and offer further support for the importance of adapting environmental and systemic factors to support EBSNA.

Peer relationships

Peer relationships were a common theme across all ten studies and whilst bullying and social isolation have been discussed as negatively influencing attendance, young people also reflected on the more positive aspects of peer relationships. Participants in Beckles (2014) research valued friendships and felt that positive peer relationships were a key part of making school feel tolerable. Friends were described as offering support, empathy and advice and young people preferred to share their difficulties with peers as opposed to teachers who were

deemed less understanding. Pupils further highlighted the value of peer relationships in their descriptions of missing their friends whilst absent and maintaining contact via text messaging (Beckles, 2014). These findings were echoed in How's (2015) study; all five participants suggested that friends can act as a protective factor and buffer against negative school experiences. Corroborating Beckles (2014) findings, friendships and social interaction were deemed the most important aspects of school above learning or academic achievement, with positive friendships often providing motivation to attend school. For one participant, the experience of making new friends was the catalyst that led to full-time attendance at school. Elsewhere in the literature, multiple references were made to positive friendships reducing loneliness, offering support, increasing enjoyment of school and providing a protective factor amidst their attendance difficulties (Baker & Bishop, 2015; Gregory & Purcell, 2014; James, 2015; Shilvock, 2010).

More recently, Smith (2020) indicated that alongside emotional support and offering a space to talk, friendships also improved young people's learning experiences. Having friends was attributed to increased understanding and participation in class, in addition to feeling more comfortable asking for help. This is consistent with previous research suggesting that young people find sharing in class challenging and prefer opportunities for paired learning (Gregory & Purcell, 2014; Moyse, 2020). Analysis of young people's narratives suggested that having friends in class increased their confidence, which in turn resulted in more effective and high-quality work. Whilst these findings appear promising, it is important to note that many young people also experienced bullying and social isolation and received little intervention or support from school staff. It is therefore unlikely that school attendance will improve without staff providing support for young people to develop and maintain positive friendships and social interactions.

2.6.5 Future aspirations

Despite challenges attending school, young people reflected on their future aspirations, which often involved attending college, enrolling in further education and securing a job (Baker & Bishop, 2015, Gregory & Purcell, 2014; How, 2015; Want, 2020). Interestingly, How (2015) noted that participants appeared passive with an external locus of control and felt controlled by school systems. Despite this, they placed value on GCSEs, employment and financial security and expressed ambitions of becoming plumbers, builders, engineers or working in childcare (How, 2015). Similar analysis of semi-structured interviews with two young people highlighted that despite uncertainty about their future, both shared hopes to re-engage with education, attend school full-time and achieve their academic potential. Want (2020) reported that both participants had a diagnosis of ASC, however, this was not a key focus of the study and the potential implications of this could have been explored further within the discussion. Although the results were not intended to be generalisable, it is worth noting that the narratives provided by both young people followed similar trajectories, with shared experiences and hopes for the future and the sample may not have been representative of the wider population of non-attendance. Nonetheless, these findings support previous research suggesting that young people experiencing EBSNA, including those with an ASC diagnosis, recognise the value of education.

2.7 Q3: What are the experiences and perceptions of school for secondary-age autistic students?

The literature discussed so far has focussed on students' experiencing EBSNA and their perceptions of school. The following section explores the similarities and differences in the school experiences and perceptions of autistic students by reviewing six journal articles and one thesis identified from Search 3.

2.7.1 Relationships at school

Peer relationships

Congruent with young people experiencing EBSNA, peer relationships were a recurring theme across the literature for autistic students, with themes of bullying and social isolation across all studies. Historically, the engagement of autistic young people in research has been overlooked due to the presumed impact of social communication difficulties on traditional data collection methods such as interviews. Instead, researchers have sought the views of parents and professionals. Humphrey and Lewis (2008) and Goodall (2018), however, prioritised the views of young people by requesting their feedback and advice on the research design prior to data collection. This informed the use of participatory methods, including semi-structured interviews, diary entries, drawings, diamond ranking, 'good teacher/bad teacher' and 'design your own school' activities. Despite potential social communication difficulties, participants demonstrated awareness of their needs and an ability to reflect on the impact of their diagnosis, proving the effectiveness of these techniques in eliciting the views of autistic students. As noted by Dillon et al. (2016), it is often assumed that autistic individuals struggle with self-reflection, however quotes from participants demonstrated the contrary; "*if you have a disability, [other students] don't want to know*" (Goodall, 2018). Findings from both studies highlighted young people's experiences of verbal abuse, physical violence, rejection and judgment and similarly to EBSNA research, there was a perception that staff did not intervene. Whilst those experiencing EBSNA did not identify possible reasons for bullying, participants in these studies recognised their increased vulnerability due to ASC, including social communication needs and difficulties understanding social nuances, making them a target for bullies (Goodall, 2018; Humphrey & Lewis, 2008). The studies explored the views of young people in both mainstream school (Humphrey & Lewis, 2008) and those attending alternative

provisions (Goodall, 2018) and the consistency in findings highlights the shared experiences of bullying and isolation across education settings.

Whilst bullying and social isolation were prominent, autistic students expressed a desire for friendships and opportunities for social inclusion. Similar to students experiencing EBSNA, positive peer relationships were identified as an important protective factor at school (Menzies, 2013; Sproston & Segdewick, 2017), with one participant reporting "*if people are nice to you, you feel better… now more people like me it's easier"* (Humphrey & Lewis, 2008). Where difficulties mentalizing and understanding subtleties of communication led to challenges within friendships, participants valued social skills groups and support from school staff to manage conflict (Goodall, 2018; Tomlinson et al., 2021). This supports Menzies (2013) who adopted a multiple case-study design with four autistic students and found that social skills interventions including the use of 'social stories', visuals and social communication groups helped develop peer networks and increased participants' sense of group identity. These findings indicate that with appropriate support, peer relationships offer a protective factor and enhance the school experiences of autistic young people.

Staff relationships

Relationships with school staff were important to young people, however alongside those with EBSNA, many autistic students described difficult relationships with staff. Sproston and Sedgewick (2017) utilised semi-structured interviews with eight autistic girls excluded from mainstream school and findings indicated that staff relationships were one of the most influential aspects of their school experience. Participants recalled feeling judged and ridiculed by teachers in mainstream schools, whereas staff at their Alternative Provision were approachable and expressed interest by listening and taking time to get to know them. This also appeared important to students in other studies who articulated a desire for understanding,

patient, kind and flexible teachers who listened to students and empathised with their difficulties (Goodall, 2018; Menzies, 2013; Tomlinson et al., 2021).

Key to school staff adopting a more understanding approach was the need for increased training related to ASC (Goodall, 2018; Humphrey & Lewis, 2008; Moyse; 2020; Tomlinson et al., 2021). Young people expressed frustration that staff were not appropriately trained to support autistic pupils and would respond to their needs based on stereotypes and past experiences with autistic students, rather than attempting to understand their individual needs (Sproston & Sedgewick, 2017; Tomlinson et al., 2021). Staff further demonstrated their lack of understanding by preventing young people from accessing personal adjustments such as 'support hubs' and negatively adjusting their approach and expectations post-diagnosis (Goodall, 2018; Moyse, 2020; Tomlinson et al., 2021).

The effectiveness of appropriate staff training was demonstrated by Tobias (2009) who facilitated focus groups and PCP drawing techniques with students and a group of parents. Results indicated that school staff were perceived as having fundamental knowledge of the key characteristics of ASC which allowed appropriate adjustments and behavioural support. Alongside this, staff recognised the importance of treating each pupil individually and understanding their unique needs, promoting effective differentiation and tailored support, and contributing to students' positive school experience. Whilst these results demonstrate the value of well-trained staff, the findings were reported in the parent focus group, and it is unclear whether similar themes emerged in the student group. This emphasises that interviewing parents as well as students can risk young people's voices being overshadowed when presenting the findings.

Despite this, in the only study to utilise a control group, Dillon et al. (2016) presented similar findings when comparing the views of autistic and non-autistic students in one mainstream school. Interestingly, findings indicated that both groups experienced positive

relationships with caring and helpful staff members, with the autistic group valuing a specific place to talk to staff. Given the disparity with earlier research that described difficult student-teacher relationships, it is possible that the smaller school environment of only 600 pupils in Dillon et al.'s (2016) study provided more opportunities for staff to know students personally and build positive relationships.

2.7.2 The school environment

A key theme identified across all seven studies was the impact of the school environment on autistic students' experiences. The sensory environment was described as a cause of anxiety, characterised by loud classrooms, busy corridors with students pushing, challenges navigating a large building and crowded communal areas (Goodall, 2018; Menzies, 2013; Moyse, 2020; Tomlinson et al., 2021). Participants in Goodall's (2018) study described "*feeling closed in and like I couldn't breathe*" in reference to the crowded, noisy and chaotic corridors at school. These findings are consistent with our understanding of sensory sensitivity in autistic individuals and highlight the lack of adjustments to meet their needs within some schools. Although the autistic students in these studies continued to attend school and were not experiencing EBSNA, this raises the question as to whether a lack of sensory adjustments may be contributing to the increased rates of EBSNA in other autistic students.

Young people identified potential changes to the school environment that would improve their experience, including designated quiet, green spaces for SEN pupils, cards to request support in class, toilet passes, ear defenders, exit cards, homework and revision clubs, additional transition support, and a pupil passport to inform staff of their needs (Tomlinson et al., 2021). For most autistic young people, access to a quiet, safe space was essential in improving their school experience and reducing their anxiety (Goodall, 2018; Humphrey & Lewis, 2008; Menzies, 2013). Findings from a 'design your own school' activity illustrated the

importance of breaking work into manageable chunks, using visuals, utilising technology, building on special interests, offering flexibility with homework and smaller class sizes (Goodall, 2018). Alongside the physical environment, students appreciated flexible learning environments, involving group work, interactive activities, consistent and clear instructions and opportunities to listen to music during class (Dillon et al., 2016; Sproston & Sedgwick, 2017).

Additional results from self-report questionnaires including the SRAS indicated that autistic students reported no difference in their school experience to non-autistic peers (Dillon et al., 2016). Social skills, relationships with staff, school functioning abilities and interpersonal strengths did not differ significantly between the two groups. This appears to contradict earlier findings that placed autistic students at increased risk of finding the school environment overwhelming and experiencing anxiety and subsequent EBSNA. As mentioned, these results are likely explained by the inclusive, small and accommodating school context that the research took place within, providing all young people with more positive school experiences. Despite this, autistic young people were more likely than their non-autistic peers to struggle with homework, which was viewed as blurring home-school boundaries. Consistent with the literature (Goodall, 2018; Tomlinson et al., 2021), autistic students valued the opportunity for homework clubs that offered adult support, suggesting that minor adjustments to the environment may increase their overall school experience.

2.7.3 Noticing difference

An autism diagnosis often resulted in young people feeling different to their peers (Humphrey & Lewis, 2008; Menzies, 2013; Moyse, 2020; Tomlinson et al., 2021) due to their self-reported repetitive and ritualistic behaviours, difficulties with social interactions, physical outbursts and reliance on routine (Menzies, 2013). As highlighted, this led to participants being

treated differently and perceived by others as ‘freaks’ or ‘mentally disabled’ (Humphrey & Lewis, 2008), resulting in some young people attempting to conceal their autism. Choosing to disclose their diagnosis was deemed a barrier to being considered ‘normal’, leading pupils to adapt themselves and their identities to adhere to social expectations and adopt behaviour perceived as normal (Humphrey & Lewis, 2008). This description is recognised as ‘masking’ or ‘camouflaging’ behaviour, whereby young people attempt to conceal their autistic traits to conform to a neurotypical society (The Autism Service, 2021). The constant negotiating and concealing of difference was further complicated by receiving additional attention and support from staff. One young person explained that their Teaching Assistant offered unnecessary help, consequently increasing her anxiety about being perceived as different (Tomlinson et al., 2021). This supports earlier research in which students expressed frustration at support staff ‘shadowing’ them during lessons, causing them to stand out to their peers. Instead of a visible level of support, students appreciated a ‘behind the scenes’ approach where staff sat at a distance and worked with multiple students (Humphrey & Lewis, 2008). Without training and guidance, support staff within schools may continue to ‘shadow’ students, who in turn reject their support, instead of adjusting their approach based on students’ individual needs and preferences. This highlights the importance of support staff receiving appropriate training which allows them to make professional judgments about the type and level of support required by individual students, ensuring a balance between students receiving appropriate support and avoiding feeling singled out.

Although for many students the notion of ‘difference’ held negative connotations, some recognised the value in sharing their diagnosis. Sensitive disclosure to peers was reported to facilitate relationships and reduce the ignorance that often underpins bullying and rejection. For these young people, autism had become integrated into their identity and part of “who they were”, allowing them to accept and share their differences with others (Humphrey & Lewis,

2008). This further suggests that support from Teaching Assistants and school staff to understand and accept their differences may allow students to feel more comfortable in accepting support within lessons, as well as negotiating the frequency and type of support they receive across the school day.

2.7.4 Anxiety and wellbeing

In a similar way to young people experiencing EBSNA, autistic students reported that school negatively impacted their wellbeing and increased anxiety, which is congruent with the literature identifying a link between ASC and anxiety. Factors discussed previously, including bullying, poor relationships, isolation and an unpredictable and sensorily overwhelming school environment led to feelings of stress, anxiety, dread and despair (Humphrey & Lewis, 2008; Goodall, 2018). Additional worries were triggered by changes in staffing and classrooms, exam pressures, difficulties accessing the curriculum and worries about transitioning to college (Tomlinson et al., 2021). Whilst participants in these studies continued to attend school, their descriptions of apprehension and "not wanting to get up" (Goodall, 2018) offer a potential insight into how attendance difficulties may develop in autistic students when the environment does not meet their needs.

2.8 Summary

A systematic search of the existing literature indicates that there is limited research exploring the views of autistic students who also experience attendance difficulties, with Moyse (2020) being the only study to focus explicitly on experiences of EBSNA in autistic students. To help further explore this topic, two searches investigated the views of students experiencing EBSNA and the views of autistic students, with findings highlighting mostly negative school experiences and perceptions. Key factors contributing to negative school experiences were difficult peer and staff relationships, mental health difficulties and an

inappropriate teaching and learning environment. Autistic participants described unique challenges around the sensory environment and the impact of being treated differently due to their diagnosis, although the association between these challenges and school attendance was not explored. Participants across both groups also identified positive relationships, increased support and a tailored learning environment as fundamental to enhancing their experience of school and further research is needed to identify whether these factors also apply to autistic students who experience EBSNA.

2.9 Rationale for current research

The current literature review provided an insight into the school experiences and perceptions of autistic students and of those experiencing EBSNA. Autistic students remain more likely to experience attendance difficulties and it is therefore vital to explore the interacting effects of autism and EBSNA. In the only research to focus on this area, Moyse (2020) presented the experiences of autistic girls who were not attending school and identified the importance of relationships, understanding and adjustments, although findings were limited to a small sample of females. Additional research is therefore required which explores the views of a wider sample of autistic students experiencing EBSNA, to identify any additional factors that may impact their school experience. Moreover, whilst the literature begins to build a picture of students' experiences and perceptions of school, additional research is required to identify the factors that may enhance school experiences and support attendance for this specific group. The views of autistic students have often been overlooked within research due to the assumed impact of social communication needs and the demands of semi-structured interviews, however the literature review indicates that alternative methods of data collection including PCP tasks and drawing and talking activities were effective in eliciting their views. Informed by the literature review, the current research will therefore utilise a Drawing the Ideal

School activity to explore the perceptions of autistic students experiencing EBSNA and to identify the factors that may support their school attendance.

3. Methodology

3.1 Overview of research

This chapter provides an overview of the research methodology, beginning with a description of the aims and research question. Following this, the research design and methodology are discussed, including the epistemological and ontological stance. The chapter describes the procedure used to recruit participants, the data collection and analysis process, and concludes by examining the reflexibility and trustworthiness of the research, with reference to ethical considerations and implications.

3.2 Research aims

How do autistic students experiencing Emotionally Based School Non-Attendance perceive school and what might this suggest about the factors that could support their attendance in the future?

3.3 Research aims

This research aims to explore the constructs of autistic young people experiencing EBSNA, through use of the Drawing the Ideal School technique (Williams & Hanke, 2007). Underpinned by PCP, the technique aims to elicit young people's views relating to school, by asking them to draw and describe their 'ideal' and 'non-ideal' schools, as well as using a rating scale to identify where their current school falls in relation to their imagined schools and identifying what could be done to make their current school more ideal. Whilst previous research has explored the views of autistic students and students experiencing EBSNA, this research aims to look more closely at the interacting effects of autism and EBSNA on participants' constructions of school. Using this information, the research aims to provide an insight into the way school environments, practice and policy could be adapted to contribute

to improved attendance for this group of young people. It is hoped that the research will empower autistic students by ensuring their voices are valued, listened to and shared. Furthermore, the research will provide information about participants' experience of using the Ideal School technique online, to understand whether the approach is an appropriate way of eliciting the constructs of autistic students experiencing EBSNA.

3.4 Methodological orientation

3.4.1 Ontology

Consideration of the researcher's ontological position gives shape and definition to how the research is conducted, including the methodology and how data is gathered, interpreted and analysed (Popkewitz et al., 1979). Ontology is defined as the philosophy concerning the nature of reality, with the researcher's ontological position referring to their beliefs about the nature of being and existence (Crotty, 2020). Ontological positions relating to the nature of reality can be viewed as a continuum, ranging from relativism to realism (Sparkes & Smith, 2013). Whilst a realist position suggests that reality exists as an objective truth that can be known, relativism is the belief that there are multiple, apprehendable and often conflicting realities, which are based on an individual's mental constructions and informed by social processes and experiences (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

The current research assumes a relativist ontological position, arguing that there are multiple constructed realities that differ across time and context, rather than one shared reality (Guba & Lincoln, 2005). From a relativist perspective, reality cannot be distinguished from the subjective experience of it, meaning each individual experiences the world differently. These multiple interpretations of experience ultimately lead to as many realities as there are people (Levers, 2013), although elements of reality are often shared amongst individuals and across cultures (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Within relativism, no version of reality holds more truth than

another, though constructions of reality are altered as individuals assume more knowledge or information. This position supports Kelly's (1966) proposition of constructive alternativism; the idea that there are infinite alternative ways of understanding a single event, with each individual building and revising personal constructs in an attempt to understand the world. This research is interested in the unique constructs and multiple perspectives of autistic young people experiencing EBSNA, as opposed to identifying objective facts about a shared or knowable reality. The study therefore fits within a relativist ontology, allowing for different individual realities to be explored and recognising that all realities will vary according to lived experience.

3.4.2 Epistemology

Whilst ontology is concerned with beliefs regarding the nature of reality, epistemology relates to how knowledge about reality can be acquired and understood (Tuli, 2010), which influences how research is conducted and the decisions regarding the most appropriate methodology. The current research adopts a constructivist epistemology, whereby knowledge is constructed through interactions between an individual's prior knowledge, existing perceptions and social experience (Fox, 2001). Key to constructivism is the process of active personal construction; an internal process which combines an individual's previous experiences with their social interactions and wider social systems, meaning the construction of knowledge constantly changes in response to new information (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Tuli, 2010).

The researcher considered the relevance of social constructivism and social constructionism within this research, however these positions focus on the role of social processes and mediation in the construction of meaning (Gergen, 1985). The current research

instead aimed to understand knowledge through the nature of individual constructs, which is more consistent with a constructivist approach.

3.5 Research purpose

3.5.1 Exploratory

This research adopted an exploratory design, seeking to understand participants' perceptions of their ideal and non-ideal school and to identify how their current school might move closer to becoming their ideal school. There is little research exploring the constructs of autistic students experiencing EBSNA using a PCP lens and it was hoped that this methodology would provide an interactive way of eliciting thoughts and ideas relating to their constructs of school and how this can be improved. A specific hypothesis regarding potential themes was not identified; instead, the researcher aimed to understand participants' perceptions, meaning the primary function of the research was inductive and exploratory.

3.5.2 Qualitative research

The research question focused on gaining data regarding individual constructions and perceptions of school, subsequently requiring the collation of qualitative data. A qualitative design also aligned with the researcher's ontological and epistemological position. Qualitative research is described as an umbrella term for a number of approaches and generally involves the systematic collection, organisation, description and interpretation of textual, verbal or visual data (Flick, 2007). In comparison to quantitative data which focuses more on pre-determined variables and relations between variables (Frey, 2018), the method is most appropriate for answering questions relating to experience, meaning and perspective, in an attempt to understand the participant's opinions (Hammarberg et al., 2016). The current research aligns with a qualitative approach as the data aimed to establish themes relating to

participants' constructs of school. Furthermore, in line with Creswell's (2013) definition of qualitative research, a key aim was to present the voices of participants, provide an interpretation of their difficulties attending school and offer potential recommendations for change.

3.5.3 Researcher values

Creswell (2013) indicated that an individual's values, beliefs and philosophical assumptions shape the planning and completion of social research. The beliefs and values held by the researcher in this study impacted the choice of research area, the methods for data collection and the type of analysis chosen. A key driver behind the hope for the research was promoting the voices of autistic children and young people. This supported the increasing global discourse relating to children and young people's right to involvement in decisions that affect them, a notion outlined by The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child ([UNCRC] UN General Assembly, 1989) and the Special Educational Needs Code of Practice (2014). Moreover, the choice to focus on young people's views aligned with a gap in the literature, whereby the perspectives of autistic students were overshadowed by their parents, carers or professionals. The literature highlighted an assumption that social communication needs prevented autistic individuals from communicating their views and opinions through semi-structured interviews and qualitative research (Fayette & Bond, 2018). The current research therefore aimed to give voice to this minoritised group through an interactive PCP technique involving drawing and talking.

The Covid-19 pandemic also affected the decision to centre the research on EBSNA. Reports indicated that the proportion of children experiencing EBSNA has increased since the beginning of the pandemic (Staffordshire County Council, 2020), and numbers of children being home-educated have risen by 75% since the onset of the pandemic (Hattenstone &

Lawrie, 2021). The researcher was therefore interested in whether the pandemic, and subsequent periods of home-learning may have influenced autistic young people's perspectives on what makes an ideal and non-ideal school.

It was important to acknowledge how the researcher's personal experiences may have impacted the choice of research area and subsequent engagement with the research. The researcher's experience of attending secondary school was largely positive, viewing school as an opportunity to connect with peers and a distraction from challenging adolescent years. The researcher strongly valued peer relationships and generally experienced a sense of belonging at school, which facilitated their ability to learn and succeed. The researcher's personal experience of EBSNA was therefore limited, making them an 'outside researcher', however this influenced their motivation to ensure that young people are provided with the same opportunities to value school and feel comfortable in their education setting. It is recognised that the researcher's educational experience influenced their internal representation of an ideal school, which is likely to differ from the participants in this research. See Appendix H for further reflections.

To further explore the factors influencing interactions with participants, Burnham's (2018) Social Graces[3] were used as a tool for reflection, specifically race, age, ability and education. As a researcher completing a professional doctorate, it is possible that the participants perceived the researcher as having academic ability, a positive education experience and unlikely to have experienced major challenges attending school. The researcher therefore aimed to adopt an advocacy position for participants, highlighting the value of their views and constructs relating to school, aiming to reduce the inevitable power imbalance between researcher and participant.

[3] Gender, Geography, Race, Religion, Age, Ability, Appearance, Class, Culture, Ethnicity, Education, Employment, Sexuality, Sexual orientation, Spirituality.

3.6 Personal Construct Psychology (PCP)

The research utilises a PCP data collection approach and aims to understand constructs relating to the school environment through this lens. Personal Construct Theory was proposed by Kelly (1955), who developed the philosophy of 'constructive alternativism'; the idea that there is no one truth; events are interpreted in a potentially infinite variety of ways and constructs are open to revision and narrowing based on new experiences. How an individual construes an event and attributes meaning to their subjective experience provides an insight into their thoughts and emotions (Burr et al., 2014; Kelly, 1955).

Whilst PCP was not initially intended to be a philosophical paradigm, it holds powerful epistemological implications (Kelly, 1955) and can be understood through a 'contextual constructivism' lens in which reality is not singular and is actively constructed through an individual's interpretation of events (Madill et al., 2000). Mahoney (1988) recognised PCP as a constructivist theory that identifies knowledge as constructed internally through an individual's personal beliefs and the linking of new knowledge with existing ideas, rather than an internalised representation of an external reality (Botella, 1995). PCP and constructivism reject causality and determinism as explanations for human behaviour and experience and instead recognise the constructive processes that contribute to subjective experiences, meaning a PCP approach aligns with the researcher's ontological and epistemological position.

Kelly (1955) described individuals as scientists, suggesting that the world is viewed through the lens of personal construction systems whereby individuals analyse similarities and themes of events to anticipate the future. The framework of PCP is organised into a fundamental postulate and eleven corollaries, with the fundamental postulate stating that psychological processes are directed by how an individual anticipates and predicts events. Of the eleven corollaries, the Dichotomy Corollary is of particular relevance to this research as it provides a framework for understanding a contrast such as ideal and non-ideal. The Dichotomy

Corollary states that construct systems consist of a set of bipolar dimensions, described as a *'finite number of dichotomous constructs'* (Kelly, 1955, p.5), with meaning understood through the process of discrimination. Dichotomous constructs do not refer to opposites, but instead contrasting poles, for instance an individual understands the construct of 'good' by their alternative comprehension of 'bad' (Kelly, 1955). Whilst there are various ways to explore perceptions, including traditional interview processes, a PCP approach was deemed a useful basis to understand students' perceptions of school through focusing on the ideal and non-ideal dichotomy.

3.7 Research design

The following section outlines how the research was conducted, including participant recruitment, inclusion criteria, the rationale for the methods and facilitation of the Ideal School technique.

3.7.1 Sample

Participants were identified through convenience sampling, a type of nonprobability sampling in which individuals are selected based on their availability, including geographical proximity or known contacts (Frey, 2018). The sample size in the current research was ten. Braun and Clarke (2021) indicated that decisions around sample size in qualitative research should not be based on generalisability; instead, researchers should reflect on the 'information richness' of the dataset and consider how this meets the aims of the study (Malterud et al., 2016). Furthermore, Crouch and McKenzie (2006) suggested that fewer than twenty participants in qualitative research facilitates the researcher's ability to establish and maintain relationships, enhancing the validity of rich, in-depth data. Similar studies utilising a PCP methodology present sample sizes ranging from 5 – 14 (Connelly, 2018; Morgan-Rose, 2016;

Schulz, 2020; Smith, 2020). It was therefore felt that the sample size of ten in the current research would generate an appropriate amount of data that allowed constructs to be explored in a rich, in-depth and complex manner. The inclusion and exclusion criteria for participation, alongside the rationale for these decisions are presented in Table 7.

Table 7

Inclusion and exclusion criteria for participation and justification for each criteria

Inclusion criteria	**Exclusion criteria**	**Justification**
Young person is aged between 11 and 16 years old.	Young person is younger than 11 and older than 16.	Research indicates that EBSNA is most common in secondary age children (Kearney, 2008), often following the transition from primary school.
Young person will have a diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Condition (ASC).	Young person will not have a diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Condition (ASC).	Evidence indicates an increased risk and prevalence of EBSNA in autistic students.
Young person will identify themselves as finding it difficult to attend school due to emotional reasons.	Young person does not identify as finding it difficult to attend school due to emotional reasons.	The focus of the study is young people who present with EBSNA. Whilst some studies specify that particpants must have attendance below 85-90%, this research gives voice to any young people who identify as finding difficult to attend school. The definition of EBSNA includes students who may attend school but experience significant anxiety in the morning, meaning students with attendance above 90% could still be considered as experiencing EBSNA.
Young person will be able to communicate verbally in English and not experience learning difficulties that prevent them from engaging in	Young person has difficulty communicating verbally in English or experiences learning difficulties that prevent them from engaging in the drawing and interview task.	The interview requires participants to express themselves verbally and understand the concept of ideal and non-ideal constructs. It is important that the constructs are elicited collaboratively between the participant and researcher (Burr et al., 2014),

the drawing and interview task.		meaning the participant is required to be able to discuss and explore their constructs verbally. Furthermore, Moran (2020) indicated that utilising PCP methods with young people with language difficulties produced 'thin narratives' that did not appear to fully encapsulate their constructs of reality.
There will not be an alternative reason for absence e.g. fixed term or permanent exclusion, long-term physical illness or a trip abroad.	Young person does not attend school due to exclusion, physical illness or another reason unrelated to emotional difficulties.	The study focuses on young people who do not attend school for emotional reasons, as opposed to alternative explanations.

3.7.2 Recruitment process

In April 2021, a recruitment poster was shared with EPs in the researcher's team (see Appendix E), who distributed the information to Special Education Needs Coordinators (SENCOs) and key staff members within their link secondary schools. Since link EPs had a pre-established working relationship with staff at their schools, they were deemed well placed to share the recruitment information. However, the researcher was reliant on school staff encouraging parents and students to contact the researcher directly, which made initial recruitment challenging. One participant in the final sample was recruited via this method.

The second recruitment method involved sharing the research poster on social media, including on Twitter and in closed Facebook groups for parents and family of autistic young people and those experiencing attendance difficulties. Parents were asked to email the researcher directly and further information was then shared, including the parent information sheet and participant information sheet. Following this, the researcher gained consent from the parent and young person using the parental and participant consent forms (see Appendix F). A total of nine participants were recruited via this method.

3.7.3 Participants

Table 8

Demographic information of participants that ensures anonymity

Pseudonym	Age[4]	Year group	Gender	Ethnicity
Kurt	16	Year 11	Male	White British
Juno	14	Year 10	Female	White British
Laura	13	Year 9	Female	White British
Rosie	11	Year 7	Female	White British
Ellie	13	Year 8	Female	White British
Jonathon	13	Year 9	Male	Black Caribbean
Charlie	14	Year 10	Female	White British
Hibbert	14	Year 9	Female	White British
Ink	13	Year 9	Female	White British
Khalil	15	Year 11	Male	White British

Table 8.1

Additional information relating to participants' attendance and school history provided by parents / carers ensuring anonymity

Reason for non-attendance	Onset of attendance difficulties	School history	Date of autism diagnosis
Pathological Demand Avoidance Sleep disorder	Year 7	Attending mainstream school inconsistently	Year 8
Anxiety Unmet Special Educational Needs	Did not state	Previously attending mainstream Currently not attending education provision	Did not state
Exhausted by demands of school	Aged 12 years	Attending mainstream daily but finds it difficult meaning attendance	Aged 11 years

[4] Age at the time of the interview.

Psychosomatic symptoms Anxiety		is not consistent and experiences somatic symptoms e.g. headaches	
Anxiety Sensory needs Processing difficulties	Year 5 / 6	Previously attending mainstream, moved to alternative provision after only able to attend one lesson three times a week	Year 9
Anxiety	Year 4	Attending mainstream school around 50% of the time	Year 7
School could not meet needs	Year 6	Previously attending mainstream Currently not attending any education setting due to exclusion	Year 8
Anxiety Unmet Special Educational Needs	Aged 10 years	Previously attending mainstream Currently not attending any education setting	Aged 10 years
Sensory needs Unmet Special Educational Needs Mental health breakdown	Aged 10 years old	Previously attending mainstream school Now attending alternative provision which meets their needs	Aged 5 years old
Trauma Medical difficulties Anxiety	Aged 4 years old	Currently attending mainstream school for one session a day	Aged 7 years old
Mental health breakdown	Aged 11 years	Following a period without attending school, now	Year 8

		attending mainstream school 2 hours per week	

3.10 Data collection

3.10.1 PCP techniques

Methods of eliciting children's views have traditionally utilised semi-structured interviews, which are dependent on linguistic and cognitive abilities and particularly disadvantage those with neurodevelopmental conditions, those who have experienced trauma or those from culturally diverse and economically deprived backgrounds (Bassett et al., 2008; Fayette & Bond, 2018; Mordock, 2001). Research indicates that adolescents can find it difficult to discuss abstract concepts during semi-structured interviews, with Bassett et al., (2008) recommending opportunities for concrete examples to illustrate their views.

As a result, there is increasing recognition of the value of alternative approaches based on PCP. The use of a technique informed by PCP was deemed to be conducive with the constructivist positioning of this research, since the technique allowed collaborative elicitation and exploration of the participants' personal constructs. Moreover, the focus on subjective experience aligns with the researcher's aim of prioritising the voice of participants who have experienced EBSNA. According to Burr et al., (2014), PCP methods privilege the voice of the participant by ensuring events are described with their precise words, labels and terms, thus ensuring the interpretative process is controlled by the participant and prioritises their perspective.

Whilst PCP methods are intrinsically participant-led, it is important that meaning is understood by both the participant and the researcher. Key to this is ensuring a collaborative approach, in which considerable time is given to exploring, understanding and agreeing construct labels relating to the ideal and non-ideal school. Further supporting the rationale for

using a PCP method in this research is the effectiveness of the approach in understanding experiences that can be difficult to articulate (Burr et al., 2014). Research indicates that through eliciting bipolar constructs and focusing on concrete events, participants appear better able to express abstract ideas (Burr et al., 2014), suggesting that PCP methods are likely to support young people to discuss potentially emotive and subjective experiences relating to school.

The use of PCP methods ensures that the methodology does not solely rely on verbal fluency, instead allowing the participant to collaboratively complete a task which allows them to construct their lived experience (Burr et al., 2014). Fayette and Bond (2018) suggest that autistic individuals have been excluded from research due to assumptions that impairments in social communication and interaction affect their ability to participate. Research confirms the various challenges associated with eliciting the views of autistic students, including challenges verbally articulating their experiences, concrete thinking and difficulty understanding abstract questions (Fayette & Bond, 2018). PCP methods therefore offer a solution, providing an opportunity for autistic students to express their views in an alternative, structured and less verbally demanding way. Indeed, PCP techniques are reported to facilitate an active, participant-led approach, described as dynamic, interesting and fun (Burr et al., 2014).

Influenced by PCP, Ravenette (1988) first introduced the technique of 'a drawing and its opposite' to explore how children make sense of themselves and their circumstances. Ravenette proposed that drawings can reveal aspects of an individual which lie below their conscious level of awareness and verbal articulation, providing a rationale for the use of drawings to understand children's views. The technique of drawing two contrasting pictures develops a polarity of thinking which allows the child to clarify the meaning of their drawings from alternative perspectives and provides a deeper understanding of their constructs compared to a singular drawing or conversation (Maxwell, 2006).

Within qualitative methodologies, drawing techniques have been shown to reveal more nuanced descriptions of concepts, emotions and information, compared to verbal communication alone (Literat, 2013; Moran, 2020). This further supports Burnham's (2008) assertion that drawing allows children to express experiences at their chosen pace; the absence of time pressure provides participants space to reflect and construct their responses more completely (Literat, 2013). Additionally, drawing techniques have been credited for reducing the power imbalance between researcher and participant, allowing the young person to feel more comfortable, empowered and in control of sharing their reality (Literat, 2013). Since those with EBSNA and ASC are more likely to experience anxiety and potential communication difficulties (Beckles, 2014; Fayette & Bond, 2018), it was felt that a drawing and talking technique would offer the most supportive methodology that allowed participants to feel comfortable in sharing their personal constructs relating to school.

3.10.2 Drawing the Ideal School

The specific PCP technique utilised in this research, Drawing the Ideal School, acknowledges these principles and addresses the limitations of solely using interviews by encouraging the visual expression of ideas alongside verbal dialogue. Based on Kelly's (1955) PCP theory, Moran (2001) first developed Drawing the Ideal Self as a technique for understanding a child's perception of themselves, regardless of their age or ability. Williams and Hanke (2007) adapted the original drawing technique to create Drawing the Ideal School, with their research demonstrating the effectiveness of the approach with autistic children. Based on these findings and the additional evidence-base for using Drawing the Ideal School with a range of children (Morgan-Rose, 2016; Moyse, 2020; Smith, 2020), the approach was deemed a suitable method for understanding the constructs and perceptions of autistic participants experiencing EBSNA.

Guided by Moran's (2001) original structure, Drawing the Ideal School first involves participants sketching their non-ideal school, followed by their ideal school. The researcher is required to analyse the drawings by eliciting descriptions related to the participants' personal perceptions and utilising exploratory questions to further understand what the drawing does and does not describe. This type of questioning used in conjunction with drawings moves beyond the surface level of the drawing to seek a deeper understanding of beliefs, values and attitudes (Beaver, 2011). Within this research, participants were asked fifteen exploratory questions to elicit details relating to their non-ideal and ideal school constructs (see Appendix G for the interview guide). Interview questions included the elements of Williams and Hanke's (2007) technique, as well as additional questions influenced by the EBSNA literature, which focused specifically on how participants would feel about attending their ideal and non-ideal schools.

According to Moran (2020), when eliciting constructs, both the emergent and the contrasting poles of a construct need to be elicited to understand the whole construct. Whilst the emergent pole is often understood by listening to an individual's description, the researcher is required to explicitly ask about the contrasting pole, using questions such as 'what is the contrast to that?' or 'as opposed to what?' Moran warns against asking for the opposite pole, as this can encourage individuals to provide a traditional 'dictionary definition' rather than their personal construct. Constructs with similar labels may hold different meanings, for instance 'smart' may refer to an individual's academic ability or to the way they dress. Moran therefore emphasises the importance of checking out meaning and exploring constructs in more detail through a pyramiding technique, asking specific questions such as 'what would that look like?' 'What might I see and hear?' 'How would you know if a teacher was X – what might they be doing?' If a child described their ideal school as 'welcoming' for instance, the researcher would need to explore this further to understand exactly what is meant by the word

and what observable behaviour might illustrate their construct of ‘welcoming’. By probing for additional detail, the participant and researcher’s understanding moves from abstract to more concrete and specific constructs.

Following the drawing activity and subsequent construct elicitation, the Ideal School technique involves a ‘scaling’ process, whereby participants are asked to rate their current school in relation to their ideal and non-ideal schools. Participants are also asked how teachers, parents or carers could help their current school become closer to ideal, as a way of understanding the potential for change.

3.10.3 Data collection procedure

The data collection process commenced in October 2021. The researcher obtained written consent from parents or carers and the participant prior to the data collection and provided an information sheet detailing the process of the study. Once consent was gained, the researcher organised a suitable time for a Zoom call.

At the beginning of the Zoom call, the researcher read through the information sheet with each participant and reminded them of their right to withdraw at any time. The participant chose whether their parent or carer was present during this part of the Zoom call. Six parents were present during the activity, and for the remaining four participants, the researcher spoke to the parent at the beginning of the Zoom call to ensure they were available should the participant become distressed or wish to end the session. The Zoom calls lasted between 29 minutes and 62 minutes. Before beginning the task, the researcher spent time building rapport by asking participants about themselves and their interests, as well as offering the opportunity to ask any questions. It was hoped that this would create a welcoming and comfortable environment for the young person to share their constructs.

Following the introduction and rapport building, the Ideal School activity was completed with the participants (see Appendix G). The Zoom call was recorded from this point. The researcher asked participants to draw their non-ideal school and their ideal school and explained that the researcher would ask questions about their drawings. Participants were given the option to either draw by hand or draw using the whiteboard function on Zoom. In line with Moran's (2020) guidance, participants were informed that the quality of their drawing was not important, and a simple sketch would suffice. Participants were informed that if they did not feel comfortable drawing, they could instead speak about their non-ideal and ideal school and answer questions verbally. Out of ten participants, only one chose to draw, with the remaining participants describing their ideal and non-ideal schools verbally. This is discussed further in Chapter 5.

Figure 2.

Step-by-step of the Ideal School data collection process

- Participants were asked to draw and/or verbally describe the type of school they would not like to go to; their non-ideal school.
- The researcher asked questions relating to features of the participants' non-ideal school using the interview guide (see Appendix G) and more detailed construct elicitation where necessary.
- Participants were asked to draw and/or verbally describe the type of school they would like to go to; their ideal school.
- The researcher asked questions relating to features of the participants' ideal school using the interview guide and more detailed construct elicitation where necessary.
- The researcher then shared a rating scale with 'non-ideal school' written at one end and 'ideal school' written at the opposite end, with non-ideal school at 0 and ideal school at 10.
- Participants were asked to mark a line on the screen showing which number their current school rated in comparison to their ideal and non-ideal schools.
- Participants then marked the following on the scale:
    - The number they would like their school to be
    - The number that would be good enough for their current school to be
    - The number their previous school would be
    - What teachers and parents or carers could do to move their current school closer to ideal
- Finally, participants were asked about their experience of completing the Drawing the Ideal School activity and whether completing the activity remotely had impacted their experience.

Throughout the process, the researcher used further exploratory questioning and pyramiding techniques where necessary to gain a clear understanding of the participants' constructs. For instance, if the participant described their non-ideal school as 'scary', the researcher used further questions such as 'what happens in the school that makes it scary?' All Zoom calls were recorded and later transcribed for data analysis alongside one drawing which the parent scanned and emailed to the researcher. Following completion of the Ideal School activity, participants were debriefed about the next steps of the research project and provided with the opportunity to ask questions. Participants were provided with an information sheet with the researcher's details and information about support services. The researcher contacted the parent or carers of participants a week after the interview to check the participants' wellbeing. Following completion of the research process, a summary of the main findings will be shared with parents and carers in a Zoom meeting. Participants chose whether findings would be shared with a key adult at school.

3.11 Data analysis

3.11.1 Reflexive thematic analysis

Researchers are required to choose between a diverse range of data analysis approaches that offer varying conceptualisations of qualitative research. A version of Thematic Analysis (TA) was presented by Braun and Clarke in 2006 and later revised to reflect evolution in their thinking. TA involves developing, analysing and interpreting patterns across a dataset, by systematically developing codes and themes. Braun and Clarke (2012) acknowledge various types of TA including coding reliability, codebook and reflexive, each with different conceptual underpinnings. Coding reliability and codebook methods appear to be underpinned by a postpositivist paradigm, emphasising the accuracy and reliability of codes through structured codebooks and multiple independent coders to

establish inter-rater reliability. Braun and Clarke (2021) argue that there is no single accurate way to code data, and as such, inter-rater reliability scores demonstrate that researchers have been trained to code data in the same way, as opposed to establishing accuracy within the data.

Whilst TA is generally understood as theoretically flexible and devoid of a specific epistemological position, it cannot be conducted within a theoretical vacuum (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Reflexive Thematic analysis (RTA) rejects the positivist assumption that reality exists within the data and aims to identify patterns of meaning across the dataset through the researcher's active involvement in the process. Braun and Clarke (2021) highlighted that meaning is not found within the data but instead constructed at the intersection between the dataset and the researcher. The theoretical flexibility of the approach fitted with the researcher's constructivist epistemological position and assumption that there is not one reality. RTA was therefore deemed the most appropriate method of data analysis, allowing the exploration of meaning within context, acknowledging the existence of multiple realities and with consideration of the researcher's influence on the data (Braun & Clarke, 2012).

RTA is applicable to a range of research paradigms and is considered appropriate for analysing various types of data, including interviews and visual data such as drawings. Furthermore, Braun and Clarke (2019) indicated that the data within RTA should be nuanced, complex and rich and the combination of drawings and semi-structured interviews allowed for the generation and analysis of deep and complex data. This is consistent with the PCP theoretical framework and constructivist positioning of the research, providing further rationale for the suitability of RTA within the current study.

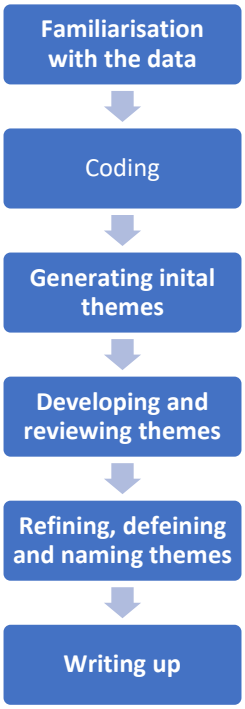
The collation of patterns and themes across the wider dataset has led to criticism of RTA for minimising individual voices. Within this study, however, the researcher aimed to

identify the voice of the collective group in relation to their ideal and non-ideal schools, rather than to focus solely on individual perceptions. Nonetheless, since RTA emphasises the active role of the researcher within the data analysis process, it is likely that their personal beliefs, values and preconceived ideas influenced the process to some extent. This highlighted the value of the reflexive approach, whereby the researcher recorded their critical reflections and potential biases towards certain elements of the data (see Appendix H).

Braun and Clarke's (2021) six phases of RTA were utilised as a framework for analysis, as illustrated in Figure 3.

Figure 3.

Six phases of Reflexive Thematic Analysis.



3.12 Data analysis process

3.12.1 Step 1: Familiarisation with the data

Braun and Clarke (2021) emphasise the importance of familiarisation with the data to gain a deep and intimate knowledge of the dataset. Following each interview, the researcher actively engaged with the data by recording initial thoughts and interpretations in a reflective journal (see Appendix H). Additional familiarisation occurred during the transcription process, whereby the researcher listened to the recordings multiple times and critically engaged with the data. Following this process, the researcher read and re-read the data and studied the drawing, highlighting salient text and noting any thoughts, interpretations and emotional responses in their reflective journal including feelings of frustration when participants described being ignored by school staff and their feelings of powerlessness (see Appendix H). By studying the data multiple times, the researcher immersed themselves in the dataset and developed a sense of understanding and familiarity with each participant and their story. Braun and Clarke (2021) suggest that rich analysis also requires distance from the data to increase insight and inspiration and the researcher therefore ensured that familiarisation was interspersed with periods away from the data.

3.12.2 Step 2: Generating codes

In RTA, codes are described as succinct analytic outputs that form the building blocks for wider themes. Coding in RTA ranges on a spectrum from semantic to latent, although Braun and Clarke (2021) also advocate for combining these approaches and the researcher therefore aimed to capture both semantic and latent meaning during coding. At times, this involved moving beyond the surface to explore underlying, implicit meaning within the data. It is recognised that seeking constructs of ‘ideal’ and ‘non-ideal’ imposed some preconceived ideas on the data, however the researcher also aimed to be driven by the data to understand individual

perceptions and meanings. Informed by Braun and Clarke's (2021) recommendations regarding the spectrum between inductive and deductive data, the researcher therefore utilised a combination of inductive and deductive approaches. The researcher used MAXQDA software to generate codes by highlighting segments of data and assigning a unique code label.

The researcher systematically coded each data item, and the dichotomous structure of the interview guide informed the decision to begin by creating codes that related to either 'ideal' or 'non-ideal' e.g. 'non-ideal school is unfair', 'ideal school is fair'. Any data which did not refer to either was coded separately. The codes were then reviewed to identify potential overlapping codes within their respective 'ideal' or 'non-ideal' category. In line with Braun and Clarke's (2021) structure for analysis, the whole dataset was reviewed and each code revisited to identify repeating patterns across the data. Where a code captured the same meaning as another, these were reviewed and merged. See Appendix I for a list of the initial codes and the merging of codes.

3.12.3 Step 3: Generating initial themes

Braun and Clarke (2021) described a theme as a central organising concept that captures the patterning of meaning across the dataset. Coding the data based on participants' references to ideal and non-ideal schools allowed the researcher to work systematically and organise the large amount of data based on these opposing constructs. Whilst the coding process resulted in 'ideal' and 'non-ideal' codes, these were reviewed together during initial theme development and codes that appeared polarised were fit together beneath a wider theme. As a result, opposing codes (e.g. 'ideal school encourages self-expression' and 'non-ideal school limits self-expression') were grouped beneath the same theme as they shared a central organising concept broadly relating to 'choice'. The researcher engaged with the dataset to consider how codes linked together and began to form potential clusters of shared ideas. By printing each

code, the researcher was able to sort similar codes to form potential candidate themes which also supported the development of an initial thematic map. Codes which did not fit within a theme were marked and later reviewed to assess their relevance to the research question. In line with Braun and Clarke's (2021) advice, the researcher ensured themes were evident across different data items and represented a meaningful pattern rather than simply summarising an element of the data (see Appendix I).

Braun and Clarke (2021) view researcher subjectivity as a key resource for understanding the data and as such, do not advocate for consensus between researchers and coders. Collaboration and reflection with other researchers, however, is recognised as enhancing interpretative depth and promoting strong theme development. The researcher therefore shared initial themes with their supervisor and a trainee EP to provide greater insight and alternative perspectives.

3.12.4 Step 4: Developing and reviewing themes

Constructing codes and themes is not a linear process and is described as organic, fluid and constantly developing (Braun & Clarke, 2021). The researcher therefore reviewed the candidate themes against each piece of coded data and considered whether each segment was captured by the corresponding theme. During this process, the researcher identified overlaps between themes, which resulted in the merging, collapsing or discarding of themes that did not answer the research question. For instance, 'card system to take a break in ideal school' was merged with 'adjustments for individual needs at ideal school' (see Appendix I). Although the researcher combined codes that referred to the ideal and non-ideal school, some codes referenced participants' previous or current school experiences. Initially, the researcher clustered these beneath 'perceptions of school', however later recognised that this theme was constructed purely to encapsulate the miscellaneous codes. The researcher revisited the wider dataset to ensure all codes were capturing what was intended and to reconsider how

participants' previous and current perceptions of school might be organised within existing themes. For instance, negative experiences of staff at their current school were instead coded beneath the 'relationships are key' theme, rather than 'perceptions of school'. This addressed the issue of themes capturing 'topic summaries' that mapped directly from interview questions, rather than identifying the direction or analytic meaning behind the theme.

3.12.5 Step 5: Defining and naming themes

Braun and Clarke (2021) caution against conceptualising themes as domain summaries that label all elements of one topic. With this in mind, each theme was named to indicate the researcher's analytic take on the data, for instance 'students have limited choice' rather than 'choice' and 'the need for a comfortable school environment' rather than 'the school environment'. When labelling themes, the researcher aimed to use participants' words where appropriate. The researcher ensured that theme names communicated their intended meaning by sharing theme names with their researcher and a trainee EP to ensure they understood the essence of the dataset.

3.12.6 Step 6: Writing up

The final phase considered the whole dataset and a review of the previous phases to ensure the final themes and subthemes answered the research question and provided a coherent and convincing narrative. Whilst TA has been criticised for the risk of producing shallow analysis and insufficient detail of data analysis (Nowell et al., 2017), Braun and Clarke (2021) argue that is the result of researchers' lack of understanding of their role within RTA or researchers using a combination of TA approaches. The researcher therefore clearly identified their theoretical and epistemological position before commencing RTA and regularly referred to Braun and Clarke's guidelines (2021) to ensure a coherent and high-quality RTA, evidenced in Appendix I.

3.13 Ethical considerations

Throughout the recruitment, data collection and analysis process, the researcher adhered to ethical guidelines, including the British Psychological Society (BPS, 2018) and the Health and Care Professions Council ethical guidelines (2018). The researcher also followed the Guidelines for Conducting Research within the Autism Community (Gowen et al., 2017). Participants were protected from harm and the researcher aimed to safeguard their wellbeing, autonomy and confidentiality throughout the process. Ethical approval was sought from the Tavistock and Portman Trust Research Ethics Committee (TREC) (see Appendix J) and further details are provided in the following sections.

3.13.1 Consent and withdrawal

Participants found it difficult to attend their education setting and it was therefore deemed unreasonable to expect them to attend an interview session in the school environment. This, alongside the ongoing uncertainty around Covid-19 lockdowns, school closures and restrictions contributed to the decision to collect data remotely. Prior to the online interview, participants were informed that involvement was voluntary and understood their right to withdraw at any point during the interview and up to four weeks following data collection. Written consent was obtained from the parent or carer and the participant prior to the interview (see Appendix D and E for information and consent forms). Participants were informed that confidentiality would be maintained unless the researcher was worried about their safety or the safety of others, at which point information would be jointly shared with either the parent or carer or school safeguarding lead.

3.13.2 Participant safety and risk

Participants were aged 16 or under and had an ASC diagnosis and were therefore classed as vulnerable. Prior to commencing the interview, the researcher ensured that each participant consented to the task through a conversation with the participant and their parent. Throughout the interview, the researcher regularly checked in with the young person to ensure they were willing to continue. It was recognised that participants may feel anxious or distressed when discussing emotive topics such as negative experiences of school and the researcher used their professional skills to notice and respond to any signs of anxiety. Participants were reminded that they could stop the interview at any point. Participants understood that their participation did not include support from the researcher in their role as a Trainee EP.

Following the interview, young people were debriefed about the process and next steps. The researcher signposted the young people to resources for support should this be necessary. The researcher also contacted the participants' parent the week after the interview to check the participants' wellbeing. Parents and participants are invited to attend a feedback presentation following completion of the project which outlines a summary of the findings and future implications. Whilst participants could choose whether a summary of their interview was shared with a key adult at their school, it was made clear that their drawings and answers to interview questions were hypothetical and would not necessarily result in changes in their school.

3.13.3 Confidentiality and anonymity

The research was conducted in accordance with GDPR guidelines, and the researcher did not approach participants directly. All data, including drawings, notes and interview recordings were stored on an encrypted drive using password protection and notes were kept in a locked filing cabinet. Due to the small sample size, there was the possibility that data may

have been recognised, particularly since only one participant completed a drawing. The remaining participants described their ideal and non-ideal school without drawing. The researcher ensured that participants understood and gave informed consent for their drawing and quotes to be included, given the small sample size. To further protect anonymity, participants chose their pseudonym to reduce opportunities for identification.

3.14 Research rigour and trustworthiness

The typical criteria used in quantitative research to determine the quality of research includes reliability and validity, referring to the extent to which findings can be replicated and the extent to which findings support previous research. These are more consistent with positivist epistemological positions and are unsuitable for judging the quality of qualitative research (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Qualitative researchers instead refer to trustworthiness to assess the rigour of their research, which encompasses credibility, dependability, confirmability and transferability (Leung, 2015). Trustworthiness is understood as the extent to which findings can be trusted and their benefit to the intended group (Angen, 2000).

3.14.1 Credibility

Credibility is concerned with the truth-value of the research and establishes the extent to which research findings represent plausible information derived from the participants' original views and data (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Various strategies support credibility including prolonged engagement, persistent observation, triangulation, peer debriefing and member checking (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Within the current research, prolonged engagement involved investing sufficient time into the interview process, including embedding opportunities to build rapport and trust in interviews, as well as immersion and familiarisation with the data. To further increase credibility, method triangulation was attempted by utilising

both a drawing and interview element within the data collection process, although only one participant engaged with the drawing. Due to limited time, the researcher did not have the opportunity to complete a member check after the data analysis process, which involves feeding back data analysis, interpretations and conclusions to participants. Despite this, consistent with the philosophical and methodological position of the research, meaning was co-constructed between the participant and researcher during drawing tasks and interviews, whereby the researcher ensured credibility by member checking throughout the interview process. This included explicitly checking interpretations and asking clarifying questions to ensure the researcher had understood the participant's perspective.

3.14.2 Transferability

Aiming to generalise findings would be inconsistent with the philosophy of the research, however the researcher aimed to ensure transferability in line with Guba and Lincoln's (1994) guidelines. Transferability refers to the degree to which results can be transferred to contexts or settings with other participants. This relies on a 'thick description' of the participants and the research process, allowing the reader to judge whether the findings are transferable to their own setting (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). The researcher in the current study provided a thick description of the data including the context of data collection, the sample size and strategy, demographic information, inclusion and exclusion criteria and a clear description of the Drawing the Ideal School process, including the interview guide and procedure.

3.14.3 Dependability and confirmability

Dependability refers to the stability of findings over time, whilst confirmability is concerned with whether findings of the research study could be confirmed by other researchers and ensures that interpretations of the findings are clearly informed by the data.

To increase dependability and confirmability, an audit trail is recommended which clearly describes the research process and steps taken throughout the entire project (Korstjens & Moser, 2018, Guba & Lincoln, 1994). The researcher therefore maintained an audit trail in the form of a reflective journal consisting of details relating to theoretical and methodological decisions, and reflections on data collection, coding and analysis, thus providing a clear rationale, transparency and objectivity in relation to all decisions.

3.14.4 Reflexivity

Reflexivity refers to the researcher's awareness of their role within the research process and is recognised as an important consideration within qualitative research (Korstjens & Moser, 2018; Willig, 2013). This is of particular importance in the current research which utilises RTA and the researcher therefore maintained a reflexive position throughout the process. The researcher aimed to evidence their reflexivity by noticing their position as an outsider researcher, acknowledging personal biases and maintaining a reflective journal to log responses and underlying assumptions and emotions throughout the research process. Reflections are discussed further in chapter 5 and additional excerpts from the reflective journal are presented in Appendix H.

Figure 4

Example of an excerpt from the researcher's reflective journal

A feeling that has been coming up for me throughout the data collection process is a feeling of frustration. This is generally towards schools, but also towards the government and I recognise that my political views will influence my construction of the data. I am highly critical of the current government and I feel their actions have influenced the running and structure of schools, as well as the mindset that grades and exam results supersede wellbeing. Whilst participants did not explicitly reference the government, today there was mention of a culture that overlooks individual need and focuses on rules and regulations and how difficult this was for participants which left me feeling frustrated at the systems. Not all school rules will be suitable for all young people - there needs to be some flexibility. Also, the changes that young people were suggesting were not particularly unrealistic or unmanageable. Some even said they had tried to suggest changes in the past but teachers and staff did not listen. I found myself agreeing with their criticisms of school – why could there not be a small breakout calming sensory room in each school? What if this was enough to make a real difference to the attendance of some autistic students? I remained conscious of these feelings to avoid my frustration influencing my responses, and to avoid feelings of hopelessness that were expressed by a lot of the participants.

3.15 Summary

This chapter described the aim of the research and the research question, which influenced the ontological and epistemological position of the researcher as well as the methodology utilised in this research. Detailed information relating to the data collection methods and analysis were presented, followed by discussion of the trustworthiness of the research.

4. Findings

4.1 Overview

The following chapter provides an analytical narrative of the data and aims to address the research question:

How do autistic students experiencing Emotionally Based School Non-Attendance perceive school and what might this suggest about the factors that could support their attendance in the future?

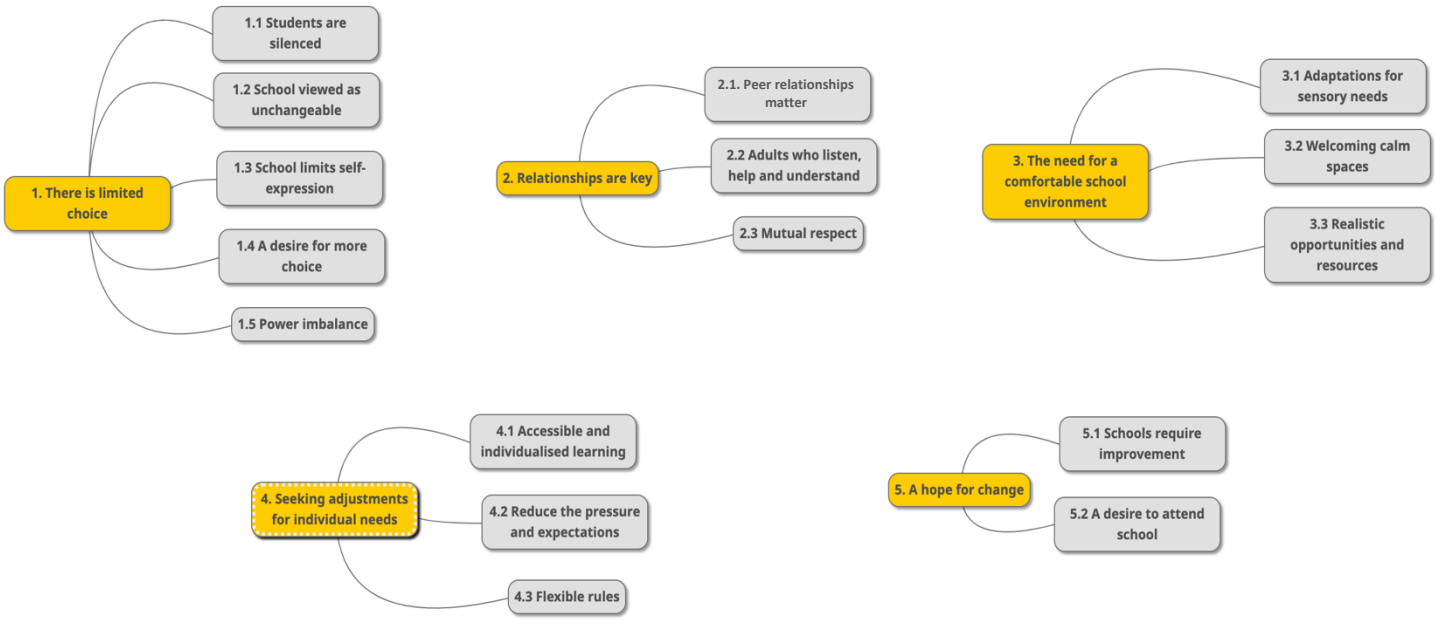
Five themes were identified across the data: **'there is limited choice',** '**relationships are key'**, '**seeking adjustments for individual needs'**, '**the need for a comfortable school environment'** and '**a hope for change'**. Whilst the themes explore different aspects of the data, relationships were identified between themes, including 'there is limited choice' and 'relationships are key'. There was also a relationship between 'seeking adjustments for individual needs' and 'a hope for change', as participants' descriptions of improving school were often related to potential adjustments to meet their needs. Similarly, a relationship exists between 'a hope for change' and 'the need for a comfortable school environment' as adjustments to the school environment were identified as supporting change in the future.

Table 9

Summary of themes

Theme	Summary
1. There is limited choice	Students experience a lack of choice over decisions at school which are always made by adults. There is a sense that nothing can change about school since students perceive themselves to have little autonomy. Despite this, participants seek increased choice over their school experiences and describe an ideal school where they are involved in decision-making. Opportunities for increased autonomy included freedom to take a break from a lesson, as well as choice over their preferred style of lesson and which peers they work with.
2. Relationships are key	Peer and adult relationships are perceived as having a significant impact on school experiences. Students discuss the attributes and qualities in other students and staff at their ideal and non-ideal school. Participants sought adults who were understanding and listened to their views, as well as opportunities to engage with like-minded peers who were keen to learn. Key to developing understanding and trusting relationships was the importance of staff learning more about autism.
3. The need for a comfortable school environment	This theme refers to the need for a physical environment that supports sensory and emotional needs including the types of resources, facilities and the school building in an ideal and non-ideal school. Participants preferred a school environment that was not sensorily overwhelming, unlimited access to separate spaces, newer resources and facilities and opportunities to spend time in nature and with animals.
4. Seeking adjustments for individual needs	This theme captures the specific adaptations that participants require to meet their needs in school including increased flexibility, reduced pressure and expectations and an adapted and personalised teaching and learning environment. This included teachers considering the value of homework, sending work home and adjusting expectations based on individual needs.
5. A hope for change	The task encouraged reflection amongst participants and given their difficult experiences of school, they described the changes required to improve their current schools. All participants were clear that they would like to attend a school that meets their needs.

Figure 5
Thematic map illustrating themes and subtheme



4.2 Theme 1. There is limited choice

This theme was particularly dominant throughout participants' narratives and describes the significance of choice on students' perceptions of school. The experience of limited choice or control, in addition to adults making decisions for them was central to participants' narratives about school and reflected in their hopes for increased autonomy over various aspects of their school experiences.

4.2.1 Subtheme 1.1: Students are silenced

Participants indicated that a non-ideal school would be completely silent, and students would have no choice over when they could speak. In many instances, remaining silent was understood as an explicit expectation, enforced by rules such as *"no speaking unless spoken to"* and teachers demanding silent classrooms and corridors. Participants explained: *"you have*

to be quiet in lessons, but not even like you can talk a little bit. You have to be silent" [Juno] and *"there will be no talking in class, like you're not allowed to like speak"* [Laura].

For other participants, there was a more implicit sense that remaining silent was the best way to be ignored by adults and avoid being reprimanded. Participants described both their current schools and non-ideal schools as creating an environment where students were afraid to speak to teachers or peers or to ask for help. Even when adults did not specifically impose rules for quiet classrooms, their negative response, or lack of response, to any requests for help led students to feel their voices were silenced anyway. Participants' previous experiences of silent schools influenced their perceptions of a non-ideal school which is illustrated in the following descriptions of a non-ideal school:

> *"You'd be scared to go up to them [teachers] and ask for something or raise your hand to speak if you want to go to the bathroom because there's like a risk of punishment or something. So you can't really express if you need something. And you just have to sit there waiting."* [Charlie]

> *"You aren't allowed help, they'll shout at you if you ask for help"* [Rosie]

As a result of their previous experiences at school, participants instead indicated their preference for a school that allowed choice and the ability to speak openly with adults and peers.

4.2.3 Subtheme 1.2: School viewed as unchangeable

For many participants, school was perceived as a fixed construct that students had no control over. Participants referred to various requests that were not allowed in their current and non-ideal schools, including leaving the classroom, taking a break, going to the toilet during lessons or going home if they were struggling. There was a sense that these expectations were accepted as an inevitable aspect of attending school, reflected by Charlie's comment; "*you don't really have a choice*".

The perception that school could never be changed appeared to be accompanied by a feeling of hopelessness amongst participants. When reflecting on how their current school could move closer to their ideal school, it became clear that participants did not believe school could be significantly improved or changed:

> *"I don't think it [the activity] was particularly helpful cos like I can't change anything"* [Laura]

> *"[School is] a shithole and it's always going to be a shithole, you know what I mean?"* [Kurt]

When participants were asked to consider their school on a scale ranging from zero (non-ideal school) to ten (ideal school), Laura suggested that she would be happy with her school being "*anything about a five*". This may be an indication of her difficulty envisioning school improving beyond this. Similarly, Juno explained: *"I think a seven or eight is fine cos school's never gonna be that great"*.

Despite sharing their ideas about an ideal type of school, participants did not feel confident that schools could considerably change or improve. For some, this was evidenced by their requests for changes being rejected by staff, whereas others had accepted that this was just the way school is. Juno described a hope for *"nicer"* teachers and more individualised support, but concluded: *"But you know, it is high school, so…"* This illustrates Juno's fixed construct of secondary school and further highlights the perception that students lack choice, so instead learn to accept that secondary school cannot be changed.

4.2.4 Subtheme 1.3: School limits self-expression

Alongside a lack of choice in expressing themselves verbally, participants shared their beliefs that school limited their self-expression by enforcing a sense of uniformity and supressing creativity. When reflecting on their current and non-ideal schools, participants

described their self-expression being restricted through stringent uniform policies that did not allow opportunities to express their individuality.

> *"No self-expression is allowed, like girls aren't even allowed to cut their hair or anything. No hair dye, no painted nails, no bracelets, or rings or necklaces. No like charms on your shoelaces, or makeup or anything. And even if you were like being bullied for how you look or something, and you complain about it, you still wouldn't be allowed to do anything about it."* [Charlie]

> *"They [my school] increased the uniformity, the individualism is gone in that school really… no expression in your clothing. You'd all have to kind of wear the same thing or wear something quite boring."* [Kurt]

> *"Maybe allow things like badges or allow whatever hairstyle you want to do… you don't have to crush everything."* [Hibbert]

Schools were positioned as places that did not value or celebrate originality and difference, with uniform policies that aimed to make everyone look the same. Since adolescence is characterised as a period of exploration and experimentation through clothing, hairstyles, piercings and accessories, participants felt deprived of these opportunities to identify and express their individuality. For many participants, school uniform impacted directly on their motivation to attend school and was described as a key factor that would improve their current school, emphasising the significant negative impact of a restrictive uniform policy.

The importance of self-expression through clothing was further highlighted in participants' descriptions of their ideal schools, where students could wear anything they wished:

> *"You can wear what you feel comfortable in rather than what the school wants you to look like… You could do whatever you wanted, you could wear as much makeup as you wanted or dye your hair how you want or paint your nails how you want them to be…"* [Juno]

> *"There's a dress code, but you're allowed to have forms of self-expression. So dyed hair is okay. Make up like no matter how extreme, necklaces, chokers, earrings, rings, painted nails, tattoos. Everything is okay. Because it's… they encourage self-expression*

> *and figuring out who you are while you're young so that, you know exactly how you want to be when you're older."* [Charlie]

As illustrated by Charlie, some participants demonstrated a level of maturity and self-awareness by recognising the role of a dress code in avoiding explicit or inappropriate clothing. Nonetheless, the value of flexibility and opportunities for expressing uniqueness was central to their accounts of an ideal school.

As well as uniform impacting freedom of expression, Laura expressed frustration at the lack of creativity within her school's uniform policy and criticised their rationale, suggesting that: *"The whole point [of school uniform] is to prepare us for jobs where we'll have to wear like suits and stuff. And I'm not going to go into a job like that."* Laura's argument points to a notion of school uniform as outdated and irrelevant for many young people, particularly those who aspire to work in creative fields; this further supports earlier perceptions that school is a fixed construct which fails to adapt at the same pace as wider society.

In addition to school uniform repressing creativity, participants referred to a wider lack of creativity across the curriculum and felt they had little choice in how and what they learnt at school. In contrast to their current and non-ideal schools, descriptions of ideal schools were characterised by engaging lessons that encouraged creativity, including opportunities to engage in Drama, Art, Textiles and Music. The following description attributes responsibility to the school system for the lack of creativity, suggesting that staff have the potential to increase and promote more creative lessons and activities. *"I think they should do more creative writing, maybe in schools. I think the schools don't encourage enough creativity. And that's dull."* [Hibbert]

4.2.5 Subtheme 1.4: A desire for more choice

Whilst increased choice over their school experiences was not neccesarily deemed realistic, participants clearly articulated their hope and desire for a degree of choice, specifically in relation to breaks and increased freedom across the school day. Access to breaks whenever they were needed was a priority for participants, influenced by their negative experiences at their previous or current schools. Despite some schools agreeing that students could access breaks from lessons, participants reported that permission was often denied, with teachers suggesting that students were avoiding work. Descriptions of ideal schools instead emphasised the importance of autonomy, allowing students to choose when they needed time away from the classroom:

> *"You could have breaks whenever you want, like, as long as you don't overdo it."* [Kurt]

> *"You could definitely go… whenever is necessary, and they're not like keeping track of how much you need to go.*" [Laura]

> *"You can go outside, you can choose wherever you want to go.*" [Rosie]

> *"I think that number one, the teachers shouldn't be allowed to say no, you can't do that. We're doing an activity right now. They shouldn't be allowed to say that*." [Hibbert]

Access to breaks away from lessons was clearly important to participants, however it was the freedom to take these breaks at any point that was fundamental to their accounts of an ideal school. The idea of allowing students the choice to take unlimited breaks requires a level of responsibility that may not align with the culture of many secondary schools, highlighted by Kurt's comment; *"don't overdo it".* This indicates an awareness of the potential for students to take advantage of access to breaks and the need for a degree of trust between staff and students to implement this change.

Participants further demonstrated their desire for choice by expressing hopes for increased freedom and decision-making across the school day. Experiences of feeling trapped and confined at school in the past, including being forbidden to leave, feeling trapped and being unable to see friends in different classes, influenced their constructs of an ideal and non-ideal school. As a result, descriptions of an ideal school were focused around increased freedom, including participants choosing their subjects, preferred lesson style and preferred peer to work with in group discussions:

> *"You'd also be put in a class based on how you learn. Like if you prefer to do more interactive sort of things you can do more interactive sort of things but if you prefer to learn by PowerPoint, you'd be taught by PowerPoint. You could choose on the day."* [Juno]

> *"People are allowed to choose their own groups."* [Charlie]

Additional ways in which students sought freedom included opportunities to contribute to lessons by writing on the whiteboard, starting school later and choosing food items for the lunch menu. These examples provide an insight into the adjustments that may contribute towards a sense of autonomy throughout the school day. Laura's following description of her ideal school represents a contrast to participants' previous and current experiences of school, suggesting that embedding choice and decision-making within schools requires considerable reassessment of the ethos and structure of many secondary schools.

> *"More stuff that will help, like more choice really, and more decisions that are yours. There'd be less rules as in like you'd decide stuff more. There'd be less rules and more stuff that's your decision."* [Laura]

4.2.6 Subtheme 1.5: Power imbalance

Participants referred to power dynamics between students and staff in their current and non-ideal schools, where staff maintained control through their arrogant, patronising and condescending approach. Participants felt that staff took advantage of their position of power

and authority and described experiences of staff members being *"on a power trip"* [Kurt]. Descriptions of interactions with staff indicated a hierarchical structure within the school system, where staff members believed they were superior because of their role or age:

> *"They're talking down on you."* [Juno]

> *"They don't respect you. You're the same level as them, but they treat you like you're below. It's irritating things where they feel like they know more than me, about me."* [Laura]

> *"They think they know better just because they're older and stuff."* [Charlie]

> *"They think they're just so much better than all their students."* [Kurt]

In contrast, an ideal school was associated with increased equality between students and staff, where students were in control of decisions, rather than their experiences being dictated by an adult. Central to participants' accounts was the importance of adults respecting their decisions and not assuming they know best:

> *"Yeah, also teachers would be like, equal to the kids, like they wouldn't think they're better cos they're teachers and they wouldn't go on about the fact that they spend their time making lessons everyday, they'd be more like friends, sort of, instead of teachers thinking that they're more important… Also you'd be able to have conversations and that might not be about the work. Like you could speak to them about anything really…."* [Juno]

> *"I definitely think that they [teachers] need to hear more from actual children because most of the time it is people that don't really know that much just making assumptions."* [Hibbert]

Participants appeared to feel that decisions were made for them with little consultation or consideration of their views, influencing their hopes to be more actively involved in decision-making. Equality was of particular importance to Juno, and is highlighted in her description of an ideal school where decisions are made collaboratively, rather than by one individual:

> *"There wouldn't be much of a headteacher, like you know how you have a teacher but they never actually do anything… you just wouldn't really have a headteacher. It would be more like the teachers are working together rather than like one headteacher making all the decisions for the rest of the teachers…"* [Juno]

Dissatisfaction with the power imbalance between students and staff was further demonstrated by participants seeking equality in expectations for staff and pupils. Some participants suggested *"more rules for the teachers"* including staff receiving detentions, whilst others proposed that students should be paid for attending school. Hibbert concluded that without consistency in the expectations of behaviour between staff and pupils, there was a risk that staff were promoting a message that negative behaviour was acceptable:

> *"I feel that there's been a bad example set by the teachers for one, because the teachers are bullies... And I think teachers are saying that it's okay to like make people cry…"* [Hibbert]

Key to seeking a more balanced relationship with adults was the need for a wider sense of fairness. Non-ideal schools were generally depicted as having unfair policies, for instance adults restricting free time and students receiving detentions without valid reasons. Non-ideal schools appeared to be based on participants' previous experiences of feeling persecuted at school, including being unable to leave the classroom and being reprimanded by staff at every opportunity. In addition to unjust policies, the sense of unfairness was also recognised as being unconsciously embedded within the culture of a non-ideal school, including instances of sexism:

> *"They wouldn't kind of realise they're doing it but they treat men with more respect than the girls. Like let the boys get away with more."* [Juno]

In contrast to their non-ideal schools, participants described a sense of fairness in their ideal school. Despite seeking more choice and freedom, students acknowledged the importance of rules, on the condition that all rules were fair. A recognition of the value of limits and

boundaries was perhaps influenced by participants' discomfort within a chaotic school environment. This seemed to inform the need for rules that ensured order and supported students to understand expectations:

> *"There will be limitations to what you could do. But they would be reasonable and not over the top."* [Hibbert]

> *"They obey the rules. Obey the rules, everyone is obeying the rules."* [Ellie]

> *"When you do something right, teachers always congratulate you. And when you do something wrong, they criticise you accordingly… Give out the appropriate sanctions when a student misbehaved… If a student was talking when the teacher was talking, they get a warning, or all the way up to if the student broke school property, their parents will be notified and have to pay for it."* [Khalil]

Other participants promoted rules that supported equality and fairness, including zero tolerance to bullying, equal opportunities to attend school trips regardless of financial circumstances and free meals for disadvantaged students. Charlie referenced an "*LGBTQ+ group that helps spread awareness and representation",* indicating that equality extends beyond explicit rules to also creating a fair and inclusive culture within an ideal school.

4.3 Theme 2: Relationships are key

Participants articulated both positive and negative experiences of relationships in their previous school or in the school they currently attend, which influenced their constructs of the type of relationships they seek in an ideal and non-ideal school.

4.3.1 Subtheme 2.1: Peer relationships matter

Peer relationships were identified as a crucial factor across descriptions of both an ideal and non-ideal school. Participants' non-ideal schools were portrayed as highly isolating, with limits on interactions with other students and few opportunities to socialise:

"You have to eat inside, and you're not allowed to mix classes or see your friends." [Rosie]

"Researcher: What is the worst thing about this school?
Ink: Probably not being in the same class as my friends"

"They're singular desks by the way cos I don't like it when you have to sit by yourself." [Juno]

It appeared that sitting alone and not socialising with friends had a negative impact on participants' school experiences and may have decreased their feelings of safety and connection within school. Feelings of isolation also extended beyond the school day, with one participant explaining that in a non-ideal school "*the other students aren't allowed to speak to you outside of school"* [Kurt]. This further reiterates the value that participants placed on peer relationships and the need for opportunities to build and maintain connections with friends.

The importance of peer relationships and interacting with other students was further demonstrated through participants' descriptions of their ideal schools. Opportunities for discussions with peers and group conversations in lessons were fundamental to their construct of an ideal school:

"*There'd be like groups. So that you can confide in your group. And you're kind of entitled to work together to figure stuff out. So nobody's really alone when it comes to the learning. And it's all done fairly, and people are allowed to choose their own groups given that they behave well…"* [Charlie]

"No seating plans… like you're allowed to like work with people. And it's not like you're sat next to the person you hate most out of the class and hates you most, you're sat with like your friends." [Laura]

"Big round table, comfy chairs, so you could all sort of like talk to one another… in lessons… if it was okay with the person, then get the class involved. And then we can see what everyone else thinks and then it's more like joint. If you don't understand we can work it out." [Juno]

As highlighted, participants valued the opportunity to discuss their work with peers to reduce feelings of isolation and support one another with learning. The option to choose groups was deemed important, suggesting that students feel more able to share ideas and engage in collaborative work when they feel comfortable with their peers. This implies that students find it challenging to engage in group activities with less familiar peers and may be based on previous experiences of feeling judged or uncomfortable in groups.

Participants were clear about the qualities they sought in other students. Within a non-ideal school, students were generally described as rude and petty, which resulted in *"so many arguments"* [Jonathon] and *"drama for no reason"* [Juno]. Participants also recalled instances of other students being disobedient, careless and disruptive at school, which influenced their constructions of students at a non-ideal school:

> *"Work disruptions… Probably a few on their phones playing stuff… or just fooling around. They might not care about what's happening."* [Ink]

> *"Really, really rude. Really rude. Disobedient. Really annoying. And damaging. And careless."* [Khalil]

> *"If the kids are disobedient doing drugs or vaping, then that is not a happy school."* [Ellie]

> *"A lot of people trying to distract you."* [Jonathon]

These quotes signify participants' frustration at the chaotic atmosphere caused by other students who prevent them from learning and highlights the importance of respectful peers who follow school rules and avoid disrupting others. This was confirmed in descriptions of an ideal school, in which participants valued peers who demonstrated a positive and engaged attitude to learning.

Participants also suggested that other students would be prejudiced, racist, homophobic and bully others in their non-ideal school, in comparison to students working collaboratively and refusing to tolerate bullying in their ideal school. Descriptions of friendly and

understanding peers in their ideal school implies that participants seek an inclusive, tolerant school community, without arguments or disagreements:

> *"There wouldn't be much need for drama. Like everyone would sorta just be friends instead of like little petty groups or whatever."* [Juno]

> *"I think they'd [other students] be understanding, friendly… I think that by a rule, no I won't say that. I won't say no neurotypicals allowed! I'm joking, I'm not going to say that."* [Hibbert]

Whilst Hibbert emphasised that her suggestion of a school without neurotypical students was not entirely serious, it illustrated the significance of having peers who understand one another's needs. For Hibbert, it seemed that only students who shared a similar diagnosis and lived experience could completely understand her; this highlights the possible social challenges that autistic students experience in conforming to neurotypical expectations within school.

4.3.2 Subtheme 2.2: Adults who listen, help and understand

Alongside peer relationships, the importance of relationships with staff was central to participants' narratives. When recalling positive school experiences, these were often associated with positive relationships with staff, highlighting the significant relational aspect of school:

> *"I really like that school. I think the teachers are lovely and the head teacher is my best friend"* [Hibbert]

> *"The staff were really nice [at primary school]. And the teachers were all mostly really nice. And they were very, well they were pretty relaxed."* [Rosie]

Despite this, many participants had also experienced difficult relationships with teachers and school staff, which informed their constructs of staff within an ideal and non-ideal

school. Within a non-ideal school, participants evoked an image of adults who failed to understand or listen to them, demonstrated by their dismissive behaviour:

> *"I feel like the teacher would just cease to exist like not care at all"* [Ink]

> *"They'd be incredibly dismissive even if you've brought up a good point. They'd send you to detention or make you stand outside even if you were just bringing up a point or, you know, asking them if they could do something else."* [Charlie]

> *"Teachers aren't very nice like the… Senco. I didn't like them people, I don't know how to describe it. They're not very understanding in this school."* [Juno]

> *"So this teacher here is sort of telling the child to get back into the class and to stop making a big deal and stop causing so much trouble."* [Hibbert]

Teachers in a non-ideal school appeared to perceive students as irritating and a nuisance, rather than recognising the impact of their needs. There was an understanding amongst participants that staff in a non-ideal school would not have time for them and showed little interest in their opinions, ideas or difficulties.

Whilst staff who understood students' needs were deemed important, participants expressed frustration at staff in their current schools who assumed they understood students' experiences without taking time to get to know them:

> *"And they also don't understand you but they think they do… they feel like they understand me too much. And it's like no, you don't…"* [Laura]

> *"Actual supportive staff, actual being the word here not just thinking they're being supportive and thinking they understand, but actually understanding what it's like."* [Ellie]

> *"It's annoying cos most of the time there is simple ideas [to help], just people don't take the time to learn them."* [Hibbert]

Participants suggested that to truly understand their experiences and needs, teachers needed to *"listen to us"* and offer time, advice and reassurance. Participants sought staff

members who were approachable, "*kind to all the students",* smiley and friendly, demonstrated by their willingness for students to ask questions:

> *"[In the ideal school] I'd feel more comfortable speaking to the teachers"* [Kurt]

> "*It's much easier to ask for help. Cos the teachers will be much more open to helping you and they know that sometimes it's hard to concentrate in lessons cos there's loads of distractions everywhere… they'd try more to understand rather than just think they know everything."* [Juno]

> *"They're just really nice and kind to you, and you feel quite happy asking them questions about things, because they're not going to tell you off."* [Ellie]

Additionally, the construction of an understanding teacher was centred around their willingness to adapt and make allowances for students:

> *"So if you came in late because your dog needed to go to the vet or something and your parents couldn't take you or you miss the bus… they'd be very understanding. If something were to go wrong, the teachers would automatically comfort their students. And if you were still struggling with whether or not to go into school… they would offer reassurance and ask if there was anything they could do to help and they'd be very understanding."* [Charlie]

> *"They'd understand [if you forgot your equipment] and they'd just like lend you something."* [Laura]

Also key to staff better understanding students was a willingness to educate themselves about autism and students' specific needs. Participants described negative experiences of being stereotyped and labelled by school staff, whereby teachers grouped autistic students together and made assumptions about their needs:

> *"There was a group for the autistic people. And the way the adults treated all of us was just so… it felt offensive, honestly, I'd rather they'd just called us a slur. They grouped us all together, it was infantilising. They treated us like these dumb bombs that would go off any second if they said the wrong thing. And they expected us all to get along just because we were autistic, even though none of us had anything in common." [Charlie]*

Descriptions of teachers who grouped autistic students together based on stereotypes indicated a lack of effort or interest in understanding autism and portrayed an image of teachers who did not care. Participants instead sought ideal schools where teachers were willing to ask, learn and understand more about autism, whilst treating all pupils as individuals and recognising their unique needs:

> *"I think you've got to learn from what's in front of you really, like get people who you know to speak about it because… I think it's easier to learn something when it's someone you know or care about telling you about it because it makes you want to do it. I think that school should have more understanding of women with autism, because they obviously know about men… but I think when it comes to women… They're less knowledgeable about it because obviously it's only just now that women are getting more diagnoses."* [Juno]

> *"For them to do more research on the actual condition instead of just listening to stereotypes. You should never assume that everyone is the same. And don't treat all students like they're all experiencing the same thing. Stop labelling people in the same group because they share similarities, because everyone is different. And to categorise people based on one thing that's similar, is very stereotypical."* [Charlie]

> *"I think that you can't just… treat everyone the same because it doesn't work like that. People's brains aren't the same… My ideal school would have people that actually had an understanding of disabilities. Because at the moment, I really think that most professionals… whose actual job it is to work with people with disabilities or in that department… I really don't think they have a proper knowledge about what it is. So I think number one, I think I'd like a school that the main people in charge of neurodivergent people are neurodivergent people… especially if they're in charge of the department. I think it's the best decision because then they are the ones understand it better."* [Hibbert]

Hibbert's suggestion of employing more neurodivergent staff further illustrates the extent to which autistic students feel misunderstood and their desire to be treated as individuals by adults who have lived experience and understanding of autism.

4.3.3 Subtheme 2.3: Mutual respect

Within a non-ideal school, participants described a lack of respect from staff towards students, characterised by *"mean, angry"* staff who ignored students and never smiled. Alongside explicit references to disrespectful staff who *"looked down"* on students in a non-ideal school, participants also recalled difficult experiences of strict teachers who shouted at the class:

> *"I think the problem is when they tell you off about anything and everything and nothing. Just their default setting is strict discipline that really really bothers… when they can't control the class and everything's very wild. And so they just shout and are snappy and shout."* [Ellie]

> *"So they never smile, they'd always shout at you… For not doing something right."* [Ellie]

Additional behaviours that were interpreted as disrespectful included teachers teasing students in front of the class and using sarcasm in a manner that embarrassed certain students. Participants seemed to suggest that staff may not always recognise the impact of their behaviour and whilst they may not have intended to be disrespectful, students often perceived their behaviour in this way:

> *"So if you went in [the classroom] they'd like make fun of you in front of the class. They'd point out [your non-attendance] in front of the class. They'd like make fun of you, but they wouldn't realise that they're being rude if that makes sense like they kind of think it was a joke."* [Juno]

> *"I find it kind of uncomfortable when they're talking about a student and what they're doing in front of me and I'm just like… am I meant to be hearing this?"* [Juno]

Participants referred to teachers in their non-ideal school as enquiring about their non-attendance in the presence of their peers, as well as asking personal questions about the reasons for their absence in front of the class. Failure to recognise the importance of privacy, sensitivity

and confidential conversations appeared to contribute to the lack of respect that students felt from staff in their current and non-ideal schools.

An ideal school, on the other hand, was constructed as an environment characterised by mutual respect. In this school, staff would avoid shouting at students or telling them off for minor offences such as incorrect uniform. Participants appeared to feel respected by staff when they were listened to and validated. Within her ideal school, Charlie proposed a child-led approach, whereby staff respected the differences between adolescents and adults and adjusted their approach accordingly:

> *"A school that caters to the teens' needs. You know, they don't follow the adult's way of life. They'll follow the teens."* [Charlie]

An additional way in which staff could demonstrate respect in an ideal school was by allowing students space when they were struggling or after a period of absence by avoiding asking too many questions and maintaining distance:

> *"Teaching Assistants could stand somewhere where they can notice if I like put my hand up or something. Cos when they sit next to you they exclude you from the rest of the class and you can't talk to anyone cos it's like you're sat next to me. They'd give you some space and they wouldn't just keep like pushing… making you do loads of work when you just can't cos you're not up to it."* [Laura]

> *"At the best school they would take you out for space. Until you like, felt ready to go back in [to class] or if you didn't feel ready to go back in this state*" [Hibbert]

> *"They would give you a day, like if you were off, they would give you a day and the next day they would ask."* [Kurt]

Whilst students described a desire for adults to provide space, they implied the value of adults holding their needs in mind. Amongst participants, there was an implicit desire to feel remembered and looked after that mirrored a parent-infant relationship:

> *"Adults reassure that it's okay. And that it's safe."* [Ink]

> *"I think they'd [students] really appreciate an email that says, I'm sorry you couldn't come in today. I hope that you're having a good day. Or like I hope you can come in tomorrow. Sometimes that works for students."* [Hibbert]

> *"There's someone there to look after you"* [Rosie]

This suggests that although participants sought increased independence, choice and equality, there remained a need for nurturing and caring adults who respected their challenges and ensured they were not forgotten during periods of absence.

Significantly, participants emphasised the need for reciprocation between staff and students; whilst there were expectations for staff to be respectful, the same applied for students. Participants recognised their role in maintaining a respectful environment and suggested that when staff offered respect, students were more likely to do the same:

> *"They wouldn't shout or anything. I think usually if you earn people's respect it's much easier to tell them to stop doing stuff so… the kids would have that respect for the teachers. Each would have that respect for the kids. And so they could just sort of know when to keep quiet…"* [Juno]

> *"Don't abuse the breaks and stuff. No fighting, no stealing.*" [Kurt]

> *"No tolerance of bullying of any kind… fights, hate crime and stuff."* [Charlie]

4.4 Theme 3: The need for a comfortable school environment

4.4.1 Subtheme 3.1: Adaptations for sensory needs

The physical school environment was raised an important factor for participants, including the way the setting was adjusted to meet the sensory needs of autistic students. Participants referred to numerous environmental factors that had negatively affected their school experience, including the size of the school, the lighting, the noise level and the sensory impact of the school uniform.

Participants generally described their non-ideal school as being too busy, with *"lots and lots of people"* in the classrooms and corridors. The large number of students at a non-ideal school would lead to *"everything on top of each other",* large queues and an overwhelming noise level:

"Lots of people in each classroom" [Rosie]

"These children are sort of… they represent the group of people… because it often feels like it's just one person against 50,000… It's just too loud" [Hibbert]

"Small classrooms but with lots of people in, not much space" [Ellie]

"Just one massive room filled with lots of noise" [Khalil]

Instead, pupils expressed a need for smaller class sizes in their ideal school to reduce the noise level. Ideal class sizes ranged from approximately five to fifteen students, although participants were clear than class sizes smaller than five presented their own challenges, including lack of engagement and connection.

The size of the school building was also deemed important within narratives of an ideal school, although there was not a shared consensus over the optimal school size. Some participants considered a large school to be overwhelming, presenting opportunities for getting lost and resulting in too much noise. Other participants preferred a larger school building that would provide more space and reduce the chaotic nature of the environment:

"Cos then it can all be like spread out instead of lots of people in one space" [Juno]

"Everybody gets to do different things at different times so that it's not all happening at once or too busy" [Ellie]

"Preferably not thousands, but I don't like a tiny school" [Laura]

"Ideally, it wouldn't be too big but if it is pretty big, it's very easy to navigate" [Charlie]

Although participants offered varying opinions relating to the size of the school, it was clear from their descriptions that a quieter, less busy environment was preferred, as autistic participants may experience noise levels more acutely than their neurotypical peers.

Opportunities to listen to music independently or play background music within the classroom also formed a construct within the ideal school. Students suggested that alternative types of noise helped their concentration within the classroom and supported them to relax:

> *"Background music… you can sit with one headphone and with music on… it helps some people concentrate more, if there's music on... It can be calming as well. Like if you start to feel stressed and you don't wanna leave you can just listen to your music instead and then catch up later."* [Juno]

> *"In my school there was not music but audio, like rain sounds and birds"* [Rosie]

> *"You're allowed to play music… to help you focus"* [Jonathon]

Additionally, participants highlighted the impact of lighting on their school experience, with bright lights described as "*intense*" and "*overwhelming*". There was a hope for adjustments to the type of lighting available at school, including *"lots of windows"* and *"natural light".* The following quotes indicate the preferred dim lighting at an ideal school and further demonstrates the type of adjustments autistic students seek to improve their school experience:

> *"It should definitely have lighting that works on a dim sort of thing because sometimes, bright lights can be really hard but sometimes for me, I don't like dim lights because they make me feel uncomfortable. So I think if it was a dimmer that could that could be good for everyone.*" [Hibbert]

> *"You could change the lighting in the fish tank and the sort of mood in the classroom. There's a lot of mood lighting"* [Rosie]

> *"It's like the lighting and stuff... it all doubles when you're feeling overwhelmed.* [Hibbert]

> *"LED coloured lights so colour changing lights, that you can change."* [Ellie]

Some participants also experienced sensory difficulties with the uniform at their current school and sought adjustments that would help their clothing feel more comfortable. Participants expressed heightened sensitivity to the *"tight, scratchy"* uniform at their current and non-ideal school:

> *"The uniform would be scratchy, uncomfortable and stiff [at a non-ideal school*]" [Ellie]

> *"The blazer, I don't like the blazer. And the fabric of the skirt. It's too warm, I don't like it"* [Juno]

> *"If a student's having trouble with a uniform part… you should be able to discuss that with the child so if the shirt's an issue, can we settle for a white t shirt… definitely be willing to have a conversation with a child if they're unable to wear a specific item of clothing."* [Hibbert]

4.4.2 Subtheme 3.2: Welcoming calming spaces

Alongside feeling overwhelmed by the sensory environment, participants were likely to have been overwhelmed by their non-ideal school, described as *"chaotic",* and *"out of control"*. This was illustrated by references to *"food fights", "no rules" and "mayhem everywhere".* Within a non-ideal school, there was little opportunity to feel calm amongst the chaos:

> *"Students causing insane amounts of chaos. No staff at all. And, just stuff left out there for us to learn. But the students aren't actually learning anything at all. It would look like a place that's been destroyed by the students. Or been turned into a mess by the students. Teacher would actually support the chaos and damage."* [Khalil]

Moreover, participants evoked a sense of feeling "*unsafe*", *"anxious"* and *"stressed"* in their current and non-ideal schools, through descriptions of feeling *"nervous all the time"* [Rosie] and *"tired… I'd just dread every second"* [Khalil]. To reduce these feelings of anxiety and create a feeling of calm within their ideal school, participants sought designated spaces that were both welcoming and calming. Key to achieving this was the use of a separate room,

depicted as a *"chilled, quiet space"* that students could use whenever they required. Whilst specific descriptions of the calm rooms varied, their common purpose appeared to be a safe space where students could relax and self-regulate. In line with their sensory needs, pupils sought a quiet space with low lighting, such as *"fairy lights"* and *"mood lighting"*, in addition to soft furnishing including cushions and bean bags. For some participants, a separate area with comfortable furniture, lighting and low noise levels was enough to support their needs, whilst others hoped for more specific resources in their ideal calm room:

> *"There could be a computer in there, one with many games"* [Ink]

> *"You could do your work in there, if you wanted to do that and the lesson is just a bit stressful."* [Juno]

> *"There'd be like a sensory room, where you could try and calm down. And this mesmerising water bubble tube like the one that goes upwards… Bean bags, stress relief.*" [Khalil]

> *"There'd be a TV. Oh, you'd be able to video chat with the teacher… you'd be able to watch the lesson from the quiet room if you didn't feel you could go back there. If you really don't feel that you can interact with the lesson on that day. And you can talk to them so if you want to you could put your microphone on and talk with them but you don't have to."* [Ellie]

> *"There'd be 20 quiet rooms. So, lots of quiet rooms so there'd be no worries about there not being one available. Beanbag. Chair. Books. Nonfiction books."* [Ellie]

> *"I think generally it'd have to be quite relaxed, but I think there should be some ear defenders, maybe some books… picture books, just to calm yourself down. Because you can focus on those things.. things that you can look at, like posters and stuff… you could talk to all the children and get their interests, so they feel like the space is more personalised for them."* [Hibbert]

> *"Either a little area or little room next door, and it'd be like a room of like loads of comfy chairs and books and stuff and you can go there if you get stressed."* [Juno]

Hopes for a calm ideal school also referred to the wider school environment, with participants expressing their desire for an appealing and aesthetically pleasing building. This

included *"bigger, more open classrooms with lots of natural light and colour",* as well as plants in the classrooms. For some participants, it was important for their ideal school to display students' artwork and colourful displays to ensure a calming and appealing environment:

> *"There'd be lots of artwork with dolphins on the wall, posters and things."* [Ellie]

> *"Stuff that shows off work students had done, there's a lot of colour like every wall is decorated in like, posters and one of those wall things [displays]… entire presentation on the wall."* [Charlie]

The vibrant and engaging decorations sought within an ideal school are in stark contrast to participants' bleak descriptions of a non-ideal school, which was constructed as "*dark, dirty and old.*" Students indicated that the worst type of school would be grey with little character, which appeared to mirror their wider representations of a non-ideal school as boring and limiting self-expression and creativity.

Participants indicated that unrestricted access to separate spaces and an aesthetically pleasing and welcoming environment within their ideal school would improve wellbeing, by increasing feelings of safety and calmness. There was a sense that students would feel more able to attend this type of school as it was considered a *"much easier place to be in*" and valued for being a *"comfortable, quiet, nice neutral zone"*.

4.4.3 Subtheme 3.3: Realistic opportunities and resources

When considering the best school, participants expressed their hope for newer resources and facilities, including sports equipment; basketball courts; a renovated science laboratory; a swimming pool; a larger library, a greenhouse; fidget toys and a computer room. In addition, access to nature was fundamental to participants' narratives of an ideal school, highlighting the positive impact of open space and opportunities to spend time outside:

> *"There'd be lots of chairs outside and trees. And you can also do lessons outside when the weather is okay, rather than having to do it inside all the time. And there'd be lots*

> *of land outside, and there's like vegetable patches like if someone really likes gardening, they can have their own little vegetable patch."* [Juno]
>
> *"There's like, a huge flower garden, because I told you there was a huge courtyard. There's like a Zen garden… where you can go and think and relax."* [Charlie]
>
> *"It's more like outside space, less gravel stuff"* [Laura]

This implies that participants may value alternative methods of learning away from the rigid, repetitive structure of the classroom, incorporating holistic activities such as gardening throughout their time at school. Access to animals was also dominant within the discourse of an ideal school, at times informed by participants' experiences of alternative provisions where there was access to farms and small animals:

> *"Some support dogs and stuff. At my current school, there's two bunnies"* [Hibbert]
>
> *"We're on like a sort of farm... It's got two main cabins, which is where we learn, and there's a field, right in front of it, there's cows and there's a very old goose."* [Juno]

Other animals within an ideal school included goats, pigs, horses, a frog pond, fish tanks, rabbits, cats and dogs. There was a sense that animals at school would support students' wellbeing, with participants often referring to *"therapy animals"* in their ideal school:

> *"You're allowed to have some therapy animals in class, like, you're allowed to have cats. Yeah, not so much bunnies and dogs."* [Rosie]
>
> *"So service dogs are allowed or service animals. And there's therapy pets as well. So whether it's like a dog or a cat that stays within the counsellor's office that students who are troubled can go see."* [Charlie]

Whilst participants were eager to share their hopes for an ideal school, there was a sense that any suggestions needed to be reasonable and realistic. Ink explicitly indicated their preference for imagining a realistic school, whilst other participants implied this through their rational and balanced suggestions that could be implemented in a secondary school. When

discussing animals, for instance, participants reflected on the practicalities of having animals at school and considered who would care for them:

> *"Little animals cos obviously big ones would be kinda hard to… little animals that you can just be with for a little bit… if you don't feel like speaking to a human! Maybe for a lesson one day you could all go clean them out or something and learn to care for things*. [Juno]

Juno suggested that animals are easier to speak to than humans and it is possible that other participants valued the idea of animals who could listen without judgment or offering advice. Alongside this, Juno's proposal of learning how to care for animals as part of a lesson highlights the benefits of having animals at school and their contribution to a more organic and potentially engaging learning environment.

4.5 Theme 4: Seeking adjustments for individual needs

4.5.1 Subtheme 4.1: Accessible and individualised learning

Participants shared experiences of learning at their previous and current schools, which were often characterised by unengaging content or difficulty accessing the lessons:

> *"One of the provisions I went to, some of the teachers were really bad. And we did like five lessons in total. We had Maths English Science History, that was it. And it was so boring. And everyday in English we'd do the same thing, it was like we'd read a text and answer questions about the text. And it was really boring, because I didn't actually get to learn anything about English and how to use devices and different words and how to do creative writing."* [Hibbert]

> *"I don't really like the PowerPoints and it's not really interactive."* [Juno]

There was a sense that school was tedious, with repetitive lessons that lacked interaction. Participants utilised their experiences of school as *"boring"* to inform their construction of the type of learning they imagined at their ideal and non-ideal school. As expected, a non-ideal school was associated with *"boredom"* and *"things you don't find*

interesting". The repetitive nature of a non-ideal school was further emphasised through repeated references to *"over and over"*:

> *"Repeating everything over and over again. Every lesson is performed the same."* [Charlie]

> *"Just be that over and over again. The same thing every day over and over and over without changing. Same classroom, same teacher over and over."* [Kurt]

The multiple references to doing the same thing repeatedly depicted an image of a non-ideal school as lacking any excitement or spontaneity, where instead students and teachers were programmed to perform on autopilot, like *"brain-controlled robots"* [Kurt]. Further contributing to the *"dullness"* of a non-ideal school was the lack of interactive activities and reliance on PowerPoint presentations. There was a sense that lessons in a non-ideal school would limit engagement by deferring to a traditional approach of *"a teacher talking at the front and you have to write everything down"*. This was further illustrated in the following quote, which suggests that teachers may purposefully restrict the enjoyment in learning:

> *"It'd be very bland learning aka 'the learning isn't meant to be fun' mentality*." [Ink]

In addition to a feeling of boredom, the learning at a non-ideal school was portrayed as inaccessible. Participants described *"very hard, confusing"* subjects and lessons that they did not understand, eliciting an image of students being lost and left behind. At an ideal school, however, participants hoped for more relaxed and interactive lessons, where students could contribute to discussions and share ideas. Key to accessible lessons at an ideal school were opportunities to revisit and explore content that students had not understood during the initial teaching session:

> *"The learning is very easy, and if you don't understand they go back and re-explain it in a different way or ask you what parts you didn't understand and then do their best to explain those parts and link them to the parts you do understand."* [Charlie]

"They'd expand on it like in their own words" [Juno]

Juno suggested that learning would be easier if key information was provided during verbal delivery of the lesson and written on the whiteboard; *"make sure you get straight to the point, rather than blabber on."* This suggests that it may be difficult for some students to filter out unnecessary information, instead preferring to have visual representations of the most salient information.

For learning to be accessible, participants also emphasised the importance of ensuring individualisation. The recognition that all students presented with unique and varying needs and learn in different ways informed an expectation that an ideal school would provide a personalised and tailored approach to learning:

"Some classrooms there are like cubicles for when you want to work alone" [Rosie]

"You'd be put together based on how you learn. There's people who prefer to like talk in lessons and there's people who prefer to sit quietly in lessons and do their work." [Juno]

Within in an ideal school, staff would adapt the teaching and learning in response to individual needs, both through the style of content delivery and through the implementation of specific support systems:

"A green to yellow to red system. Red means I need to leave the classroom right away. Yellow… I need a bit of support… Can you come over here so we could talk about this? And green… If someone's just like, are you doing okay, across the room? It could be like yeah, I'm doing okay, here's a green card…" [Hibbert]

Hibbert's suggestion implies a shift from a one-size-fits-all approach within lessons and instead recognises the importance of individualised adaptations that support learning and development. This was further illustrated by suggestions of embedding special interests within the curriculum, supporting earlier notions of allowing creativity and opportunities for students to express themselves and their unique personalities:

"[Other students and teachers] like marine biology as well, so they're all very enthusiastic about the same things. You get to focus on your special interest, all the time." [Ellie]

"There's a place where you game" [Khalil]

"I liked when we did 'show and tell' and it could be like here is an element about my personality. Can I hear something about yours? And normally show and tell is really chaotic… But like, I think it could be cool to have, Friday afternoons, you could bring something from home. If you forget, you could draw something or make something in class" [Hibbert]

4.5.2 Subtheme 4.2: Reduce the pressure and expectations

The need for adjustments for individual requirements appeared to stem from participants' experience of school staff holding unrealistic expectations. This was illustrated through descriptions of a non-ideal school that allowed limited or no breaks throughout the day, with an expectation to continue studying at all times:

"So basically just having no break" [Laura]

"It wouldn't be a break it would just be no lessons… it would still have to be very quiet. You wouldn't be allowed to run around or play games. It's honestly just a lesson without a teacher teaching it because all you really can do is just study." [Juno]

Alongside a lack of breaks, pupils would be expected to attend their non-ideal school for long hours, with a *"really early start and a late finish".* Even once school finished, there remained an expectation for students to complete homework tasks, with a non-ideal school issuing significant quantities of homework ranging from three hours a night to twenty-five tasks a week:

"I don't like homework because it reminds me too much of school, when you're not in school. And it also takes away from the time that you get where… you're not in school, but then… that just gets taken away, then you have to do more schoolwork." [Juno]

"I always think homework is just such a dumb concept. Because you're at home. You aren't at school. You're supposed to be having fun at home. Like I understand if it's an

> *important thing, revision or something, but just giving your students an insane amount of homework isn't nice... home is a safe space."* [Charlie]
>
> *"So much homework you can't enjoy your weekend"* [Rosie]

There appeared to be a perception that completing homework was unfair and descriptions of a non-ideal school captured an implicit assumption of teachers as punitive and harsh for setting homework. Alongside feeling that teachers were burdening them with something, participants also emphasised what was being taken away by the homework, which in most cases was their free time to relax and have fun.

The pressure and expectation to begin school early, work without breaks and continue studying in their own time signified the priority that a non-ideal school placed on academic attainment and learning. This appeared to confirm that a non-ideal school prioritised grades and the school's reputation over students' emotional wellbeing and mental health: *"[Students] are more valuable than a bunch of exam result numbers*." [Hibbert].

Unsurprisingly, there was a desire for increased flexibility around homework in an ideal school. Participants varied in their views of homework, with some suggesting reduced quantity such as *"thirty minutes a night",* whilst others including Jonathon and Ink, opted for *"no homework"* at all. Participants felt homework was most valuable when it served a purpose and did not take a significant amount of time:

> *"There's barely any homework and when there is it's always like revision for tests or big projects that are like, for groups and always fun to do… it builds teamwork and stuff."* [Charlie]
>
> *"I think number one, students shouldn't get into too much trouble if they're unable to complete the homework… I really don't think people should go overboard with homework because it can be really stressful."* [Hibbert]

Participants further highlighted the pressure and expectations they experience at school by recommending flexible start times, shorter days and the option for a three-day weekend at

their ideal school. Given their difficulty attending school, some participants also suggested the possibility of going home if they were finding school too hard:

> *"You'd be able to speak to the teachers, they'd understand and let you go home"* [Kurt]

> *"I feel like the weekend would be three days and the weekday would be four days."* [Charlie]

> *"Start later, and finish later, just start late so you don't have to wake up as early... I'd prefer to have four days a week… cos a three day weekend would be so much better."* [Laura]

> *"I'd probably try and do half a day. I don't really feel comfortable going to any school for full day currently…"* [Ink]

Amongst participants, there was an impression that the current structure of the school day and week was exhausting, resulting in high levels of pressure and leading students to seek increased time at home to recover. Participants also highlighted the role school staff could play in reducing pressure, by lowering expectations, supporting with tests and sending work home if students were absent:

> *"There is set lesson times to attend, but if you can't manage it… the pressure is completely off."*

> *"Teachers would send you the work so you have the option… if you feel up to it. You wouldn't feel that you had these expectations to uphold."* [Juno]

> *"You'd still have exams, but like it wouldn't be with the exam format.'* [Kurt]

4.5.3 Subtheme 4.3: Flexible rules

Whilst fair rules were deemed important in an ideal school, there was often little room for flexibility in participants' current schools, and this seemed to inform their view of a non-ideal school, illustrated by strict rules and punishments that were perceived to be disproportionate:

> *"They don't take into [account] people have different situations… So it's like you do this and you get a detention. If you forget your books or your equipment… you get a detention, when it's not my fault I forgot."* [Laura]

> *"There'd be detention for almost anything. The littlest things… if the classroom was silent, you had to ask your friend something, they'd shout at you."* [Juno]

> *"They would like tell me to immediately sit down like shouting."* [Jonathon]

> *"There's no room for error... no flexibility when it comes to rules… even if you broke one of those rules by mistake or literally couldn't follow the rules for medical reasons… they wouldn't hear you out... You'd just go straight to detention"* [Charlie]

These extracts highlight participants' experiences of school as strict, which informed their construction of a non-ideal school as having *"long lists of rules"*. Participants seemed to agree that an ideal school would instead allow a degree of flexibility, as opposed to rigid rules. For some participants, this involved access to phones in lessons or negotiations around the school uniform, whilst Charlie suggested *"rules are very easy to bend… very slack"*.

4.6 Theme 5: A hope for change

4.6.1 Subtheme 5.1: Schools require improvement

The Ideal School task encouraged reflection amongst participants as they compared their previous and current schools to their ideal and non-ideal school. Enjoyment of the task varied amongst participants, with some suggesting *"it was actually really good*", *"I enjoyed doing it online, it was nice to have my opinion heard", "it was cool",* whilst others suggested "*it was alright*" and *"I don't think it was particularly helpful*". Despite mixed feedback, the task revealed a consensus amongst participants that their current provisions required marked improvement if they were to reach the level of an ideal school:

> *"[The activity] helped me realise that there was still a lot of things wrong with school nowadays because as I was describing the worst school I realised how many similarities there were between the worst school and my current school."* [Charlie]

> *"All the stuff I've mentioned about the ideal school would take [my current school] up to a ten"* [Laura]

When describing their non-ideal school, participants often recalled their negative experiences at their current or previous school, using this to guide their description of a non-ideal school. This offers further indication that participants were often basing their constructions of a non-ideal school on their previous experiences of school, emphasising their dissatisfaction with the current school system. Ratings for their previous and current schools ranged from 1 – 8 out of 10. Most participants rated their current and previous school between 1-3, however some participants rated their school higher. Participants who rated their current school more highly were attending alternative and specialist provisions, which appears to highlight the positive impact of adjustments and adaptations and the unsuitability of the current mainstream environment in meeting their needs.

4.6.2. Subtheme 5.2: A desire to attend school

All participants reported that they would not attend their non-ideal school, with Khalil suggesting he would *"try my best to avoid it"*, providing a clear indication of the association between the school environment and attendance patterns. Despite the challenges and difficulties participants described in relation to their school experiences, students remained hopeful that their attendance could improve in future if their school environment was adjusted. In contrast to their non-ideal school, all ten participants were motivated to attend their ideal school, suggesting that adaptations to the school environment would be likely to positively impact attendance:

> *"I'd go quite often actually. I have trouble going to school anyway, but it would be a more comfortable school for me."* [Ink]

> *"Well yeah I'd definitely want to go"* [Khalil]

"Everyday, not the weekend, that would be a bit much" [Juno]

"You'd just be more okay to go and feel better about going" [Laura]

4.7 Chapter summary

This chapter described the key findings of the current research, including participants' desire for increased choice and autonomy at school, positive relationships, and a physical and emotional environment that was tailored to their needs.

5. Discussion

5.1 Overview

This chapter aims to critically analyse the findings and address the research question by considering the findings in the context of previous literature and psychological theories and frameworks. The chapter begins with a summary of the themes, followed by exploration of the findings in relation to previous research. The implications of these findings are discussed in relation to the school environment, educational practice and the EP role, before consideration of the strengths and limitations and directions for future research.

5.2 Summary of themes

Many findings in the current research support previous literature exploring the perceptions of autistic students or those experiencing EBSNA. These include the perceived lack of freedom at school, the importance of relationships and the need to adapt the school environment to meet individual needs. This suggests that the current participant group are generally not seeking novel, unrealistic, or additional adjustments and may indicate that recommendations from previous research have not been implemented. This research adds to the existing literature by exploring the views of a mixed-gender sample of autistic students who also experience EBSNA, using an adapted version of the Ideal School task. The objective of the research was to answer the following question:

How do autistic students experiencing Emotionally Based School Non-Attendance (EBSNA) perceive school and what might this suggest about the factors that could support their attendance in the future?

The five superordinate themes aim to illustrate participants' constructs and perceptions of school and identify the factors that could support their attendance:

- There is limited choice
- Relationships are key
- The need for a comfortable school environment
- Seeking adjustments for individual needs
- A hope for change

5.3 Discussion of themes

5.3.1 There is limited choice

The significant lack of choice within schools was a highly prevalent and dominant narrative within participants' school experiences. School was constructed as an environment where students had little choice, influence or control over decisions and their voices were silenced by the adults in power. Previous experiences influenced students' hopes for a school environment where they felt comfortable seeking support and collaboratively sharing their views without negative consequences. This is consistent with previous EBSNA research that identified a lack of autonomy and freedom as factors that motivated students to stay at home (Beckles, 2014), whereas promoting autonomy through offering choice and control was an effective reintegration strategy for students experiencing EBSNA (Nuttall & Woods, 2013).

Despite EBSNA literature highlighting the importance of autonomy in supporting attendance, the current research indicates that adults continue to direct the choices and decisions at school, maintaining a power imbalance between staff and students. Consistent with Moyse (2020), participants expressed frustration at the inequity between staff and students and the perception that adults viewed themselves as superior and more knowledgeable than students. This relates to Freire's (1985) description of a teacher as a depositor of information

and ‘the one who knows’, a position which remains prevalent within the structure of education systems. Moyse (2020) suggested that this power imbalance maintains the control and oppression of students within schools in order to meet accountability targets arising from government-driven measures. This supports Gamman’s (2004) criticism of an exam-oriented education system which forces children to become passive recipients with no agency, choice or control. The current research suggests, however, that rather than contributing to attainment or attendance targets, a lack of choice negatively impacts autistic students’ perceptions of school and their motivation to attend.

At times, the lack of choice within schools extended to students’ needs being unmet, including being denied access to the toilet or a time-out during lessons. Maslow’s (1943) Hierarchy of Needs highlights the impact of unmet physiological needs on learning, motivation and development, suggesting that when physiological needs are not met, students will not feel motivated to learn and consequently may be more likely to stay at home. Whilst these challenges have been raised in previous EBSNA research (Beckles, 2014; Smith, 2020), access to toilets may be particularly important for autistic students due to the gastro-intestinal, sensory and motor issues associated with ASC (North Derbyshire CAMHS, 2018) and it is important for school staff to understand that basic physiological needs are a prerequisite for learning (Maslow, 1943).

School was constructed as a place that supressed self-expression, individuality and creativity, particularly through restrictive uniform policies. These findings are not unique to autistic students, with research indicating that neurotypical students experiencing EBSNA also seek comfortable uniform that allows self-expression and promotes self-esteem (Smith, 2020). The consistency of findings between autistic and non-autistic students experiencing EBSNA indicates that restrictive uniform policies and limited opportunities to express themselves affects a wide proportion of students, and it is worth considering the impact this may have on

attendance. Currently, there is little consensus regarding the effectiveness of school uniform, despite 98% of UK secondary state schools requiring uniform (Fleming, 2019). Some studies suggest that school uniform improves achievement, attendance and behaviour and reduces the likelihood of bullying (Baumann & Krskova, 2016; Gentile & Imberman, 2012), whilst contrasting findings report no significant associations (Education Endowment Foundation [EEF], 2021; Park, 2013; Yeung, 2009). It has been argued that some schools have a preoccupation with uniform as a 'panacea for educational problems', whereby school uniform is viewed as a necessity for appropriate learning and behaviour (Rochester Independent College, n.d.). This was evident in the accounts of participants who recalled being reprimanded for their uniform upon entering school and receiving detentions for minor uniform indiscretions. Moyse (2020) further referred to the 'climate of accountability' based on performance, conduct and attendance that prioritises conformity and uniformity in English schools. Instead of promoting individuality, it is argued that many schools aim to achieve optimum performance by ensuring all students conform to the same expectations and standards, including uniform policies, with little recognition of individual differences. This is likely to be particularly salient for autistic students with sensory needs, who report additional challenges with uncomfortable, restrictive uniform. Whilst there is not conclusive evidence to justify abolishing uniform, students' suggestions of increased flexibility and a more comfortable uniform may provide increased autonomy and choice that contributes to improved attendance.

For autistic students, conforming to expectations can be particularly challenging and exhausting. Research increasingly recognises the role of masking, whereby autistic individuals suppress their differences by engaging in neurotypical behaviours in order to fit in (The Autism Service, 2021). It is therefore unsurprising that autistic students within this research constructed a non-ideal school as one which denies self-expression, individuality and creativity, when they are already attempting to mask their differences and conform to neurotypical expectations.

Indeed, Moyse (2020) argues that within UK secondary schools, there is little room for individuality and difference, including neurodiversity, which is often perceived through a deficit-lens, as a problem to be fixed rather than a difference to be understood and celebrated. This idea is consistent with accounts of participants in the current study who suggested that school 'crushed' any opportunities for uniqueness or self-expression. It seems plausible that some autistic students who become unable to attend school may experience 'autistic burnout', a phrase used to describe the intense physical, mental or emotional exhaustion and loss of skills experienced by many autistic individuals (NAS, 2020). Autistic burnout is understood to be the result of mimicking neurotypical behaviours through masking or camouflaging, as well as the consequence of sensory overstimulation. Removal from the situation that triggered the burnout is reported to be a helpful strategy (NAS, 2020) and may explain why some autistic students remove themselves from school systems that expect neurotypical behaviours.

The impact of conforming and having limited choice appeared to contribute to students' perceptions of school as a fixed construct with little opportunity for change. Participants presented with an external locus of control; a concept proposed by Rotter (1966) suggesting that life is constrained by external factors outside of one's control. Students in the current study accepted school as beyond their control, consistent with How's (2015) understanding of students as 'passive recipients of the school experience'. Following exploration of the views of students experiencing EBSNA, How (2015) suggested that non-attendance may be an attempt to regain a sense of agency and control in a system where students feel limited and powerless. It seems possible that autistic students in the current study may have also sought control in the only way they felt was available; by not attending school.

The lack of choice and control described by participants informed their hopes to attend a school that offered a degree of autonomy and choice over decisions. Previous research with both autistic students and those experiencing EBSNA supports this notion (Baker & Bishop,

2015; Beckles, 2014), and consistent with Gregory and Purcell (2014), the need to feel listened to was central to participants' accounts. The findings of the current study suggest that little has changed to provide greater collaboration and more choice for students within the structure of school systems. This is despite national and international initiatives including the UNCRC (1989) and the SEN Code of Practice (2014) that aim to prioritise young people's involvement in decisions and ensure their voices are heard. Moreover, whilst the EP role prioritises listening to young people and involving them in decision-making, this does not appear to be widely established practice within schools that participants attended.

Although UK governments have highlighted the importance of giving young people a voice, this appears somewhat contradictory to their support of behaviourist approaches and zero-tolerance behaviour policies adopted by many UK secondary schools (DfE, 2016a). The effect of these approaches is illustrated by Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000) which suggests two types of motivation; extrinsic motivation, where behaviour is based on external sources outside an individual's control, and intrinsic motivation, an internal drive based on an individual's interests and values. Behaviourist approaches are often associated with extrinsic motivation, meaning students are motivated to perform an activity to earn a reward or avoid a punishment, resulting in little autonomy and increased external pressure to conform to school constructs (Ryan & Deci, 2000). It is argued that the lack of opportunities to exert influence leads to disengagement, passivity and reduced motivation to achieve learning potential. This suggests that increasing collaboration and embedding choice throughout the school day may increase intrinsic motivation based on interest and enjoyment, consequently improving engagement and attendance. It is recognised however, that increased autonomy, collaboration between staff and students and opportunities for students to co-construct their own learning presents challenges for schools. As highlighted by participants in the current study, limitations and rules remain essential within an ideal school environment and there is a

need for schools to find balance between autonomy and boundaries. An initial step in achieving this is through the development of strong and trusting relationships between staff and students, which will be considered further in the following section.

5.3.2 Relationships are key

Peer relationships

The relational aspect of school was evident across all accounts and participants expressed a desire for positive relationships at their ideal school that counteracted previous negative experiences. Bullying and social isolation are cited as key causes of EBSNA (Thambirajah et al., 2008), with research indicating that autistic students are more likely to experience social difficulties and often begin secondary school expecting to be bullied (Tobias, 2009). Unlike previous research with autistic students however (Goodall, 2018; Menzie, 2013; Tomlinson et al., 2021), participants in the current study focused less on bullying, instead emphasising the challenges of peers who were disruptive, disinterested, and unmotivated to learn. Given the sensory challenges associated with ASC, it is possible that participants struggled to filter distractions and disruptions from other students, potentially impacting their motivation to attend school. Despite their attendance difficulties, this highlighted the value placed on learning, with participants seeking an environment conducive to learning where peers followed instructions and engaged with their work.

Moreover, opportunities to connect with peers in class through group work and discussions with friends were deemed important at an ideal school, which is consistent with literature linking positive peer relationships to increased engagement with lessons and school attendance (Beckles, 2014; Humphrey & Lewis, 2008; Shilvock, 2010; Smith, 2020). The opportunity to connect with peers has been identified as a protective factor for students experiencing EBSNA and the current study extends these findings to this sample of autistic

students. Whilst dominant narratives suggest that autistic students may struggle with social communication and forming friendships (Ambitious about Autism, 2016), these findings indicate that opportunities to nurture friendships may in fact be a protective factor for autistic students experiencing EBSNA. Indeed, participants in the current study hoped for friendly, inclusive and understanding peers at an ideal school, highlighting the importance of schools ensuring regular opportunities to foster peer relationships, promote tolerance and enhance belonging and connection.

Staff relationships

The quality of relationships with staff was fundamental to students' constructions of school. Many participants expressed dissatisfaction with staff at their current schools who were perceived as dismissive, disrespectful and unsupportive, leading to students communicating a need for friendly, approachable adults who attempted to understand their needs. These findings extend previous research which highlights the impact of relationships with staff on the school experiences of autistic students and those experiencing EBSNA. Smith (2020) suggested that increased understanding and respect from staff contributed to improvements in students' attendance, whilst Billington (2018) described the negative impact of disrespectful, uncaring staff on students' attendance. Participants within the current study emphasised the importance of being held in mind by teachers whilst absent from school and being valued as more than just 'exam result numbers.' This adds further weight to the perception that many schools propagate a culture of prioritising targets over students' mental health (Baker & Bishop, 2015; Sproston et al., 2017). As previously noted, school staff are under increasing pressure to meet government-driven targets related to grades, attendance and behaviour (Moyse, 2020) and it appears that this message is being communicated to students through the absence of understanding and supportive interactions with staff. It is therefore proposed that relationship-

based approaches may be more effective than inflexible zero-tolerance behaviour policies that prioritise attainment over wellbeing (Nottingham County Council, 2020). Promoting relational connection and belonging within schools has been shown to improve attendance (Payne & Welch, 2017), providing further support for the importance of staff-student relationships as highlighted by the participants in this study.

It is, however, important to acknowledge that adopting a relationship-based approach requires an organisational shift in the culture of many schools, which is likely to require significant time and staff commitment. Currently, the increasing pressure and workload experienced by school staff impacts their capacity to build positive, meaningful relationships and leads to many students' needs remaining unmet. This ultimately contributes to the maintenance of attendance difficulties. However, without wider systemic change supported by Ofsted, government advisors and social mobility commissioners, schools may feel they are unable to implement a relational approach. Moreover, an approach that encourages equality between staff and students requires schools to relinquish the hierarchical structure and power imbalance cited by participants, which may be uncomfortable and challenging for some staff and school governing bodies.

The Department for Education guidance for behaviour management draws largely upon behaviourist principles, suggesting that all behaviour is the response to environmental stimuli (Skinner, 1985), such as 'rewards and sanctions' (DfE, 2016a). Whilst this approach can be effective in upholding expectations within schools, viewing behaviour (including non-attendance) as solely the product of conditioning overlooks the complexity of behaviour and the cognitive and emotional aspects of behaviour. This is reflected in the zero-tolerance, often punitive, behaviour policies developed by many UK secondary schools characterised by punishment and little flexibility including detentions, isolation rooms, report cards and exclusions (DfE, 2016a). Whilst there is a perceived dichotomy between behaviourist and

relational approaches which suggests the two are mutually exclusive, the reality is far more nuanced. Within the EP profession, it is recognised that promoting relationships within schools should not preclude high expectations of attendance or behaviour and a combined approach that values relationships as well as elements of behaviourism is therefore recommended. This was confirmed by participants in the current research who sought positive relationships with understanding, nurturing staff who offered adjustments and flexibility, whilst also recognising the importance of boundaries, fairness and consequences for behaviour.

The experience of attending school as an autistic student added an additional layer of complexity to participants' perceptions of school and their relationships with staff. Students expressed frustration that staff appeared unwilling to learn about autism and instead grouped students together based on assumptions and their previous experiences of autistic students, demonstrating a lack of understanding and a reliance on stereotypes. Participants spoke passionately about the need for staff who listen to their lived experiences, attend autism training, and avoid stereotyping and labelling. These findings corroborate with previous literature in which autistic students described teachers' lack of understanding of autism, failure to implement training and limited compassion for their individual needs (Goodall, 2018; Menzies; 2013; Moyse, 2020). It is concerning that despite the wealth of literature recommending additional training for staff to develop greater insight into autism, students within the current study continued to experience a lack of understanding, which appeared to negatively influence their attendance. This raises questions regarding the breadth of teacher training provided within the UK. Over 70% of mainstream teachers did not feel their initial teacher training adequately prepared them to support SEN pupils (NASUWT, 2012) and by 2018, little had changed regarding teachers' confidence (NASUWT, 2018). Further research exploring the self-efficacy of mainstream and specialist teachers in teaching autistic students concluded that a one-size-fits-all approach, workload pressures and the heterogeneity of autism

negatively impacted teachers' self-efficacy and ability to meet needs, particularly within mainstream schools (Cook & Ogden, 2021). These findings confirm that in order to develop meaningful and sensitive relationships with students that contribute towards attendance, school staff require additional time and specific training, alongside a willingness to develop their understanding of students' needs.

5.3.3 The need for a comfortable school environment

For autistic students, the secondary school environment can be noisy, stressful and overwhelming, with crowded corridors, high noise levels and congregations of students (Tobias, 2009). Participants in the current study expressed the need for an environment that acknowledged their sensory needs and reported that an ideal school would not be too noisy, busy or chaotic. This was illustrated through their descriptions of smaller class sizes, relaxing background music, adjustable mood lighting, quiet corridors and increased space. Across previous EBSNA research, there is little reference to the impact of the sensory environment at school, although one participant discussed noise and the large school as a challenge contributing to their EBSNA (Clissold, 2018). Within Clissold's research, the participant who described sensory and environmental difficulties had an ASC diagnosis, which highlights the specific difficulties faced by autistic students in response to their sensory environment.

It is well documented within the autism literature that inappropriate school environments with high sensory demands such as large class sizes and elevated noise levels negatively impact school experiences of autistic students (Goodall, 2018; Tomlinson et al., 2021). Autistic students report experiencing auditory sensory overload due to noise levels and feelings of claustrophobia in overcrowded busy corridors (Goodall, 2018; Tomlinson et al., 2021), as well as sensitivity to smells and touch at school (Menzies, 2013), whilst opportunities to listen to calming music were deemed supportive (Sproston et al., 2017). Given autistic

students are more likely to experience sensory processing difficulties and sensitivity to their environment compared to neurotypical peers (NAS, 2020a), the current research suggests that environmental and sensory factors at school may be contributing to the negative perceptions of school experienced by participants, and potentially correlated with the higher rates of EBSNA within this group.

Despite research evidencing the association between sensory demands and decreased engagement and concentration at school (Humphrey & Lewis, 2008; Menzies, 2013), autistic students continue to experience sensory overwhelm. ASC is recognised as a neurodevelopmental difference which is associated with increased sensory needs and as a result, autistic students require additional adjustments to meet these sensory needs. The current study therefore provides further evidence that understanding EBSNA in the context of autistic students' sensory differences and the impact of potential sensory demands of the school environment, is more likely to support adjustments and improve engagement and attendance for autistic students.

The sensory challenges faced by autistic students appeared to contribute to feelings of anxiety and dread and participants described their hopes for a welcoming, calming space separate from their classroom that provided respite from the chaos of the school environment. Descriptions of an ideal school included a separate room decorated with soft furnishings, cushions, bean bags and fairy lights, where students could relax and self-regulate, with calming sensory activities, books and ear defenders. These findings mirror previous studies that highlight autistic students' need for a quiet space to manage anxiety and sensory overload (Menzies, 2013; Tobias, 2009; Williams & Hanke, 2007). Most participants did not have access to these spaces in their current school, and those that did were often attending an alternative provision. This implies that mainstream schools may not prioritise these adjustments and resources required by autistic students, which likely plays a role in their difficulties attending

school. The lack of adjustments in mainstream schools reflects the dominance of the medical model which views difficulties in the context of the individual, rather than their environment (Gregory & Purcell, 2014; Moyse, 2020). It is argued that adopting a social model of disability would instead allow schools to look beyond the individual and recognise the impact of the school environment and implement sensory adjustments to meet students' needs.

Unique to the current study was students' desire for animals in their ideal school, including therapy cats, support dogs, fish, rabbits, farm animals and a frog pond. Whilst participants in other studies had access to animals at alternative provisions (Sproston et al., 2017; Tomlinson et al., 2021), there is little mention of animals at mainstream secondary school elsewhere in the EBSNA and ASC literature. Research using a 'Drawing the Ideal Classroom' task with autistic students in primary school revealed similar findings, whereby participants included a range of pets in their ideal classrooms (Morgan-Rose, 2016). The current research indicates that the desire to have access to a range of animals at school is not limited to primary-age students and may also improve the engagement and attendance of autistic secondary-age pupils.

Alongside animals to support their anxiety, students also described their ideal school as having newer facilities and resources. Opportunities for play and creative learning reduce as children progress through school, with increasing focus on covering the curriculum, achieving outcomes and studying for exams. The focus on exams and results, generally driven by governmental priorities, has led to increased formality and rigidity within the secondary school curriculum (Jenkin, 2013), however findings in the current study suggest that students are seeking opportunities to engage in activities away from the classroom that include play and creative learning. Since all participants suggested they would attend their ideal school, it seems likely that increased access to newer facilities, opportunities for creative, play-based learning outside the classroom and access to nature and animals may contribute to increased attendance

for this group. With the exception of access to animals, these findings are consistent with previous research and are not unique to autistic students experiencing EBSNA (Beckles, 2014; Clissold, 2018; Smith, 2020), which suggests that the benefits of holistic learning opportunities may support the attendance and engagement of a wide range of students.

5.3.4 Seeking adjustments for individual needs

For most students, school was constructed as a boring, repetitive and dull place where learning was neither fun nor interactive. Participants described a non-ideal school where students were forced to repeat the same tasks everyday and likened the experience to a robotic factory. The relates to the earlier suggestion that school suppresses creativity and variety, with the aim of producing replica, conformist students (Moyse, 2020). However, when students shift from passive recipients to active constructors of their learning, motivation and enjoyment of learning increases (Cetin-Dindar, 2015). This notion was illustrated in the current study as participants sought an ideal school where lessons were interesting and accessible, involving interactive activities, teachers clearly explaining the work and key information written on the board. Students experiencing EBSNA have reported that inadequate teacher explanations led to difficulties understanding the work, causing them to disengage from the lesson, whilst boring, difficult or irrelevant subjects decreased their motivation to attend school (Beckles, 2014). This links to common difficulties associated with ASC including challenges understanding abstract concepts and inference, which may explain why autistic students in this research sought a learning environment characterised by clear explanations.

Smith (2020) further noted that students experiencing EBSNA were more motivated to attend interesting and engaging lessons that built on their interests and strengths, involving interactive and creative methods with a broad range of learning styles. Across the literature, a preference for interactive learning is reported by both autistic and non-autistic students (Dillon

et al, 2016; Menzies, 2013 Shilvock, 2010) and the current study confirms that autistic students experiencing EBSNA also valued interactive learning. This challenges the assumption that autistic students may avoid group interaction (Bauminger et al., 2004) and suggests that learning which includes opportunities for interactive and collaborative work is likely to benefit a wide range of students, including those with social communication needs.

As highlighted previously, peer relationships are important and opportunities to engage in group discussions and interactive learning are therefore valued by students. This concept is underpinned by Vygotsky's (1978) Zone of Proximal Development. Without interaction with teachers and peers, students are unable to experience mediation or scaffolding that extends their learning and helps reach their potential (Dillon et al., 2016). Nonetheless, it remains important to carefully consider how group work and interactive activities are organised. The current study builds on existing findings by highlighting the need for personalised and individualised learning environments. Whilst interactive learning was generally valued, participants emphasised that not all students learn in the same way and described occasions where independent work might be preferred. Moreover, for some students, speaking publicly to the class was a significant social challenge and participants were keen to highlight the importance of avoiding a one-size-fits-all approach, instead promoting learning environments that consider these differences and are tailored to students' needs and interests.

Within the current research, school was constructed as a highly pressurised environment, which informed the conceptualisation of non-ideal schools as having no breaks, significant quantities of homework and long days leading to feelings of exhaustion. Participants emphasised the need for a school with less pressure and expectations, including exit cards to leave lessons, shorter school days or longer weekends and less homework, which mirrors previous findings with both autistic students and those experiencing EBSNA (Beckles, 2014, Goodall, 2018; Smith, 2020). Whilst many students show minimal enjoyment towards

homework, Dillon et al. (2016) indicated that autistic students appeared more reluctant to engage with homework than a non-autistic control group. This was evident in the narratives of autistic participants in the current study, who perceived homework as impeding on their freedom and blurring home-school boundaries.

EBSNA rises sharply as students enter secondary school (Thambirajah et al., 2008), which raises the possibility that reduced engagement and attendance is partly a response to the transition, change in environment and increased demands and expectations compared to primary school (How, 2015). Moreover, transitions are a known difficulty for autistic students and the requirement to move between classrooms and adjust to new teachers across the day may be one reason for the heightened rates of EBSNA within this group. As noted, recent policy development has focused on increasing school attendance in an attempt to raise attainment, resulting in pressure filtered down from the government, Ofsted and senior leadership teams to teachers and support staff, who in turn 'pass it down to students' (Moyse, 2020; Sproston et al., 2017). Findings in the current study confirm students' dissatisfaction with highly pressurised and disciplinarian school systems that are rigid and inflexible, which supports earlier research associating rigid, strict and authoritarian systems with EBSNA (How, 2015). The expectation to attend school daily without support or understanding of their additional needs appears to decrease students' motivation, highlighted by participants in the current study who explained they would never attend their non-ideal school. Moreover, it is argued that rigid attendance policies and limited flexibility promotes an ableist stance, that assumes all students can attend school every day, regardless of their additional needs (Not Fine in School, 2022; Square Peg, 2022). Although potentially difficult to achieve in practice, a shift in the culture and ethos of secondary schools towards adapting to individual needs, offering flexibility and reducing expectations might positively contribute to engagement and attendance.

5.3.5 A hope for change

Historically, attendance difficulties have been conceptualised as a choice, whereby students make the decision to refuse or avoid school. This implies that students experiencing EBSNA do not want to attend school, however more recent literature suggests that this is often not the case. Despite their difficulties attending, students experiencing EBSNA are reported to recognise the importance of gaining an education and the value of attending school to both learn and socialise (James, 2015; Shilvock, 2010). Students experiencing EBSNA continue to express hopes for their future, including completing examinations, achieving high grades, seeking higher education and securing a job. In contrast to the assumption that non-attendance is a choice they are happy with; students worried that by not attending school, they would end up 'doing nothing' with their lives (James, 2015), emphasising the cognitive dissonance likely experienced by students when they are unable to attend school.

Whilst much research explores how students experiencing EBSNA perceive school, there remains limited research focusing on the constructs of autistic students experiencing ESBNA. Moyse (2020) did however, identify that attending school was important for ten autistic girls experiencing attendance difficulties. It was concluded that the girls were not rejecting learning through their absence, but instead rejecting a school environment and ethos that was damaging to their mental health. The current research extends these findings by identifying similar hopes for the future within a mixed-gender group of autistic students. All participants in the current study reported that they would like to attend their ideal school, and whilst findings cannot be generalised to the wider population of autistic students, this does suggest that the adjustments and adaptations reported in this study may contribute to an increased ability to attend school.

Whilst hopeful about potentially attending school in the future, participants noted the significant improvements required for their current school to become more ideal, highlighting

the ongoing barriers to attendance within some secondary schools. This further emphasises the unsuitability of many mainstream secondary school environments in meeting the needs of autistic students. However, with 71% of autistic students attending mainstream schools (NAS, 2021) and the focus on inclusion within education, there is a strong rationale for adapting the environment to meet their needs and to positively influence attendance and inclusion. Interestingly, students who expressed higher satisfaction with their current school were attending alternative provisions, which are characterised by a smaller, less sensorily demanding environment, additional resources, increased understanding and adjustments for individual needs. This suggests that the availability of alternative provisions remains necessary to ensure that students can attend school, however in line with inclusion policies and the Equality Act (2010), the initial step should prioritise adapting mainstream environments to meet students' needs.

This is congruent with the literature suggesting that environmental factors are key drivers of EBSNA, further confirming the position that non-attendance should no longer be understood as a within-child issue, but rather as the result of multiple interacting factors, including the environment. This notion is consistent with the reciprocal interaction between systems illustrated in Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory and supports literature that constructs EBSNA as the product of multiple interacting factors (Gregory & Purcell, 2014).

5.4 Reflections on the current research

5.4.1 Drawing the Ideal School

The use of drawing techniques has been identified as supporting children across a variety of ages who find it difficult to verbally articulate their thoughts and ideas (Burnham, 2008), including with autistic students, students experiencing EBSNA, students at risk of

exclusion and students experiencing anxiety (Morgan-Rose, 2016; Moyse, 2020; Pirotta, 2016; Schulz, 2020). This informed the use of Drawing the Ideal School in the current research, which was the first to utilise this technique online rather than in a face-to-face session. Participants were asked about their experience of engaging with the technique and feedback generally appeared positive, with most participants enjoying the task and the opportunity to have their opinion heard. There was a consensus that the task worked well online, as it afforded participants increased privacy and the option to leave easily if they felt uncomfortable. Completing the task online prevented some participants from feeling 'trapped' and they appreciated engaging with the task in their own space. Moreover, the task encouraged reflection from participants, with Charlie explaining that it helped identify elements of her current school which still required improvement.

Consistent with Kelly's (1955) PCP theory, participants' earlier experiences of attending school informed their construction of an ideal and non-ideal school. This was particularly evident when participants explicitly described their previous or current school whilst being asked about their non-ideal school. For some participants, this triggered difficult emotions and the researcher wondered whether completing the activity in person would have allowed increased containment of these feelings compared to an online interview.

Irrespective of the positive feedback, an important finding in this study is participants' lack of engagement with the drawing element of the activity. Only one participant drew on paper and another began drawing online but then shared their views verbally. These observations relate to Schulz (2020) who completed a Drawing the Ideal Teacher task and noted that some students preferred the researcher to illustrate their verbal descriptions. It is possible that completing the task online in the current research added a further barrier to engaging with the drawing task as the researcher could not model or draw for the student. One participant explained that they were 'not good at drawing', however others did not provide a

reason for their decision not to draw. It seems possible that participants found drawing exposing and difficult or worried that their drawing would be judged negatively. These observations indicate that the drawing aspect of the activity may be less important than the opportunity to verbally describe the best and worst type of school. This relates to research which highlights the benefits of PCP in supporting self-knowledge and understanding. It seems that regardless of drawing, the highly structured nature of the Ideal School task supported the elicitation of constructs in a way that simply asking students to share their experiences of school might not.

Most participants articulated their ideas verbally without difficulty, further challenging generalisations that autistic students struggle with the demands of research (Fayette & Bond, 2018). Two participants, however, found the process more challenging, requiring the researcher to use additional questioning and laddering techniques to elicit their constructs. One participant did not feel comfortable discussing their ideas verbally, so instead wrote down their ideas and responses for their parent to share with the researcher. Another participant found it difficult to identify the appropriate words to describe their ideal and non-ideal school, which resulted in less rich descriptions compared to other participants. Schulz (2020) noted similar observations when completing the task with students who had experienced school exclusion and the suggestion of a word bank offering a diverse range of vocabulary might have supported this participant in completing the task. Nonetheless, participants within the current study generally offered positive feedback in relation to the Ideal School task and observations suggest that completing the activity online, without an expectation to draw, may be a suitable approach for autistic students experiencing EBSNA. This has wider ramifications for individuals with communication needs and highlights the importance of ensuring the availability of appropriate tools to elicit their views, that also consider individual preferences.

5.5 Implications for practice

This research highlights the significant role schools can play in supporting autistic students experiencing EBSNA. Various recommendations were identified through participants' narratives, particularly in reference to their ideal school and the steps their current schools could take to become more ideal. Implications from the research findings are now presented, with reference to the EP role in supporting their implementation.

5.5.1 Autonomy and choice

Participants reported feeling their voices were silenced at school and schools should consider how they could increase the autonomy and choice available for pupils to support their engagement. Schools could aim to create a culture where asking for support is encouraged and accepted, rather than met with impatient or negative consequences. Increased choice and autonomy could be further achieved by allowing students breaks when needed and ensuring exit cards are used consistently by all staff. Furthermore, it is important for school staff to allow students access to the toilet to ensure their basic needs are met prior to beginning learning.

Increased choice and flexibility regarding school uniform was important for many participants and whilst it is recognised that changes to uniform policies may not be straightforward, it is possible that minor adjustments will support feelings of autonomy and engagement. Offering a degree of flexibility within uniform policies for instance allowing painted nails, dyed hair, make up or simple jewellery allows students to express their unique personalities and recognise school as an environment which celebrates difference. This approach has been adopted in many independent schools, highlighting the feasibility of the changes. Moreover, participants sought uniform that was comfortable and unrestricting. Schools could therefore seek students' views about the uniform policy before implementing any changes, allowing students to feel listened to and involved in decisions affecting them.

Schools may wish to create opportunities for students to co-construct their learning environment by allowing the option to work with friends and choose their own groups, lesson style, subject or activity. Additional ways to increase autonomy throughout the school day are through interactive lessons where students contribute by writing on the whiteboard and are actively involved as opposed to sitting and listening as passive recipients. Schools are encouraged to notice opportunities for students to be involved in decision-making, for instance suggesting changes to the lunch menu. Regardless of how trivial or small the decisions may seem; this is likely to increase feelings of freedom and autonomy.

Equality was identified as important to participants within the current study which suggests that opportunities to reduce the power difference between staff and students may contribute to increased satisfaction at school. Due to their role and responsibility, staff will maintain a degree of power over the structure of the school day and decision making, however demonstrating interest in students' ideas and avoiding making assumptions may reduce the imbalance between staff and students. Increasing choice for students does not mean that adults no longer have control and as such, staff should avoid viewing choice as an 'all or nothing' concept, instead recognising that reasonable opportunities for students to make decisions across the school day are likely to empower and motivate students. As noted, a shift to a more democratic school environment is likely to present challenges for some schools that rely on disciplinarian, hierarchical approaches. EPs are, however, well positioned to support schools to reflect on and adjust the culture and ethos of their school through consultation approaches and facilitation of reflective spaces.

As discussed, many parents also report limited involvement in decisions about their children and feel blamed for their absence (Not Fine in School, 2022; Square Peg, 2022). The EP role has the scope to address these concerns through joint home-school consultations, with

opportunities for mediating the relationship between home and school and ensuring the young person's voice remains central within decisions that affect them.

5.5.2 A relational approach that recognises unmet needs

There is a clear interaction between increasing autonomy and choice and implementing a relational approach within schools. Participants were clear that offering more choice involved a degree of trust, respect and understanding between students and staff. This research implies that strict, punitive approaches are unlikely to support attendance and recommends a school ethos that prioritises the development of strong relationships between staff and students. On a practical level, staff should avoid using sarcasm, shouting or asking about students' absence publicly. Instead, participants recommended that staff demonstrate their care by emailing them when absent, as well as offering space upon their return. For example, participants felt that Teaching Assistants were most supportive when they provided subtle support from a distance. Furthermore, school staff should aim to listen, help and understand the experiences of students through offering friendly advice, time and reassurance.

It is recognised that many schools face increased pressure and report that there is limited time or capacity to build relationships or offer advice. EPs are well placed to support schools in addressing these challenges by helping to embed a relational approach within their organisation. Nottingham County Council (2020) propose a strengths-based relational approach that is underpinned by connection, belonging and attunement. Based on Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943), Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) and Emotion Coaching and restorative principles, the approach supports schools to understand behaviour as the result of unmet needs and the impact of the environment.

To further support a relational approach and increased understanding of ASC and EBSNA, EPs can utilise their consultation skills to address staff concerns, using a sensitive and

curious approach to understand parental and staff constructions of the situation (Arnold et al., 2021). Consultation offers the opportunity for EPs to provide alternative hypotheses, which may involve challenging a within-child narrative of EBSNA, and instead supporting staff to recognise the multiple interacting factors, including the environment, that contribute to EBSNA (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Gregory & Purcell, 2014). Moreover, the language used to describe attendance difficulties has contributed to challenges in understanding and supporting the issue. With this in mind, EPs can utilise consultation to explore language and explain the issues associated with terms such as 'refuser' and 'avoider'. By offering and modelling an alternative discourse, EPs can help reframe how EBSNA is understood and responded to within school systems.

Further contributing to the development of relationships is the need for staff to learn about the presentation and impact of autism. It is important that staff recognise individual differences between autistic students and do not use their previous experiences to stereotype or make assumptions. Participants suggested that staff should learn about autism by listening to students' experiences and adjusting their approach to meet their needs. One participant highlighted the importance of representation in schools through employing a more neurodiverse workforce who have lived experience and understanding of students' needs.

Moreover, consistent with recommendations from the Autistic Girls Network (AGN, 2022), some participants highlighted the need for staff to learn specifically about "women with autism". AGN (2022) emphasise that autistic girls present differently; their needs are often overlooked due to masking and presenting internally. It is therefore important that staff are willing to learn and listen to the experiences of autistic students, demonstrating curiosity in their interests, experiences and passions (AGN, 2022). Further opportunities for school staff to access training on the presentation and impact of autism, including in autistic girls, remains a key priority for supporting this group of young people. EP services can therefore provide

training that includes psychoeducation, the impact of ASC on attendance and the significance of the external environment in relation to ASC and EBSNA. With the support of their EP, schools can then consider how to implement reasonable changes and adjustments to their school environment. A wider implication extends to adaptations to Initial Teaching Training programmes, to ensure additional teaching around SEN and ASC.

Given the importance of peer relationships, schools should create opportunities for students to develop and maintain relationships with their friends. As noted, this is likely to be supported by allowing opportunities for students to choose who they work with. Autistic students often experience elevated anxiety, particularly in social situations and it is suggested that sitting with friends and peers allows them to feel more comfortable and reduces anxiety (AGN, 2022).

5.5.3 Adjustments to the school environment

The sensory environment

The National Autistic Society (NAS, 2019) propose reasonable adjustments to reduce the impact of sensory differences and findings of the current study confirm the importance of sensory adjustments from the perspective of autistic students. Possible sensory adjustments identified in this research include:

- Consideration of how busy and noisy the school environment is, including reducing loud and crowded corridors. Autistic students may need to leave a lesson earlier to navigate the corridors during quieter times.
- A reduction in class sizes to reduce sensory demands e.g. ensuring there is enough space in the classroom and ensuring noise levels do not escalate.
- Opportunities for background music or audio sounds such as rainfall and bird songs during class.
- Increasing the amount of natural light and having opportunities to adjust lighting including mood lighting and coloured lights.

- A more comfortable school uniform that is less restrictive, stiff or irritable.
- Calming sensory spaces in separate rooms away from the classroom. These spaces could include fairy lights, mood lighting, bean bags, soft furnishings, books, ear defenders, computers and be designed and decorated in collaboration with students.
- Increased access to green space as well as opportunities to spend time with animals.

Additional environmental adjustments

Implications from the current study emphasise the importance of creating interactive learning environments to reduce feelings of boredom amongst students. Whilst teachers are required to follow the secondary curriculum, there is scope for increased creativity in how lessons are taught that involve interaction with students, ultimately supporting engagement with learning. Moreover, participants indicated that teachers should provide clear explanations and ensure work is tailored to students' needs.

Interestingly, there was a lack of focus on learning within the data and participants were more concerned with *how* the lesson was taught rather than the specific subject or curriculum content. It is possible that this was the result of the structure of the Ideal School task which did not ask specifically about learning. Moreover, identifying the most appropriate style and type of learning for their needs requires a level of self-awareness and metacognitive skills that may have been challenging for participants. The lack of focus on learning across participants' narratives highlights the vital role of EPs in assessing students' profiles of difference and need. This data can then be used to provide school staff with an insight into the most effective teaching methods for individual students, as well as supporting students to understand their learning needs.

Schools may wish to adjust their environment and ethos by aiming to reduce the pressure experienced by students. This could be achieved through:

- Careful consideration of homework tasks, including the amount of homework and ensuring that homework has a clear purpose and is based on students' interests.
- Adjustments to the structure of the school day including starting the day later and embedding more opportunities for breaks.
- Less rigid behaviour policies including consideration of the effectiveness and impact of detentions.
- Sending work home to students when absent without expectation to complete the task.

5.5.4 Student voice

The current study suggests that a PCP method such as the Ideal School may be a helpful approach to understanding the needs of autistic students experiencing EBSNA. Eliciting pupil views is a vital aspect of the EP role and this technique offers a sensitive yet insightful way of identifying how students perceive school, as well as the elements of their current school which require improvement. EPs should ensure individual preferences are considered prior to the assessment work including whether the student feels comfortable drawing and whether a word bank may support construct elicitation. Moreover, Moran (2020) highlighted that PCP offers the opportunity to work therapeutically, which is consistent with the feedback from participants in the current study who reported enjoying the task which aided reflection and offered new perspectives. Alongside providing valuable assessment information, the Ideal School task can therefore provide an element of intervention, particularly through the solution-focused scaling exercises.

Given the effectiveness of the Ideal School task in this research, it is likely that school staff could benefit from being trained in delivering the activity. Williams and Hanke (2007) explored the effectiveness of the task when delivered by school staff who had been trained by an EP. Findings demonstrated the appropriateness of the Ideal School with autistic students when delivered by a familiar member of staff and highlights EPs' potential role in training schools to use the approach with students. Given the ongoing challenges regarding funding and

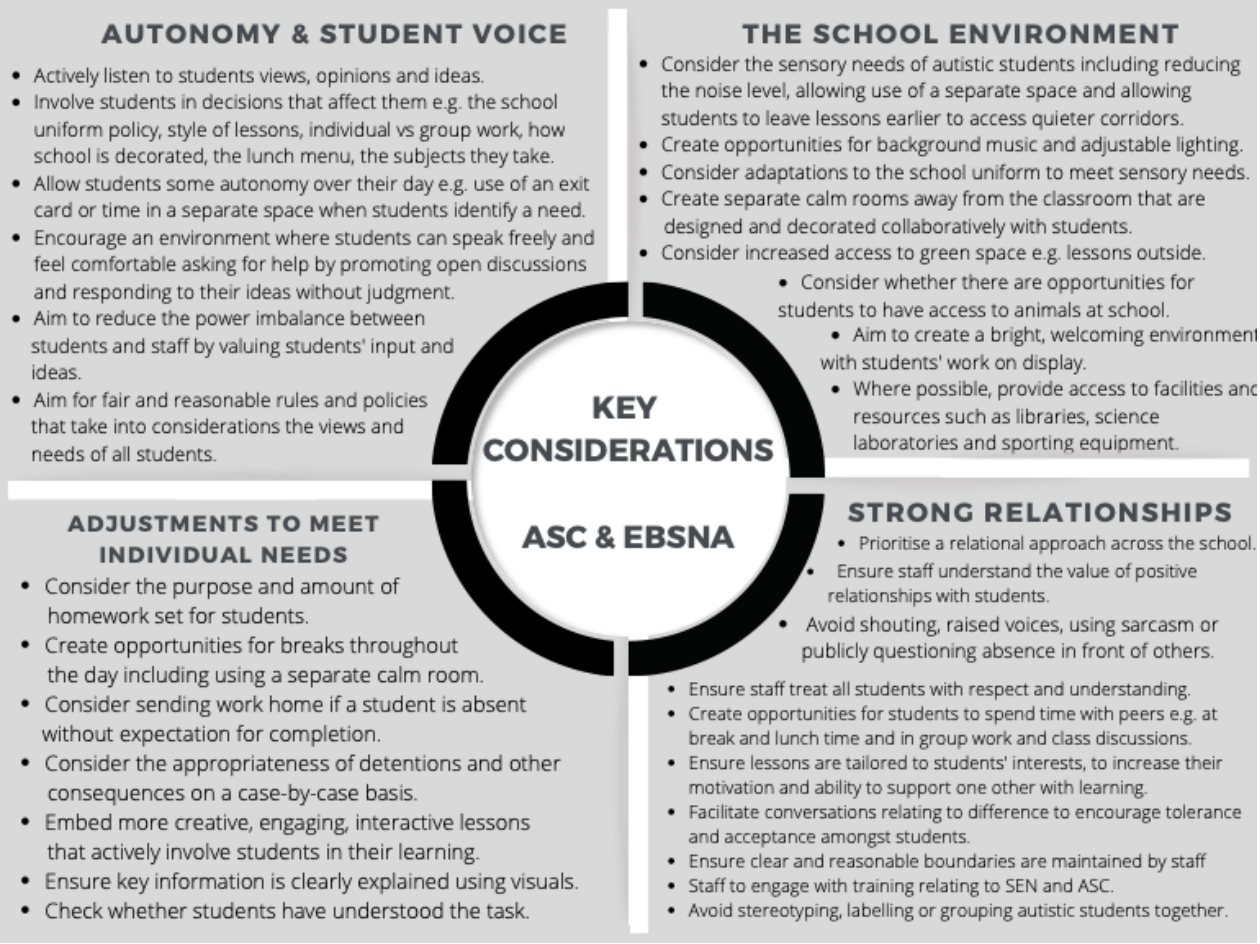
traded EP time (Lee & Woods, 2017), it seems economical for schools to also be trained in approaches that elicit pupil views independently of an EP assessment.

5.5.5 Key considerations

Figure 6 was developed in accordance with the Guidelines for Conducting Research within the Autism Community (Gowen et al., 2017) which recommends disseminating findings using a variety of media including visuals.

Figure 6

Key considerations for supporting autistic students experiencing EBSNA



It is recognised that a wide range of strategies are presented in Figure 6 and some may be more challenging to implement within mainstream secondary schools. Adjusting the school

environment, for instance, may pose challenges within mainstream secondary schools, particularly adjustable lighting, background music, access to animals and reducing the noise levels. Whilst some students may value dimmed lighting, others may find this does not meet their sensory needs, which highlights the difficulties associated with implementing specific strategies. Despite this, adjustments such as allowing students to leave lessons slightly early to avoid busy corridors, flexibility within school uniform policies and bright welcoming environments with students' work on display appear more realistic and achievable within mainstream schools.

Increasing autonomy and valuing students' voices is likely to be achievable within mainstream schools if staff are willing to share elements of decision-making with students. Embedding small elements of choice across the day, for instance choosing who to work with, when to use an exit card, how the classroom is decorated or what is on the lunch menu all appear realistic and reasonable choices that are likely to empower students and ensure their involvement in decisions that affect them.

As noted previously, prioritising strong relationships can be challenging due to high workloads and time pressures that prevent opportunities for staff to develop meaningful relationships, particularly in larger mainstream secondary schools. Despite this, there are elements that may be more realistic and straightforward to implement, including staff maintaining a respectful approach and avoiding shouting, raised voices or sarcasm. Moreover, avoiding stereotyping and assumptions about autistic students appears reasonable within mainstream schools, as well as staff engaging with additional training to better understand the needs of neurodivergent students.

Adjustments to meet individual needs may pose challenges for some mainstream secondary schools, particularly adjusting homework or detention policies that are often viewed as non-negotiable. Many of the adjustments to meet individual needs rely on mainstream

schools increasing their flexibility and recognising that a one-size-fits-all approach may not be appropriate, and instead considering the appropriateness of strategies on a case-by-case basis.

5.6 Limitations and future research

Within this research, all participants except one were White British and it is possible that a more diverse sample may have yielded different findings. Interestingly, the only participant to have received a permanent exclusion from school following their non-attendance was Black Caribbean. Research indicates that exclusion rates are five times higher for Black Caribbean boys (Demi, 2019), and whilst no conclusion can be drawn in the circumstances of this participant, it does raise questions about the perceived difference between EBSNA and school exclusion. It appears that students experiencing EBSNA are self-excluding through their internalising behaviour when they cannot manage the school environment whilst students who externalise their needs are more likely to receive school exclusions. The driver of the behaviour, however, is ultimately the same - school is not meeting their needs. It would therefore be useful for future research to explore the experiences of exclusion, EBSNA and ASC within more diverse samples and to understand why some students are more likely to experience EBSNA and others school exclusion.

Whereas previous research explored the perceptions of autistic students who do not experience attendance difficulties, the current research explored the perceptions of autistic students who do experience attendance difficulties. Interestingly, their experiences and perceptions of school were largely similar, yet some autistic students continue attending school whilst others experience EBSNA. It is beyond the scope of this research to discuss this in depth, however future research may wish to explore the protective factors that allow some autistic students to continue attending school.

5.6.1 Methodological limitations

Whilst PCP and the Ideal School methodology have various benefits, including an accessible structure to elicit constructs, it is important to discuss limitations of the approach. The Ideal School task is underpinned by the aim of eliciting bipolar constructs to identify an individual's understanding and perceptions of school. By limiting construct elicitation to ideal and non-ideal, the approach allows little opportunity to share anything less polarised. Within this research, participants' answers did not always relate to ideal and non-ideal schools; despite not being explicitly asked, they also shared positive and negative experiences of their previous or current schools. However, the approach does not ask participants about aspects of school they feel ambivalent about, that are less important to them and fall somewhere between ideal and non-ideal. Instead, the approach creates a split; polarising between non-ideal and ideal, without recognising that many school environments are likely to fall somewhere between the two extremes. Future research may therefore wish to utilise The Ideal School task as one aspect of the data collection process in order to triangulate data obtained through additional methods.

Participants within the current research did not feel they could elicit change within school systems and this may have affected their engagement with the Ideal School task. If participants could not envision school being any different, the task of describing their ideal school may have been perceived as pointless, trivial and meaningless, thus reducing the efficacy of the task. Although some participants reported enjoying the activity, this was certainly true for one participant who indicated that the task was not helpful as any potential change remained out of their control.

Participants' parents were present during some interviews to reduce anxiety and support engagement. This was participants' preference and an important ethical consideration to prevent anxiety or distress. Despite this, parents often provided prompts and ideas to help their child answer a question and this may have influenced participants' answers to the interview

questions. Although their prompts were likely to be reflective of their understanding of their child and previous conversations, it is important to acknowledge the influence of the parental voice within the current research. Although parental views and experiences of EBSNA have been explored within the existing literature, future research may benefit from completing the task with parents and young people separately and comparing their views about an ideal school for autistic students experiencing EBSNA.

5.7 Strengths of the research

The current study is the first to adapt the Ideal School technique for online use and the identification of the activity as suitable and effective for online use is a key strength of this research. Although most participants chose not to draw, completing the task verbally online proved an effective way of eliciting their constructs and received positive feedback from participants. Additionally, the Ideal School approach was adapted to elicit specific views in relation to students' experiences of EBSNA. Including questions such as 'Would you like to attend this school? How often would you attend this school? What would happen if you did not attend this school?' allowed the researcher to understand more about the impact of EBSNA on the constructs of an ideal and non-ideal school.

Use of solution-focused scaling questions provided an additional opportunity for participants to engage in reflection about how their current school could be improved to support their attendance. This element of the methodology directly informed the implications of the current research, thereby ensuring the promotion of participants' authentic voices. These findings add insight into the perspectives of autistic students experiencing EBSNA and can be used to inform highly practical and feasible adaptations and adjustments in schools.

Participants in the current study were identified through EP services and social media posts. As a result, participants were recruited from across the UK and attended different schools

and provisions. Participants had experienced a mix of both mainstream and alternative provisions, which is likely to have informed a more diverse range of constructs relating to an ideal and non-ideal school than if participants were selected from one school or area.

5.8 Dissemination

The findings of this study will be shared with participants through a written summary and via a Zoom meeting. Where participants provided consent, a summary of findings will be shared with their schools. The researcher intends to present the findings to their EPS to promote the use of the Ideal School with autistic students experiencing EBSNA and to highlight the EP role in supporting schools to reflect on the impact of their environment.

The researcher intends to share the findings with the wider EP community through publishing on an online database such as ETHOS and in a journal such as Educational Psychology in Practice. In addition, the researcher hopes to share the findings with ASC and EBSNA communities through organisations such as AGN, Not Fine in School and Square Peg, who support parents and children impacted by autism and barriers to school attendance.

The researcher will present to the Autism Advisory Service in their LA to help shape their EBSNA offer. Additionally, the researcher has begun sharing their findings through delivering training and reflective spaces with a local hospital school who are supporting autistic students experiencing EBSNA. Finally, the researcher will disseminate their research in a video as part of an EP project exploring ASC and EBSNA that will be shared with EPs, professionals, parents and schools.

5.9 Conclusion

Due to the increased likelihood of autistic students experiencing EBSNA, the current research aimed to explore their perceptions of school and the factors that might support their

attendance. Although research has explored the perceptions of autistic students and students experiencing EBSNA, there remains limited research exploring the interacting effects of autism and EBSNA. This research therefore provides a unique contribution to EP practice, a profession well positioned to support attendance in students with additional needs.

An adapted online version of the Drawing the Ideal School technique was effective in revealing the challenges participants experienced at their previous and current schools that contributed to their EBSNA. Participants shared experiences of trying to conform to the expectations of school, despite feeling misunderstood by staff. The lack of flexibility, understanding or willingness to adjust within school systems resulted in feelings of anxiety, dread and an overwhelmingly negative perception of school. Findings indicated that participants perceived themselves to have little control over decisions and in line with Kelly's PCP (1955), these past experiences informed participants' constructs of an ideal and non-ideal school. As a result, participants sought increased freedom and autonomy throughout their school day. Opportunities for choice included students' basic needs being met prior to beginning learning and opportunities for interactive, co-constructed learning. For this to be achieved, there is a need to promote positive relationships at school where students feel valued and listened to by staff. This includes a move away from strict, punitive and rigid policies to adopting a more relational approach where behaviour is understood in the context of unmet needs and the impact of the environment. A key barrier to this, however, is the lack of understanding amongst school staff regarding the impact of autism and it is suggested that staff access increased training and supervision to support autistic students. This is likely to contribute to the increased flexibility, adjustments for sensory needs and individualised learning environments sought by participants in this study.

Despite experiencing significant challenges at school, all participants expressed a desire to attend their imaginary ideal school, which challenges previously dominant narratives of

EBSNA as a within-child issue, a choice or a conscious refusal. Instead, this confirms the impact of the school environment on attendance, as all students indicated their willingness to attend a school where the environment met their needs. This has significant implications for professionals working with this group of young people and it remains vital that schools are supported to understand the impact of the environment, which has the potential to be the catalyst for change. EPs are well positioned to assess the suitability of the school environment and help schools to reflect on their ethos and policies, alongside embedding relational approaches, increased autonomy and reasonable environmental adjustments to contribute to improved attendance.

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Appendices

Appendix A – literature review search terms

Search terms for literature review question 1

Search terms

Emotionally-based school* OR school refus* OR extended non-attend* OR persistent non-attend* OR school non-attend* OR school phobia OR EBSNA OR EBSA OR PSNA n = 1270

AND

Autism Spectrum Condition OR Autism Spectrum Disorder OR autism* OR autistic* OR neurodivergent OR neurotypical OR asperger* n = 87268

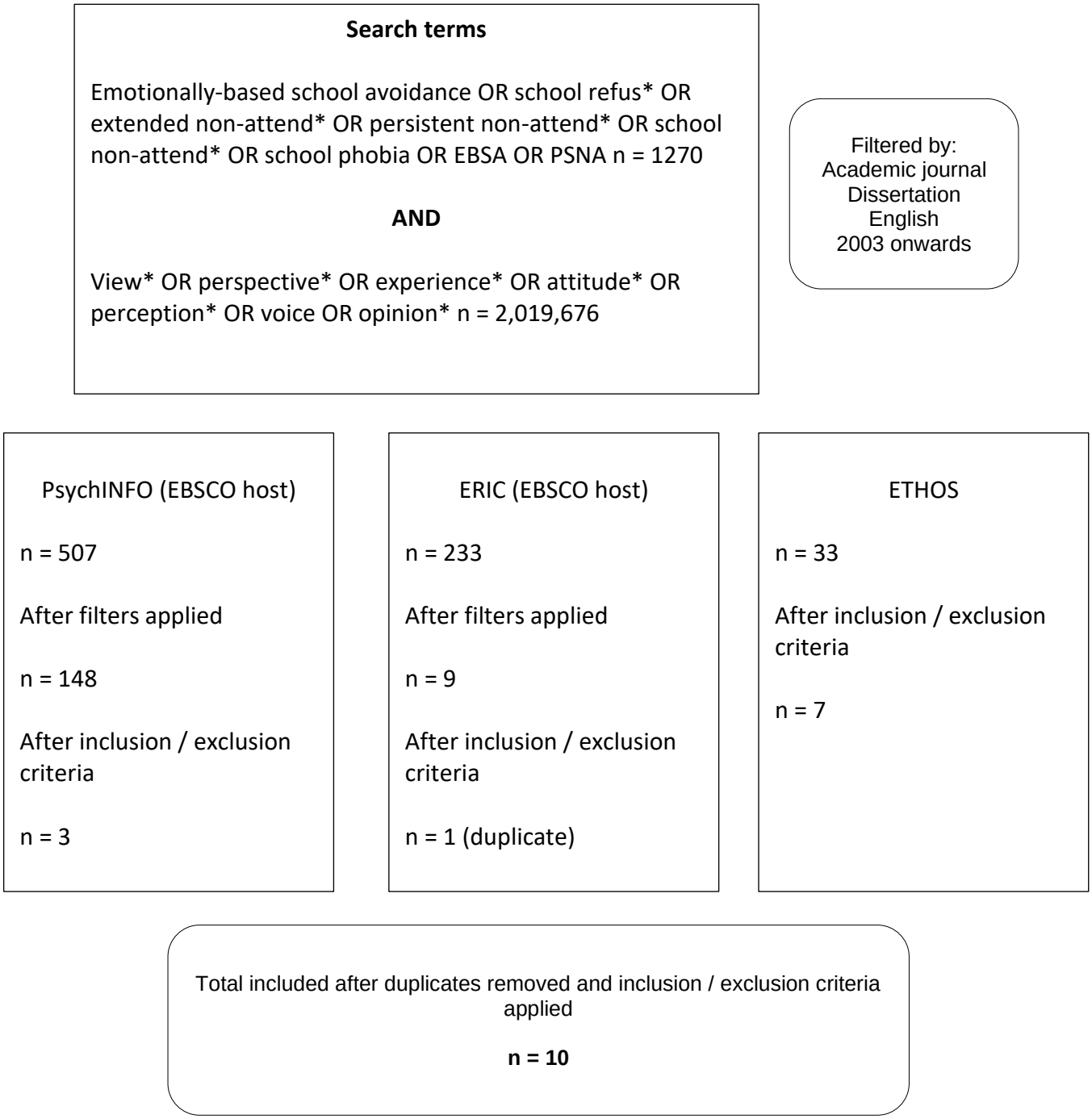
Filtered by:
Academic journal
Dissertation
English
2003 onwards

PsychINFO (EBSCO host)	ERIC (EBSCO host)	ETHOS	Grey literature search
n = 52	n = 34	n = 1	n = 27
After filters applied	After filters applied	After reading abstract	After reading abstract
n = 28	n = 27	n = 0	n = 1
After reading abstract / article	After reading abstract / article		
n = 0	n = 0		

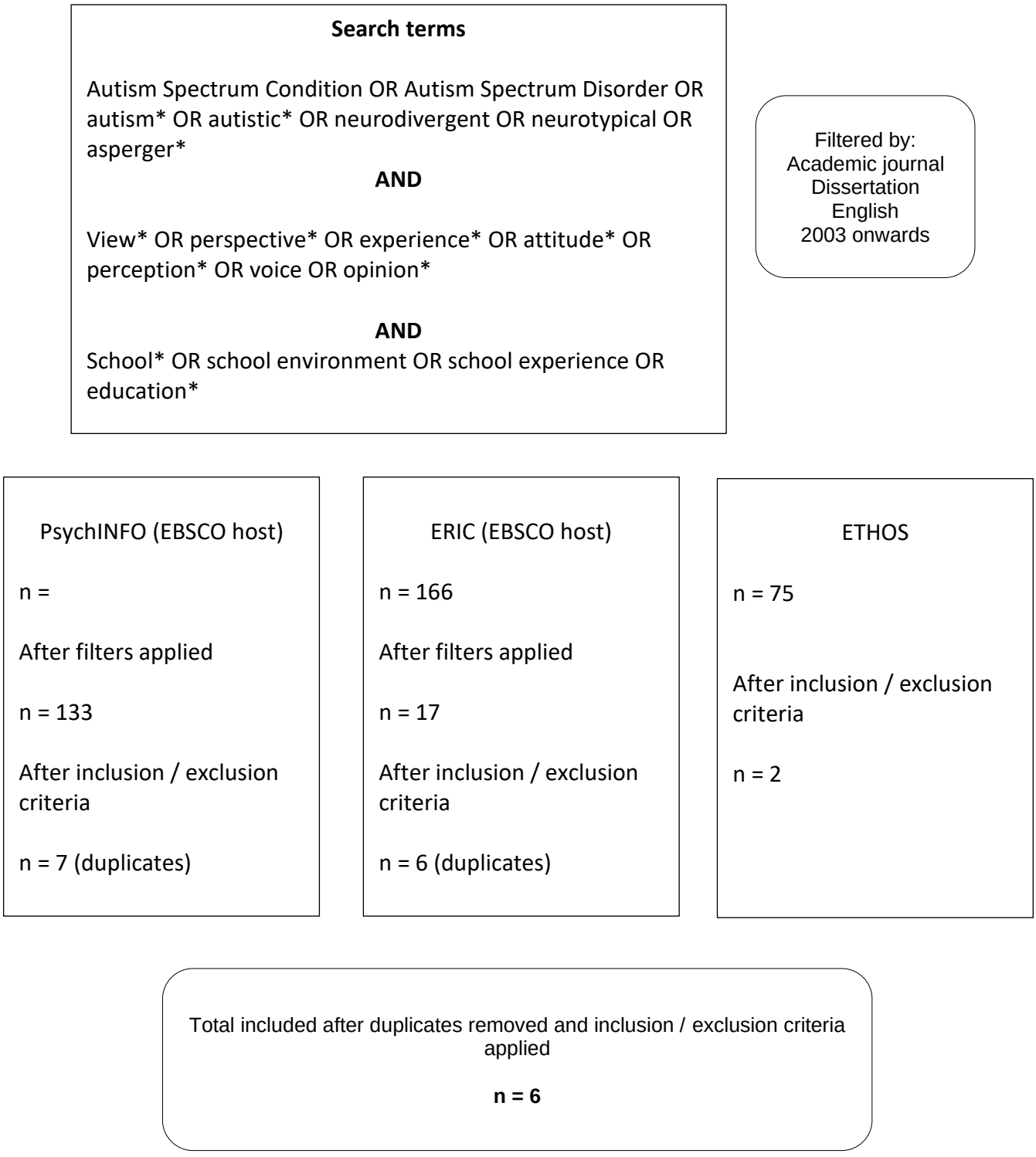
Total included after duplicates removed and abstracts / articles read

n = 1

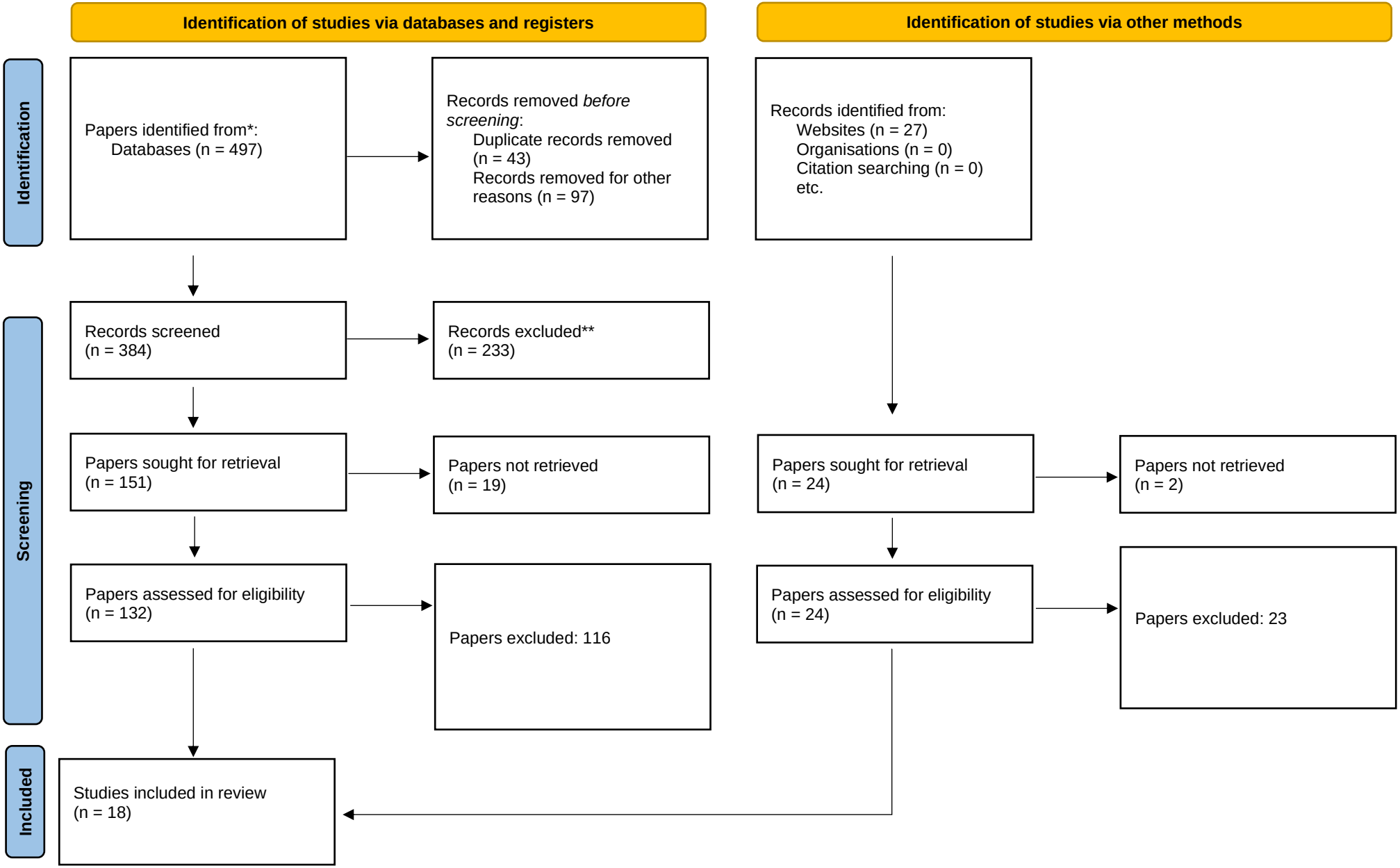
Search terms for literature review question 2



Search terms for literature review question 3



Appendix B – PRISMA flow diagram for three systematic literature searches which included searches of databases and other sources



Appendix C - Specialist Unit for Review Evidence (SURE) Questions to assist with the critical appraisal of qualitative studies

Citation: The mainstream school experiences of adolescent autistic girls (Tomlinson et al., 2021)
Study Design: Multiple-case study design

1. Does the study address a clearly focused question/hypothesis	**Yes**	Can't tell	No
Setting?	One mainstream secondary school identified for good autism practice		
Perspective?	Exploratory – identifying the views of autistic girls in relation to their school experiences		
Intervention or Phenomena	Phenomena – exploring the views of autistic girls in relation to their experiences of school		
Comparator/control (if any)?	No		
Evaluation/Exploration?	Exploration of autistic girls' experiences of school		

2. Is the choice of qualitative method appropriate?	
Is it an exploration of eg behaviour/reasoning/ beliefs)?	Yes
Do the authors discuss how they decided which method to use?	Yes
3. Is the sampling strategy clearly described and justified?	
Is it clear how participants were selected?	Yes via the SENCO
Do the authors explain why they selected these particular participants?	Yes
Is detailed information provided about participant characteristics and about those who chose not to participate?	Brief information provided

4. Is the method of data collection well described? Was the setting appropriate for data collection?	Yes Data collected via semi-structured interviews and participants' choice of methods including photo

Is it clear what methods were used to collect data? Type of method (eg, focus groups, interviews, open questionnaire etc) and tools (eg notes, audio, audio visual recording).	elicitation, diary accounts and art-based methods Not detailed
Is there sufficient detail of the methods used (eg how any topics/questions were generated and whether they were piloted; if observation was used, whether the context described and were observations made in a variety of circumstances?	No
Were the methods modified during the study? If YES, is this explained?	Yes
Is there triangulation of data (ie more than one source of data collection)?	Not clear
Do the authors report achieving data saturation?	
5. Is the relationship between the researcher(s) and participants explored? Did the researcher report critically examining/reflecting on their role and any relationship with participants particularly in relation to formulating research questions and collecting data).	Not specified
Were any potential power relationships involved (ie relationships that could influence in the way in which participants respond)?	Yes, addressed through choice of data collection methods
6. Are ethical issues explicitly discussed?	
Is there sufficient information on how the research was explained to participants?	Yes
Was ethical approval sought?	Yes
Are there any potential confidentiality issues in relation to data collection?	No
7. Is the data analysis/interpretation process described and justified?	
Is it clear how the themes and concepts were identified in the data?	Yes – using Thematic Analysis
Was the analysis performed by more than one researcher?	Yes
Are negative/discrepant results taken into account?	Yes

8. Are the findings credible?	
Are there sufficient data to support the findings?	Yes
Are sequences from the original data presented (eg quotations) and were these fairly selected?	Yes, quotations and thematic maps of experiences / data
Are the data rich (ie are the participants' voices foregrounded?	Yes

Are the explanations for the results plausible and coherent? Are the results of the study compared with those from other studies?	Yes Yes
9. Is any sponsorship/conflict of interest reported?	No
10. Finally...consider: Did the authors identify any limitations? Are the conclusions the same in the abstract and the full text?	Yes Yes

Summary

The study provides a clear overview of the experiences of three autistic girls who attend a mainstream secondary school. The methods consider power dynamics and the challenges autistic young people may face in communicating their needs and participants were offered a choice of methods of data collection. Despite informative results, there is limited information comparing experiences or identifying themes across the interviews. It may have been helpful to provide further detail that cross-examined each case study. Nonetheless, the findings are very useful for the literature search and support previous research identifying the challenges autistic young people face in relation to their school experiences.

Citation: Supporting students with autistic spectrum disorder (ASD) at secondary school: a parent and student perspective (Tobias, 2009)
Study Design: Focus groups

1. Does the study address a clearly focused question/hypothesis	**Yes**	Can't tell	No
Setting?	At one secondary school		
Perspective?	Exploratory – exploring the perceptions of autistic students in relation to school		
Intervention or Phenomena	Phenomena – exploring the views of autistic students' school experiences		
Comparator/control (if any)?	None specified		
Evaluation/Exploration?	Exploration of autistic students experiences of school and support at school		

2. Is the choice of qualitative method appropriate? Is it an exploration of eg behaviour/reasoning/ beliefs)? Do the authors discuss how they decided which method to use?	 Yes Yes
3. Is the sampling strategy clearly described and justified? Is it clear how participants were selected? Do the authors explain why they selected these particular participants? Is detailed information provided about participant characteristics and about those who chose not to participate?	Yes – through teaching staff at one school Convenience sampling Yes, but not those who chose not to participate

4. Is the method of data collection well described? Was the setting appropriate for data collection? Is it clear what methods were used to collect data? Type of method (eg, focus groups, interviews, open questionnaire etc) and tools (eg notes, audio, audio visual recording). Is there sufficient detail of the methods used (eg how any topics/questions were generated and whether they were piloted; if observation was used, whether the context described and were observations made in a variety of circumstances? Were the methods modified during the study? If YES, is this explained? Is there triangulation of data (ie more than one source of data collection)? Do the authors report achieving data saturation?	Yes Data collected via focus groups with activities based on PCP Yes Not clear Yes across focus groups No
5. Is the relationship between the researcher(s) and participants explored? Did the researcher report critically examining/reflecting on their role and any relationship with participants particularly in relation to formulating research questions and collecting data). Were any potential power relationships involved (ie relationships that could influence in the way in which participants respond)?	Not explicitly No
6. Are ethical issues explicitly discussed? Is there sufficient information on how the research was explained to participants?	Yes Yes No

Was ethical approval sought? Are there any potential confidentiality issues in relation to data collection?	
7. Is the data analysis/interpretation process described and justified? Is it clear how the themes and concepts were identified in the data? Was the analysis performed by more than one researcher? Are negative/discrepant results taken into account?	Yes – using IPA No Yes

8. Are the findings credible? Are there sufficient data to support the findings? Are sequences from the original data presented (eg quotations) and were these fairly selected? Are the data rich (ie are the participants' voices foregrounded? Are the explanations for the results plausible and coherent? Are the results of the study compared with those from other studies?	Yes Yes using quotations Yes Yes Yes, although more detail may have been useful
9. Is any sponsorship/conflict of interest reported?	No
10. Finally...consider: Did the authors identify any limitations? Are the conclusions the same in the abstract and the full text?	Yes briefly Yes although brief
Summary The study provides an insight into the perceptions and experiences of autistic young people and their parents using a focus group methodology. The themes are in line with previous research, highlighting the additional support autistic young people seek from school. More detail relating to the analysis of data and how themes emerged may have been useful. Although the themes were presented coherently with quotations to support the findings, it could have been made clearer whether the findings were from the young person or parent focus groups. Links are made to previous research and implications for future practice.	

Citation: Autistic girls and school exclusion: Perspectives of students and their parents (Sproston et al. 2016)
Study Design: Semi-structured interviews

1. Does the study address a clearly focused question/hypothesis	**Yes**	Can't tell	No
Setting?	Semi-structured interviews at education setting or home		
Perspective?	Exploratory – exploring the school experiences of 8 autistic girls and their parents		
Intervention or Phenomena	Phenomena – exploring the views of autistic girls and their parents in relation to school		
Comparator/control (if any)?	None specified		
Evaluation/Exploration?	Exploration of autistic girls and their parents' views and experiences of school		

2. Is the choice of qualitative method appropriate?	
Is it an exploration of eg behaviour/reasoning/ beliefs)?	Yes
Do the authors discuss how they decided which method to use?	Yes briefly
3. Is the sampling strategy clearly described and justified? Is it clear how participants were selected?	Yes – identified through specialist schools, PRUs and charities
Do the authors explain why they selected these particular participants?	Selected via convenience sampling
Is detailed information provided about participant characteristics and about those who chose not to participate?	Detailed information about participants

4. Is the method of data collection well described? Was the setting appropriate for data collection?	Yes
Is it clear what methods were used to collect data? Type of method (eg, focus groups, interviews, open questionnaire etc) and tools (eg notes, audio, audio visual recording).	Data collected via semi-structured interviews
Is there sufficient detail of the methods used (eg how any topics/questions were generated and whether they were piloted; if observation was used, whether the context described and were observations made in a variety of circumstances?	Semi-structured interviews were based on the literature Not specified
Were the methods modified during the study? If YES, is this explained?	Yes between young people and parents Not clear

Is there triangulation of data (ie more than one source of data collection)? Do the authors report achieving data saturation?	
5. Is the relationship between the researcher(s) and participants explored? Did the researcher report critically examining/reflecting on their role and any relationship with participants particularly in relation to formulating research questions and collecting data). Were any potential power relationships involved (ie relationships that could influence in the way in which participants respond)?	Briefly acknowledged Yes between researcher and young person and parents being present for interviews. Young people were given a choice whether there parent was present.
6. Are ethical issues explicitly discussed? Is there sufficient information on how the research was explained to participants? Was ethical approval sought? Are there any potential confidentiality issues in relation to data collection?	Not detailed Yes No
7. Is the data analysis/interpretation process described and justified? Is it clear how the themes and concepts were identified in the data? Was the analysis performed by more than one researcher? Are negative/discrepant results taken into account?	Yes – using Thematic Analysis Yes Not clear

8. Are the findings credible? Are there sufficient data to support the findings? Are sequences from the original data presented (eg quotations) and were these fairly selected? Are the data rich (ie are the participants' voices foregrounded? Are the explanations for the results plausible and coherent? Are the results of the study compared with those from other studies?	Yes Yes with quotations and visual representations Yes Yes Yes
9. Is any sponsorship/conflict of interest reported?	No
10. Finally...consider: Did the authors identify any limitations? Are the conclusions the same in the abstract and the full text?	Yes Yes

Summary
The study provides insight into the experiences of autistic young people in relation to their mainstream school experiences and exclusion experiences. Data is triangulated with interviews with parents of young people however their views are presented together in the findings. One participant did not have a diagnosis of ASC and the participants are likely to have represented a small subgroup of autistic girls excluded from school. Despite this, the study does offer an overview of the similarities in themes from young people and their parents in relation to experiences of school and exclusion.

Citation: Missing: The autistic girls absent from mainstream secondary schools (Moyse, 2020)
Study Design: Mixed-methods

1. Does the study address a clearly focused question/hypothesis	**Yes**	Can't tell	No
Setting?	Semi-structured interviews and analysis of secondary data (this does not include voice of the young person and therefore will not be included in the literature review) Interviews took place in university building		
Perspective?	Exploratory – exploring the experiences of 10 autistic girls who have attendance difficulties		
Intervention or Phenomena	Phenomena – exploring the views of autistic girls in relation to school attendance		
Comparator/control (if any)?	None specified		
Evaluation/Exploration?	Exploration of autistic students experiences of attendance difficulties		

2. Is the choice of qualitative method appropriate? Is it an exploration of eg behaviour/reasoning/ beliefs)? Do the authors discuss how they decided which method to use?	 Yes Yes
3. Is the sampling strategy clearly described and justified? Is it clear how participants were selected? Do the authors explain why they selected these particular participants? Is detailed information provided about participant characteristics and about those who chose not to participate?	Yes – through charities and social media pages Snowball sampling Detailed information about participants and those who were not included

4. Is the method of data collection well described? Was the setting appropriate for data collection? Is it clear what methods were used to collect data? Type of method (eg, focus groups, interviews, open questionnaire etc) and tools (eg notes, audio, audio visual recording). Is there sufficient detail of the methods used (eg how any topics/questions were generated and whether they were piloted; if observation was used, whether the context described and were observations made in a variety of circumstances? Were the methods modified during the study? If YES, is this explained? Is there triangulation of data (ie more than one source of data collection)? Do the authors report achieving data saturation?	Yes Data collected via semi-structured interviews using PCP approaches and a life chart Piloted with autism advisory group No Yes between parents young people and staff Yes
5. Is the relationship between the researcher(s) and participants explored? Did the researcher report critically examining/reflecting on their role and any relationship with participants particularly in relation to formulating research questions and collecting data). Were any potential power relationships involved (ie relationships that could influence in the way in which participants respond)?	Yes Yes, acknowledged by author
6. Are ethical issues explicitly discussed?	Yes Yes

Is there sufficient information on how the research was explained to participants? Was ethical approval sought? Are there any potential confidentiality issues in relation to data collection?	No
7. Is the data analysis/interpretation process described and justified? Is it clear how the themes and concepts were identified in the data? Was the analysis performed by more than one researcher? Are negative/discrepant results taken into account?	Yes – using Thematic Analysis led by participants No Yes

8. Are the findings credible? Are there sufficient data to support the findings? Are sequences from the original data presented (eg quotations) and were these fairly selected? Are the data rich (ie are the participants' voices foregrounded? Are the explanations for the results plausible and coherent? Are the results of the study compared with those from other studies?	Yes Yes with quotations, vignettes and visuals Yes Yes Yes
9. Is any sponsorship/conflict of interest reported?	No
10. Finally...consider: Did the authors identify any limitations? Are the conclusions the same in the abstract and the full text?	Yes Yes
Summary The study is mixed-methods, focusing on the views of autistic young people and secondary data relating to autism referrals and diagnoses. The experiences of autistic young people are relevant to the current literature review and offer an in-depth insight into the experiences of autistic girls who have attendance difficulties. Throughout the study, an autism advisory group advised on methods of data collection and the process of data collection, which adds value to the study. The findings are unique in that they appear to be the only published UK study exploring the perceptions of autistic students with attendance difficulties.	

Citation: Exploring Needs and Supportive Factors for Students with Autism Spectrum Conditions who Show Signs of Anxiety within the Mainstream Secondary School Setting (Menzies, 2013)
Study Design: Multiple-embedded case study

1. Does the study address a clearly focused question/hypothesis	**Yes**	Can't tell	No
Setting?	Semi-structured interviews at mainstream secondary school		
Perspective?	Exploratory – exploring the school experiences of 4 autistic students		
Intervention or Phenomena	Phenomena – exploring the views of autistic students		
Comparator/control (if any)?	None specified		
Evaluation/Exploration?	Exploration of autistic students experiences of school following anxiety episode		

2. Is the choice of qualitative method appropriate?	Yes
Is it an exploration of eg behaviour/reasoning/ beliefs)?	
Do the authors discuss how they decided which method to use?	Yes
3. Is the sampling strategy clearly described and justified?	Yes – through professionals
Is it clear how participants were selected?	
Do the authors explain why they selected these particular participants?	Opportunity sampling
Is detailed information provided about participant characteristics and about those who chose not to participate?	Detailed information about participants and those who were not included

4. Is the method of data collection well described? Was the setting appropriate for data collection?	Yes
Is it clear what methods were used to collect data? Type of method (eg, focus groups, interviews, open questionnaire etc) and tools (eg notes, audio, audio visual recording).	Data collected via semi-structured interviews and card-sort activities as well as documents relating to the young person

Is there sufficient detail of the methods used (eg how any topics/questions were generated and whether they were piloted; if observation was used, whether the context described and were observations made in a variety of circumstances?	Semi-structured interviews were based on the literature
Were the methods modified during the study? If YES, is this explained?	Method of recruitment was altered. Interview schedule was differentiated depending on need
Is there triangulation of data (ie more than one source of data collection)?	Yes between parents young people and staff
Do the authors report achieving data saturation?	Not clear
5. Is the relationship between the researcher(s) and participants explored? Did the researcher report critically examining/reflecting on their role and any relationship with participants particularly in relation to formulating research questions and collecting data).	Yes
Were any potential power relationships involved (ie relationships that could influence in the way in which participants respond)?	Yes, acknowledged by author
6. Are ethical issues explicitly discussed?	
Is there sufficient information on how the research was explained to participants?	Yes
Was ethical approval sought?	Yes
Are there any potential confidentiality issues in relation to data collection?	No
7. Is the data analysis/interpretation process described and justified?	Yes – using Thematic Analysis
Is it clear how the themes and concepts were identified in the data?	No
Was the analysis performed by more than one researcher?	
Are negative/discrepant results taken into account?	Yes

8. Are the findings credible?	
Are there sufficient data to support the findings?	Yes
Are sequences from the original data presented (eg quotations) and were these fairly selected?	Yes with quotations, vignettes and visuals
Are the data rich (ie are the participants' voices foregrounded?	Yes
Are the explanations for the results plausible and coherent?	Yes

Are the results of the study compared with those from other studies?	Yes
9. Is any sponsorship/conflict of interest reported?	No
10. Finally...consider: Did the authors identify any limitations? Are the conclusions the same in the abstract and the full text?	Yes Yes
Summary The study provides a clear insight into the views of autistic young people who have experienced anxiety, as well as the views of their parents. Due to recruitment issues, the sample consists of a smaller minority group than originally planned, however the findings give significant depth to each young person's experiences of school which will inform the current literature review.	

Citation: Using an active listening approach to consider the views of three young people on the topic of missing education. Billington (2018)
Study Design: Semi-structured interviews and diaries using IPA

1. Does the study address a clearly focused question/hypothesis	**Yes**	Can't tell	No
Setting?	Four mainstream secondary schools in the north-west of England during form-group or free periods		
Perspective?	Exploratory – identifying the views of 20 autistic young people about their school experiences		
Intervention or Phenomena	Phenomena – exploring the views of autistic pupils in relation to their experiences of school		
Comparator/control (if any)?	None identified		
Evaluation/Exploration?	Exploration of autistic young people's experiences of school		

2. Is the choice of qualitative method appropriate? Is it an exploration of eg behaviour/reasoning/ beliefs)? Do the authors discuss how they decided which method to use?	Yes – exploration of the narratives of autistic young people regarding school Yes briefly
3. Is the sampling strategy clearly described and justified? Is it clear how participants were selected? Do the authors explain why they selected these particular participants? Is detailed information provided about participant characteristics and about those who chose not to participate?	Yes – through links with secondary school management teams Selected via purposive sampling Very limited information about participants

4. Is the method of data collection well described? Was the setting appropriate for data collection? Is it clear what methods were used to collect data? Type of method (eg, focus groups, interviews, open questionnaire etc) and tools (eg notes, audio, audio visual recording). Is there sufficient detail of the methods used (eg how any topics/questions were generated and whether they were piloted; if observation was used, whether the context described and were observations made in a variety of circumstances? Were the methods modified during the study? If YES, is this explained? Is there triangulation of data (ie more than one source of data collection)? Do the authors report achieving data saturation?	Yes, consideration for time of interview e.g. form time or free period or lunchtime Data collected via semi-structured interviews and diaries Yes Methods were not modified Yes Not clear
5. Is the relationship between the researcher(s) and participants explored? Did the researcher report critically examining/reflecting on their role and any relationship with participants particularly in relation to formulating research questions and collecting data). Were any potential power relationships involved (ie relationships that could influence in the way in which participants respond)?	Yes Yes, addressed through collaborative methods
6. Are ethical issues explicitly discussed? Is there sufficient information on how the research was explained to participants? Was ethical approval sought?	Yes Yes No

Are there any potential confidentiality issues in relation to data collection?	
7. Is the data analysis/interpretation process described and justified? Is it clear how the themes and concepts were identified in the data? Was the analysis performed by more than one researcher? Are negative/discrepant results taken into account?	Yes – using IPA Yes N/A

8. Are the findings credible? Are there sufficient data to support the findings? Are sequences from the original data presented (eg quotations) and were these fairly selected? Are the data rich (ie are the participants' voices foregrounded? Are the explanations for the results plausible and coherent? Are the results of the study compared with those from other studies?	Yes Yes – quotations included and a visual representation of the relationships between themes in the data Yes Yes Yes
9. Is any sponsorship/conflict of interest reported?	Not reported
10. Finally...consider: Did the authors identify any limitations? Are the conclusions the same in the abstract and the full text?	No Yes
Summary The study provides an insight into the views of 20 autistic young people in relation to their school experiences. Triangulation of data through interviews, diaries and drawings resulted in clear and detailed findings, with strong implications for practice.	

Citation: 'I felt closed in and like I couldn't breathe': A qualitative study exploring the mainstream educational experiences of autistic young people (Goodall, 2018)
Study Design: Qualitative participatory approach using semi-structured interviews and visual activities

1. Does the study address a clearly focused question/hypothesis	**Yes**	Can't tell	No
Setting?	Within two education settings (mainstream and AP)		
Perspective?	Exploratory – exploring the lived educational experiences of autistic young people and their thoughts about school improvement		
Intervention or Phenomena	Phenomena – exploring the views of autistic pupils in relation to their experiences of school		
Comparator/control (if any)?	None identified		
Evaluation/Exploration?	Exploration of autistic young people's experiences and perceptions of school		

2. Is the choice of qualitative method appropriate? Is it an exploration of eg behaviour/reasoning/ beliefs)? Do the authors discuss how they decided which method to use?	Yes – exploration of the narratives of young people experiencing attendance difficulties Yes briefly
3. Is the sampling strategy clearly described and justified? Is it clear how participants were selected? Do the authors explain why they selected these particular participants? Is detailed information provided about participant characteristics and about those who chose not to participate?	Yes – the author works within a school and had links with education provisions. A colleague approached young people Selected via purposive convenience sampling Brief information about participants

4. Is the method of data collection well described? Was the setting appropriate for data collection? Is it clear what methods were used to collect data? Type of method (eg, focus groups, interviews, open questionnaire etc) and tools (eg notes, audio, audio visual recording). Is there sufficient detail of the methods used (eg how any topics/questions were generated and whether they were piloted; if observation was used,	Yes Data collected via semi-structured interviews, beans and pots activity, diamond ranking, good teacher, bad teacher, me at school and design your own school Yes

whether the context described and were observations made in a variety of circumstances?	Methods were not modified but advised by young people
Were the methods modified during the study? If YES, is this explained?	Yes
Is there triangulation of data (ie more than one source of data collection)?	Not clear
Do the authors report achieving data saturation?	
5. Is the relationship between the researcher(s) and participants explored? Did the researcher report critically examining/reflecting on their role and any relationship with participants particularly in relation to formulating research questions and collecting data).	Yes
Were any potential power relationships involved (ie relationships that could influence in the way in which participants respond)?	Yes, addressed by author
6. Are ethical issues explicitly discussed?	
Is there sufficient information on how the research was explained to participants?	Yes
Was ethical approval sought?	Yes
Are there any potential confidentiality issues in relation to data collection?	No
7. Is the data analysis/interpretation process described and justified?	No, unclear how data was analysed into themes
Is it clear how the themes and concepts were identified in the data?	
Was the analysis performed by more than one researcher?	Unclear
Are negative/discrepant results taken into account?	Unclear

8. Are the findings credible?	Yes
Are there sufficient data to support the findings?	
Are sequences from the original data presented (eg quotations) and were these fairly selected?	Yes – quotations and pictures illustrate findings
Are the data rich (ie are the participants' voices foregrounded?	Yes
Are the explanations for the results plausible and coherent?	Yes
Are the results of the study compared with those from other studies?	Yes

9. Is any sponsorship/conflict of interest reported?	Yes – the author teaches at the school where participants were recruited
10. Finally...consider: Did the authors identify any limitations? Are the conclusions the same in the abstract and the full text?	Limitations Yes
Summary The study provides a comprehensive insight into the perspectives of autistic young people in two schools. The findings should be interpreted with caution since the author was known to some of the young people as they worked in their school which may have created bias. Furthermore, there is no information detailing the analysis and how themes were identified within the data. Despite this, the findings are clearly presented and triangulated from a number of data collection methods which are relevant to the literature review and young people's perspectives remain central throughout.	

Citation: Autism and the U.K. Secondary School Experience (Dillon et al., 2016)
Study Design: Self-report questionnaires and semi-structured interviews

1. Does the study address a clearly focused question/hypothesis	**Yes**	Can't tell	No
Setting?	One mainstream secondary school in the West Midlands		
Perspective?	Exploratory – identifying the views of 14 autistic and 14 non-autistic young people about their school experiences		
Intervention or Phenomena	Phenomena – exploring the views of autistic pupils in relation to their experiences of school and comparison to students without autism		
Comparator/control (if any)?	Comparison between autistic and non-autistic young people's views and perceptions. Matched according to age and sex		
Evaluation/Exploration?	Exploration of autistic and non-autistic young people's experiences of school		

2. Is the choice of qualitative method appropriate? Is it an exploration of eg behaviour/reasoning/ beliefs)? Do the authors discuss how they decided which method to use?	Yes – mixed method is justified Yes briefly
3. Is the sampling strategy clearly described and justified? Is it clear how participants were selected? Do the authors explain why they selected these particular participants? Is detailed information provided about participant characteristics and about those who chose not to participate?	Yes – identified through Director of Inclusion at school Selected via purposive sampling Brief information about participants

4. Is the method of data collection well described? Was the setting appropriate for data collection? Is it clear what methods were used to collect data? Type of method (eg, focus groups, interviews, open questionnaire etc) and tools (eg notes, audio, audio visual recording). Is there sufficient detail of the methods used (eg how any topics/questions were generated and whether they were piloted; if observation was used, whether the context described and were observations made in a variety of circumstances? Were the methods modified during the study? If YES, is this explained? Is there triangulation of data (ie more than one source of data collection)? Do the authors report achieving data saturation?	Yes Data collected via questionnaire and semi-structured interviews Yes a pilot was conducted resulting in the amendment of the questionnaire Yes following the pilot Yes Not clear
5. Is the relationship between the researcher(s) and participants explored? Did the researcher report critically examining/reflecting on their role and any relationship with participants particularly in relation to formulating research questions and collecting data). Were any potential power relationships involved (ie relationships that could influence in the way in which participants respond)?	Yes Yes, addressed through collaborative methods
6. Are ethical issues explicitly discussed? Is there sufficient information on how the research was explained to participants? Was ethical approval sought? Are there any potential confidentiality issues in relation to data collection?	Yes Yes No

7. Is the data analysis/interpretation process described and justified? Is it clear how the themes and concepts were identified in the data? Was the analysis performed by more than one researcher? Are negative/discrepant results taken into account?	Yes – using statistical analysis and content analysis Yes Yes

8. Are the findings credible? Are there sufficient data to support the findings? Are sequences from the original data presented (eg quotations) and were these fairly selected? Are the data rich (ie are the participants' voices foregrounded? Are the explanations for the results plausible and coherent? Are the results of the study compared with those from other studies?	Yes Yes Yes Yes Yes
9. Is any sponsorship/conflict of interest reported?	Yes – researcher worked in school and had prior relationship with pupils
10. Finally...consider: Did the authors identify any limitations? Are the conclusions the same in the abstract and the full text?	Yes Yes
Summary The study is valuable for the comparison between autistic and non-autistic students; however it is important to note that all students were recruited from one school and results may therefore reflect the inclusive nature of this particular school. The author was also known to the young people in the study which has both strengths and limitations. Nonetheless, this study provides an overview of the experiences of autistic young people in comparison to their non-autistic peers using a variety of data collection methods.	

Citation: Out of school: a phenomenological exploration of extended non-attendance (Baker & Bishop, 2015)
Study Design: Semi-structured interviews

1. Does the study address a clearly focused question/hypothesis	**Yes**	Can't tell	No

Setting?	Interviews in participants' homes in the South of England
Perspective?	Exploratory – seeks views of 4 young people about their EBSA experience
Intervention or Phenomena	Phenomena – exploring the phenomena of EBSA and young people's experiences of this
Comparator/control (if any)?	None identified
Evaluation/Exploration?	Exploration of how young people with EBSA make sense of their experiences

2. Is the choice of qualitative method appropriate? Is it an exploration of eg behaviour/reasoning/ beliefs)? Do the authors discuss how they decided which method to use?	Yes – exploration of the views of young people experiencing EBSA Yes
3. Is the sampling strategy clearly described and justified? Is it clear how participants were selected? Do the authors explain why they selected these particular participants? Is detailed information provided about participant characteristics and about those who chose not to participate?	Yes – word of mouth in EPS Selected via purposive sampling Brief details about participants. Three decided not to participate

4. Is the method of data collection well described? Was the setting appropriate for data collection? Is it clear what methods were used to collect data? Type of method (eg, focus groups, interviews, open questionnaire etc) and tools (eg notes, audio, audio visual recording). Is there sufficient detail of the methods used (eg how any topics/questions were generated and whether they were piloted; if observation was used, whether the context described and were observations made in a variety of circumstances? Were the methods modified during the study? If YES, is this explained? Is there triangulation of data (ie more than one source of data collection)? Do the authors report achieving data saturation?	Yes, interviews in participants' homes Data collected via semi-structured interviews prompted by a topic guide. Questions were derived based on literature but no details provided Methods were not modified No Not clear
5. Is the relationship between the researcher(s) and participants explored? Did the researcher report critically	

examining/reflecting on their role and any relationship with participants particularly in relation to formulating research questions and collecting data). Were any potential power relationships involved (ie relationships that could influence in the way in which participants respond)?	Briefly acknowledged Briefly acknowledged
6. Are ethical issues explicitly discussed? Is there sufficient information on how the research was explained to participants? Was ethical approval sought? Are there any potential confidentiality issues in relation to data collection?	Yes brief information Yes Addressed in research and parents absent from room
7. Is the data analysis/interpretation process described and justified? Is it clear how the themes and concepts were identified in the data? Was the analysis performed by more than one researcher? are negative/discrepant results taken into account?	Yes – using IPA Yes Yes, contrasting findings included

8. Are the findings credible? Are there sufficient data to support the findings? Are sequences from the original data presented (eg quotations) and were these fairly selected? Are the data rich (ie are the participants' voices foregrounded)? Are the explanations for the results plausible and coherent? Are the results of the study compared with those from other studies?	Yes Yes – quotations included Yes Yes Yes
9. Is any sponsorship/conflict of interest reported?	Not reported
10. Finally...consider: Did the authors identify any limitations? Are the conclusions the same in the abstract and the full text?	Yes Yes
Summary The study keeps young people's voices at the centre throughout and aims to understand their lived experiences of EBSNA. There is limited information about the procedure, however the interview guide was informed by the literature. There are strong links and comparisons to previous research which supports the reliability of the study. Participants were approached directly by staff and more likely to have been open to engaging with the research, however this was deemed most appropriate given the challenges of recruiting this population.	

Citation: An exploration of the perceptions and experiences of non-attenders and school staff within a secondary school context. (Beckles, 2014)
Study Design: Semi-structured interviews

1. Does the study address a clearly focused question/hypothesis	**Yes**	Can't tell	No
Setting?	Interviews conducted from one secondary school		
Perspective?	Exploratory – seeks views of 12 young people about their attendance difficulties		
Intervention or Phenomena	Phenomena – exploring the phenomena of attendance difficulties and young people's experiences of this		
Comparator/control (if any)?	None identified		
Evaluation/Exploration?	Exploration of the experiences and perceptions of young people with attendance difficulties		

2. Is the choice of qualitative method appropriate? Is it an exploration of eg behaviour/reasoning/ beliefs)? Do the authors discuss how they decided which method to use?	Yes – exploration of the experiences of young people with early attendance difficulties Yes
3. Is the sampling strategy clearly described and justified? Is it clear how participants were selected? Do the authors explain why they selected these particular participants? Is detailed information provided about participant characteristics and about those who chose not to participate?	Yes – through school SENCO Selected via convenience sampling Information provided about participants and two who did not participate

4. Is the method of data collection well described? Was the setting appropriate for data collection?	Yes Data collected via semi-structured interview, scaling, timelines

Is it clear what methods were used to collect data? Type of method (eg, focus groups, interviews, open questionnaire etc) and tools (eg notes, audio, audio visual recording). Is there sufficient detail of the methods used (eg how any topics/questions were generated and whether they were piloted; if observation was used, whether the context described and were observations made in a variety of circumstances? Were the methods modified during the study? If YES, is this explained? Is there triangulation of data (ie more than one source of data collection)? Do the authors report achieving data saturation?	Yes, some detail. Pilot study completed. Interview schedule was modified following pilot and Drawing the Ideal School was excluded Yes through semi-structured interviews and PCP methods Yes
5. Is the relationship between the researcher(s) and participants explored? Did the researcher report critically examining/reflecting on their role and any relationship with participants particularly in relation to formulating research questions and collecting data). Were any potential power relationships involved (ie relationships that could influence in the way in which participants respond)?	Yes Yes discussed by author
6. Are ethical issues explicitly discussed? Is there sufficient information on how the research was explained to participants? Was ethical approval sought? Are there any potential confidentiality issues in relation to data collection?	Yes Yes No
7. Is the data analysis/interpretation process described and justified? Is it clear how the themes and concepts were identified in the data? Was the analysis performed by more than one researcher? Are negative/discrepant results taken into account?	Yes – using Thematic Analysis No Yes

8. Are the findings credible? Are there sufficient data to support the findings? Are sequences from the original data presented (eg quotations) and were these fairly selected? Are the data rich (ie are the participants' voices foregrounded)? Are the explanations for the results plausible and coherent?	Yes Yes – quotations included and transcripts within appendices Yes Yes

Are the results of the study compared with those from other studies?	Yes
9. Is any sponsorship/conflict of interest reported?	Not reported
10. Finally...consider: Did the authors identify any limitations? Are the conclusions the same in the abstract and the full text?	Yes Yes
Summary The study provides an insight into the experiences of young people with attendance difficulties, however those with specific attendance difficulties (deemed truants) were not included, meaning a proportion of young people's voices may be missing. Despite this, the research provides an insight into young people's non-attendance experiences.	

Citation: Using an active listening approach to consider the views of three young people on the topic of missing education. Billington (2018)
Study Design: Semi-structured interviews using a narrative inquiry approach

1. Does the study address a clearly focused question/hypothesis	**Yes**	Can't tell	No
Setting?	Setting not described		
Perspective?	Exploratory – seeks views of 3 young people about their attendance difficulties		
Intervention or Phenomena	Phenomena – exploring the phenomena of attendance difficulties and young people's experiences of this		
Comparator/control (if any)?	None identified		
Evaluation/Exploration?	Exploration of how young people with attendance difficulties recount their narratives		

2. Is the choice of qualitative method appropriate? Is it an exploration of eg behaviour/reasoning/ beliefs)? Do the authors discuss how they decided which method to use?	Yes – exploration of the narratives of young people experiencing attendance difficulties Yes briefly

3. Is the sampling strategy clearly described and justified? Is it clear how participants were selected? Do the authors explain why they selected these particular participants? Is detailed information provided about participant characteristics and about those who chose not to participate?	Yes – through key professional from Children Missing in Education Team Selected via purposive sampling Brief information about participants

4. Is the method of data collection well described? Was the setting appropriate for data collection? Is it clear what methods were used to collect data? Type of method (eg, focus groups, interviews, open questionnaire etc) and tools (eg notes, audio, audio visual recording). Is there sufficient detail of the methods used (eg how any topics/questions were generated and whether they were piloted; if observation was used, whether the context described and were observations made in a variety of circumstances? Were the methods modified during the study? If YES, is this explained? Is there triangulation of data (ie more than one source of data collection)? Do the authors report achieving data saturation?	Yes Data collected via semi-structured interviews prompted by a topic guide. Methods section is brief – participants were given opportunities to tell their stories Methods were not modified No Not clear
5. Is the relationship between the researcher(s) and participants explored? Did the researcher report critically examining/reflecting on their role and any relationship with participants particularly in relation to formulating research questions and collecting data). Were any potential power relationships involved (ie relationships that could influence in the way in which participants respond)?	No No – aimed to facilitate a power balance through an active listening approach
6. Are ethical issues explicitly discussed? Is there sufficient information on how the research was explained to participants? Was ethical approval sought? Are there any potential confidentiality issues in relation to data collection?	Yes Yes No
7. Is the data analysis/interpretation process described and justified? Is it clear how the themes and concepts were identified in the data?	Yes – using Voice-Centred Relational Method or the Listening Guide

Was the analysis performed by more than one researcher? are negative/discrepant results taken into account?	Yes N/A

8. Are the findings credible? Are there sufficient data to support the findings? Are sequences from the original data presented (eg quotations) and were these fairly selected? Are the data rich (ie are the participants' voices foregrounded)? Are the explanations for the results plausible and coherent? Are the results of the study compared with those from other studies?	Yes Yes – quotations included Yes Yes No
9. Is any sponsorship/conflict of interest reported?	Not reported
10. Finally...consider: Did the authors identify any limitations? Are the conclusions the same in the abstract and the full text?	Yes Yes
Summary This study is well-presented and provides an insight into the stories and perceptions of three young people experiencing attendance difficulties. There is not detailed information relating to the analysis of data, however the narrative inquiry approach is valued for reducing the power imbalance between the researcher and participants and ensuring participants are contributing directly to the findings of the study. The research adopts a definition of persistent absence that is wide-ranging and does not exclude particular groups of non-attenders such as truants. It therefore offers a unique contribution to the non-attendance literature, with findings relevant to the current literature review.	

Citation: A Qualitative Exploration of Pupil, Parent and Staff Discourses of Extended School Non-Attendance (Clissold, 2018)
Study Design: Interviews and qualitative analysis

1. Does the study address a clearly focused question/hypothesis	**Yes**	Can't tell	No

Setting?	Interviews in school (for staff) and home (for YP and parents)
Perspective?	Exploratory – seeks views of 3 young people, 3 parents and 3 staff in relation to the causes of EBSA
Intervention or Phenomena	Phenomena – exploring the discourse around EBSA as constructed by young people, their parents and staff through language
Comparator/control (if any)?	Comparisons between young people, parents and staff
Evaluation/Exploration?	Exploration of discourse across participants

2. Is the choice of qualitative method appropriate? Is it an exploration of eg behaviour/reasoning/ beliefs)? Do the authors discuss how they decided which method to use?	Yes – exploration of the discourse of young people's reasons for experiencing EBSA behaviour and the views of parents and staff Yes
3. Is the sampling strategy clearly described and justified? Is it clear how participants were selected? Do the authors explain why they selected these particular participants? Is detailed information provided about participant characteristics and about those who chose not to participate?	Participants selected via EPS Chosen via non-probability purposive sampling Details provided about participants but no reference to any who chose not to participate

4. Is the method of data collection well described? Was the setting appropriate for data collection? Is it clear what methods were used to collect data? Type of method (eg, focus groups, interviews, open questionnaire etc) and tools (eg notes, audio, audio visual recording). Is there sufficient detail of the methods used (eg how any topics/questions were generated and whether they were piloted; if observation was used, whether the context described and were observations made in a variety of circumstances? Were the methods modified during the study? If YES, is this explained? Is there triangulation of data (ie more than one source of data collection)?	Yes data collection took place in school (for staff) and participants' homes to remove any pressures of school environment Data collected via interviews and 'all about me', 'school timeline' and 'grid elaboration' tools and described in detail Methods were not modified Triangulation occurred through interview and additional tools

Do the authors report achieving data saturation?	Not clear
5. Is the relationship between the researcher(s) and participants explored? Did the researcher report critically examining/reflecting on their role and any relationship with participants particularly in relation to formulating research questions and collecting data). Were any potential power relationships involved (ie relationships that could influence in the way in which participants respond)?	Yes Yes
6. Are ethical issues explicitly discussed? Is there sufficient information on how the research was explained to participants? Was ethical approval sought? Are there any potential confidentiality issues in relation to data collection?	 Yes Yes No
7. Is the data analysis/interpretation process described and justified? Is it clear how the themes and concepts were identified in the data? Was the analysis performed by more than one researcher? are negative/discrepant results taken into account?	Yes – using discourse analysis No – one researcher Yes

8. Are the findings credible? Are there sufficient data to support the findings? Are sequences from the original data presented (eg quotations) and were these fairly selected? Are the data rich (ie are the participants' voices foregrounded)? Are the explanations for the results plausible and coherent? Are the results of the study compared with those from other studies?	Yes Yes – quotations included Yes participants' voices are central throughout with quotations. Separate sections for each analysis e.g. parent, young person and staff Yes Yes
9. Is any sponsorship/conflict of interest reported?	Not reported
10. Finally...consider: Did the authors identify any limitations? Are the conclusions the same in the abstract and the full text?	Yes Yes
Summary	

The research uses interviews and additional visual measures to understand the discourse around EBSA and how language is used to construct understanding and reasons for EBSA. The sampling method was purposive which may have limited the range of perspectives provided in the research e.g. all White British from one area.

Citation: Extended school non-attenders' views: developing best practice (Gregory & Purcell, 2014)
Study Design: Semi-structured interviews and qualitative analysis

1. Does the study address a clearly focused question/hypothesis	**Yes**	Can't tell	No
Setting?	Not specified		
Perspective?	Exploratory – seeks views of young people and their families with attendance difficulties		
Intervention or Phenomena	Phenomena – explores the experiences of young people and their families who have experienced EBSA		
Comparator/control (if any)?	Not specified		
Evaluation/Exploration?	Exploration of experiences of young people with EBSA and their families		

2. Is the choice of qualitative method appropriate? Is it an exploration of eg behaviour/reasoning/ beliefs)? Do the authors discuss how they decided which method to use?	Yes – the study aims to identify the key concerns and experiences of extended school non-attenders and their families No
3. Is the sampling strategy clearly described and justified? Is it clear how participants were selected? Do the authors explain why they selected these particular participants?	Participants selected via Education Welfare Service and Home Tuition Service These were the participants available

Is detailed information provided about participant characteristics and about those who chose not to participate?	Brief details provided about participants and reference to families who did not reply or give consent but no further details provided. 2 young people did not want to be interviewed so their parents were interviewed without them.

4. Is the method of data collection well described? Was the setting appropriate for data collection? Is it clear what methods were used to collect data? Type of method (eg, focus groups, interviews, open questionnaire etc) and tools (eg notes, audio, audio visual recording). Is there sufficient detail of the methods used (eg how any topics/questions were generated and whether they were piloted; if observation was used, whether the context described and were observations made in a variety of circumstances? Were the methods modified during the study? If YES, is this explained? Is there triangulation of data (ie more than one source of data collection)? Do the authors report achieving data saturation?	 Not clear setting for data collection Data collected via semi-structured interviews for parent and young person based on 4 categories of school avoidance. A history of primary school experience was also taken. Pilot study was conducted. Not clear whether methods modified Not specified No
5. Is the relationship between the researcher(s) and participants explored? Did the researcher report critically examining/reflecting on their role and any relationship with participants particularly in relation to formulating research questions and collecting data). Were any potential power relationships involved (ie relationships that could influence in the way in which participants respond)?	No Not specified, however it is unclear whether young people were interviewed with their parents which may have influenced power dynamics and how much young people shared
6. Are ethical issues explicitly discussed? Is there sufficient information on how the research was explained to participants? Was ethical approval sought? Are there any potential confidentiality issues in relation to data collection?	 No details provided Yes Not specified
7. Is the data analysis/interpretation process described and justified? Is it clear how the themes and concepts were identified in the data?	Yes – using IPA Yes

Was the analysis performed by more than one researcher? Are negative/discrepant results taken into account?	Yes Yes

8. Are the findings credible? Are there sufficient data to support the findings? Are sequences from the original data presented (eg quotations) and were these fairly selected? Are the data rich (ie are the participants' voices foregrounded)? Are the explanations for the results plausible and coherent? Are the results of the study compared with those from other studies?	Yes Yes some quotes included in study Yes, parent and young person's voices are central Yes No
9. Is any sponsorship/conflict of interest reported?	Not reported
10. Finally...consider: Did the authors identify any limitations? Are the conclusions the same in the abstract and the full text?	Yes Yes
Summary The research uses semi-structured interviews to identify the perspectives of young people with EBSA and their families. The method section is limited and there are few details about the interview schedule which would have been useful. It is unclear whether young people and parents were interviewed together or separately which may have influenced how transparent participants were in interviews. This is not made clear in the abstract or title of the study. The study does not compare findings from other research, and a large focus was on whether young people's voices could be elicited. However it does also offer a useful insight into the way EBSA is construed by young people and their families and the findings are relevant to the current study.	

Citation: Exploring the experiences and perceptions of Key Stage 4 students whose school attendance is persistently low (an interpretative phenomenological study) – How 2015
Study Design: Semi-structured interviews using IPA

1. Does the study address a clearly focused question/hypothesis	**Yes**	Can't tell	No
Setting?	Interviews with 5 young people from one secondary school		
Perspective?	Exploratory – seeks views of 5 young people		

Intervention or Phenomena	Phenomena – exploring the experiences of young people with EBSA
Comparator/control (if any)?	No
Evaluation/Exploration?	Exploration of experiences of EBSA

2. Is the choice of qualitative method appropriate? Is it an exploration of eg behaviour/reasoning/ beliefs)? Do the authors discuss how they decided which method to use?	Yes – exploration of beliefs. Study aims to gain an in-depth understanding of the experiences of young people with EBSA Yes – discusses alternative methods that could have been used and the appropriateness of their chosen method
3. Is the sampling strategy clearly described and justified? Is it clear how participants were selected? Do the authors explain why they selected these particular participants? Is detailed information provided about participant characteristics and about those who chose not to participate?	Participants selected via SENCO and EWO Identified by school staff as meeting criteria Details provided about participants and reference to one participant who did not return consent form

4. Is the method of data collection well described? Was the setting appropriate for data collection? Is it clear what methods were used to collect data? Type of method (eg, focus groups, interviews, open questionnaire etc) and tools (eg notes, audio, audio visual recording). Is there sufficient detail of the methods used (eg how any topics/questions were generated and whether they were piloted; if observation was used, whether the context described and were observations made in a variety of circumstances? Were the methods modified during the study? If YES, is this explained? Is there triangulation of data (ie more than one source of data collection)? Do the authors report achieving data saturation?	Yes data collection took place at participants' homes to remove any pressures of school environment Data collected via interviews. A pilot was conducted prior to the data collection which led to removal of one question. Methods were not modified No triangulation Not clear
5. Is the relationship between the researcher(s) and participants explored?	Yes

Did the researcher report critically examining/reflecting on their role and any relationship with participants particularly in relation to formulating research questions and collecting data). Were any potential power relationships involved (ie relationships that could influence in the way in which participants respond)?	Yes
6. Are ethical issues explicitly discussed? Is there sufficient information on how the research was explained to participants? Was ethical approval sought? Are there any potential confidentiality issues in relation to data collection?	 Yes Yes No
7. Is the data analysis/interpretation process described and justified? Is it clear how the themes and concepts were identified in the data? Was the analysis performed by more than one researcher? Are negative/discrepant results taken into account?	Yes – using IPA, justification provided No – one researcher All results are discussed

8. Are the findings credible? Are there sufficient data to support the findings? Are sequences from the original data presented (eg quotations) and were these fairly selected? Are the data rich (ie are the participants' voices foregrounded)? Are the explanations for the results plausible and coherent? Are the results of the study compared with those from other studies?	 Yes Yes – quotations included Yes participants' voices are central throughout with quotations. Yes Yes
9. Is any sponsorship/conflict of interest reported?	Not reported
10. Finally...consider: Did the authors identify any limitations? Are the conclusions the same in the abstract and the full text?	Yes Yes
Summary The research clearly outlines the rationale for a qualitative approach using semi-structured interviews and an IPA methodology, with details of the interview schedule included. The research focuses on the views	

of young people and their experiences, although interviews were conducted with parents which may have impacted the findings. Nonetheless, this is a relevant piece of research that captures young people's views.

Citation: Investingating the factors associated with emotionally-based non-attendance at school from young people's perspective. Shilvock, 2010
Study Design: Semi-structured interviews informed by PCP

1. Does the study address a clearly focused question/hypothesis	**Yes**	Can't tell	No
Setting?	Not specified		
Perspective?	Exploratory – seeks views of 3 young people about their EBSA experience		
Intervention or Phenomena	Phenomena – exploring the phenomena of EBSA and young people's constructs about this		
Comparator/control (if any)?	None identified		
Evaluation/Exploration?	Exploration of EBSA experiences across three young people		

2. Is the choice of qualitative method appropriate? Is it an exploration of eg behaviour/reasoning/ beliefs)? Do the authors discuss how they decided which method to use?	Yes – exploration of the views of young people experiencing EBSA Yes in detail
3. Is the sampling strategy clearly described and justified? Is it clear how participants were selected? Do the authors explain why they selected these particular participants? Is detailed information provided about participant characteristics and about those who chose not to participate?	Participants identified by pastoral lead and education welfare officer at the young person's school Selected via purposive sampling (some issues with inclusion / exclusion criteria) Details provided about participants and two who were unable to participate

4. Is the method of data collection well described? Was the setting appropriate for data collection? Is it clear what methods were used to collect data? Type of method (eg, focus groups, interviews, open questionnaire etc) and tools (eg notes, audio, audio visual recording). Is there sufficient detail of the methods used (eg how any topics/questions were generated and whether they were piloted; if observation was used, whether the context described and were observations made in a variety of circumstances? Were the methods modified during the study? If YES, is this explained? Is there triangulation of data (ie more than one source of data collection)? Do the authors report achieving data saturation?	Yes although no details about where the data collection took place. Data collected via semi-structured interviews which included open-ended questions, Q-sort and Salmon line activities and a sentence completion task Yes Methods were not modified Triangulation occurred through three data collection methods Not clear
5. Is the relationship between the researcher(s) and participants explored? Did the researcher report critically examining/reflecting on their role and any relationship with participants particularly in relation to formulating research questions and collecting data). Were any potential power relationships involved (ie relationships that could influence in the way in which participants respond)?	Yes Yes
6. Are ethical issues explicitly discussed? Is there sufficient information on how the research was explained to participants? Was ethical approval sought? Are there any potential confidentiality issues in relation to data collection?	Yes and the first question in semi-structured interview also acknowledged this Yes These were accounted for
7. Is the data analysis/interpretation process described and justified? Is it clear how the themes and concepts were identified in the data? Was the analysis performed by more than one researcher? are negative/discrepant results taken into account?	Yes – using thematic analysis No – one researcher Yes

8. Are the findings credible? Are there sufficient data to support the findings?	.Yes

Are sequences from the original data presented (eg quotations) and were these fairly selected? Are the data rich (ie are the participants' voices foregrounded)? Are the explanations for the results plausible and coherent? Are the results of the study compared with those from other studies?	Yes – quotations included and transcript in appendix Yes Yes Yes throughout
9. Is any sponsorship/conflict of interest reported?	Not reported
10. Finally...consider: Did the authors identify any limitations? Are the conclusions the same in the abstract and the full text?	Yes No abstract included
Summary The sample excluded young people identified as truants as the inclusion criteria were based on Berg's 1969 criteria and West Sussex (2004) criteria, overlooking the wide spectrum of non-attendance behaviours. This adds to the narrative of different types of non-attendance receiving different types of support and should be noted when interpreting the results. Despite this, the methods are relevant to the current study and the findings are well presented in the context of PCP, demonstrating the challenges young people with EBSA have experienced.	

Citation: Pupil Voice in School Non-Attendance: Exploring the perceptions of Pupils, whose attendance is below 85% (James, 2015)
Study Design: Questionnaire and interviews

1. Does the study address a clearly focused question/hypothesis	**Yes**	Can't tell	No
Setting?	Not specified		
Perspective?	Exploratory – seeks views of 5 young people and 2 key workers in relation to EBSA		
Intervention or Phenomena	Phenomena – explores how young people with EBSA construe school. Also aimed to understand whether PCP methods are supportive for YP.		
Comparator/control (if any)?	Compared to Keyworkers		
Evaluation/Exploration?	Exploration of experiences of EBSA		

	Evaluation of the use of PCP with young people with attendance difficulties

2. Is the choice of qualitative method appropriate? Is it an exploration of eg behaviour/reasoning/ beliefs)? Do the authors discuss how they decided which method to use?	Yes – the study aims to identify how individuals construe their attendance experiences. Quantitative methods could have been used for the SRAS – this would have led to a mixed-methods design. Yes
3. Is the sampling strategy clearly described and justified? Is it clear how participants were selected? Do the authors explain why they selected these particular participants? Is detailed information provided about participant characteristics and about those who chose not to participate?	Participants recruited via their keyworkers or secondary school These were the participants available Yes as much as possible whilst maintaining anonymity

4. Is the method of data collection well described? Was the setting appropriate for data collection? Is it clear what methods were used to collect data? Type of method (eg, focus groups, interviews, open questionnaire etc) and tools (eg notes, audio, audio visual recording). Is there sufficient detail of the methods used (eg how any topics/questions were generated and whether they were piloted; if observation was used, whether the context described and were observations made in a variety of circumstances? Were the methods modified during the study? If YES, is this explained? Is there triangulation of data (ie more than one source of data collection)? Do the authors report achieving data saturation?	Yes – participants' choice Data collected via questionnaire (SRAS), semi-structured interview and PCP methods, including Triadic elicitation, laddering and reparatory grid. Yes, keyworkers were not originally going to be interviewed but due to recruitment issues, a decision was made to interview them Yes between keyworkers and young people and in different data collection methods No

5. Is the relationship between the researcher(s) and participants explored? Did the researcher report critically examining/reflecting on their role and any relationship with participants particularly in relation to formulating research questions and collecting data). Were any potential power relationships involved (ie relationships that could influence in the way in which participants respond)?	Yes Yes, acknowledged in research
6. Are ethical issues explicitly discussed? Is there sufficient information on how the research was explained to participants? Was ethical approval sought? Are there any potential confidentiality issues in relation to data collection?	Yes Yes These were addressed
7. Is the data analysis/interpretation process described and justified? Is it clear how the themes and concepts were identified in the data? Was the analysis performed by more than one researcher? Are negative/discrepant results taken into account?	Data analysed jointly with participant but limited description of this process. No – not clear how themes were identified in data Yes – one participant's attendance improved so results no longer included in main body

8. Are the findings credible? Are there sufficient data to support the findings? Are sequences from the original data presented (eg quotations) and were these fairly selected? Are the data rich (ie are the participants' voices foregrounded)? Are the explanations for the results plausible and coherent? Are the results of the study compared with those from other studies?	Yes quotes included in study Yes Yes Yes Yes
9. Is any sponsorship/conflict of interest reported?	Not reported
10. Finally...consider: Did the authors identify any limitations? Are the conclusions the same in the abstract and the full text?	Yes Yes
Summary The research explores the experiences of young people with EBSA. Despite recruitment difficulties, five young people were interviewed, however it is not entirely clear how the data from semi-structured interviews was analysed. The study describes joint analysis with the young person but the process is not	

clearly defined, which may reduce reliability of findings. Furthermore, the presentation of results was not consistent; some were presented visually and some in text which made it more difficult to identify themes.

Citation: What works to support attendance? An Appreciative Inquiry into the school-related factors which help pupils experiencing Persistent School Non-Attendance to attend secondary school (Smith, 2020).
Study Design: Semi-structured interviews using PCP approaches and appreciative inquiry

1. Does the study address a clearly focused question/hypothesis	**Yes**	Can't tell	No
Setting?	Interviews conducted at home or school (participant's choice)		
Perspective?	Exploratory – seeks views of 7 young people about their attendance difficulties		
Intervention or Phenomena	Phenomena – exploring the phenomena of attendance difficulties and young people's experiences of this		
Comparator/control (if any)?	None identified		
Evaluation/Exploration?	Exploration of how young people with attendance difficulties recount their narratives		

2. Is the choice of qualitative method appropriate? Is it an exploration of eg behaviour/reasoning/ beliefs)?	Yes – exploration of the narratives of young people experiencing attendance difficulties
Do the authors discuss how they decided which method to use?	Yes
3. Is the sampling strategy clearly described and justified? Is it clear how participants were selected?	Yes – through school SENCO
Do the authors explain why they selected these particular participants?	Selected via purposive sampling
Is detailed information provided about participant characteristics and about those who chose not to participate?	Information provided about participants

4. Is the method of data collection well described? Was the setting appropriate for data collection?	Yes

Is it clear what methods were used to collect data? Type of method (eg, focus groups, interviews, open questionnaire etc) and tools (eg notes, audio, audio visual recording).	Data collected via semi-structured interview, scaling and Drawing the Ideal School task
Is there sufficient detail of the methods used (eg how any topics/questions were generated and whether they were piloted; if observation was used, whether the context described and were observations made in a variety of circumstances?	Yes
Were the methods modified during the study? If YES, is this explained?	Methods were not modified
Is there triangulation of data (ie more than one source of data collection)?	Yes through semi-structured interviews and PCP methods
Do the authors report achieving data saturation?	Yes
5. Is the relationship between the researcher(s) and participants explored? Did the researcher report critically examining/reflecting on their role and any relationship with participants particularly in relation to formulating research questions and collecting data).	Yes
Were any potential power relationships involved (ie relationships that could influence in the way in which participants respond)?	Yes discussed by author
6. Are ethical issues explicitly discussed?	
Is there sufficient information on how the research was explained to participants?	Yes
Was ethical approval sought?	Yes
Are there any potential confidentiality issues in relation to data collection?	No
7. Is the data analysis/interpretation process described and justified?	Yes – using Thematic Analysis
Is it clear how the themes and concepts were identified in the data?	No
Was the analysis performed by more than one researcher?	N/A
Are negative/discrepant results taken into account?	

8. Are the findings credible?	
Are there sufficient data to support the findings?	Yes
Are sequences from the original data presented (eg quotations) and were these fairly selected?	Yes – quotations included and transcripts within appendices
Are the data rich (ie are the participants' voices foregrounded)?	Yes

Are the explanations for the results plausible and coherent? Are the results of the study compared with those from other studies?	 Yes Yes
9. Is any sponsorship/conflict of interest reported?	Not reported
10. Finally...consider: Did the authors identify any limitations? Are the conclusions the same in the abstract and the full text?	Yes Yes
Summary The study provides a clear rationale for exploring the experiences and perceptions of young people with EBSA from a strengths-based perspective, using an appreciative inquiry approach. The use of PCP methods including Drawing the Ideal School is clearly justified and provides an insight into young people's experiences of school and what is working and not working. The research is highly relevant to the literature review and presents reliable and trustworthy findings.	

Citation: A Narrative Oriented Inquiry into emotionally based school avoidance: hearing the voices of young people and their parents (Want, 2020)
Study Design: Narrative inquiry using guided narrative interviews and a visual life path tool

1. Does the study address a clearly focused question/hypothesis	**Yes**	Can't tell	No
Setting?	Home visits with young people and parents in East Midlands, recruited through EPS		
Perspective?	Exploratory – seeks views of two secondary-age young people and three parents		
Intervention or Phenomena	Phenomena – exploring the narratives of young people experiencing EBSA and their parents		
Comparator/control (if any)?	Comparisons between young people and parents		
Evaluation/Exploration?	Exploration of narratives across participants		

2. Is the choice of qualitative method appropriate? Is it an exploration of eg behaviour/reasoning/ beliefs)? Do the authors discuss how they decided which method to use?	Yes – exploration of narratives of young people experiencing EBSA and their parents Yes – 'informant' style interview to avoid fixed questions and narrative approach to facilitate participant voices to be heard and experiences shared
3. Is the sampling strategy clearly described and justified? Is it clear how participants were selected? Do the authors explain why they selected these particular participants? Is detailed information provided about participant characteristics and about those who chose not to participate?	Participants selected via EPs in the service and recommendation from another participant Chosen via convenience sampling Details provided about participants but no reference to any who chose not to participate

4. Is the method of data collection well described? Was the setting appropriate for data collection? Is it clear what methods were used to collect data? Type of method (eg, focus groups, interviews, open questionnaire etc) and tools (eg notes, audio, audio visual recording). Is there sufficient detail of the methods used (eg how any topics/questions were generated and whether they were piloted; if observation was used, whether the context described and were observations made in a variety of circumstances? Were the methods modified during the study? If YES, is this explained? Is there triangulation of data (ie more than one source of data collection)? Do the authors report achieving data saturation?	Yes data collection took place in participants' homes to remove any pressures of school environment Data was collected via narrative interviews and a 'life path' used as a timeline to facilitate story telling – process is well described. Methods were not modified Triangulation occurred through interview and life path tool as well as parents and young people's interviews Not clear
5. Is the relationship between the researcher(s) and participants explored? Did the researcher report critically examining/reflecting on their role and any relationship with participants particularly in relation to formulating research questions and collecting data). Were any potential power relationships involved (ie relationships that could influence in the way in which participants respond)?	Yes Yes – researcher reflected on power imbalance between researcher and participants.

6. Are ethical issues explicitly discussed? Is there sufficient information on how the research was explained to participants? Was ethical approval sought? Are there any potential confidentiality issues in relation to data collection?	 Yes Yes No
7. Is the data analysis/interpretation process described and justified? Is it clear how the themes and concepts were identified in the data? Was the analysis performed by more than one researcher? Are negative/discrepant results taken into account?	Yes – using content analysis No – one researcher Yes

8. Are the findings credible? Are there sufficient data to support the findings? Are sequences from the original data presented (eg quotations) and were these fairly selected? Are the data rich (ie are the participants' voices foregrounded)? Are the explanations for the results plausible and coherent? Are the results of the study compared with those from other studies?	Yes Yes – quotations included, appear fairly selected although more weight to parents (as 3 parents and 2 young people) Yes participants' voices are central throughout Yes Yes
9. Is any sponsorship/conflict of interest reported?	No
10. Finally...consider: Did the authors identify any limitations? Are the conclusions the same in the abstract and the full text?	Yes Yes although brief conclusions within abstract
Summary A well-considered piece of research that places young people and their parent's voices at the centre and provides an insight into the factors affecting their EBSA experiences and hopes for the future. The study only involved 2 young people (which is the sample that the current literature review focuses on). As there were 2 young people and 3 parents, the parent voice can overshadow the young person's voice at times, however this remains a relevant piece of research for the literature review.	

Appendix D – Information sheets

Participant information sheet

Title: The Ideal School: Exploring the constructs of autistic young people experiencing Emotionally Based School Non-attendance
Researcher: Mollie Higgins mhiggins@tavi-port.nhs.uk
Supervisor: Rachael Green rgreen@tavi-port.nhs.uk

Can you help me with my project?

I am doing some work with autistic young people who find it difficult to attend school. I am looking for young people to complete some drawings and answer some questions on Zoom.

- I will ask you to imagine and draw pictures of your **'best school'** and **'worst school'** so I can understand what you might need and want in school.
- I will ask you some questions about your drawings. There are no right or wrong answers. I am just interested in what you think.
- You can request a break at any time and you can ask to stop the meeting any at point.
- I will be recording the Zoom meeting so I can remember what we spoke about.
- Your drawings and the recording of our meeting will be kept safely and protected with a password.
- If you tell me anything that makes me feel worried, we will have a conversation with your parent or trusted adult to make sure we are keeping you safe.
- When I finish writing up my project, other people will be able to read it. You might recognise your drawing or quotes but your name and the name of your school will not be included anywhere. You can choose the name that we use instead of your name. We will have another Zoom call to share the overall findings of the research. You can choose whether to share your drawing and answers with someone at school.
- You do not have to take part in the research and you can change your mind at any point up to four weeks after our Zoom meeting.

Mollie

Parent / carer information sheet

Title: The Ideal School: Exploring the constructs of autistic young people experiencing Emotionally Based School Non-Attendance

Who is doing the research?
My name is Mollie Higgins and I am Trainee Educational Psychologist studying at the Tavistock and Portman NHS Trust and working for an Educational Psychology Service. I am carrying out some research that aims to explore the views of autistic young people who are finding it difficult to attend school and find out what they think about the school environment.

This research has received ethical approval from the Tavistock Research and Ethics Committee. You are receiving this information because a staff member at your child's school has identified your child as a potential participant for this research or you have requested further information from me directly. I have not had any access to pupil records. Taking part in this study is entirely voluntary for your child and not taking part will not have a detrimental effect on the quality of education or care they receive at school.

Aims of the research
The study aims to understand how autistic young people who are experiencing Emotionally Based School Non-Attendance (EBSNA) view school and it is hoped that gaining their views will allow suggestions to be made to schools about adjustments that could potentially support young people with these difficulties.

Inclusion criteria
To be involved in the research, your child should meet the following criteria:

- Secondary age - in Key Stage 3 or 4 (aged between 11-16)
- Find it difficult to attend school
- Have a diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Condition (ASC)
- Can communicate verbally in English

What does participation involve?
I will meet online (via Zoom) with you and your child prior to the interview to discuss the research and answer any questions. I will then carry out an established drawing technique called 'Drawing the Ideal School' where your child will be asked to draw some pictures and discuss and answer questions about how they view school. Drawings will be saved via the computer or requested to be emailed to me following the interview. This interview will be completed via the online platform 'Zoom' and is anticipated to last a maximum of an hour (with breaks where necessary). I will make a recording of the interview which will be transcribed for analysis but will not be shared. Recordings will be stored securely and destroyed following analysis. Upon completion of the research, there will be a feedback session via Zoom to share an overview of the findings.

Benefits of the research
Participation within this research will provide your child with an opportunity to complete an evidence-based therapeutic activity that allows them to think and reflect on their experiences of school and what would support them to attend school. Your child's views are important in providing an insight into how autistic young people with EBSNA view school and how schools might be able to adapt their approach and environment in order to improve attendance.

Risks involved in the research
Although there is little risk associated with this research, it should be noted that any interview and discussion may result in emotional distress. You or your child can make the decision to withdraw from the study and you will also be signposted to further support should the study cause any distress.

Withdrawal
You or your child can make the decision to withdraw from the study at any point up to four weeks after the online drawing and interview session, without providing a reason. Any research data collected before your withdrawal may still be used, unless you request that it is destroyed. Please inform me via email if you wish to withdraw.

Personal data
All data, including drawings, notes and interview recordings will be stored on an encrypted drive using password protection and any physical drawings or notes will be kept in a locked filing cabinet. Data will be kept for between six to ten years, at which point data will be destroyed. During this time period, only myself and external examiners will have access to the data. As the research involves a small sample of up to ten young people, it is possible that your child may recognise their drawings or quotes in the research findings. Your child's data will be anonymised to protect their identity. Data collected during the study will be stored and used in compliance with the UK Data Protection Act (2018) and the Trust's Data Protection Policy, which can be found here: https://tavistockandportman.nhs.uk/about-us/governance/policies-and-procedures/

If your child discloses information that causes concern about their or someone's else's safety, I am required to follow safeguarding procedures and share this information with yourself or a member of school staff to maintain their safety. I will discuss this with you and your child.

Research findings
The study is written as part of a doctoral thesis for Child, Community and Educational Psychology and a copy will be available at the Tavistock and Portman. You or your child can choose for their drawing not to be included in this to protect against identification. Upon completion of the research, you will be invited to a voluntary online meeting where the wider findings will be shared. You and your child can decide whether you wish for their drawings and summary of their interview to be shared with their school. I may also publish the research at a later date in a peer reviewed journal, presentation or within the media.

Further information
If you require further information relating to this research, please contact me: mhiggins@tavi-port.nhs.uk or my supervisor rgreen@tavi-port.nhs.uk. If you have any concerns about the conduct of the investigator, researcher(s) or any other aspect of this

research project, please contact Simon Carrington, Head of Academic Governance and Quality Assurance (academicquality@tavi-port.nhs.uk).

Appendix E – recruitment poster

The Tavistock and Portman NHS
NHS Foundation Trust

Appendix F – consent forms

Parent / carer consent form

Title: The Ideal School: Exploring the constructs of autistic young people experiencing Emotionally Based School Non Attendance
Researcher: Mollie Higgins mhiggins@tavi-port.nhs.uk
Supervisor: Rachael Green rgreen@tavi-port.nhs.uk

Please initial the statements below if you agree with them: **Initial:**

1. I have read and understood the information sheet and have had the opportunity to ask questions.	
2. I understand that this project is part of Mollie Higgins' doctoral thesis.	
3. I understand that my child's participation in this research is voluntary and I am free at any time to withdraw their consent or any unprocessed data (up to 4 weeks post-interview) without providing a reason.	
4. I agree for my child's Zoom interview to be recorded.	
5. I will be available at the time of my child's Zoom interview should they become distressed or wish to stop.	
6. I understand that my child's data will be anonymised. I understand that the sample size is small (~10) which may limit confidentiality in anonymised quotes and drawings.	
7. I understand that there are limitations to confidentiality relating to concerns regarding harm to my child or others.	
8. I understand that my child's interview will be used for this research and cannot be accessed for any other purposes.	
9. I understand that the findings from this research will be published in a thesis as part of a professional doctorate, as well as possibly in a presentation, media or peer reviewed journal.	
10. I give consent for my child to participate in this research.	
11. I give consent for my child's drawings to be included in the results of the study.	
12. I would like to receive a summary of the findings of the study.	

Parent / carer's name: _____

Parent / carer's signature: _____

Child's name: _____

Date: _____

Parent questionnaire – demographic information

Please complete the following questions in relation to your child:

Child's initials…….

Child's age…….

Child's year group……..

Child's gender

Male Female Prefer not to say Other ……

Child's ethnicity…….

How old was your child when they first started having difficulties attending school?

.....

When did your child receive their Autism Spectrum Condition diagnosis?

.....

How often is your child currently attending school? (not including school closures due to Covid-19)

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

Please briefly state the primary reason for your child's attendance difficulties:

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

Please provide your contact number for the researcher to contact you one week post-interview (this will be stored securely and deleted following completion of the project)

.....

Title: The Ideal School: Exploring the constructs of autistic young people experiencing Emotionally Based School Non-Attendance
Researcher: Mollie Higgins (supervised by Dr Rachael Green)

Participant assent form

1. **Are you willing to help me with my research by drawing and talking about your ideas of the best and worst school?**

Please tick one box:

Yes  ☐ No  ☐

2. **Would you like your drawings and answers to be shared with a key adult at your school?**

Please tick one box:

Yes  ☐ No  ☐

3. **Are you happy for your drawing to be included in the write up of the project?**

Please tick one box:

Yes  ☐ No  ☐

You can say yes or no, either are OK and your decision will not be shared with anyone else. You can say no now and then change your mind at a later date.

Thank you.

Mollie

Appendix G – interview guide and Drawing the Ideal School process

Drawing The Ideal School
This is an established, evidence-based technique, with questions created by Moran (2001) and developed by Morgan-Rose (2016) and Williams and Hanke (2005). Prior to introduction of the activity, the researcher engages in a rapport-building conversation with the participant.

Introduction
I would like to find out what the worst and best school would be like for you so I can see how school could be made better for young people who find it hard to attend. First, I'd like you to think about the kind of school you would not like to have. This is not a real school, but the worst school you can imagine. Next, I would like you to think about the kind of school you would like to have. This is not a real school, but the best school you can imagine.

Interview questions
The questions used as part of the Ideal School approach are as follows.

1) *Tell me three things about this school.*
2) *Tell me about some of the things the students are doing in this school.*
3) *Tell me three things about these students.*
4) *Tell me about some of the things the adults are doing in this school.*
5) *Tell me three things about the adults.*
6) *Tell me the way you feel about this school.*
7) *How would you feel when you are in this school?*
8) *What happens during breaktime at this school?*
9) *What happens if you are having a bad day at this school?*
10) *What would some of the rules be at this school?*
11) *What would be your favourite thing about this school?*
12) *What would be your least favourite thing about this school?*
13) *Would you like to go to this school?*
14) *How often would you go to this school?*
15) *What would happen if you didn't go to this school on some days?*

Scaling activity
The next step is an exploration of the child's actual experience. The researcher shares their screen to complete the following scaling activity:

The researcher follows this process:

1) *We have the kind of school you don't want to have (worst school) and the kind of school you would like to have (best school). Think about your current school and put a line to show where your current school is.* (The researcher writes 'now' above this line).

2) *Where would you like your school to be on this line, in a perfect world? Put a mark on the line to show that.* (The researcher writes 'ideal' above this line).
3) *If your current school can't get to ideal, what would be good enough? Put a mark on the line to show that.* (The researcher writes 'good enough' above this line).
4) *Can you think about your previous school? Can you make a line to show that?* (The researcher writes 'previous' above this line). *What are the differences between your previous and current school?*
5) *Can you tell me some things your teachers could do to help your current school get to here* (point to ideal)?
6) *Can you tell me some things your parent or carer could do to help your current school get to here (*point to ideal)?

Final questions:

1) *How have you found completing this activity?*
2) *Did it make a difference completing this activity remotely? Would you have preferred to complete it online or in person?*

Appendix H – excerpts from reflective journal

October 2021:
I finally have one participant and have completed the interview. It left me feeling hopeful and excited at the prospect of my research, but that hope has faded as I constantly seek more participants with little success. The interview was difficult to set up and I thought that reflected my ongoing issues with organising the interviews and ensuring they can happen. The young person couldn't hear me well and it took us a long time to be able to hear one another. I wondered how he perceived me, as a woman from England compared to a young man from Scotland, especially as I don't have much knowledge of the Scottish education system.

October 2021: Reflections on data collection
One parent asked me if I was neurodivergent myself and I felt my position as an 'outsider researcher' was really highlighted. I thought about what I hoped to gain from the research – I wanted to ensure young people with additional needs could also enjoy school and access learning and experience success. Whilst she was very understanding, I felt that this may have created an 'us' vs 'them' split. During the interview, there had been criticism of professionals and some reference to not having neurotypical individuals attend their 'ideal school' and I wondered how this felt now they knew I was neurotypical. I experienced the feeling of invading a group that I was not part of, that I did not have lived experience of and wondered whether I should have chosen this path rather than something more 'personal' to me.

October 2021:
Noticed that I found it harder to sit with the silence in an interview today. A lot of gaps and pauses felt uncomfortable and I wanted to get the most out of the session. I think I could have allowed more space and time for the young person to articulate themselves instead of jumping in with questions which I will be mindful of in my next session.

November 2021:
Within education and the EP community, EBSA seems to be the most common, accepted and understood term. But criticisms remain rife, particularly on Twitter where there are many arguments against use of the term 'avoidance' (which implies choice) and 'emotionally-based' (as this assumes a reason). I have explored a variety of different terms and have come to recognise that I may not be able to please everyone who comes across my research. Perhaps there will always be a term which upsets somebody or does not reflect their own experience. This has been difficult for me to accept. As a 'people pleaser in recovery' (i.e. trying to move away from the notion that I can please everybody), I worry about upsetting or offending somebody, particularly if they are autistic and identify with the young people in my research. I am wary of dismissing their experiences and using terminology or language that causes people to disengage with my research, particularly if it is research that is relevant to their experience. For this reason, I have chosen to use the term EBSNA, as it is increasingly common and recognised. I still have worries about parental responses or responses from the autistic community but I think the reflection and ever-evolving language means that no term will remain fixed.

February 2022: Further reflections on language

Since starting my project, I have read a lot around the language used to describe ASC, particularly on Facebook groups for 'actually autistic' individuals and parents of autistic pupils. This has really helped me understand the importance of language and the reasons for using 'autistic' rather than 'with ASC'. Although this is not the preferred term for everybody, the majority of the autistic community have expressed their preference for the term 'autistic', since 'with ASC' suggests it is something they can treat or something that you have developed, rather than being a significant part of your identity. For instance, you would not say a 'person with tallness' or a 'person with gayness'. This helped me understand the relevance of person-first language and how valuable it is to read and hear the opinions of those it affects the most.

February 2022:

Was reflecting today on whether there were gender differences between participants. It seemed that those who identified as male were more likely to need prompts, they did not initiate the conversation as much as those who identified as females. I felt a bit guilty asking lots of questions when some young people did not engage as much as I had hoped. I thought about their experience of this interview – did it feel like just another adult trying to get them to go to school, or did it feel different, like they were really being heard and listened to?

Appendix I – Reflexive Thematic Analytic process

Coding

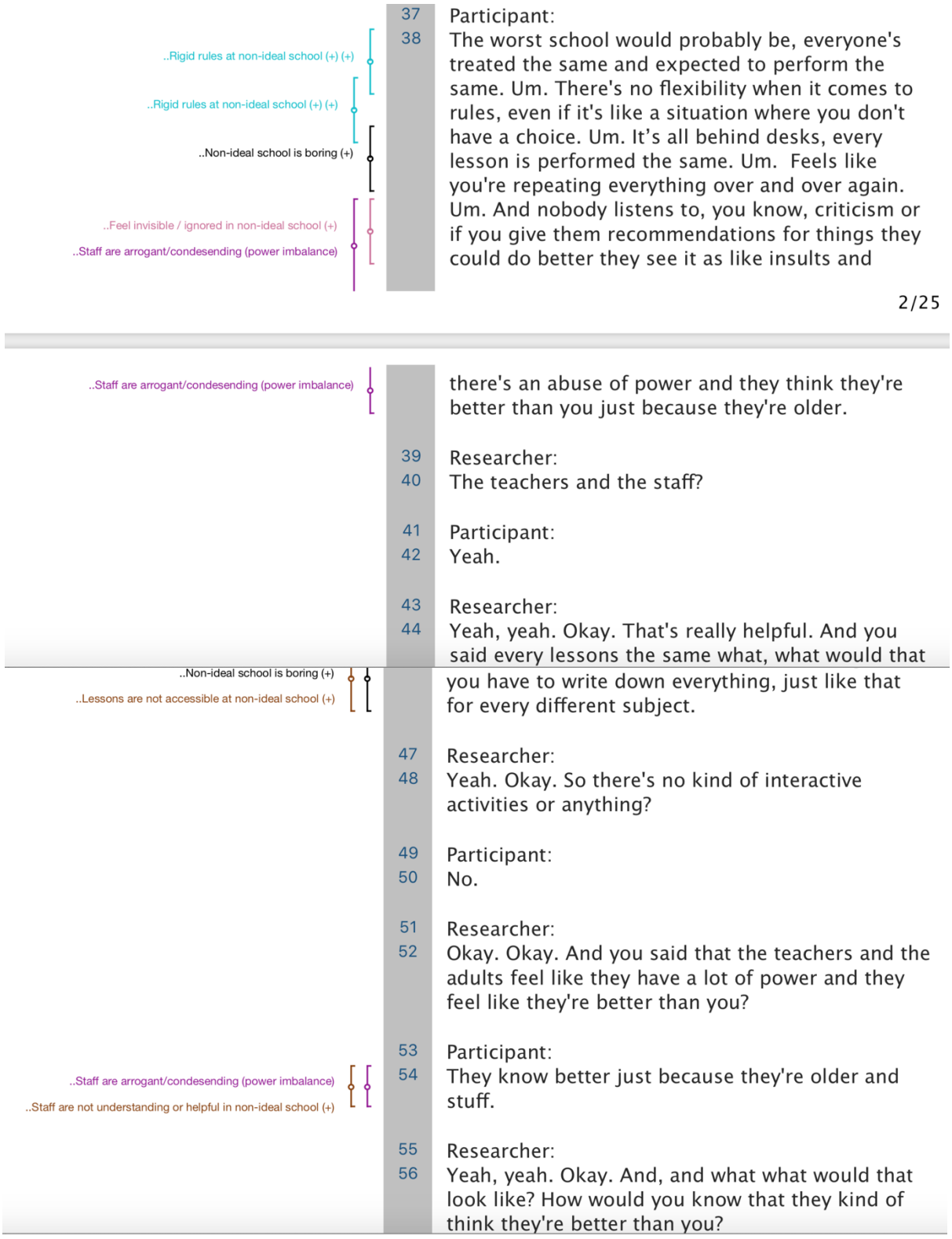
Following an initial process of familiarisation with the dataset described in the methodology chapter, the researcher moved into the more systematic and rigorous stage of coding the data. The dichotomous structure of the interview guide informed the decision to begin by coding data items based on their reference to an ideal or non-ideal school. Any data which did not refer to an ideal or non-ideal school was coded separately. The initial codes identified on this basis are presented below:

Ideal school	**Non-ideal school**
Need for order at ideal school	No uniform in non-ideal school
Ideal school is fair	Feeling of dread at non-ideal school
Ideal school needed to be realistic	Teachers support chaos at non-ideal school
In classes with friends at ideal school	Separated from friends at non-ideal school
Other students are motivated to learn in ideal school	Non-ideal school is chaotic / out of control
Other students are friendly and understanding at ideal school	Sensory environment is overwhelming at non-ideal school
Card system to take a break in ideal school	Non-ideal school does not take responsibility
Consequences for teachers who do not accommodate needs	Feel emotionally unsafe in non-ideal school
Adjustments are made for individual needs at ideal school	Students do not feel listened to at non-ideal school
Neurodivergent staff who have an understanding in ideal school	Students ignore you at non-ideal school
Staff understand SEN needs in ideal school	Lessons are not interactive at non-ideal school
Feel listened to at ideal school	Rigid rules at non-ideal school
Ideal school does not stereotype/group all SEN pupils together	Everyone is expected to perform the same at non-ideal school
Feel safe in ideal school	Not allowed phones in lessons in non-ideal school
Learning is accessible at ideal school	Participant describing own school as non-ideal
Support / tolerance for minority groups at ideal school	Students distracting you at non-ideal school
Counsellor who is good at their job at ideal school	Arguments with students at non-ideal school
Uniform at ideal school	Not good food at non-ideal school
Ideal school has normal start / finish times	Other students are disobedient
Ideal school is quieter	No outside space at non-ideal school
Phones allowed at ideal school	Long days at non-ideal school
Clear instructions at ideal school	Feel trapped at non-ideal school
Can stay / board at your ideal school	Non-ideal school is hot and stuffy
Students obey the rules at ideal school	Staff are mean and hard on you at non-ideal school
Artwork / displays on wall in ideal school	Non-ideal school is dirty
Focus on your special interest at ideal school	Catch up work if you're absent at non-ideal school
More flexibility at ideal school	Nowhere to go if you are struggle in non-ideal school
Participant is in control of ideal school	Feel invisible in non-ideal school
Students paid to come to ideal school	Lots of homework in non-ideal school
Ideal school would be expensive to run	Would have to speak in front of class at non-ideal school
Big library in ideal school	Staff do not accommodate your needs at non-ideal school
Fidget toys in ideal school	Staff think they understand you or know best at non-ideal school
Opportunities to work independent in ideal school	Staff are disrespectful at non-ideal school
Room to go if unwell in ideal school	Sat next to pupils you don't like
Building is not too big in non-ideal school	Would have to do PE at non-ideal school
Swimming pool / basket ball court in ideal school	Sexist systems at non-ideal school
Calm colours and lighting in ideal school	Publicly questioned about attendance in non-ideal school
Earn trips through hard work at ideal school	Not motivated to attend non-ideal school
Four days a week at ideal school	Afraid to ask for help in non-ideal school
Would feel happier at ideal school	Feel anxious at non-ideal school
Less strict ideal school	Non-ideal school is big
Longer break and lunch at ideal school	Old dark building at non-ideal school

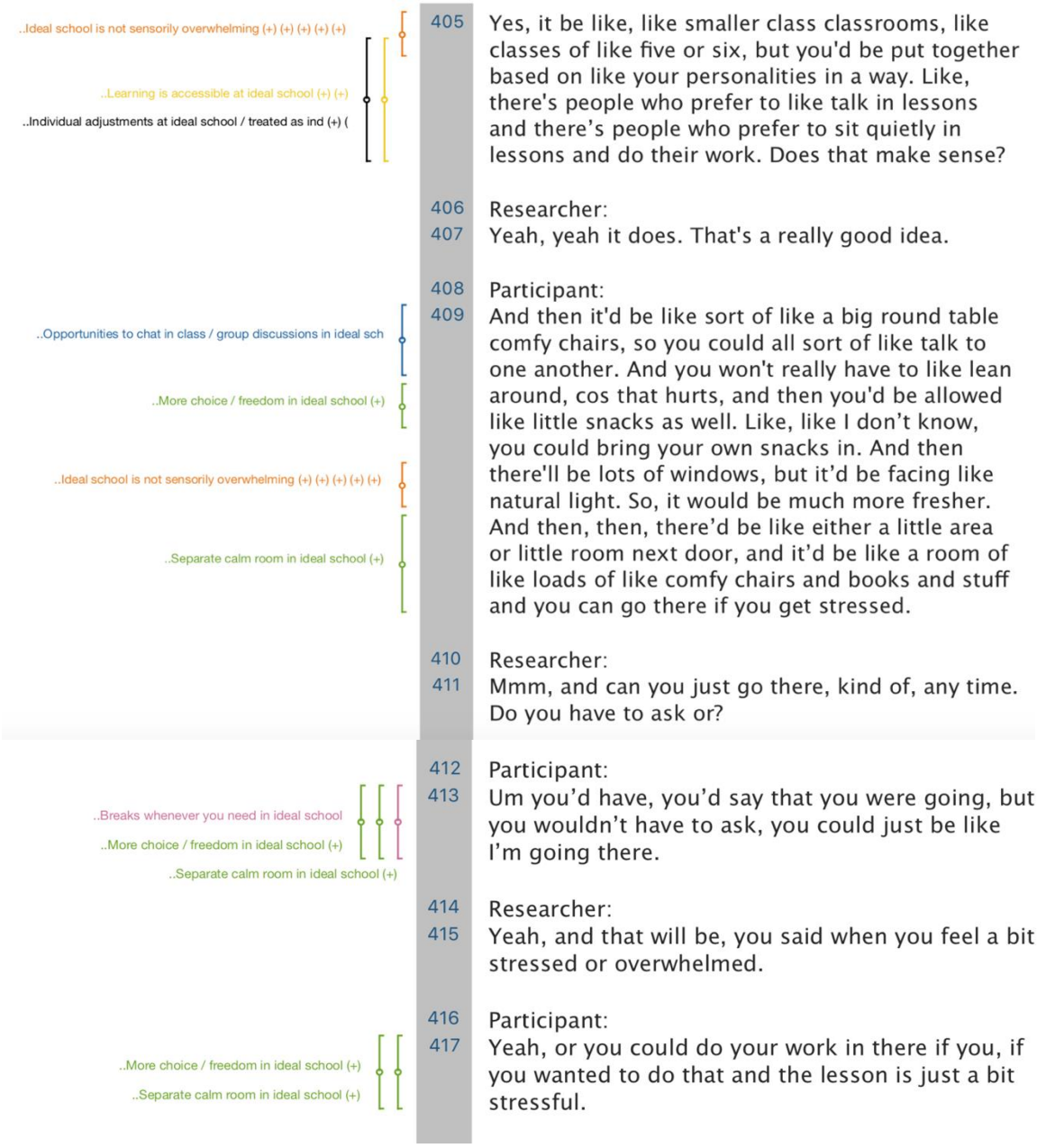
Choose own seating plans in ideal school	Rude and judgmental students at non-ideal school
Staff sit at a distance at ideal school	Shouting/detention over minor things in non-ideal school
Staff care about pupils in ideal school	Non-ideal school prioritises grades/reputation over MH
Newer resources at ideal school	Non-ideal school is too loud/busy
No hierarchy in ideal school / more collaboration	Uncomfortable uniform at non-ideal school
Teachers check in if you did not attend ideal school	Too many students in non-ideal school
Access to nature in ideal school	Don't understand lessons in non-ideal school
Key information on board in ideal school	Non-ideal school is very small
Staff get to the point in ideal school	Non-ideal school is repetitive
Less pressure in ideal school	Non-ideal school feels isolated
More flexibility around homework in ideal school	Students are silenced in non-ideal school
More inside and outside space in ideal school	Pupils lack choice in non-ideal school
Areas to socialise in ideal school	No creative subjects in non-ideal school
Varied food options at ideal school	None or limited break time or lunch in non-ideal school
Access to animals at ideal school	Staff are arrogant/condescending (power imbalance)
Feel calmer in ideal school	Staff are not understanding or helpful in non-ideal school
No uniform in ideal school	No self-expression in non-ideal school
Teachers model and explain behaviour in ideal school	Students feel persecuted in non-ideal school
Everyone gets on in ideal school	Would feel bored in non-ideal school
Less pupils in ideal school	
Staff do not assume they know better at ideal school	**Additional codes**
Staff and pupils more equal in ideal school	Other students were distracting
Staff are respectful in ideal school	Want better facilities
Can listen to music / audio in lessons in ideal school	Varied curriculum
Open classrooms in ideal school	Do not like very small class sizes
Separate calm room in ideal school	Students do not want to learn
Natural light in ideal school	Likes sensory room at current school
Opportunities to chat in class / group discussions in ideal sch	Would like more 1:1 support
Different classes tailored to individual needs at ideal school	Want nicer staff
Opportunities for self-expression at ideal school	Positive experiences of staff at previous school
No special facilities needed at ideal school	Good school trips at previous school
Adults give you space at ideal school	PCP task not helpful
Shorter days / starts later at ideal school	School policies are unfair
Motivated to attend ideal school	Unsure how to explain all the negative aspects of school
There is mutual respect in ideal school	School should learn about women with ASC by asking them
There is choice to go home at ideal school	Negative experiences of staff at school
Breaks whenever you need in ideal school	Friends improve school experience
Would feel less frustrated at ideal school	Values the farm at current school
More choice / freedom in ideal school	Listening to music helps learning
Less pupils in ideal school	Interactive lessons make it easier to learn
Engaging lessons in ideal school	Current school is good as not many pupils
Varied and creative subjects in ideal school	School is exhausting
No exam format in ideal school	Considered what the best school would be like
Large building at ideal school	Staff do not listen at school
Chatty students at ideal school	PCP task was positive
Understanding staff you can talk to / listen at ideal school	Feeling powerless / can't change school / it'll never be good
	Current school requires improvement

Below are extracts from three transcripts, showing how data was coded. Each time the researcher identified a relevant piece of data related to the research question, this was either created as a new code or categorised with an existing code. Codes were identified at both the semantic and latent level, and using both a deductive and inductive approach, ensuring that the range of explicit and underlying meaning was captured in relation to ideal and non-ideal schools.

Coded excerpt from Charlie's transcript



Coded excerpt from Juno's transcript



Coded excerpt from Kurt's transcript

Coding the data based on participants' references to ideal and non-ideal schools allowed the researcher to work systematically and organise the large amount of data based on these opposing constructs. Despite this, the researcher experienced difficulty disentangling the ideal and non-ideal and identifying separate codes for each item. At times the researcher found themselves moving towards the next stage of the RTA process before coding was complete, as they noticed how codes that appeared polarised might fit together beneath a wider theme. To ensure the researcher remained with the coding stage of the process, they reflected on the number of the codes created and recognised that these often captured very similar segments of data, described by Braun and Clarke (2021) as 'micro-differences' in the dataset. The researcher therefore merged similar codes beneath their ideal, non-ideal and additional subheadings, which allowed the reduction of the overall number of codes. Some examples of merged codes are illustrated below:

- 'Consequences for teachers at ideal school' and 'support for minority groups at ideal school' merged with 'ideal school is fair'
- 'Card system to take a break in ideal school' merged with 'adjustments are made for individual needs at ideal school'
- 'Neurodivergent staff who have an understanding in ideal school' merged with 'Staff understand SEN needs in ideal school'
- 'Calm colours in ideal school', 'less pupils in ideal school' and 'open classrooms in ideal school' merged with 'Ideal school is not sensorily overwhelming'
- 'Swimming pool / basketball court at ideal school' merged with 'new/better resources at ideal school'
- 'Other students are disobedient at non-ideal school' merged with 'difficulties with other students at non-ideal school'
- 'Nowhere to go if you are struggling at non-ideal school' merged with 'feel trapped at non-ideal school'
- 'Separated from friends at non-ideal school' merged with 'feel isolated in non-ideal school'

Generating themes

The table below demonstrates examples of how data was coded to create subthemes and themes.

Theme: Relationships are key		
Data extract	**Code**	**Subtheme**
Juno: And then it'd be like sort of like a big round table, comfy chairs, so you could all sort of like talk to one another. (P2 Juno, Paragraph. 409) **Juno:** But if it was in lessons then they'd kind of, if it was okay with the person, then get the class involved. And then we can see what everyone else thinks and then it's more like a joint... If you don't understand we can work it out. (P2 Juno, Paragraph. 684) **Researcher:** If there was a couple of things that you could choose that would make it [school] a little bit better, say to get to a five, what might they be? **Laura:** …choosing your seating plans (P3 Laura, Paragraph. 570) **Juno:** I like ones where you kind of talk to the person the whole time, if that makes sense. Like whilst you're doing your work you can, not like on a powerpoint cos I don't really like PowerPoints and it's not really interactive. (P2 Juno, Paragraph. 445)	Opportunities to chat in class / group discussions at ideal school	Peer relationships matter

Juno: like you can speak in them [the lessons] (P2 Juno, Paragraph. 794) **Laura:** no seating plans… like you're allowed to like work with people. And it's not like you're sat next to the person you hate most of the class and hates you most, you're sat with like your friends. (P3 Laura, Paragraph. 417) **Researcher:** And how about the other students in the school, what would they be like? **Kurt**: I dunno. Erm, I've got a really wide taste of friends I suppose so I'm not bothered about how they are, as long as they're talkative. (P1 Kurt, Paragraph. 236-238) **Ink:** Speaking of in class, you will be in in classes with some of your friends. Not all of them because that can get a bit chaotic. (P9 Ink, Paragraph. 186) **Charlie:** There'd be like groups. So that you can confide in your group. And you're kind of entitled to work together to figure stuff out. So nobody's really alone when it comes to the learning. And it's all done fairly, and people are allowed to choose their own groups given that they behave well and behave well then they're given warnings and stuff (P7 Charlie, Paragraph. 247) **Hibbert:** There's not enough children [in current class]. There's three other people in my class (P8 Hibbert, Paragraph. 319) **Researcher:** Would you be allowed to talk to each other in class? **Rosie:** Erm… yeah, a bit so it doesn't get too loud then… (P4 Rosie, Paragraph. 455-457) **Ink:** You can still talk with your friends if the teacher isn't talking. (P9 Ink, Paragraph. 182)		
Kurt: [School would be] in the middle of nowhere. (P1 Kurt, Paragraph. 48) **Kurt:** Nobody's allowed to speak here, outside of school, like the other students aren't allowed to speak to you outside of school. (P1 Kurt, Paragraph. 163) **Researcher:** what would be the worst thing about this school? **Ink:** probably not being in the same class as my friends (P9 Ink, Paragraph. 96) **Juno:** They're singular desks by the way cos I don't like it when you have to sit by yourself. (P2 Juno, Paragraph. 6) **Charlie:** I would have to deal with stuff alone. (P7 Charlie, Paragraph. 126-130) **Ink:** Yeah, I don't like not being in the same class as my friends. (P9 Ink, Paragraph. 102) **Rosie:** You have to eat inside, and you're not allowed to mix classes or see your friends. (P4 Rosie, Paragraph. 93)	Feel isolated in non-ideal school	
Hibbert: I think everyone should understand each other. (P8 Hibbert, Paragraph. 126) **Hibbert:** I think they'd be understanding, friendly… I think that by a rule, no I won't say that. I won't say no neurotypicals allowed! I'm joking, I'm not going to say that (P8 Hibbert, Paragraph. 118)	Other students are friendly and understanding at ideal school	
Hibbert: I think that that the classmates should I mean hopefully have a good attitude about learning but because no one in my school cares anything about learning… They're all so slow… not slow but like they don't put effort, they take their time. (P8 Hibbert, Paragraph. 126) **Khalil:** the students actually want to learn (P10 Khalil, Paragraph. 329) **Hibbert:** Three more would be good, maybe four more and are nice and want to learn, people that want to learn (P8 Hibbert, Paragraph. 333)	Other students are motivated to learn at ideal school	
Laura: Everyone's just your friends really, like people that you don't have a problem with. (P3 Laura, Paragraph. 425)	Everyone gets on at ideal school	

Charlie: like there's no tolerance of bullying of any kind. Fights, hate crime and stuff. (P7 Charlie, Paragraph. 260) **Researcher:** so would everyone be getting on? **Jonathon:** Yeah (P6 Jonathon, Paragraph. 182-184) **Juno:** there wouldn't be much need for drama. Like everyone would sorta just be friends instead of like little petty groups or whatever. (P2 Juno, Paragraph. 544)		
Jonathon: And a lot of people trying to distract you [at non-ideal school]. (P6 Jonathon, Paragraph. 38) **Hibbert:** And so these people represent a big group and also they are the children in the classroom that are making such a big noise. They're so annoying. (P8 Hibbert, Paragraph. 201) **Juno:** they'd make drama out of anything. (P2 Juno, Paragraph. 142) **Laura:** I don't like when, like in both when like you're sat next to two people if they like really don't like you, then you're just kinda… stuck. (P3 Laura, Paragraph. 21) **Juno:** I don't know what the word is but they'd be like, you know like all the big picture of like the racism and the homophobia, just like, all of those. (P2 Juno, Paragraph. 154) **Ellie:** if the kids are disobedient doing drugs or vaping, then that is not a happy school. (P5 Ellie, Paragraph. 84) **Rosie:** other students would ignore you. (P4 Rosie, Paragraph. 50) **Khalil:** The school would look like a place that's been destroyed by the students. Or been turned into a mess by the students. (P10 Khalil, Paragraph. 29-30) **Khalil:** [other students would be] really, really rude. really rude. Disobedient. Really annoying. And and damaging. And and careless. (P10 Khalil, Paragraph. 41-42) **Juno:** Rude to each other (P2 Juno, Paragraph. 150) **Jonathon:** So many arguments I guess [at non-ideal school]. (P6 Jonathon, Paragraph. 22) **Charlie:** Um basically like, um sort of stuck up like, just bullies I guess, in general, but not in the sense of, like fights and upfront insult… insults. But more in like the incredibly annoying and antagonising. (P7 Charlie, Paragraph. 86) **Researcher:** what would other students be like in this school? **Charlie:** Um just quiet, ignore you. Even if you're like asking for help and stuff. (P7 Charlie, Paragraph. 98) **Ink:** Well going off of what might happen, probably a few on their phones playing stuff like Among Us, or just fooling around. They might not care about what's happening. (P9 Ink, Paragraph. 27) **Laura:** Well some people annoy you (P3 Laura, Paragraph. 55)	Difficulties with other students at non-ideal school	

Braun and Clarke (2021) describe RTA as a recursive and evolving process, so despite moving towards generating initial candidate themes, the researcher later revisited and re-clustered several codes. At this stage of the process, the researcher clustered codes based on similar patterns of meaning, which led to codes relating to the ideal school and non-ideal school being clustered together. Despite presenting dichotomous constructs (e.g. less homework in ideal school and too much homework in non-ideal school), it was clear that these codes shared a central organising concept, relating to expectations and pressures of

homework. Using both electronic and hard copies of the codes, the researcher continued to cluster similar codes together and identified the following candidate themes: *the school environment; relationships are key; having choice; room for flexibility; perceptions of school; we want to attend; school as a difficult place.*

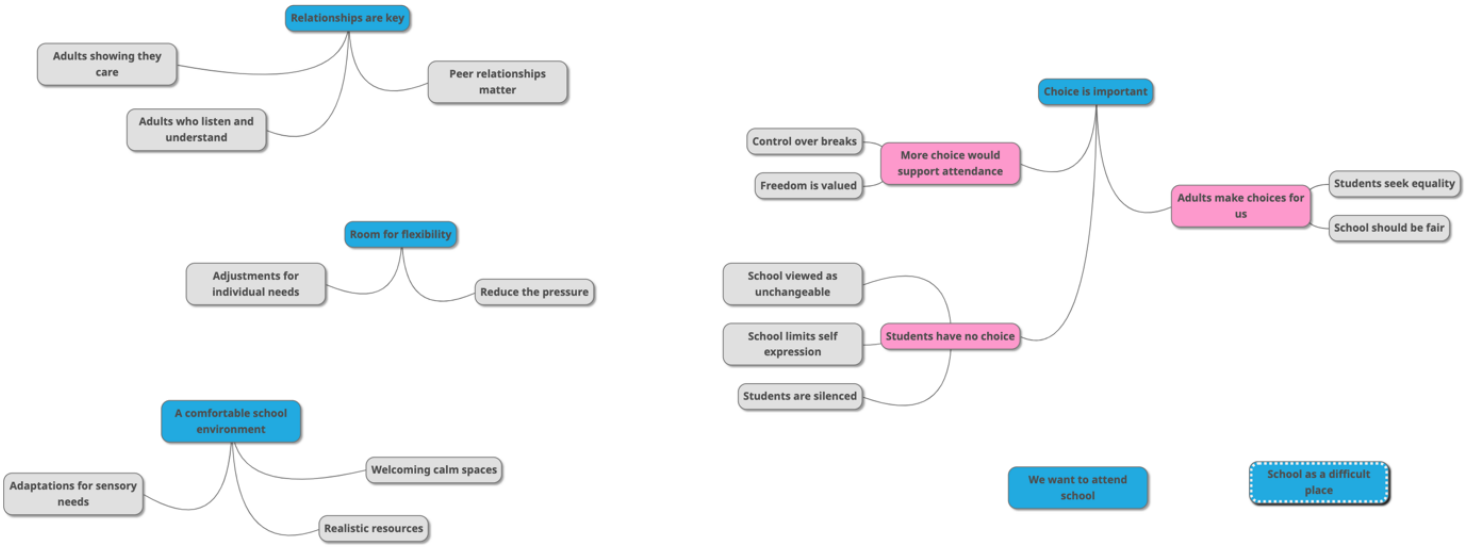
Reviewing and naming themes

Although the researcher combined codes that referred to the ideal and non-ideal school, some codes referenced participants' previous or current school experiences. Initially, the researcher clustered these beneath 'perceptions of school', however later recognised that this theme had been constructed purely to encapsulate the miscellaneous codes that did not fit within other themes. At this point, the researcher revisited the wider dataset to ensure that all codes were capturing what was intended and to reconsider how participants' previous and current perceptions of school might be organised within the existing themes.

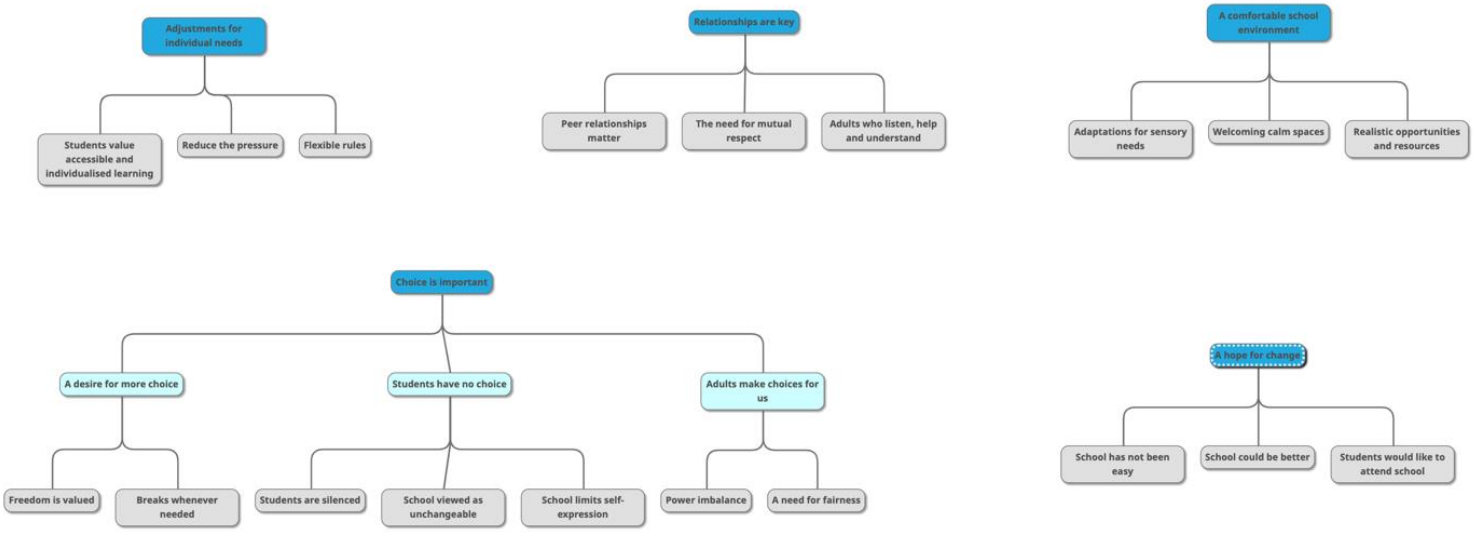
Revisiting the wider dataset allowed the researcher to recode data and to include past and current perceptions of school beneath the candidate themes. For instance, where participants had referred to negative experiences of staff at their current school, this was now coded beneath the 'relationships are key' theme, rather than 'perceptions of school'. This helped address the issue of some of the themes (including 'perceptions of school' and 'the school environment') capturing 'topic summaries', that mapped directly from interview questions, rather than identifying the direction or analytic meaning behind the theme. The process of revisiting the entire dataset ensured that the themes moved away from topic summaries and each one evidenced a shared idea, rather than the potentially contrasting range of responses relating to a particular interview question.

When reviewing the themes, thought was given to the similarity between 'flexibility' and 'choice' and whether these were discrete themes. Upon reviewing the data and codes, it was felt that 'room for flexibility,' worked better as a subcode, subsumed beneath 'adjustments for individual needs.' During the process of naming themes, the researcher remained conscious of avoiding using topic summaries and attempted to use participants' words where possible. The thematic maps below show two earlier versions of potential themes and subthemes and the final thematic map in version 3.

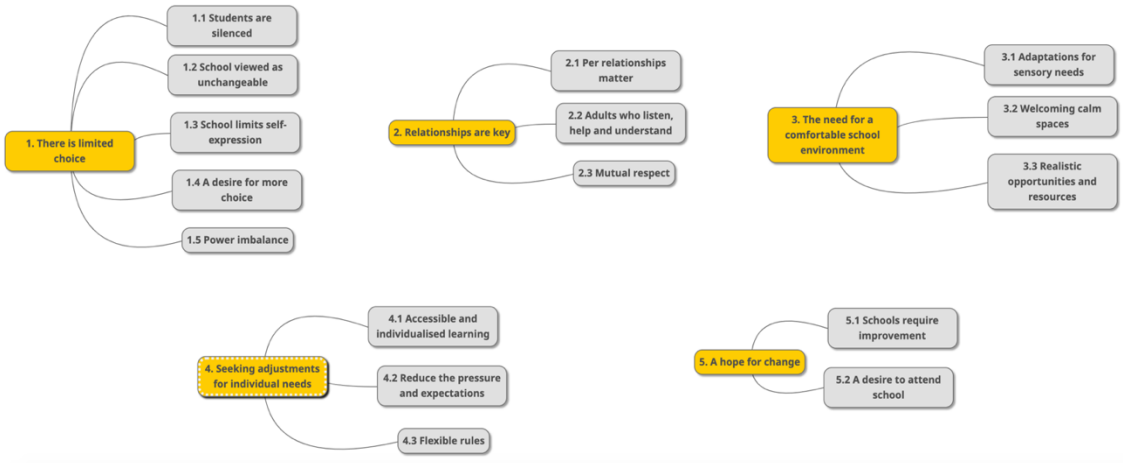
Thematic map 1



Thematic map 2



Thematic map 3 (final version)



Appendix J – Ethics form

The Tavistock and Portman NHS
NHS Foundation Trust

Tavistock and Portman Trust Research Ethics Committee (TREC)
APPLICATION FOR ETHICAL REVIEW OF STUDENT RESEARCH PROJECTS

This application should be submitted alongside copies of any supporting documentation which will be handed to participants, including a participant information sheet, consent form, self-completion survey or questionnaire.

Where a form is submitted and sections are incomplete, the form will not be considered by TREC and will be returned to the applicant for completion.

For further guidance please contact Paru Jeram (academicquality@tavi-port.nhs.uk)

FOR ALL APPLICANTS

If you already have ethical approval from another body (including HRA/IRAS) please submit the application form and outcome letters. You need only complete sections of the TREC form which are NOT covered in your existing approval

Is your project considered as 'research' according to the HRA tool? (http://www.hra-decisiontools.org.uk/research/index.html)	**No**
Will your project involve participants who are under 18 or who are classed as vulnerable? (see section 7)	**Yes**
Will your project include data collection outside of the UK?	**No**

SECTION A: PROJECT DETAILS

Project title	The Ideal School: Exploring the constructs of young people experiencing Emotionally Based School Avoidance		
Proposed project start date	March 2021	**Anticipated project end date**	August 2022
Principle Investigator (normally your Research Supervisor): Rachael Green			
Please note: TREC approval will only be given for the length of the project as stated above up to a maximum of 6 years. Projects exceeding these timeframes will need additional ethical approval			
Has NHS or other approval been sought for this research including through submission via Research Application System	**YES (NRES approval)** ☐ **YES (HRA approval)** ☐ **Other** **NO** ☐		

(IRAS) or to the Health Research Authority (HRA)?	☒
If you already have ethical approval from another body (including HRA/IRAS) please submit the application form and outcome letters.	

SECTION B: APPLICANT DETAILS

Name of Researcher	Mollie Higgins
Programme of Study and Target Award	M4 – Doctorate in Child, Community and Educational Psychology
Email address	mhiggins@tavi-port.nhs.uk
Contact telephone number	07948565508

SECTION C: CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

Will any of the researchers or their institutions receive any other benefits or incentives for taking part in this research over and above their normal salary package or the costs of undertaking the research? **YES** ☐ **NO** ☒ If **YES**, please detail below:
Is there any further possibility for conflict of interest? YES ☐ **NO** ☒
Are you proposing to conduct this work in a location where you work or have a placement? **YES** ☒ **NO** ☐ If **YES**, please detail below outline how you will avoid issues arising around colleagues being involved in this project:
As the participants involved in the project are young people, Educational Psychology colleagues will not be directly involved in the project. If any participants are receiving input from another Educational Psychologist in the team, it will be made clear that this work is separate from the young person's involvement in this project and information will remain confidential.

Is your project being commissioned by and/or carried out on behalf of a body external to the Trust? (for example; commissioned by a local authority, school, care home, other NHS Trust or other organisation).	**YES** ☐ **NO** ☒

*Please note that 'external' is defined as an organisation which is external to the Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust (Trust)	
If **YES**, please add details here:	
Will you be required to get further ethical approval after receiving TREC approval? If **YES**, please supply details of the ethical approval bodies below AND include any letters of approval from the ethical approval bodies (letters received after receiving TREC approval should be submitted to complete your record):	**YES** ☐ **NO** ☒
If your project is being undertaken with one or more clinical services or organisations external to the Trust, please provide details of these:	
If you still need to agree these arrangements or if you can only approach organisations after you have ethical approval, please identify the types of organisations (eg. schools or clinical services) you wish to approach:	
Do you have approval from the organisations detailed above? (this includes R&D approval where relevant) Please attach approval letters to this application. Any approval letters received after TREC approval has been granted MUST be submitted to be appended to your record.	**YES** ☒ **NO** ☐ **NA** ☐ **Please see appendix for letter of consent from Principal Educational Psychologist in the researcher's local authority.**

SECTION D: SIGNATURES AND DECLARATIONS

APPLICANT DECLARATION

I confirm that:

- The information contained in this application is, to the best of my knowledge, correct and up to date.
- I have attempted to identify all risks related to the research.
- I acknowledge my obligations and commitment to upholding ethical principles and to keep my supervisor updated with the progress of my research
- I am aware that for cases of proven misconduct, it may result in formal disciplinary proceedings and/or the cancellation of the proposed research.

• I understand that if my project design, methodology or method of data collection changes I must seek an amendment to my ethical approvals as failure to do so, may result in a report of academic and/or research misconduct.

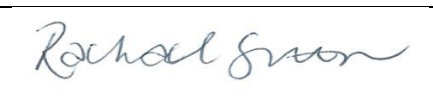
Applicant (print name)	Mollie Higgins
Signed	
Date	10.03.2021

FOR RESEARCH DEGREE STUDENT APPLICANTS ONLY

Name of Supervisor/Principal Investigator	Dr Rachael Green

Supervisor –

- Does the student have the necessary skills to carry out the research?
  YES ☒ **NO** ☐
- Is the participant information sheet, consent form and any other documentation appropriate?
  YES ☒ **NO** ☐
- Are the procedures for recruitment of participants and obtaining informed consent suitable and sufficient?
  YES ☒ **NO** ☐
- Where required, does the researcher have current Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) clearance?
  YES ☒ **NO** ☐

Signed	
Date	15th March 2021

COURSE LEAD/RESEARCH LEAD

Does the proposed research as detailed herein have your support to proceed? YES ☐ NO ☐

Signed	
Date	

SECTION E: DETAILS OF THE PROPOSED RESEARCH

1. Provide a brief description of the proposed research, including the requirements of participants. This must be in lay terms and free from technical or discipline specific terminology or jargon. If such terms are required, please ensure they are adequately explained (Do not exceed 500 words)

This research seeks to explore the constructs of young people who present with Emotionally Based School Avoidance (EBSA), a term used to describe children and young people who have 'severe difficulty in attending school due to emotional factors' (West Sussex Guidance, 2018). I am seeking to recruit 10 young people aged between 11-16 who have difficulty attending school. I intend to recruit participants from schools and education settings in the Local Authority where I am currently training as an Educational Psychologist by approaching schools and Local Authority colleagues. The research is guided by the following question: what constructs of school do young people with Emotionally Based School Avoidance have?

Prior to the interview, consent and assent will be gained from the parent and young person. Demographic and contextual information will be collected from the participants' parent / carer via a questionnaire. The data collected with include their child's age, year group, gender, ethnicity, first incidence of school avoidance, amount of time attending school and primary reason for school avoidance. The parent or carer will also be asked to provide a contact number in case the researcher needs to make contact, which will be stored on an encrypted drive.

Since young people with EBSA find it difficult to attend their education setting, it is unreasonable to expect them to attend an interview session in this environment and data will therefore be collected remotely. Using the online platform Zoom, participants will be asked to engage in a 'Drawing the Ideal School' activity, an established concept based on Moran's (2001) 'Ideal Self' and adapted by Hanke and Williams (2007). Underpinned by Personal Construct Psychology (PCP), the approach aims to elicit young people's views relating to school, by asking them to draw and discuss their 'ideal' and 'non-ideal' schools, as well as using a scaling activity to identify where their current school falls in relation to their imagined schools. The drawings will be completed either by hand and shown to the camera or using the whiteboard function on Zoom. Moran (2001) indicates that the drawings are used as a basis for discussion and are not required to be detailed. A semi-structured interview will be conducted alongside the drawings to help the researcher clarify details, including questions relating to the young person, staff, peers and the school environment. This will support the researcher to gain a deeper understanding of the participants' school constructs. The interview will also ask participants how their current school compares to their ideal school and their experience of using the 'Ideal School' technique online.

The online drawing and interview session will be recorded using the Zoom 'record' function and drawings will be saved via the computer or scanned and emailed to the researcher, with the participants' consent. Once the drawing and interview sessions are completed, Thematic Analysis (TA) will be used to analyse the transcripts and identify themes relating to participants' school constructs.

2. Provide a statement on the aims and significance of the proposed research, including potential impact to knowledge and understanding in the field (where appropriate, indicate the associated hypothesis which will be tested). This should be a clear justification of the proposed research, why it should proceed and a statement on any anticipated benefits to the community. (Do not exceed 700 words)

This project aims to explore the constructs of children and young people who have difficulty attending school for emotional reasons. Young people who miss education are at increased risk of negative outcomes, including limited academic progress, social isolation, mental health difficulties, and reduced employment opportunities (Department for Education, 2016; Gregory and Purcell, 2014). Improving attendance therefore remains a national priority and Educational Psychologists (EPs) play a key role in promoting inclusion and supporting young people to access education. Previous research identifies the role of the school environment as a factor contributing to school avoidance (Malcolm et al., 2003), highlighting the importance of exploring these young people's constructs relating to their ideal and non-ideal school environment. This research therefore proposes to explore the school constructs of young people with EBSA and aims to provide an insight into the way the school environment could be adapted to contribute to improved attendance.

Both nationally and locally, there has been increasing recognition of the importance of seeking young people's views and ensuring their voices are heard, particularly following the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) and the Special Educational Needs (SEN) Code of Practice (2014). Addressing a lack of children and young people's views within EBSA literature (Baker and Bishop, 2015), more recent research has utilised interviews to explore young people's perspectives on their school non-attendance. Findings indicated that experiences such as bullying, fear of teachers, anxiety and social isolation contributed to difficulties attending school. Further risk factors included challenging peer or staff relationships, not feeling listened to and a lack of control and flexibility (Billington, 2018; Gregory & Purcell, 2014; How, 2015; James, 2015 and Shilvock, 2010). Whilst these studies provide an insight into young people's experiences of not attending school, the current project aims to add to this knowledge by utilising a PCP lens and using the 'Drawing the Ideal School' technique to explore their constructs and identify how the school environment could be improved to support attendance. Despite a growing evidence base linked to pupil voice within EBSA literature, there is currently no research utilising the 'Ideal School' technique with this group of young people. Given the success of this approach with other children who find it difficult to engage, for instance those with anxiety, Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and children at risk of exclusion, it is likely that it will provide a useful tool to support young people with EBSA in identifying and sharing their constructs.

Furthermore, the current project will add to existing knowledge of EBSA by exploring the views of young people in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. Young people's experiences of school have been significantly impacted by Covid-19, with school closures, smaller class sizes and the introduction of online learning. By utilising a PCP methodology, the current research may help to identify how young people with EBSA have altered their constructs of what makes an ideal and non-ideal school in response to this global crisis.

The EP role involves working across school systems at an individual, group and organisational level (Farrell, 2006) and EPs are continuously seeking new and creative methods of engaging with young people. This is the first project which proposes to use the 'Drawing the Ideal' technique via remote technology, and it is hoped that this will identify whether using the tool in this way supports engagement for young people with EBSA. Consequently, this may provide EPs with an alternative method of exploring school constructs and supporting young people with EBSA in the future. Finally, the research intends to benefit young people with EBSA directly, by providing an opportunity to use a therapeutic tool with a Trainee EP to explore their ideas about school. Furthermore, the research aims to provide schools and education settings with information about what young people with EBSA believe contributes to an ideal and non-ideal school and how the education environment can be improved to support their attendance.

3. Provide an outline of the methodology for the proposed research, including proposed method of data collection, *tasks* assigned to participants of the research and the proposed method and duration of data analysis. If the proposed research makes use of pre-established and generally accepted techniques, please make this clear. (Do not exceed 500 words)

The proposed research is underpinned by a relativist ontology and constructivist epistemology and will collect qualitative data through the use of drawings and a semi-structured interview. Following the receipt of informed consent, young people who meet the inclusion criteria will be invited to take part in an online version of the 'Drawing the Ideal School' activity and interviewed about their school constructs. The 'Ideal School' approach will ask the participant to imagine and draw a brief sketch of 'the worst' school, either on paper or using the whiteboard function on Zoom. The participant will be asked to describe the image they drew whilst the researcher makes notes of the participants' words. A semi-structured interview will be conducted asking the participant about the characteristics of their worst school. The participants will then be asked to complete the same task, imagining and drawing 'the best' school. The researcher will then share their computer screen on Zoom to complete a scaling activity with the young person to identify where their current school falls in relation to their ideal school and what others can do to create a more ideal school. Participants will also be given the opportunity to reflect on their experience of using the technique online. All interviews will be recorded by the researcher and drawings will be saved at the end of each interview. It is anticipated that the session will last a maximum of an hour, with breaks as required. Following the interview, participants will be asked whether they are still happy for the information they have shared to be used for the project.

Interviews will be transcribed and analysed using inductive Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006) to identify whether there are themes in the school constructs of young people with EBSA. The process involves generating initial codes before identifying and refining specific themes. It is anticipated that the data analysis will be conducted over a period of two months following the completion of interviews.

SECTION F: PARTICIPANT DETAILS

4. Provide an explanation detailing how you will identify, approach and recruit the participants for the proposed research, including clarification on sample size and location. Please provide justification for the exclusion/inclusion criteria for this study (i.e. who will be allowed to / not allowed to participate) and explain briefly, in lay terms, why these criteria are in place. (Do not exceed 500 words)

A purposive sample of 10 young people aged between 11-16 years who are experiencing Emotionally Based School Avoidance will be recruited from the Local Authority where I am training as an Educational Psychologist. A sample of 10 has been chosen in line with previous research utilising 'Drawing the Ideal' techniques (Morgan-Rose, 2015; Pirotta, 2016) and Crouch and McKenzie's (2006) guidance of using less than twenty participants in a qualitative study to establish relationships and enhance the validity of rich, in-depth data.

Recruitment strategy:

- Step 1: Contact the Headteacher or SENCO of secondary school or provision in my area to outline the research and share the recruitment information. I will ask the staff member to identify any young people who meet the inclusion criteria and request they share the information about the research project with the young person and their parent or carer.

- Step 1a [if step 1 does not provide enough participants]: Contact Local Authority colleagues including Social Workers, Education Welfare Officers and Emotional Wellbeing Practitioners to outline the research and share the recruitment information. If colleagues are working with any young people or parents of young people who meet the inclusion criteria, they will decide whether it is appropriate to share information about the research project.

- Step 1b [if step 1a does not provide enough participants]: Share poster in private Facebook group (if necessary and following ethical approval). The group is named *'Not Fine in School: Family Support for School Attendance Difficulties'* and is for parents and family members of young people who struggle to attend school. I will contact the administrator of the group to gain permission to share the research poster once ethical approval is received.

- Step 2: An information sheet (see appendix) will be sent via the school or professional to parents of any young people who have expressed an interest and meet the inclusion criteria.

- Step 3: Parents will be asked to contact me directly if they consent for their child to take part in the project and will be required to sign a consent form on behalf of their child.

- Step 4: All participants will be required to provide assent prior to interviews taking place.

Inclusion and exclusion criteria:

Inclusion criteria	Justification
Young people will be aged between 11-16 years old.	Research suggests that EBSA is most common in secondary age children (Kearney, 2008), often following the transition from primary school. There is currently a paucity of research with young people in Key Stage 3.
Young people will identify themselves as finding it difficult to attend school due to emotional reasons.	The focus of the study is young people who present with EBSA. Some studies have specified that young people must have attendance below 85-90%, however this study gives voice to any young people who identify as experiencing school avoidance.

Young people will be able to communicate verbally in English and not experience learning difficulties that prevent them from engaging in the drawing and interview task.	The interview requires participants to be able to express themselves verbally in English and understand the concept of ideal and non-ideal constructs.
There will not be an alternative reason for absence e.g., fixed term or permanent exclusion, long-term illness or a trip abroad.	The study focuses on children who do not attend school for emotional reasons as opposed to alternative explanations.

5. Please state the location(s) of the proposed research including the location of any interviews. Please provide a Risk Assessment if required. Consideration should be given to lone working, visiting private residences, conducting research outside working hours or any other non-standard arrangements.

If any data collection is to be done online, please identify the platforms to be used.

Data will be collected using the online platform Zoom. The meeting ID and password will be shared with the participant prior to the meeting via an encrypted email. All Zoom meetings will be protected with a password. Participants will be made aware that the Zoom call is being recorded and consent will have been agreed prior to the start of the interview. Participants will be aware that the Zoom recording will be stored securely following the interview and disposed of in line with data protection guidelines.

6. Will the participants be from any of the following groups? ***(Tick as appropriate)***

- ☐ Students or Staff of the Trust or Partner delivering your programme.
- ☐ Adults (over the age of 18 years with mental capacity to give consent to participate in the research).
- ☒ Children or legal minors (anyone under the age of 16 years)[1]
- ☐ Adults who are unconscious, severely ill or have a terminal illness.
- ☐ Adults who may lose mental capacity to consent during the course of the research.
- ☐ Adults in emergency situations.
- ☐ Adults[2] with mental illness - particularly those detained under the Mental Health Act (1983 & 2007).
- ☐ Participants who may lack capacity to consent to participate in the research under the research requirements of the Mental Capacity Act (2005).
- ☐ Prisoners, where ethical approval may be required from the National Offender Management Service (NOMS).
- ☐ Young Offenders, where ethical approval may be required from the National Offender Management Service (NOMS).
- ☐ Healthy volunteers (in high risk intervention studies).
- ☐ Participants who may be considered to have a pre-existing and potentially dependent[3] relationship with the investigator (e.g. those in care homes, students, colleagues, service-users, patients).
- ☐ Other vulnerable groups (see Question 6).
- ☐ Adults who are in custody, custodial care, or for whom a court has assumed responsibility.
- ☐ Participants who are members of the Armed Forces.

[1]If the proposed research involves children or adults who meet the Police Act (1997) definition of vulnerability[3], any researchers who will have contact with participants must have current Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) clearance.

[2] *'Adults with a learning or physical disability, a physical or mental illness, or a reduction in physical or mental capacity, and living in a care home or home for people with learning difficulties or receiving care in their own home, or receiving hospital or social care services.' (Police Act, 1997)*
[3] *Proposed research involving participants with whom the investigator or researcher(s) shares a dependent or unequal relationships (e.g. teacher/student, clinical therapist/service-user) may compromise the ability to give informed consent which is free from any form of pressure (real or implied) arising from this relationship. TREC recommends that, wherever practicable, investigators choose participants with whom they have no dependent relationship. Following due scrutiny, if the investigator is confident that the research involving participants in dependent relationships is vital and defensible, TREC will require additional information setting out the case and detailing how risks inherent in the dependent relationship will be managed. TREC will also need to be reassured that refusal to participate will not result in any discrimination or penalty.*

7. Will the study involve participants who are vulnerable? YES ☒ NO ☐

For the purposes of research, 'vulnerable' participants may be adults whose ability to protect their own interests are impaired or reduced in comparison to that of the broader population. Vulnerability may arise from:

- the participant's personal characteristics (e.g. mental or physical impairment)
- their social environment, context and/or disadvantage (e.g. socio-economic mobility, educational attainment, resources, substance dependence, displacement or homelessness).
- where prospective participants are at high risk of consenting under duress, or as a result of manipulation or coercion, they must also be considered as vulnerable
- children are automatically presumed to be vulnerable.

7.1. If YES, what special arrangements are in place to protect vulnerable participants' interests?

Participants involved in the project will be under the age of 16 and therefore classed as vulnerable. A diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder also impacts participants' vulnerability. Parental consent will be gained prior to any interviews taking place. Participants will receive a clear information sheet and have the opportunity to meet with the researcher via Zoom to discuss the information sheet and ask any questions prior to the interviews. Participants will be informed that they have the right to withdraw at any time until the point of data analysis (up to four weeks after each interview). They will be reminded that they can stop the interview at any point and request breaks as necessary. I have an enhanced DBS check which can be shared upon request. Please see Question 13 for further details of how participants will be supported.

If YES, a Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) check **within the last three years** is required.
Please provide details of the "clear disclosure":

Date of disclosure: 08/07/2019
Type of disclosure: Enhanced
Organisation that requested disclosure: Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust
DBS certificate number: 001664674943

*(NOTE: information concerning activities which require DBS checks can be found via https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/dbs-check-eligible-positions-guidance). Please **do not** include a copy of your DBS certificate with your application*

8. Do you propose to make any form of payment or incentive available to participants of the research? YES ☐ NO ☒

If **YES**, please provide details taking into account that any payment or incentive should be representative of reasonable remuneration for participation and may not be of a value that could be coercive or exerting undue influence on potential participants' decision to take part in the research. Wherever possible, remuneration in a monetary form should be avoided and substituted with vouchers, coupons or equivalent. Any payment made to research participants may have benefit or HMRC implications and participants should be alerted to this in the participant information sheet as they may wish to choose to decline payment.

N/A

9. What special arrangements are in place for eliciting informed consent from participants who may not adequately understand verbal explanations or written information provided in English; where participants have special communication needs; where participants have limited literacy; or where children are involved in the research? (Do not exceed 200 words)

The information sheet clearly explains the purpose of the research, what participants will be required to do and the procedures for gaining consent / assent. The information sheet explains that participants are under no obligation to take part in the research and they can withdraw at any time prior to the start of data analysis (up to four weeks after each interview). It will be made clear that the 'Ideal School' technique is being used as a way of understanding participants' views and will not necessarily result in changes to their current school. It is participants' choice whether information from their interview is shared with their school and they can change their decision at any time. They will be made aware that data will be anonymised and have the opportunity to choose their own pseudonym. They will also be made aware that the small sample size of 10 participants may reduce levels of anonymity. Prior to the interview, the researcher will meet with each participant remotely to read through the information sheet and assent form and answer questions. Following the interview, the researcher will check that the participant is still happy for the information they have shared to be used.

SECTION F: RISK ASSESSMENT AND RISK MANAGEMENT

10. Does the proposed research involve any of the following? ***(Tick as appropriate)***

☒ use of a questionnaire, self-completion survey or data-collection instrument (attach copy)
☐ use of emails or the internet as a means of data collection
☐ use of written or computerised tests
☒ interviews (attach interview questions)
☐ diaries (attach diary record form)
☐ participant observation
☐ participant observation (in a non-public place) without their knowledge / covert research
☒ audio-recording interviewees or events
☒ video-recording interviewees or events
☐ access to personal and/or sensitive data (i.e. student, patient, client or service-user data) without the participant's informed consent for use of these data for research purposes
☐ administration of any questions, tasks, investigations, procedures or stimuli which may be experienced by participants as physically or mentally painful, stressful or unpleasant during or after the research process
☐ performance of any acts which might diminish the self-esteem of participants or cause them to experience discomfiture, regret or any other adverse emotional or psychological reaction
☐ Themes around extremism or radicalisation
☐ investigation of participants involved in illegal or illicit activities (e.g. use of illegal drugs)
☐ procedures that involve the deception of participants
☐ administration of any substance or agent
☐ use of non-treatment of placebo control conditions
☐ participation in a clinical trial
☐ research undertaken at an off-campus location (risk assessment attached)
☐ research overseas (please ensure Section G is complete)

11. Does the proposed research involve any specific or anticipated risks (e.g. physical, psychological, social, legal or economic) to participants that are greater than those encountered in everyday life?

YES ☒ **NO** ☐

If **YES**, please describe below including details of precautionary measures.

The 'Ideal School' technique requires participants to reflect on their ideas about school which may cause emotional distress for participants who find it difficult to attend school. Although interview questions do not explicitly ask about their experiences of not attending school, it is likely that participants will discuss this when sharing their ideal and non-ideal constructs of school. Participants will also be asked where their current school rates in relation to their imagined schools, requiring them to think about their current school which may cause some psychological discomfort.

The participant will be made aware that the interview can be ended at any time and that they can request breaks as required. If a participant becomes distressed during the

interview, the researcher will terminate the interview immediately and provide a space to talk to the participant to ensure they feel supported. The participant's parent or carer will be available and they will be asked whether they would like their parent or carer to join the conversation. This will not be a recorded conversation. If participants decline this offer, they will be informed that their parent or carer will be contacted by the researcher after the interview to make them aware that the interview was terminated due to their emotional response.

In the event of the interview being terminated, the researcher will make contact with the parent or carer the following day to assess the participants' wellbeing. For all participants, the researcher will contact parents / carers one week after the interview to assess the participants' wellbeing. All parents / carers and participants will have the researcher's email address and will be informed that they can email if they require additional support following the interview. If participants continue to show distress following the interview, the researcher will offer a meeting with the young person and their parent / carer to discuss how to support them.

For participants who were recruited through their school setting, the school safeguarding lead will be informed of the termination of the interview so that support can be provided. For participants who were identified by a member of Local Authority staff, this member of staff will be informed of the termination of the interview so that support can be provided.

If the parent or carer reports continued distress or concern for their child, the researcher will signpost to an appropriate service e.g. CAMHS, Kooth or a school counsellor. All participants will be provided with an information sheet detailing support services they can access.

12. Where the procedures involve potential hazards and/or discomfort or distress for participants, please state what previous experience the investigator or researcher(s) have had in conducting this type of research.

I am a trainee Educational Psychologist with over five years experience of working with children and young people in various different roles, including supporting children with EBSA, SEN and their parents. During my undergraduate research project, I interviewed and provided support to participants who experienced strong emotional responses when sharing their early childhood experiences. I have received training in interviewing, consultation, safeguarding and active listening and have significant experience of applying these skills to support young people in distress in both my previous role working as a mental health practitioner and my current role as a Trainee EP. My research supervisor has experience of supervising projects that involve young people with EBSA and projects that utilise the 'Drawing the Ideal' approach.

13. Provide an explanation of any potential benefits to participants. Please ensure this is framed within the overall contribution of the proposed research to knowledge or practice. (Do not exceed 400 words)
NOTE: Where the proposed research involves students, they should be assured that accepting the offer to participate or choosing to decline will have no impact on their assessments or learning experience. Similarly, it should be made clear to participants who are patients, service-users and/or receiving any form of treatment or medication that they are not invited to participate in the belief that participation in the research will result in some relief or improvement in their condition.

This research aims to contribute to the literature relating to young people's experiences of EBSA and recognises the importance of their environment in contributing to school attendance. Participants will be listened to without judgement and by giving young people a voice to share their constructs relating to school, it is hoped that participants will feel empowered and feelings of blame previously reported by young people with EBSA (Gregory & Purcell, 2014) will be reduced.

The research will inform schools about how this group of young people view school and what they feel contributes to an ideal and non-ideal school, in the hope that schools can adapt their approach and school environment to support the attendance of young people with EBSA. With participants' consent, data relating to their ideal and non-ideal school will be shared with their current school to offer ideas for adjustments and provide the knowledge required to support their attendance. Ultimately, this research has the potential to offer suggestions to schools regarding how best to support young people with EBSA, as well as the possibility of leading to further research on a larger scale that may lead to changes on a wider level.

Finally, 'Drawing the Ideal School' has been recommended as a useful tool for eliciting the views of young people with EBSA and supporting them to explore and reflect on their views about school (West Sussex EPS, 2018). This research will provide participants with the opportunity to participate in an evidence-based, therapeutic intervention (Moran, 2001; 2006; Williams & Hanke, 2005) with a Trainee EP. By engaging in the 'Drawing the Ideal' approach, participants will be supported to reflect on their school constructs and non-attendance in an alternative way, with the support and containment of the researcher.

14. Provide an outline of any measures you have in place in the event of adverse or unexpected outcomes and the potential impact this may have on participants involved in the proposed research. (Do not exceed 300 words)

Prior to the interview, the researcher will make parents/carers aware of the date and time that the young person is completing the interview and confirm that they will be available should the young person feel distressed. The participant will be made aware that the interview can be ended at any time and that they can request breaks as required. If a participant becomes distressed during the interview, the researcher will terminate the interview immediately and provide a space to talk to the participant to ensure they feel supported. The participant will be asked whether they would like their parent or carer to join the conversation. This will not be a recorded conversation. If participants decline this offer, they will be informed that their parent or carer will be contacted by the researcher

after the interview to make them aware that the interview was terminated due to their emotional response.

In the event of the interview being terminated, the researcher will make contact with the parent or carer the following day to assess the participants' wellbeing. For all participants, the researcher will contact parents / carers one week after the interview to assess the participants' wellbeing. All parents / carers and participants will have the researcher's email address and will be informed that they can email if they require additional support following the interview. If participants continue to show distress following the interview, the researcher will offer a meeting with the young person and their parent / carer to discuss how to support them.

For participants who were recruited through their school setting, the school safeguarding lead will be informed of the termination of the interview where agreed. For participants who were identified by a member of Local Authority staff, this member of staff will be informed of the termination of the interview where agreed.

If the parent or carer reports continued distress or concerns, the researcher will signpost to an appropriate service e.g. CAMHS, Kooth or a school counsellor. All participants will be provided with an information sheet detailing support services they can access.

15. Provide an outline of your debriefing, support and feedback protocol for participants involved in the proposed research. This should include, for example, where participants may feel the need to discuss thoughts or feelings brought about following their participation in the research. This may involve referral to an external support or counseling service, where participation in the research has caused specific issues for participants.

At the end of the interview, participants will be debriefed and the next steps of the research project will be clearly explained. The researcher will check that the participant is still happy for the information they have shared to be used as part of the research project. During the debrief, participants will have the opportunity to ask any questions about the process. Participants will be reminded that their data will remain confidential and anonymous and they can withdraw their data up to four weeks after the interview. Participants will receive an information sheet with an email address to contact the researcher should they wish to. The information sheet will also include information relating to services that can offer additional support, for instance 'Kooth' and CAMHS, as well as a key named person from their current school or other referring professional. The parent / carer of each participant will be contacted a week after the interview to monitor the participants' wellbeing.

Once the research process is completed, a summary of the main findings will be shared with parents / carers in the form of a Zoom meeting. Participants will also be invited to a voluntary Zoom meeting to feedback the findings and give them the opportunity to reflect on their participation. In cases where the participant provided consent for their data to be shared with their school, the researcher will make contact with the link staff member to outline the participants' view of their current school and ideas for making their school more ideal. It is likely that other schools and education settings would benefit from receiving an overview of findings and the researcher will therefore offer to share their findings more widely once completed.

16. Please provide the names and nature of any external support or counselling organisations that will be suggested to participants if participation in the research has potential to raise specific issues for participants.
Kooth – online counselling CAMHS Young Minds School support services e.g. school counsellor
17. Where medical aftercare may be necessary, this should include details of the treatment available to participants. Debriefing may involve the disclosure of further information on the aims of the research, the participant's performance and/or the results of the research. (Do not exceed 500 words)
N/A

FOR RESEARCH UNDERTAKEN OUTSIDE THE UK

18. Does the proposed research involve travel outside of the UK? ☐
YES ☒ **NO**

If YES, please confirm:

☐ I have consulted the Foreign and Commonwealth Office website for guidance/travel advice? http://www.fco.gov.uk/en/travel-and-living-abroad/

☐ I have completed ta RISK Assessment covering all aspects of the project including consideration of the location of the data collection and risks to participants.

All overseas project data collection will need approval from the Deputy Director of Education and Training or their nominee. Normally this will be done based on the information provided in this form. All projects approved through the TREC process will be indemnified by the Trust against claims made by third parties.

If you have any queries regarding research outside the UK, please contact academicquality@tavi-port.nhs.uk:

Students are required to arrange their own travel and medical insurance to cover project work outside of the UK. Please indicate what insurance cover you have or will have in place.

N/A

19. Please evidence how compliance with all local research ethics and research governance requirements have been assessed for the country(ies) in which the research is taking place. Please also clarify how the requirements will be met:
N/A

SECTION G: PARTICIPANT CONSENT AND WITHDRAWAL

20. Have you attached a copy of your participant information sheet (this should be in *plain English*)? Where the research involves non-English speaking participants, please include translated materials. **YES** ☒ **NO** ☐ If **NO**, please indicate what alternative arrangements are in place below:

21. Have you attached a copy of your participant consent form (this should be in *plain English*)? Where the research involves non-English speaking participants, please include translated materials. **YES** ☒ **NO** ☐ If **NO**, please indicate what alternative arrangements are in place below:

22. The following is a <u>participant information sheet</u> checklist covering the various points that should be included in this document.

☒ Clear identification of the Trust as the sponsor for the research, the project title, the Researcher and Principal Investigator (your Research Supervisor) and other researchers along with relevant contact details.
☒ Details of what involvement in the proposed research will require (e.g., participation in interviews, completion of questionnaire, audio/video-recording of events), estimated time commitment and any risks involved.
☒ A statement confirming that the research has received formal approval from TREC or other ethics body.
☒ If the sample size is small, advice to participants that this may have implications for confidentiality / anonymity.
☐ A clear statement that where participants are in a dependent relationship with any of the researchers that participation in the research will have no impact on assessment / treatment / service-use or support.
☒ Assurance that involvement in the project is voluntary and that participants are free to withdraw consent at any time, and to withdraw any unprocessed data previously supplied.

☒ Advice as to arrangements to be made to protect confidentiality of data, including that confidentiality of information provided is subject to legal limitations.
☒ A statement that the data generated in the course of the research will be retained in accordance with the Trusts 's Data Protection and handling Policies.: https://tavistockandportman.nhs.uk/about-us/governance/policies-and-procedures/
☒ Advice that if participants have any concerns about the conduct of the investigator, researcher(s) or any other aspect of this research project, they should contact Simon Carrington, Head of Academic Governance and Quality Assurance (academicquality@tavi-port.nhs.uk)
☒ Confirmation on any limitations in confidentiality where disclosure of imminent harm to self and/or others may occur.

23. The following is a consent form checklist covering the various points that should be included in this document.

☒ Trust letterhead or logo.
☒ Title of the project (with research degree projects this need not necessarily be the title of the thesis) and names of investigators.
☒ Confirmation that the research project is part of a degree
☒ Confirmation that involvement in the project is voluntary and that participants are free to withdraw at any time, or to withdraw any unprocessed data previously supplied.
☒ Confirmation of particular requirements of participants, including for example whether interviews are to be audio-/video-recorded, whether anonymised quotes will be used in publications advice of legal limitations to data confidentiality.
☒ If the sample size is small, confirmation that this may have implications for anonymity any other relevant information.
☒ The proposed method of publication or dissemination of the research findings.
☐ Details of any external contractors or partner institutions involved in the research.
☐ Details of any funding bodies or research councils supporting the research.
☒ Confirmation on any limitations in confidentiality where disclosure of imminent harm to self and/or others may occur.

SECTION H: CONFIDENTIALITY AND ANONYMITY

24. Below is a checklist covering key points relating to the confidentiality and anonymity of participants. Please indicate where relevant to the proposed research.

☐ Participants will be completely anonymised and their identity will not be known by the investigator or researcher(s) (i.e. the participants are part of an anonymous randomised sample and return responses with no form of personal identification)?
☐ The responses are anonymised or are an anonymised sample (i.e. a permanent process of coding has been carried out whereby direct and indirect identifiers have been removed from data and replaced by a code, with no record retained of how the code relates to the identifiers).
☐ The samples and data are de-identified (i.e. direct and indirect identifiers have been removed and replaced by a code. The investigator or researchers are able to link the code to the original identifiers and isolate the participant to whom the sample or data relates).
☐ Participants have the option of being identified in a publication that will arise from the research.

☒ Participants will be pseudo-anonymised in a publication that will arise from the research. (I.e. the researcher will endeavour to remove or alter details that would identify the participant.)
☐ The proposed research will make use of personal sensitive data.
☐ Participants consent to be identified in the study and subsequent dissemination of research findings and/or publication.

25. **Participants must be made aware that the confidentiality of the information they provide is subject to legal limitations in data confidentiality (i.e. the data may be subject to a subpoena, a freedom of information request or mandated reporting by some professions). This only applies to named or de-identified data. If your participants are named or de-identified, please confirm that you will specifically state these limitations.**

YES ☒ **NO** ☐

If **NO**, please indicate why this is the case below:

NOTE: WHERE THE PROPOSED RESEARCH INVOLVES A SMALL SAMPLE OR FOCUS GROUP, PARTICIPANTS SHOULD BE ADVISED THAT THERE WILL BE DISTINCT LIMITATIONS IN THE LEVEL OF ANONYMITY THEY CAN BE AFFORDED.

SECTION I: DATA ACCESS, SECURITY AND MANAGEMENT

26. **Will the Researcher/Principal Investigator be responsible for the security of all data collected in connection with the proposed research? YES** ☒ **NO** ☐

If **NO**, please indicate what alternative arrangements are in place below:

27. **In line with the 5th principle of the Data Protection Act (1998), which states that personal data shall not be kept for longer than is necessary for that purpose or**

those purposes for which it was collected; please state how long data will be retained for.

☐ 1-2 years ☐ 3-5 years ☒ 6-10 years ☐ 10> years

NOTE: In line with Research Councils UK (RCUK) guidance, doctoral project data should normally be stored for 10 years.

28. Below is a checklist which relates to the management, storage and secure destruction of data for the purposes of the proposed research. Please indicate where relevant to your proposed arrangements.

☒ Research data, codes and all identifying information to be kept in separate locked filing cabinets.
☒ Research data will only be stored in the University of Essex OneDrive system and no other cloud storage location.
☒ Access to computer files to be available to research team by password only.
☐ Access to computer files to be available to individuals outside the research team by password only (See **23.1**).
☐ Research data will be encrypted and transferred electronically within the UK.
☐ Research data will be encrypted and transferred electronically outside of the UK.

NOTE: Transfer of research data via third party commercial file sharing services, such as Google Docs and YouSendIt are not necessarily secure or permanent. These systems may also be located overseas and not covered by UK law. If the system is located outside the European Economic Area (EEA) or territories deemed to have sufficient standards of data protection, transfer may also breach the Data Protection Act (1998).

Essex students also have access the 'Box' service for file transfer:
https://www.essex.ac.uk/student/it-services/box

☒ Use of personal addresses, postcodes, faxes, e-mails or telephone numbers.
☒ Collection and storage of personal sensitive data (e.g. racial or ethnic origin, political or religious beliefs or physical or mental health or condition).
☒ Use of personal data in the form of audio or video recordings.
☒ Primary data gathered on encrypted mobile devices (i.e. laptops).

NOTE: This should be transferred to secure University of Essex OneDrive at the first opportunity.

☒ All electronic data will undergo secure disposal.

NOTE: For hard drives and magnetic storage devices (HDD or SSD), deleting files does not permanently erase the data on most systems, but only deletes the reference to the file. Files can be restored when deleted in this way. Research files must be overwritten to ensure they are completely irretrievable. Software is available for the secure erasing of files from hard drives which meet recognised standards to securely scramble sensitive data. Examples of this software are BC Wipe, Wipe File, DeleteOnClick and Eraser for Windows platforms. Mac users can use the standard 'secure empty trash' option; an alternative is Permanent eraser software.

☒ All hardcopy data will undergo secure disposal.

NOTE: For shredding research data stored in hardcopy (i.e. paper), adopting DIN 3 ensures files are cut into 2mm strips or confetti like cross-cut particles of 4x40mm. The UK government requires a minimum standard of DIN 4 for its material, which ensures cross cut particles of at least 2x15mm.

29. Please provide details of individuals outside the research team who will be given password protected access to encrypted data for the proposed research.

N/A

30. Please provide details on the regions and territories where research data will be electronically transferred that are external to the UK:

N/A

SECTION J: PUBLICATION AND DISSEMINATION OF RESEARCH FINDINGS

30. How will the results of the research be reported and disseminated? ***(Select all that apply)***

- ☒ Peer reviewed journal
- ☐ Non-peer reviewed journal
- ☐ Peer reviewed books
- ☒ Publication in media, social media or website (including Podcasts and online videos)
- ☒ Conference presentation
- ☒ Internal report
- ☐ Promotional report and materials
- ☐ Reports compiled for or on behalf of external organisations
- ☒ Dissertation/Thesis
- ☐ Other publication
- ☒ Written feedback to research participants
- ☒ Presentation to participants or relevant community groups
- ☐ Other (Please specify below)

SECTION K: OTHER ETHICAL ISSUES

31. Are there any other ethical issues that have not been addressed which you would wish to bring to the attention of Tavistock Research Ethics Committee (TREC)?

N/A

SECTION L: CHECKLIST FOR ATTACHED DOCUMENTS

32. Please check that the following documents are attached to your application.

- ☐ Letters of approval from any external ethical approval bodies (where relevant)
- ☒ Recruitment advertisement
- ☒ Participant information sheets (including easy-read where relevant)
- ☒ Consent forms (including easy-read where relevant)
- ☒ Assent form for children (where relevant)
- ☒ Letters of approval from locations for data collection
- ☒ Questionnaire
- ☒ Interview Schedule or topic guide
- ☐ Risk Assessment (where applicable)
- ☐ Overseas travel approval (where applicable)

34. Where it is not possible to attach the above materials, please provide an explanation below.

Change to Doctoral Research Protocol 2020/21

Student name	Mollie Higgins
Date	16.09.2021
Doctoral programme	M4
Supervisor(s)	Rachael Green
Has ethical approval been granted? Please include process (TREC/UREC/IRAS) and date	Yes

Please state clearly and simply the proposed changes to your project (methods of data gathering, changes to design etc.)

I would like to extend my sample from Years 7, 8 and 9 to include children in Years 10 and 11. A number of young people have expressed interest in the study who are from Years 10 and 11 and this will maximise my chances of recruiting the proposed sample size.

Since gaining ethical approval and starting recruitment for my project, conversations with colleagues, parents and school staff and the existing literature have indicated that a significant proportion of young people who experience difficulties attending school have a diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and I would like to include these young people in my sample.

Please return this form as directed by your supervisor or course lead. You **must** ensure any changes are also approved by your ethical approval body before you start work.

The Tavistock and Portman NHS
NHS Foundation Trust

Quality Assurance & Enhancement
Directorate of Education & Training
Tavistock Centre
120 Belsize Lane
London
NW3 5BA

Tel: 020 8938 2699
https://tavistockandportman.nhs.uk/

Mollie Higgins

By Email

22 April 2021

Dear Mollie,

Re: Trust Research Ethics Application

Title: The Ideal School: Exploring the constructs of young people experiencing Emotionally Based School Avoidance

Thank you for submitting your updated Research Ethics documentation. I am pleased to inform you that subject to formal ratification by the Trust Research Ethics Committee your application has been approved. This means you can proceed with your research.

Please be advised that any changes to the project design including changes to methodology/data collection etc, must be referred to TREC as failure to do so, may result in a report of academic and/or research misconduct.

If you have any further questions or require any clarification do not hesitate to contact me.

I am copying this communication to your supervisor.

May I take this opportunity of wishing you every success with your research.

Yours sincerely,

Best regards,

Paru Jeram
Secretary to the Trust Research Degrees Subcommittee
T: 020 938 2699
E: academicquality@tavi-Port.nhs.uk

cc. Course Lead, Supervisor, Research Lead

To: Higgins, Mollie

Official

Official

Dear Mollie

Your thesis sounds very interesting and incredibly useful for our young people who find attending school incredibly challenging (especially in the post-covid era).

I am happy to give my permission for you to conduct your thesis in our ı schools and please do not hesitate to get in touch if you have any questions or need any support with recruitment or other parts of your thesis.

Best wishes

Interim Principal Educational Psychologist

Appendix K – Participants' drawing of an ideal school