

How has the ELSA intervention supported students who have experienced, or are experiencing, Emotional Based School Non-Attendance (EBSNA)?

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Submitted in part requirement for the Doctorate in Educational Psychology (EdPsyD)

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Date (May 2026)

Word Count (Excluding Contents Pages, Acknowledgements, References and Appendices): 54,435

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Summary

This thesis comprises three chapters. The first is a narrative literature review which investigates the wide topic of Emotional Based School Non-Attendance (EBSNA), exploring the history of how it is named and defined, and the research covering the main contributing factors, protective factors and methods of early identification and interventions. One of the interventions focused on is that of Emotional Literacy Support Assistants (ELSA), the way they work, and the way the intervention may be used to support attendance and EBSNA. The Educational Psychologists (EPs) role in EBSNA support and ELSA training is explored and areas for future research are outlined.

The second chapter draws out an empirical study. Semi-structured interviews were used to explore seven ELSA's experiences of supporting young people from across England following a period of EBSNA. This qualitative research used reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021) to analyse the data. The analysis generated five themes with eight subthemes. The themes are discussed in the context of the existing literature, and suggestions for how this impacts EP practice are included, as well as a critique of the current study and possible extensions for the future are considered.

The third chapter comprises a critical reflection of the research process from the initial ideas of research, through exploring the literature and deciding on an area of study, to designing the study, making alterations, and collecting and analysing the data. Possible methods for dissemination of the data and ways it might influence EP practice are also explored.

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List of Acronyms

ASD	Autism Spectrum Disorder
CBT	Cognitive Behavioural Therapy
CYP	Children and Young People
EBSA	Emotional Based School Avoidance
EBSNA	Emotional Based School Non-Attendance
EHCP	Education, Health and Care Plan
ELSA	Emotional Literacy Support Assistant
EP	Educational Psychologist
IoU	Intolerance of Uncertainty
LA	Local Authority
RCT	Randomised Controlled Trial
SEMH	Social, Emotional, Mental Health
SEN	Special Educational Needs
SEND	Special Educational Needs and Disabilities
SES	Socio-Economic Status
UK	United Kingdom
YP	Young person/Young people

Acknowledgements

Firstly, I would like to thank all of the ELSAs who gave up their own time to take part in my research. I am so grateful for you giving your time and all of your insights so generously.

Huge thanks to my research supervisor, Dr Alistair James. Your patience, calm and pragmatic outlook has kept me on the straight and narrow for the past two years. I appreciate all the time and effort you have dedicated to this project and for helping me get to the finish line.

Thank you to the whole UEA Educational Psychology Doctorate teaching team for all your support over the last three years, especially Dr Sarah Raspin and Dr Joey Szabo-Hemmings who managed my worries with sensitivity and good grace. Thanks also to the Department for Education for their funding.

Thank you to my fabulous placement supervisors, Dr Rachel Sawyer, Dr Sarah Duffield and Dr Sophie Hoyle. You've given me more than you know by believing in me when I doubted myself and guiding me when I felt like I didn't know the way. You are all superb humans, thank you for being in my corner.

To my family and my friends. They say it takes a village to raise a child, but it also takes a village to complete a Doctoral Thesis so I thank you for helping me on so many practical fronts, listening when I didn't think I could manage and for telling me to keep going (even when I didn't want to hear it). Mum, you are a superstar. Kate and Rowena, you never have to hear about my thesis again I promise.

And to my fabulous cheer squad. Logan, my task master. You are my cool, calm and practical thinking head, always there checking in and pushing me on. Huxley, your happy dances got me through so many dark times. I promise that I won't spend so much time in the study anymore, and I won't need to be so serious. Fun Mumma will return!

Finally, Robin. Team Tasha with every fibre of your body. Every single time I needed you, every single time I doubted, you've been there supporting, guiding and patiently loving. Thank you for being my person.

Introduction and Overview

Research Context

Since the Covid pandemic, there has been increasing concern from schools and from UK Government about the increase in pupil absence, especially those young people who are classed as persistently or severely absent (missing more than 10% or 50% of sessions, respectively) (Long & Roberts, 2025). Those who are missing more than 10% of sessions rose from 10.9% in 2018/19 to 21.2% in 2022/23. This is slowly decreasing (17.63% in 2024/25), however severe absence rates are still increasing, with rates at 2.26% in 2024/25 from 0.81% in pre-COVID years (Department for Education, 2025b). Higher absence rates have been associated with lower GCSE attainment (Long & Roberts, 2025) as well as lower employment (Attwood & Croll, 2015) and fewer close friends (Carroll, 2011).

Over time the language used to describe school attendance and absence has changed, and so this literature review will examine the complex risk and resilience factors that impact young people who are unable to attend school and would be defined as experiencing Emotional Based School Non-Attendance (EBSNA). This review will use Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological model (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998) as a lens to view the multiple complex issues that impact a young person's ability to attend school and the barriers to their education, specifically focusing on the micro and meso-systems. The Bioecological model was chosen over the earlier Ecological Systems Theory as it has a greater emphasis on incorporating the young person's biological characteristics as well as the complex, reciprocal interactions of them, their environment and the other people in it, over time.

This research will focus on the way the Emotional Literacy Support Assistant (ELSA) intervention can support young people who are having difficulty with attendance and highlight the way that ELSAs work within the micro and mesosystems to enable young people to feel able to increase their attendance.

Research gaps and approach

Researchers across various domains, including psychology, medicine and education have utilised different terminology, frameworks and proposed different interventions to approach the issue of school non-attendance, which has made it challenging for research to be compared, as well as difficult to formulate ways to

manage the issues these young people face (Kearney, 2008). This research will follow the strand of research looking at possible interventions for young people experiencing EBSNA. Some of the main risk factors for triggering and perpetuating EBSNA are those that ELSAs are trained to support, and so this research will focus on an (as yet) unresearched area of how ELSA is being used to support young people experiencing EBSNA.

Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological model will be used to frame the influence of the multiple systems affecting young peoples' attendance while also considering the way multiple systems may be supported by the ELSA intervention.

Positionality

Throughout the research journey I have considered how my perspectives, personal values, my privileges as an educated, middle-class white woman, my previous experiences and world view would impact on the research in terms of the questions asked and the interpretations I make. My interest in both EBSNA and ELSA stemmed from my previous work with young people struggling to attend school, and in spending time with school staff who did not know how to support their students to overcome their barriers to attending. I had a great deal of previous research experience in longitudinal, quantitative research, but my experience with qualitative data collection and analysis was much more limited. As a researcher I was considering ELSAs experiences with an outsider lens due to my educational background and power dynamics, but that I was bringing shared lived experiences as white women working in an education field and having a shared goal of improving experiences for young people.

Implications for Educational Psychologists

This research has implications for the ways that Educational Psychologists (EPs) can support and advise schools on working with families where their young people are experiencing EBSNA. EPs also train and supervise ELSAs and so this research will have a direct impact on the way they support these members of school staff throughout their ELSA role.

Structure of the Thesis

This thesis comprises three chapters. The first is a narrative literature review which investigates the wide topic of Emotional Based School Non-Attendance (EBSNA), exploring the history of how it is named and defined, and the research covering the main contributing factors, protective factors and methods of early identification and interventions. One of the interventions focused on is that of Emotional Literacy Support Assistants (ELSA), the way they work, and the way the intervention may be used to support attendance and EBSNA. The Educational Psychologists (EPs) role in EBSNA support and ELSA training is explored and areas for future research are outlined.

The second chapter draws out an empirical study. Semi-structured interviews were used to explore seven ELSA's experiences of supporting young people from across England following a period of EBSNA. This qualitative research used reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021) to analyse the data. The analysis generated five themes with eight subthemes. The themes are discussed in the context of the existing literature, and suggestions for how this impacts EP practice are included, as well as a critique of the current study and possible extensions for the future are considered.

The third chapter comprises a critical reflection of the research process from the initial ideas of research, through exploring the literature and deciding on an area of study, to designing the study, making alterations, and collecting and analysing the data. Possible methods for dissemination of the data and ways it might influence EP practice are also explored.

Chapter 1: Literature Review

1.1 Introduction

This literature review will describe and critique research exploring Emotional Based School Non-Attendance (EBSNA), what the risk and resilience factors are for young people experiencing this barrier to attendance and how the Emotional Literacy Support Assistant intervention can be used in schools and colleges in the UK to provide support for these young people. The literature included in this review will be based around the micro and mesosystems of Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological model (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998) in order to highlight the multiple systems that can positively and negatively impact young people and how they experience EBSNA, as well as the ways these systems can be affected by the ELSA intervention. A narrative approach has been used to identify relevant literature and gaps within current research (Snyder, 2019).

Definitions and language used to describe school absence or non-attendance have changed over the years with changing understanding of the issues behind the difficulties with attending. Where terms around refusal or avoidance once placed more of the onus on the young person and suggested a choice in not attending, this review will use the term "Emotional Based School Non-Attendance" as it highlights the emotional difficulties behind not attending and removes the suggestion that young people are avoiding school through choice rather than are unable to attend due to interactions of individual and environmental factors. Even though there are more neutral terms coming into use and will be discussed later in this chapter, EBSNA is commonly used within the research literature and so will be used for the purposes of this review.

The research base suggests that children and young people who experience EBSNA are a heterogeneous group with multiple factors influencing their ability to attend school. By focusing on the micro and mesosystems (child, family and school) it is hoped that the review can identify ways that these systems can be supported inside and outside of school to foster improved experiences of overall feelings of safety and wellbeing for young people which in turn promotes better school attendance.

Areas that have been shown by previous research to be factors at play in EBSNA (such as anxiety, difficulty with emotional regulation, coping skills and resilience, low self-concept and lack of peer relations and social skills) are those that ELSAs receive training in, and can be focused on by ELSAs during intervention sessions (Burton, 2008). Although there has been a growing body of research investigating the risk and protective factors for EBSNA, as well as early identification and possible intervention techniques, there is currently no research into the use of ELSA for those experiencing EBSNA.

Having identified this gap in the literature I am interested in exploring ELSAs experiences of using the ELSA intervention to support young people who have experienced, or are experiencing EBSNA and to understand, from what they share, what the impact of the intervention has been on the students themselves and also on their school and home environment; their micro and mesosystems.

The following section will describe the aims of the literature review and the search strategy that was utilised. The subsequent sections will outline the current context for this research and explore the research base for the risk and resilience factors for EBSNA, framed using the micro and mesosystems of Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological model (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). The role of the EP and possible research directions will also be outlined, before describing and discussing the current empirical study in the next chapter.

1.2 Focus and structure of the review

This review aims to look at the existing literature regarding EBSNA, including the history behind the current name and definition which highlights important changes in the theoretical understanding of EBSNA, the factors and systems that are involved when young people are experiencing barriers to attendance, and research investigating early identification and intervention techniques. This review uses a narrative approach (Snyder, 2019) to provide a context showing the past and current research and to highlight gaps in the literature which may lead to areas of further development. A narrative review was chosen over a more rigid systematic approach because on searching the research databases there were a very large number of existing papers on the wide topic of Emotional Based School Avoidance (or Non-Attendance) and over time the idea of EBSNA had been conceptualised differently.

As the literature was being scoped in order to develop and refine possible research questions, the narrative literature review was used as a means to draw the literature together and identify an area of investigation that had not been explored before (Baumeister & Leary, 1997). It was decided that a review that followed the historical evolution of the conceptual underpinnings would be of importance because, as will be discussed, these have been influenced by changing social, educational and psychological perspectives which have impacted on understanding of the factors involved in EBSNA and on possible approaches to intervention.

Although open to the criticism of selective citation, the aim of this review was not to provide a reproducible and fully comprehensive review of all literature on the topic, but to provide a broad overview with reliable research examples, that were relevant for the research questions.

While carrying out this review, as the starting point for the research process, it was vital to stay aware of my own positionality and the previous experiences that I brought to the process. Being a reflexive researcher and maintaining some awareness of my values and assumptions throughout the process was important to enable reflection on how the research was being shaped (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

The literature search was guided by three main questions:

- 1) What is the history of EBSNA, including the definitions and psychological perspectives behind our understanding of attendance difficulties?
- 2) What does the literature suggest are the main risk and resilience factors underpinning EBSNA, especially regarding the young person's micro and mesosystems; within themselves, family and school-based factors?
- 3) How does ELSA support young people in general, and more specifically those finding school attendance challenging?

1.3 Search Approach

The literature included within this review was identified by searching websites and research databases such as Google Scholar, EBSCO, ProQuest, Science Direct, PsycINFO and Scopus to search for literature spanning peer reviewed articles, books and unpublished theses for current context on EBSNA and ELSA research. Search terms used are shown in Table 1. The search was undertaken

primarily during August and September 2024 but was also revisited during the period of data analysis and write up (January to April 2026) to include any more recent papers and to include some changes in language and understanding used around school attendance.

A “waterfall” or “snowballing” strategy was used following the initial search, where papers which were referenced, and were relevant, were followed up to provide a broader understanding of the topic area, and also more in-depth knowledge of specific areas of research. Researchers have found that although different papers are found between snowballing and systematic reviewing (Jalali & Wohlin, 2012) the majority are the same, and snowballing may be easier to perform for novice researchers, as well as being more straightforward where the search terms can be variable (e.g. EBSA, EBSNA, attendance difficulties, truanting, school avoidance etc) as the title’s relevance is judged by eye rather than by the systematic review search terms.

Table 1:

Search Terms

Main search terms
Emotional based school avoidance / EBSA
Emotional based school non-attendance / EBSNA
School refusal
School avoidance
School non-attendance
Truanting
EBSNA/EBSA and Early Identification
EBSNA/EBSA and Intervention / Early Intervention
EBSNA/EBSA and Anxiety
EBSNA/EBSA and
Emotional Literacy Support Assistant / ELSA / ELSA intervention
ELSA and Attendance
ELSA and Sense of Belonging / School Belonging
ELSA and EBSNA/EBSA
Emotional Literacy interventions and USA/Australia/Europe

Literature was mostly published in peer reviewed journals, however unpublished doctoral theses were also included when the topic was closely relevant to EBSNA or ELSA. Literature was filtered to have been published (or theses completed) between 2000 and 2026, and published in English, including UK and international research, with the majority coming from the UK, United States of America, Australia, Norway and Japan. Although global in nature, the papers were largely from “Western” industrialised nations with similar educational structures. International research was included in the pool of EBSNA research as including only UK research would have intentionally limited the information available and excluded a range of insights into the understanding of the factors triggering and perpetuating EBSNA. While there are differing social, political and educational environments in these different countries, as well as differing definitions of school attendance difficulties which impacts the type of support offered, the information gathered from the research may still provide useful insights that could be transferred to the UK if used with caution.

ELSA research was solely derived from the UK as currently ELSA is not used in other countries around the world. Search terms were used to identify some of the alternative emotional literacy interventions used in other countries in order to compare the mechanisms at work and efficacy of the interventions.

1.4 Changing Terminology and Definitions

The next section will outline how the terminology surrounding school attendance has altered over the last 90 years and the impact that these changes have had in terms of conceptualising attendance, our understanding of it and the subsequent support put in place as a result.

The terms have changed from “Truancy” to “School Phobia”, then “School Refusal” to “Emotional Based School Avoidance/Non-Attendance” (EBSA/EBSNA) and most recently “Barriers to Education”.

Truancy was the first way of describing young people (YP) who were not attending school, suggesting that the pupil was making a choice not to attend because another environment (i.e. home) was more desirable than school (Broadwin, 1932). Broadwin was the first to characterise non-attendance as a form of truancy, but where the parent is aware of the non-attendance with the child

describing feeling afraid to attend but not understanding the reason why. This was the first subtle shift away from the suggestion of total defiance and including an element of worry or anxiety around school itself. Johnson and colleagues (Johnson et al., 1941) extended this distinction between being emotionally unable to attend school and truancy by using the term “school phobia” and described it as an expression of anxiety leading to the phobia. They suggested that the YP had come to dread something about school environment often alongside an overriding fear of being away from the home environment and their parents. Therefore it was seen as a form of separation anxiety that was preventing the YP from attending school (Johnson et al., 1941).

Berg studied YP in a psychiatric unit, and set out four main criteria that defined “school phobia” (Berg et al., 1969) which even though the terminology may have changed are still often referred to today when considering EBSNA in many research papers, and in EBSNA guidance frameworks. These are as follows:

- (1) Severe difficulty attending school
- (2) Severe emotional upset at the prospect of attending school
- (3) Staying at home with the knowledge of parents
- (4) Absence of anti-social behaviours

Berg’s conceptualisation is based “within-child” and views the difficulty as a problem coming from a medical model of disability and as something for the child to overcome via medical care or therapy, overlooking any social or environmental factors that may be impacting on attendance.

McDonald and Sheperd (McDonald & Sheperd, 1976) described this phobia as occurring due to a threat to the YP’s self-image, difficulties performing academically in the way they hoped, or a difficulty with peers that is threatening to their self-image. They suggested that the YP found it easier to retreat to the safety of being at home, therefore avoiding any threats to their self-image and the realities of school life. This is a psychoanalytical view, whereas behaviourist learning theorists (e.g. Kearney & Silverman, 1993) suggest that difficulty with school situations have become connected or conditioned to difficulties at home (parental rejection, divorce) and so school becomes the feared situation which can be avoided by staying at

home. These conceptualisations of school phobia are still mostly centred around the young person but have some inclusion of factors outside of the young person influencing their behaviours.

Towards the end of the 20th Century, the definition changed to be more descriptive of the behaviour of the YP, with “school refusal” as the more popular term (Heyne et al., 2004; Kearney & Silverman, 1993). However, this still frames attendance difficulties as a choice made by the YP rather than an inability to attend, which places the onus on the YP and family to resolve.

Kearney & Silverman suggest that there are 4 main reasons for the possible avoidant behaviour:

1. Avoidance of negative emotions (e.g. anxiety, distress, depression) – negative reinforcement
2. Escape from aversive social situations (e.g. bullying) or evaluative situations (e.g. peer interaction in social anxiety/phobia) – negative reinforcement
3. Obtaining attention from significant others (e.g. parents) – positive reinforcement
4. Seeking tangible reinforcement or rewards (e.g. watching television, sleeping) – positive reinforcement

From these four profiles they designed the School Refusal Assessment Scale (SRAS) which has been used in multiple countries to identify school refusal behaviours. However, although Kearney and colleagues looked at the function the avoidant behaviour was serving (applied behaviour analysis), they considered each group of YP as a homogeneous group and did not take into consideration systemic or interacting factors that may be at play, for example the family dynamic or issues at school with learning difficulties.

Researchers have suggested that “school refusal” as an umbrella term for non-attendance needs further distinction to be made between those YP who cannot attend due to the extent of their emotional distress (King & Bernstein, 2001) and those where the YP chooses to be absent from school often without the knowledge of the parent which was defined as “truancy”. Research by Hersov (Hersov, 1960) found truancy was more frequently associated with behavioural issues and conduct

disorders and would therefore be categorised differently. However, this research did not take into account situations where a young person may be choosing not to attend due to reasons beyond their control such as difficulties with peers or access to the curriculum. The reasoning behind non-attendance can be a much more complex picture.

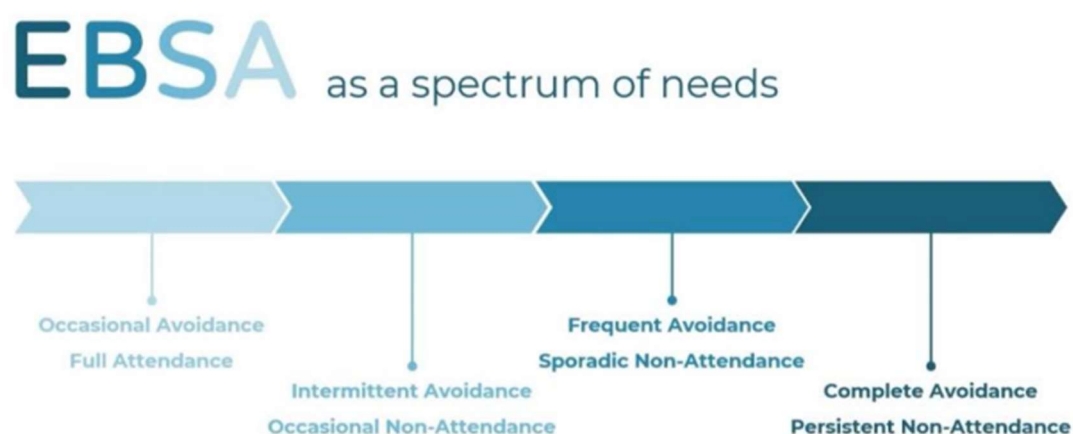
Terminology is important because anxiety or emotional related school non-attendance may be viewed more sympathetically by school than truancy as this language implies the child is not attending by choice and attributes responsibility for non-attendance on the child with acceptance of the parents. Students where non-attendance is attributed to a Social, Emotional or Mental Health (SEMH) reason would hopefully be approached in a more supportive and therapeutic manner than via one of punishment (Finning et al., 2019). Different interventions may also be utilised that will be better focused on one form of non-attendance than the other. This is highlighted by the research of Egger and colleagues (Egger et al., 2003) who found through questionnaires and interviews with parents and young people as part of a US longitudinal study, that there was a large positive association between “school refusal” (implying an emotional basis) and depression and separation anxiety disorder, whereas “truancy” (implying no “reason” for not attending other than because the YP did not want to) was associated more with behavioural than emotional issues.

Most recently, the terminology has shifted to highlight that YP are not attending due to emotional difficulties with a focus on anxiety, rather than through choice. The acknowledgement of the anxiety and emotional basis for not attending reflects an increasing understanding of the influence and interaction of multiple factors on attendance. However, some of the terms still place the onus on the YP with the use of Emotional Based School Refusal (EBSR) or Emotional Based School Avoidance (EBSA). The more compassionate, less judgemental term Emotional Based School Non-Attendance (EBSNA) is becoming used more frequently and is gaining more popularity in the literature (Thambirajah et al., 2008; West Sussex County Council Educational Psychology Service, 2022). However there is a suggestion by some researchers (Pellegrini, 2007) that a more neutral term such as “extended school non-attendance” should be used to describe the behaviour without stating the reason behind it, but not understating the length of time this behaviour can continue. EBSNA

does not have the same presentation for all children but commonly displays as a fear of, or anxiety connected to, the school situation/environment due to a possible multitude of reasons, leading to non-attendance. It can range from occasional reluctance to attend or complete refusal, or full attendance (although with underlying anxiety and a great deal of persuasion from home) to persistent non-attendance. It has started to be seen as a spectrum of needs by some researchers (see below Figure 1). Some YP may not attend only on certain days, or certain lessons, and some may not attend at all. Often attendance difficulties are accompanied by physical symptoms of stomach aches, sickness or headaches that become more prevalent.

Figure 1:

Image taken from Dr Jerricah Holder's training: Working to support entrenched EBSA needs - EBSA as a spectrum of needs (Holder, 2025)



This thesis will continue to use EBSNA, in order to underline the fact that YP are not attending due to emotional reasons, but referring to their non-attendance, rather than refusal, so that it is not framed in a judgemental way. In this researcher's opinion "extended school non-attendance" does not centre the leading factor behind the attendance difficulties. Regardless of the cause (peer relations, curriculum access, exam worries, separation etc) all factors lead to an exceptional emotional response where the YP feels unable to attend the educational setting. EBSNA covers this adequately and is well understood by educational professionals and within academic literature.

A recent project led by Spectrum Gaming (Spectrum Gaming, 2025) called "Barriers to Education" (Barriers to Education, 2025) has been working with the

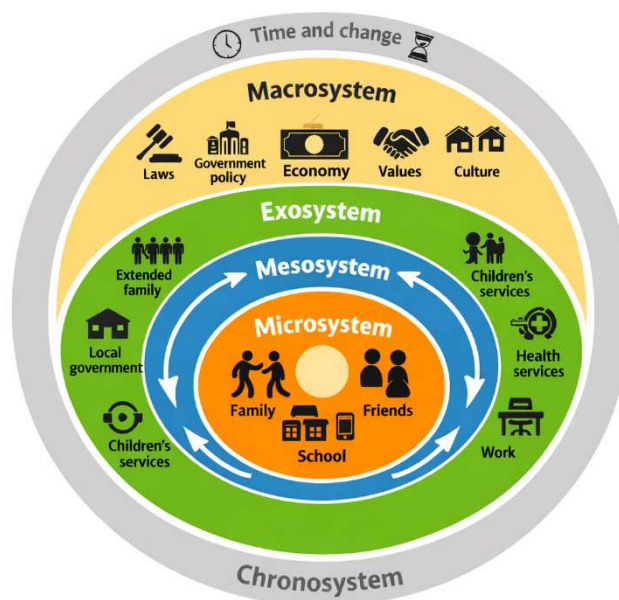
‘North West Emotionally Based School Avoidance Interest Group’, Local Authorities, Health services, the Third Sector and Parent Carer Forums to create an approach and subsequent guidance that is “universal and proactive” based on the lived experiences of YP and families and underpinned by research, to support YP experiencing “barriers to education”. This is the term the young people chose as most appropriate. They felt that “school avoidance or non-attendance” put too much emphasis on them and wanted the terminology to recognise their decreasing attendance was due to barriers impacting upon them that existed before their attendance declined, and that the focus should be on their access to education and learning rather than only attendance.

1.5 Psychological Frameworks

Instead of looking for a single answer to the issue of EBSNA, researchers have applied systemic frameworks to attempt to understand the influence of multiple factors and their interactions. This section will consider Bronfenbrenner’s Bioecological model (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998) which was developed to explain that children’s development is the result of the interactions between them and the social, environmental and cultural systems around them. Influence is seen as bi-directional with the young person influencing and being influenced by these systems. This review and subsequent research will use the Bioecological model to understand the factors that influence a young person and how those can be seen as both risk and resilience factors for EBSNA, as well as how ELSA can work across these systems.

Figure 2:

Diagram of Bronfenbrenner's original Ecological Systems Theory of Development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) (figure created by the author)



Although “distal factors” in the exo-, macro- and chronosystems (those further from the child) have been the subject of research and may influence EBSNA (for example in terms of parent’s employment, government funding for schools and mental health services, effects of the Covid-19 pandemic), the microsystem and mesosystem (the “proximal” factors) will be the main focus of this review as the majority of research focuses on these systems as the most directly influencing and observable of the systems around a young person. They are also the systems where intervention is usually targeted. The microsystem comprises the closest environments to the young person, including their home environment, family, school environment, teachers and peers. The mesosystem is the interactions between the elements of the microsystem for example parent and peer relationships, or teacher and parent interactions.

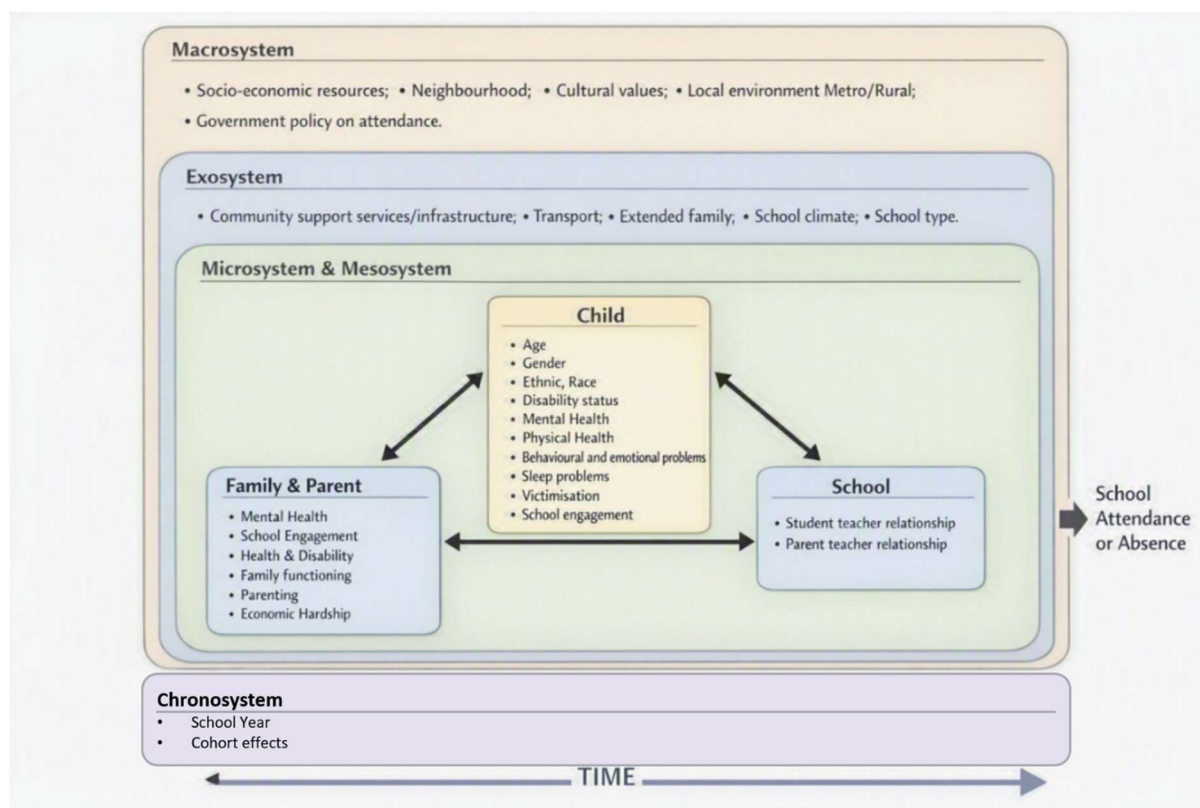
Other researchers have adapted Bronfenbrenner’s Bioecological model and original Ecological systems theory diagram (seen above in Figure 2) specifically to investigate risk factors specifically for EBSNA, the barriers for attendance and

suggestions for how they may be supported (Bodycote, 2022; Gubbels et al., 2019; Melvin et al., 2019; Nuttall & Woods, 2013).

It is important to look at school refusal in terms of all of the contexts that the child exists within, and how they are interacting, rather than placing the issue solely “within” the child themselves. The KiTeS Framework, devised by Australian researchers, (Melvin et al., 2019) uses Bronfenbrenner’s Bioecological model to draw together literature around school attendance problems from a range of individual, familial and environmental factors. Following their identification of the wide range of factors impacting on school attendance, and the suggestion from other researchers that a combination and interplay of factors may better explain attendance difficulties, they combined the literature with Bronfenbrenner’s Bioecological model to understand the multiple factors that can influence school attendance issues. The researchers hoped that it would be used to inform research in several disciplines (education, psychology, paediatrics, disability, youth justice) and would inform interventions for attendance difficulties. They highlighted that it demonstrates the need for individualised support for YP who may be experiencing difficulties with attendance (that would be classed as a SEND need) and to show the multiple levels of influence on a YP and how these all need to work together for appropriate interventions to work in their best interests.

Figure 3:

KiTeS Framework (Melvin et al., 2019) (figure created by the author)



Nuttall and Woods (Nuttall & Woods, 2013) case study research proposed factors that supported reintegration following a period of EBSNA at the psychological level of the child, but also for the family and within the school context. Although this was a very small qualitative case study of two students, they suggest their data aligned with Bronfenbrenner's original multi-level, ecological systems theory model (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) which would work well for supporting reintegration using four areas of support: psychological factors, support for psychological factors, family support and the role of professionals and systems, which they called the "ecological model of successful reintegration". They found changes within each system and interactions between them meant successful reintegration for the two students in their study. Being able to identify the systems where support may be needed enables reflection by school staff and possible areas for intervention. This exploratory practice-based evidence can provide useful insights that worked in this specific context, but as attendance difficulties are so complex, it is acknowledged that with a

different school environment, different staff and a different family the outcomes may not have been as positive.

Bodycote designed an adapted version of Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological model (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998) , following her interviews of 40 parents of children with school attendance difficulties. She sought to understand parent experiences of attempting to resolve the difficulties of their children. She designed her framework with the parent in the centre as an advocate for their child and showing the relevant interconnected systems at play and how they can not only form barriers to their child's education but also be used to support a resolution to the difficulties by working in collaboration between families, school and external professionals. Where school attendance becomes a problem, the majority of parents do try to come to a resolution for their child's absences (Bodycote, 2022) and seek to work out the cause of their child's anxiety and distress at the prospect of going to school. They are also required to take responsibility for getting them to return. Bodycote describes the difficulty they found in doing this as the past narrative has been a "within child" discourse regarding the "problem" but the narrative is shifting to recognise the multiple systems influencing the young person including the school environment, which the parent has no control over. Bodycote especially highlights how parents in her study were torn between their legal duty to send their child to school, the societal expectation of them sending their child, and their role as their child's advocate and protector. They described finding support from schools, health services, the Local Authority and other professionals hard to access. Having a parent able to be the advocate is vital for the young person as they may not be able to advocate for themselves, especially with external services, however Bodycote explained the practical and emotional toll this can take on the parent as the mesosystem became a "site of conflict" as they attempted to manage mediation between family, school, peers and professionals. It may also be an uncomfortable position for a parent to be in if the home environment is a contributing factor to the young person's EBSNA.

Being able to show schools Bodycote's Bioecological systems model may enable them to see the complex interactions at play for children and young people who are experiencing EBSNA, and subsequently there may be some shifting of the

prevailing narrative around the cause of EBSNA which may enable them to be more supportive and sympathetic to finding a resolution in collaboration with parents.

Grandison (Grandison et al., 2008, p. 33) suggests that where factors are interacting that school refusal is where “stress exceeds support, when risks are greater than resilience and when “pull” factors overcome “push” factors that encourage attendance”. This research is commonly used in LA attendance guidance, where the suggestion is to aim to increase push factors towards school, making it more desirable, and decrease pull factors towards home by reducing enjoyable activities. This advice should be suggested with caution as it can appear reductionist to suggest that taking away a safe foundation at home (by removing the opportunity to rest or do enjoyable activities) will make a YP then find school more attractive. The multiple interacting factors, including the school environment, that are making attendance difficult due to the stress and anxiety that are caused may not have undergone any significant change. Although schools want to alter and adapt the environment and learning activities to make school a safe and welcoming environment where YP have lowered levels of stress, feel they belong and feel safe to learn, the complexity of the situation should not be reduced to a simple, push and pull scenario.

Another psychological theory that provides some context and understanding around EBSNA is Maslow’s hierarchy of needs (Maslow, 1943). Maslow proposed that individuals must have their physiological and safety needs met, before they are able to focus on their psychological needs, such as self-esteem and self-actualisation. Therefore if a young person has difficulties at home that mean their physiological need for food and sleep are not met, they do not feel a sense of safety or having their needs understood at school, or they lack a sense of belonging there; these are all factors that can contribute to not feeling able to attend school or to engage in learning.

1.6 Context

1.6.1 *Responsibility for Attendance*

In the UK it is the duty of parents to ensure their compulsory school age children (5 to 16) attend school (HM Government, 1996). If the child who is a registered pupil at a school fails to attend regularly (without an authorised reason for absence, and with the parent's knowledge) then the parent is guilty of an offence (as outlined in Section 444(1) of the Education Act 1996) and can be given a fine, an education supervision order (a court order that formalises a return to school plan) or parents can be prosecuted in the Magistrates Court. Where a parent knows that their child is not attending (which is often the case where the child has difficulty attending for emotional based reasons) the parent is subject to an increased fine and a community order or possible imprisonment.

As outlined in the recent "Working together to improve school attendance" document, (Department for Education, 2024b) schools also have a responsibility for managing and improving attendance, not only for academic performance but also to ensure safeguarding and welfare of their students. The document describes how schools are expected to: work jointly with families to understand and remove barriers to attendance, maintain a whole school culture of high attendance (with a clear attendance policy), monitor attendance to identify where support may be needed and to be mindful of pupils with mental or physical ill health or SEND needs who may need support to attend. If a pupil is at risk of becoming persistently absent, schools are expected to work alongside pupils and their parents as well as the local authority and outside agencies where appropriate to form a multi-agency effort to identify barriers and access support (Department for Education, 2024b). This guidance acknowledges barriers to accessing education are "wide ranging and complex, both within and beyond the school gates" and that there should be holistic, whole-family support. This would be in line with an ecosystemic approach.

Schools should make reasonable adjustments for non-attendance due to a disability under the Equality Act 2010 (Government Equalities Office, 2010) and reasonable adjustments should be made for children having difficulty attending due to long term physical or mental ill health, in the same way as any other SEND need (as outlined in the SEND Code of Practice 2015) (Department for Education, 2015).

However, in the new guidance (August 2024) the range of codes provided for schools to use when reporting absence from school (for example, due to illness, religious reasons, transport difficulties etc) still does not include a code that is related to Emotional Based School Non-Attendance (EBSNA), or mental health difficulties directly related to school attendance. There is no differentiation between what may be considered “truancy” and what could be defined as EBSNA. Absences can be labelled as illness, but there are no specific details recorded so it would be recorded as unauthorised, and the parent is held responsible.

A qualitative survey based on 126 responses from parents explored the reasons children were unable to attend school, the reactions of schools and the LA and the help parents received (Epstein & Brown, 2019). According to the survey, 34% of them had been prosecuted or were at threat of prosecution which they felt put them under greater fear and stress during an already stressful time, caused an additional financial burden and did not make their children return to school any faster. Although the research was not of a representative sample and so not necessarily generalisable, the researchers concluded that a punitive approach to addressing attendance was not working and in agreement with other research on families managing non-attendance that fines were not useful where there were multiple reasons children were not attending school (Arthur, 2015).

Epstein and Brown conclude that similar to other countries such as Denmark, non-attendance should not be treated as a criminal justice situation but should be tackled as a matter of social welfare with the welfare of the child as central to the solutions. The approach in Denmark for example, would also align with an ecological systems framework, where school and parents are encouraged to work together while supporting the needs of the child.

1.6.2 Why is this topic important and what is the current situation?

It is a statutory requirement to attend school (HM Government, 1996), with young people being identified as a “persistent absentee” if they miss more than 10% of sessions in a year, or a “severe absentee” if they miss more than 50% of sessions.

Table 2 below shows the absence rates each Autumn term since the 2018/19 school year to the most recent completed school year (23/24). It shows that

persistent absenteeism has increased dramatically across that time period in all school types but has decreased in the last year. It remains to be seen if that decrease will continue in subsequent years. However, the rate of severe absences across school groups is still increasing and has not shown the same decreasing trend as with persistent absences.

Table 2:*Absence Data by school type 2018-2024 (Department for Education, 2023-2024)*

		2018/19 Autumn term	2019/20 Autumn term	2020/21 Autumn term	2021/22 Autumn term	2022/23 Autumn term	2023/24 Autumn term
Percentage of persistent absentees (10% or more missed)	State- funded primary	9.20%	11.20%	9.90%	19.50%	20.90%	15.40%
	State- funded secondary	12.70%	15.00%	16.30%	27.70%	27.40%	23.40%
	Special	27.60%	30.00%	29.20%	39.40%	40.90%	36.20%
	Total	10.90%	13.10%	13.00%	23.50%	24.20%	19.40%
Percentage of severe absentees (50% or more missed)	State- funded primary	0.40%	0.40%	0.90%	0.60%	0.70%	0.80%
	State- funded secondary	1.10%	1.30%	1.70%	2.10%	2.80%	3.10%
	Special	4.10%	4.40%	5.20%	5.50%	5.80%	6.20%
	Total	0.70%	0.90%	1.30%	1.40%	1.70%	2.00%

The attendance numbers can be difficult to interpret as there is no separate attendance code for EBSNA, and children are all put in a group of “non-attenders” with non-authorised absence. This includes children missing school for mental health reasons, those truly “truanting” and those allowed to miss school sessions by parentally condoned absence (for being a carer for example). Academic literature does not always separate these out either.

It can also be difficult to decide what the true level of school refusal is (official UK cut offs are 10% and 50%, but this is not the case for other countries) as there are children who have severe emotional difficulty attending who could have lower attendance but are made to attend. These tend to be the younger children. Use of authorised part-time tables can make the picture more confusing, as although there is now an attendance code for this it does not give a clear indication of the reason for

the part-time timetable. By law they should only be used in exceptional circumstances (Department for Education, 2024b) for example for medical reasons (which could include inability to attend due to anxiety), and be short term with a reintegration plan and end date set.

Although the years affected by Covid will have altered the absences and attendance of some children, the absence rates were already rising pre-Covid. Data from longitudinal research looking at causes of school absence using pre-Covid data (van Poortvliet, 2026) showed that Socio-Economic Status has the biggest influence. Children in the lowest income bracket have a higher relative likelihood of unauthorised absence, at both primary and secondary phase, but shows more strongly at secondary phase. Multiple risk factors are associated with lower socio-economic status e.g. having unstable living circumstances and parental employment, which could contribute to attendance difficulties. Physical and mental health, both of the YP and of the parents was also highlighted by this research as contributing to school absences, especially for emotional difficulties such as anxiety (van Poortvliet, 2026).

The research also showed that having SEN support or an Education, Health, and Care Plan (EHCP) is also associated with more absence. From pre-Covid to 2025 EHCP numbers (and accordingly requests for assessments) increased dramatically from 353,995 in 2018/19 to 638,745 in 2024/25 (HM Government, 2025). The increase in attendance difficulties alongside these increases, may indicate that young people are missing school due to an unmet SEN need in school.

1.6.3 Why is being absent from school a problem?

As outlined by Gubbels meta-analytic review of studies identifying risk factors for school absenteeism and dropout (Gubbels et al., 2019), not attending school is associated with a multitude of problems in later life ranging from risky sexual behaviour, teenage pregnancy, substance abuse and permanent drop out from school which has been associated with later economic deprivation and mental health and social problems. In order to identify the main risks for these issues, the review looked at the 75 included studies (from the USA, Canada, Australia and Europe) and reported 781 potential risk factors which they collated into 12 risk domains. Although this was a very comprehensive review, all literature referred to problematic school

absenteeism (unexcused absence) as well as missing classes, school non-attendance and refusal without separating them out. They omitted “excused absence” which EBSNA could be included under as parents are often aware of their children not attending and absence can be labelled as illness. The review also focused on individual risks which did not enable combinations of risks or risk factors to be studied for which are the most predictive. The review acknowledges that in future, risks, assessments and interventions should be based on multiple factors from the child, family, school and peer perspective combined, which is in line with Bronfenbrenner’s Bioecological model.

As stated by Lester & Michelson in their UK based study, (Lester & Michelson, 2024) only half of persistently absent pupils achieve the expected standard in reading, writing and mathematics at the end of Key Stage 2 (i.e. when aged 10–11 years) compared with 71% of pupils with greater than 99% attendance (Thomson, 2023). This highlights the gaps in knowledge that start to form at this early stage which can then impact on attainment through secondary school.

Research has shown that a loss of schooling through low attendance is associated with poorer academic performance (Credé et al., 2010). This meta-analysis of more than 21,000 students across 68 studies, showed that class attendance is very strongly related to achieved grades even when considering student characteristics, so the results were not due to motivation or conscientiousness. The authors propose that students that attend more can take advantage of distributed practice and overlearning, rather than cramming information in massed practice. They also benefit from different modes of instruction and in-person teaching as opposed to receiving learning materials solely from books or online. Although this was a study based on US college data it may still be applicable to UK secondary school students who attend lessons in a similar way, albeit not on a voluntary basis.

Data from the British Household Panel Survey (BHPS) collected between 1991 and 2009, (which became the “Understanding Society” survey in 2011, continuing until 2024 and comprising data from over 40,000 households) has shown that school non-attendance (called truancy in this paper) among pupils in Year 10, was later associated with lower exam results and unemployment. Those often not

attending school were “three times less likely to stay in education post-16, three times more likely to have no “good” GCSE passes and ten times more likely to be unemployed six months after leaving education” (Attwood & Croll, 2015, p. 15). It is worth bearing in mind the study does not make any differentiation for young people that may have had special educational needs, medical difficulties etc.

The pattern of these findings was replicated with data from over 15,000 young people included in the Longitudinal Study of Young People in England (LSYPE) from 2004 to 2010, although the SES data from this study was able to show that being from a more privileged SES background did not prevent truancy relating to GCSE results, but it did act as a protective factor for unemployment. The study did not ask in-depth questions regarding the reasons behind non-attendance, covering only bullying, boredom and a dislike of school/lesson/teacher. More data on these factors could have teased apart truancy versus emotional reasons for non-attendance which may have given a different picture.

Carroll conducted one of the first studies that looked at primary school non-attenders and peer relationships in the UK. They identified that those students who are school non-attenders miss out on the social aspect of school, and have fewer friends (Carroll, 2011). 140 Year 6 pupils with poor attendance (below 80%, median 73.7%) between Year 2 and Year 6 were matched with “better attenders” (median 93%) for school class teacher, gender, attitude to school, reading ability, season of birth and a measure of intelligence. The “poor attenders” made and received fewer friendship choices when children were asked to name their best friend and up to four other friends.

Although this study provides convincing evidence for absence on peer relationships, it may also be the case that absence is in part due to having fewer friendships in the first place. When returning to school the absence may have compounded the social deficit as it becomes more difficult to make friends again. The authors stress the importance of early intervention, and research into starting this early in primary school (the children in this study were studied from Year 2 until Year 6) using techniques to build social skills to support the formation of peer relationships.

1.7 Literature Review Focus: Risk and Resilience Factors Contributing to EBSNA

Understanding the multiple contributing factors towards experiencing EBSNA is particularly challenging due to the multiple definitions and methods of framing difficulty with school attendance which researchers, government, schools and parents have. This in turn can affect the resulting support and interventions that are offered. Historically there has been a focus on singular causes of attendance difficulties but increasingly the understanding is becoming focused on multiple factors across the influencing systems that young people exist in. As discussed previously, frameworks such as Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological model (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998) , and associated variations of this (Bodycote, 2022; Melvin et al., 2019), are helping to conceptualise the risks connected to young people's internal characteristics, home and school environments and the interplay between them. Gubbels' meta-analytic review identified risk factor groupings covering all of these areas, with the authors identifying the following as the most important: "physical and mental health, substance use, anti-social and risk taking behaviours, problems at or with school, characteristics of school, parenting problems or difficulties and family structure" (Gubbels et al, 2019, cited in Carrick et al., 2026, p. 3). In order to identify the possible appropriate support for young people experiencing EBSNA, the risks and protective factors specific to the micro- (young person, family and school level) and meso- (interactions between micro systems) systems will now be considered in more detail. The table below is not an exhaustive list but highlights some of the main areas of research.

Table 3:

Risk and protective factors for EBSNA across Bronfenbrenner's micro and mesosystems

	Risk Factors	Protective Factors
Child	Age (Malcolm et al., 2003; Ulaş & Seçer, 2024) Gender (Fremont, 2003; King & Bernstein, 2001 Brand & O'Conner, 2004; Havik et al., 2015) Anxiety (Beidel et al., 1999; Dallaire & Weinraub, 2005; Egger et al., 2003; Finning et al., 2019; Kearney & Albano, 2004) SEND (including Autism) (Escoffier et al., 2025; Gubbels et al., 2019; Melvin et al., 2019; Munkhaugen et al., 2017; Prosser & Birchwood, 2024; Totsika et al., 2020) Autism and Anxiety (Boulter et al., 2014; van Steensel et al., 2011)	Increased self-efficacy (Maric et al., 2013) Personality traits (Lounsbury et al., 2004)
Family	Lower Socio-Economic Status (van Poortvliet, 2026) Parent involvement/attitudes (Desforjes & Abouchaar, 2003) Parental mental health (Gubbels et al., 2019; McGahan et al., 2025) Insecure attachment (Bowlby, 1988; Colonnese et al., 2011; Dallaire & Weinraub, 2005)	Prosocial behaviours (Filippello et al., 2018) Healthy attachment style (Kearney & Silverman, 1995) Perception of parents self-efficacy (González et al., 2019)

	Risk Factors	Protective Factors
School	Difficult peer relations/Bullying (Egger et al., 2003; Hawker & Boulton, 2000; Hutzell & Payne, 2012)	Sense of belonging (Allen et al., 2018; Goodenow & Grady, 1993; Sawyer & Collingwood, 2024)
	Relationships with adults in school (Corcoran & Kelly, 2023; Melvin et al., 2019)	School based relationships and experiences (Allen et al., 2018; Sobba, 2019)
	School Transition points (King & Bernstein, 2001; Malcolm et al., 2003)	Positive student-teacher relationships (Brandseth et al., 2019; Havik et al., 2014; Maslow, 1943; Ulaş & Seçer, 2024)
	Unpredictable environment (Baker & Bishop, 2015; Havik et al., 2014)	Students' positive feelings about school (Gottfried & Gee, 2017; Higgins, 2022)
	Negative learning experiences (Corcoran & Kelly, 2023)	

1.8 Research Evidence for Risk and Protective Factors

1.8.1 Child Risk Factors

Age

School refusal can occur across school ages, but there is some disagreement regarding the most prevalent age for EBSNA. Some research suggests that primary school pupils (between 5 and 10 year olds) are at risk of non-attendance (Malcolm et al., 2003), however other researchers including Ulaş and Serçer (Ulaş & Seçer, 2024) in their review of school refusal literature, found within the 40 papers they collated, (all studies published in English but from a wide range of countries including Spain, Korea, Japan, Finland, Australia, The Netherlands, Turkey and the USA) that the majority of studies were based on secondary age students (10 to 18). They reflected that this age group was most at risk as factors such as peer difficulties, low self-perception and pressure for high performance are more likely in this age group due to puberty and body image changes, changes in identity perception and exams. However, this may reflect the more chronic school refusal in older students, and that

older students are less able to be persuaded into school and are most at risk of dropping out altogether. This age group may also be easier to research, as they may be more able to identify their reasons for non-attendance and better at articulating them for research purposes. There is also some suggestion that two separate factors may be at play for the two age brackets, with separation anxiety being the driving force at the earlier age and social anxiety being the main force in the older age range.

Gender

UK Government data indicated that there is very little difference between the genders in attendance rate (overall 4.4% authorised absence for both boys and girls, 2.9% unauthorised absence for girls and 2.8% for boys, with slightly higher persistent absence rate for girls at 22.4% compared to 21.4%) (Department for Education, 2025c), which is largely backed by research literature (Fremont, 2003; King & Bernstein, 2001). However, some research suggests that girls show more school refusal than boys. Two very different studies (Havik's self-report questionnaire of 5,465 students across Norway and Brand and O'Conner's three participant case study research in the USA) came to the same conclusion, that girls are more likely to be school refusers (Brand & O'Conner, 2004; Havik et al., 2015). They suggest that there may be a link between the greater number of girls showing attendance difficulties and the connection between school refusal and anxiety (Egger et al., 2003). They propose that students that refuse may be those who are more sensitive to the effects of stressful situations or environments that result in negative emotions, somatic symptoms and avoidance behaviours. These may be girls and young women as they show a higher prevalence of anxiety disorders than boys, especially in adolescence (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Although it was a study with a very small sample and based in one school district within the USA and with families that could pay for additional private support, Brand and O'Conner demonstrated in their case studies that a team approach to supporting students with attendance difficulties was effective in improving attendance, taking exams, graduating and making future plans. They had a great deal of resources to support their students including: school teaching and admin staff, parents, school psychologist, school counsellor, social worker and private therapists. However, the

researchers reflected that they required the insight of each person at different stages to be successful. This reflects an ecosystemic approach to school attendance.

Anxiety

As highlighted by the heavily cited research by Berg (Berg et al., 1969) EBSNA includes “severe emotional upset at the prospect of attending school” which is most often attributed to a form of anxiety connected to attending for some reason(s). More recently Finning (Finning et al., 2019) reviewed the association between anxiety and poor attendance, as the authors found there was often an emphasis on anxiety being part of the cause of difficulties with attendance, but there was no systematic review to investigate this in detail. Eleven studies (with total sample size of 25, 724) were included following eligibility screening, carried out across the UK, USA, Canada, Norway, Germany and South Korea, with the studies assessing anxiety through validated scales, interviews and medical diagnoses. Where the methods were different, the authors considered them to be similar enough, or measuring the same constructs to be included. The authors found there was an association between anxiety and both truancy and school refusal. However, there were difficulties raised in the use of differing terminology by papers in the review, and clear definitions across countries about what constitutes “persistent” absence (for example 10% in the UK). Researching different thresholds and the effects that these have may support different support being put in place for students in the future. Also having clearer data on attendance patterns and especially patterns of illness (headaches, stomach complaints etc), may help to identify those children with anxiety who then may begin to miss school and fall into the cycle of anxiety that perpetuates the non-attendance.

Kearney and Albano (Kearney & Albano, 2004) studied a clinical sample of YP, termed “school refusers” by this paper, and found that those who attributed negative reinforcement reasons for their school refusal (e.g. avoidance of school related or social related situations) tended to have more associated generalised anxiety, social anxiety, specific phobia, agoraphobia and depression, whereas those who attributed more positive reinforcements e.g. perceived reward in the form of watching TV or playing games at home (with the exception of separation anxiety and the attention of parents) had higher scores for behavioural problems and

oppositional disorders. Therefore, indicating that truancy and EBSNA have two different root causes and possible clinical perpetuating factors, leading to differing support to be offered. This was supported by Egger and colleagues (Egger et al., 2003) who differentiated two groups of students based on anxiety (emotional based school avoidance) or truancy (behavioural disorder-based school avoidance).

Separation anxiety and social anxiety are commonly seen in children who have challenges with attendance, with separation anxiety being more common with younger children and social anxiety more so for those in middle childhood into adolescence. As suggested by Bowlby (Bowlby, 1984) insecurely attached children will experience more anxiety than those with secure attachments. This was supported by more recent research by Dailaire and Weinraub (Dallaire & Weinraub, 2005). This US based longitudinal study rated the parenting behaviour of 893 families across six years. They completed four observations per year of the child and family at home, childcare and at school, and on a visit to the laboratory playroom. Interactions were coded for sensitivity, stimulation of cognitive development, negative regard and detachment. Ninety-nine families were drawn as a subset of the original families to take part in the extra part of the study where mothers were given a separation anxiety questionnaire, and the children were given a separation anxiety measure using puppets. Researchers found that children who were identified as having an insecure attachment in early life (15 months) self-reported significantly higher levels of separation anxiety at age 6 years than those identified as having a secure attachment. Those labelled as having an insecure-ambivalent attachment showed the highest levels of anxiety. This may be caused by a parent who is inconsistent with their attention and interactions, and so the child becomes “clingy” and needing constant reassurance, as they cannot be certain that the parent will respond without ever increasing demands for their attention. Their motivation is consumed by ensuring the relationship continues. This would then lead to these children wanting to stay at home, or with the parent, rather than attend school to ensure that the parent will be available for them and be reassured that when they leave them at school they will return. This study had an ethnically and educationally diverse sample, although the sample size was much smaller than the original data set. It is also rare in that it uses self-reports from children so young. The research

was also only focused on mothers and did not include fathers although the original video data was available for analysis.

Meta analysis of 46 studies examining the relationship between insecure attachment and child anxiety by Colonna (Colonna et al., 2011) also indicate that ambivalent attachment style shows the strongest association with anxiety. The meta-analysis suggested that the relationship was stronger during adolescence than earlier childhood, although this could have been due to the studies with older students relying on questionnaires and self-evaluations, rather than parent reports or observations.

Beidel highlighted that for those young people with social anxiety there are many situations that arise at school that they find triggering, for example musical or sports performances, reading out loud in class, putting ideas forward in group work etc (Beidel et al., 1999). Social anxiety can then lead to avoidance of certain lessons, extra-curricular activities and social situations, which in turn can lead to isolation and/or bullying, all of which can be triggering and perpetuating factors for EBSNA.

While viewed through a medical lens, anxiety can be seen as having a physiological or “within-person” element, in that people may have a genetic predisposition for anxiety disorders. However, when viewed via an interactionist lens, anxiety is not seen as fixed identity or single cognitive style but seen as an interaction of their individual cognition within and between them and their environment. Ingul and Nordahl (Ingul & Nordahl, 2013) indicate that from their research into school absenteeism with 865 high school students in Norway, relative to anxious non-attenders, anxious school attenders had fewer other problems, for example problems with family or peers or learning difficulties. The authors suggest that this would indicate that anxiety is a risk factor, but that it only becomes a difficulty that can lead to EBSNA if other factors (such as negative parental attitudes, learning difficulties, feeling unsafe at school) are layered on top which leads to the burden being too great. This would support the idea that intervention for EBSNA cannot only focus on one area and needs to identify and tackle difficulties across the systems that surround the young person in order to be effective.

Special Educational Needs

UK Government attendance data for academic year 2024/2025 would suggest that young people who have Special Educational Needs (SEN) may be at more risk of having difficulties with EBSNA, as the rates of persistent absence were significantly higher than for those young people with no SEN (36.9% with an EHCP versus 16.5% without SEN) (Department for Education, 2025c). However, these absences are not coded more specifically, so could include illness and medical appointments as well as possible EBSNA. This is also reported by Education Departments in other countries (for example Australia and the USA) where data indicates that young people with “intellectual and developmental disabilities” have higher rates of school absence than their peers (Melvin et al., 2019). Gubbels meta-analytic review of risk factors for absenteeism (Gubbels et al., 2019) also reported a large significant effect for “low IQ/learning difficulties” through peer-reviewed literature.

As one in three pupils with an EHCP are identified as having a primary need of ASD (Department for Education, 2024a), this would suggest that autistic pupils may have more difficulty attending school than their peers. This was also indicated by both Norwegian (Munkhaugen et al., 2017) and British studies (Totsika et al., 2020) who showed that autistic pupils had more “school refusal” than non-autistic pupils as identified by teachers and parents. 486 parents of autistic pupils attending school or preschool in the UK participated in an online survey as part of Totsika’s study. The survey collected data regarding how many days out of the previous month their child was absent, the reason for the absence, the type of school they attended and how they travelled there. 43% gave “school refusal” as the reason for their child’s absence (the majority of cases) compared to 32% for illness. 43% of pupils missed at least 10% of days, classed as persistent absence with almost half (49%) of school days missed by children with persistent absence due to school refusal. This data is in line with the data from Munkhaugen and colleagues teacher reported data of children with ASD who showed “school refusal behaviour” (Munkhaugen et al., 2017) even though their definition of school refusal was slightly different. This data shows much higher non-attendance than the national average for persistent non-attenders (average 19% across all school types), suggesting that non-attendance in autistic young people is a significant problem.

Although this study is one of the most comprehensive studies of non-attendance in autistic young people, there were areas of further research that would be beneficial for providing support for this cohort. The study did not separate out the difficulties of the young people (for example differing levels of social communication or sensory difficulties) or any co-occurring conditions which may have had an impact on their attendance and would help to inform any possible future interventions. They also had a small sub-group of students who did not attend at all over the month, who may have had a different set of risk factors impacting on their attendance aside from their autistic profile, for whom an alternative approach to support and intervention may be required.

More recently Escoffier et al (Escoffier et al., 2025) and Prosser and Birchwood (Prosser & Birchwood, 2024) carried out systematic reviews to investigate possible links between “school refusal” and “EBSNA” and ASD respectively. They found there is still very little research currently in this area, with most studies being small scale and very little from the UK (nothing using the searches for EBSNA) meaning generalisability across cultures may also be a challenge. As with other researchers, they found difficulty collating research when definitions are different and terminology is variable. Overall, they suggest the studies they included indicate that YP with ASD appear to be at more risk of having difficulty attending school. Suggested reasons include: that autistic pupils may find emotional regulation challenging which can lead to avoidance and anxiety (Mazefsky et al., 2013), that they find it harder to resolve peer conflict due to difficulties understanding nuance of social interactions (Milton, 2012), greater likelihood of bullying (Ochi et al., 2020), co-occurring ADHD was an added risk factor (McClemont et al., 2021) or that adaptations to the environment are needed following assessment and consultation with YP, parents and school (Hirata & Ozawa, 2023).

Autism and anxiety

Approximately 40 % of CYP with Autism have a diagnosis of at least one anxiety disorder as identified by the DSM-IV (van Steensel et al., 2011) more than twice as high compared to typically developing children. Anxiety in YP with Autism can be due to many factors but can be connected to difficulties in social situations,

challenges with sensory processing and due to difficulties with executive functioning and intolerance of uncertainty (Jenkinson et al., 2020).

Intolerance of uncertainty (IoU) measured using the Intolerance of Uncertainty Scale (Buhr & Dugas, 2002), causes a negative emotional, cognitive or behavioural reaction to uncertain situations and events. It has been associated with anxiety in neurotypical people as well as those with autism. As a preference for sameness, routines and difficulty with change are well known as being associated with autism, therefore it is clear that IoU is a relevant part of autism and has been shown to mediate the relationship between ASD and anxiety (Boulter et al., 2014). This anxiety could be a contributing factor to school avoidance and therefore be linked to EBSNA in this group. As Boulter found the slope of association between IoU and anxiety was the same in ASD children and neurotypical children, this shows that similar processes may be at work within both populations.

IoU has also been found to be connected to emotional regulation (Sahib et al., 2023) with a positive association found between uncertainty and maladaptive emotion regulation with cognitive avoidance being the strategy most strongly related to uncertainty. Sahib found, in line with other research, that avoidance, including cognitive avoidance, maintains and strengthens the cycle of emotional distress. They looked at possible adaptive emotional regulation strategies, and found that mindfulness had the largest effect size, therefore as mindfulness increases, intolerance of uncertainty decreases. Mindfulness (being present in the moment and accepting the situation), is in contrast to intolerance of uncertainty which focuses on the uncertainty of the present and the future, which causes anxiety. IoU has also been found to predict experiential avoidance (Di Giuseppe & Taylor, 2021). This study shows that non-clinical individuals' avoidance is influenced by their ability to regulate emotion and level of intolerance in relation to uncertainty.

1.8.2 Child Protective Factors

Overall, individual, child focused, protective factors for EBSNA are not well researched compared to risk factors. Ulaş and Seğer's systematic review of school refusal (Ulaş & Seğer, 2024) addressed protective factors as part of their research question looking at components of school refusal within the 40 studies they identified. They suggest that students with "high social functioning and prosocial

behaviours” (Filippello et al., 2018 cited in; Ulaş & Seğer, 2024) as well as showing “academic resilience and self-esteem” (Seğer & Ulaş, 2020 cited in Ulaş & Seğer, 2024) will be more protected against risk factors of EBSNA than other students.

Research has been undertaken to look at specific personality traits and school attendance. Lounsbury (Lounsbury et al., 2004) studied personality traits of 851 students between 7th and 12th grade in the USA to identify if any predicted school absence. They found that openness, emotional stability and conscientiousness were all related to absence, however it could be argued that knowledge regarding personality traits is of limited use as they are thought to be relatively static over time and so of limited use for possible intervention. Personality traits are likely to be one element of risk or protection rather than a main factor.

Self-efficacy, or the ability to cope with difficult situations has also been suggested as a possible protective factor for difficulties with school attendance. Although researched indirectly, research using CBT for anxiety based school refusal has found that self-efficacy is a mediating factor, with even small changes enhancing outcomes (Maric et al., 2013). This may be relevant for intervention with young people experiencing EBSNA even if they are not receiving CBT. The researchers suggested that self-efficacy is important for supporting increased school attendance in the short term, but then that other factors, e.g. positive relationships with peers and staff and their ability to keep using the skills learned may facilitate the continued increased attendance into the future. This would align with the idea that multiple factors need to be in place to support attendance across multiple systems (individual, school and peers) to protect against persistent attendance difficulties.

1.8.3 Family Risk Factors

Another element of the child’s microsystem that has been researched for the effect on EBSNA is the family or home environment.

Socio-Economic Status

As stated earlier, data from longitudinal research looking at causes of school absence using pre-Covid data from 8125 children as part of the Millenium Cohort Study (van Poortvliet, 2026) showed that SES is the most significant family factor to affect school absence. Children in the lowest income bracket have a higher relative

likelihood of unauthorised absence, in both primary and secondary school. Low family SES was also identified as a significant effect on school absence in Gubbels' meta-analysis of risk factors for absenteeism and dropout (Gubbels et al., 2019).

Parental School Involvement

However, within Gubbels' (2019) meta-analysis, a more strongly significant effect was found within the family domain from the impact of low parental school involvement. This domain covered not helping with homework, low levels of communication with staff, low expectations of achievements, not reading with their child or supporting them with school activities. While this could be viewed as the parents' choice to have minimal engagement with their child's education, and a judgement about the importance of school and learning, there are several other factors which may play a part in their involvement with school. As described by Desforges and Abouchaar (Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003) parental involvement is linked to family social economic status via material deprivation, parental aspiration and school composition (judgement of school standards) as well as parental confidence in supporting their child's learning (connected to parental level of education) and parental mental and physical health. Their literature review indicates how complex "parental involvement" is as a concept, and how encouraging more parental involvement between home and school is too reductionist a concept as there are so many contributing elements. Interventions may rely on individual school initiatives to include parents and involve them in the school community, but also on parent education, as well as on social and community initiatives to support the family as a whole.

Parental Mental Health

Various researchers have investigated the possible risk factor of poor parental mental health on a young person's school attendance difficulties for example in Gubbels meta-analysis (Gubbels et al., 2019) but also separately (Bahali et al, 2025 and Bernstein & Garfinkel, 1988 cited in McGahan et al., 2025). However, most studies do not consider both pre-existing and depression after school attendance problems begin. McGahan et al (McGahan et al., 2025) used data from the Avon Longitudinal Study of Parents and Children (14,833 families) to investigate any possible link between school avoidance and separation/school anxiety in the children

aged 8, and maternal depression symptoms. In contrast with past studies, they found that school avoidant behaviours were associated with maternal depression after attendance problems began, and not before, whereas separation/school anxiety was associated with maternal depression both before and after. This may suggest parental mental health difficulties may be more specific to a type of school attendance difficulty, in this case separation anxiety, which is more associated with younger children. It also highlights the difficulties parents face in getting young people to attend school which can themselves cause mental health challenges which may require whole family support.

Parenting Style and Attachment

Historically, parenting style and parental attachment have been posited as connected to EBSNA from many years ago. Where the cause of EBSNA has been attributed to separation anxiety, this is often seen as the child being over-reliant on the mother, with the parent being labelled as “neurotic” or “emotionally unstable” (Johnson et al., 1941). The narrative of parent blaming and suggestion of being a “bad parent” (especially by school staff), and specifically of the mother, is commonplace, and is reflected in parent reports of what happens when their child is unable to attend school from interviews of parents in several recent studies (Browne, 2018; Sawyer & Collingwood, 2024).

Attachment theory (Bowlby, 1984) has been used to understand how parenting style may be related to EBSNA. Attachment theory would suggest that children form bonds with their caregivers to ensure their survival and that their behaviour is driven by a need to keep them close-by. If a secure attachment is not in place, this may contribute to separation anxiety if children are uncertain if their caregiver is going to return. Separation anxiety has been proposed as a risk factor for EBSNA in younger children (Dallaire & Weinraub, 2005; Egger et al., 2003). Children will feel confident to explore their environment if they have a secure, emotional place of safety to return to. Building on this, the work of Ainsworth (Ainsworth, 1979), proposes that “insecure” attachments are linked to low self-esteem and relationship difficulties throughout life (Bowlby, 1988; Groh et al., 2014; Lorenzini & Fonagy, 2013). Insecure attachments have also been related to later anxiety through childhood and adolescence (Colonnese et al., 2011), which has been

seen earlier in this review to be a risk factor for EBSNA. Current thinking would consider attachment style as only one factor amongst several possible factors and not the only explanation for attendance difficulties.

1.8.4 Family Protective Factors

Attachment style

Those with a “healthy” attachment pattern as described by Kearney and Silverman (Kearney & Silverman, 1995) is one that is described as “relationship oriented” with high levels of cohesion, expressiveness and low levels of conflict. This contrasts with the other 4 relationship subtypes that they identified in their review of family functioning and prediction of EBSNA: enmeshed (with overinvolved parents), conflictive (where there is a great deal of hostility and fighting), detached (where parents are not involved or attentive to the child’s needs) and mixed (where there are varied proportions of profiles). School refusal was seen less within what they termed “healthy” families. However, it is worth acknowledging that school refusal was identified in all family types, and so having a “healthy” style may just be one factor within the complex dynamics of factors that may trigger and perpetuate EBSNA.

Within the systematic review of school refusal completed by Ulaş and Seğer (Ulaş & Seğer, 2024) they identified protective factors within the individual, family and environment, or what could be described as Bronfenbrenner’s microsystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). Very little of the research covered the family system, however in addition to papers suggesting higher SES families and healthy attachment patterns as described previously, the authors also identified solving family problems and having what they term a “harmonious family environment” was suggested to be a protective factor for EBSNA (Gonzalez et al., 2019 cited in Ulaş & Seğer, 2024). Another study also identified a possible protective factor as young people perceiving their parents to have a high level of self-efficacy. Carless et al suggest from their study with adolescents who have difficulty with attendance and those who do not, that seeing their parents able to cope with difficult situations helps them to perceive their family as functioning well, and this is protective against school refusal (Carless et al., 2015 cited in Ulaş & Seğer, 2024).

While the studies highlighted here show the important influence that parents and the family have on young people, the focus is often on attachment style which is not accessible to intervention approaches and also is open to suggestion that “foundations are not fate”. In a review by Fraley and Roisman (Fraley & Roisman, 2019) they suggest that although early attachments can be very powerful and have lasting effects from childhood into adulthood, there are opportunities for children’s attachments to be shaped by multiple people and that even though those with insecure attachments as early experiences may not always be insecure as adults. They suggest that non-familial relationships, differing contexts and the contributions of genes can all have an impact on our attachment patterns. Therefore, in the context of EBSNA, reducing familial impact on young people to only attachment is removing all other surrounding influences and simplifying too greatly.

1.8.5 School Risk Factors

In addition to individual and family factors, the role of the school environment as part of Bronfenbrenner’s microsystem influences on EBSNA will also be considered.

Corcoran and Kelly (Corcoran & Kelly, 2023) carried out a meta-ethnographic review of studies exploring the views and experiences of YP who experienced EBSNA (called Extended School Non-Attendance in their paper) and identified seven themes as related to their experiences, of which four were related to their school experience.

These were:

- 1) Difficult relationships with peer group (bullying, difficulties conforming to social norms and forming friendships)
- 2) Inconsistent relationships with and support from adults (poor relationships with teaching staff, support being inconsistent and slow)
- 3) Negative experiences of school transition (feeling trapped, uneasy, unsafe, feeling that the environment was busy, noisy and overwhelming, loss of friendships)
- 4) Negative experiences of learning (subjects they did not like or understand, lack of support, not having additional learning needs met)

Each of these risk factors will now be considered in turn in more detail.

Bullying and peer conflict

Peer relationships are an important factor identified in the literature as impacting on attendance. Bullying (in the form of ignoring and isolating as well as name calling and physical harm) can lead to damage to a young person's sense of self/identity and lead to social isolation. Hawker & Boulton (Hawker & Boulton, 2000) found that those that were bullied experienced more depression and loneliness, and that social and generalised anxiety were also significantly associated with being bullied. These forms of anxiety are also risk factors for those who experience EBSNA.

Astor and colleagues (Astor et al., 2002) carried out a questionnaire with 3,518 high school students asking about school climate, teacher support, personal experience of bullying and violence and observation of it to other people. They found a strong correlation of fear of victimisation with school avoidance. Similarly Hutzell and Payne (Hutzell & Payne, 2012) found adolescent students who were bullied had greater levels of school avoidance compared to those who had not experienced bullying. The authors suggest that the avoidance of school was to avoid the bully and the bullying situation, which may lead to increased anxiety around attending school and therefore increased school avoidance. However, Attwood and Croll (Attwood & Croll, 2006) did not find this same strong association, and suggested from the British Household Panel Survey data that there was only a low association between peer victimisation and school avoidance. They suggested that poor school relationships and low SES were more important factors. Egger (Egger et al., 2003) suggested that school refusers were not only at risk of victimisation by peers, but were more likely to have more peer conflict in general. They suggested they were also shyer with peers and had more difficulty in general with making friends. Therefore, the impact of bullying on school avoidance may depend on more specific factors around peer relations as well as bullying and fear of victimisation. Whether this then leads to school avoidance may be impacted by other factors such as the school environment itself and the young person's confidence in how the difficulties will be dealt with.

Relationships with and support from adults in school

Gubbels meta-analysis of risk factors for school absenteeism (Gubbels et al., 2019) identified far fewer factors within the school domain than for the individual and family. They suggested that the main influencing risk factor for difficulties with attendance was having a poor pupil-teacher relationship. Corcoran and Kelly (Corcoran & Kelly, 2023) also identified that relationships with teachers and whether they provided appropriate support and appeared to care about the young people were also frequently mentioned in the studies they reviewed. Overall, Melvin (Melvin et al., 2019) suggests that within the KiTes Framework school risk factors for attendance problems at the micro and mesosystem levels include “school climate” which refers not only to the physical environment, safety and inclusion but also to the interactions of teacher, student and peer relationships and levels of support received. This may imply that like the bullying and peer interaction risk factors, the school environment encompasses multiple factors that can influence attendance as well as the individual and family factors.

School transitions

Transition points, especially from primary to secondary school, appear to be a trigger for EBSNA for many pupils, especially following the transition into Year 7 (King & Bernstein, 2001). The change in size of the school, moving classes, changes of teachers and the feeling of vulnerability amongst pupils who are older, physically larger and without the sense of staff support of primary school can be difficult for some YP to manage. In a small qualitative, interview based study of four adolescent students who had not attended school for more than a year, all mentioned difficulties with transition to secondary school, especially the size and unpredictability of the environment (Baker & Bishop, 2015). Havik et al have also highlighted the noisy, disruptive and unpredictable environments, especially of large secondary schools, that parents in their study of school factors associated with school refusal indicated were of importance (Havik et al., 2014). These authors suggested that in these busy, unpredictable school environments young people who have additional risk factors such emotion regulation difficulties, unhelpful thinking styles (worry and anxiety) and low self-efficacy, may then be at higher risk for EBSNA. These may not have been

such risk factors in smaller, less busy and more predictable environments such as primary school.

In a study of 27 schools in 7 LAs across England, children, parents, school staff and LA representatives were asked in questionnaires and interviews why they thought young people were absent from school, what they thought was acceptable and how they thought it could be improved (Malcolm et al., 2003). One of the possible causes mentioned by LA representatives and school staff was transition from primary to secondary school with reasons for increasing non-attendance being given such as large buildings, more teachers, different classrooms and new peer groups. Consequently, six of the LAs implemented schemes to support the transition process where there were pupils they felt were “at risk” of finding the transition difficult. However, they do not specify what this entailed or how they identified these children as “at risk”. Although schools did identify some school related reasons for absence, they attributed the majority of absence to parental/home-based reasons and parents “allowing” their children not to attend, whereas the converse was true in that parents believed their children were not attending due to school-based reasons (difficulty with work, poor teacher relationships). Schools reported strategies for dealing with poor attendance was either to celebrate those who did attend with awards or to punish those who did not attend. Only half of the schools mentioned adapting the environment, trying to understand the causes of a young person’s absence, adapting timetables and support via learning mentors. It is worth acknowledging that this study is now more than 20 years old, so the hope is that schools now take a more understanding and holistic approach to attendance difficulties and would aim to work alongside pupils and their families rather than blaming and punishing them.

Negative learning experiences

The last school based factor highlighted by Corcoran and Kelly’s meta-ethnographic review of causes of extended school non-attendance (Corcoran & Kelly, 2023) is concerned with the young person’s negative experiences of learning in school. The literature they reviewed highlighted how difficulties with the learning content and the lack of motivation to attend lessons they could not understand, along

with the lack of support in those lessons, were all contributing factors for not attending school.

As discussed previously, having Special Educational Needs has been researched as a risk factor for EBSNA. Possible difficulties with learning, anxiety around finding learning challenging, as well as difficulties within the educational environment are all additional risk factors. However Heyne et al (Heyne et al., 2011) reported no learning difficulties in their CBT randomised controlled trial of students with anxiety based non-attendance, suggesting that other school based risk factors such as academic pressure and lack of adaptation to a child's academic level may also contribute to having a negative learning experience that may contribute to difficulties with attendance (Havik et al., 2014).

The ability for schools to be able to support students with any SEND need (cognitive, social emotional mental health, physical or communication based) may be impacted by the wider economic situation, but the consequences may be felt within school, families and individual young people who may then feel unsupported and may contribute to them continuing to face barriers to attendance.

1.8.6 School Protective Factors

The overarching themes in literature regarding school-based protective factors for EBSNA were the inverse of the risk factors and related to the three main areas: positive school experiences and peer relationships, positive student-teacher relationships and support from teachers, and positive feelings and attitudes towards school. These align to Allen and colleagues definition of what constitute school belonging (Allen et al., 2018) from their meta-analysis of 51 studies looking at individual and social level factors that influence school belonging:

- 1) Positive school-based relationships and experiences
- 2) Positive student-teacher relationships
- 3) Students' positive feelings about school overall

These aspects of school belonging enabled students to "feel accepted, respected, included and supported by others in the school social environment" (Goodenow & Grady, 1993).

This sense of belonging was a theme highlighted by parents as a supportive factor for their children in the mixed methods study carried out by Sawyer exploring parental experiences of EBSNA (Sawyer & Collingwood, 2024). One of the main themes generated by Sawyer from the parent interview data was “Promoting a sense of belonging for the CYP” which included a relationship-based approach as a factor crucial in improvements to a YP’s attendance following EBSNA. This is echoed through a great deal of the literature in this area, as described below.

School-based Relationships and Experiences

Sobba (Sobba, 2019) has identified that having “social capital” namely participating in school activities, a closeness to adults and to peers could be a protective factor for EBSNA, especially where there has been an experience of bullying. This peer support (especially important through adolescence where close relationships with friends appear to take on more weight than those of family) is suggested to give social and academic support and promotes a “sense of care and acceptance” (Allen et al., 2018) which may protect against stress and anxiety and attendance difficulties. However, the authors found that although peer support was influential, it was not as strongly associated to school belonging as parent or teacher support. They suggest peer support is a complex factor, and it may not be possible to just state the presence or absence of peers is enough to protect against attendance difficulties, but may rely on the type of peers, the environment and the dynamics of if they are perceived as caring relationships.

Positive Student-Teacher Relationships

Ulaş and Seğer’s systematic review of school refusal identified only three school based protective factors, two of which related to positive teacher-student relationships and teacher support (Ulaş & Seğer, 2024). Similarly, in a Norwegian study with more than 500 secondary school students, environmental factors such as perception of teacher support and a feeling of class belonging were all identified as being crucial for mental wellbeing (Brandseth et al., 2019), with the effect of teacher support being twice as strong for male students. This aligns with Maslow’s theory of hierarchy of needs and the idea that people need the feeling of safety (both physical and psychological) before they are able to have confidence in themselves and achieve all they aim to achieve (Maslow, 1943).

Havik et al (Havik et al., 2014) carried out a study using semi-structured interviews with parents of young people (age 10-18) experiencing EBSNA (or school refusal as they describe it) from which they suggest that teacher support was one of the most important protective factors. They proposed that teacher support was not only based on academic teaching but covered three additional areas: emotional, instructional and organisational. Emotional support was important as the parents perceived that their young people appreciated knowing there was someone at school who cared about them and mentioned qualities of respect, appreciation and trustworthiness. Instructional support encompasses individual guidance, with parents mentioning the importance of adaptations made by the teacher for example in not reading aloud in class or not having to ask to go out. The authors suggest this is especially important for young people at risk of EBSNA as they may experience more worry and anxiety about academic achievement or the classroom environment than other students. For teachers to be able to identify some of these risk factors for their students means they are better able to support them and so decrease risk of EBSNA or support them on their return to school. Organisational support is described as the way teachers help students organise their learning but also their social relationships. Parents described teacher support in this area such as making adaptations to the timetable, having clear routines or creating a weekly plan together. This was supportive to those students who have a greater need for a predictable schedule and who may otherwise experience stress and worry where there was a lack of predictability which might put them at greater risk of EBSNA.

Although this study gives some very useful insight into school-based factors that can be protective factors for young people experiencing EBSNA, being a qualitative study the number of participants was small and may not be generalisable to other groups of students. Also, as the experiences are shared via parents, rather than directly from the young people themselves, they may not accurately represent what is happening in the classroom. As discussed previously from the research by Malcolm (Malcolm et al., 2003), parents also tend to blame school over individual or family factors for EBSNA, and so this may also be the case in Havik's study.

Students Positive Feelings About School

Gottfried and Gee (Gottfried & Gee, 2017) investigated factors around what they term “chronic absenteeism” using longitudinal data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study of 9,350 students and their families across the USA. They grounded their research in Bronfenbrenner’s Bioecological model by looking at micro, meso-, exo- and macrosystem factors, and ways they co-occurred, in association with kindergarteners’ chronic absence. This was a contrast to other research where only single factors are considered. One of their main findings was that children who had a positive attitude to school and expressed that they liked and enjoyed school, were less likely to be absent. Importantly this was the case across all socio-economic groups, and so would suggest that interventions that increase positive feeling and engagement with school may be successful for a broad range of students.

Higgins (Higgins, 2022) specifically investigated the views of autistic pupils with EBSNA about school and what would make it a more positive environment. Ten pupils carried out the ideal school drawing activity connected to the work of Kelly and Personal Construct Psychology (Kelly, 1955) which indicated that they felt adults in school hold all of the control and make all of the decisions. These students felt if they could have more choice and autonomy in decision making, as well as having more positive relationships with staff and other students within a calm environment suited to their needs, then they would feel more able to attend school.

This research highlights the multifaceted nature of what might make a school environment more “ideal”. These students suggest not only the relational aspect of positive relationships with staff and peers, but an environment suited to their needs and having autonomy around their access and engagement with the learning and the environment.

1.9 Research Evidence for Early Identification and Intervention Approaches

1.9.1 Early Identification

Many Local Authorities have produced guidelines for schools on EBSNA over the last five years. The majority of LA documents (77% of the 48 documents analysed from across the UK; 45 from England, 2 from Wales and 1 from Scotland)

(Hammond-Price et al., 2025) advocate for early identification and evidence based interventions supported by whole school approaches, greater staff awareness and (in almost 80% of document) working in tandem with parents/carers and YP. Most LAs (96%) included some form of tool or framework for assessment and planning, such as risk screening tools, the ATTEND framework, or Trafford's Early Identification of Need Tool (EINT) (Boaler et al., 2024).

Boaler and colleagues (Boaler et al., 2024) completed an action research study in one UK local authority where, working with a group of stakeholders from local educational services, they developed an "Early Identification of Needs Tool" (EINT) for identifying potential emotional based attendance difficulties. The tool statements covered seven areas: Attendance, Loss and Change, Family Dynamic, Curriculum Learning Needs, Social and Personal, Wellbeing and Other. The statements are then marked as "High", "Medium", "Low", "Not an issue" or "Not known". 24 people piloted the EINT (83% SENCOs, but also pastoral and attendance staff as well as parent carers). In their survey data they shared that they found it very useful for enabling solution-focused conversations, made staff feel more confident in planning to move forward and follow up actions, and enabled parents/carers to feel heard. Having pupil evaluations of the EINT would extend this research, as well as evaluating how well it works with students with differing levels of attendance and examining the effectiveness of interventions that are already in place.

Some researchers have looked at risk factors across individual, family and school factors to try to identify those children for whom attendance may become a problem in the future (Ingul et al., 2019; Ulaş & Seğer, 2024).

Ingul and colleagues (Ingul et al., 2019) used the risk factors to create a framework which outlines each of these signs of emerging non-attendance, how to measure and gather information about them and then suggests the use of an "attendance team" comprised of school staff, but also pastoral staff, mental health services and the family GP, to identify the difficulties and support families with specific areas of need that are highlighted. They propose an ongoing evaluation and tracking process that aligns with the "assess-plan-do-review" cycle of the SEND Graduated Response outlined in the SEND Code of Practice (Department for

Education, 2015). However, they acknowledge that schools will not be able to give time and resources to assess all areas and so suggest that areas are confined to early signs rather than risks as they are more easily observable. They also suggest starting investigations into absence quickly, and for schools to choose a low threshold for triggering assessment by the attendance team.

As so many possible risks and signs of EBSNA have been identified across the literature, schools' staff, pastoral teams and attendance staff would find it useful if there was one assessment that could be used, combining individual, school and family factors, and appropriate interventions could then be quickly applied. This was attempted by researchers who made the Risk Indicator Survey I (RISK I) (Kim & Barthelemy, 2011). This was a US based study, using factors based mostly around truancy (conduct problems, lack of motivation, unstable home life, social problems, self-harm and attention problems) and does not cover the criteria set out by the research of Berg to be classified as EBSNA (Berg et al., 1969). Further work on a similar tool including more measures on the Berg criteria would be welcomed in the literature and by schools looking for a quick and easy risk assessment measure.

Following this, researchers in the US (Skedgell & Kearney, 2018) carried out regression tree analysis to aim to identify predictors of non-attendance at different levels (1%, 10% 15%) finding a more homogenous set of risk factors associated with the greater absences. They only looked at demographic (age, gender, ethnicity) and academic information (grade, grade point average, presence of individualised education plan and participation in sports). In future research it may be possible to include other factors connected to emotional wellbeing and try to pick apart some of the more complex relationships between risk factors. It may also help show more specific risk factors at the lower absence level (1%) as at present the risks are wide and it would be untenable for schools to manage to mitigate them all. It would involve a great deal of data gathering but ultimately it may help to better identify those at highest risk and enable preventative and supportive measures to be put in place in advance.

In another US based study, Graczyk & Kearney (Graczyk & Kearney, 2024) developed a "public-health" style tiered framework for supporting schools with attendance issues named the Multi-Dimensional Multi-Tiered System of Supports

(MD-MTSS) for Attendance and School Attendance Problems (A-SAP). They proposed a multi-tiered framework outlining evidence-based practices that promote school attendance (see Table 4). They propose that a framework that is based on screening, data-based decision making with evidence-based assessments and interventions (akin to a medical model) can work for education and focus on identifying issues within different “systems” (academic, social, emotional, behavioural and physical) simultaneously. This ties in with the idea of working with Bronfenbrenner’s Bioecological model, and the multiple influences on and environments the child exists in, as well as reflecting the multiple “causes” and factors at play in EBSNA cases.

Ideally Educational Psychologists would like to be working at Tier 1 and Tier 2 levels to support systemic work on attendance in general, with more individualised work with small numbers of students who need bespoke support. However, currently, students are more likely to come to the attention of schools, attendance officers and EPs when they reach Tier 3, are in crisis and in need for intensive and more complex support from multiple agencies.

Table 4:

Information in the table is taken from Kearney & Graczyk's original work on the multidimensional, multi-tiered system of supports model (Kearney & Graczyk, 2020).

Tier	Type of interventions	Data to support
1	Universal/school wide – improvements to school environment, physical and mental health, academic readiness etc	Attendance data, course grades, early warning signs of attendance problems, transition difficulties
2	Supporting emerging attendance issues – therapeutic interventions for emotional distress, student and family support, teacher/peer mentoring	Behavioural observations, daily monitoring, functional analysis, interviews, academic and medical records
3	Individual chronic/severe attendance problems – extended Tier 2 support, plus alternative education provision, intensive case management	Comprehensive case study analysis, input from multiple agencies
4	Young people with severe depression/psychosis – intensive intervention including inpatient or residential facilities	As Tier 3 plus additional medical input where necessary

Although yet to be evaluated in the literature, the authors suggest that for the MD-MTSS for A-SAP framework to be effective there need to be robust implementation determinants (for example strong leadership) and implementation strategies (high quality training and support for implementation staff). Implementation outcomes and outcomes for students then need to be measured and assessed over time. They also suggest that an appropriate way to plan and measure the sustainability of an MD-MTSS would be to use Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological model similar to Melvin's KiTes Framework (Melvin et al., 2019) for example they suggest; chronosystem –

measuring attendance over time, macrosystem – measure government policies that impact attendance, mesosystem – measure school ethos and climate.

1.9.2 Possible Interventions

EBSNA is a heterogeneous issue, with many factors all contributing to children and young people's experiences, that many routes to intervention have been tried. When the dominant discourse was one of a "within-child" and largely medical led reasoning for EBSNA, techniques including pharmacotherapy were used as "treatment". For example Bernstein (Bernstein et al., 1990) used anxiety and depression medication as "treatment" for school refusal (as termed in their paper). Although these may be useful for YP with anxiety and depression that contribute to EBSNA, they have not been advised to be used as a general treatment as they are not appropriate for everyone.

Individual behavioural techniques with gradual exposure alongside forms of reinforcement (rewards) and increased "push" factors to make school a more attractive environment than home (Thambirajah et al., 2008) are well used strategies to try and increase attendance and return young people to school. Eklund's meta-analysis of 22 intervention studies (coded as behavioural, academic, family or policy based) published between 2000 and 2018 (Eklund et al., 2022) showed a small positive effect for the behavioural techniques included in the review, suggesting this may be an effective technique for some YP, but it does not address any of the family or environmental factors that may have been contributing to EBSNA in the first place. This may mean that it is effective only in the short term.

Alternatively, family therapy and family based interventions have also been attempted as part of "treatment" plans as several studies have described "family types", styles of parenting and parental involvement as possible contributing factors of EBSNA (Kearney & Silverman, 1995). In Eklund's meta-analysis 6 of the 22 studies included family, for example using family conferences, a "family agreement" family therapy or home-school communications for students absent from school. These studies showed a small effect size; however the studies themselves were too variable and were not with large enough samples or of rigorous enough design to recommend the interventions as effective.

Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) has grown in popularity as an intervention for EBSNA as it is used to challenge anxious thoughts and help teach YP to reframe their thoughts into less negative ones. This has been found to be effective with YP on an individual level (King et al., 1998) in that they had increased school attendance, while also showing improved self-reports of fear, anxiety, depression and coping. Caregivers also rated improvements, which were maintained after three months. It has also been found to be effective when delivered via parents, rather than therapists (Thirlwall et al., 2013). YP from this and other studies of CBT intervention often meet criteria for anxiety disorders, making them like each other in that respect. There is some evidence that CBT can be used successfully for YP with anxiety disorders (Stiede et al., 2023). As research indicates that almost 50% of autistic children experience clinical levels of anxiety the CUES project (Rodgers et al., 2023) piloted a parent delivered CBT intervention specifically for children with autism, that focused on Intolerance of Uncertainty and found in their pilot group, it reduced anxiety and improved responses to uncertain situations, suggesting that this form of intervention may be beneficial for some YP experiencing EBSNA.

However, in a systematic review of psychosocial interventions used for school refusal (7 of the 8 studies used CBT techniques), Maynard (Maynard et al., 2015) found only tentative support for CBT being an effective intervention for school refusal with effects of CBT on anxiety not significantly different from zero, although effects on attendance were significant. Although this is unexpected, the authors suggest that the increase in attendance may have caused an increase in anxiety in the short term, which may (or may not) have decreased over a longer period, however this was unknown. The studies were all small, with the majority of interventions taking place in a clinical setting with a wide range of number of sessions (from 4 to 12). Maynard also reports that although most studies were randomised controlled trials, they were not rigorous with their randomisation or concealing which participants were in treatment or control groups. These factors, and the mixed nature of the literature in the area, make it difficult to be conclusive about CBT as an effective intervention.

The research base suggests that children who experience EBSNA are a heterogeneous group and so what can work for one group may not work for another group, as their underlying reasons for triggering and perpetuating EBSNA may be different. This is a good opportunity to move away from CBT as an intervention as it

locates the problem as “within-child” and means that schools and families do not have to make any environmental changes to support their CYP, or acknowledge any of the other systems/factors that might be influencing them and increasing the risks of EBSNA. Following their small scale, case study research, Nuttall and Woods (Nuttall & Woods, 2013) suggest that using a multi-level, ecological systems theory model (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) approach to intervention may be effective for young people reintegrating after a period of EBSNA, even though it may be more time and resource heavy.

A recent review by McDonald and Pervez (McDonald & Pervez, 2025) focused on school based interventions for EBSNA within UK primary and secondary schools. They suggest as EBSNA is related to school attendance, schools should be primary partners involved in the intervention to support young people. They also highlight that given the link between EBSNA and anxiety and the difficulty accessing external support services such as CAMHS (Smith, 2023) that schools should be moving to support their young people “in-house” with interventions that they can run themselves. In the review itself the authors could only include five studies (three qualitative, one quantitative RCT and one quantitative non-randomised study), partially due the poor quality of studies, but mostly due to the lack of studies (none since 2018) which is surprising given the increase in young people not attending school and the Government focus on attendance.

In a study not included in the McDonald and Pervez review, Cunningham et al investigated school staff’ experiences of supporting children with school attendance difficulties in primary school (Cunningham et al., 2022). Eight members of school staff from seven schools across five English counties were interviewed regarding attendance difficulties, the challenges in dealing with them and the support available. The staff members recognised that although they perceive school non-attendance to be complex and caused by multiple factors (child, family and school or learning environment) they identified several interventions that helped support reintegration spanning both social/emotional and learning areas. The researchers argued that this was important, as most intervention studies usually focus on an intervention that is delivered by professionals (usually clinicians, therapists or sometimes Educational Psychologists), and so to know that an intervention can be effectively implemented in

a school environment, with school staff would make it more accessible and would mean it could be started more quickly.

Staff in the study shared that key to supporting children with attendance difficulties was having available resources, in the form of dedicated staff members, and input from outside agencies to go to for support and advice. There was a feeling that an individualised approach was needed to address the issues behind non-attendance, whether that was anxiety about lessons, difficulties with friends or sensory difficulties. They recognised that being sensitive, and knowing the children helped to identify the issues.

Anecdotally, the interventions that staff perceived to work well were therapeutic in nature and tended to focus on improving emotional wellbeing, either through play, drama, nurture groups, or via social interventions, to support peer relations or social-communication difficulties (e.g. Circle of Friends or social stories). All of the techniques and interventions that staff had been using target areas that have been shown by previous research to be factors at play in EBSNA (anxiety, difficulty with emotional regulation, coping skills, and lack of peer relations), showing that school staff have the skills to support these children in areas of risk for EBSNA, as long as they have the time and resources to do so. They also indicated that they perceived the support and collaboration of parents and other agencies involved with the family to be important for the effectiveness of intervention. In terms of working with the young person, the staff members highlighted that building a strong relationship with the pupil, and for them to have a sense of belonging was important, as was facilitating a feeling of safety at school, by using safe areas and nurture rooms. This is in line with research into protective factors for young people and fostering their sense of wellbeing and belonging.

Hammond-Price's review of UK LA advice for schools (Hammond-Price et al., 2025) also stated that LA guidance suggests the development of a sense of belonging (Sawyer & Collingwood, 2024), using inclusive, relational approaches (Corcoran & Kelly, 2023) and having consistent home-school communication (Boaler & Bond, 2023).

A meta-analysis of how schools can foster a sense of belonging was conducted by Allen et al (Allen et al., 2018). Data from schools based across the

USA, Australia and the UK (urban, suburban and rural) were included, with themes grouped into individual, microsystem and mesosystem level factors based on Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological model. In line with Cunningham's findings, Allen found that the strongest factors impacting school belonging were YP having emotional stability and having social support from others, most specifically teacher support. They found students have a greater sense of belonging when they have positive, caring and empathic relationships with an adult who is fair and can help them resolve personal problems.

In the UK, Emotional Literacy Support Assistants (ELSAs) work within schools to support the emotional needs of their children and young people. Their training covers many areas that are highlighted as possible difficulties for those YP who are not attending school due to emotional reasons (emotional awareness, self-efficacy, friendship skills, loss), while strengthening those that have been identified as protective factors. They also work in an individualised, therapeutic way, basing their work on building a trusting, respectful relationship while providing a reflective space to share their thoughts and feelings, while building emotional literacy skills (Burton, 2008).

As ELSA seems well placed to support young people experiencing barriers to education, this review will now consider the ELSA intervention in more detail and consider the research around the intervention to date, especially in connection to attendance.

1.10 ELSA

As described in the section above, there have been a range of types of intervention used to support young people at risk of, and experiencing EBSNA. McDonald and Pervez (McDonald & Pervez, 2025) suggested in their review that schools should take the initiative to invest in staff training to enable both intensive individual interventions and system-wide whole school support (for example in trauma informed practice, or EBSNA awareness) to take place in order to provide a more supportive school environment for all students. This is echoed by Boaler and Bond (Boaler & Bond, 2023) who also suggest whole-school preventative initiatives should be used alongside targeted interventions which focus on relationship building and promoting school belonging.

The Emotional Literacy Support Assistant (ELSA) intervention was developed in order for Educational Psychologists to help build capacity within schools to support CYP with their emotional wellbeing needs (Shotton & Burton, 2018). In use across the UK, ELSAs can only qualify and practice as ELSAs if they have attended a 6-day training programme and attend half-termly supervision given by qualified Educational Psychologists. The training focuses on aspects of emotional literacy and is built around Borba's building blocks of self-esteem (Borba, 2003) (security, selfhood, affiliation, mission and competence) covering the topics of attachment, belonging, resilience, emotional regulation and grief. The intervention itself is designed to last between 6-10 weeks and focuses on person centred, individual or small group work to support with emotional literacy skills, self-esteem, friendship and social skills and improved resilience. These are many of the areas that have been highlighted to be areas of difficulty for CYP experiencing EBSNA and have shown to be protective factors where they are areas of strength.

Although the primary function of an ELSA is to work with the young person through their particular identified area of need, the original ELSA programme was designed for ELSAs to communicate with, and advocate for the young person, with their parents teachers and other professionals (Woodcock, 2007). In a study by McEwan (McEwen, 2019) the author interviewed 8 ELSAs and 7 children that they had worked with about their experiences of the ELSA intervention, with the children also being asked to draw a comic strip of their experiences before, during and after ELSA, as well as their best and worst session. Relationships were identified by both ELSAs and the young people as the most important aspect of the intervention, with ELSAs identifying the continued work with parents and teachers as important for identifying difficulties and facilitating changes.

In a systematic literature review by Purcell and Kelly (Purcell & Kelly, 2023) the authors explored pupil perspectives of key outcomes from the ELSA intervention in 12 papers (8 qualitative and 4 mixed-methods). Included papers were all from across the UK (10 from England and 2 from Wales) focusing on pupils aged 5 to 16, with small sample sizes ranging from 2-53. Pupils indicated the key outcomes from the ELSA intervention were: better emotional understanding and the ability to regulate their emotions, better communication skills and learning to talk about feelings, but most applicable for those students experiencing EBSNA, the ELSA

intervention was able to strengthen their relationships with peers, with family and with the ELSAs themselves, and pupils felt an increased sense of safety and security at school which prompted increased confidence, participation in lessons and greater willingness to attend (Krause et al., 2020).

This review investigated the literature connecting ELSA and EBSNA and to date there is nothing specifically looking at how ELSA is being used with this cohort. Even when widening to consider attendance in general, there are only two specific studies that mention attendance. The first is Krause et al (Krause et al., 2020) who explored the impact of ELSA on wellbeing by interviewing thirteen pupils across primary and secondary schools in Wales regarding how ELSA had impacted their wellbeing. Although only a small number, pupils reported feeling more willing to attend school following the ELSA sessions because they could talk with them and that they had encouraged them to be more involved with activities in school. They also reported they felt more able to cope with difficulties, had more hopes and aspirations and felt more optimistic rather than fearful of the future. The other paper by Bravery and Harris (Bravery & Harris, 2009) interviewed 21 ELSAs and 17 Head Teachers across one local authority in England regarding the impact ELSA was having in their schools. 67% of ELSAs and 47% of Head Teachers reported that ELSA was having a positive impact on individuals attendance and 10% of ELSAs and 5% of Head Teachers reported a positive impact on attendance across the school that they attributed to pupils managing anger and understanding their emotions better, as well as feeling more in control of their emotions. These papers suggest that ELSA can help pupils to feel more positively about schools which can lead to increased attendance.

As there is such little research on ELSA and attendance, a review by Sawyer and Hampton (Sawyer & Hampton, 2025) focused on exploring the relationship between ELSA and school belonging. As outlined earlier in this review a sense of school belonging is a protective factor for EBSNA. The authors identified 18 studies published between 2009 and 2023 all carried out in the UK, exploring how ELSA contributes towards YP's experience of school belonging. 12 studies gathered views of CYP, two studies included parent views, eleven studies views of ELSAs themselves and four others considered the views of other school staff. Eleven studies were qualitative and seven used mixed methods. The authors identified five

main outcomes from the identified studies. The first was being able to explore and express their emotions. As well as feeling happier, the young people felt more confident and better able to cope with difficulties (Bravery & Harris, 2009; Willis & Land, 2022).

The second outcome identified by Sawyer and Hampton was the therapeutic relationship and strength of relationship between ELSA and YP, which is an element of ELSA that is mentioned in the majority of ELSA research. For example pupils in both research by Willis and Land (Willis & Land, 2022) and Krause (Krause et al., 2020) as well as Headteachers, ELSAs and parents all refer to the strength of the relationship between the ELSA and the YP as being a driver for change (Bravery & Harris, 2009; Hill et al., 2013; McEwen, 2019; Nicholson-Roberts et al., 2025; Wilding & Claridge, 2016). A further relationship-based outcome of the ELSA intervention that was identified was that improved relationships were able to be built with peers, within family and school. While friendships are a specific area that ELSAs are trained to work on with young people, the research highlights the ability of ELSAs to support young people with the social skills needed for peer relationships, especially post Covid (Russo, 2022). This was echoed by Purcell and Kelly (Purcell & Kelly, 2023) where YP in the studies they reviewed shared their family relationships had been strengthened, they had less arguments and their families had better understanding of their needs. Further to the therapeutic relationship described above, all of the 12 young people interviewed in the research by Wong et al (Wong et al., 2020) appreciated the close relationship they had with their ELSA, but some of them explained this was because the ELSAs were able to advocate for them, and share their wishes and views with other adults, for example parents, teachers or other professionals. Although a strength of this study is that it explored children's views and did so through not only interviews but through a drawing exercise too, some children chose not to take part in the drawing leading to an even smaller data set, meaning the views may not be representative of children receiving ELSA intervention.

The final outcomes identified by Sawyer and Hampton were that ELSA supported young people's access to learning and gave them a better perception of their strengths. Having ELSA support seems to have prompted increased confidence and greater participation in lessons (Krause et al., 2020) as well as building the

sense of self and greater resilience of young people through celebrating their strengths and achievements (Hill et al., 2013). ELSA involvement also enabled young people to feel more able to cope with challenging situations in the classroom which in turn meant they were not getting into trouble as frequently (Bravery & Harris, 2009).

Overall, the literature appears to show that ELSA builds on many of the school based protective factors discussed earlier in this review; helping to build positive relationships within school (and support those outside of school), promote positive school experiences, provide a strong adult relationship to trust and to advocate for them, and to increase confidence and positive feelings around school encouraging a good school climate. ELSAs are already seeing an increase in the volume and complexity of work, with anxiety and social issues being the most prevalent issues (Russo, 2022). In the knowledge of this, the ELSA programme may therefore be well-suited to support YP experiencing EBSNA, at a time when schools are reporting increased anxiety and difficulties with pupils managing emotional needs (National Association of Head Teachers, 2022), which research previously outlined suggest is a risk factor for associated attendance difficulties.

1.11 Role of the EP

EPs produced (solely or jointly) 85% of the LA guidance documents on EBSNA researched by Hammond-Price et al in their recent review (Hammond-Price et al., 2025), showing that EPs are being called on ever increasingly to contribute their knowledge to support schools with pupils experiencing EBSNA. EPs already have a role in school for supporting individuals and contributing to systemic approaches for the whole school. Although rarely mentioned in the guidance documents reviewed, EPs are well placed to contribute to a multi-agency approach by providing a psychological perspective to conversations that may be mostly focused on attendance data. EPs are also able to use their skills to facilitate bridging conversations between school and parents in order to come to agreement and shared understanding (Dowling & Osborne, 1994). EPs can be vital advocates and an appreciated “external perspective” for parents and YP when working to support families struggling to share their perspectives with school and accessing available support (Sawyer & Collingwood, 2024).

They are well placed to offer staff training on EBSNA, and to contribute to research tools and frameworks for early identification (either “in-house” or ones created by other services e.g. EINT or ATTEND framework), as well as possible interventions. These could include therapeutic interventions such as Cognitive Behavioural Therapy based techniques, social skills sessions or emotional literacy-based interventions. EPs already train and supervise ELSAs in school, helping to build capacity in schools for supporting YP with their emotional literacy and wellbeing.

1.12 Summary: Current State of Research, Gaps and Future Directions

This review has underlined the increasing prevalence of Emotional Based School Non-Attendance and the need that schools have for support in three main areas.

- 1) Identification of risk for their pupils
- 2) Assessment tools and frameworks that are appropriate to use
- 3) Interventions that can support emotional wellbeing and attendance

The complex pattern of risks that can contribute to a YP experiencing EBSNA are difficult for school staff to unpick without committing a great deal of time and resources, even in the knowledge that understanding these risk factors is vital for early identification and support to be put in place. Although there has been research into frameworks of risks (Ingul et al., 2019) and surveys of risk factors (Kim & Barthelemy, 2011) there is scope for extending research in both of these to identify the impact on EBSNA in a more long term manner and to make surveys more detailed and EBSNA specific in order to identify students in need of individualised support.

As most Local Authorities in the UK are advocating for the use of assessment tools or frameworks within schools to aid their planning and support work (Hammond-Price et al., 2025) more research could explore their use in practice with schools and families. The research is promoting an increasingly multi agency/ multi system approach to understand the complex factors contributing to each individual child’s experiences of school non-attendance. This could be explored for example through the use of Melvin’s KiTes framework which is based on the Bronfenbrenner’s Bioecological model (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998, 2006; Melvin et al., 2019) or

with Boaler's EINT tool (Boaler et al., 2024) within school and family consultations to get a broader picture of areas of difficulty outside of only child based factors.

Another area where additional research is needed is in identification of reliable and effective interventions. Schools have limited capacity to provide multiple intervention options and as there has been limited evidence of any one specific intervention having the most impact, more knowledge about what works for children experiencing EBSNA and the best way to implement that would give clarity on how to support them. Research has suggested that individualised, person centred, and relationship-based interventions are the most impactful and so exploring interventions which already encompass some of these features may be beneficial.

The current research seeks to investigate an as yet, unresearched area focusing specifically on how the ELSA intervention (which has been previously researched around school belonging but not explicitly school attendance) is being used to support young people who have experienced or are experiencing EBSNA. The research will explore the experiences of the ELSAs implementing the intervention and their perceptions of which elements of the ELSA intervention worked best, what the impact was for the young person and how the ELSA sessions influenced outcomes both in and out of school. The research will be using Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological model as a lens to investigate the impact of the intervention across the individual level as well as the micro and mesosystems. The current research utilises semi-structured interviews with ELSAs across England and seeks to answer the following research questions:

- 1) How have ELSAs (using the ELSA intervention) supported young people who have experienced, or are experiencing, EBSNA?
- 2) What do ELSAs perceive as the impact of the intervention on the child and the micro-mesosystem around them?

Chapter 2: Empirical Paper

2.1 Abstract

Since the Covid pandemic, there has been increasing concern from schools and from UK Government about the increase in pupil absence, especially those young people who are classed as persistently or severely absent (missing more than 10% or 50% of sessions, respectively) (Long & Roberts, 2025). Although persistent absence is slowly decreasing, severe absence rates are still increasing (Department for Education, 2025b). Emotional Based School Non-Attendance (EBSNA) is considered to be contributing to these numbers. There is a small literature base exploring school-based interventions for early intervention and support with reintegration of these students.

The current research explores the experiences of Emotional Literacy Support Assistants (ELSAs) (Burton, 2021) supporting young people who were experiencing, or had experienced EBSNA. Data was collected via semi-structured interviews with seven participants practicing as ELSAs in schools across England. The data was analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021) which elicited five key themes and eight subthemes. The five main themes consist of: “Building Trust”, “Facilitating the systems around the Young Person”, “Above and Beyond ELSA”, “The Journey Continues” and “Managing Pressure”.

This research highlights the work of ELSAs in supporting students experiencing EBSNA with individual factors as well as across their micro and mesosystems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). It suggests that having a trusting and consistent relationship with an emotionally and physically available adult who can advocate for a young person, teach and model emotional literacy strategies, and also act as their link between systems creates the sense of safety, trust and belonging that this cohort of young people need to enable them to attend school.

2.2 Introduction

In the United Kingdom (UK) it is the duty of parents to ensure their compulsory school age children (5 to 16 years) attend school (HM Government, 1996). If the child who is a registered pupil at a school fails to attend regularly (without an authorised reason for absence, and with the parent’s knowledge) then the parent is guilty of an offence (as outlined in Section 444(1) of the Education Act

1996) and can be given a fine, an education supervision order or prosecuted in the Magistrates Court.

Since school non-attendance increased following the Covid-19 pandemic (Department for Education, 2026), the UK Government has had an increased focus on improving attendance, and produced new guidance outlining school responsibility for managing and improving attendance, not only for academic performance but also to ensure safeguarding and welfare of their students (“Working together to improve school attendance”)(Department for Education, 2024b). This guidance outlines key expectations for schools including working jointly with families to understand barriers to attendance and work to remove them, monitor attendance to identify where support may be needed and be mindful of pupils with mental or physical ill health or SEND needs that may need support to attend.

Historically, rates of pupils experiencing EBSNA were estimated to be around approximately 1-2% of pupils based on figures from the mid-1990s (Halligan & Cryer, 2022). However, as we know that rates of non-attendance have increased, especially in terms of severe absenteeism (not attending more than 50% of the time) these figures may no longer be accurate. However, it is difficult, even with increasing understanding of EBSNA to state the prevalence due to differing terminology and criteria used and the coding of absence by schools.

Largely, EBSNA is understood to have a variable presentation across children and young people but generally displays as difficulty attending school, accompanied by severe emotional upset or fear of the school situation and learning environment leading to non-attendance ranging from occasional non-attendance to complete absence of attendance. EBSNA has started to be seen as a spectrum of needs by some researchers, and this is reflected in the work of Holder (Holder, 2025) shown in Figure 4. These markers along with parental awareness of non-attendance and an absence of accompanied anti-social behaviours are identified by Berg et al (Berg et al., 1969) as characteristic of EBSNA, and are often still used today. Past researchers favoured more “within-child” and medicalised reasoning for non-attendance, but terminology has been shifting away from centring on the YP and identifying that causes of EBSNA are often multi-dimensional with a wide range of factors that contribute to the onset and persistence of EBSNA difficulties. This is

reflected in several frameworks for understanding EBSNA and considering methods of intervention (Boaler et al., 2024; Melvin et al., 2019). Grandison et al (Grandison et al., 2008) provide a useful description of the impact of interacting processes where “stress exceeds support, when risks are greater than resilience and when “pull” factors overcome “push” factors that encourage attendance”.

More recent literature highlights the need to consider factors relating to the child, family and school, and consider how they interact with each other. This is in line with Bronfenbrenner’s Bioecological model (Bronfenbrenner, 2005; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998) which describes the effect of multiple systems, and their interactions, on a child’s development.

2.2.1 Risk and Protective Factors for EBSNA across the Micro and Mesosystems

Understanding the multiple contributing factors towards experiencing EBSNA is particularly challenging due to the multiple definitions and methods of framing difficulty with school attendance which researchers, government, schools and parents have. This in turn can affect the resulting support and interventions that are offered. Historically there has been a focus on singular causes of attendance difficulties but increasingly the understanding is becoming focused on multiple factors across the influencing systems that young people exist in. This research will use Bronfenbrenner’s Bioecological model (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998), and specifically the micro and mesosystems (individual, family, and school environment and the interactions between them) as a lens through which to view the risks and protective factors influencing the young people at risk of, or experiencing EBSNA.

A summary of some of the main risk and protective factors for each system will be presented in a table below. Detail about each factor can be found in Chapter 1.

Table 5:

Risk and protective factors for EBSNA across Bronfenbrenner's micro and mesosystems

	Risk Factors	Protective Factors
Child	Age (Malcolm et al., 2003; Ulaş & Seçer, 2024) Gender (Fremont, 2003; King & Bernstein, 2001 Brand & O'Conner, 2004; Havik et al., 2015) Anxiety (Beidel et al., 1999; Dallaire & Weinraub, 2005; Egger et al., 2003; Finning et al., 2019; Kearney & Albano, 2004) SEND (including Autism) (Escoffier et al., 2025; Gubbels et al., 2019; Melvin et al., 2019; Munkhaugen et al., 2017; Prosser & Birchwood, 2024; Totsika et al., 2020) Autism and Anxiety (Boulter et al., 2014; van Steensel et al., 2011)	Increased self-efficacy (Maric et al., 2013) Personality traits (Lounsbury et al., 2004)
Family	Lower Socio-Economic Status (van Poortvliet, 2026) Parent involvement/attitudes (Desforjes & Abouchaar, 2003) Parental mental health (Gubbels et al., 2019; McGahan et al., 2025) Insecure attachment (Bowlby, 1988; Colonnese et al., 2011; Dallaire & Weinraub, 2005)	Prosocial behaviours (Filippello et al., 2018) Healthy attachment style (Kearney & Silverman, 1995) Perception of parents self-efficacy (González et al., 2019)

	Risk Factors	Protective Factors
School	Difficult peer relations/Bullying (Egger et al., 2003; Hawker & Boulton, 2000; Hutzell & Payne, 2012) Relationships with adults in school (Corcoran & Kelly, 2023; Melvin et al., 2019) School Transition points (King & Bernstein, 2001; Malcolm et al., 2003) Unpredictable environment (Baker & Bishop, 2015; Havik et al., 2014) Negative learning experiences (Corcoran & Kelly, 2023)	Sense of belonging (Allen et al., 2018; Goodenow & Grady, 1993; Sawyer & Collingwood, 2024) School based relationships and experiences (Allen et al., 2018; Sobba, 2019) Positive student-teacher relationships (Brandseth et al., 2019; Havik et al., 2014; Maslow, 1943; Ulaş & Seğer, 2024) Students' positive feelings about school (Gottfried & Gee, 2017; Higgins, 2022)

In brief, although there is mixed data related to age and gender, there is some suggestion that being in secondary school and being female are connected with more attendance difficulties (Brand & O'Conner, 2004; Havik et al., 2015; Ulaş & Seğer, 2024). This may be connected to anxiety, which has been seen as increased for girls, and is in itself a risk factor for increased non-attendance (Egger et al., 2003; Finning et al., 2019). Having SEN is linked to greater difficulties with attendance (Gubbels et al., 2019; Melvin et al., 2019), especially for those young people with autism (Munkhaugen et al., 2017; Totsika et al., 2020), who also have a higher prevalence of anxiety (van Steensel et al., 2011) but also have difficulties with emotional regulation (Mazefsky et al., 2013), understanding social norms (Milton, 2012) and social communication difficulties which can lead to peer conflict and difficulties with the environment due to sensory difficulties. These are all additional risk factors for attendance difficulties and EBSNA if not supported.

In terms of protective factors, there are very few in the literature, but there are suggestions that increased social function, better academic resilience and self-esteem (Filippello et al., 2018), and improved self-efficacy (the ability to cope with

difficult situations) (Maric et al., 2013) are all supportive factors to protect from triggering and perpetuating EBSNA. Having certain personality traits are also suggested by some research (Lounsbury et al., 2004), but there is limited evidence for this.

Family factors such as low SES are connected to increased school absence (van Poortvliet, 2026) across school years. Lack of parental involvement in school is also linked to lower attendance (Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003). However, parental involvement has additional complicating factors and can be influenced by low SES, aspirations, parental confidence and parental physical and mental health (Gubbels et al., 2019; McGahan et al., 2025). In addition, parenting style and insecure attachment has been connected to increased anxiety (Bowlby, 1988; Colonnese et al., 2011; Dallaire & Weinraub, 2005) which is a risk factor for non-attendance.

Protective factors suggested by the research are concerned with healthy attachment styles (Kearney & Silverman, 1995), as well as a “harmonious family environment” (González et al., 2019) and for young people to perceive their parents as able to cope with difficult situations (Carless et al., 2015).

School factors that are suggested to give increased risk of EBSNA are related to difficult relations with peers (including bullying) (Egger et al., 2003; Hawker & Boulton, 2000; Hutzell & Payne, 2012), poor relationships with adults in school (Corcoran & Kelly, 2023; Melvin et al., 2019), negative experiences of school transitions (King & Bernstein, 2001; Malcolm et al., 2003) and a negative experience of learning where additional needs are not met (Corcoran & Kelly, 2023) and the environment is perceived to be unpredictable and unsafe (Baker & Bishop, 2015; Havik et al., 2014). In contrast the protective factors are largely the opposite, and suggest that a positive school experience (including better peer relations) (Sobba, 2019), positive relationships with adults in school (Brandseth et al., 2019; Havik et al., 2014; Ulaş & Seğer, 2024) and overall positive feelings about school (Gottfried & Gee, 2017) contribute to a better sense of school belonging (Allen et al., 2018; Goodenow & Grady, 1993; Sawyer & Collingwood, 2024).

As an intervention, ELSA is suggested to improve emotional literacy and regulation, give better communication skills (especially around emotional understanding) as well as strengthening relationships with peers, family and the

ELSA themselves. Research suggests that ELSA improves a sense of safety and security at school which in turn improves confidence which can promote increased participation in lessons. The strength of the relationship young people build with the ELSAs is suggested to be a key driver for change.

As many of the risk factors for EBSNA are areas supported by the ELSA intervention, it is important to explore how this intervention is used in schools to support this cohort of children especially in light of the research around the risk and protective factors involved in the microsystem and mesosystem around the children, which is the area in which ELSA is operating, and the impact that this has on a young person at risk of, or experiencing, EBSNA.

2.3 Aims and Rationale of Present Study

This study aims to gather ELSA's experiences of supporting YP who have experienced, or are experiencing EBSNA, using the ELSA intervention. The study will explore how ELSA is being used and elements that may have potential impact from the point of view of practitioners. Given that we are assuming that the ELSAs are having an influence on the thinking and behaviour of the YP taking part, if we can understand from ELSAs themselves what they did, and what the perceived outcomes were, this may help to inform future ELSA programme delivery and effectiveness (Timmins & Miller, 2007), and is relevant for EPs providing ELSA training and supervision.

As there is currently no research investigating the use of ELSA with this specific group, this constitutes a knowledge gap (Miles, 2017) and so this research will be the first to connect the two areas and understand how the use of ELSA could have positive outcomes for YP experiencing EBSNA. It is hoped that the data will not only support ELSAs with areas of focus and methods of working while delivering their intervention, but also to help inform Educational Psychology Services across the UK with evidence to support the training delivery and supervision of ELSAs in their LAs. The intervention may have the potential to have positive outcomes for these YP, in which case the hope would be for key ELSA knowledge and principles to become embedded across schools as a wider whole school ethos for the school staff to work together to support YP both inside and outside of the intervention.

Research Questions

This research study will aim to explore the following research questions:

1. How have ELSAs (using the ELSA intervention) supported young people who have experienced, or are experiencing, EBSNA?
2. What do ELSAs perceive as the impact of the intervention on the child and the micro-mesosystem around them?

2.4 Methodology

This research is written in the “first-person” writing style in order to align with the reflexive thematic analysis methodology used as it acknowledges that I, as the researcher, am part of the research, and the knowledge generated by this study is situated and shaped by my practices as much as those of the participants. My subjectivity is part of reflexive thematic analysis and not something to be minimised in order to produce objective, generalisable outcomes.

As stated by Trainor and Bundon (Trainor & Bundon, 2021, p. 707) “reflexivity is about more than just one’s positionality – it is about the role of the researcher as an active agent in the production of knowledge” and I endeavoured to reflect on and be aware of the history, values, assumptions and social privileges I was drawing on while carrying out this research. I have considered how my perspectives as an educated, middle-class white cisgender female, as well as my previous life experiences and world view would impact on the research in terms of the questions asked and the interpretations I make. My interest in both EBSNA and ELSA stemmed from my previous work with young people struggling to attend school while working as an Assistant EP, and in spending time with school staff who did not know how to support their students to overcome their barriers to attending. I had many years of previous research experience in longitudinal, quantitative research, but my experience with qualitative data collection and analysis was much more limited. As a researcher I was considering ELSAs experiences with an outsider lens due to my educational background and the power dynamics my position afforded, but that I was bringing shared lived experiences as white women working in an education field and having a shared goal of improving experiences for young people.

2.4.1 Ontology and epistemology

Ontology and epistemology are the philosophical theories that inform research practice. Ontology refers to the nature of reality and whether a researcher assumes that there is reality to know and understand, separate from their research practice (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Epistemology refers to what knowledge is, and how this knowledge can be known and understood by a researcher. Both ontology and epistemology are inextricably linked to how a researcher conceptualises language (Reicher, 2000). Positions can vary and are associated with particular methodologies which align with their approaches.

The current research adopts a relativist ontological stance. This position suggests that there is not an independent, fixed, ultimate truth outside of the person, and that “all perspectives are equally valid” (Burr, 1995, p. 129) and are shaped by experiences, shared interactions and cultural norms. This allows me as the researcher to use the interview data to understand how the ELSAs are constructing their own meaning and reality for themselves, as opposed to a realist researcher who would take their descriptions as “face value” descriptions of what happened (Willig, 2012). The aim of this research is to generate a rich, in-depth understanding of how the participants perceived their experiences. The analysis will also be aligned with a relativist position, through reflexive thematic analysis, in that it is my interpretation of the data which is also influenced by my values and experiences and the meaning that I infer upon what is said.

In terms of epistemological position, I will be taking a social constructionist position as I am considering that knowledge is created through the language used by the participants, rather than reflected by it (Braun & Clarke, 2021). The social constructionist position views knowledge and experience of the world as mediated by the social environment and come from internalised social constructions. My role in the process is to receive what is said by the ELSAs and to explore how they are using their language to talk about supporting young people with EBSNA, how these shape and construct their experiences and how they position themselves. As Willig (Willig, 2012, p. 12) describes it, the researcher is “like an architect”, looking at what is being described “with a view to how it has been constructed and from what resources and materials”.

2.4.2 Design

Qualitative data was collected through semi-structured interviews, which were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021). This was selected as it is an effective and flexible method which allows for both inductive and deductive themes to be generated. This is appropriate for this research as although the aim was to primarily use inductive theme generation, driven by the data, one of my research questions is focused on the impact of the ELSA intervention on the micro and mesosystems influencing the child, so the analysis will also be shaped by viewing the participants shared experiences through the lens of Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological model.

Reflexive thematic analysis is rooted within the "Big Q" qualitative research paradigm (Kidder & Fine, 1987) and so it is focused on understanding the situated knowledge and experiences of participants, and identifying patterns across the data set rather than, for example, interrogating individual personal accounts in detail. As my research questions concern investigating the experiences of a group of participants this method is appropriate. It also acknowledges that I, as the researcher, play an active part in analysing the data and as such themes will be produced by me through engagement with the participant and the data, influenced by my own perspectives, values and previous knowledge on the subject. This central role of the researcher is acknowledged and valued as part of the research and this is not seen as bias, as there is no aim to make the analysis objective or generalisable.

2.4.3 Participants and recruitment

The participants in the study were recruited and selected due to them all fulfilling the criteria of being registered and practicing ELSAs who had been working with YP experiencing EBSNA, with some form of positive outcome. They were considered to be knowledgeable and experienced in this particular area and by replying to the advert, were displaying their willingness to participate and share their experiences (Palinkas et al., 2015). This is a popular sampling method in qualitative research where the emphasis is on depth of understanding as opposed to generalisability.

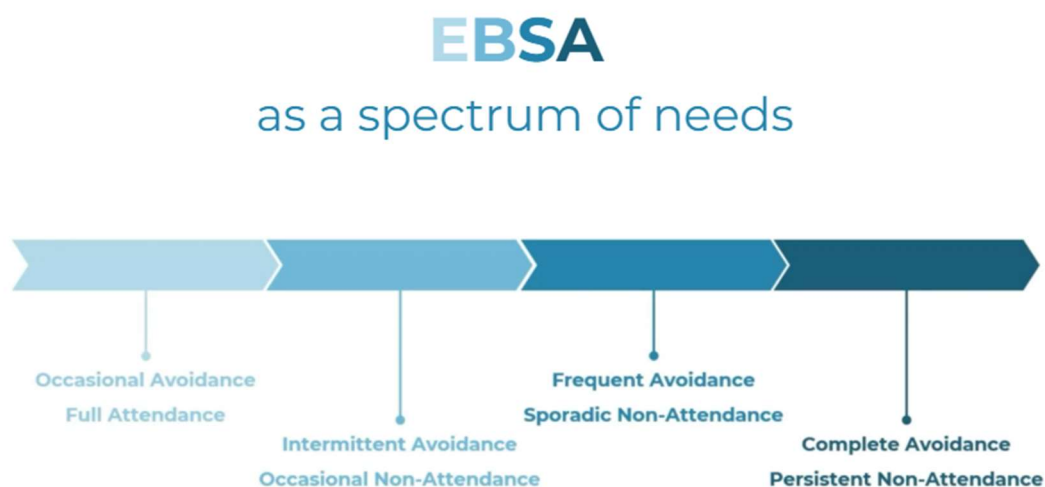
EBSNA in this study was based around the characteristics outlined by Berg (Berg et al., 1969) as stated below.

- (1) Severe difficulty attending school,
- (2) Severe emotional upset at the prospect of attending school,
- (3) Staying at home with the knowledge of parents
- (4) Absence of anti-social behaviours.

However, presentation of EBSNA can cover a wide range of patterns of avoidance and attendance. It can range from occasional reluctance to attend or complete refusal, or full attendance (although with underlying anxiety) to persistent non-attendance. It has started to be seen as a spectrum of needs by some researchers and in this research all variations of difficulty attending were accepted.

Figure 4:

Image taken from Dr Jerricah Holder's training: Working to support entrenched EBSA needs - EBSA as a spectrum of needs (Holder, 2025)



The research focus is based on there being some form of “positive outcome” from the ELSA involvement, which is acknowledged to be subjective in nature. It was not specifically quantified to allow for a range of outcomes and to understand what the ELSAs themselves considered to be “positive” from their experience of supporting these YP.

Participants were recruited with the support of Educational Psychology Services across England who acted as gatekeepers to the ELSA participants. EPs

working as ELSA supervisors were identified using the ELSA Network website and asked to forward a recruitment flyer and information sheet to ELSAs registered within their service (see Appendix 1). ELSAs who received the recruitment information were asked to return the included consent form to the researcher to take part (see Appendix 2).

Ten participants responded to the recruitment information, with one withdrawing due to safeguarding concerns, and two did not respond to further emails sent to arrange a time for an interview to take place. Therefore, seven ELSAs consented and took part in interviews. Although there is no definitive number of participants needed to ensure that the majority of themes are mentioned enough times to be recognised as important in the analysis (Fugard & Potts, 2015), Braun and Clarke (Braun & Clarke, 2013) have suggested that for small projects 6-10 participants is an acceptable number for interviews. Following transcription checks, and coding, I was satisfied that the dataset contained enough information power (Malterud et al., 2016) as very few new codes were being produced.

Demographic information is presented in Table 6 below. Information regarding the type of schools the ELSAs worked in, the length of time they had been qualified for and the amount of time they practice as ELSAs each week is included. They range from recently qualified ELSAs, having only been qualified for a year, to up to seven years, and some have only two hours a week for ELSA whereas others work as full-time ELSAs. Of the seven, only one works within a primary setting, although it is a school that takes pupils across primary and secondary ages, and so the ELSA may have worked with secondary pupils too. Although the young people they kept in mind while discussing their work were not described in detail, they comprised three female and four male students with four of the seven starting ELSA sessions in Year 7. This would align with previous research that suggests times of transition as a risk factor for EBSNA. Three of the seven young people had a diagnosis of autism, with two in the process of obtaining an assessment. While one young person had co-occurring anxiety, for three others anxiety was their main presenting difficulty.

Table 6:

Participant demographics and information regarding the children they were discussing

	Type of school	Length of time qualified	Area of the UK	Time given to ELSA per week	YP Yr	YP M/F	YP diagnoses?	EHCP?	Attendance
ELSA 1	Upper	3 Years	East	10 hrs	9	M	Anxiety	No	None to almost full
ELSA 2	Secondary	2 Years	East	2 hrs	7	F	Anxiety – neurodiversity being explored	Pending	None to part time
ELSA 3	Secondary	1 Year	East	4 hrs	7	M	Anxiety	Yes	None to attending only for ELSA
ELSA 4	Secondary	4 Years	North West	9-10 hours	8	F	ASC	Yes	Declining since Yr 8 to non-attendance, now attending in afternoons
ELSA 5	Secondary	7 Years	South West	25 hours	7	M	ASC and anxiety	No	Declining through Yr 7, very sporadic, now consistent part time timetable

	Type of school	Length of time qualified	Area of the UK	Time given to ELSA per week	YP Yr	YP M/F	YP diagnoses?	EHCP?	Attendance
ELSA 6	Secondary	2.5 Years	South East	Was 25 hours now approx. 3 hours	7	M	Neurodiversity being explored	No	Declining through Yr 7, large periods of time away, part time timetable increasing
ELSA 7	Primary and Secondary	2 Years	East	12 hours	6	F	ASC	Yes	Declining Year 6 to Year 7, now almost full time in Year 8

2.4.4 Data Generation

Following receipt of a signed consent form, participants were invited to take part in a semi-structured interview online via Microsoft Teams to better understand their experiences of using the ELSA intervention to support YP who had been experiencing EBSNA. Semi-structured interviews were used to give greater flexibility during discussion and to allow the interview to be more participant-led, allowing them to share thoughts in greater depth while keeping enough structure to cover the main research questions. This style of interview also allows for rapport to be built with participants, allowing receiving initiatives, and a safe space for participant reflection (Magaldi & Berler, 2020). Using online interviews via Microsoft Teams allowed me to speak to ELSAs across England, rather than only in the immediate geographical area. Audio and video recordings were taken of each interview following participant consent, to allow me to manually check and amend any typographical errors, as the

transcriptions were automatically generated. Videos were deleted once the transcriptions were checked by myself, and the participants had reviewed their transcriptions and confirmed they were representative of what was said. Following participant confirmation of the transcriptions, the transcripts were anonymised with each participant being allocated a number.

Before the main interview began, the type of school the ELSA's worked in, how long they had been qualified, the amount of time they dedicated to working as ELSAs each week and some general information about the YP they supported was gathered. Participants were reminded not to use the names or any identifying information of the children that they were referring to while taking part in the interview as there was no ethical consent from parents to discuss them. The main questions were structured to understand what areas were focused on during their ELSA sessions and the style of their work. They were also asked about the outcomes of their work, what they thought had influenced that outcome and why, and what changes they would have made to their work if they could (see Appendix 3). Not all questions were planned but followed the lead of the participants during the interview across the topic area. Interviews lasted between 29 and 61 minutes (average 47 minutes) and were conducted between June and December 2025.

2.4.5 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for the current research was gained from the University of East Anglia School for Education and Lifelong Learning Research Ethics Committee (see Appendix 4) for the original research study in April 2025, with a small amendment made in June 2025 for contacting a different gatekeeper as the LAs often did not hold the contact details for the gatekeeper originally named in the first ethics submission. Another amendment was submitted in September 2025, again for alteration to the participant recruitment route, and for removal of two originally stated participant groups, bringing the research to the format it is described in this chapter. More detail around changes to the study are outlined in Chapter 3.

The ethics submission was completed following the British Educational Research Association guidelines (British Educational Research Association [BERA], 2024), alongside the British Psychological Society (BPS) Code of Human Research Ethics (Oates et al., 2021), the British Psychological Society (BPS) Code of Ethics

and Conduct (British Psychological Society, 2021) and the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC) standards of conduct, performance and ethics (Health Care and Professions Council, 2024).

Participants were provided with a detailed information sheet and consent form to read and complete before the interview to allow them time and space to consider participation before the interview itself. If no consent form was returned, then no interview appointment was made. However, due to completing the interviews online, it was re-confirmed with the participants before the interview began that they had read and understood the information and they were able to ask any questions at this point. It was verbally confirmed with the participants that they consented to audio and visual recordings, and they were reminded that a transcript would be sent to them once they had been checked for any automatic transcription errors. They were also reminded that their data would be anonymised once they had received and checked the transcripts, at which point they would no longer be able to withdraw from the study. Participants were asked some basic demographic information (see Table 6) about themselves and their ELSA work. They were also asked to keep a young person that they had been working with in mind, and asked some basic information about them, but reminded not to use any names, as there had not been any parental consent to discuss specific children.

Participant information (names and email addresses) was kept in a password protected Excel sheet on my UEA OneDrive and only used for the purpose of contacting them for interview, sending transcripts and a research summary. They will be deleted after I have completed the Doctorate course.

Participants were reassured that there was no obligation to take part in the current study and that their participation was entirely voluntary and would not affect the support they received via their Educational Psychology Service. It was reiterated to the participants that they were speaking to me as a student Trainee EP and not as part of the Local Authority, so that their participation and any information or views that they may share would not affect the support they received via the LA, EP service or school.

In order to reduce the possibility of distress, following the interview, the participants were signposted to additional support that they could receive and in the

debrief they were asked if they required me to share any additional need for support with their line manager or EP supervisor. They were also reminded that a summary of the research would be sent to them once the study was completed. None of the participants requested additional support, and the majority mentioned that their line managers and/or supervising EPs were already aware of the young people that they had worked with and had been supportive of their work.

Data was stored on my UEA OneDrive in line with the UEA Information Classification and Data Management Policy.

2.4.6 Data Analysis

The semi-structured interview transcripts were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021). This methodology was chosen as it aligns with my ontological and epistemological position as the researcher, and enabled the research question to be actively investigated, generating themes from the data that highlighted similarities in participant experiences. Reflexive thematic analysis is widely used in qualitative research when generating themes across a data set which aligned with my aim for this study. A possible alternative may have been to use Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), but this would have had a focus on single individuals lived experiences in great depth, without the exploration of shared patterns of meaning. Reflexive thematic analysis also centres the reflexivity of the researcher and the central role that I play in the research process from the questions I ask (and the way I ask them), the values and assumptions I bring and the way I interpret what is being said. I was very aware of my position as a researcher within the process, but also my dual role as a Trainee EP, and how these roles may affect the way I spoke to the ELSAs and what they felt comfortable to share with me. Both ways of analysing the data have similarities, in familiarisation and coding the data, and ultimately generating themes, however the process of reflexive thematic analysis felt like the more appropriate method for these research questions.

The process consisted of the six steps outlined by Braun and Clarke (Braun & Clarke, 2021): familiarisation, generation of initial codes, generating themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes and writing up. Through every stage of the process, I spent time revisiting, and relistening to the interviews, considering if there was any aspect of the data that I had not considered and to ensure that I had

confidence in my understanding of what the participants had shared. I was aware that my aim was for the analysis process to be as inductive as possible, however I reflected on my knowledge about EBSNA and ELSA and how I was concerned about bringing “too much” of this to the coding and theme generation. I knew I was going to be thinking about the ELSA’s perceptions of the impact of the intervention on Bronfenbrenner’s micro and mesosystems so there was a deductive element to coding and theme generation, but I tried to maintain awareness of keeping codes and themes driven by the data itself. I kept a reflective diary of the research process, some extracts of which are included in Appendix 5.

2.4.7 Familiarisation

Although the interviews were initially transcribed by Teams, I spent time watching the associated videos and listening to the audio to ensure that what was written was a faithful account of what had been said by the participants. I listened to them multiple times to become more familiar with the content and made some familiarisation notes. Braun and Clarke (Braun & Clarke, 2021, p. 46) suggest in depth, critical engagement with the data via which ever means is suited to yourself. This can be visual or textual as long as it enables capturing patterns, features or questions that are generated. Mine are mostly text based, where I started to make some links and I used highlighters to identify topics that came up frequently. Two of the main areas I noted down were “Relationship building” and “Going beyond ELSA”. It was already very clear at this point that a recurring topic of the interviews was how much extra work the ELSAs were doing that would not normally come under the ELSA remit, which really surprised me. I realised I held assumptions about what ELSA looked like in practice from giving ELSA training and this was not the reality. I reflected that when ELSAs train, I wondered if this is what they thought the role was going to look like. I knew from the inspirational interviews they gave how much they put into the role, but I started to consider how much schools are asking of them. Some familiarisation notes are shared in Appendix 6.

2.4.8 Generation of Initial Codes

During this phase I worked through each of the transcriptions generating initial codes that I felt were broadly relevant to the research question and highlighted an idea that was of note. I used a mixture of an Excel spreadsheet to keep track of the

transcript line number alongside the words or short sentence that I used as a code, and a printed copy of each transcript where I underlined the relevant quote and wrote the code next to it. A sample of these can be seen in Appendix 7.

The data was coded using a primarily inductive approach as this fits with my research question which aims to understand ELSAs experiences in using the intervention with YP experiencing EBSNA. The experiences they shared during the interviews were the starting point for understanding their meaning and the coding and theme generation. It is acknowledged that in “Big Q” qualitative research, the induction process and the meaning produced is never “pure” as I will be bringing my own perspectives as a researcher and a Trainee EP, as well as the life experiences from working as an Assistant EP with young people experiencing EBSNA, as well as a parent of school age children, to the coding and theme generation process. Although there is very little previous research on using ELSA in this way, I will also be bringing the knowledge that came from reading around the topics of and ELSA research and making mental connections about the possibilities of how they could relate together. I also had in mind the second of my research questions, considering the impact of the ELSA intervention on the child and the micro and mesosystems that they exist in. The coding was therefore going to be shaped by hearing the ELSAs perspectives through the lens of Bronfenbrenner’s Bioecological model and generating codes with the knowledge of the individual, family and school levels of influence.

As I coded, it was starting to become apparent that some of the participants were working with young people who had more acute and persistent EBSNA and others were less severe. This made for differences in coding where some felt very deep and rich experiences whereas others were more descriptive in nature.

As suggested by Braun and Clarke (Braun & Clarke, 2021) the codes that were formed were as brief and precise as possible while still summarising the meaning in the data. As expected by the process, they had an element of my interpretation of what was important as they were created by me. Initially, the coding mostly consisted of semantic codes as the meanings were close to what was shared by the participants in their own choice of language. For example, “I need to get to know Mum and for Mum to know I’m working with them as part of the team” was

coded as “Working with the parent” as a semantic code. However, as coding progressed, and I engaged with the transcripts and the codes multiple times, more latent codes were produced as more implicit ideas were generated. For example, “I wanted to know what was his passion, what moved him, what made him feel alive” was coded as “Deeper understanding of the YP” as a latent code. Overall, almost 300 codes were generated, and it became apparent that there was a difference in the types of codes being generated from the interviews depending on how much time the participants worked as ELSAs across the week. I reflected that there appeared to be a loose association between those that worked more hours (and so had more daily experience) and the depth of insight the ELSAs had about their young people’s thoughts and experiences.

2.4.9 Generating Themes

As I had already logged the codes into an Excel sheet it was possible to see more easily the codes that had been generated multiple times, and areas where codes might be shared. That is not to say that the importance was determined by the number of times codes were generated, but that I had identified them as important to the research question multiple times.

I printed and cut the codes out individually (see Appendix 8) as I found it difficult to mentally “see” them all when they only existed digitally. I then mounted them onto post-it notes and started to group them together in space (in my case on a wall) (see Appendix 9). Once I had made some initial groups of codes, I drew out a mind map of the groups and how I thought they might link together using some initial themes (see Appendix 10). There seemed to be some initial groups of codes forming around the more logistical aspects of ELSA, for example what ELSAs were providing and receiving during the sessions. There was also a grouping around trust which I termed “The Trust Triangle” because of the fact it seemed to consist of the trust building between YP, ELSA and also parent. However there were also school factors and the trust of external professionals which did not quite fit into this description. This would be adapted over time to become the “Trust Framework” and eventually become a subgroup of the main theme “Building Trust”. There was also a loose grouping that alluded to the difficulties that ELSAs face in their work, which over time and in moving codes around, began to form into the pressures that ELSAs face, both from external, systemic factors and internally.

Over the next few days, I spent some time looking at each grouping and moving codes in and out, especially in the group that felt more descriptive around what ELSAs provided and received. Following this I merged two groups of codes together to make one more cohesive theme regarding what ELSAs provide for YP and what YP get in return. However, the theme became more about their relationship and less about the outcomes for the YP. So I formed a new group of codes from some of the codes that had come from this initial grouping as it felt there was another theme that I had not fully formed, around what YP receive from ELSA that they take into the future (for example pride in themselves, increased confidence and better communication skills) (see Appendix 11). During this more detailed look at the code groups, and initial themes, I drew out another mind map and re-named the themes with less descriptive names (see Appendix 12). Using guidance from Braun and Clarke (Braun & Clarke, 2021) I thought carefully about making sure the theme names were not just topic areas but shared some of the “meaning and analytic direction” (Braun & Clarke, 2021, p. 112) and would give more detail about how the data has been analysed. For example, I could have named the theme suggesting ELSAs feel a great deal of pressure “Pressure” but instead called it “Managing pressure” because the theme describes how the ELSAs deal with the pressures they feel.

2.4.10 Developing and Reviewing Themes

In Phase 4 of Braun and Clarke’s suggested process, themes were reviewed again to see how they might link together, but they were still in development as themes are still open to revision and change during the writing process. The themes I currently had generated were checked against Braun and Clarke’s review and development questions (Braun & Clarke, 2021, p. 99) to identify if the themes had clear boundaries, and were not too broad and containing contradictory meanings, and that there was enough evidence for each one which otherwise would have suggested it was a code rather than a theme. Again, I checked that the theme was sharing something meaningful and important from the data in relation to the research question.

Adaptations were made to the theme of “Facilitating the systems around the YP” and how the subthemes were structured to cover parents, school, peers and

other professionals in line with the research question around the micro and mesosystem around the YP.

2.4.11 Defining and Naming Themes

The definitions for each theme were written with Braun and Clarke's review and development questions in mind, ensuring it described the "central organising concept" (Braun & Clarke, 2021), what is unique to that theme and how it contributes to the overall research question. The names were chosen to inform the reader of what was contained in the write up, but also to signal more than just what the area was but also how I would explain the theme and the direction of my analysis.

2.4.12 Writing Up

The last phase involved writing up the research "story" and drawing conclusions from across the data. I took all of the themes that were generated and related them not only to each other to form a coherent whole, but to the relevant literature in the areas of ELSA and EBSNA.

Data extracts, in this case quotes, were included in the writing to illustrate the meaning of the theme more clearly, in conjunction with my analysis of the extract, and the conclusions I drew from both.

In the writing up process, I still felt uncertain about one of the themes which had a basis in the idea of the relationship between ELSA and YP and "therapeutic alliance" which was a concept that many of the ELSA papers had mentioned. However, I had no knowledge of the theory behind it, so I carried out an additional small literature search regarding the therapeutic alliance. As with the main initial literature search, I searched websites and research databases such as Google Scholar, EBSCO, ProQuest, Science Direct, PsycINFO and Scopus to search for literature spanning peer reviewed articles and books for the search term "therapeutic alliance". At this point I was not looking for a large bank of knowledge but some papers that would assist my general understanding. The literature searches were returning over 13,000 papers, so I decided to direct my efforts to using the references within the ELSA papers which I hoped would provide literature around the therapeutic alliance that would be relevant to ELSA and aligned with the ELSA philosophy.

During supervision, despite having started writing, I discussed the possibility of merging two of the themes as there was perceived to be some overlap between two themes that I was calling “The YP-ELSA Relationship” and the connection to the concept of therapeutic alliance, and “The Trust Framework” and I wanted to ensure there were clear boundaries. I read through what I felt should be included in each section and decided that these should be merged to make a new theme named “Building Trust” and the subthemes would then encompass “Therapeutic Alliance” and “The Trust Ripple Effect” in order to describe more appropriately the way relationships were built with the YP and ELSA, but also impacted on the other systems around them.

2.5 Generated Themes and Analytic Narrative

The themes I have generated will now be presented alongside the analytic narrative. This is described by Braun and Clarke as “a rich, detailed interpretive account of the themes” (Braun & Clarke, 2021, p. 135), whereby the data (in this case quotes from the ELSA interviews) and my interpretation of them are combined with possible connections to previous literature (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Presenting the analysis in this way creates a more cohesive narrative and prevents repetition.

In the current research I will be reporting five key themes and eight subthemes. These consist of:

1) Building Trust

ELSAs report building a trusting relationship with the young person based on the features of a “therapeutic alliance” which enables their work together through the intervention and beyond. However, building this trust between them also allows trust to build between the individuals and the systems around the young person, supporting them to feel safe enough to attend school.

2) Facilitating the systems around the Young Person

All of the ways that ELSAs work with and connect the Bronfenbrenner-style systems around the young person to support their attendance at school

3) Above and beyond ELSA

ELSAs who work with young people experiencing EBSNA work in many more ways than just using the intervention to support them

4) The journey continues

Young people experiencing EBSNA rely on more intensive and longer lasting support which continues for both ELSA and young person, as well as having long lasting outcomes for the young people

5) Managing Pressure

ELSAs feel the impact of both systemic and personal pressures while working with these specific young people

Figure 5:
Thematic Map



2.5.1 Themes

Theme 1: Building Trust

This theme encompasses how trust is built between the young person and the ELSA themselves, as well as the how this trust spreads through the other individuals and systems around the young person. The ELSAs shared both the personal attributes and qualities they perceive to be important for the relationships to form, as well as the strategies and techniques that were used. This is consistent with the idea of a “therapeutic alliance” (Green, 2006b; Hougaard, 1994). Once this trusted relationship had formed there was perceived to be a spread of trust, so that parents and school staff were more trusting of each other as well as of the young person.

Subtheme 1A: Therapeutic Alliance: The Young Person – ELSA

Relationship

The first subtheme describes a prevalent idea in the data; the trusting relationship that was built between the young person and ELSA. The ELSAs described the main areas that they felt were the “foundations” of the relationship (the personal element and the work within the sessions), and how important that was to enable their work together.

For example, ELSA 4 discussed having worked with a young person, and then had a break, and how she was concerned that if the relationship they had built was no longer in place, that they would no longer still work together effectively:

ELSA 4: *“I did a couple of sessions leading up to the summer that were a bit more informal. It was just me checking back in with her, you know, do we still have that relationship?”*

This overarching theme of connectedness and relationship building has been highlighted in previous research into ELSA work and the benefits of the “therapeutic relationship” that is built between them and the YP (McEwen, 2019). The therapeutic relationship encompasses a range of factors at play between a therapist and client while in the process of treatment. Rogers (Rogers, 1957) suggested that the emotional quality of the therapeutic relationship was the key driver of therapeutic

change. Although ELSA is not “therapy” in the traditional sense, it is based on the counselling skills of empathy, genuineness and unconditional positive regard (Rogers & Kelly, 2024).

Relationships (when someone has people in their life that care for them) are described as being a core part of wellbeing in a report into measuring children’s wellbeing (New Economics Foundation, 2009). It suggests that positive relationships are part of social wellbeing and contribute to a sense of acceptance and safety to explore the world, which aligns with the “secure base” model where a safe relationship with a caregiver allows the child to perceive a safe base to explore and return to (Bowlby, 1988; Schofield & Beek, 2023). The innermost social circle of wellbeing for a child is proposed by Jaana Minkkinen in her Structural Model of Child Wellbeing (Minkkinen, 2013) to refer to those people in a child’s life who interact with them face-to-face and provide physical, cognitive, emotional and material support. This social support is connected to their immediate wellbeing and acts like the microsystem described by Bronfenbrenner (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). In the case of this study the ELSAs may be viewed to be working within that innermost social circle of wellbeing, providing emotional support, and building emotional literacy skills, for current and for future wellbeing.

The first factor that the ELSAs identified as one of the foundations for their trusting relationship with the young person was what they perceived to be their own personal attributes. The attributes described by the ELSAs to be the most important were:

a) Authenticity

e.g. ELSA 2: *“I just sometimes sort of just step back and think how difficult it has been for her. I’m just trying to sort of be quite authentic for her.”*

b) Empathy

e.g. ELSA 5: *“I cannot say that I ever felt what he felt, but trying to, trying to actually empathise and actually say “It’s OK. I’m here. I don’t know what you feel, but I’m, I’m working to try together.”*

c) Approachability

e.g. ELSA 4: *“I’m not like, “Right, how are we going to get you back into school?” Some people are like that with her and she’ll just shut down. So I think I just try and generally be approachable.”*

d) Sensitivity

e.g. ELSA 5: *“You need to know that I am ELSA, but I am human as well.”*

e) Understanding

e.g. ELSA 6: *“It’s finding those things that pique their interest and keep them coming back, and having somebody that listens and understands, yeah.”*

They also perceived that their approach and way of working allowed the young people to begin to trust in them, and to feel a sense of safety in the ELSA sessions. Two important characteristics of their working style were described as:

i) Being consistent and reliable, for example by having regular meetings in the same place and being available. For example, these ELSAs commented:

ELSA 1: *“Having a go to person that’s there for them and then knowing that person is there.”*

ELSA 2: *“Having a regular time, each week, the predictability of it being the same person, meeting with me in the same venue, in a nice room.”*

ii) Providing comfort and safety

ELSA 3: (My target) *“Was to make him feel comfortable and like, make him want to feel like school was a safe place for him. I feel like I became sort of the safe place for him.”*

Comments by ELSAs in this study echo attributes of ELSAs in a study by Rogers and Kelly (Rogers & Kelly, 2024) who described the fact that the attributes of the ELSA as a person were seen as one the most vital elements of the intervention. One of their subthemes described that ELSA was conceptualised as the person rather than the intervention, with contributions extending through the whole school. Their participants described the ELSA as “warm and mothering”, “soft, gentle and nurturing” and as “her personality” being the “most important”.

Research by Marsh (Marsh, 2012) suggested that in the teacher-pupil relationship the key factor in pupils developing a sense of belonging was teachers showing a genuine interest in them. This looked like active listening, seeming interested in them and relating to them as a person, showing enthusiasm, giving praise, and creating a comfortable, relaxed and stress-free atmosphere.

ELSAs in this study shared some of the same factors (active listening and feeling comfortable) as important in their work:

ELSA 1: *“And you’ve got to do a bit of like, active listening. You know, the more counselling side of it, to get you that “why” and “what” and talk about it”*

ELSA 5: *“So he would know that he had an adult to actually nurture...nurture him to make him feel comfortable.”*

ELSAs frequently mentioned the importance of building rapport as integral to their relationship, and how the use of games and humour helped with this, as well as giving the students a sense of control and agency over parts of the session in order to build the trust between them:

ELSA 2: *“I tried to incorporate fun games that actually will be silly and that worked really well...trying to bring out the humour in the sessions I think was one of the key things.”*

ELSA 3: *“He loved games, so he loves cards...I think he liked it because I’m clueless on that, he would teach me how to play card games. So, I think he liked that he was teaching me something.”*

The styles of working that the ELSAs employed were also frequently shared in the interviews as part of the method of building rapport and start to form a trusting, therapeutic relationship. For example, as ELSA 1 describes, she was able to employ flexible, person-centred approaches to their sessions, sometimes using a different perspective to that that would be used by teaching staff:

ELSA 1: *“I try not to do it obviously. I’m quite instinctive with what I do, to be honest. I listen. I’ll sort of pull out what they’re saying and then I sort of go to...try and put a target in that fits with them.”*

ELSAs described using non-threatening, less “target-based” activities such as crafts, as well as adjusting their way of working to make the young person feel more comfortable. In this example, ELSA 2 describes activities she did and adaptations that she made:

ELSA 2: *“We did origami, and I found practical activities whilst we were talking was hugely beneficial for her because she didn’t like eye contact so we could be looking at something else and there wasn’t that threat.”*

ELSAs discussed that they were able to move at a pace suitable for the young person, and these ELSAs perceived themselves to have the confidence and expertise to adapt their sessions where needed, for example ELSA 4 commented:

ELSA 4: *“I try and turn it into a conversation rather than getting a work sheet out. It’s just knowing how to pitch it so it doesn’t come across as patronising”*

Similarly to the research with teachers, research into mentors for students struggling with attendance, found that positive qualities in mentors included advocacy and encouragement of students, (DeSocio et al., 2007) building rapport and closer relationships (Cook et al., 2017).

These quotes all demonstrate the ways ELSAs are starting to build the trust of the young people they are working with and outlining the foundations of their positive relationship and the perceived support that they are offering. As suggested in the review of school refusal literature by Ulaş and Seğer (Ulaş & Seğer, 2024) these are all factors identified as protective factors for EBSNA.

The second factor that the ELSAs identified as part of the foundations for their trusting relationship with the young person was the work they completed within intervention sessions. This is more semantic in nature, with ELSAs giving mainly descriptive explanations of their work. They described strategies and techniques that they introduced to the young person they were working with, and methods and styles of work that they used (for example one-to-one, structured sessions). Most are ones taught during ELSA training and described in the ELSA handbook.

The ELSAs described in detail during the interviews some of the techniques they used with and taught their young people to use independently:

ELSA 1: *“Techniques to get him through the door...sort of breathing, where the anxiety was coming from and where he’s feeling it.”*

ELSA 2: *“Body maps. Where do you feel stress? Where do you feel worried? They worked really well. Lots on grounding techniques.”*

ELSAs also shared that the work they completed with young people often included elements of psychoeducation. This is described as where the person leading the intervention (therapists, health care workers, or in this case ELSAs) give the person taking part some knowledge about their difficulty in order to empower them and decrease anxiety associated with the difficulty, and also lead them to using coping strategies which can cause a behaviour change (Hedman-Lagerlöf & Axelsson, 2019).

ELSA 4 described how she worked with a young person to better understand their autism:

ELSA 4: *“We make the best progress with problem solving together. She will bring me a problem, we’ll talk it through. She wants to know more about autism...but she didn’t have a very good idea of what autism is, it was just like, whatever you see in the mainstream media. So we did a bit of work on that together.”*

ELSA 6 described using cognitive restructuring of thought patterns to support her young person, giving them a strategy to use independently in future:

ELSA 6: *“We play lots of games about managing emotions. One of the things we do is sort of like, negative to positive thinking...he recognises that he wants to think positively and that is one of his favourite games to play.”*

These examples of psychoeducation support the idea that ELSAs are working with young people in ways that help to decrease their anxiety around difficulties they may be having for example with understanding neurodiversity or with their mental health, and promoting the idea that these young people can cope with the difficulties they have by using the strategies that ELSAs are teaching them. This is in line with research by Maric (Maric et al., 2013) that suggests increased perception of self-efficacy within young people is a protective factor for EBSNA.

Application to Therapeutic Alliance

After carrying out the coding, two main elements of building a therapeutic relationship were generated as described above. I attributed them to attributes of the ELSAs themselves (somewhat “personal factors”) and the type of work carried out within the intervention sessions themselves (the “tasks done”). At the time I did not have any knowledge of a model that these aligned with and was using my own internal descriptions. However, the strong relationship which is reported to form between ELSA and the young person in the majority of ELSA research, for example (Hill et al., 2013; Wilding & Claridge, 2016) is suggested to occur because they have trust in the ELSA and have developed a “therapeutic alliance”. My assumption was that this was a description of the relationship that forms between therapist and client during treatment.

However, after further reading of some of the therapeutic alliance literature for a better understanding, I considered the ELSA data through the lens of Hougaard’s model of therapeutic alliance (Hougaard, 1994). The data shows some alignment with Hougaard’s model, but with emphasis on the personal aspects alongside engaging, shared activities. The “personal alliance” part of the model largely consists of core personal attributes and qualities shown by the ELSAs and echo other research studies suggesting personal attributes (such as authenticity, empathy and approachability shared by the ELSAs in the data extracts above) to be a key factor in building trusted relationships with young people (McEwen, 2019; Nicholson-Roberts et al., 2025). Differences between ELSA and true “therapy based” therapeutic alliance may be evident because usually the therapist is not embedded in the organisation, the “client” visits them and then leaves, and the relationship is temporary. In psychotherapy or counselling, the client would access support only as long as necessary. However, ELSAs are members of staff, part of the school system and permanently in the school environment, therefore enabling the relationship to be more enduring, even though ELSA is designed to be time-bound. The ELSAs in this study and many other studies have shown that where needs are high and cases are complex, this is rarely the case and the ELSA sessions continue past the designed 6-10 weeks (Bravery & Harris, 2009; McEwen, 2019).

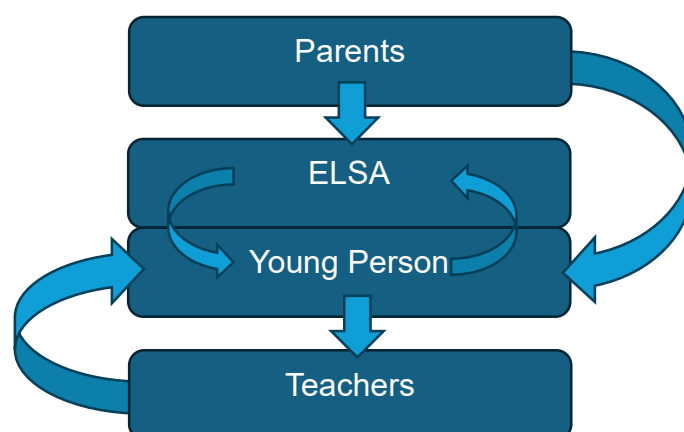
Subtheme 1B: The Trust Ripple Effect

The second subtheme that comes under the main theme of “Building Trust” is the “Trust Ripple Effect”. This subtheme describes the perception ELSAs have that once they have built a trusting relationship between themselves and the young person they are working with, they observed this trust to spread between the elements of the young person’s microsystem. This is aligned with the work of Miller (Miller, 2003, p. 126) who describes how the effect of an intervention can have a “ripple effect...beyond the most obvious point of an intervention”. The way this shift in perception of the child ripples through the systems around them is also described by James and Leyden (James & Leyden, 2010) in their investigation of the Circle of Friends intervention.

In the case of this study, the ELSAs shared that individually, once the young person trusted the ELSA, they also appeared to trust the school staff more, and the teachers also learned to have more trust in what the young person could cope with in terms of lessons and attendance. Once parents could see that their young person was accessing ELSA, they also came to have trust in the ELSA and (similarly to the teachers) they were able to trust their young person more regarding how they were accessing lessons and their ability to attend school. See Figure 6 below for a diagram of how the ELSAs perceived trust to spread.

Figure 6:

The Trust Ripple Effect



ELSAs shared that the young people appreciated their predictability, and them being consistent in the behaviours they showed in order to build their trust. The

ELSAs noted that the young people then had faith that the ELSAs were working on their behalf:

ELSA 4: *“I’ve never told her I’d do something and then not done it, so she knows she can take me at my word”*

ELSA 1: *“Once they know that you’re on their side and you’re doing as best you can for them and they can trust you, it’s massive about trust. He really started to trust me and started talking...he could see I was talking to the teachers and see how much effort you’re, sort of, putting in for him. I think they think you’re working for them, then it’s sort of so much easier.”*

This is aligned with attachment research which proposes that having predictable behaviour allows secure attachments to form (Bowlby, 1988). More recently Louise Bomber (Bomber, 2011) suggests in her work that the “key adult” figure should create a sense of safety through their predictability, responding to the young person, being attuned to their emotions and helping them to regulate.

Dependability, being reliable and honest in their actions and behaviours, also make a person seem trustworthy, in addition to having faith, that a person will continue to act in the way that they have acted so far, and will “follow through” on their promises. ELSAs shared that once trust was built between the ELSA and the young person, this trust seemed to spread, and that the faith they had in the ELSA also became faith in and trust of the teachers in school. They knew that the ELSAs were working alongside school staff and were doing work with them on their behalf. The ELSAs perception was that if the young people felt that the ELSAs had kept their word about something, then the teachers would do the same. For example:

ELSA 1: *“It’s safety, I think. I think if the teachers are doing what you have put in place, and he’s experienced that, he can tell that the teachers are doing what you’ve said they’re going to do. And he’s, you know, they’ve promised.”*

ELSA 7: *“My instinct to think, no, I need to connect with you first, so now you can connect with school now.”*

Baier (Baier, 1997) defined trust as letting someone take care of something you care about and involves elements of choice, risk, and vulnerability. It is this vulnerability and the element of risk that young people, especially those who may

feel anxiety and distress at the idea of attending school, may be feeling when entering into a trusting relationship with the ELSA. Three dimensions of trust: predictability, dependability, and faith are proposed by researchers (Rempel et al., 1985) all of which were shared by ELSAs as qualities and behaviours that they felt were shown by them and appreciated by young people that they worked with.

In line with Baier's definition of trust, ELSAs also feel that parents' levels of trust are also increasing:

ELSA 2: *"Mum has also got that trust that I've been trying to do things for her daughter's benefit...sometimes it hasn't worked, but sometimes it has, so I think it's about trust building with the parent as well, isn't it?"*

ELSA 5: *"I said to her, your son is really, really intelligent and very capable. I want to sit down with him for 2 hours and we're going to revise science, and I'm going to do a mock exam with him. If he cannot do it, I promise you I will never push again, and she was "OK, let's do it!" I said to him I promise you if you don't achieve a 5...I will give up."*

"So Mum started to notice this kind of changes that he was having, therefore Mum joined the choir."

ELSAs shared that the parents appear to be trusting them with their children, often when they know not only their children are suffering emotional distress and feeling vulnerable in school, but the ELSAs reflected that parents' levels of stress may be heightened too:

ELSA 1: *"A lot of anxiety on behalf of the family. Parents were pleased that she was able to engage. That was a big bonus and Mum has 30 minutes to herself whilst her daughter was with me, so I think that was a big step for Mum as well."*

Research into parental lived experience of school distress (another term for Emotional Based School Non-Attendance) (Mullally & Connolly, 2025) described how the impact of having a young person who was unable to attend school was having a devastating impact on their mental health, including significantly heightened daily anxiety and significantly lower mood and more negative emotions. Only one of the 947 parents reported any positive outcomes (being able to be at home more).

Parents also reported negative treatment by schools and other professionals, which included being disbelieved or blamed for the non-attendance as well as being at threat of being fined.

This trust may not be through choice, but it may be increasingly through desperation at a lack of support for their young person, and through hope that ELSA will be an avenue of support and way to “solve” the difficulties their young person is having, which will in turn allow them to attend school, and relieve the pressure on them as parents who are feeling blamed.

However, previous research (Wilding & Claridge, 2016) has discussed parental misunderstanding of ELSA as a “solution” to within-child difficulties rather than what is the true philosophy of ELSA. The ELSA Network describes how a successful ELSA will “draw out the pupils’ feelings, create a reflective space in which to explore their lived experiences, and never to try to ‘fix the problem’” (ELSA Network, 2017). However, the parents discussed by the ELSAs in this research study were felt to have been more thoroughly included and informed about the ELSA sessions and the strategies that ELSAs were sharing with the young people than those described in the research paper. Throughout the data ELSAs described parents’ knowledge and involvement in the process:

ELSA 2: *“Very supportive, very engaged with what we were doing. They sort of knew the rough structure and the girl would go home and explain what we’ve done”*

ELSA 6: *“I share a lot of my ELSA resources with home. I will talk to parents who their young person might be having a mini life crisis, as teenagers do, and I’m able to send some resources for them to look through.”*

Therefore, it is felt within this study that the parents had been given more information than in previous research and were genuinely trusting of the ELSAs in the hopes of better understanding of emotions and long-lasting strategies for their young people to use to cope with their emotional distress and ideally improve attendance.

Where ELSAs perceived there to be increased trust with parents, there was the suggestion that this may promote the greater involvement of parents and for ELSA techniques and resources to be used at home as well as at school:

ELSA 1: *“A lot of chatting to the parents. I think the parents are massive. Seriously, I think you can get on board with the parents, they think you’re on their side, then it goes in when they’re at home as well.”*

Research has also found that where parent trust in teachers is higher, parents are more involved in school life and what is going on with their children in the school environment, and where parents feel a teacher is more invested in their child they are more involved and have higher trust of the teacher (Vera, 2017). This is connected with Gubbels meta-analysis of school absenteeism (Gubbels et al., 2019) that considered within the family domain one of the largest risk factors for EBSNA to come from the impact of low parental school involvement. This may suggest that where ELSAs and parents have a trusting relationship, parents may become more likely to be involved in what is happening in the school environment and therefore this may lead to a decreased risk (or elevated protective factor) of EBSNA. The reciprocal nature of the work that ELSAs describe in this research between home and school may increase the impact of the work being done and reinforces the trust felt by each party.

In addition to the young people and parents trust of the ELSA, and in turn the young person’s renewed trust in the teaching staff, there was another layer of trust that was highlighted by the ELSAs taking part in this study, and that was increased trust of the young people by the adults around them. ELSAs shared their perception that school staff may be starting to understand the young person’s point of view and that they should trust them to know if they can attend that it was a case of “can’t not won’t” in terms of attendance (Fricker, 2023):

ELSA 1: *“He’ll go “I couldn’t do that lesson, but I’m going to try X” or whatever. He will say what he feels comfortable with, or if he feels like it’s completely pointless he’ll say “No I can’t”. And I think from our perspective, we have to go with what they say because you can’t, I think you can tell if they’re not going to do it and it’s pointless, that trying to push them, because if you*

do, it just makes the pressure worse. I think it's got to come from them. They've got to want to, you know, they've got to feel like they can."

They also commented on how some families had spent so long protecting a young person that they now found it hard to trust that the young person knew best and was increasingly able to cope in the school situation:

ELSA 2: *"That is working with the family as well isn't it? Come on, put some, give some trust to your daughter. Let her lead a little bit, she's engaging."*

ELSA 5: *"You need to give him a bit of freedom because obviously you're like a guardian, but you need to give him a bit of freedom and trust."*

Previous research would suggest that part of feeling intrinsically motivated, in this case to attend school, comes from feeling connected to others and having a sense of belonging in school (Deci & Ryan, 2013). However Scheidecker and Freeman's research into what makes good teaching staff (Scheidecker & Freeman, 2015) suggests that before motivation can take place, there has to be a strong foundation of mutual trust and respect, which can only be made possible by having a strong relationship with each student. It appears from what the ELSAs in this study have shared, that this basis of a strong trusting relationship is formed between them and the young person taking part in the intervention, however it then allows trust and connection to form through their other relationships too. As Moran proposes (Moran, 2010) the therapeutic relationship that is built between the ELSA and the young person may be important in supporting them to explore their constructions around relationships, what they value and what they would want from future relationships, especially in relation to school, for example with staff members, and with peers.

Theme 2: Facilitating the systems around the Young Person

This theme focuses on the ways that ELSAs understand their work to take place within and facilitate the Bronfenbrenner-style systems around the young person to support their attendance at school. This was one of the strongest themes to be generated from the data and highlighted that although the ELSAs were working with YP on "within child" difficulties for example with self-esteem, strategies for dealing with anger or anxiety and support for emotional difficulties for example connected to bereavement or bullying, which would be expected from this particular

intervention, their involvement was more far reaching. ELSAs shared that they were working with all systems around the young person in the form of supporting the family/parent, in working alongside school, working with the young person and their peers, as well as working with other involved professionals.

This is a reflection of ELSAs working as Bronfenbrenner would describe (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998) at the level of the microsystem (family, school and peers), and the exosystem (other professionals) but mainly within the mesosystem at the intersection of where these systems interact together, acting as a bridge and facilitator for co-ordinating them all.

Melvin and colleagues (Melvin et al., 2019) proposed The “Kids and Teens at School” (KiTeS) framework which takes Bronfenbrenner’s Bioecological model approach to understanding school attendance difficulties. This research would suggest that for young people experiencing EBSNA, the role of an ELSA is at the centre of their framework, mediating between the main factors in the microsystem (young person, family and school) and interacting with the exosystem on behalf of the young person. I have termed this theme “Facilitating the systems around the young person”, as it is crucial to co-ordinating the effort to support these young people with many of the interacting risk factors and complex areas of difficulty that can contribute to EBSNA.

The following subthemes will look at each element of the microsystem and how ELSAs work within each and coordinate between them.

Subtheme 2A: Family Support

In addition to the building of trust with parents that was highlighted in the previous theme, all ELSAs shared the importance of working with parents while they were carrying out the intervention with a young person. They described having had in-depth and continuous communications with parents, sharing resources and triangulating information about what the young person’s difficulties were in order to provide support:

ELSA 4: *“I’m in regular contact with her Mums. Like the fact that I have to ring her Mum every day”*

ELSA 7: *“Speaking to parents because how they may be at home may be completely different to how they are at school.”*

ELSAs perceived that if the young person could see that there was a consistent message and that ELSAs and parents were working together then the same strategies could be employed in both places:

ELSA 6: *What I find as well is I’ve been getting Mum onside... So if it’s relevant, I’ll say to Mum, “Well we looked at this today. We did this today. And she’ll follow it on at home as well. So he’s got that continuous sort of input if you like. I’ve told her some of the resources that I’ve used. When we’re saying school is safe, and Mum is saying school is safe, then he’s getting that same message.”*

Liaison with parents is encouraged by the ELSA Network before, during or after intervention to share what has been worked on and share parent and/or child perspectives (where the young person has indicated they are happy for these to be shared).

Having family support, and specifically the positive working relationships between home and school aligns with one of the four themes required for successful intervention for “school refusal behaviour” in research by Nuttall and Woods (Nuttall & Woods, 2013). They also found that having someone who was supportive and nurturing to the parents and including them in the process, was an important factor in support for the family and had a knock-on effect for how the young people felt about their progress. ELSAs in this research shared how their role also incorporated this:

ELSA 1: *“I think for them to feel like something’s going well is really, really massively important. So a lot of talking to, emailing back and forth, what they’re doing and where they’re at. I think parents are massive to do with, you know how they feel about what is going on.”*

ELSA 5: *“I need to get to know Mum and actually I need Mum to know that I’m with them and I’m part of the team.”*

Subtheme 2B: Mediating with school

Whilst the previous subtheme explored the support for parents, this subtheme focuses on the ELSAs' perceptions that a key part within their expanded role was to mediate between the young person and school teaching staff. ELSAs felt that part of their experience of supporting young people, especially those experiencing EBSNA, was to be able to share school difficulties with staff members. ELSAs described passing information to teachers that young people did not feel able to share, for example about the lesson environment:

ELSA 6: *"Using the ELSA resources we were able to find that out and that's given him the confidence and that voice to say XXX (ELSA name) I'm not happy in this lesson because..."*

"It could be as little as they're not attending school because they're not happy where they're sitting in class. But they don't know how to articulate that."

ELSA 4: *"Or they'll come to me and say, 'I don't want to sit where I sit in maths anymore, and then I'll contact the teacher and explain that for them, like all sorts of stuff like that.'"*

ELSAs shared their views regarding acting as the young person's voice in school. There were often things that the young person was finding a barrier to their attendance and they wanted staff to be aware, but sharing these things was unmanageable to them:

ELSA 1: *"I got him to highlight things about school he might find difficult...yeah what he wanted, he wanted the teachers to know about him."*

ELSA 7: *"I would always sort of like explain, you know...are you ok if I speak to your teacher about this, this aspect?"*

Advocating for the young person was a subtheme identified as part of previous research carried out with children who had received support from an ELSA in primary school (Wong et al., 2020), and was seen as part of building positive relationships between the two parties, which may also have a positive impact on young people's wellbeing (Krause et al., 2020).

Subtheme 2C: Assisting peer relations

Although working on friendships is traditionally part of the ELSA training and the remit of an ELSA, the ELSAs as part of this research perceived their role not only in supporting young people to learn friendship skills, but they discussed orchestrating friendship groups, lunchtime clubs and buddies for their young people in order for them to have an extra layer of support when in school and a sense of safety around the unstructured parts of the timetable:

ELSA 6: *“The social time at school is causing a barrier now. He is a recluse outside of school...but the other people, other students, when they see him they’re excited. They welcome him, they greet him, and his face is beaming and he likes that. And I’ve asked him if it’s, is he worried about losing that, and he has said yes, he’s worried about that being taken away.”*

ELSA 7: *“Some students come in and maybe they feel that they don’t have any friends. So that’s another reason of why they don’t want to come to school. What I’ve found helpful is thinking about which areas that they really enjoy doing...then maybe trying to get them into a lunchtime group. Then that kind of makes them feel a bit safer about break times, you know, this sort of anxiety around well, who am I going to play with?”*

As highlighted by Corcoran and Kelly in their review of children’s experiences of not attending school (Corcoran & Kelly, 2023) one of the main themes generated as contributing to not attending was “difficult relationships with their peer group” either due to bullying, difficulties with social communication or understanding social norms. This element of feeling accepted and included was identified by Goodenow and Grady as part of school belonging (Goodenow & Grady, 1993). Therefore, this data suggests that ELSAs are implementing a supportive and protective environment that may be particularly important for those students at risk of EBSNA or reintegrating after a period of EBSNA and looking to rebuild their peer support system.

Subtheme 2D: Working with other professionals

The ELSAs taking part in this research described not only working within Bronfenbrenner's microsystems but also within the exosystem, by interacting with other professionals that were working with the YP. Although Woodcock (Woodcock, 2007) describes how one of the original four functions of ELSA was to advocate for the YP with teachers, parents and other professionals, this is emphasised less in the current ELSA training, where communication with parents and teaching staff is highlighted but the mention of other professionals has been decreased. Through the discussions with the ELSAs in this study, they suggest that supporting YP experiencing EBSNA has meant that the level and complexity of need have increased, and this was mentioned frequently. This level of need may account for the ELSAs becoming involved with external professionals more frequently in these cases, whereas this would not have been the case previously.

The ELSAs mentioned working with a wide range of professionals including their local LA Educational Psychologists for advice and for supervision (specifically around cases including the ones we discussed) as well as using other nationwide EP resources, which they called on for EBSNA specific support:

ELSA 2: *"We used the EBSNA resources on the County Council website. I think they do link in with ELSA, so "What's important to me? What's going well? What's tricky?"*

ELSA 5: *"I started to use information that I had from EBSA Horizons (an EP led EBSA resource). And I started to base myself into OK, ELSA will also help me because I need him to tell me how he's feeling. So actually I can work and give him strategies and tools."*

ELSAs also spoke about working with Autism specialists, representatives from the ADHD Foundation, Education Welfare Officers and Family Support Practitioners. Some ELSAs also worked in tandem with therapists that their YP were seeing, and ensured that their work was complementary to each other:

ELSA 5: *"We're in very close communication because I'm still doing my ELSA with him, but they actually contacted and said "Can you still do this, because it's really complementing what we're doing, but it's not, you know, it's not*

interfering with what we're doing". But it's really beneficial so we communicate weekly and they tell me what they want me to do and I will say from my ELSA resources, this, this and this, and we're complimenting each other."

ELSA 6: *"The therapist contact(ed) me, and they say we need to speak to the Educational Psychologist. This child needs something that anchors him in school. And at the moment that is the anchor. You are the anchor."*

Previous research (Nuttall & Woods, 2013) suggested that working alongside professionals in a multi-level, "ecological systems theory" way was key to supporting young people to reintegrate following a period of EBSNA. They suggested that "collaborative working between professionals" (Nuttall & Woods, 2013, p. 358) was a key facilitator as it allowed consistency in understanding young people's needs and in being able to work towards a shared goal and coordinate their involvement. This type of working was underlined in the quote above by ELSA 5.

Work by McEwen (McEwen, 2019) also mentioned that the close working relationship between not only parents and ELSAs as discussed above, but also with other staff members and professionals, facilitates identification and monitoring of any changes that occur. This in turn supports the ELSA and other professionals work and helps to guide their ongoing involvement with the young person.

Through the ELSA interviews in this study, it became apparent that the ELSAs are not working discreetly within each of these systems, but they appear to be the lynch pin around which all the systems are working for the young person. It appeared that the ELSA was the central point around which a "team" was forming for the young person, with ELSAs describing how they co-ordinate and work together:

ELSA 1: *"It's like coordinating everything, so it works. It's a chain. It's seriously a chain of events...everybody's got to be on board."*

"A trust builds up there as well, so he's got more than one safety net, as it were."

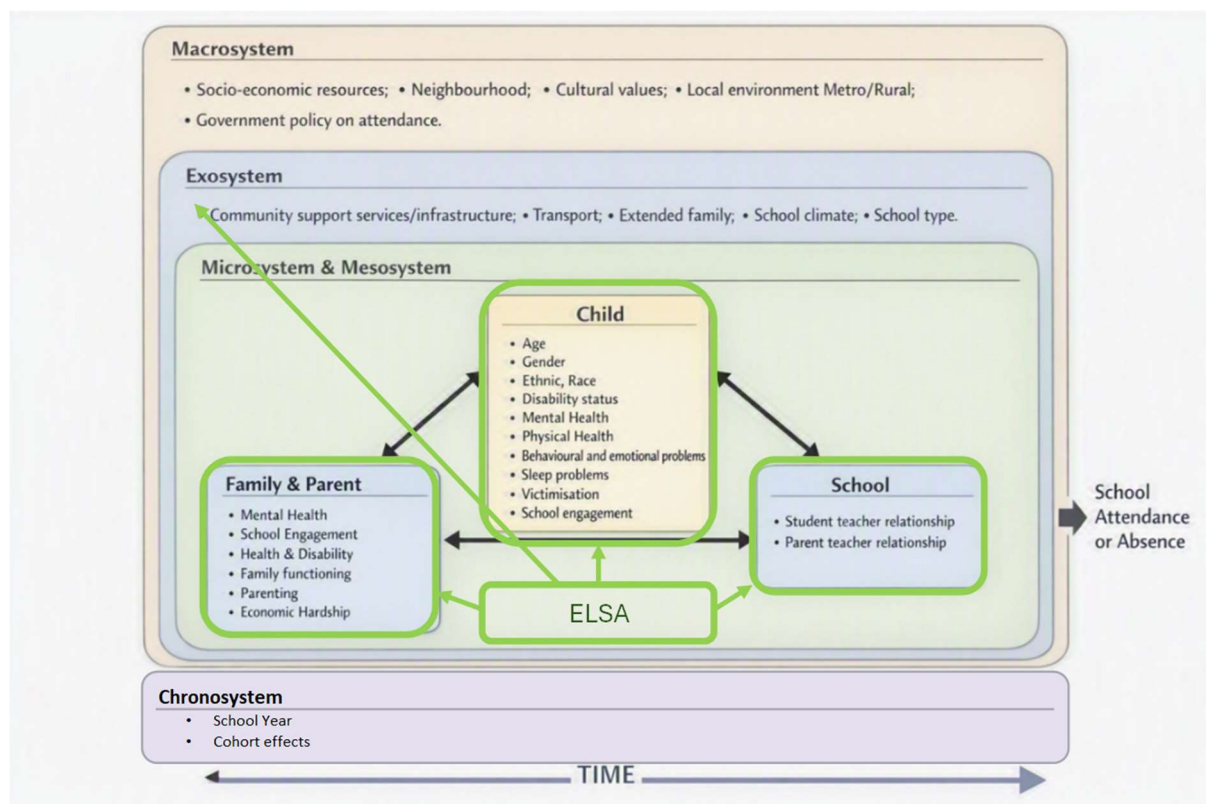
ELSA 5: *"He can pull through with the help of all of us."*

In line with Melvin's KiTes framework (Melvin et al., 2019) seen in Figure 3, I have annotated their diagram to show the way ELSAs have described their work within the microsystem (see Figure 7). They describe working within the child, family

and school elements as well as mediating between the three (as well as with external professionals and peers). ELSAs have shared their conception of the “co-ordination” role of all the systems, which includes ensuring that everyone follows through on what they have said they will do. This reinforces a sense of safety and trust in the ELSA and their therapeutic relationship.

Figure 7:

Diagram adapted from Melvin et al KiTeS framework (Melvin et al., 2019) with additions to show how ELSAs have described their working patterns in this study (figure created by the author)



Bodycote’s work on the Bioecological systems model of the parent journey through school attendance problems (Bodycote, 2022) show the parent in the centre advocating for the child with school, peers and other services. However, in contrast, the perception of the ELSAs in this study has been that they are frequently at the centre of the circle also advocating and acting as “a bridge” between and within these groups (alongside parents) on behalf of the child. This could be due to the data coming from the ELSAs’ viewpoint.

In addition to this, Bodycote describes the “mesosystem” as holding possible “sources of conflict” (Bodycote, 2022, p. 243), and from the interviews carried out in this research it is suggested that the ELSAs are working to alleviate the stress and worry that some of these sources of conflict create. For example, they are supporting the emotional impact of difficulties with attendance for young people but also for the parents. ELSAs shared the impact that having non-attending children had on the parents:

ELSA 3: *“Mum quit a job to work to be there for him and all of this. So it was kind of, we were trying to get him back I so she could go back to work.”*

ELSA 5: *“Mum will worry every time we have meetings, “I don’t know what to do about attendance”.*

As part of the coordination role the ELSAs saw themselves in, it may be useful to have ELSAs to help support parents who might be carrying a great deal of the burden of a child who is not attending school, and the social expectations that come with parenting “correctly” and following the social conventions, expectations and rules (including legal) of sending your child to school. By being the bridge between the systems around the young person, ELSAs may also be helping to resolve the dilemma many parents feel between education and wellbeing and what is “in the best interests” of their child, which is one of the possible conflicts identified by Bodycote. By helping enable young people to attend even minimally (even in some cases as described in this research by only attending for the ELSA sessions themselves) ELSAs may help to prevent the conflict between parent and school where parents can feel that their opinions do not have as much power as those of school staff and where often parents perceive a culture of blame (Malcolm et al., 2003; Sawyer & Collingwood, 2024). They felt they were not seen by school as taking adequate action to get their children to attend, whereas parents felt their child’s attendance difficulties stemmed from an inadequate learning environment that was not meeting their child’s needs (Malcolm et al., 2003). This difficult power dynamic, where one narrative can be upheld over the other, and diminishing the authority of one party over the other, may be difficult to resolve. However, it may be that the ELSA is in a prime position to bridge between both parties in the best interests of the young person.

Talking from personal experience ELSA 1 described the difficulties felt by parents and the where the blame is placed:

ELSA 1: *“Because everybody, like the teachers, it’s always the parents. It’s the parents. It’s always that, always. And I think that you feel guilty enough as it is. If your child can’t get into school, you feel terrible and you’re trying all different techniques to try and get them out the door. And it’s awful. I know, it’s so stressful. I know.”*

ELSAs also shared that another element to their role was to repair damaged relationships, which was a prime source of conflict between systems. This may have been between parent and young person, or between school staff and young person, and even between school and parent. ELSA 6 specifically spoke about the range of relationships she has supported:

ELSA 6: *“One I come across a lot is there’s been a breakdown with a teacher. So, we talk a lot. I use my ELSA resources, and we talk about healthy relationships”*

“It’s “Shall I make that phone call home and tell Mum how you’re feeling because they can’t tell Mum.”

“With a few students, identifying different kinds of relationships and how you would talk to people in that relationship, can actually repair relationships within a school. Not just friends, but teachers, headteacher, parents.”

Theme 3: Above and Beyond ELSA

The following theme will consider how ELSAs who work with YP experiencing EBSNA, work in many more ways than just using the intervention to support them. This theme was generated due to the multiple descriptions by the ELSAs of the ways they perceive the intervention to have been extended beyond its original remit.

Sheila Burton originally developed the Emotional Literacy Support Assistant (ELSA) intervention in 2001 and devised the training to combine psychological theory and practical guidance on supporting young people’s emotional awareness, self-esteem, understanding and management of anger, social and friendship skills, loss and bereavement and communication skills. The proactive intervention is

designed to be time-limited, focussing on clear targets, set specifically for each child (Burton, 2021). However, this research has highlighted that ELSAs that are specifically working with YP experiencing EBSNA are doing work “above and beyond” the original design. Although it was somewhat expected that pupils may need further support, the involvement that participants describe suggests that their role has transformed into something more.

As a basic extension to the ELSA intervention sessions, ELSAs frequently referred to continuing to “check in” with students after the main intervention was complete. They discussed how even when the sessions were finished, they kept the contact going:

ELSA 2: *“It’s more of a checking in, so that she has 20 mins at the start of the day...how are you, how was last night, what you’ve been up to...just trying to work out if there’s any barriers for that particular day”*

ELSA 7: *“I’m kind of the view of if they still need a little bit of support then we should still sort of provide it”*

These “check-ins” are a popular extension to the ELSA intervention (not just for those experiencing EBSNA), and mentioned in many previous ELSA research studies (McEwen, 2019; Russo, 2022). They have been described to serve the purpose of keeping the relationship going and providing some support, without the official timetabled meetings. However, these ELSAs were finding that they were doing more than just “check ins” and frequently completing extra work between their sessions with the young person. These ELSAs gave examples of the additional time they made for the young people and the types of support they provided:

ELSA 2: *“At break or lunchtime, we still sort of get the games or break time in the nurture room and get the games out...just sort of trying to just give her that space if she does want to talk about anything”*

ELSA 6: *(The resources) “they get worn out or forgotten about or lost, and we need to renew them, or remind you, or refresh them”*

“You’re not allowed to email members of staff...now I don’t agree with that. In my role I will give my email address to students if I feel they need it and they will email me “Miss can I see you?” and I’ll go along and see them”

Other ELSAs shared their extended support for young people outside of the therapeutic style of ELSA, and beyond emotional literacy. Some of these ELSAs shared supporting their young people with work experience, getting apprenticeships when they were preparing to leave school, broadening their hobbies and going with them to appointments:

ELSA 1: *“Because I’ve been at the school a long time, I can just sort of go, you know, whatever, wherever they need or like, I’ve done. I’ve taken them to child development.”* (Referring to the Child Development Centre for an appointment)

ELSA 5: *“He absolutely loves trains. So, what I did is I contact GWR. And they have a section of er...apprenticeships which apparently is really difficult to get into...I contacted them and they sent me a lot of information. And also I’ve got a colleague...he created a blog. I’ve got a student that is crazy about trains, but loves cameras. Would you teach him to do a blog? Maybe he might, he might be interested.”*

Previous research has also found that ELSAs sometimes do extra tasks in addition to the intervention (Krause et al., 2020) and there is concern that this can make young people over reliant on the ELSA they are working with and not supporting young people to build emotional literacy skills.

ELSAs reflected that part of their role often included what I coded as “going against the system” whether that was not conforming to how the school expected them to work or working using the ELSA principles but outside of the usual remit of ELSA. These ELSAs shared how they did not follow the rules of the time-bound nature of ELSA:

ELSA 5: *“I had to fight against the system because at the time you had two weeks to bring back the student...The whole time I never let him go. I fought against the system because ELSA supposed to be 6-10 weeks... I disguise it to lunch club...I’ve got my team and he’s part of my team.”*

“They knew what I was aiming. They knew that I was breaking the rules. No, you know, I was not going to bring him back in 6 weeks or 10 weeks.”

ELSA 6: *“It’s like saying to someone who has an addiction or a medical condition, “Ok we’ve given you six weeks of treatment. You’re better now. Off you go”. No...I have drop-in sessions so I’m very naughty”*

ELSAs shared in their interviews that they went beyond just what was learned during their ELSA training by choosing to expand their knowledge further, upskill and take part in continuous professional development (CPD) to support the young people more thoroughly. Some ELSAs described contacting other professionals for advice, but also continuing to learn and seek out information in their own time and at financial cost to themselves:

ELSA 5: *“I’m always looking for courses that I pay myself as well. XXX runs amazing courses, so I try to go there and bring my students cases forwards.*

I took a course with Bereavement UK...they sent me a lot of books and a lot of information.”

ELSA 6: *“ELSA is always there, but you’re always looking for more. You’re always looking for ways, what else can I bring in?”*

Going “above and beyond” their role and seeking out CPD opportunities was a theme also highlighted by Endersby (Endersby, 2021) who reported ELSAs experiences of seeking training opportunities to “enhance the role” during the Covid-19 pandemic. Although this was a unique situation where ELSAs were looking for more resources and information to support the YP through a challenging time that no one had experienced before, it underlines the fact that similarly to then, the ELSAs in this research are in a position of supporting young people without what they feel is adequate training or resources for the situation or presenting needs of the young person. The needs of the young people, especially those experiencing EBSNA are more complex and so are changing what the role of an ELSA has traditionally been.

ELSAs spoke in their interviews about feeling that it needed a certain type of person to be an ELSA and that their passion for the role and supporting the young people they worked with meant they put in extra effort and went above and beyond the usual role for them:

ELSA 1: *“I actually found him. I actually adopted him...he’s not, he wasn’t on my ELSA list...and that happens quite often, to be honest. You just find people. I don’t know, it’s just the sort of person you are I think.”*

“I think you’ve got to be passionate about doing it. So I think you’ve got to be passionate about trying to do it...I think it makes a lot of difference. I’ll be that sort of person, more person centred.”

ELSA 5: *“It’s having a good intention as an ELSA. Having a good intention to help another human being”*

This data that led to generation of this theme has suggested that some ELSAs, as in this study, are supporting students with complex and enduring needs and so they feel that they are redefining their role, finding different ways of working and pushing the boundaries of their remit as ELSAs in order to support young people, while adding to their knowledge and skill set in order to provide the necessary support.

Theme 4: The journey continues

This theme explores how young people experiencing EBSNA rely on more intensive and longer lasting support which continues beyond the intervention for both ELSA and young person and has long lasting outcomes for the young person.

As previous research and this study have shown, young people experiencing EBSNA rely on longer lasting support than “traditional” ELSA. However, the experiences shared by the ELSAs in this study have also generated a theme that describes positive, long-lasting impacts of the intervention for the young people. They describe a form of journey from improvement in communication and the using of taught strategies to overcome barriers, which ELSAs shared has led to perceived attendance improvement and increased confidence, as well as pride and positive long-term outcomes which continue after leaving the school environment. Several ELSAs reflected that this was not a fixed outcome but an ongoing and continuous process.

These ELSAs shared how one of the first outcomes of their work with young people is often improved communication skills, both with them and with other adults and their peers:

ELSA 1: *“He’s talking. Yeah it’s really good. He sort of started talking to me, then he started talking to the person in the other room...he started to talk to her as well because he used to come in here and chat to me and she’s been here as well...it’s sort of filtered in. He will talk to one of them (teachers) especially if like, I was there, so yeah it’s safe.”*

The ELSAs perceived this to be an important foundation for being able to build the positive relationship needed for ELSAs to work with the young people who had been referred to them and for them to be able to share their needs and wants with other staff members. ELSA 6 described how this was starting to happen for her student:

ELSA 6: *“He will talk to me at school. He’s now starting to talk to another member of staff, but only if they’re with me. In the classroom he has started talking to his science teacher, albeit in a quiet voice, almost a whisper.”*

“It’s given him that confidence and that voice to say, Miss, I’m not happy in this lesson because...”

Young people in previous ELSA research (Purcell & Kelly, 2023) shared that one of the main outcomes from being part of the ELSA intervention for them was gaining communication skills. They felt that they had learned to talk more about their feelings and experiences, but that they were also better able to ask for help from other staff members and problem solve with others.

ELSAs considered that once they had better communication with the young person and the foundations of the relationship were being built, then they could take the next step in the ELSA intervention and introduce tools and strategies for the young person to try when they were having difficulties with emotional regulation, anxiety, friendships etc. For example:

ELSA 6: *“The reason you came to ELSA is always going to be there because we’re not there to fix it. We’re there to give you the tools.”*

ELSA 7: *“Having that sort of special time to really talk about how she was feeling and the strategies and ways that we could help her feel more comfortable coming into school.”*

The majority of the ELSAs shared that not only did the young people manage to learn the strategies from their sessions, but they were able to use them both in school and outside of school. ELSAs described seeing the young people use their strategies in school:

ELSA 2: *“She has definitely used some of the grounding techniques to some of the anxiety, breathing, some of the work about identifying triggers and barriers that we can put in place. So no, she’s definitely been using some of the things we’ve talked about.”*

This echoes research with young people who had received ELSA and reported that they now had the ability to apply the skills they had learned in the intervention sessions in a broad range of settings, for example breathing techniques or reframing of negative thoughts (Purcell et al., 2025). Similarly, some ELSAs within this study had heard from the young people or their families about the ability to use their skills outside of school:

ELSA 5: *“So Mum started to notice, from not leaving the house, to starting to do things without Mum knowing. He was outside the house. He went for a walk, on an adventure. So Mum started to notice this kind of changes he was having.”*

They shared that once these triggers and barriers started to be overcome, the young people that they were working with started to feel more able to attend school. These ELSAs described how their attendance was starting to be impacted:

ELSA 1: *“We’ve found if he’s gone to one lesson, if you can get through the door to one lesson, he’ll keep doing it. Before if something slightly went wrong it knocked him...just gave up straight away. At first that would have been it, but now he goes “Right, I want to try the next lesson.”*

ELSA 2: *“Yesterday we expanded it to 20 minutes, plus break, plus 30 minutes of art lesson, which for her is huge. I was so proud of her. It sounds so small doesn’t it? But you know for some students, that’s massive.”*

This outcome was shared by other research on pupil perspectives of their wellbeing following ELSA, who shared that overcoming barriers such as reduced anxiety, feeling calmer and having anger strategies made them more willing to attend

school (Krause et al., 2020) as they had the ELSA to discuss difficulties with, and they were more involved in the school environment. Although there is very little previous research looking directly at the impact of ELSA on attendance, Bravery and Harris found that 67% of ELSAs and 47% of Headteachers (in the schools taking part in the research) believed that the ELSA intervention had a positive impact on the attendance of those young people taking part. It should be acknowledged that these are perceptions rather than gathered attendance data but aligned with this data it was expressed by all participants in this small scale research that attendance had increased for the young people they had worked with. This would suggest more research should be done to look at attendance data explicitly to confirm what is felt by the staff.

The ELSAs shared that they felt, in part, that this perceived attendance increase was linked to increased confidence in the young people. Some ELSAs shared how they saw this in school and how parents shared it with them:

ELSA 2: *“She is definitely more confident. She will still go quite quiet sometimes...but then there will be other times where she’ll suddenly have an outburst of a sort of conversation and tell you how she’s feeling and what she’s worried about.”*

ELSA 7: *“With this student not only was it the strategies, but it was kind of building up self-esteem and confidence. Mum did notice an improvement to the point where she felt she could actually sleep over at a camp and things like that. So that kind of feedback was good...especially as this student found it really difficult to participate in class, like put up her hand.”*

These perceptions are aligned with research by Wong (Wong et al., 2020) who shared that the children in their study described feeling a boost of self-esteem and confidence from their ELSAs and that this increased confidence led to increased participation and engagement in their learning, as well as feeling more confident to cope with difficult situations outside of school. This was echoed in other research (Purcell & Kelly, 2023; Purcell et al., 2025).

Overall, all of the ELSAs shared that not only had attendance increased, but there had been some very positive long-term outcomes for their young people. One

ELSA shared an example of the young person being able to leave their bedroom and go outside:

ELSA 6: *“She’s noticed if they’re going somewhere...he’s always been, “I don’t want to. I don’t want to”. She’s now insisting they go...Now she actively sees him using his techniques. I’m trying to encourage him to go out and she said in the summer holidays he sat in the garden a lot, which he would never do. Now it’s only the garden, but it’s a big step.”*

Others were able to visit relatives, or as in the following example, the young person was able to get a job and earn money doing something they love:

ELSA 5: *“My first ever EBSA student became my daughter’s tutor in University...she said “I’ve got a house because of her. I’ve got a degree because of her...I never thought I was going to ever, ever be in school, finish school. But you did it.”*

This was also underlined by the work of Purcell et al. (Purcell et al., 2025) whose young participants shared that the confidence given to them by their ELSA sessions could be taken forward as they transitioned into college and adulthood and that ELSA had helped them to think about academic futures and career aspirations that had previously seemed beyond reach when their only consideration was getting into school. The participants in the study by Krause (Krause et al., 2020) also felt more optimistic about the future. Although there is very little exploration of this area in ELSA research, my study would also suggest that ELSAs working with these young people have made the future more positive for the students taking part.

ELSAs expressed that with the young people experiencing EBSNA, they felt ELSA was not to be seen as a short-term fixed outcome, it was seen by them to be more of a continuous process. ELSA 4 shared:

ELSA 4: *“So now I can’t see it ending, I can see it spreading...but I’ll be calling on what I do in ELSA sessions with her.”*

They felt it was always going to be needed, as the issues the young person had were not “fixable” and they would need time to revisit, extend, and to ensure strategies evolved and were added to and adapted for each young person as necessary. They felt that most importantly, the relationship endured.

ELSA 5: *“I don’t believe in complete task things. I believe in “You achieved! Come on! Let’s go on to the next one!” It’s more like a milestone to me rather than achieving stuff.”*

ELSA 6: *“Those sessions can be the difference...and how their behaviour is deteriorating, or friendship issues, or home life deteriorating, yeah the whole host of problems, (keeping on going with sessions) it can just be enough to keep them on that even keel.”*

These comments echo the ideas of Rogers (Rogers, 1961) “The good life is a process, not a state of being. It is a direction, not a destination.”

Theme 5: Managing Pressure

Although this topic was not the aim of this research specifically, this theme was generated due to the ELSAs describing how the work they were doing with the young people caused them to feel a great deal of pressure. This theme is separated into two subthemes: personal pressures and systemic pressures.

Subtheme 5A: Personal pressures

This subtheme explored the ELSAs’ perceptions of the pressure that they felt personally while working with young people who had experienced or were experiencing EBSNA. In particular they described the emotional toll that the work was taking on them:

ELSA 1: *“It’s all the time...you don’t get many breaks, so it’s quite emotionally stressful. No, it is quite emotionally stressful.”*

ELSA 6: *“The reason I left was because there was no support for me and my emotional wellbeing at all, and that was a lot to take on full time.”*

This strain has been echoed in previous ELSA research (Nicholson-Roberts, 2019; Willis & Land, 2022) where ELSAs shared the overwhelming sense that sessions were an emotional and heavy load for them to manage when there was such a high need for empathy and containment of the YP.

The ELSAs in this research spoke of the feeling of responsibility they carried. They shared the pressure they felt in being “the person” to support these young people in particular:

ELSA 1: *“So you feel like all the pressure is on you, you know, to try, and to do”*

In addition, some talked about how they were expected to be both physically and emotionally available:

ELSA 1: *“They just turn up and they expect you to be available...it’s not like counselling where you’ve got that session and they go away, they’re there all the time...so you’re there on tap all the time basically.”*

ELSA 4: *“I’ll say, well if you can get her in at any point in the day, that’d be fantastic. I’m available from half one. She will come in at 1.31, and look for me...I can’t just drop what I’m doing in the morning to see her”*

They often felt that all the responsibility fell to them and that although the boundaries were exceeded in terms of what would be deemed to be their role, the YP would only attend for ELSA itself. These ELSAs explained that because the young person did not have the same relationship with another member of staff, no one could share the responsibility with them:

ELSA 3: *“He didn’t want to come in. Then it kind of got back into it again, where if we had an ELSA session, he would come in...By Christmas time, he would only come in to see me.”*

ELSA 4: *“She will only come into the building at the minute if she sees me. X might have been able to support, but because she doesn’t have that relationship with her, it’s fallen to me.”*

Although the benefits of a strong relationship between ELSA and young person appears to be positive, some of the ELSAs shared concerns over the young people they worked with becoming overly dependent on them. ELSA 3 shared her fears:

ELSA 3: *“We were worried that I was the only reason he was coming into school”*

This is a theme that has been echoed in other research (Mann, 2014; Nicholson-Roberts et al., 2025) where it was hypothesised that young people were

not learning the skills of emotional literacy and regulation and became unable to emotionally regulate independently without the ELSA.

Another ELSA acknowledged that the young person she was working with was reliant on her, but she felt this was unsurprising given his background and their working relationship. She shared her willingness to accept the dependency and continue supporting him, while they worked on strategies for him to cope independently:

ELSA 6: *“They thought he was attached to me. So, of course he’s attached to me. But he needs some sort of attachment that actually guides him...No I feel these children need people who actually care about them...Why are we going to let this child suffer when I can, I actually can see him.”*

Previous research suggested that the dependence on the ELSA meant that the sessions stretched further than the suggested remit of ELSAs six to ten sessions (Mann, 2014), however other researchers have suggested that the time needed to work within the complex systems around a young person and build trusting relationships (Nicholson-Roberts et al., 2025) with those who may be feeling unsafe in school takes longer than the original ELSA structure would suggest.

ELSAs in this study flagged that working under these time constraints but still wanting to work in the best interests of the young person caused them to feel under pressure. They felt that they knew that the complex needs and difficulties linked to EBSNA were not going to be “resolved” in the time frame usually given for ELSA. Some ELSAs described how they were still expected to get YP to return to school in short time frames:

ELSA 1: *“Some of the students you can have a six week session if it’s something or nothing. But most of the ones that I’m dealing with are massively beyond that”*

ELSA 6: *“EBSA is not fixable in a given amount of time anyway, and all the while you’re doing EBSA, you’re going to need ELSA...They were “Six, six to eight week sessions”. It was never “Oh, well done, bye!” Never.*

The ELSAs interviewed in this study knew from their experience that the time frames and the original ELSA structure was unrealistic for this more complex work,

and they were willing to take the pressure of knowing they were working outside of the expectations of the intervention and often of their school too.

Subtheme 5B: Systemic pressures

This subtheme was generated as in addition to feeling internal pressures through working with these young people, ELSAs were also subject to external systemic pressure. This pressure was perceived to come from two sources: the microsystem (school and home factors) and the exosystem (mental health resources and support services).

In terms of microsystem pressures, the first source of pressure was perceived by ELSAs to come from the school setting and ELSA line managers (often SENCOs) as shared by these ELSAs:

ELSA 3: *“My SENCO was like, you just need to keep doing it to get him into school”*

ELSA 4: *“I can get her in, which is good...I don’t know how much it is helping her access her education because she’s not going to lessons. But attendance wise it is helping her get into the building”*

This pressure may have been passed on to ELSAs from line managers who were in turn feeling pressure to get the young person to attend due to the Government’s renewed drive for attendance and the expectation from the “Working together to improve school attendance” document (Department for Education, 2024b) and the new “Attendance Baseline Improvement Expectation” (Department for Education, 2025a) for each school to be improving attendance.

Similar to other previous research (Miles, 2015) ELSAs shared that they had pressure exerted on them by the school setting due to the expectation that they could juggle multiple roles. ELSAs are often employed as TAs or pastoral workers. These ELSAs talked about the difficulty of maintaining multiple roles and the conflict this can bring:

ELSA 1: *“It was too much because it was going from like all the emotional, stressful listening to stories, and then going straight into a lesson...it’s just, it was just too much. So I can’t do, I can’t do both. It’s impossible.”*

ELSA 2: *“Part of that is complicating my other role. I wish I had just kept my ELSA hat on and been true to ELSA and just stayed with her in that space and had a positive experience and not tried to stretch her too much and get her to transition back in.”*

Some ELSAs felt there was also a professional/personal conflict in the way they were being asked to work, with ELSA 5 describing her struggle in holding two conflicting positions:

ELSA 5: *“I’ll say to her well, my responsibility is to tell you this. As a parent I think very differently.”*

ELSAs also shared another microsystem-based perception of pressure, coming from parents. Although the communication between home and school appears to play a very important role in supporting young people with EBSNA, and contributes to the sense of trust that is built between all of the systems around the young person, ELSAs shared that sometimes there could be pressure from home regarding what the focus of the ELSA sessions should be:

ELSA 7: *“That was another area that Mum was sort of like, concerned about, you know, wanting to support in that area.”*

ELSA 4: *“I think it’s more her parents that are interested in her working on that rather than herself. Mum’s wanting a real focus on that social communication...I don’t know if that’s necessarily what she wants...Mum almost wants me to teach her how to speak to people and I am reluctant to because I don’t think that’s fair.”*

Although the ELSAs felt this pressure, not all of them changed their focus to accommodate it, as seen in ELSA 4’s description above, instead using their professional judgement to focus on other topics.

The second source of external pressure that ELSAs shared was based within the exosystem, and came from their perception of being responsible for working with young people with increasingly more complex needs than ELSA was originally designed for. ELSA 1 explained her working situation:

ELSA 1: *“Then there’s more complex needs like you know, with the mutism...it’s a lot more...The amount of need and the severity of needs, because they’re all waiting for more help.”*

ELSAs also commented on frequently supporting YP who had either been turned down for, or were waiting for more in-depth support from external agencies that had no capacity to support them:

ELSA 5: *“Because they didn’t apparently meet thresholds for different things. I thought to get involved “Family first”. Nothing. I had to support them with a lot of things, he would say because he was suicidal for a good amount of time, probably a whole year. And there was nothing, nothing. CAMHS. He didn’t meet the threshold for CAMHS either. No social worker either.”*

ELSA 6: *“And they put him on a one-to-one DBT waiting list. We do have a school counsellor who is willing to see him, but again, that’s an exceptionally long waiting list.*

I have gone to other agencies and said, “What can I do, until you can do?”

The majority of ELSAs talked about having increased requests for their support and the pressure they felt in knowing there were YP now also waiting for them:

ELSA 7: *“I do think there has been an increase definitely...we’ve got waiting lists now”*

The Future Minds report (Centre for Mental Health, 2025) shared that despite increasing capacity, children and young people in England were waiting an average of 21 weeks for a first Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) appointment in 2023, with 40% of NHS trusts having young people waiting over two years for support (NHS England, 2023). This has an impact on school attendance, where NHS data shows a strong relationship between mental health and school absence with ten times more pupils with mental health difficulties missing more than 15 days of school per term compared with their peers without difficulties. In the 16-24 age bracket, 61% of young people waiting for mental health support stopped attending school or college (M&S and Young Minds, 2023).

Although ELSA is not a “mental health” intervention, these are often the young people that the ELSAs shared that they found themselves supporting because there were currently no other professionals available to support them. ELSA 1 shared her experience of this:

ELSA 1: *“They’re the ones that have been referred because they’re waiting for CAMHS...so that we’re holding them for when they go to CAMHS.”*

The data that contributed to generating this theme appear to indicate that ELSAs are subject to a great deal of pressure through carrying out their work, especially with this cohort of young people who often have complex and acute needs. This would suggest that the support they receive via ELSA supervision sessions provided by their Local Authority EP service may be vital to upholding their emotional wellbeing and preventing them from feeling exhaustion and burnout related to their work. Ideally ELSAs should be supported by their line manager and other staff in their setting, (although their time, resources and understanding of ELSA work can impact this) and reminded that their own self-care is vital to continue to be effective and have the positive impact that they do.

Conversely, even though the ELSAs shared the pressures of their work, they also shared their positives. Understandably making a difference to these young people, whether it was through small but meaningful changes or much larger, more impactful differences gave the ELSAs involved a great deal of pride and satisfaction. As we have heard from their experiences shared through this research, they invest a huge amount of time and energy, and take on willingly, a great deal of responsibility and pressure on behalf of the young people that they work with. Therefore, when they can see positive changes, they rightfully feel a sense of fulfilment. ELSA 3 shared her experience of this:

ELSA 3: *“It was a good feeling that I was that safe person that he would come to...so I can see you and make sure you’re OK and that you still know that I’m there to talk to you. I’m still happy with how it went.”*

Positive outcomes were a key feature in the thesis of Endersby (Endersby, 2021) which investigated the experiences of a small group of ELSAs (via semi-structured interviews) during the Covid-19 pandemic. She describes the positive outcomes of the children the ELSAs had worked with, and the sense of appreciation

the ELSAs felt and the satisfaction they gained for carrying out their role. Endersby describes how the feeling of how worthwhile the ELSA work was, became an important feature in their experience.

ELSA 6 went further and explained that if she can share her feelings of pride with the young person themselves it has even more impact:

ELSA 6: *“I’ll say to him, “How proud are you of yourself?” and we’ve gone from this (fingers a little way apart) to this (hands apart). And he’ll say to me, “How proud are you of me?” and I’m like “Well I can’t stretch my arms wide enough”.*

“Well look at you! You’ve been here all day! You came to my lesson! I’m so proud of you” and you know they get that sense of belonging, and I think that is the, it’s really meaningful to them.”

2.6 Conclusions

Although there is no previous research looking at the direct connection between the ELSA intervention and its use for working to support young people who have experienced (or are experiencing) EBSNA, this research has shown that the intervention is being used for this purpose. This study aimed to explore two main research questions. The first (RQ1) aimed to investigate how ELSAs (using the ELSA intervention) support young people who have experienced EBSNA, and the second (RQ2), explored what ELSAs perceive the impact of the intervention to be on the young person and the micro and mesosystem around them.

The following section will link the themes generated in this study to the research questions.

RQ1: How have ELSAs (using the ELSA intervention) supported young people who have experienced, or are experiencing, EBSNA?

The ELSAs that took part in this study identified many ways in which they perceived their work to support young people who they worked with who had experienced or were experiencing EBSNA. In relation to RQ1, Themes 1, 2 and 3 (“Building Trust”, “Facilitating the systems around the YP” and “Above and Beyond ELSA”) reflect how the ELSAs provided this support.

Theme 1 shows the foundation for the work that these ELSAs do, in building trust with the young person. The ELSAs suggested that this was achieved through creating a therapeutic alliance between themselves and the young person they are working with (Subtheme 1A) to form a safe, trusting space in which to work together on learning supportive tools and techniques for them to use. Building strong, positive relationships which ELSAs described in this data, and is a prevalent idea in the majority of ELSA research (for example Hill et al., 2013; Wilding & Claridge, 2016) occurs because they have trust in the ELSA developed via the “therapeutic alliance”. The strength of this relationship has been shown to be a key factor on the impact and outcomes of intervention programmes (Elvins & Green, 2008; Green, 2006a)

Theme 2 highlighted the work that ELSAs undertook within the systems around the young person; their family (2A), their school environment (2B), their peers (2C) and the other professionals (2D) that may have also been working with them. Many of the ELSAs interviewed were not working in a siloed way with each element of the microsystem in turn, but described their role as within the mesosystem, co-ordinating and mediating between elements of the microsystem. In respect to RQ1 this style of working meant the ELSAs perceived their work to involve supporting the family (2A), advocating and be the child’s voice within school (2B), building peer relations to foster a sense of school belonging (2C) as well as carrying out complimentary work with external professionals (2D). Additionally, the ELSAs saw their role in coordination of the elements of the microsystem allowing the “team” around the child to be formed. They expressed that the part of this role incorporated ensuring that each element (family, school, peers, professionals) kept to their word on what they had committed to do, which supported the young person by reinforcing the sense of safety and trust in the ELSA and the relationship they had.

In connection with RQ1, Theme 3 highlighted specifically how ELSAs may support young people experiencing EBSNA in an extended way, beyond “traditional” ELSA. Taking longer than the prescribed six to ten sessions is common amongst ELSA research (Bravery & Harris, 2009; Harris, 2010a, 2010b; McEwen, 2019) but the ELSAs in the current study were taking on young people for years at a time, going with them to outside appointments, having extra sessions at break and lunchtime, ringing parents each day, extending their own knowledge with CPD, as well doing emotional literacy skills work. Their role appeared to be changing with the

increased needs of these young people and becoming an evolved version of ELSA, akin to the key adult used for emotional support outlined by Louise Bomber (Bomber, 2011). Bomber outlines in her work how the “key adult” should create a sense of safety through their predictability, responding to the young person, being attuned to their emotions, helping them to regulate, and in the case of the ELSAs guiding them in ways to be able to self-regulate. She emphasises that the trusting relationship as described in Theme 1, is the priority before learning can happen, which is what the ELSAs in this study shared. They prioritised the relationship building before any emotional literacy learning took place. Any challenging behaviour that is shown by the young person is viewed with understanding and taken to be a sign of an unmet need. The ELSAs took this stance of unconditional positive regard (Rogers, 1957) as standard, but some shared that they would need to explain and advocate for the young people with teaching staff who may misunderstand the behaviour in the classroom, as well as the behaviour in terms of non-attendance, to be through choice or defiance. She also proposes that the adult should be the young person’s “champion”, advocating for their needs and protecting their emotional and psychological wellbeing. This idea is connected to the ideas in Theme 2, in terms of the ELSA working to advocate for and coordinate the support around the young person.

RQ2: What do ELSAs perceive as the impact of the intervention on the child and the micro-mesosystem around them?

As part of Theme 1, ELSAs discussed how trust was perceived to spread through the microsystem via a trust ripple effect (Theme 1B). The ELSAs described how patterns of interactions between key people were influenced by their involvement. They felt trust was perceived to spread through the elements of the microsystem around the YP, to build trust between ELSA and parents, parents and school and also between both parents and school and the YP themselves. Many ELSAs reported feeling trusted by parents to work with their young people at a time when they were at their most vulnerable, and in many cases the parents were under a great deal of pressure to get their children to attend. Young people were perceived by the ELSAs to become more trusting of the teaching staff as an extension of their trust of the ELSA, because they felt that ELSAs were advocating for them to teaching staff and that they could mediate for them if they had difficulty in safely

sharing their wants and needs in the past. ELSAs expressed their belief that trust throughout the system grew, and they felt that parents and teachers also began to have greater trust of the young people in terms of what they were able to cope with in the school environment (see Figure 6).

In relation to RQ2, Theme 2 describes how ELSAs worked not only with the elements of the microsystem around the young person but how the strength of their working style appears to be at the mesosystem level. The ELSAs described how they felt that they became the centre of a “team” around the young person, and a bridge between the systems around the young person. ELSAs perceived the impact of this to be enablement of the ELSAs to work holistically (as suggested in the “Working together to improve school attendance” document, (Department for Education, 2024b) and as suggested by previous research by Nuttall and Woods (Nuttall & Woods, 2013), ensured consistency in understanding the young person’s needs and in working towards shared goals to support, for example reintegration following a period of EBSNA.

In response to RQ2, Theme 4 describes some of the more long-term impacts that ELSA provides for the young people receiving the intervention. These are mostly at the individual level but may also have an impact on the home/family system.

The ELSAs all shared attendance improvements for the young people they worked with, which in terms of school, may have been seen as one of the most important outcomes. However, there were also many other benefits that the ELSAs attributed to taking part in the intervention. The ELSAs perceived the young people to have improved communication skills as well as the ability to use the strategies they had been taught (for example breathing techniques or reframing negative thoughts) enabling them to overcome barriers such as anxiety or making new friends. This was aligned with previous research (Purcell & Kelly, 2023; Purcell et al., 2025) that suggested that the increase in confidence that having these skills gave, meant that not only were young people more willing to attend school (Krause et al., 2020) but they were also able to apply the skills they had learned in the wider community, giving them increased confidence to go to places they had not wanted to go before and to engage in community activities, as well as feeling more positive about the future. The ELSAs in this research shared similar perceptions of the long-

term positive outcomes from the intervention, including being able to go outside of the house, seeing family, pursuing hobbies and getting a job.

These were all incredibly positive outcomes for the young person personally, but Theme 4 also suggested an impact on the microsystem of the young person in terms of their family system, with ELSAs sharing the relief of parents when their young person not only started to attend school again, but started to do activities that they had been reluctant to do, or had stopped doing altogether. In line with previous research by Wong (Wong et al., 2020) the young people were perceived to feel better able to cope with situations outside of school (for example, in feeling anxious about going to camp) and so were able to attend.

Finally, Theme 5 (Managing Pressure) was not anticipated as part of this research as the semi-structured interview questions were directed towards the work of the ELSA, goals, outcomes and how their work influenced these outcomes. I did not have the intention of exploring the stresses and pressures that the ELSAs perceived their work to put on them. However, as part of their narrative of the experience of carrying out the ELSA intervention with YP experiencing EBSNA, the data led to generating this theme which encompassed not only the personal, emotional pressures (5A) but pressures they felt were exerted due to systemic factors (5B) that were impacting on them.

Focusing on RQ2, Theme 5 describes the impact of the intervention on the ELSA themselves when they are working with this cohort of young people in the role they have positioned themselves as taking; in the centre of the “team” around the young person, coordinating the mesosystem. They suggest that this extended version of the ELSA role exerts a heavy emotional load, due to the expectation to be emotionally and physically available for the young person, not only during ELSA sessions but at other times too (5A). The ELSAs perceived the responsibility for getting the young person to attend school was being held primarily by them, as the young person often did not have the same trusting “therapeutic relationship” with any other members of staff (5A). Similarly to other studies (Mann, 2014) some ELSAs in this research did raise a concern about the possibility of the young person becoming reliant on them, however they felt it was unsurprising given the difficulties of the young people they were working with. It was felt that the extended time needed to

work with these young people was a reflection of their more complex needs and the way that the ELSAs were working within complex systems (Nicholson-Roberts et al., 2025), both within the microsystem and mesosystem.

ELSAs also felt pressure to be coming from individual elements of the microsystem, for example in the expectations from school to get young people to return quickly, as well as from home in the topics that were suggested to be covered in intervention sessions (5B). However, one of the most prevalent experiences shared by the ELSAs was that the needs of young people were more complex than would usually be referred to ELSAs but that their role was to work with them while they were waiting for other more specialist services to provide support (5B). This is an impact on the ELSAs of outside of the micro-mesosystem, but from the exosystem and the locally available support systems, policies and funding.

As previously outlined, there is no research linking ELSA directly with young people experiencing EBSNA and their attendance. However, the ELSAs in this research all reported that the young people they worked with had improved attendance following their ELSA sessions. The ELSAs were not asked to quantify the change in attendance in this study, but descriptively they shared that changes ranged from full non-attendance to attending only for ELSA sessions, all the way through to returning to full attendance. It is not possible to say that the use of ELSA would cause improved attendance for all young people who take part in the ELSA intervention as this was only a small sample, and the ELSAs that volunteered to take part in this research were asked to take part where there had been a positive outcome, which was left open to their subjective interpretation. Future research avenues might include studies looking at quantifying attendance changes for students across multiple school settings where they had used ELSA as part of the support for their EBSNA.

Of the ELSAs that took part in this research, 6 of the 7 were based within secondary schools and all had worked within a secondary setting. They also worked with more “severe” cases of EBSNA, some of which had become quite entrenched over time. It is acknowledged that this is not a representative sample of ELSAs across the UK, nor that EBSNA is only an increasing issue within secondary school settings. However, this led me to consider for this piece of research, what the

reasoning behind some of the more complex and chronic cases of EBSNA being situated in secondary schools might be, and how the ELSA intervention is supporting the changes between the primary and secondary environment.

Previous research proposes that the loss of the close staff support that CYP have typically had in primary school settings (King & Bernstein, 2001) may be a contributing factor to triggering and perpetuating of EBSNA. Where in primary school young people will have had consistent relationships with adults that were trusted and predictable, this may increase feelings of security and lessen anxiety (Ingul et al., 2019). Therefore, those ELSA relationships may be replacing these previously held relationships from primary school in a secondary setting.

Recent findings from Jerrim (Jerrim, 2025) looked at school engagement in 81,000 children in England. One measure was of emotional engagement which he hypothesised would indicate a feeling of a sense of belonging in school, mean having positive relationships with peers and have positive mutually respectful relationships with staff. A key question that was asked regarding emotional safety and a sense of belonging in school, which we may consider would be connected to EBSNA, asked students about “feelings of safety” in school. These pupils reported a huge decline in their sense of safety from Year 6 across the transition into Year 7, which then drops in Year 8 and 9 and never recovers. Scores for “feeling safe” fall from just over 8 (out of 10) in Year 6 (for both girls and boys) to approximately 6.5 in Year 7 and 5.8 in Year 9 for girls, around 6.8 in Year 7 and 6.5 in Year 9 for boys. It is possible to consider that having access to an ELSA could be a protective factor against the loss of sense of safety and belonging in school, for those at risk of EBSNA due to individual, family or school-based factors.

2.7 Implications for Educational Psychology Practice

The current research focuses on the experiences of seven ELSAs from across England who had carried out the ELSA intervention with young people who had experienced, or were experiencing, Emotional Based School Non-Attendance. This section will consider implications for Educational Psychology practice in light of the generated themes.

The current research emphasised that ELSAs that work with young people experiencing EBSNA are not keeping to the “traditional” ELSA structure or remit

(Shotton & Burton, 2025) in order to support these young people. They have described in detail their experiences of going “above and beyond” the ELSA role as the needs of the young people have become more complex. This has implications for the EPs who train and supervise ELSAs. Humphrey (Humphrey et al., 2013) suggested that as young people’s needs change the social and emotional (SEL) programmes that are being used in schools (such as ELSA) will need to become diluted or discontinued. I would suggest instead that EPs could take advantage of the strong foundation that ELSA provides and expand the role to have EBSNA specific ELSAs, with additional and more specific training tailored for the young people of this cohort. The majority of EP services across the UK have developed their own EBSNA guidance (Hammond-Price et al., 2025) and so in training EPs could support ELSAs to have a better understanding of the triggering and perpetuating factors associated with EBSNA, as well as the protective factors and the additional support that these young people may find helpful.

This additional training alongside the ongoing supervision from the EP service may be beneficial for supporting the wellbeing of ELSAs themselves who reported in this study that they feel under pressure from schools and the overall system to be supporting young people who often have complex needs and are waiting for external, specialist support. Needing to be emotionally and physically available has a big emotional impact on the ELSAs themselves (Nicholson-Roberts, 2019). These ELSAs are not trained counsellors or therapists, although they work in a therapeutic way, and often seek out their own CPD to work in an appropriate way with the young people referred to them. EPs would be in a good position to be able to provide this for the ELSAs so that they are not having to spend their own time and money finding CPD, and also the EP service would be able to ensure that the advice they give is relevant and evidence based, and that the ELSAs feel they are working within their competencies.

If ELSAs have additional training given by the EPS based on their EBSNA guidance and up-to-date research, then they may be able to identify and work with the young people at the early stages of EBSNA rather than being called on to help when they are already fully not attending. Research shows that anxiety and mental health difficulties (often in association with neurodivergence) are frequently linked to EBSNA (in this research termed “school distress”) (Connolly et al., 2023) and so if

there was a route available for young people to get support within school, in a familiar environment and with familiar adults, without having to be referred elsewhere, this may reduce the impact for them, and remove some pressure on other services at a later stage.

The Department for Education's guidance for schools and colleges to promote mental health and wellbeing, is to employ a whole school approach (HM Government, 2021; Rainer & Abdinasir, 2023). EPs may be able to support this via their work through the "eight principles to promoting a whole school or college approach to mental health and wellbeing". For example, they can provide guidance for class-based teaching regarding emotional literacy as well as promoting the work of the ELSAs in school, as one element of the support for social and emotional learning. EPs are also able to support with staff development to give training and CPD around emotional literacy and wellbeing, as well as providing wellbeing support for staff themselves. EPs are also skilled in gathering pupil voice regarding emotional wellbeing and at the first stages of supporting students "at risk" of EBSNA, as well as working with parents and carers who may be seeking support for their young people who are showing signs of anxiety and having attendance difficulties.

Research by Roffey (Roffey, 2008) has shown that schools are best thought of as complex and dynamic systems where the individuals and individual interventions are viewed as the microsystem level of Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological model (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998) but they do not work in isolation. They are also being interacted upon by the mesosystem (relational values of the staffroom and classrooms), the exosystem level (relationship and wellbeing policies and practices across school) and the macrosystem level (school culture and expectations). Roffey suggests that long term positive outcomes needed work to happen at every level of the school system. EPs would be well placed to work at each of these levels to support the individual work happening through the ELSA intervention at the individual, microsystem level.

As has been seen by this research, ELSAs roles are evolving into the central anchor and coordination point for many of the systems around the young person where they are showing signs of school distress and attendance difficulties. EPs may be able to work alongside ELSAs in a multi-systemic way, assisting with the

coordination and maintenance of relationships between YP, parents, schools and professionals, or, as are being set up in some Local Authorities, as part of multi-agency attendance teams (Department for Education, 2024b).

As well as training ELSAs, EPs have a secondary role as ELSA supervisors. Supervision should develop skills and competence, protect those they work with by ensuring good quality work, and support the supervisee (Hawkins & Shohet, 2012). ELSAs should receive supervision once per half term (Shotton & Burton, 2025) and in terms of ELSA specifically, ELSA supervision involves “understanding the psychological development of children and young people, considering the meaning behind children’s behaviours and applying psychological principles to the process of supporting change” (Burton, 2017). The current research has shown the amount of pressure that ELSAs may be working under with this cohort of young people especially, and so EPs may look to provide specialist or additional supervision sessions for ELSAs that are working with students experiencing EBSNA.

EPs are also in a good position to support ELSAs during supervision by spending time reflecting on eco-systemic frameworks together and exploring different factors that may be impacting on attendance and what the focus of the intervention may be. A framework such as Melvin’s KiTes framework (Melvin et al., 2019) may be a useful resource for this.

Burton (Burton, 2017) suggests that as the majority of ELSAs will not have had extensive psychological training, their supervision support should give additional knowledge where it might be needed if they are supporting students with complex needs outside of their competence. As shared by the ELSAs in this study, they are accepting referrals of young people with increasingly complex needs, especially in relation to EBSNA, and so ELSA supervision is even more important than it ever was. Especially where young people experiencing EBSNA are staying working with ELSAs for increasingly long periods of time, ongoing and more in-depth, or more frequent, supervision may be necessary for those ELSAs who are working with these young people. ELSAs from the current study, as in previous research have shared how much they value EP time for supervision (Bravery & Harris, 2009) and so it will be important for EPs to ensure supervision sessions are regularly scheduled and attended.

2.8 Strengths and Limitations and Future Research

The following section outlines the strengths and limitations of my research by comparing to the suggested guidelines of Braun and Clarke for good reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021, 2024) and also Yardley's principles of good quality qualitative research (Yardley, 2000), but also through self-reflection on how the research fulfilled my own criteria and how I considered it could have been improved.

In considering the 15-point checklist provided by Braun and Clarke (2021) for good reflexive thematic analysis, I am confident that I have taken their guidance into account at each point. Firstly, I ensured that my data was transcribed and checked against the original recordings for accuracy, plus they were sent out to the participants to check they were representative of what they said and consented to their use in the next stage of analysis. At the coding stage each transcript was given time and consideration, and the coding process was comprehensive and repeated multiple times. Themes were then generated with a defined central organising concept, with themes being "meaning based" rather than topic summaries (Braun & Clarke, 2024). During analysis, data were interpreted in the light of previous research, giving extracts of data as evidence of the interpretation and the analysis was tied back to the original research questions.

Overall, the phases were all given adequate time for consideration, and the approach and explanations were explained using appropriate language for the "Big Q" reflexive thematic analysis approach, giving space for my engagement with the data as a subjective researcher and keeping awareness of any postpositivist "creep" into the writing.

Yardley suggests that good qualitative research show the qualities of sensitivity to context, commitment and rigour, transparency and coherence, as well as impact and importance (Yardley, 2000).

In terms of sensitivity to context, Yardley suggests that researchers should have a good understanding of the literature around their topic and the arguments around their research area. I would consider that within this study I carried out a thorough literature review regarding EBSNA, but then supplemented this with additional reading around the topics of ELSA, and of therapeutic relationships while

analysing the data, giving me a good understanding of the topics under consideration, and was able to link my work to the previous work of other researchers in these areas.

The social context of the relationship between myself and the participants was also taken into consideration, and included within the ethics application, regarding any possible perceived power inequalities between myself and the participants. As the researcher, I tried to position myself not as the “expert” on the topic we were discussing, and not as a Trainee EP, but as a student; curious and interested to hear their experiences. However, it was inescapable that there would be some analysis and interpretation of what they shared with me, and this may have led them to give more positive and socially acceptable accounts of their work.

Commitment and rigour are suggested by Yardley (2000, p. 221) as “prolonged engagement with the topic” and completing thorough data collection and analysis. I showed commitment by working in the topic area of EBSNA for two years before becoming a Trainee EP, and therefore deciding I would complete my thesis on an area connected to EBSNA. I completed a comprehensive, narrative literature review over eighteen months and endeavoured to keep up to date with the literature throughout that time. The data gathering phase was more complex than anticipated but I demonstrated commitment by persevering throughout the difficulties I encountered.

I demonstrated rigour by immersing myself in the coding process, and revisiting the data multiple times, to ensure that codes were comprehensive and had been explored thoroughly. I also revisited the code groupings and considered alternative themes when I was concerned that there was some overlap. I followed the guidance of Braun and Clarke carefully (Braun & Clarke, 2021) regarding the phases of reflexive thematic analysis, especially as this was a new methodology to me, to ensure that I was being rigorous in my research process.

In terms of transparency and coherence, I endeavoured to be as transparent in my research process as possible by explaining my decision making through each phase of the reflexive thematic analysis process and keeping reflective diaries and photos of the coding and theme generation process, for openness. The methodology

includes by its nature so much of the researcher's subjectivity, that it was important to me to share this and acknowledge the impact it had while doing this research.

At the start of the research journey, I spent time ensuring coherence of "fit" between the research question I wanted to explore and the ontology, epistemology and methodology of the study I designed. Later in the process, I spent time trying to make as coherent a narrative of the participants' experiences in relation to previous research and in generating the codes and themes that were shared between them.

In relation to Yardley's criteria for impact of research, I would consider researchers, regardless of the topic and methodology, would like for their research to have impact and to be useful to the wider participant group, or to other researchers who wish to explore and extend the research further. I would like to share my findings with ELSAs themselves, hopefully validating their own experiences and sharing how other ELSAs support young people experiencing EBSNA. I would also like to be able to share the research with SENCOs who are often required to choose evidence-based interventions to support their students' needs but do not routinely have access to research journals with peer-reviewed articles about them.

I would like to share my research within my own educational psychology service but also to wider EP services and beyond via published research through journals such as Educational Psychology in Practice (EPiP) or Pastoral Care in Education which is a more international journal focused on children's emotional health and wellbeing and often includes evaluation of school-based interventions.

To date, there is no research that has looked at the use of the ELSA intervention with young people experiencing EBSNA, even though it is known by schools and EP services anecdotally that it is frequently used with this cohort of young people. Therefore, I would like to think that this research will be useful for schools to see how the ELSA intervention can be used to support this group of young people, for current ELSAs to see how their work can support these young people and the specific techniques and methods that other ELSAs have found useful. Hopefully EPs will be able to see how ELSA work can be used in this way, and how they may be able to extend their training and supervision with ELSAs for this specific use. I am not expecting to be able to generalise these exact findings, in a positivist sense, to other ELSAs and to other young people who receive the ELSA

intervention as that does not fit with exploratory qualitative research of this kind. However, it may be possible to say that where contexts and participants are similar there may be some transferability (Lewis et al., 2014) of the ways that ELSAs have worked with this participant group that could be useful to other ELSAs looking for support with their work.

A limitation of this study is that it only includes experiences of ELSAs rather than including the voice of the young people who have received ELSA. ELSA research is mostly carried out with ELSAs, teachers and EPs; less research includes the CYP voice rather than adult perceptions of the value of the intervention (Rogers & Kelly, 2024). Having the opportunity to give their views on educational matters that affect them is included in the SEND Code of Practice (Department for Education, 2015) and would have been valuable to include when assessing the impact of the intervention from their point of view. Even less research includes parent views, which legislation outlines as important to gain regarding decisions pertaining to educational provision for their children (Home Office, 2014). A study that included experiences from all three perspectives was the original aim of this study, but recruitment difficulties led to reduction in the scope of the current research.

Another potential limitation of this study was that the design asked participants for their positive experiences of using ELSA with young people experiencing EBSNA. This was chosen because this study was exploratory in nature and in considering there would only be a small number of participants, I wanted to ensure that there would be some homogeneity in their responses in order to find themes in the interview data. This may have given an overly positive outlook on the way ELSA is being used with this cohort. If there had not been an issue with recruitment it may have been possible to recruit participants with any experiences in using ELSA for this purpose and to have had sufficient data to explore negative as well as positive experiences. As I also hoped that the themes generated from the data of ELSA experiences would be of use to other ELSAs and to the EP services training and supervising them, I persevered with only recruiting ELSAs with positive experiences to be able to share these going forward.

This study also has an absence of male ELSAs experiences, and of those ELSAs working with younger children and young people. All seven ELSAs who

participated were women and six of the seven ELSAs were based in secondary school settings. This reflects the workforce in schools, where 93% of teaching assistants (which make up the majority of ELSAs) are female. However, as two-thirds of teaching assistants work in early years and primary settings (Department for Education, 2025d) it was not representative of the school workforce to have as many secondary ELSAs participating. It may suggest that the young people experiencing EBSNA that school perceived to be of a level that required intervention, are more frequently those in secondary school settings, which aligns with the most recent data showing in academic year 24/25, 13.5% of primary school pupils were persistently absent, compared to 24.3% of secondary school pupils (Department for Education, 2025a).

Overall, ELSAs shared that the positive changes shown by the young people they worked with included attendance improvements. However no quantitative data was collected regarding the level of change of the attendance for these young people. This was not the aim of this particular study, but in future, it may be beneficial as part of the overall picture, to understand the amount of change in attendance shown when being able to state that ELSA is a worthwhile intervention for schools to invest in to support their young people who are struggling with barriers to attending school. This study was interested in the experiences of ELSAs and a more holistic view of what elements of ELSA supported these young people, not only to attend, but in their overall sense of wellbeing that enable positive life outcomes for them. The nature of this research makes it difficult to definitively state that ELSA itself was the reason for the changes seen in the young people that were discussed in this study as there are many other factors to take into account, and as was shown by the themes, it would be incredibly difficult to tease apart the influence of the emotional literacy strategies taught by ELSA, the impact of the therapeutic alliance formed between the ELSA and the young person and the coordinating role of the ELSA around the micro and mesosystem of the young person. It is not the role of this research to do that, but just to highlight that the ELSA's role is developing and evolving into the central point in coordinating the strategies and the relationships, that enable the trust, safety, connection, belonging and confidence elements to grow, and the positive outcomes to follow.

Chapter 3: Reflective Account

3.1 Introduction

This chapter will describe my research journey, from first ideas through to data collection, analysis and write up, documenting challenges and changes that were made throughout the process.

I spent a great deal of time considering a range of topic areas, but I wanted to focus on something that I had seen first-hand in my previous working roles in an attempt to ensure the research was relevant. I wanted to make sure that I had a genuine interest in the topic so that I was motivated to dig deeper into the literature and spend time working on the research as a whole. Once I had this topic area in mind, I was able to refine the ideas with the support of my research supervisor. Several times throughout the research process there needed to be changes made to the recruitment process and to the methodology used, but I kept notes during key phases to enable reflection and keep clarity on the decision-making process.

Overall the research process took a lot longer than I had expected it to, and there was an element of frustration for me that the research did not end up as I originally planned, but I am immensely proud of the final project and hopefully what I have produced will be valuable for ELSAs, school and EPs working with young people experiencing EBSNA.

3.2 The Research

3.2.1 Research choice and research questions

Having worked in literacy and language learning research previously, I considered this as a research topic, but it is a very wide area, and I felt it would be challenging to narrow down a research question. Before becoming a Trainee EP (TEP), I worked as an Assistant Psychologist (AP) and two of the most memorable students I worked with were young people who struggled with being able to attend school. At that point EBSNA was not being mentioned as frequently as it is now, and it struck me at the time that their schools had little idea of the best way to support them. Both were complex cases, but I worked for an extended period with one of the girls, and later I got a message from her parent sharing that she felt our work together had been a turning point for her, and that she had been able to start to

attend and had gone on to have much more positive outcomes. I reflected that if I did an extended research project in the future I would like to see how EPs could support young people, families and schools where the young people were unable to attend for emotional based reasons. So, for this reason I decided that my more recent experience with young people struggling with attendance would be a more appropriate topic area.

The language and literacy projects were large, longitudinal quantitative research projects, so I had confidence in research of this sort. However, the type of research that would be needed to investigate research questions looking at qualitative experiences were not ones that I had any experience or confidence in. I decided at the time to start looking at the literature around EBSNA in the hopes that there would be a research focus that would align more with my areas of expertise but knowing that I may need to leave my comfort zone and embrace a different approach and learn a new methodology. I knew that I wanted to be able to support these young people but that I needed to know more about the topic, read more broadly, see what the gaps were in the literature and if I could find a more specific research focus that could be used across what I already knew to be a heterogeneous group with various contributing factors to their non-attendance.

3.2.2 Literature review

I spent the summer of 2024 reading as many research papers and past theses as possible to have a better understanding of what EBSNA was, what the risk and protective factors were, what researchers were proposing were the best ways of identifying those at risk and supporting those who were experiencing attendance difficulties. I was surprised to find there was a great deal of research, even though it felt like it was only starting to come into the collective consciousness as a growing problem and it felt quite overwhelming to know where to start with choosing a topic area.

Three main strands of possible research areas started to emerge as the most obvious and so I considered each of the following for how I could design a relevant and useful piece of research that would be able to inform schools and EPs in supporting this group of students. I considered:

- 1) How to identify pupils who might be at risk of EBSNA – early intervention

- 2) Exploring an assessment tool or framework in more depth
- 3) Exploring which interventions support pupils with the difficulties associated with EBSNA

There was also the possibility of working in tandem with a newly opened unit for EBSNA in the LA that I was working in, exploring in more detail the experiences of the young people using the base as a stepping stone for reintegration into the mainstream environment. However, this was discounted as the unit was only recently opened and their systems and processes were not well developed. I met with the staff, and although they were very enthusiastic, they were still figuring out how best to work with the young people and there were no embedded ways of working or reliable interventions in place. They shared with me that the school's Senior Leadership Team were putting increasing amounts of pressure on them to prove their impact and so the ways they were working were more aligned with what they wanted than how the staff felt was best to support the young people. Therefore, I decided it would be best to allow them the time to settle in, embed their processes and ways of working rather than adding the pressure of a research project. I was unsure how valuable the data would be until procedures were in place as the young people's experiences could have been negatively impacted by the logistical operations.

Following discussions with my supervisor and presenting some ideas to my peers and the course team, I narrowed down my choice to looking at an intervention for EBSNA that was not based around gradual exposure or CBT based techniques, which appeared to be the most common interventions for young people experiencing anxiety disorders; one of the main risk factors for EBSNA. I investigated other types of interventions that had been used with young people specifically with difficulty attending or reintegrating after a period of non-attendance (Cunningham et al., 2022; Nuttall & Woods, 2013) and they identified many of the features of an intervention that already exists; ELSA. ELSA is individualised, relational, child-centred, and builds the skills of emotional literacy and regulation for supporting anxiety, self-esteem difficulties, friendship issues, managing conflict and strong feelings (Shotton & Burton, 2025), all areas highlighted as risk factors for triggering and perpetuating EBSNA. I discovered from doing more research that at that time, no research had

been done linking the use of ELSA to supporting young people experiencing EBSNA, and so I decided this was where I was going to focus my project.

3.2.3 Methodology

Originally, I decided that I would carry out semi-structured interviews with the ELSAs themselves, the YP who had received ELSA intervention and their parents. This was an ambitious design, but as the majority of ELSA research is carried out with ELSAs, teachers or EPs who supervise ELSAs (Rogers & Kelly, 2024) I wanted to get ELSA experiences of supporting these YP, but I also wanted to hear the experiences and the impact of the intervention on the YP and their families. I felt it was important to get the young person's voice rather than only the adult perceptions of the impact of the intervention especially as having the opportunity to give their views on educational matters that affect them is included in The Children and Families Act (Home Office, 2014). I planned to use a realist evaluation methodology (Pawson & Tilley, 1997) devised to evaluate interventions without using an experimental design. I was interested to know "what works, for whom and in what circumstances" taking the context into account. Although mostly used in health care intervention research (Smeets et al., 2022) the method is being used increasingly in education research where schools are expected to ensure interventions are evidence based and to show evidence of impact in the appropriate context.

Unfortunately, the recruitment of participants became more difficult than originally anticipated (see "Participants and Recruitment" for more detail) and so the time frame for collecting data became truncated. Therefore it was decided that in order to complete the research project in a timely manner, the research plan would have to be altered by decreasing the participant groups down from three to one, and only include ELSAs, and to look for broader themes and patterns of meaning across the ELSA experiences of working with this cohort of YP.

This alteration of data therefore meant reconsideration of how to analyse it and the philosophical assumptions I was making. Previously the realist evaluation methodology would assume a realist ontological position of believing there is a reality to know and understand (Pawson & Tilley, 1997) and research as a way to generate objective knowledge in a post-positivist epistemology. However, some researchers take a critical realist stance (and therefore a subjective contextualist

epistemology) by emphasising the context contingent nature of the research and the participants. I had taken a critical realist ontological position (Bhaskar, 1975). However, in terms of ontology and epistemology I moved away from looking for a truth to be found, and the knowledge of the causal mechanisms for what works, for whom and in what context, to exploring the experiences of the ELSAs in more depth. This meant taking a relativist, social constructionist position, and considering that the knowledge shared by the ELSAs would be being created through the language used by them, rather than reflecting their thoughts.

I decided to change the analysis method to reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021) which aligned with this ontology and epistemology, and aligned with the “Big Q” qualitative method, understanding the situated knowledge and experiences of participants, and identifying patterns across the data. It allowed me to become more involved in the data while acknowledging that my involvement would shape the knowledge the participants produced through my own values and ways of engaging with them while I was gathering data.

I had very limited previous knowledge of qualitative research before the Doctorate process and so I was nervous of qualitative methods and especially using methods I did not know well, in my thesis. I was concerned about “doing it right” and that was reflected in many of my reflective diaries on the process. With guidance from peers who had previously used reflexive thematic analysis and from my supervisor, I read through the Braun and Clarke Thematic Analysis Practical Guide (Braun & Clarke, 2021) in an attempt to feel less daunted and more prepared for the process ahead. Their examples made the methodology feel more accessible and the process more manageable.

3.2.4 Ethics

The original ethics application was submitted to the University of East Anglia School for Education and Lifelong Learning Research Ethics Committee for the original research study in April 2025. The ethics submission was completed following the British Educational Research Association guidelines (British Educational Research Association [BERA], 2024), alongside the British Psychological Society (BPS) Code of Human Research Ethics (Oates et al., 2021), the British Psychological Society (BPS) Code of Ethics and Conduct (British Psychological

Society, 2021) and the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC) standards of conduct, performance and ethics (Health Care and Professions Council, 2024).

At this stage the LA EPs were the gatekeepers who were being asked to send information about the study to the Headteachers of schools where they supervised ELSAs. This process was set out to ensure that Headteachers had awareness of any research that involved their staff, to ensure that if there were any safeguarding issues that there was a route to reporting through the Designated Safeguarding Leads through school and also so that ELSAs were not being contacted directly leading them to feel pressure to consent to taking part. However, through the process of sending information out to EPs who agreed to support the research, it became apparent that EP services only hold the details of ELSAs and line managers and not the Headteachers details. This became an issue with recruitment as the information was not being received by the Headteachers to pass onwards to ELSAs. Therefore, I made a small amendment in June 2025 for contacting ELSA line managers instead. Another amendment was submitted in September 2025, again for alteration to the participant recruitment route, to add the possibility of recruitment via social media and on an ELSA supervisor's forum. At this point there had been no young people or parents who had consented to take part in the research, and so the ethics application was also altered to remove these two originally stated participant groups, bringing the research to the format it is described in Chapter 2.

Having put a great deal of time and effort into the original application, with preparation of three different consent forms and information sheets, and the additional ethical considerations when working with young people of consent, safeguarding and consideration of discussion around potentially traumatic experiences, I was disappointed that I was reducing the groups down to one. At the time I also worried that just having one group and it being the most popular group researched into ELSA, that I would not be making enough of a novel contribution to the research area, and that I was missing the most vital voice in the space.

If I had the knowledge I had now, I would have persevered with the YP group and approached the recruitment in a whole different way, having a more streamlined process than relying on so many levels of gatekeepers which led to bottlenecks in the process.

3.2.5 Participants and recruitment

As described in the “Ethics” section the participant groups were changed during the research process due to recruitment difficulties. Originally, I had three participant groups: ELSAs, YP who had received ELSA and parents of the YP receiving ELSA. Once ethics approval was received, I started to contact the EPs in LAs that supervised ELSAs. They were the gatekeepers for the ELSAs; however I had originally built in an extra layer of gatekeeper, the Headteachers for the reasons explained above. This proved to cause difficulty for the information to make it to the intended recipients (ELSA) as the LAs did not have Headteacher contact details. Once this had been amended in the ethics application to become ELSA line managers, then ELSAs started to receive the information and began to volunteer to take part. A caveat was also added that allowed recruitment direct to ELSAs if this was the only information that the LA held, on the proviso that if they wanted to participate, they informed their line manager. This was checked with them before the interviews started to ensure that more senior school staff had oversight of the ELSA’s participation in the research in case of any safeguarding issues arising, or if they shared that they needed additional support following the case they spoke about. As part of the debrief process the ELSAs were asked if they would like for me to contact their line manager or their ELSA supervisor for them to receive additional support. Ethically, I wanted to avoid contacting ELSAs directly to avoid them feeling pressure to take part due to the power dynamics of the situation. It was made clear on the consent form that they had no obligation to take part and that it would not affect their ongoing relationship with their supervising EP or with their LA if they did not participate.

I started with recruitment in one region of the UK, but this was very slow and necessitated extending the recruitment across the whole of the UK, as well as utilising other avenues for recruitment. I had relied on EP services for recruitment as they supervise ELSAs, and so this was more targeted than sending information straight to schools where there may not be an ELSA. However, EP services are very busy and EP time is highly pressured due to statutory responsibilities and increased workload (Atfield, 2023), and although many agreed to help disseminate information, there were many occasions where they contacted me months later to say they were only just sending information out. Therefore, I also approached some ELSA

Facebook groups to advertise on my behalf, and my placement supervisor was also able to post on the ELSA Network supervisor forum on my behalf. Broadening the dissemination of the information meant I had better recruitment, although still slow. I attribute this to ELSAs using their own time to participate, and as the research showed they are often using their own time over and above their job role to support the young people in their settings, I hope the reason for the slow recruitment was that many were too busy rather than them feeling uncomfortable to share their experiences.

In tandem with the ELSA recruitment, the ELSA line managers were asked to pass the information to parents of those young people who had received ELSA in support of their EBSNA. Unfortunately, no parents responded, and the line managers (often SENCOs of the school) sometimes expressed that they did not pass the information on as their relationship with the parents was strained or they felt they would not want to talk about their young person's attendance difficulties.

While I obviously very much respect their decision and feelings on the matter, it was frustrating to hear, as I would have liked to have the parent's perspective whether good or bad, and whereas the ELSAs I spoke to had very positive relationships with the parents and felt they worked well as a team, perhaps this was a skewed view of the overall picture. If I could repeat the research, I would not have relied on schools for the recruitment of parents and young people but recruited them through online forums or parent-carer groups. However, their interest and engagement in these groups may mean that their feelings regarding school and support for their young people may also be skewed. Having a large sample of interviewees may be the best way to get a good range of voices, and to get a better idea of the overall pattern.

As parents were acting as the gatekeepers for the young people who may have taken part in the research, but there were no parent responses, there was never any chance for there to be any young people consent to take part. I was disappointed not to be able to include this group in this research study as this would have enhanced the understanding of the support that was provided to them by hearing experiences directly from them.

Overall, therefore, the number of participant groups was decreased from three to one. It is acknowledged that it is a limitation of this study is that it only includes experiences of ELSAs rather than including the voice of the young people who have received ELSA and their parents, especially as they are groups with whom ELSA research is rarely carried out. The YP voice would have been especially valuable in assessing the impact of the intervention directly rather than relying on adult perceptions of the intervention.

Once the study was reduced down to one group, it was decided that the design would focus on asking participants for their positive experiences of using ELSA to support young people experiencing EBSNA. This was chosen because the study was exploratory in nature and in the knowledge that there would only be a small number of participants I wanted to ensure some homogeneity of responses in the interview data in order to be able to identify common factors when generating themes. It is acknowledged that this may have the potential to have given an overly positive impression of the ELSA intervention and the way it is being used to support this cohort. Although participants were recruited with this positive view of using ELSA, the interview questions themselves did not ask specifically about the positives but were more open for ELSAs to share their general experiences. They may have felt that negative experiences and potential barriers were not the focus and so not shared these with me, but I feel that as the ELSAs openly spoke about the pressures they perceived themselves to be under, they may also have felt able to share some of the more negative aspects if those were particularly salient. If there had been fewer issues with recruitment then it may have been possible to recruit participants with all experiences in using ELSA with young people experiencing EBSNA, and to have had sufficient data to explore the difficulties and barriers as well as facilitators and the positive outcomes.

I hoped that in the longer term, the contribution of the research would be that the themes generated from the data would be of use to other ELSAs and the EP services training and supervising them, and so I persevered in recruitment of ELSAs with positive experiences in order to share what their practice looked like when things went well. Although it is acknowledged that the ELSA intervention is highly individualised for each child, I was hoping to highlight commonalities that could theoretically be used towards positive outcomes.

3.2.6 Data Collection

Once an ELSA had responded to volunteer to take part, I ensured they had read the information sheet and returned the consent form. Following this a day and time to meet was arranged. I was very nervous before all the interviews, due to a combination of worry that the participant would not join the online meeting, or that there would be technical difficulties and the interview would not record and I would be left having wasted their time. I was very aware that the ELSAs were using their own time to meet with me, and so I wanted to make sure that I got the most out of the interview and that they did not feel it had not been worth them using that time.

On the day of each interview I confirmed with them again that they had read the information sheet and that they understood the focus of our conversation, as well as confirming whether they wanted the interview to be audio and visual, or only audio. I made sure that they understood the visual was just to enable easier transcription checking and that once the transcriptions had been checked by myself and by them, that the videos would be deleted and they would be anonymised by being assigned a number. We also discussed having a focus child or young person in mind, but for them to be mindful of not using their name as we had not got consent from the parent to discuss them specifically. All ELSAs consented to video and audio recordings.

Following the first interview I felt overwhelmed at the level of work this ELSA was putting in on behalf of her student, and what a huge emotional toll it was taking on her. I recall wondering if the other interviews would follow in the same way, or if she was the exception rather than the rule. It made me excited to hear more experiences, and to keep holding interviews and collecting data. Even in that first interview it confirmed for me what an amazing job that ELSAs do, even if not all to the same level as this ELSA, and how valuable the intervention and the people running it are to school settings and the young people they are supporting. It confirmed that I wanted to find out more and see where the experiences would lead.

As the interviews progressed, I became worried that the pace of responses was slow and after three interviews the responses stopped altogether which is when I made amendments to the recruitment strategy by recruiting via line managers and

in broadening the search to across the whole of the UK rather than just focusing on one region. In hindsight it was a mistake to have curtailed the recruitment in the first place, but I was over optimistic regarding how many responses I would have from one region. I know from working in this region that the ELSA intervention is hugely popular and that there are hundreds of ELSAs, so I mistakenly thought that this would enable me to recruit a big enough sample. According to marketing data (Intuit Mailchimp, 2025) only approximately 3% of education marketing emails get clicked through, and so I should have started with more LAs from the beginning. On reflection I think I was concerned that I would have too many responses and not be able to make time to hear all the participants, plus I was hoping to also have two more groups and so I wanted to have time and space for their voices too. In reality it meant a slower recruitment of ELSAs and ending up without a second and third group anyway. This was an important learning experience that I can take forward into future research projects.

I was concerned that as there was a large gap in time between the first group of three ELSAs interviewed and then the second group of four ELSAs when recruitment resumed, that my style of interviewing may have changed as I already had the past knowledge of what the first set of ELSAs had shared. I was wary of leading the second group into certain descriptions or avenues of thought and so ensured I kept the questioning as similar as possible (using the question list) and only broadened the questions out when I felt they had already opened the discussion into a particular area. I was always going to have an impact on the interview process but I wanted to ensure I was aware of “how” I was having an influence (Braun & Clarke, 2021) and keep this consideration throughout the interview processes.

3.2.7 Data Analysis

The analysis process was heavily guided by Braun and Clarke’s thematic analysis practical guide (Braun & Clarke, 2021) as this was a methodology that I was not confident with. I read through the book previously when I was thinking through methodologies, but once I made the decision to move away from realist evaluation, I took one chapter at a time and read each in more depth.

The first phase of analysis involved familiarisation with the data through immersion. For my data set this involved watching and listening to the recordings of

the interviews, firstly to check the transcripts for accuracy, but then multiple times following this to get a real sense of what the participants were sharing. I did not make familiarisation doodles, as suggested in the practical guide, but I jotted notes down; just a few linking words or thoughts that occurred to me connected to research papers I had read or connecting the different transcripts together. I started to see some of the more experienced ELSAs were very forthcoming in their views and I was relieved that they had not appeared to be nervous to share their views and did not appear to be affected by any perceived power differences between us, or my positioning as a researcher who may be “analysing” or judging their practice. A couple of the less experienced ELSAs did seem a little more tentative with what they shared to start with, but as we talked, they relaxed and I felt confident they were not holding back.

The next phase involved coding the data. I used the physical printed transcript to underline and write the codes on, but I also logged these into an Excel spreadsheet so that I was more able to see patterns across all the transcripts at the same time. Although this was time consuming, I also planned to print them all out individually at a later stage when I was generating themes so that I could see them grouped in space and so it felt like I would be supporting the later phases by working this way. I was concerned that I was not “doing it right” and that I was generating too many codes from the transcripts, which I discussed with my supervisor. We spoke about the worry of “doing it wrong” meaning I was coding a lot, but that with more experience I would feel more confident. We also discussed that at a later point it might be appropriate to collapse some of the codes down, but to persevere with working in the same way.

I was concerned as I coded that I was producing too many semantic codes, and not enough latent codes. I felt my contribution in terms of the research would be too descriptive and have very little use to EPs and ELSAs to use to support young people. Going through the codes several times helped me to see more of the links and look “more deeply” at what the participants were sharing and how they were using their language to frame their experiences. As there was no previous research around ELSA being used for EBSNA, the coding was more inductive and less deductive as I had no previous theory to call on. However, I had read around feelings of safety and belonging in school, and the reasons for triggering and perpetuating

EBSNA, so some of these links and patterns did start to form as the experiences the participants shared started to align with what I had previously read.

The next phase of generating themes or “identifying shared patterned meaning across the data set” (Braun & Clarke, 2021, p. 35) felt easy to move into as some of these patterns had mentally started to form. I printed out all the codes and taped them onto post-it notes so that I could organise them in space and begin to group them into candidate themes while having the opportunity to move them and change them. I was excited to be starting this process; however, it was something I actually found the most challenging. I revisited groupings and altered the themes several times, especially as there were groups of codes that felt too large and needed to be separated for example with the YP and ELSA relationships. I drew several mind maps of the themes as I had them, and how they connected to each other, with some themes staying the same over time, and others evolving in what the central concept was, and therefore how the codes linked around it.

Although I took breaks from the theme generation, I found I was still ruminating on it and would keep revisiting the wall of post-it notes and the mind maps. The fourth and fifth phases involved developing and reviewing themes and refining and defining the names of the themes. I considered that these phases and the fine tuning of the themes, especially the naming continued all through the sixth phase of writing up. As I was writing there was still some moving of the boundaries between themes, for example the “Above and Beyond ELSA” and the “Facilitating the Systems Around the YP” themes which had some overlap with each other, as well as Theme 1 “Building Trust” which had several incarnations. It was the one theme that I felt was still ill defined and in my writing I left it until last as I was still unhappy with what story it was telling and how I should define it. I gave it several different names, but it was not until I did some additional reading around therapeutic relationships that I felt I really understood what the theme meant, and I finally understood what the ELSAs had been sharing with me, and that I had a definition for it. It felt like a relief when it finally “fitted” and was the last piece of the puzzle of what I was trying to express. This very much reflects how much of my own interpretation and my ideas as the researcher, were involved in the process of generating the themes.

I had not anticipated that the process was going to feel as challenging as it did, or that I was going to feel so strongly that I was trying to mould and shape something while being respectful of the data I had and not just telling the story I wanted to tell. It felt like a big responsibility to “get it right” even though there was no “right”. However, by the end of the writing I knew the transcripts of the participants so well that I felt confident that I had conveyed their perceptions of their experiences thoroughly and that the themes were generated with great thought and consideration, and that was what I set out to do.

3.3 Contribution to the field and implications for EP practice

3.3.1 Dissemination

The aim of research of this kind is not to make it generalisable as if from a positivist approach, but I hoped that I would be able to produce research that was impactful and have transferable elements where contexts were similar, for example with other ELSAs who are working with young people who are experiencing EBSNA, or for EPs who are supporting schools with young people in this position and supervising ELSAs who are working in this area. I will provide a summary of the research to the ELSAs who took part in the study as they all requested this on their consent forms. I would also like to share the outcomes of the research with ELSAs across the UK at the national ELSA conference if possible. It is known anecdotally that ELSAs are working with YP experiencing EBSNA but as to date there is no research looking into it more formally, I would like to share my findings with them. Hopefully this will validate their own experiences, and they can hear the ways the ELSAs I spoke to have been able to support these young people, in the hopes they might be able to do the same or take confidence in what they are already doing. I would also like to be able to share the research with SENCOs who are often required to choose evidence-based interventions to support their students’ needs but do not often have access to peer-reviewed journals to read about them.

As shared in the previous chapter, I would like for EPs to be able to extend both the training and the supervision available for ELSAs who are already working with these students or are preparing to in the future. This research has shown the additional responsibilities these ELSAs take on and extended timeframe that these ELSAs are working in and so I would like to share my research not only within my

own educational psychology service but also to wider EP services who support ELSAs, to have EBSNA specific training modules and to provide specialist supervision. This could be completed via continued professional development for ELSA trainers and supervisors, or via published research through journals such as *Educational Psychology in Practice* (EPiP) or *Pastoral Care in Education* which is a more international journal focused on children's emotional health and wellbeing and often includes evaluation of school-based interventions.

Currently ELSA is not used internationally as Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) interventions tend to be either curriculum based (in Finland and the Netherlands for example) or they tend to be whole class or whole school strategies (like "Second Step" in the USA or "You Can Do It!" in Australia) and delivered mostly by teaching staff, as a manualised programme of activities rather than an individualised approach. However, most of the core objectives and topics covered are aligned with the ELSA model and so I think ELSA would make a feasible alternative to these approaches in other countries to support their young people with attendance difficulties and EBSNA, as long as there was sufficient training and supervision available.

3.3.2 Further research

There is an expectation for research to be high quality which is often linked to it being "evidence based" and therefore in the style of a positivist experimental design such as a randomised controlled trial whose large, homogenous group and strictly controlled environments are not well suited to school environments. Therefore EPs are better suited to working within more qualitative, practitioner led research from a practice based evidence perspective (Miller & Frederickson, 2006).

As stated previously, the original design of this research included young people who had received the ELSA intervention, although a limitation of this study was that I was unable to fulfil this part of the research on this occasion. Therefore, I consider it to be important that the voices of the young people who had been experiencing EBSNA and received the ELSA intervention are heard, and that their experiences inform the way ELSAs are taught by EPs in future. It would also be beneficial to have some quantitative data alongside the qualitative, in order to understand the measurable impact of ELSA on the young people in terms of

attendance data as well as differences in their wellbeing measures (Glatzer & Gulyas, 2014), feelings of safety and of belonging etc.

This research did not quantify in any way the extent of the school avoidance shown by the young people who had been referred to the ELSAs in this study. In speaking with the ELSAs it became apparent that the majority were more long-term, entrenched cases. It is known that EBSNA can be considered a spectrum of needs from occasional non-attendance to full non-attendance (Holder, 2025) as shown by Figure 4, and so future researchers may find it beneficial to understand the main needs and level of non-attendance shown by young people in order to understand if ELSA is beneficial to all young people or more specific to those with more complex needs and long term absence.

Future researchers may be interested to extend this research by looking at if ELSA could be used as early intervention at times of transition (Yr 6 to Yr 7, Yr 11 to post 16) for those students who may have risk factors that may mean the move may be challenging. For example, those pupils who may have already had difficulty coming into school during primary years, have had anxiety in the past or are already known to find change difficult, possibly due to past experiences or neurodiversity.

As seen by this research, ELSAs are working at the intersection of multiple systems that involve each young person, and so more research into how this role could be supported by their line managers in school, or by the EPs that supervise them would be beneficial. The frameworks given by Melvin and by Bodycote (Bodycote, 2022; Melvin et al., 2019) could be used to support their work within and between these systems, helping them to keep track of support that is in place, and any possible difficulties or trigger points for the young person.

The present study could just be the starting point for many avenues of exploration in this topic alone, with EBSNA research providing a huge opportunity for research in multiple areas such as risk factors, early intervention, EBSNA and neurodiversity and many others that will inform practice for EPs and school staff as well as supporting parents.

3.3.3 Areas of personal development

Although I had past experience of research, it was a very different form and scale to this study and employed different methodology, coming from a different ontological and epistemological position. In terms of research skills, I feel I have had to learn how to be more flexible and to be able to adapt when the study was not progressing the way I originally planned, and I have had to work on my reflexive skills and feeling comfortable with my impact on the research itself which did not come very naturally to me. I feel I have grown in confidence in qualitative research and although the final study does not look the same as my initial plan, I am proud of overcoming the challenges and learning new skills in order to produce a good quality piece of research that will be informative and valuable for other researchers, ELSAs and EPs.

There were so many possible avenues to this research area that I do not see this being the end of the story, but just the beginning of exploring how schools and EPs can support these young people who are finding attending school such a huge barrier to their education. While I foresee carrying out research at the same time as working as a qualified EP may be a challenge, my passion in keeping that part of being a practitioner psychologist going, being curious, continuing learning and understanding “why” and “how” will never diminish, and will inform my professional practice accordingly.

3.4 Conclusion

This chapter is a reflective account of my research journey. I hope sharing it enables other researchers to understand my decision-making processes and to appreciate how the research can inform current and future practice for EPs, ELSAs and school staff working with young people finding attending school a barrier to their education.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Recruitment flyer and participant information sheet



Research Participants Needed!!

Who am I?

My name is Natasha Mead and I am a Year 3 Trainee Educational Psychologist at the University of East Anglia (UEA).



What is the research about?

Emotional Literacy Support Assistants (ELSAs) regularly describe their work with children and young people who are (or have been) experiencing Emotional Based School Non-Attendance (EBSNA). This could be anything from supporting a reluctant child into school in the morning to virtual sessions with a young person not attending at all.

However, there is no research on the impact of ELSA on EBSNA.

Can I take part? What do I have to do?

If you are a registered ELSA who has worked with, or is currently working with, a young person experiencing EBSNA then I'd love to speak to you!

Participation will involve a 45min-1hr long interview (online via MS Teams) to explore your experiences using ELSA to support the young person.

How do I sign up?

If you are interested to take part, or would like further information, please email me:

n.mead@uea.ac.uk



Ethics Application Number: 2425-1333

Mrs Natasha Mead
Trainee Educational Psychologist

26th Sept 2025

Faculty of Social Sciences
School of Education and Lifelong Learning

University of East Anglia
Norwich Research Park
Norwich NR4 7TJ
United Kingdom

Email: natasha.mead@uea.ac.uk

How has the Emotional Literacy Support Assistant (ELSA) intervention supported young people's attendance at school following a period of Emotional Based School Non-Attendance (EBSNA)?

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

(1) What is this study about?

You are invited to take part in a research study about Emotional Based School Non-Attendance (EBSNA), an overarching term for reduced or total non-attendance of school, or lessons, by a child or young person (CYP). Severe absences have been increasing post-pandemic with EBSNA playing a part in this. Multiple factors contribute to non-attendance which can be difficult for schools and professionals to understand.

The research study will be interested to find out how the Emotional Literacy Support Assistant (ELSA) intervention has been used with children and young people who have experienced periods of EBSNA and there has been a positive outcome. This does not have to be full attendance, but just an improvement from previous attendance.

Why am I being asked to take part?

You have been invited to participate in this study because you have been working as an ELSA and supporting children and young people who have been identified as having difficulty with attendance due to Emotional Based School Non-Attendance.

This Participant Information Sheet tells you about the research study. Knowing what is involved will help you decide if you want to take part in the study. Please read this sheet carefully and ask questions about anything that you don't understand or want to know more about.

Participation in this research study is voluntary. By giving consent to take part in this study you are telling us that you:

- ✓ Understand what you have read.
- ✓ Agree to take part in the research study as outlined below.
- ✓ Agree to the use of your personal information as described.
- ✓ You have received a copy of this Participant Information Sheet to keep.

(2) Who is running the study?

The study is being carried out by the following researcher(s): Mrs Natasha Mead.

This will take place under the supervision of Dr Alistair James (,).

Both researcher and supervisor are based in the School of Education and Lifelong Learning at the University of East Anglia. The researcher currently works as a Trainee Educational Psychologist within a Local Authority Educational Psychology Service in the East of England. However they will be carrying out this research as part of their Doctoral training course and not as part of any Local Authority.

(3) What will the study involve for me?

If you choose to take part you will be asked to join the researcher on a Teams call to discuss how you have worked with children and young people in your capacity as an ELSA to support their attendance when they were experiencing Emotional Based School Non-Attendance.

Interviews will be approximately 45 minutes to an hour long, and will involve discussing what work you did in your sessions, what the outcomes were, what you feel it was about attending ELSA sessions that influenced that outcome and what you might do differently in the future.

An audio/video recording will be taken.

You will have the opportunity to review the transcript of the interview you took part in, prior to publication. Some time will also be needed for this if it is something you choose.

(4) How much of my time will the study take?

The interview is a one off interview that is expected to take approximately 45 minutes.

(5) Do I have to be in the study? Can I withdraw from the study once I have started?

Being in this study is completely voluntary and you do not have to take part.

Your decision whether to participate will not affect your current or future relationship with the researchers or anyone else at the University of East Anglia (or or any East of England Educational Psychology Service located with a Local Authority.) now or in the future.

If you decide to take part in the study, you can withdraw your consent up to the point that your data is fully anonymised. You can do this by telling the researcher that you no longer wish to take part. Following this it is no longer possible to withdraw your data.

(6) What are the consequences if I withdraw from the study?

You are free to stop the interview at any time. Unless you say that you want us to keep them, any recordings will be erased and the information you have provided will not be included in the study results. You may also refuse to answer any questions that you do not wish to answer during the interview. If you decide at a later time to withdraw from the study your information will be removed from our records and will not be included in any results, up to the point where the transcripts have been anonymised.

(7) Are there any risks or costs associated with being in the study?

As you may be discussing an emotive topic, this may bring up some distressing feelings. If you feel you need further support with this please contact the Educational Psychologist responsible for your ELSA supervision. Further support may also be available from within school via your line manager.

(8) Are there any benefits associated with being in the study?

By taking part in this research you will be supporting Educational Psychologists to advise schools about the best ways to support children and young people who are experiencing Emotional Based School Non-Attendance.

We will also be able to give ELSAs like yourself better resources and supervision around supporting these children in ways that are more likely help them.

In turn this will give the best support possible to the children who are finding attendance difficult for emotional based reasons.

In the longer term we hope to be able to share this vital knowledge with schools and Local Authorities across the country, as well as via conferences and peer reviewed journal articles so that more people are aware of the best way to support children experiencing Emotional Based School Non-Attendance in the future.

(9) What will happen to information provided by me and data collected during the study?

If you decide to take part your name and email address will be kept securely in order to stay in contact and provide you with the opportunity to check the interview transcript later, should you want to, and provide you with a summary of the findings if requested.

If you consent, the video and audio of the interview will be recorded and kept only as long as needed by the researcher to complete the transcription of the interview. Once this is complete, you will have the opportunity to check the transcript with the researcher, at which point the transcription will be anonymised, and then the video/audio will be deleted. If you prefer not to have your camera on, the video will still record, but only the blank screen.

Once the transcripts have been anonymised there will be no opportunity to withdraw your data from the study. Only the researcher will have access to the data.

Themes, outcomes and conclusions drawn from the data will be used to inform the researcher's Doctoral thesis and may also be shared at conferences and may be included in peer reviewed journal articles.

Electronic data will be kept in a secure password protected file on the UEA Onedrive of the researcher. Data will not be deposited in a repository or used for any other research projects.

Your personal data and information will only be used as outlined in this Participant Information Sheet, unless you consent otherwise. Data management will follow the Data Protection Act 2018 (DPA 2018) and UK General Data Protection Regulation (UK GDPR), and the University of East Anglia's [Research Data Management Policy](#).

The information you provide will be stored securely and your identity will be kept strictly confidential, except as required by law. Study findings may be published and may also be used for other scholarly and educational purposes such as in teaching, but you will not be identified if you decide to participate in this study. The data will be kept for at least 10 years beyond the last date the data were used. The study findings may be deposited in a repository to allow it to facilitate its reuse. The deposited data will not include your name or any identifiable information about you.

(10) What if I would like further information about the study?

When you have read this information, Mrs Natasha Mead (n.mead@uea.ac.uk, \$ Null Qualifier) will be available to discuss it with you further and answer any questions you may have.

(11) Will I be told the results of the study?

You have a right to receive feedback about the overall results of this study.

You can tell us that you wish to receive feedback by ticking the relevant box on the consent form to receive feedback once the study is complete.

This feedback will be in the form of a short summary of the findings.

This feedback will be provided at the end of the study.

(12) What if I have a complaint or any concerns about the study?

If there is a problem please let me know. You can contact me via the University of East Anglia at the following address:

Mrs Natasha Mead
School of Education and Lifelong Learning
University of East Anglia
NORWICH NR4 7TJ
n.mead@uea.ac.uk

If you are concerned about the way this study is being conducted or you wish to make a complaint to someone independent from the study, please contact the Head of School of Education and Lifelong Learning: Professor Yann Lebeau (Y.Lebeau@uea.ac.uk, \$ Null Qualifier).

(13) How do I know that this study has been approved to take place?

To protect your safety, rights, wellbeing and dignity, all research in the University of East Anglia is reviewed by a Research Ethics Body. This research was approved by the EDU S-REC (School of Education and Lifelong Learning Research Ethics Subcommittee).

(14) What is the general data protection information I need to be informed about?

According to data protection legislation, we are required to inform you that the legal basis for processing your data as listed in Article 6(1) of the UK GDPR is because this allows us to process personal data when it is necessary to perform our public tasks as a University.

In addition to the specific information provided above about why your personal data is required and how it will be used, there is also some general information which needs to be provided for you:

- The data controller is the University of East Anglia.
- For further information, you can contact the University's Data Protection Officer at dataprotection@uea.ac.uk
- You can also find out more about your data protection rights at the [Information Commissioner's Office \(ICO\)](#).
- If you are unhappy with how your personal data has been used, please contact the University's Data Protection Officer at dataprotection@uea.ac.uk in the first instance.

(15) OK, I want to take part – what do I do next?

You need to fill in one copy of the consent form and email it back to the researcher. Please keep the letter, information sheet and the second copy of the consent form for your information.

Please inform your ELSA line manager of your intention to take part in the research.

(16) Further information

This information was last updated on 26th Sept 2025.

If there are changes to the information provided, you will be notified by email, as soon as possible.

This information sheet is for you to keep

Appendix 2: Participant consent form

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM (First Copy to Researcher)

I, [PRINT NAME], **am** willing to participate in this research study.

In giving my consent I state that:

- I understand the purpose of the study, what I will be asked to do, and any risks/benefits involved.
- I have read the Participant Information Sheet, which I may keep, for my records, and have been able to discuss my involvement in the study with the researchers if I wished to do so.
- The researchers have answered any questions that I had about the study and I am happy with the answers.
- I have informed my ELSA line manager of my intention to take part in the research.
- I understand that being in this study is completely voluntary and I do not have to take part. My decision whether to be in the study will not affect my relationship with the researchers or anyone else at the University of East Anglia (or or any East of England Educational Psychology Service located with a Local Authority.) now or in the future.
- I understand that I may stop the interview at any time if I do not wish to continue, and that unless I indicate otherwise any recordings will then be erased and the information provided will not be included in the study results. I also understand that I may refuse to answer any questions I don't wish to answer.
- I understand that the results of this study will be used in the way described in the information sheet.
- I understand that personal information about me that is collected over the course of this project will be stored securely and will only be used for purposes that I have agreed to. I understand that information about me will only be told to others with my permission, except as required by law.

I consent to:

.....
Date

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM (Second Copy to Participant)

I, [PRINT NAME], **am** willing to participate in this research study.

In giving my consent I state that:

- I understand the purpose of the study, what I will be asked to do, and any risks/benefits involved.
- I have read the Participant Information Sheet, which I may keep, for my records, and have been able to discuss my involvement in the study with the researchers if I wished to do so.
- The researchers have answered any questions that I had about the study and I am happy with the answers.
- I have informed my ELSA line manager of my intention to take part in the research.
- I understand that being in this study is completely voluntary and I do not have to take part. My decision whether to be in the study will not affect my relationship with the researchers or anyone else at the University of East Anglia (or or any East of England Educational Psychology Service located with a Local Authority.) now or in the future.
- I understand that I may stop the interview at any time if I do not wish to continue, and that unless I indicate otherwise any recordings will then be erased and the information provided will not be included in the study results. I also understand that I may refuse to answer any questions I don't wish to answer.
- I understand that the results of this study will be used in the way described in the information sheet.
- I understand that personal information about me that is collected over the course of this project will be stored securely and will only be used for purposes that I have agreed to. I understand that information about me will only be told to others with my permission, except as required by law.

I consent to:

Audio-recording

YES ☐ NO ☐

Appendix 3: Semi structured interview questions and participant debrief

Semi-structured interview plan and question starters – these are examples of questions and can be elaborated on or extended depending on the conversation

ELSA interviews

Before the interview begins, there will be a reiteration of the purpose of the study and the aim of the interview. The researcher will also re-check they have read the information sheet, that they still consent to take part and ensure they are aware that they can withdraw until the point that the data is analysed. They will be reminded that afterwards they can contact the researcher with any questions or extra comments and will get a research update once the research is complete if they would like to know more.

First: Collection of information:

- Gender identified as
- How long have you been an ELSA?
- How much time per week do you have for ELSA?
- Do you also have other responsibilities in school (i.e as a TA, SENCO, pastoral lead etc?)
- Is your school a
Primary/Secondary/Lower/Middle/Upper/Special/Alternative provision?
– please do not use the name.

REMINDER: ELSAs should try not use the names of children they have worked with while talking about their work in the interview. If a name is revealed by accident it will be redacted in the transcript.

Proposed questions:

- I understand that you have worked with a CYP who has been experiencing attendance difficulties, or what we might call Emotional Based School Non-Attendance, can you tell me more about that?
What kind of difficulties was the child having?
What was the pattern of attendance?
Did they have any diagnosis/EHCP?

- What did you work on in your sessions with the CYP? What goals did you set? Were these created with the child/parents/school staff?
- What were the outcomes of your work with them?
Were the changes only at school/at home?
Was anything from sessions shared with parents/carers?
- Why do you think this was the outcome?
- What was it about attending ELSA sessions that influenced that outcome?
Was there any other support in place? What role did that have?
- Would you have done anything differently? If so, what do you think would have been the outcome if you had?

Remind them that if they would like to read a transcript, to let the researcher know so that they can provide it once transcription is complete.

Participant Debrief Checklist

- Wellbeing check-in following interview
- Anything additional to share?
- Any questions?
- Reminder that if they want to review transcript, researcher will be in contact
- Reminder that a research summary will be shared when data has been analysed
- Is there anything we have discussed that you would like me to share with your line manager/a colleague/your link EP/other source of support?
- Check that participant has researcher's contact details in case of questions and have the details of the UEA Research Ethics committee should they wish to raise any issues

Participants will be provided with a verbal debrief, checking that they are ok at the end of the interview and verbally checking if there is anything else they want to say or share and if they have any questions about the process. They will be reminded that if they stated they would like to read the transcript of their interview, that the researcher will be in contact with them once the transcripts are checked. Once the data has been analysed the researcher will share a summary with them (developmentally appropriate language for the CYP). Finally the researcher will check with the participant if there is anything they would like the researcher to share

with the school (or the parent for the CYP) and that they can have the conversation with headteacher or parent as necessary.

Appendix 4: Ethical approval documentation (original ethics submission plus amendments)

Ethics ETH2425-1333 : Mrs Natasha Mead

Date Created	17 Jan 2025
Date Submitted	17 Feb 2025
Date of last resubmission	15 Apr 2025
Date forwarded to	16 Apr 2025 committee
Researcher	Mrs Natasha Mead
Category	PGR
Supervisor	Dr Alistair James
Faculty	Faculty of Social Sciences
Current status	Approved after amendments made

Ethics application

Applicant and research team

Principal Applicant

Name of Principal Applicant Mrs
Natasha Mead
UEA account dvp23apu@uea.ac.uk
School/Department
School of Education and Lifelong Learning
Category
PGR

Primary Supervisor

Name of Primary Supervisor [Dr
Alistair James](#)

Primary Supervisor's school/department
School of Education and Lifelong Learning

Project details

Project title

How has the Emotional Literacy Support Assistant (ELSA) intervention supported young people's attendance at school following a period of Emotional Based School Non-Attendance (EBSNA)? Using thematic analysis within a realist evaluation framework to understand the contexts and mechanisms needed for positive outcomes.

Project start date

22 Apr 2025

Project end date

31 Jul 2026

Describe the scope and aims of the project in language understandable by a non-technical audience. Include any other relevant background which will allow the reviewers to contextualise the research.

Pre 2020 Covid pandemic, persistent (>10% school missed) and severe absence (> 50% school missed) was increasing, with persistent absence staying at approximately double the pre-pandemic rate three years later (Department for Education, 2023). Although persistent absence figures have decreased for the 23/24 academic year, severe absences have continued to increase across all school types both in the UK and globally (UNESCO, 2020).

Emotional Based School Non-Attendance (EBSNA), is an overarching term for reduced or total nonattendance of school, or lessons, by a child or young person (CYP). We know that children who experience EBSNA are a heterogeneous group, so what works to support one CYP to attend school may not work for another, as their triggering and perpetuating reasons may differ.

The proposed research study is interested in an intervention that already exists in schools and works on many of the areas highlighted in previous research as difficulties for CYP with EBSNA (anxiety, friendships, bullying, self-esteem).

Emotional Literacy Support Assistants (ELSAs) have 6 days training from the Educational Psychology service, and ongoing half termly supervision. They work with each referred child for around 6-8 weeks on psychological approaches to support anxiety, emotional literacy, self-regulation, self-esteem, social skills, loss and bereavement.

There is currently no peer reviewed research on the use of ELSA to support EBSNA, although anecdotal evidence shows this does happen in schools.

To date ELSA research is mostly carried out with ELSAs, teachers and EPs; less research includes the CYP voice. Less research includes parent views, which legislation values in decisions pertaining to educational provision for their children (Home Office, 2014).

This research proposes to interview CYP who have experienced EBSNA (and their parents) and the ELSA practitioners who have worked with them, to understand the contexts and mechanisms of the intervention and what the outcomes have been.

Provide a brief explanation of the research design (e.g. interview, experimental, observational, survey), questions, methodology, and data gathered/analysis. If relevant, include what the participants will be expected to do/experience.

The aim will be to recruit a purposive sample of between 4-8 participants from each group (ELSAs who have supported CYP with experience of EBSNA, CYP in Year 5 and above; age 9 upwards, who have experienced EBSNA and received ELSA support for this, and parents of these young people) to take part in semi-structured interviews with the researcher. Each interview will last approximately 45 mins (for ELSAs) and approximately 30 mins (for CYP and parents). Interviews will be carried out via Microsoft Teams, audio and video recorded (with consent) and transcribed (using Microsoft Teams transcription software) with the researcher checking transcriptions for accuracy.

The data will be collected in two phases (Phase 1: ELSAs, Phase 2: Parents and CYP). This will allow analysis via thematic analysis in a realist evaluation framework.

A realist evaluation is appropriate for this study as ELSA is an intervention frequently used in schools and anecdotally used to support children experiencing difficulties with EBSNA. However, currently there is no research to show what the outcomes are, or what mechanisms and specific contexts are needed for positive outcomes. Therefore, using thematic analysis but in the structure of the Contexts, Mechanisms and Outcomes from realist evaluation methodology will allow the researcher to see links between them more clearly. This would be most appropriate at this exploratory stage of the research.

Proposed main research question:

1. How has ELSA supported young people's attendance at school following a period of EBSNA?

Using the proposed methodology, the following questions should also be answered:

2. What were the outcomes on attendance from ELSAs working with CYP?

3. What were the mechanisms that are proposed to have affected these outcomes when ELSAs work with YP experiencing EBSNA?

4. What are the contexts where these mechanisms and outcomes occur when ELSAs work with YP experiencing EBSNA?

Detail how any adverse events arising in the course of the project will be reported in a timely manner.

The principal applicant will report any adverse event in Ethics Monitor and make their research supervisor aware of the adverse event so that they can deal with the event and any surrounding circumstances.

The Chair and Support Staff of the S-REC that gave the original ethics approval, the Primary Supervisor and UEA's Research Integrity Manager will be notified by email of the reporting of an adverse event via logging in Ethics Monitor. The EDU Head of School, Professor Yann Lebeau, will also be notified.

Will you also be applying for Health Research Authority approval (HRA)?

No

Indicate if you are applying for approval for an experiment to be conducted in the School of Economics' Laboratory for Economic and Decision Research (LEDR).

No

Is the project?: none of
the options listed

Does the project have external funding administered through the University's Research and Innovation Services (RIN)? No

Will the research take place outside of the UK?

No

Will any part of the project be carried out under the auspices of an external organisation, or involve collaboration between institutions?

No

Do you require or have you already gained approval from an ethics review body external to UEA?

No

Does this new project relate to a project which already has ethics approval from UEA?

No

Research categories

Will the project include primary data collection involving human participants?

Yes

Will the project use secondary data involving human participants?

No

Will the project involve the use of live animals?

No

Will the project have the potential to affect the environment?

No

Will the project have the potential to affect culturally valuable, significant or sensitive objects or practices?

No

Will the project involve security sensitive research?

No

Will the project involve a generative Artificial Intelligence (AI) tool?

No

Human participants - selection and recruitment

How many Participant Groups are there who will receive tailored participant information?:

Three

Name of Participant Group 1.

Emotional Literacy Support Assistants (ELSAs)

Name of Participant Group 2, if applicable.

Parents

Name of Participant Group 3, if applicable.

Children and young people

How will the participants be selected/recruited?

Participants for this study will be a purposive sample of those involved in ELSA sessions with CYP who have experienced EBSNA. There will be three participant groups:

- 1) ELSAs who have delivered ELSA sessions to CYP who have experienced EBSNA, with a positive outcome (not necessarily a full return to school, but a positive change from the previous situation)
- 2) CYP who received those sessions, restricted to those in Year 5 and above, to maximise their ability to reflect on their experiences.
- 3) Parents of these CYP

The aim is to recruit 4 - 8 participants from each group.

A courtesy email to the Principal Educational Psychologist of the Local Authority will be sent, making them aware their EPs will be contacted regarding a research project concerning ELSA and EBSNA. Following this, Educational Psychologists acting as ELSA coordinators will be contacted (email addresses freely available via the ELSA Network website) to ask for them to send an invitation to participate to Headteachers of schools where they supervise ELSA.

Headteachers of these schools will be given information about the study and asked to pass the participant information sheet and consent form to their ELSAs and to parents whose children have received ELSA to support EBSNA experiences. They are the gatekeepers through which study information is distributed so they have awareness of the study and so there is no implicit feeling of obligation to participate by ELSAs or families. This also ensures if there are any safeguarding issues, the researcher has a school contact, likely to be the Designated Safeguarding Lead.

If ELSAs or parents are interested to take part they can return the consent form to the researcher.

If parents are willing for their child to take part, extra information and consent form is provided for parents and also for their children.

How and when will participants receive this recruitment material?

Once the ethics application has been approved, emails will be sent to the LA Principal Educational Psychologist and simultaneously to the EPs acting as ELSA Coordinators in the East of England. Emails can be gathered from the ELSA Network website (freely available).

The ELSA coordinators will be emailed explaining the study and asking them to send an invitation to participate to the Headteachers of schools where they supervise ELSAs. The Headteachers will be asked to pass the information on to the ELSAs in their school who have experience of supporting students with EBSNA and to the parents of these students. There will be an additional section on the parent information sheet that they can choose to complete if they consent for their child to also take part, as well as the CYP information and their own consent form to complete and return to the researcher.

There will be 2 versions of the invitation letter, one for Key Stage 2 children and one for Key Stage 3 and 4 children as well as a developmentally appropriate information letter and consent form.

Recruitment of ELSAs and parents would ideally start from April/May 2025. The interviews with the ELSAs would be carried out first (approximately May-end July 2025), and then the parent and young people's interviews would be carried out second (from Sept to end Oct 2025).

In terms of UEA participants only, will you be advertising the opportunity to take part in this project to?:

None of the above (i.e. UEA's Student Insight Review Group (SIRG) does not need to be informed)

What are the characteristics of the participants?

Group 1: ELSAs - these will be qualified ELSAs who have worked in school (or via home visits or online) in their ELSA capacity to support children and young people who have experienced Emotional Based School Non-Attendance (EBSNA) and feel there has been a positive outcome from their involvement. A group of between 4 and 8 ELSAs will be recruited from across the East of England.

Group 2: Parents - these will be a group of parents whose children/young people (Year 5 and above) have received ELSA sessions in order to support Emotional Based School Non-Attendance, and feel there has been a positive outcome. A group of between 4 and 8 parents will be recruited from across the East of England via their ELSAs.

Group 3 - Children and young people - these will be a group of children and young people (in Year 5 or above) who have experienced Emotional Based School Non-Attendance and have received ELSA sessions at school, at home or online to support them with this, and feel there has been a positive outcome. A group of between 4 and 8 children or young people will be recruited via their ELSAs and with consent of their parents as they are under 16 years old.

All demographic information (outlined in interview schedule) will be gathered as part of the interview and saved as part of the interview transcript.

Will the project require the cooperation of a gatekeeper for initial access to the individuals/groups to be recruited? Yes

Who will be your gatekeeper for accessing participants?

Educational psychologists who supervise ELSAs in Local Authority Educational Psychology Services will be the gatekeepers for sending information about the study out to Headteachers of the schools where they supervise ELSAs.

Headteachers will then be the gatekeepers who send participant information sheets and consent forms to ELSAs who work in their schools and have experience of supporting children who have

experienced attendance difficulties due to EBSNA, as well as to the parents of the CYP they have supported.

How and when will a gatekeeper permission be obtained?

Educational psychologists who supervise ELSAs have their emails freely available on the ELSA Network website (<https://www.elsanetwork.org/area-directory/>)

They will be contacted as soon as ethical approval is obtained for dissemination to the Headteachers of schools where they supervise ELSAs (ideally between April 2025 and July 2025).

The Headteachers are then asked to be gatekeepers for the ELSAs working in their schools and the parents of the CYP who have been supported by ELSA for EBSNA reasons. They will be asked to pass on the invite and participant information and consent form to both ELSAs and to parents between April 2025 and October 2025.

Parents are then asked to be gatekeepers for their children. If parents' consent for their CYP to participate they will pass on the participant information and consent form to their CYP. This will also take place ideally between July 2025 and October 2025, but up to Dec 2025.

Provide any relevant gatekeeper documentation (letters of invite, emails etc).

How will you record a gatekeeper's permission?

If gatekeepers reply to say they are happy to pass information on, copies of their emails will be kept securely on the researcher's UEA Onedrive and a log of their details will be kept on a password protected Microsoft Excel document on the researcher's UEA Onedrive in case contact is needed for safeguarding reasons. Once the project is complete, data will be stored in line with the UEA Information Classification and Data Management Policy.

Is there any sense in which participants might be 'obliged' to participate?

Yes

If yes, provide details.

Yes it is possible that that Headteachers may feel obligated to take part as they are being contacted by Educational Psychologists from their local authority that they may be relying on for link or statutory work. ELSAs may feel obligated to take part as they are being supervised by educational psychologists in their local authority.

Parents may feel obligated to take part as they are being contacted by their child's school

Headteacher and so they feel it would be detrimental to their relationship and possibly the support for their child if they don't participate.

Children may feel obligated to participate if their parents have asked them to, or as the research is connected to ELSA sessions at school, they may feel if they don't take part this support may stop.

What will you do to ensure participation is voluntary?

This will be mitigated by making it clear in the information provided that participation is entirely voluntary and there are no negative implications by participating or not, and hopefully positive feelings regarding participation in helping others in the future.

It will be outlined to Headteachers, ELSAs and parents that the researcher is working in their capacity as a student Trainee EP for UEA, not connected to the Local Authority, so their participation, or not, will not affect the relationship they have with the Local Authority, the EP service or with the school.

It will be reiterated to the CYP that there is no obligation to take part, even if their parent chooses to take part. They will be reminded that it does not affect any support they get at school from ELSAs or otherwise.

I am recruiting my participants from across the East of England to minimise conflict of interests with the Local Authority where I am training. I will hope to have had no prior knowledge of the children/young people/families who may have offered to take part. If this is the case I would have to check with the parents if they were happy to continue, and reiterate that my research is separate to my work in the Local Authority, and that it would have no bearing on how the Local Authority would engage with them in the future so they don't feel obliged to take part.

Will the project involve vulnerable groups?

Yes

If yes, explain the necessity of involving these individuals as research participants and what will be done to facilitate their participation, or the participation of people with physical disabilities.

To date ELSA research is mostly carried out with ELSAs, teachers and Educational Psychologists; less research includes the child and young person's voice rather than adult perceptions of the value of the intervention (Rogers & Kelly, 2024). Having the opportunity to give their views on educational matters that affect them is included in the SEND Code of Practice (Department for Education, 2015) and would be valuable when assessing the impact of the intervention from their point of view.

As participants are under the age of 16, they will be given separate, developmentally appropriate, information about the study and consent will be required from a parent or carer in addition to their own consent. Two versions of the invitation, one appropriate for Key Stage 2 children who may take part (Year 5 and 6) and one set for Key Stage 3 and 4 children will be provided for them.

Interviews will be shorter than for the adults, and be carried out online via Microsoft Teams, with interviews being video recorded (only with consent). Although Teams may be more difficult for the interviews with younger children, they will be able to be accompanied by a parent for support, although it is acknowledged their presence may affect their responses.

Will payment or any other incentive be made to any participant?

No

Include any other ethical considerations regarding participation.

Both parents and CYP will be consulted on if they consent to video recording of the interviews taking place. This is explicitly on the consent form, and will be confirmed verbally before recording would begin.

In order to record using Teams both video and audio have to be recorded, but parents and young people will be offered to turn their camera off. Once the audio recordings are transcribed and transcriptions checked, the videos can be deleted. In the interim they will be stored on the researcher's UEA Onedrive.

It will be made clear to all participants that they are able to withdraw during the interview process until the interviews are transcribed. After this they will have been anonymised and so it will not be possible to withdraw after this point as their data will not be able to be identified.

Parents and CYP will be signposted to relevant sources for support for themselves and CYP in regards to EBSNA and mental health support for any ongoing anxiety needs.

All participation groups will be offered the opportunity to see their transcripts before the data is anonymised and before the video/audio is deleted, to ensure they are satisfied it is a true representation of what was said during the interview. If the CYP would like to read through their transcripts with the researcher that will also be offered.

Any disclosures made during interviews of potential harm to the CYP themselves, to others, or putting themselves in danger will be referred through safeguarding processes via the Headteacher/Designated Safeguarding Lead at their school, and the appropriate processes followed according to school policy. If further issues or anxieties are raised during the interviews (regarding general wellbeing) these can be flagged to the Headteacher who can investigate further ongoing support for the young person in school.

Human participants - consent options

By which method(s) will consent to participate in the research be obtained?:

Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form

Human participants - information and consent

Participant Information and Consent

Will opt out consent for participation in the research be used?

No

You can generate a Participant Information Text and Consent Form for this application by completing information in the Participant Information Text and Consent Form Generator tab. Alternatively you can upload your Participant Information Text and Participant Consent Form which you have already prepared. Confirm below:

Upload prepared Participant Information Text and Consent Form.

Upload the Participant Information Text and Consent Form.

Enter participant group number and name.

1 ELSAs

Enter participant group number and name.

3 Children and Young People (CYP)

Enter participant group number and name.

2 Parents

When will participants receive the participant information and consent request? Following ethics approval, invitation emails will be sent to ELSA coordinators, who will then disseminate to Heads of schools where they supervise ELSAs. If these Headteachers are willing to pass the information on to their ELSAs and to parents of CYP supported by ELSA for EBSNA reasons, this is the point where participants would receive information and consent form.

How will you record a participant's decision to take part in the research?

Participants name and email address will be saved into a password protected Microsoft Excel sheet on the researcher's UEA Onedrive, along with consent forms.

Once the project is complete data will be stored in line with the UEA Information Classification and Data Management Policy.

Parental/Guardian Information and Consent

Are you asking for parental/guardian (or other responsible person) consent?

Yes

You can generate a Parental/Guardian Information Text and Consent Form for this application by completing information in the Parental/Guardian Information Text and Consent Form Generator tab. Alternatively you can upload your Parental/Guardian (or Other Responsible Person) Information Text and Consent Form which you have already prepared. Confirm below: Upload prepared Parental/Guardian or Other Responsible Person Information Text and Consent Form.

Upload the Parental/Guardian (or other Responsible Person) Information Text and Consent Form.

Enter participant group number and name.

3 Child and young person

When will parents/guardians (or other responsible person) receive the parental/guardian (or other responsible person) information and consent request?

Headteachers will act as the gatekeepers to pass the participant information and consent form on to parents that fit the criteria and that they think may be interested to take part. Parents will then have the choice to consent: 1) Only for themselves, or 2) also for their child to take part. The CYP information and consent will also be included in their information, so that if their child also wishes to take part they can return all of the consent forms to the researcher.

How will you record a parent's/guardian's (or other responsible person's) decision regarding consent for their child (or other vulnerable person) to participate in the research? Parent's name, first name of the child, school contact and email address will be saved into a password

protected Microsoft Excel sheet on the researcher's UEA Onedrive. This is to make it easier to cross reference the child with the parent and school if there is a safeguarding concern, or further follow up with the school if needed for the CYP's wellbeing.

Consent forms will be saved into the researcher's UEA Onedrive. Once the project is complete data will be stored in line with the UEA Information Classification and Data Management Policy.

Human participants - method

Which data collection methods will be used in the research?:

Interview

If your research involves any of the methods (including Other) listed above, upload supporting materials.

How have your characteristics, or those of the participants influenced the design of the study or how the research is experienced by participants?

As a white, female, middle class researcher with an assumed level of education due to the course and thesis requirement, I will approach the interview process knowing that I bring those potential biases to the research.

As a Trainee EP with additional training in communication and with good interpersonal skills, I would hope to build some rapport with the ELSAs, parents and young people before the interviews in order to put them at ease. If the social, cultural or gender of the participants is different from my own I feel that it should not affect my ability to be able to listen to their voice and responses.

Hopefully the questions should not feel controversial or cause conflict between participants and researcher, however I will be open to the possibility that the topic area could evoke emotional responses. I will be ready to receive those from the participants, as I want to know and acknowledge their experiences.

I will ensure participants understand I am interviewing them in my capacity as a Trainee Educational Psychologist and not a Local Authority staff member, to minimise any degree of concern they may have in how their responses will be received within the area they live and work.

As I am recruiting my participants from across the East of England to minimise conflict of interests with the Local Authority where I am training. I will hope to have had no prior knowledge of the children/young people/families who may have offered to take part. If this is the case I would have to check with the parents if they were happy to continue, and reiterate that my research is separate to my work in the Local Authority, and that it would have no bearing on how the Local Authority would engage with them in the future.

Will the project involve transcripts? Yes

Select ONE option below: Transcription software

If yes provide details.

Transcription will be carried out by Microsoft Teams transcription software during the interview process. The transcriptions will be checked by hand by reviewing the videos (if available) or the audio recordings and correcting any mistakes made by the software.

Provide an explanation if you are not offering the participant the opportunity to review their transcripts.

Participants will be offered the chance to review their transcripts after transcript checking. Children and Young people will be offered the option to check it through with the researcher, or parent, or both.

Will you be capturing photographs or video footage (digital assets) of individuals taken for University business? No

Is this research using visual/vocal methods where respondents may be identified? Yes

If yes, confirm what safeguards are in place for participants who are vulnerable or underage.

Participants may have a parent/carer with them during the interview. It will be explained that once the transcription of the interview is complete and checked, the participant's interview data will be anonymised and they will thereafter be known only as CYP1, CYP2 etc.

As stated above they can decline to have video recorded (therefore they can turn their camera off), and if they do consent to video it will be deleted once transcription is complete. The transcripts will not be saved using an identifiable name but only a code (known only to the researcher) and saved securely on the researcher's UEA OneDrive. Once the project is complete data will be stored in line with the UEA Information Classification and Data Management Policy.

Will it be necessary for participants to take part in the study without their knowledge and consent at the time? No

Will deception or incomplete disclosure be used? No

Will the participants be debriefed after data collection?

Yes

If yes, how will they be debriefed and what information will be provided?

Participants will be provided with a verbal debrief, checking that they are ok at the end of the interview and verbally checking if there is anything else they want to say or share and if they have any questions about the process. They will be reminded that if they stated they would like to read the transcript of their interview, that the researcher will be in contact with them once the transcripts are checked. Once the data has been analysed the researcher will share a summary with them (developmentally appropriate language for the CYP). Finally the researcher will check with the participant if there is anything they would like the researcher to share with the school (or the parent for the CYP) and that they can have the conversation with headteacher or parent as necessary.

If yes, upload a copy of the debrief information.

Will substances be administered to the participants?

No

Will involvement in the project result in, or the risk of, discomfort, physical harm, psychological harm or intrusive procedures? Yes

If yes, provide details.

It is hoped that there will be no psychological harm to the participants from participation in the research study. However as there may be discussion of Emotional Based School Non-Attendance and the feelings and emotions arising from this, there is a possibility that participants, mostly the children/young people and/or their parents, may be upset by these discussions. Sensitivity to the manner of questioning will be needed.

Parents will also be provided with signposting to various services that might be able to support them further. These include The Anna Freud Centre (for EBSNA information) as well as the charities "Square Peg", "Not fine in school" and Anxiety UK.

CYP will be provided with signposting to the following services who may be able to support them further: Kooth and Young Minds (for young people's mental health support).

ELSAs may feel they need support from within school, and will be encouraged to find someone in school that they trust who they can speak to. The researcher will contact school on their behalf if they request additional support. ELSAs will be reminded to approach their Educational Psychologist for additional support in supervision if needed.

During interviews there will be the opportunity to have breaks if the parent/child/young person needs to either take some time out, or would like to stop altogether. It will be made clear that this is absolutely acceptable to do.

If families require more support from school, then I will be able to contact the ELSA from their school and /or the Headteacher and flag to them that this child/family may need additional support.

Will the project involve prolonged or repetitive testing?

No

Will the project involve potentially sensitive topics?

Yes

If yes, provide details.

Discussion of Emotional Based School Non-Attendance and possible feelings and emotions associated with this. See above for ways of supporting these potentially upsetting conversations. However the hope of the project is to uncover methods of support and positive outcomes for these students so hopefully these will also be conversations that produce good feelings, good outcomes and feelings of hope for the future.

As the research is looking for participants where there has been some positive outcome from the ELSA involvement it would be hoped that there is less ongoing vulnerability around the participants which would reduce potential sensitivity and risk of harm.

Positive outcomes can be anything from being able to enter school in the morning without support from a parent to returning to school after a period of non-attendance.

Will the project involve elite interviews?

No

Will the project involve any incitement to, encouragement of, or participation, in an illegal act (by participant or researcher)?

No

Will the research involve an investigation of people engaged in or supporting activities that compromise computer security or other activities that may normally be considered harmful or unlawful? No

Does the research involve members of the public in participatory research where they are actively involved in undertaking research tasks?

No

Does the research offer advice or guidance to people?

No

Is the research intended to benefit the participants, third parties or the local community? Yes

Provide an explanation.

Participation will not directly benefit these participants but may aid in future support for children and young people like them. It will hopefully benefit Educational Psychologists that will be supervising ELSA practitioners in how to support children and young people experiencing EBSNA. As well as informing the training and supervision of ELSA practitioners themselves to be able to support the children and young people experiencing EBSNA in a more targeted way.

What procedures are in place for monitoring the research with respect to ethical compliance?

In the first instance the researcher will be monitoring the study for ethical compliance as stated in the ethics application, under supervision from their Research Supervisor, and course directors. The researcher and supervisor will have regular supervisory meetings to ensure that the research is complying to ethical guidelines and to what has been set out in the ethics application.

Does the study involve the use of a clinical or non-clinical scale, questionnaire or inventory which has specific copyright permissions, reproduction or distribution restrictions or training requirements? No

Include any other ethical considerations regarding data collection methods.

See above for information regarding audio/video data.

Safeguarding - in the unlikely even that during the interview process a child discloses information that the researcher deems something that puts them (or someone else) at risk of harm, or has done in the past, the researcher would immediately discuss the appropriate pathway for a safeguarding disclosure with their research supervisor. The most appropriate is likely to be via their school's Designated Safeguarding Lead and the school's protocol would be followed. As the researcher would have the Headteacher as a first contact with the school and acting as the gatekeeper for the ELSAs and families, they would be able to be contacted regarding any safeguarding issue. They are likely to be the Designated Safeguarding Lead, but if not they will be the most appropriate person to act on

that knowledge and will be able to be relied on to act on the information given. The researcher can also ensure they find out who the Designated Safeguarding Lead is and also contact them with the information in the eventuality that the Headteacher is not the DSL.

The Chair of the EDU Research Ethics Committee would also be informed.

As permission has not been granted for ELSAs to discuss specific children, ELSAs will be reminded not to use the names or any identifying information of children they have worked with. Should this happen by accident the information will be redacted in the transcript before the data is checked, and ultimately anonymised. The focus of questioning is on the intervention process rather than the child or individual cases, and the themes will be extracted from the group of interviews rather than single ones.

Health and safety - participants

Is there a possibility that the health and safety of any of the participants in this project including a support person (e.g. a care giver, school teaching assistant) may be in question?

Yes

If yes, describe the nature of any health and safety concerns to the participants and the steps you will take to minimise these.

Following the BERA guidelines the researcher has considered their duty of care to look for potential risks to participants. There are minimal risks from this study other than the possible emotional and psychological impact of discussing potentially upsetting periods of their lives. Trainee EPs have additional training in communication and active listening skills, and so will be able to support participants during their interviews, should any distress occur.

As outlined earlier, the researcher will signpost the participants (ELSAs and parents on behalf of themselves and the young people) to support following Emotional Based School Non-Attendance. This could be via Kooth (for Young Person's mental health), the Anna Freud Centre (for EBSNA), and the charities "Square Peg" and "Not Fine in School" for other support. Support can also sought via their Educational Psychologist. ELSAs will be reminded to take any difficult casework to their supervision sessions with their allocated Educational Psychologists for support if needed.

Although no potential risks to participants are foreseen, they will be reminded that they are able to withdraw (until the point where data is anonymised) if they would like to without any consequence.

As participation is open to any participant that fulfills the criteria no disadvantage is foreseen due to research design.

What procedures have been established for the care and protection of participants?

Support services for ELSAs, parents and CYP are signposted as described above.

Describe your safeguarding protocol. What procedures are in place for the appropriate referral of a participant who discloses an emotional, psychological, health, education or other issue during the course of the research or is identified by the researcher to have such a need?

Safeguarding - participants will be reminded that their data is confidential, unless they share information which puts them or someone else at risk of harm, in which case the researcher will be unable to keep it confidential and will have to share it to keep them or other people safe. In the unlikely event that during the interview process a child discloses information that the researcher

deems something that puts them (or someone else) at risk of harm, or has done in the past, the researcher would immediately discuss the appropriate pathway for a safeguarding disclosure with their research supervisor. The most appropriate is likely to be via their school's Designated Safeguarding Lead and the school's protocol would be followed. As the researcher will have the contact details of the Headteacher, they will be able to be contacted straight away and are likely to be the school's Designated Safeguarding Lead. If they are not they will know who is the appropriate person and be fully aware of the correct protocols to follow and can be trusted to act on the information given. In the unlikely event that the Headteacher is not the DSL, the researcher can also find the name of the DSL (usually found on the school website) and contact them to share the information in addition to sharing with the Headteacher.

The Chair of the EDU Research Ethics Committee would also be made aware of the situation and it would be discussed with the researcher's supervisor in the first instance.

What is the possible harm to the wider community from their participation or from the project as a whole?

There is unlikely to be any harm to the wider community from participation or from the project in general.

There could be a possibility that ELSAs or parents may share information regarding ways schools, Local Authorities or the education system as a whole negatively impacted their child's experience of school which had an affect on their attendance.

This may serve to highlight the current situation in schools of an increasing number of children who feel unable to attend due to emotional reasons and any contribution from the systems around the child that may contribute to that.

What precautions will you take to minimise any possible harm to the wider community?

Although no harm to the wider community is foreseen, if any general themes/issues came to light during the interviews as stated above, this could be shared with schools or the Local Authority in the hope of systemic change both on a small or larger scale. For example there may be ways schools could be more supportive for children and young people and minimise Emotional Based School Avoidance being exacerbated by the school systems. All information would be generalised and shared as themes and not regarding specific schools/individuals as participants data is anonymised.

Any individual issues will be dealt with using the safeguarding procedures outlined previously.

Health and safety - researcher(s)

Is there a possibility that the health and safety of any of the researcher(s) and that of any other people (as distinct from any participants) impacted by this project including research assistants/translators may be in question? Yes

If yes, how have you addressed the health and safety concerns? Describe any safeguards included and relevant protocols.

In order to minimise concerns for health and safety of the researcher, the decision was made to carry out interviews online via Microsoft Teams rather than in person. This would mean that long car journeys were prevented, as well as protecting the researcher from lone working in the homes of participants.

To ensure online safety of children/young people participating, they can choose to have a parent sitting with them during the interview. If they choose not to, there is still a safeguard for them (and for the researcher) as the interview will be recorded.

The researcher will ensure that they work in a quiet, private space where they cannot be overheard, and their screen cannot be seen, as well as using a headset so that anyone else will not hear what is shared by the participants.

To ensure online safety of the researcher, they would ensure that once the interview had started no one else was able to enter the interview "room". They would also ensure that they had not disclosed their location and use a blurred background.

Risk assessment

Are there hazards associated with undertaking this project where a formal risk assessment will be required?

No

Data management

Will the project involve any personal data (including pseudonymised data) not in the public domain? Yes

If yes, will any of the personal data be?: Anonymised

If using anonymised and/or pseudonymised data, describe the measures that will be implemented to prevent de-anonymisation.

Once audio recording is transcribed and checked (and the participants have been offered the opportunity to read through them) the participants' data (transcriptions) will henceforth be anonymised and they will only be known as ELSA1, ELSA2, Parent1, Parent2, CYP1, CYP 2 etc.

Prevention of de-anonymisation will be ensured as their code will NOT be kept with their names, email addresses etc (in a password protected Microsoft Excel sheet) or with their signed consent forms.

Details of any schools or participants that have taken part will not be disclosed to any third parties (i.e the Local Authority or Educational Psychologists that supervise ELSAs) so that the participants cannot be identified following participation. The only situation where this would not be the case, was if there was a safeguarding issue, in which case the identity of the participant would have to be made known to the school Headteacher/Designated Safeguarding Lead, the researcher's supervisor and possibly to the Local Authority depending on the level of escalation of the safeguarding disclosure.

Any publications or talks given where data is shared will only be shared using the anonymised codes and not giving any further details of the school or area the participants are from, other than the "East of England".

Demographic information will be collected during interview and saved as part of the transcript.

As permission has not been granted for ELSAs to discuss specific children, ELSAs will be reminded not to use the names or any identifying information of children they have worked with. Should this

happen by accident the information will be redacted in the transcript before the data is checked, and ultimately anonymised.

If not using anonymised or pseudonymised data, how will you maintain participant confidentiality and comply with data protection requirements?

N/A

Will any personal data be processed by another organisation(s)?

No

Will the project involve access to records of sensitive/confidential information?

No

Will the project involve access to confidential business data?

No

Will the project involve secure data that requires permission from the appropriate authorities before use? No

Will you be using publicly available data from the internet for your study?

Yes

If yes, provide details about the publicly available data from the internet you will be using for your study.

Email addresses of ELSA supervisors from across the country are publicly available via the ELSA Network website (<https://www.elsanetwork.org/area-directory/>)

This is a freely accessible website and no membership is needed.

These email addresses will be used to contact ELSA supervisors across the East of England asking them to pass the invitation and participant information to Headteachers of schools where they supervise ELSAs.

Headteachers will be asked to pass the information about the study on to both ELSAs in their school and to parents whose children have been in receipt of ELSA to support their attendance due to EBSNA.

Will the research data in this study be deposited in a repository to allow it to be made available for scholarly and educational purposes? No

Provide details.

Data will not be kept in a repository to allow it to be made available for scholarly and educational purposes because UEA does not have a repository for such, therefore data cannot be stored at UEA, and can only be stored on the researcher's OneDrive while they are part of the University. Once the project is complete data will be stored in line with the UEA Information Classification and Data Management Policy.

Who will have access to the data during and after the project?

During and after the project the main named researcher will have access to the data. The researcher will only discuss anonymised data with the researcher supervisor in supervision if necessary. If the participants request to read their transcript they will be given only their own transcript to read with the researcher and comment accordingly.

After the project is complete, the Local Authority in which the researcher is placed as a Trainee Educational Psychologist may be interested in the findings but this will be a summary of findings across the East of England and not specific to their Local Authority.

Where/how do you intend to store the data during and after the project?

Research Data (video/audio, transcriptions, Microsoft Excel spreadsheet with contact info, and consent forms) will be stored in digital format using the researcher's UEA Onedrive. Once the project is complete data will be stored in line with the UEA Information Classification and Data Management Policy.

Access to data are controlled (the primary researcher will have access and only discuss with the research supervisor in supervision where necessary) to protect against theft, misuse, damage or loss.

Demographic data will be collected during the interview and stored as part of the transcript.

How will you ensure the secure storage of the data during and after the project? Data files (in the form of anonymised transcripts) will be password protected and saved on the researcher's UEA OneDrive. When the researcher is no longer part of the University the anonymised transcripts will be stored in line with the UEA Information Classification and Data Management Policy.

How long will research data be stored after the study has ended?

Data will be kept for 10 years from the last use.

How long will research data be accessible after the study has ended?

Video data will be deleted once transcription is complete and participants have had the opportunity to check them (if requested). Anonymised transcription data will be stored as above and will be accessible for 10 years from their last use.

How are you intending to destroy the project data when it is no longer required?

Video data will be permanently digitally deleted once transcriptions have been checked and read by participants. Transcriptions, consent forms and contact information will be permanently digitally deleted from UEA Onedrive once the researcher has left the University. Once the period of 10 years since the last use has passed the data will be permanently digitally deleted in line with the UEA Information Classification and Data Management Policy.

Attached files

Email to ELSA Coordinators.docx

Email to Headteachers.docx

ETH2425-1333 - ELSA -Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form (OPT IN) - Interview.docx

ETH2425-1333 - Child and young person - Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form (OPT IN)
- Interview.docx

ETH2425-1333 - Parent -Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form (OPT IN) - Interview.docx

ETH2425-1333 - Parent -Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form (OPT IN) - Interview.docx

Interview plan and questions for all groups.docx

Participant Debrief Checklist.docx

Secondary data questionnaire questions.docx

ETH2425-1333 - ELSA -Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form (OPT IN) - Interview.docx

ETH2425-1333 - Parent -Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form (OPT IN) - Interview.docx

ETH2425-1333 - Child and young person - Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form (OPT IN)
- Interview.docx

ETH2425-1333 - Parental_Guardian Information Sheet and Consent Form (OPT IN) - Interview.docx

Ethics ETH2526-0210 (Significant amendments): Mrs Natasha**Mead**

Date Created	26 Sep 2025
Date Submitted	26 Sep 2025
Date forwarded to committee	29 Sep 2025
Researcher	Mrs Natasha Mead
Category	PGR
Supervisor	Dr Alistair James
Faculty	Faculty of Social Sciences
Current status	Approved

Ethics application**Amendment type****Type of amendment**

Change to research protocol

Is this amendment related to Covid-19?

No

Change research protocol**Change your original application submitted in Ethics Monitor****Select the relevant tab(s) from your original ethics application to edit:**

Project details

Research categories

Human participants - selection and recruitment

Human participants - consent method

Human participants - information and consent

Human participants - method

Health and safety - participants

Health and safety - researcher(s)

Risk assessment

Data management

If other, fully describe the changes below.

Attach any documentation which relates to the changes described.

Project details

Project title

How has the Emotional Literacy Support Assistant (ELSA) intervention supported young people's attendance at school following a period of Emotional Based School Non-Attendance (EBSNA)? Using thematic analysis within a realist evaluation framework to understand the contexts and mechanisms needed for positive outcomes.

Project start date

Apr 2025

Project end date

31 Jul 2026

Describe the scope and aims of the project in language understandable by a non-technical audience. Include any other relevant background which will allow the reviewers to contextualise the research.

Pre 2020 Covid pandemic, persistent (>10% school missed) and severe absence (> 50% school missed) was increasing, with persistent absence staying at approximately double the pre-pandemic rate three years later (Department for Education, 2023). Although persistent absence figures have decreased for the 23/24

academic year, severe absences have continued to increase across all school types both in the UK and globally (UNESCO, 2020).

Emotional Based School Non-Attendance (EBSNA), is an overarching term for reduced or total nonattendance of school, or lessons, by a child or young person (CYP). We know that children who experience EBSNA are a heterogeneous group, so what works to support one CYP to attend school may not work for another, as their triggering and perpetuating reasons may differ.

The proposed research study is interested in an intervention that already exists in schools and works on many of the areas highlighted in previous research as difficulties for CYP with EBSNA (anxiety, friendships, bullying, self-esteem).

Emotional Literacy Support Assistants (ELSAs) have 6 days training from the Educational Psychology service, and ongoing half termly supervision. They work with each referred child for around 6-8 weeks on psychological approaches to support anxiety, emotional literacy, self-regulation, self-esteem, social skills, loss and bereavement.

There is currently no peer reviewed research on the use of ELSA to support EBSNA, although anecdotal evidence shows this does happen in schools.

To date ELSA research is mostly carried out with ELSAs, teachers and EPs; less research includes the CYP voice. Less research includes parent views, which legislation values in decisions pertaining to educational provision for their children (Home Office, 2014).

This research proposes to interview the ELSA practitioners who have worked with CYP who have been experience/are experiencing EBSNA, to understand the contexts and mechanisms of the intervention and what the outcomes have been.

Provide a brief explanation of the research design (e.g. interview, experimental, observational, survey), questions, methodology, and data gathered/analysis. If relevant, include what the participants will be expected to do/experience.

The aim will be to recruit a purposive sample of between 4-8 participants who will be ELSAs who have supported CYP with experience of EBSNA to take part in semi-structured interviews with the researcher. Each interview will last approximately 45

mins. Interviews will be carried out via Microsoft Teams, audio and video recorded (with consent) and transcribed (using Microsoft Teams transcription software) with the researcher checking transcriptions for accuracy.

A realist evaluation is appropriate for this study as ELSA is an intervention frequently used in schools and anecdotally used to support children experiencing difficulties with EBSNA. However, currently there is no research to show what the outcomes are, or what mechanisms and specific contexts are needed for positive outcomes. Therefore, using thematic analysis but in the structure of the Contexts, Mechanisms and Outcomes from realist evaluation methodology will allow the researcher to see links between them more clearly. This would be most appropriate at this exploratory stage of the research.

Proposed main research question:

1.How has ELSA supported young people's attendance at school following a period of EBSNA?

Using the proposed methodology, the following questions should also be answered:

2.What were the outcomes on attendance from ELSAs working with CYP?

3.What were the mechanisms that are proposed to have affected these outcomes when ELSAs work with YP experiencing EBSNA?

4.What are the contexts where these mechanisms and outcomes occur when ELSAs work with YP experiencing EBSNA?

Detail how any adverse events arising in the course of the project will be reported in a timely manner.

The principal applicant will report any adverse event in Ethics Monitor and make their research supervisor aware of the adverse event so that they can deal with the event and any surrounding circumstances.

The Chair and Support Staff of the S-REC that gave the original ethics approval, the Primary Supervisor and UEA's Research Integrity Manager will be notified by email of the reporting of an adverse event via logging in Ethics Monitor. The EDU Head of School, Professor Yann Lebeau, will also be notified.

Will you also be applying for Health Research Authority approval (HRA)?

No

Indicate if you are applying for approval for an experiment to be conducted in the School of Economics' Laboratory for Economic and Decision Research (LEDR).

No

Is the project?: none of
the options listed

Does the project have external funding administered through the University's Research and Innovation Services (RIN)? No

Will the research take place outside of the UK?

No

Will any part of the project be carried out under the auspices of an external organisation, or involve collaboration between institutions?

No

Do you require or have you already gained approval from an ethics review body external to

UEA?

No

Does this new project relate to a project which already has ethics approval from UEA?

No

Research categories

Will the project include primary data collection involving human participants?

Yes

Will the project use secondary data involving human participants?

No

Will the project involve the use of live animals?

No

Will the project have the potential to affect the environment?

No

Will the project have the potential to affect culturally valuable, significant or sensitive objects or practices?

No

Will the project involve security sensitive research?

No

Will the project involve a generative Artificial Intelligence (AI) tool?

No

Human participants - selection and recruitment

How many Participant Groups are there who will receive tailored participant information?: One

Name of Participant Group 1.

Emotional Literacy Support Assistants (ELSAs)

How will the participants be selected/recruited?

Participants will be a purposive sample of those

ELSAs who have delivered ELSA sessions to CYP who have experienced EBSNA, with a positive outcome (not necessarily full return to school, but positive change from previously).

The aim will be to recruit between 4 and 8 participants.

A courtesy email to the Principal Educational Psychologist of the Local Authority will be sent, making them aware their EPs will be contacted regarding a research project concerning ELSA and EBSNA. Following this, Educational Psychologists acting as

ELSA coordinators will be contacted (email addresses freely available via the ELSA Network website) to request they send an invitation to ELSA Line Managers (usually SENCOs) where they supervise ELSA or directly to ELSAs themselves if this is the information that they hold.

Line managers/ELSA's will be sent the participant information sheet and consent form.

If an ELSA is in contact to participate, it will be confirmed with them that they have informed their line manager of their intention to participate.

If information is sent directly to Line managers they are the gatekeepers through which study information is distributed so they have awareness of the study and so there is no implicit feeling of obligation to participate by ELSAs or families.

Usually an ELSA will have spoken about their cases to their line manager but if there are new safeguarding issues, the researcher will contact the Designated Safeguarding Lead of the school where the ELSA works.

A flyer for the study will also be distributed via appropriate ELSA related social media pages, for example ELSA Support Facebook Page (posts are only made via the ELSA support administrators) and will be sent to the ELSA co-ordinators forum for distribution to the members.

If appropriate, upload a copy of the proposed advertisement, including proposed recruitment emails, flyers, posters or invitation letter.

How and when will participants receive this recruitment material?

Once the ethics application has been approved, emails will be sent to the LA Principal Educational Psychologist and simultaneously to the EPs acting as ELSA Coordinators across the UK. Emails can be gathered from the ELSA Network website (freely available).

The ELSA coordinators will be emailed explaining the study and asking them to send an invitation to participate to the ELSA Line managers of schools where they supervise ELSAs, or directly to ELSAs if this is the information that they hold. Line managers will be asked to pass the information on to the ELSAs in their school who have experience of supporting students with EBSNA.

Recruitment of ELSAs would ideally start from April/May 2025. The interviews with the ELSAs would be carried out approximately between May and November 2025.

The flyer will be posted to ELSA relevant social media pages, for example the ELSA support facebook page administrator to post on the ELSA support facebook page.

The flyer will also be sent to the ELSA Co-ordinator forum for them to distribute to their ELSAs.

In terms of UEA participants only, will you be advertising the opportunity to take part in this project to?:

None of the above (i.e. UEA's Student Insight Review Group (SIRG) does not need to be informed)

What are the characteristics of the participants?

ELSAs - these will be qualified ELSAs who have worked in school (or via home visits or online) in their ELSA capacity to support children and young people who have experienced Emotional Based School Non-Attendance (EBSNA) and feel there has been a positive outcome from their involvement.

A group of between 4 and 8 ELSAs will be recruited from across the UK (ELSA runs in England, Scotland, Wales and the Channel Islands).

All demographic information (outlined in interview schedule) will be gathered as part of the interview and saved as part of the interview transcript.

Will the project require the cooperation of a gatekeeper for initial access to the individuals/groups to be recruited? Yes

Who will be your gatekeeper for accessing participants?

Educational psychologists who supervise ELSAs in Local Authority Educational Psychology Services will be the gatekeepers for sending information about the study out to ELSA line managers of the schools where they supervise ELSAs, or directly to ELSAs if this is the information that they hold. If Line Manager information is held then line managers are the gatekeepers who pass the information on to ELSAs.

For the flyers, the appropriate administrators for the social media pages, for example the ELSA Support administrator and the ELSA Coordinators forum administrators will gatekeep sending the flyer on to their subscribers.

How and when will a gatekeeper permission be obtained?

Educational psychologists who supervise ELSAs have their emails freely available on the ELSA

Network website (<https://www.elsanetwork.org/area-directory/>)

They will be contacted as soon as ethical approval is obtained for dissemination to the line managers of ELSAs of schools where they supervise ELSAs (ideally between April 2025 and Nov 2025), or directly to the ELSAs if this is the information that they hold. The line managers are then asked to be the gatekeepers of the information being passed to the ELSAs.

Provide any relevant gatekeeper documentation (letters of invite, emails etc).

How will you record a gatekeeper's permission?

If gatekeepers reply to say they are happy to pass information on, copies of their emails will be kept securely on the researcher's UEA Onedrive and a log of their details will be kept on a password protected Microsoft Excel document on the researcher's UEA Onedrive in case contact is needed for safeguarding reasons. Once the project is complete, data will be stored in line with the UEA Information Classification and Data Management Policy.

Is there any sense in which participants might be 'obliged' to participate?

Yes

If yes, provide details.

Yes it is possible that that ELSA Line managers (most often SENCOs) may feel obligated to take part as they are being contacted by Educational Psychologists from their local authority that they may be relying on for link or statutory work. ELSAs may feel obligated to take part as they are being supervised by educational psychologists in their local authority.

What will you do to ensure participation is voluntary?

This will be mitigated by making it clear in the information provided that participation is entirely voluntary and there are no negative implications by participating or not, and hopefully positive feelings regarding participation in helping others in the future.

It will be outlined to Line managers and ELSAs that the researcher is working in their capacity as a student Trainee EP for UEA, not connected to the Local Authority, so their participation, or not, will not affect the relationship they have with the Local Authority, the EP service or with the school. They will be reminded that it does not affect any support they get.

I am recruiting my participants from across the UK to minimise conflict of interests with the Local Authority where I am training. I will hope to have had no prior knowledge of the children/young people/families who may have offered to take part, even if I have worked within a particular school, the ELSAs will be reminded not to use the YP's name or specific detail about them. If it was very obvious that the ELSA was one that had been connected to a YP I knew, I would have to check with the parents if they were happy for the interview to take place, and reiterate that my research is separate to my work in the Local Authority, and that it would have no bearing on how the Local Authority would engage with them in the future.

Will the project involve vulnerable groups?

No

Will payment or any other incentive be made to any participant?

No

Include any other ethical considerations regarding participation.

Participants will be consulted on if they consent to video recording of the interviews taking place. This is explicitly on the consent form, and will be confirmed verbally before recording would begin.

In order to record using Teams both video and audio have to be recorded, but they will be offered to turn their camera off. Once the audio recordings are transcribed and transcriptions checked, the videos can be deleted. In the interim they will be stored on the researcher's UEA Onedrive.

It will be made clear to all participants that they are able to withdraw during the interview process until the interviews are transcribed. After this they will have been anonymised and so it will not be possible to withdraw after this point as their data will not be able to be identified.

Participants will be signposted to relevant sources for support for themselves and CYP in regards to EBSNA and mental health support for any ongoing anxiety needs.

All participants will be offered the opportunity to see their transcripts before the data is anonymised and before the video/audio is deleted, to ensure they are satisfied it is a true representation of what was said during the interview.

Any safeguarding concerns that may arise during interviews will be referred through safeguarding processes via the Headteacher/Designated Safeguarding Lead at the school of the ELSA, and the appropriate processes followed according to school policy. If further issues are raised during the interviews (regarding ELSA wellbeing) these can be flagged to the ELSA supervisor and Line Manager who can investigate further ongoing support.

Human participants - consent options

By which method(s) will consent to participate in the research be obtained?:

Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form

Human participants - information and consent

Participant Information and Consent

You can generate a Participant Information Text and Consent Form for this application by completing information in the Participant Information Text and Consent Form Generator tab. Alternatively you can upload your Participant Information Text and Participant Consent Form which you have already prepared. Confirm below:

Upload prepared Participant Information Text and Consent Form.

Upload the Participant Information Text and Consent Form.

Enter participant group number and name. 1 ELSAs

When will participants receive the participant information and consent request? Following ethics approval, invitation emails will be sent to ELSA coordinators, who will then disseminate the information and consent form to ELSA line managers of schools where they supervise ELSAs, or direct to ELSAs if this is the information that they hold.

If ELSAs see social media posts they will be sent the information directly when they make contact with the researcher.

If ELSAs are in contact with the researcher to take part then they would be asked to ensure their line manager had been made aware of their intention to participate.

How will you record a participant's decision to take part in the research?

Participants name and email address will be saved into a password protected Microsoft Excel sheet on the researcher's UEA Onedrive, along with consent forms.

Once the project is complete data will be stored in line with the UEA Information Classification and Data Management Policy.

Human participants - method

Which data collection methods will be used in the research?:

Interview

If your research involves any of the methods (including Other) listed above, upload supporting materials.

How have your characteristics, or those of the participants influenced the design of the study or how the research is experienced by participants?

As a white, female, middle class researcher with an assumed level of education due to the course requirement, I will approach the interviews knowing I bring those potential biases to the research.

As a Trainee EP with additional training in communication and good interpersonal skills, I would hope to build rapport with the ELSAs to put them at ease. If the social, cultural or gender of the participants is different from my own I feel it should not affect my ability to listen to their voice and responses.

Hopefully the questions should not feel controversial or cause conflict between participants and researcher, however I will be open to the possibility that the topic could evoke emotional responses. I will be ready to receive those from the participants, as I want to know and acknowledge their experiences.

I will ensure participants understand I am interviewing them in my capacity as a Trainee Educational Psychologist and not a Local Authority staff member, to minimise any degree of concern they may have in how their responses will be received within the area they live and work.

I am recruiting my participants from across the UK to minimise conflict of interests with the Local

Authority where I am training. I will hope to have had no prior knowledge of the young people that ELSAs may discuss, and ELSAs will be reminded not to use any names. If it was evident that the school was one I had worked in and the ELSA may discuss a child I knew I would check with parents if they were happy for the interview to continue, and reiterate that my research is separate to my work in the Local Authority, and that it would have no bearing on how the Local Authority would engage with them in future.

Will the project involve transcripts?

Yes

Select ONE option below:

Transcription software

If yes provide details.

Transcription will be carried out by Microsoft Teams transcription software during the interview process. The transcriptions will be checked by hand by reviewing the videos (if available) or the audio recordings and correcting any mistakes made by the software.

Provide an explanation if you are not offering the participant the opportunity to review their transcripts.

Participants will be offered the chance to review their transcripts after transcript checking.

Will you be capturing photographs or video footage (digital assets) of individuals taken for University business? No

Is this research using visual/vocal methods where respondents may be identified? Yes

If yes, confirm what safeguards are in place for participants who are vulnerable or underage.

No participants are underage, however it will be explained that once the transcription of the interview is complete and checked, the participant's interview data will be anonymised and they will thereafter be known only as ELSA1, ELSA2 etc.

As stated above they can decline to have video recorded (therefore they can turn their camera off), and if they do consent to video it will be deleted once transcription is complete. The transcripts will not be saved using an identifiable name but only a code (known only to the researcher) and saved securely on the researcher's UEA OneDrive. Once the project is complete data will be stored in line with the UEA Information Classification and Data Management Policy.

Will it be necessary for participants to take part in the study without their knowledge and consent at the time? No

Will deception or incomplete disclosure be used? No

Will the participants be debriefed after data collection?

Yes

If yes, how will they be debriefed and what information will be provided?

Participants will be provided with a verbal debrief, checking that they are ok at the end of the interview and verbally checking if there is anything else they want to say

or share and if they have any questions about the process. They will be reminded that if they stated they would like to read the transcript of their interview, that the researcher will be in contact with them once the transcripts are checked. Once the data has been analysed the researcher will share a summary with them. Finally the researcher will check with the participant if there is anything they would like the researcher to share with the school and that they can have the conversation with headteacher or line manager as necessary.

If yes, upload a copy of the debrief information.

Will substances be administered to the participants?

No

Will involvement in the project result in, or the risk of, discomfort, physical harm, psychological harm or intrusive procedures? Yes

If yes, provide details.

It is hoped that there will be no psychological harm to the participants from participation in the research study. However as there may be discussion of Emotional Based School Non-Attendance and the feelings and emotions arising from this, there is a possibility that participants may be upset by these discussions. Sensitivity to the manner of questioning will be needed.

ELSAs may feel they need support from within school, and will be encouraged to find someone in school that they trust who they can speak to. The researcher will contact school on their behalf if they request additional support. ELSAs will be reminded to approach their Educational Psychologist for additional support in supervision if needed.

During interviews there will be the opportunity to have breaks if needed to either take some time out, or would like to stop altogether. It will be made clear that this is absolutely acceptable to do.

Will the project involve prolonged or repetitive testing?

No

Will the project involve potentially sensitive topics?

Yes

If yes, provide details.

Discussion of Emotional Based School Non-Attendance and possible feelings and emotions associated with this. See above for ways of supporting these potentially upsetting conversations. However the hope of the project is to uncover methods of support and positive outcomes for these students so hopefully these will also be conversations that produce good feelings, good outcomes and feelings of hope for the future.

As the research is looking for participants where there has been some positive outcome from the ELSA involvement it would be hoped that there is less ongoing vulnerability around the participants which would reduce potential sensitivity and risk of harm.

Positive outcomes can be anything from being able to enter school in the morning without support from a parent to returning to school after a period of non-attendance.

Will the project involve elite interviews?

No

Will the project involve any incitement to, encouragement of, or participation, in an illegal act (by participant or researcher)?

No

Will the research involve an investigation of people engaged in or supporting activities that compromise computer security or other activities that may normally be considered harmful or unlawful? No

Does the research involve members of the public in participatory research where they are actively involved in undertaking research tasks?

No

Does the research offer advice or guidance to people?

No

Is the research intended to benefit the participants, third parties or the local community?

Yes

Provide an explanation.

Participation will not directly benefit these participants but may aid in future support for children and young people that are having similar difficulties to those the ELSAs have worked with. It will hopefully benefit Educational Psychologists that will be supervising ELSA practitioners in how to support children and young people experiencing EBSNA. As well as informing the training and supervision of ELSA practitioners themselves to be able to support the children and young people experiencing EBSNA in a more targeted way.

What procedures are in place for monitoring the research with respect to ethical compliance? In the first instance the researcher will be monitoring the study for ethical compliance as stated in the ethics application, under supervision from their Research Supervisor, and course directors. The researcher and supervisor will have regular supervisory meetings to ensure that the research is complying to ethical guidelines and to what has been set out in the ethics application.

Does the study involve the use of a clinical or non-clinical scale, questionnaire or inventory which has specific copyright permissions, reproduction or distribution restrictions or training requirements? No

Include any other ethical considerations regarding data collection methods.

See above for information regarding audio/video data.

Safeguarding - in the unlikely even that during the interview process a participant shares a safeguarding issue that has not already been brought to the attention of the school DSL, the researcher would immediately discuss the appropriate pathway for a safeguarding disclosure with their research supervisor. The most appropriate is likely to be via their school's Designated

Safeguarding Lead and the school's protocol would be followed. The researcher will contact the Headteacher of the ELSA's school who is most often the Designated Safeguarding Lead, but if not they will be the most appropriate person to act on that

knowledge and will be able to be relied on to act on the information given. The researcher can also ensure they find out who the Designated Safeguarding Lead is and also contact them with the information in the eventuality that the Headteacher is not the DSL.

The Chair of the EDU Research Ethics Committee would also be informed.

As permission has not been granted for ELSAs to discuss specific children, ELSAs will be reminded not to use the names or any identifying information of children they have worked with. Should this happen by accident the information will be redacted in the transcript before the data is checked, and ultimately anonymised. The focus of questioning is on the intervention process rather than the child or individual cases, and the themes will be extracted from the group of interviews rather than single ones.

Health and safety - participants

Is there a possibility that the health and safety of any of the participants in this project including a support person (e.g. a care giver, school teaching assistant) may be in question?

Yes

If yes, describe the nature of any health and safety concerns to the participants and the steps you will take to minimise these.

Following the BERA guidelines the researcher has considered their duty of care to look for potential risks to participants. There are minimal risks from this study other than the possible emotional and psychological impact of discussing potentially upsetting periods of their lives. Trainee EPs have additional training in communication and active listening skills, and so will be able to support participants during their interviews, should any distress occur.

As outlined earlier, the researcher will signpost the participants to support via their school, or their Educational Psychologist. ELSAs will be reminded to take any difficult casework to their supervision sessions with their allocated Educational Psychologists for support if needed.

Although no potential risks to participants are foreseen, they will be reminded that they are able to withdraw (until the point where data is anonymised) if they would like to without any consequence.

As participation is open to any participant that fulfills the criteria no disadvantage is foreseen due to research design.

What procedures have been established for the care and protection of participants?

Support suggested for ELSAs as described above.

Describe your safeguarding protocol. What procedures are in place for the appropriate referral of a participant who discloses an emotional, psychological, health, education or other issue during the course of the research or is identified by the researcher to have such a need?

Safeguarding - participants will be reminded that their data is confidential, unless they share information which puts them or someone else at risk of harm, in which case the researcher will be unable to keep it confidential and will have to share it to keep them or other people safe. In the unlikely event that during the interview process an ELSA shares a safeguarding concern that has not already been discussed with their school DSL, the researcher would immediately discuss the appropriate pathway for a safeguarding disclosure with their research supervisor. The most appropriate is likely to be via their school's Designated Safeguarding Lead and the school's protocol would be followed. The researcher would contact the Headteacher as they are likely to be the school's Designated Safeguarding Lead. If they are not they will know who is the appropriate person and be fully aware of the correct protocols to follow and can be trusted to act on the information given. In the unlikely event that the Headteacher is not the DSL, the researcher can also find the name of the DSL (usually found on the school website) and contact them to share the information in addition to sharing with the Headteacher.

The Chair of the EDU Research Ethics Committee would also be made aware of the situation and it would be discussed with the researcher's supervisor in the first instance.

What is the possible harm to the wider community from their participation or from the project as a whole?

There is unlikely to be any harm to the wider community from participation or from the project in general.

There could be a possibility that ELSAs may share information regarding ways schools, Local Authorities or the education system as a whole negatively impacted a child's experience of school which had an affect on their attendance.

This may serve to highlight the current situation in schools of an increasing number of children who feel unable to attend due to emotional reasons and any contribution from the systems around the child that may contribute to that.

What precautions will you take to minimise any possible harm to the wider community?

Although no harm to the wider community is foreseen, if any general themes/issues came to light during the interviews as stated above, this could be shared with schools or the Local Authority in the hope of systemic change both on a small or larger scale. For example there may be ways schools could be more supportive for children and young people and minimise Emotional Based School Avoidance being exacerbated by the school systems. All information would be generalised and shared as themes and not regarding specific schools/individuals as participants data is anonymised.

Any individual issues will be dealt with using the safeguarding procedures outlined previously.

Health and safety - researcher(s)

Is there a possibility that the health and safety of any of the researcher(s) and that of any other people (as distinct from any participants) impacted by this project including research assistants/translators may be in question?

Yes

If yes, how have you addressed the health and safety concerns? Describe any safeguards included and relevant protocols.

In order to minimise concerns for health and safety of the researcher, the decision was made to carry out interviews online via Microsoft Teams rather than in person.

This would mean that long car journeys were prevented, as well as protecting the researcher from lone working in the homes of participants.

The researcher will ensure that they work in a quiet, private space where they cannot be overheard, and their screen cannot be seen, as well as using a headset so that anyone else will not hear what is shared by the participants.

To ensure online safety of the researcher, they would ensure that once the interview had started no one else was able to enter the interview "room". They would also ensure that they had not disclosed their location and use a blurred background.

Risk assessment

Are there hazards associated with undertaking this project where a formal risk assessment will be required?

No

Data management

Will the project involve any personal data (including pseudonymised data) not in the public domain?

Yes

If yes, will any of the personal data be?:

Anonymised

If using anonymised and/or pseudonymised data, describe the measures that will be implemented to prevent de-anonymisation.

Once audio recording is transcribed and checked (and the participants have been offered the opportunity to read through them) the participants' data (transcriptions) will henceforth be anonymised and they will only be known as ELSA1, ELSA2 etc.

Prevention of de-anonymisation will be ensured as their code will NOT be kept with their names, email addresses etc (in a password protected Microsoft Excel sheet) or with their signed consent forms.

Details of any schools or participants that have taken part will not be disclosed to any third parties (i.e the Local Authority or Educational Psychologists that supervise

ELSAs) so that the participants cannot be identified following participation. The only situation where this would not be the case, was if there was a safeguarding issue, in which case the identity of the participant would have to be made known to the school Headteacher/Designated Safeguarding Lead, the researcher's supervisor and possibly to the Local Authority depending on the level of escalation of the safeguarding disclosure.

Any publications or talks given where data is shared will only be shared using the anonymised codes and not giving any further details of the school or area the participants are from, other than the UK.

Demographic information will be collected during interview and saved as part of the transcript.

As permission has not been granted for ELSAs to discuss specific children, ELSAs will be reminded not to use the names or any identifying information of children they have worked with. Should this happen by accident the information will be redacted in the transcript before the data is checked, and ultimately anonymised.

If not using anonymised or pseudonymised data, how will you maintain participant confidentiality and comply with data protection requirements? N/A

Will any personal data be processed by another organisation(s)?

No

Will the project involve access to records of sensitive/confidential information?

No

Will the project involve access to confidential business data?

No

Will the project involve secure data that requires permission from the appropriate authorities before use?

No

Will you be using publicly available data from the internet for your study?

Yes

If yes, provide details about the publicly available data from the internet you will be using for your study.

Email addresses of ELSA supervisors from across the country are publicly available via the ELSA

Network website (<https://www.elsanetwork.org/area-directory/>)

This is a freely accessible website and no membership is needed.

These email addresses will be used to contact ELSA supervisors across the UK asking them to pass the invitation and participant information to ELSA line managers of schools where they supervise ELSAs, or to ELSAs directly if this is the information that they hold.

The ELSA support page on Facebook is openly available to the public but cannot be posted on by anyone but the page admins. The admins will be contacted to ask for them to post the flyer on the page.

Will the research data in this study be deposited in a repository to allow it to be made available for scholarly and educational purposes? No

Provide details.

Data will not be kept in a repository to allow it to be made available for scholarly and educational purposes because UEA does not have a repository for such, therefore data cannot be stored at UEA, and can only be stored on the researcher's OneDrive while they are part of the University. Once the project is complete data will be stored in line with the UEA Information Classification and Data Management Policy.

Who will have access to the data during and after the project?

During and after the project the main named researcher will have access to the data. The researcher will only discuss anonymised data with the researcher supervisor in supervision if necessary. If the participants request to read their transcript they will be given only their own transcript to read with the researcher and comment accordingly.

After the project is complete, the Local Authority in which the researcher is placed as a Trainee Educational Psychologist may be interested in the findings but this will be a summary of findings across the UK and not specific to their Local Authority.

Where/how do you intend to store the data during and after the project?

Research Data (video/audio, transcriptions, Microsoft Excel spreadsheet with contact info, and consent forms) will be stored in digital format using the researcher's UEA Onedrive. Once the project is complete data will be stored in line with the UEA Information Classification and Data Management Policy.

Access to data are controlled (the primary researcher will have access and only discuss with the research supervisor in supervision where necessary) to protect against theft, misuse, damage or loss.

Demographic data will be collected during the interview and stored as part of the transcript.

How will you ensure the secure storage of the data during and after the project? Data files (in the form of anonymised transcripts) will be password protected and saved on the researcher's UEA OneDrive. When the researcher is no longer part of the University the anonymised transcripts will be stored in line with the UEA Information Classification and Data Management Policy.

How long will research data be stored after the study has ended?

Data will be kept for 10 years from the last use.

How long will research data be accessible after the study has ended?

Video data will be deleted once transcription is complete and participants have had the opportunity to check them (if requested). Anonymised transcription data will be stored as above and will be accessible for 10 years from their last use.

How are you intending to destroy the project data when it is no longer required?

Video data will be permanently digitally deleted once transcriptions have been checked and read by participants. Transcriptions, consent forms and contact information will be permanently digitally deleted from UEA Onedrive once the

researcher has left the University. Once the period of 10 years since the last use has passed the data will be permanently digitally deleted in line with the UEA Information Classification and Data Management Policy.

Appendix 5: Examples of Reflective Diary Entries

Coding

I am so nervous about coding. I keep resisting the process, writing something else, or reviewing some other writing. It feels like such a big job, and if I don't code it "right" then will appropriate themes be generated? Am I influencing the coding too much by what I "hope" will be in there, and what I suspect the themes will be? I know that I can't come to the process blindly, but I want the themes to be authentically from the participant experiences so that they would identify with the themes and not feel they have been too heavily impacted by my involvement in the process. I know I am bringing myself to the process but will they recognise the themes when they read them?

Coding 2

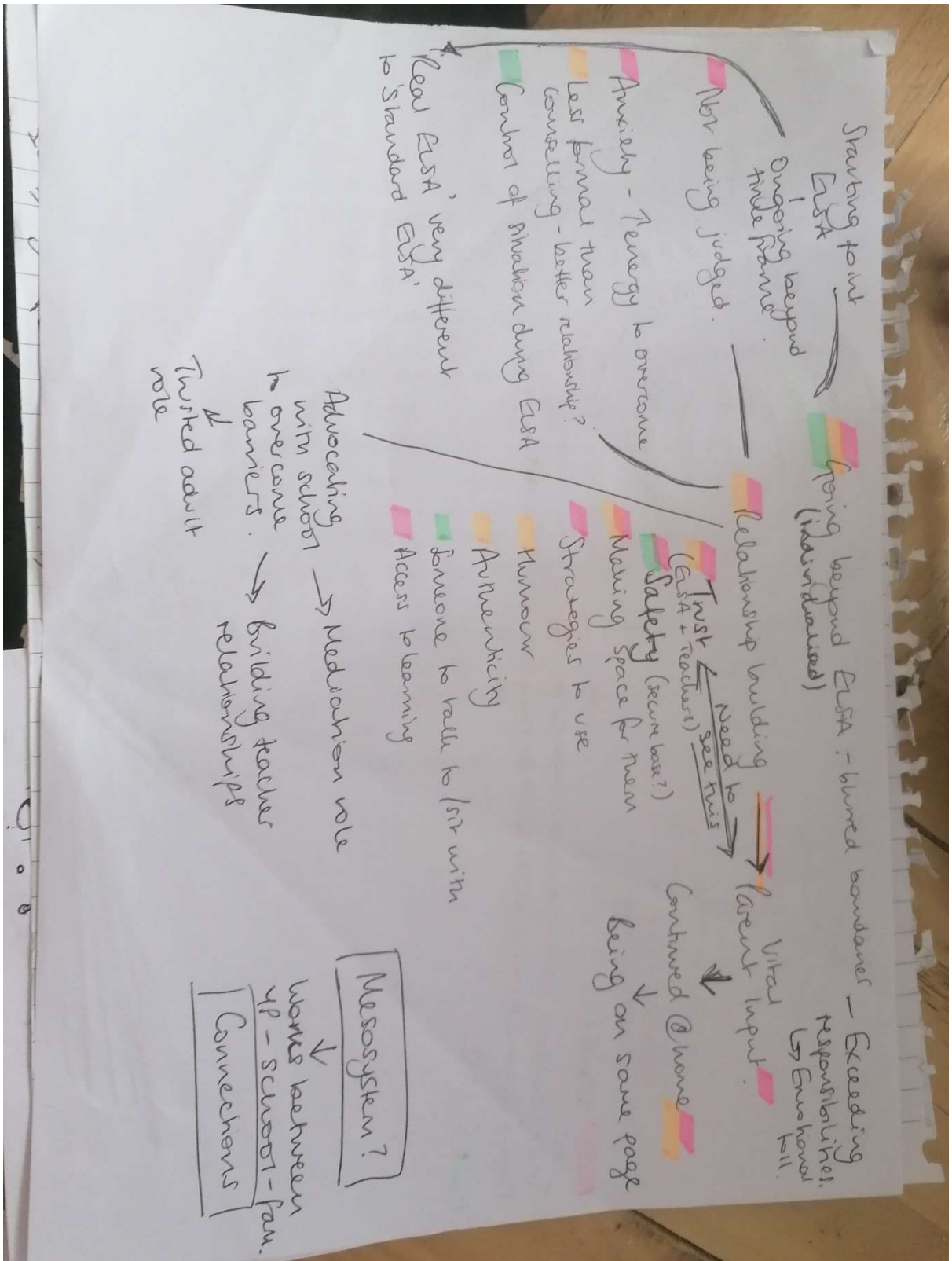
I'm coding. Everyone says you'll know your data inside out because you will be "in" it, and you will have read it so many times. I've always worried about this. What if this doesn't organically happen? What if I "miss" something, or I am missing something at the latent level? But today after coding 4 and a half participants I can feel it. I'm seeing patterns and I can recognise codes from where they have come up before. I'm so relieved. This feels like a process I have a handle on now, rather than this process that was so big I couldn't see the wood for the trees.

Recruitment

Recruitment is not really progressing as I hoped, and I am concerned that I will not be able to speak with all of the research groups that I initially had hoped. I wanted to be able to speak with the young people who had received the ELSA intervention, but so far no parents have consented to take part, and time is moving fast. I will be really disappointed if I have to remove them and their parents as participants as I don't think it will make the research as rich and the YP voice was going to be so key to understanding the impact that ELSA can have for YP experiencing Emotional Based School Non-Attendance. I'd love to know what it was about ELSA that helped. Maybe it's none of the things that myself and the ELSAs think it is. Maybe it's all of them. I know the research can always be extended in future but it is so disappointing to not

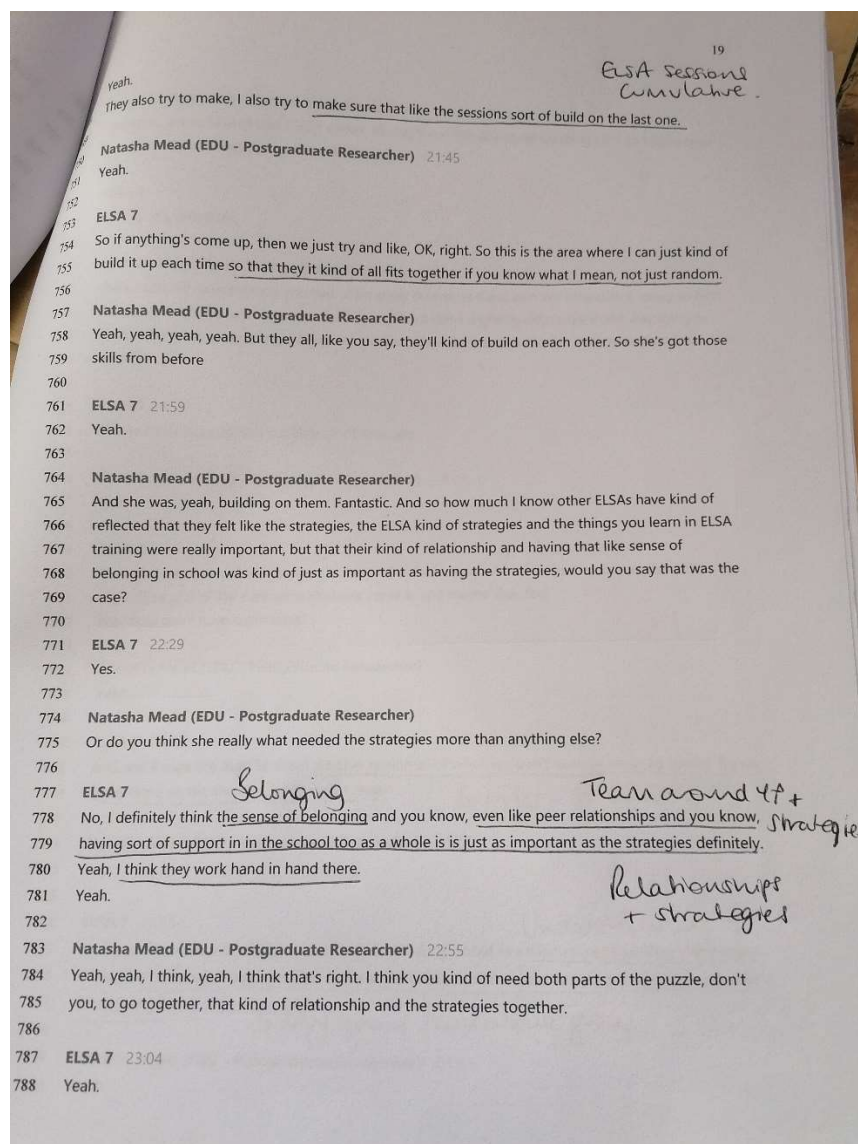
being able to include their voice and have both perspectives. I didn't know that the recruitment would be this hard, or this slow. My experience of research recruitment made me overly confident, and I think I didn't see the barriers that should have been more obvious and now time means I am too restricted to keep waiting. A project for another time!

Appendix 6: Familiarisation Notes

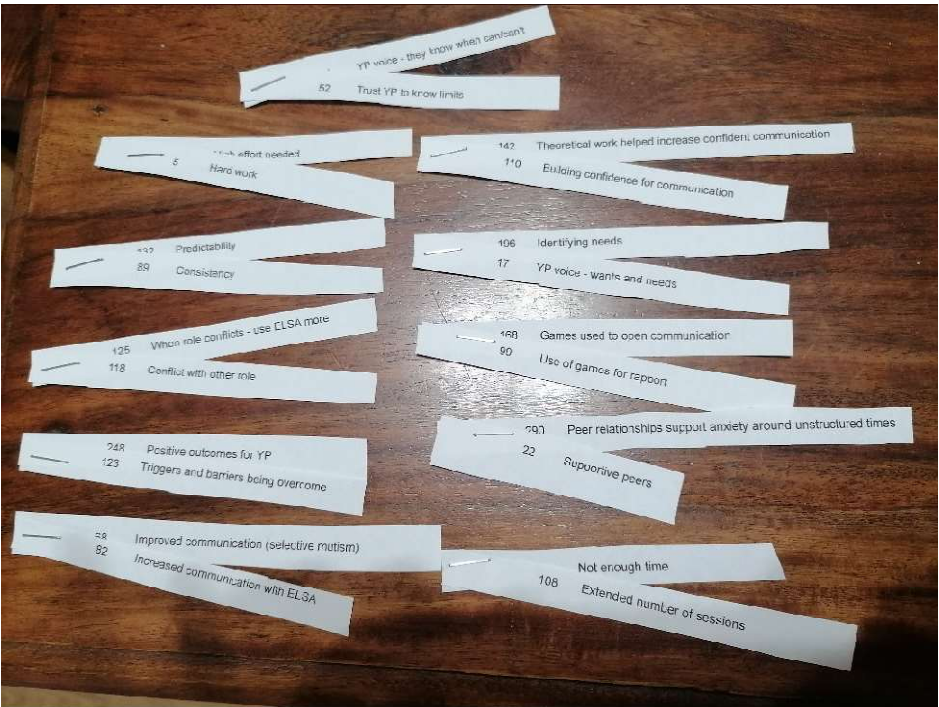
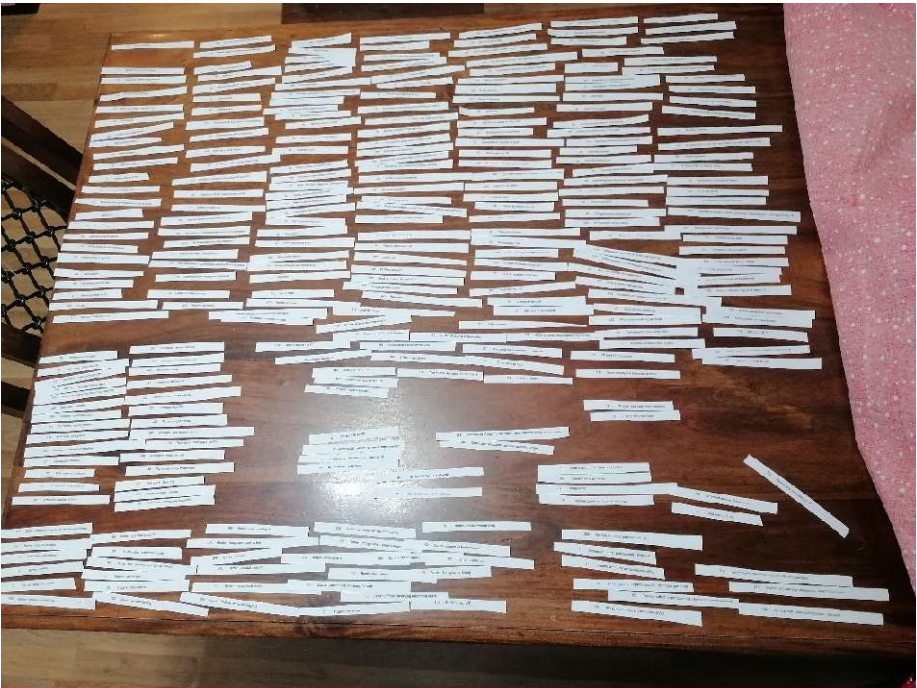


Appendix 7: Example of codes (within Excel and highlighted in transcriptions)

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I
1	Code number	Code	Places - ELSA 1	Places - ELSA 2	Places - ELSA 3	Places - ELSA 4	Places - ELSA 5	Places - ELSA 6	Places - ELSA
2	1	Other responsibilities too much	E1L122						
3	2	Emotional toll on ELSA	E1L131 E1L802				E5L1359 E5L1397 E5L1454 E5L323 E5L443 E5L1067 E5L1113 E5L1138 E5L1167	E6L1845 E6L1851	
4	3	Not enough time	E1L141				E5L1453 E5L1317	E6L1595	E7L426
5	4	Wellbeing support for YP	E1L156						
6	5	Hard work	E1L176						
7	6	School move	E1L220	E2L647	E3L157 E3L501 E3L510				
8	7	Barrier - Selective mutism	E1L249					E6L391	
9	8	Barrier - Anxiety	E1L258 E1L305	E2L296 E2L445 E2L817	E3L99 E3L322			E6L344 E6L424 E6L1554	E7L200 E7L700
10	9	Not attending lessons	E1L257 E1L240	E2L170	E3L106	E4L360	E5L869		
11	10	Working with other professionals - ELSA	E1L266		E3L172				
12	11	Working with other professionals - Outreach	F1L221						



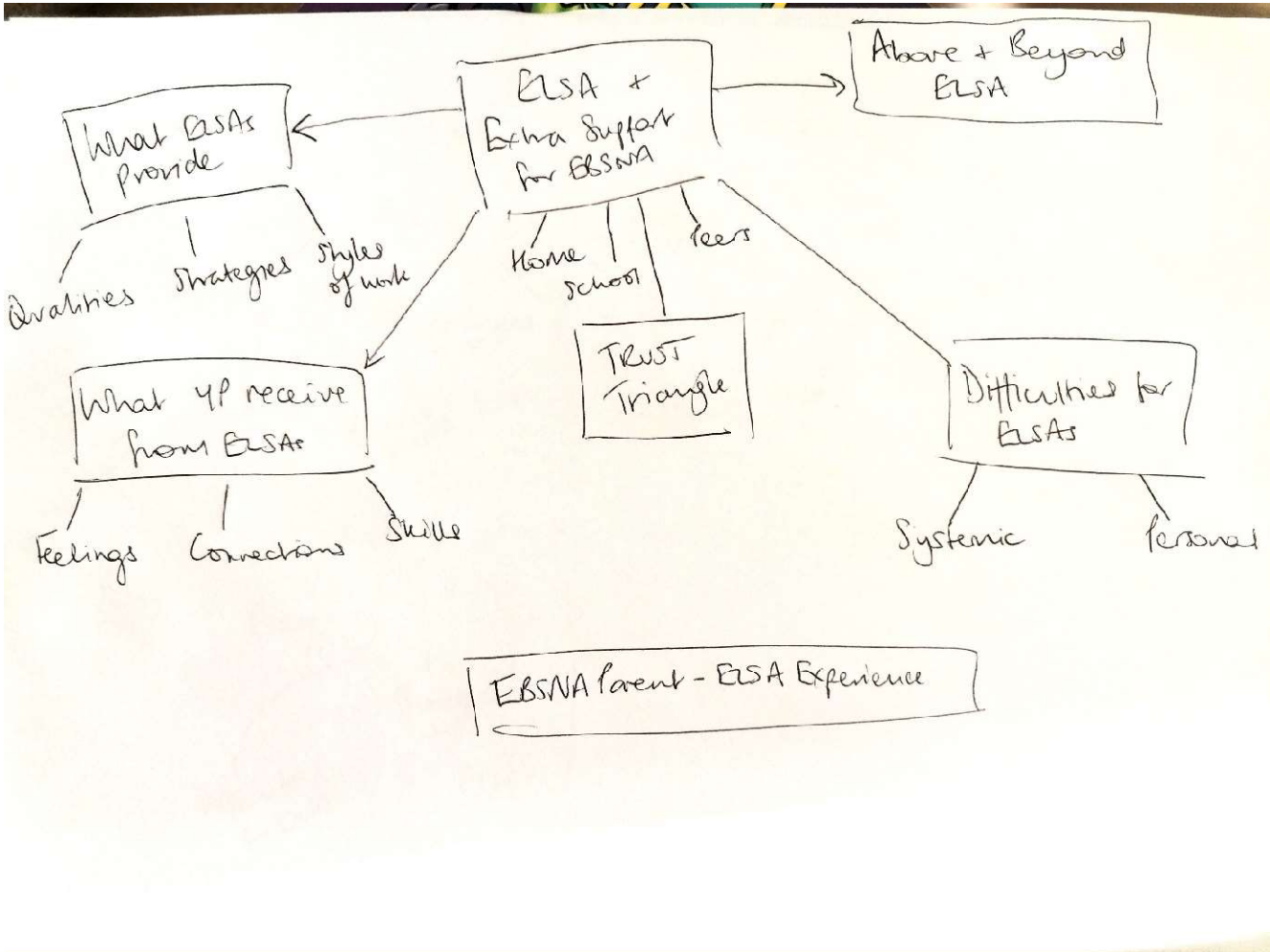
Appendix 8: Printed codes



Appendix 9: Grouping codes to initial themes

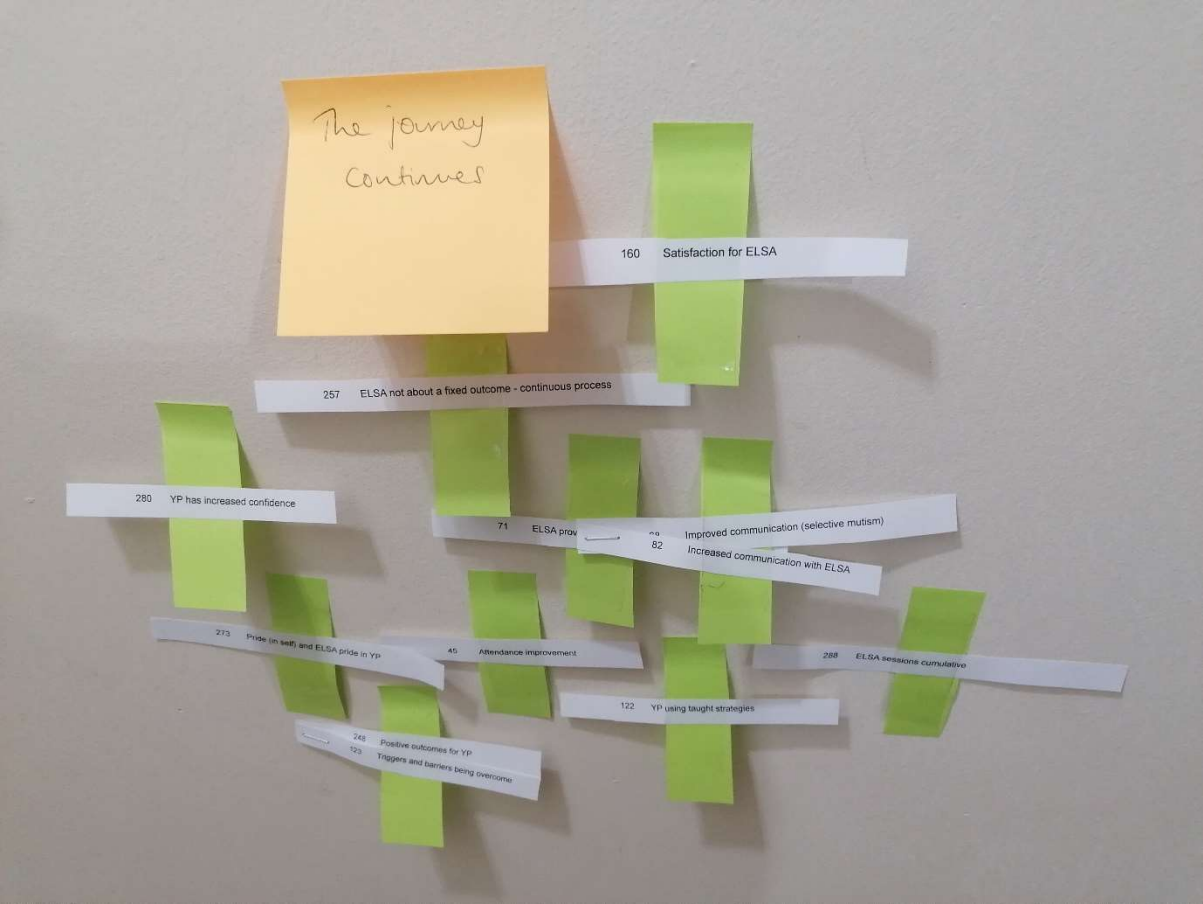


Appendix 10: Initial mind map



Appendix 11: Re-grouping codes and new theme generation





Appendix 12: Mind Map 2

