

Exploring the intricacies of extended school non-attendance (ESNA) from the perspectives of two young people, their parent(s), and the school staff involved in their case: The need for early identification and individually tailored support.

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Abstract

This thesis comprises three chapters: a literature review, an empirical chapter and a reflective chapter. Through a Reflexive Thematic Analysis, and using Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 2000; Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994) as a framework, it explores the experiences of young people, their parents and the school staff involved in their cases of extended school non-attendance (ESNA).

The study explores two cases of ESNA from young people attending secondary/high schools in the region. Reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) was employed to analyse the interview data from the young person, their parent and various staff that had provided support in their case. Interview data was integrated with information from other data sources including attendance data, scores from anxiety and belongingness questionnaires, and school policy documents to provide a comprehensive understanding of each case. The research identifies that ESNA is influenced by a variety of factors, such as anxiety and environmental factors, relationships within the systems, and access to support and services. The following overarching themes were found:

- Individual-level experiences, symptoms and reactions
- Interaction between the individual, family and the school environment
- The impact of wider external systems and life events

However, whilst the underpinning factors are similar in each case, the participants experienced these elements uniquely.

Based on the findings of this research, the ICE framework was developed which emphasises three key components when addressing ESNA: Identification and early intervention (I), Collaboration and communication of stakeholders and services (C), and Empathetic response with individually tailored support (E). This framework aims to provide a structured approach to addressing ESNA, highlighting the importance of early detection, coordinated efforts among stakeholders and personalised support strategies to effectively reduce barriers to ESNA.

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List of Abbreviations

Abbreviation	Full Term
ESNA	Extended School Non-Attendance
EBSA	Emotionally Based School Avoidance
EBSNA	Emotionally Based School Non-Attendance
DfE	Department for Education
INSA	International Network for School Attendance
YP	Young Person
EST	Ecological Systems Theory
SEND	Special Educational Needs and Disabilities
ASD	Autism Spectrum Disorder
ASC	Autism Spectrum Condition
ADHD	Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder
NDS	Neurodevelopmental Service
SENDCo	Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator
LA	Local Authority
EP	Educational Psychologist
TEP	Trainee Educational Psychologist
RTA	Reflexive Thematic Analysis
CR	Critical Realism
CBT	Cognitive Behavioural Therapy
STEM	Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics

CHAPTER ONE: Literature Review – Extended School Non-attendance (ESNA)

1.0 Introduction

Legislation in the UK states that all children over ‘compulsory school age’ (currently from five years old), must have appropriate full-time education (Department for Education, 2015). The importance of school attendance and the negative implications of non-attendance are well-documented in the literature, linking low and non-attendance with long-term outcomes such as early school dropout, increased risk of unemployment (Garcia-Gracia & Valls, 2023), impaired social functioning (Maynard et al., 2015) and mental health difficulties (Thambirajah et al., 2008). Furthermore, as the Children’s Commissioner (2024) reports, schools are places where children make friends, learn new hobbies, and build on ambitions for the future, therefore providing a setting in which many social and life skills are learned and developed.

The latest statistics from the Department of Education (2024) show that 20.1% of children were persistently absent (defined as levels of attendance dropping to 90% or below) in Autumn 2023. Although this is an improvement from the previous year, when it was reported that 24.2% of pupils were persistently absent, this still means that there is a concerning number of children regularly absent from education. Whilst there are reasons, such as unauthorised holidays and illness, included within these figures, a growing concern is absence due to anxiety and emotional distress, more recently referred to as EBSA (emotionally based school avoidance) or EBSNA (emotionally based school non-attendance). EBSA/EBSNA has been conceptualised as non-attendance due to extreme emotional difficulties that are experienced when attending or considering attending school (Knage, 2023).

However, terminology, definition, and conceptualisation of the phenomenon is a much-discussed topic. Considered a problem within the field, the definition of the phenomenon is inconsistent and ambiguous, and researchers (Heyne, 2018; Kearney et al., 2022; Knage, 2023; Pellegrini, 2007) argue that such ambiguity is becoming an obstacle to the

advancement of scientific knowledge. Therefore, the consensus is that the field needs a shared and well-defined terminology to use as a springboard for development (Heyne, 2018; Knage, 2023). A term (which will be discussed further in the chapter) which is becoming more popular again is extended school non-attendance (ESNA)(Knage, 2023). Unlike the term EBSA or EBSNA, the term ESNA takes the focus away from the individual experiencing it and places it in the wider context (Pellegrini, 2007). Although there are also disadvantages with using this term due to the blurred boundaries (the reasons for the non-attendance due to anxiety or distress), the term ESNA will be used throughout this study to ensure it is not being spoken about from the within-child perspective therefore preventing any blame or shame being attributed to an individual.

This chapter aims to explore the literature surrounding ESNA, including its fluid conceptualisation, associated legislation, and theoretical underpinnings to create a deeper understanding and consider present and future implications for practice. The review will adopt a narrative approach (Ferrari, 2015), as a comprehensive synthesis of existing knowledge and diverse perspectives on the topic is required. Systematic reviews typically start with a well-defined research question which could be restrictive to understand the contribution of current factors in this field (Snyder, 2019). Narrative reviews can allow for a broader explanation of theoretical frameworks, qualitative insights and factors influencing ESNA. This flexibility is considered crucial for understanding the heterogenic and complex nature of ESNA, considering historical perspectives and developments, and highlighting gaps that may be present. Baumeister and Leary (1997) explain that narrative reviews are particularly effective in summarising large, complex bodies of literature which makes this method ideal when considering ESNA. Additionally, (Green et al., 2006), explain and emphasise that narrative reviews can provide a more thorough understanding of the context and development of a research topic, which is considered important for emotionally charged and socially intricate issues such as ESNA. Moreover, Ferrari (2015), suggests that narrative reviews are ideal for identifying the relationships and trends across diverse research findings vital for developing holistic perceptions of and interventions for ESNA. However, the researcher also acknowledges the criticality around using narrative reviews and as (Green et al., 2006), emphasise, understands the importance of avoiding bias towards the literature that supports the researcher's perspectives and assumptions.

In conducting this literature review, it is important to acknowledge the researcher's positionality, as personal and professional experiences with ESNA may have informed the selection and interpretation of the literature. Having worked closely with young people experiencing ESNA in various educational and support roles and being a parent of a child with similar challenges, the researcher brings a unique perspective that may create potential biases. These experiences contribute to a deeper understanding of the issue but may also influence how certain themes and gaps in the literature are identified. The reflections of these experiences, and potential impact on the research, are explored further in Chapter 2 and Chapter 3 to ensure transparency and reflexivity in this process.

1.1 Search strategy

A comprehensive search of the peer-reviewed and grey literature was conducted between 03.06.2023 and 20.05.2024. Databases used to run the search included:

Education Resources Information Centre (ERIC), Education Source, MEDLINE, Academic Search Complete and APA PsychInfo.

Table 1 below displays the search terms inputted to the databases and the filters applied. The search terms include variations of the terminology and Boolean operators.

Table 1. Search Terms

Main Search term	Additional Search Terms
Emotionally based school non-attendance EBSNA	'anxiety based –'
Emotionally based school avoidance EBSA	'Reintegration after –' '-school staff '
School refusal	'-covid 19'
School avoidance	'-socioeconomic status'
School phobia	'-special educational need'
Extended school nonattendance	'SEND'
School distress	'SEN'

Both qualitative, quantitative and mixed methodologies were included to ensure a holistic collection. A waterfall search (Jalali & Wohlin, 2012) was undertaken for these papers by manually searching relevant research that was referenced in the search-generated papers. As Kitchenham et al. (2009) explain, this is a particularly useful method when searching literature in a field where there is a rapidly evolving body of knowledge and literature, as it helps to trace the development of research themes and methodologies over time. There were no restrictions in terms of publication dates as the historical context was deemed important to understand the shifts in perspectives and development in conceptualisation.

In order to counteract bias during the literature review, the researcher employed several strategies to ensure a balanced and objective approach. First, a reflexive journal was maintained throughout the review process (see Appendix 12) to document the researcher's assumptions and perspectives, allowing for regular reflection on how these could shape the interpretation and selection of literature (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The researcher also purposefully included diverse literature that presented contrasting or conflicting viewpoints, and the approach to the literature search was systematic to ensure various sources were included. These measures helped to ensure that the findings and interpretations in the literature review were reflective of the existing research rather than personal preconceptions (McDonagh et al., 2013). To minimise the possibility of subtly shaping data collection or analysis by potential bias, McDonagh et al. (2013), advocate for techniques such as triangulation (using multiple methods or sources to cross-verify findings). Additionally, McDonagh et al. (2023) advise caution when using grey literature. Whilst this study did use grey literature, the sources were carefully considered before inclusion. These strategies all contribute to increasing the credibility and trustworthiness of the research whilst counterbalancing the influence of preconceptions.

This review will discuss topics found in the literature such as the difficulties with definitions, terminology and rhetoric, reporting on the shift in perspective and the move from the within-child to that of a more ecological environmental perspective.

The review will also discuss wider circumstances highlighted in the literature that have impacted ESNA such as the 'cost of living crisis' and socioeconomic contexts (Broadbent et

al., 2023; Hill & Webber, 2022; Klein & Sosu, 2024; Skinner et al., 2022), and the COVID-19 pandemic (Bagnall et al., 2022; Nathwani et al., 2021; Totsika et al., 2023a). This event will be discussed concerning more recently published studies, however, research in this area is quickly evolving and many of the impacts of the pandemic and subsequent lockdowns are only just being brought to light (Nathwani et al., 2021).

The literature review will also consider the relationship between ESNA and special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) (Department for Education, 2015), especially links with ESNA and young people diagnosed with, or considered to have, a neurodivergent condition or profile (Connolly et al., 2023; John et al., 2022; Martin, 2023; Morgan & Costello, 2023; Totsika et al., 2020, 2023b). This topic has become more frequently studied since the COVID-19 pandemic with social anxiety and social communication being a particular difficulty after lockdown for neurodivergent young people (Connolly et al., 2023).

Furthermore, the relationships that are present between the individual and school (staff and peers) and the individual and home (parental and sibling) will also be discussed regarding their link with ESNA and the 'push' and 'pull' factors being discussed. Those that pull the young person towards the home and push away from the school (West Sussex Educational Psychology Service, 2022). Additionally, relationships between the school and parents and the importance of collaboration and engagement (Adams, 2022; Connolly & Mullally, 2023; Havik et al., 2014).

Psychological theories and theoretical underpinnings that have been used to synthesise the literature will be discussed, which are central to the subject of ESNA, such as the sense of belonging theory (Allen et al., 2021; Baumeister et al., 2007) and Ecological Systems Theory (EST) (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 2000; Leduc et al., 2022). These theories will be used to illustrate the themes and topics found in the literature and to enhance understanding of the global problem and the systemic difficulties that are contributing.

1.2 Definitions, terminology and rhetoric

There is a plethora of current literature in the field of attendance difficulties and the topic has become increasingly studied due to the rise in prevalence and government concern (Yasin, 2023). However, despite the abundance of literature, a definition is difficult to ascertain due to the innate heterogeneity of the phenomenon and, as many researchers have documented, the everchanging terminology that has been used to describe it (Corcoran et al., 2022; Ingul et al., 2019; Pellegrini, 2007). One of the most difficult elements of defining such a complex concept is the variety of reasons, triggers and issues that underpin the barriers to attendance and the individual differences of those it affects (Kearney et al., 2020). Extended school non-attendance (Pellegrini, 2007) is not a new concept, it is more a revisited term.

Historically there have been many terms used to define young people who find school attendance difficult and who have persistently stayed away from the educational setting (Connolly et al., 2023; Heyne et al., 2017; Ingul et al., 2019; Kearney, 2008; Pellegrini, 2007; Thambirajah et al., 2008). Initially, ESNA was thought of as a medical problem and was termed a form of neurosis after which it was considered to be a 'phobia' with children admitted to a regional adolescent psychiatric unit (Berg et al., 1969). ESNA has also been linked with separation anxiety alongside phobic behaviours (Johnson et al., 1941; Kearney & Silverman, 1991). The term school phobia was used for quite a period, and this was the time in which the psychological difficulties were being more acknowledged. Berg et al. (1969) proposed a set of criteria that they suggested contextualised school phobia:

- I. Severe difficulty in attending school, often leading to prolonged absence
- II. Severe emotional upset surrounding school attendance which may include physiological signs
- III. Staying at home with the knowledge of parents
- IV. Absence of anti-social behaviours

Some other popular terms that have been used historically are:

- School refusal (Brill, 2009; Havik & Ingul, 2021; Kearney, 2002; Kearney & Silverman, 1991)
- School truancy (Attwood & Croll, 2006; Elliott & Place, 2019)
- School distress (Connolly et al., 2023)

- Parentally condoned absence (Birioukov, 2016)
- Persistent absenteeism (Reid, 1983)
- Emotionally based school avoidance (EBSA) (Anna Freud Centre, 2022; Halligan & Cryer, 2022a; West Sussex Educational Psychology Service, 2020)
- Emotionally based school non-attendance (EBSNA) (Corcoran et al., 2022; Sawyer, 2022)
- Extended school non-attendance (ESNA)(Baker & Bishop, 2015; Knage, 2023)

The above terms have been used to describe pupils who are not attending the school environment in many pieces of educational and psychological research. However, these terms can appear to put responsibility or blame on a particular party and vary in the consideration of who is the problem holder (often the young person (YP) and their family). Furthermore, as Havik and Ingul, (2021), and Heyne and Maynard (2016) discuss, these terms do not distinguish between those who are ‘truanting’ (purposefully not attending school through choice) and those children who want to attend but feel they cannot. One of the main differences here is that a YP truanting will often hide their behaviour from parents, whilst a YP that is experiencing ESNA will be very open and transparent about their difficulty with attending the school environment (Epstein et al., 2019). Heyne and Maynard (2016) suggest that truanting is an externalising behaviour which is often paired with other externalising behaviours such as fighting, stealing, and drug use whilst ‘school refusal’ is a more internalising behaviour underpinned by internalising symptoms such as anxiety, mood problems and physical complaints.

The term ‘school avoidance’ implies that the YP is purposefully avoiding the school. As Heyne (2018) explains, the term ‘school phobia’ implies that the YP holds the problem, that it is within the YP and the phobia needs fixing and therefore would need addressing with intervention towards the child in isolation from the wider context. Many of these historical terms have focussed on the element of fear, whereas more recent literature (Corcoran et al., 2022, 2024; Halligan & Cryer, 2022b; Nathwani et al., 2021) has endeavoured to open the discourse and found it is rarely ‘fear’ of the school and more centred around the complex constructs such as the various strands of anxiety that are often underpinned by

environment, sensory difficulties, social interaction barriers or other elements (Melvin et al., 2019).

The importance of the shift in thinking is that the 'problem' is now not necessarily seen as 'within' the child and more that it is an environmental difficulty that is not always within the YP's control. Therefore, this shift in concept means that there are far more ways that it can be addressed rather than the historical train of thought which focussed more on fixing the problem which was viewed to be within the YP (Connolly et al., 2023). Additionally, the research suggests that young people experiencing ESNA want to attend the school but feel they cannot, suggesting that this is possibly where the emphasis needs to be and the implementation of individually tailored intervention to allow this to happen (Corcoran et al., 2024). Moreover, the shift in thinking and the language used removes the element of blame and shame somewhat from the YP. Previous terms such as school 'avoidance' have suggested that the YP has autonomy and is controlling the behaviour (Halligan & Cryer, 2022). Even some of the more recent terms that acknowledge the feelings of anxiety and environmental triggers such as EBSA or EBSNA reflect that the non-attendance is due to the YP responses and internal reactions. However, the term ESNA, as (Knage, 2023) suggests, dilutes this and removes the 'problem holder' describing it as a non-attributable phenomenon.

There is a further complex argument in that the terms EBSNA and EBSA, which have more recently been adopted by professionals, acknowledge that the avoidance or non-attendance stems from negative emotions initiated by the pressure and need to attend school and that it is an important and addressable factor (Heyne, 2018; Heyne et al., 2017). Kearney Silverman (1991) attempted to remove the blaming language by conceptualising the phenomenon as a 'school attendance problem' however, as Heyne (2018) argues, this is a widespread and unhelpful term that does not highlight the importance of the emotional and distressing reactions and can include other attendance problems. To address this Heyne et al. (2019) introduced four points to conceptualise EBSA or school attendance problems in this category, which are

- The YP is reluctant or refuses to attend school, in conjunction with emotional distress and can include sporadic attendance (late arrivals, missing whole days, missing consecutive weeks).
- The YP does not try and hide the absence from their parents/carers.
- The YP does not display antisocial behaviour beyond resistance to parents/carers attempts to get them into school.
- Parents have made reasonable efforts, currently or at an earlier stage in the history of the problem, to secure their attendance at school.

Heyne explained that this concept was very different to others such as 'truancy' 'school withdrawal' and 'school exclusion'.

There is a complex argument about terminology and arguments for and against the more recently used terms. The term ESNA could reflect those who are non-attending for other reasons such as long-term medical issues. However, there has been a recent parental dispute at using the terms EBSNA and EBSA (Morgan & Costello, 2023), due to the inference of blame or the focus on the problem within the child. The search for an appropriate definition that will not offend, or attribute blame continues. Whilst the researcher agrees that there is not yet a term that fully encapsulates the complexities and intricacies of the phenomenon, for this study the term ESNA will be used to ensure a neutral position and avoid attribution of blame or shame. Furthermore, this also aligns with terminology that is currently being used within many LAs and some of the new governmental guidance (Corcoran, 2023).

1.3 Legislation and guidance about ESNA in the UK

The Education Act (1996) places a legal duty on parents to ensure their child has an education and is attending school regularly. There are various reasons why a child might miss school such as illness, exclusion, truancy and family holidays. However, if it is deemed a parent is not supporting a child to access school, it can lead to actions such as Fixed Penalty Notices and/or court action in a criminal or family court (Department for Education, 2024b). Furthermore, following safeguarding policies, there is a possibility of involvement from

social services (Morgan & Costello, 2023). Ultimately, it is the headteacher's discretion whether to authorise an absence and individual circumstances are to be considered.

Recently, there has been an increase in the pace of national and international research and the U.K. as a nation, appears to be on the cusp of (if not already in) a debate around school attendance. Due to the current concerns regarding attendance, the Department for Education published new guidance for national use outlining the expectation for schools to build strong relationships with families and to listen to and understand the barriers to attendance that may be present so that they can work effectively alongside families to remove them (Department for Education, 2023). This guidance also states that medical evidence is not required for the school to make adaptations (i.e., reasonable adjustments), for the child and as long as their parents are working with the school to improve attendance, they should not be prosecuted. This statutory guidance was updated again in February 2024 and will come into force in August 2024. From this date, schools will be required to update and share data regarding attendance. This could be seen as a positive step as the lack of data that has been available previously has made the true prevalence of ESNA difficult to quantify. Alongside this, schools will need to ensure that staff receive training on attendance difficulties and the Local Authority will need to have a School Attendance Support Team that works with schools to remove area-wide barriers to attendance (Department for Education, 2024b).

The new guidance on national attendance data submission will allow monitoring of the national levels of attendance. Furthermore, it will allow schools the ability to follow and monitor data closely to ensure they can provide intervention and strategies in-house at the first signs of attendance difficulties. New attendance codes will be introduced to break down the non-attendance reasons more clearly so that areas of need can be identified earlier (Whittaker 2024). From research, we know that early detection of ESNA is more likely to result in reintegration, or the prevention of it becoming a chronic behaviour (Chu et al., 2018; Ingul et al., 2019). These reforms are part of the next phase of the government's plan to improve attendance which will include expansion of the attendance hubs programme (hubs run by senior leaders with effective attendance practice). Furthermore, schools are advised in the new guidance to be mindful of pupils absent from school due to mental or

physical health or their SEND and to support them (Whittaker 2024), thus formally acknowledging the impact these issues can have on attendance.

1.4 Ecological Systems Theory (EST): A theoretical psychological lens through which to understand the literature on ESNA

As aforementioned, historically there has been a tendency to view ESNA as a ‘within child’ problem (Berg et al., 1969; Johnson et al., 1941), although more recently, an ecological perspective has been suggested as an appropriate and useful way of understanding ESNA, considering the bidirectional relationships and impact between the systems around the YP (Leduc et al., 2022). Much of the recent literature has used Bronfenbrenner’s (1979, 2000) ecological systems theory (EST) (Fig. 1), and Bronfenbrenner & Ceci’s (1994) bioecological model of human development (Fig. 2), to enable a holistic understanding of the complexities of ESNA and to highlight the individuality of each case (Anna Freud Centre, 2022; Corcoran, 2023; Knage, 2023; Seddon, 2023). As can be seen in Fig. 1 below, the EST focuses on the systems around the individual and the bidirectional relationships between the systems impacting the individual and each other.

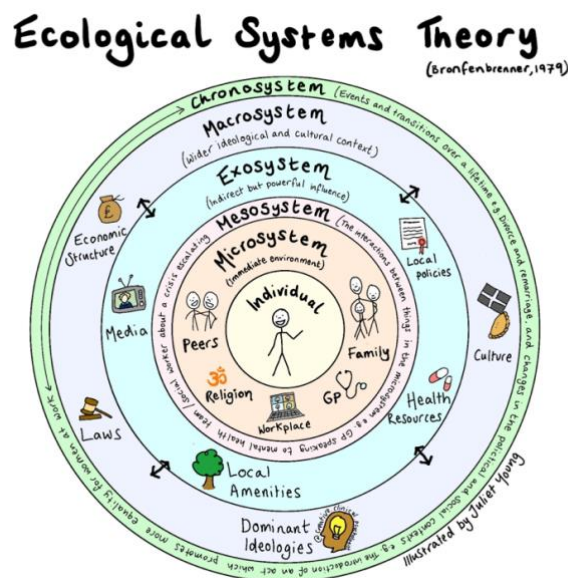


Figure 1. Illustration of Ecological Systems Theory (Young, 2021)

Fig. 2 below shows how Bronfenbrenner and Ceci's (1994) model can be used to illustrate how these systems may impact each other when considering the concept of ESNA. It shows the significant impact of systems on the individual and each other.

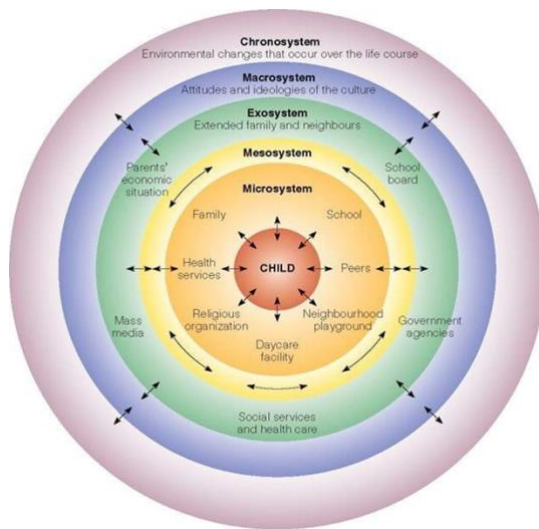


Figure 2. Bioecological Model of Human Development in relation to school attendance (Rhodes, 2013)

The use of this approach enables the perspective to be shifted from a 'within child' problem to a consideration of the close links with, and impact of, the systems and environments around the child. Additionally, whilst these theories include the systems around the child, they do not negate the important cognitive and individual factors that can impact ESNA, more they consider the responses to these factors widening how they can be addressed and responded to. Using the EST to understand ESNA can enable the systems to collaborate and work together to promote positive responses. It can enable school staff and those around the child to consider the multitude of factors on each level that not only have a negative impact but also those that have a positive impact and to further understand the 'push and pull' factors that can be utilised for reintegration (West Sussex Educational Psychology Service, 2022). Furthermore, this theoretical overview has been recommended by the International Network for School Attendance (INSA) an international group working to address difficulties and promote school attendance globally.

Bronfenbrenner's EST (1979) has been used to structure the literature review due to the perspective of some of the older literature, and also as it provides a framework to

understand ESNA as a multifaceted phenomenon influenced by the interaction between different systems surrounding the YP. However, for the empirical study (Chapter2), Bronfenbrenner and Ceci's (1994) bioecological model of human development was used. This later model places additional emphasis on the role of individual cognitive and bioecological factors, alongside environmental systems. The bioecological model considers the dynamic interaction between the individual's developmental processes and the external systems, making it more suitable for interpreting the complex, real-life experiences of young people with ESNA. By integrating both individual and systemic factors, this later version of the EST offers deeper exploration of how specific variables within these systems may influence ESNA.

1.4.1 Individual level

There are factors within the individual that could impact school attendance. For example, Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) would be seen even in the EST as being on the individual level and within the child. Furthermore, research such as the 4-factor structure (Kearney & Albano, 2004) is being revised to consider whether there may be an element of trait and state (nature/nurture) factors at play (Adams, 2022). This could be considered in the context of curriculum cuts and reduction in the number of creative subjects on offer and the autonomy over a YP's subject choice. For example, young people who are interested, or gifted, in more creative or art-based subjects are currently having these opportunities reduced with the current focus on STEM subjects in curriculum restructures, which could result in some young people losing interest and motivation to attend. Furthermore, for many students, creative subjects such as art, music and drama provide an essential outlet for self-expressions and emotional release. Without these subjects, school can become a monotonous and stressful environment focused solely on academic achievements, which can be particularly demotivating for students who excel in or enjoy creative disciplines (Schnitzler et al., 2021). The important aspect of viewing ESNA through the EST however, is to consider how the bidirectional relationships and influences can impact the individual whilst not negating any individual differences.

1.4.1.1 ESNA and SEND (including Neurodiversity and Mental Health Difficulties)

There is evidence that young people with recognised SEND may be at higher risk of experiencing ESNA (Connolly et al., 2023; John et al., 2022; Totsika et al., 2023b). Furthermore, the Children's Commissioner's report (2024), states that children with an Education Health and Care Plan and those in receipt of SEND support account for 34.7% and 29.9% of persistent absentees respectively, with 18.2% of children with no identified SEND being persistently absent over the same period. Other research states that young people with SEND are three times more likely to present with persistent attendance difficulties

(Martin, 2023), many of which are said to be neurodiverse, and a substantial number are waiting for further assessment and support (Connolly et al., 2023).

There is also a strong link between ESNA and young people suffering from mental health difficulties with 12.6% of young people with a probable mental health difficulty having missed more than 15 days of school compared with just 4% of those without (NHS Digital, 2022). Furthermore, mental health difficulties and anxiety are also more prevalent in those with neurodiverse conditions especially those on the autism spectrum (Adams, 2022; Totsika et al., 2023). Totsika et al. (2023), used the 'Kids and Teens at School Framework' (Melvin et al., 2019), which is based on the ecological systems perspective to explore potential factors and correlates of school non-attendance in children on the autism spectrum. They found that the same four variables were associated with increased risk of non-attendance: attending a mainstream school, parental unemployment, increasing child age, and not living in a two-parent household. Results from a systematic review by Finning et al., (2018), found associations with school refusal and anxiety disorders (i.e. separation, generalised, and social anxiety) as well as simple phobia. Furthermore, there needs to be a consideration in the individual level of the EST regarding mental health difficulties. For example, consideration to what extent the ESNA behaviours can be attributed to anxiety and individual traits of the young person or whether it can be attributed to the environment that they are in and the environmental factors around them and sensory responses causing the anxiety responses (Bond, 2024).

Despite the research into the links between ESNA and SEND difficulties, although a link has been found, there has been no clarification in understanding the complexity of factors that contribute to ESNA and the correlations remain an understudied sector of research (Seddon, 2023). Furthermore, the range of SEND difficulties makes researching this area very difficult and adds to the natural heterogeneity of the phenomenon. The research and figures, however, show that those with SEND, in particular SEMH needs and neurodivergent conditions are particularly vulnerable to ESNA or persistent school non-attendance (Bond, 2024), yet targeted interventions have not made a substantial difference suggesting different approaches need to be taken. Cunningham et al. (2022) focussed their study on staff perceptions and experiences and found that they considered CBT and other interventions to

work in isolation, but they expressed concern regarding the influence of the wider environment and had the view that these individual interventions did not work in isolation. From this research, the recommendations were to provide a sufficient resource with early intervention, development of a school community, collaboration with families, liaising with other professionals and targeted evidence-based strategies in a well-prepared plan. This supports the EST and mentions each system and its impact on the individual.

1.4.2 Microsystem

The Microsystem can be defined as the level consisting of factors within relationships and systems that are in the direct and immediate surroundings of the individual (Leduc et al., 2022). One of the major factors here that are pertinent to consider is navigating the relationships in the system that are bi-directional and can impact significantly on ESNA (Attwood & Croll, 2006; Connolly & Mullally, 2023; Garcia-Gracia & Valls, 2023; Juvonen et al., 2019; Sawyer, 2022). This is a broad section and can be categorised into relationships between the individual and different sectors. Therefore, this section will be separated into factors arising from relationships with peers, relationships with school staff, and relationships with families.

1.4.2.1 Relationships with peers

Bullying has been identified as a potential contributor to ESNA. Zacharia and Yablon (2022) found that a student's peer relationships and sense of safety and peer relationships had a direct correlation with school avoidance. Lewis et al. (2004.) explain that three major assumptions are made about children attending school which are: that children will feel comfortable about leaving home and attending school, that they will cope with the curriculum and learning challenges and that they will get on with other children and teachers in school. These are significant expectations, and many children cannot live up to these especially neurodiverse children as McClemon et al., (2021) discussed. McClemon et al. (2021) claim that school refusal is a 'red flag' for the identification of bullying in children with ASD or ADHD and that children in their study with these diagnoses were most likely to refuse school due to bullying. This is somewhat understandable as one of the significant

difficulties with neurodiverse differences is social communication however, this is also prevalent with neurotypical young people and is also related to reasons for avoiding attending school (Schlesier et al., 2023). As Schleiser et al. (2023) explain, opportunities and avenues for bullying have increased enormously with the introduction of social media and the digital age, meaning that young people are vulnerable to contact from bullies 'round the clock'. However, whilst it can be said that bullying is correlated with ESNA, there are also grounds to suggest that isolation is more the underlying factor than targeted bullying (McClemont et al., 2021). Furthermore, whilst negative relationships with peers may exacerbate ESNA, there is a case for positive relationships with peers acting as 'pull' factors towards school attendance with qualitative studies suggesting that good peer relationships can prevent ESNA (Havik et al., 2015; Havik & Ingul, 2021).

1.4.2.2 Relationships with school staff

Kern & Wehmeyer (2021) discuss how important school belonging is, impacting several factors such as mental health, academic attainment and engagement. Substantial research has suggested that there is a direct correlation between student-teacher relationships and a young person's sense of belonging in school (Arslan & Coşkun, 2020; Corcoran et al., 2024; Kern & Wehmeyer, 2021). According to Maslow's (1943) Hierarchy of Needs, once our physiological and safety needs are met, the next essential level is our belongingness and love needs (see Fig. 3 below)

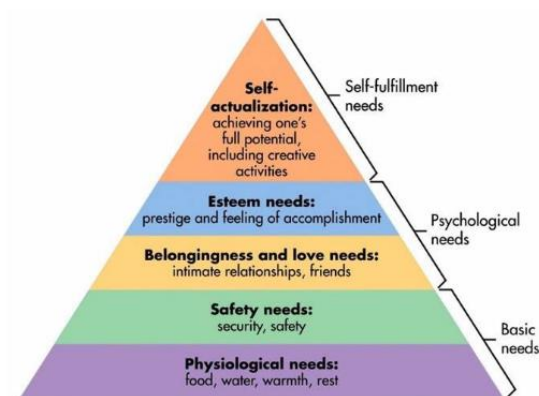


Figure 3. Maslow's Hierarchy of Need (Simply Psychology, 2023)

Whilst a sense of belonging in peer relationships is also needed, the teacher-student relationship is particularly important because it can support peer relationships whilst also strengthening a sense of belonging in the school environment from a different level, almost as a bridging relationship. Research by Allen (2018) indicates that a student will have a stronger sense of belonging if they perceive their teachers are genuinely caring and supportive. It is important to consider the young people with SEN regarding relationships for various reasons. As previously mentioned, young people with neurodivergent profiles or SEMH needs are found to have a higher prevalence of ESNA (Connolly et al., 2023). Neurodivergence brings with it social communication difficulties which can impact not only peer relationships but teacher-student relationships (Connolly et al., 2023), highlighting the need for empathetic, understanding and patient responses from the teaching staff. Having an encouraging staff member that the YP feels they can trust is key to successful reintegration after ESNA (Corcoran et al., 2022; Sawyer, 2022; Seddon, 2023a).

1.4.2.3 Relationships with families

Young people's relationships with their families and other relationship dynamics between family members can directly impact school attendance. Research suggests that traumatic family events such as bereavement (Devenney & O'toole, 2021), parental separation (Tekin & Aydin, 2022), parental health needs (Havik & Ingul, 2021), overprotective parenting (Chockalingam et al., 2023), domestic violence (Rutter, 2021), a family history of ESNA (Totsika et al., 2020) and controlling parenting can be risk factors for ESNA (Tamlyn, 2022). However, it can be argued that in the research cited, many of the changes such as alterations to family dynamics or elderly grandparents dying often occur at the same time as other life transitions such as moving from primary to high school education or puberty, hence making it very difficult to know for certain that these elements are the underlying causes (Gelder et al., 1983). Nonetheless, it is documented that parental influence can be a factor in ESNA and some previous research has suggested that school staff often associate ESNA with ineffective parenting, disorganisation and chaotic home environments (Beckles, 2014; Kearney &

Silverman, 1991). Beckles (2014) reports that one of the main factors discussed with school staff in their study was the lack of engagement or involvement of the parents in their children's education and sometimes 'enabling' the ESNA to happen. The research supporting this attitude is dated and there has been a substantial shift in perceptions however, the need to find causality, responsibility and blame continues to have a detrimental impact on relationships between parents and their YP, and between parents and schools (Kearney et al., 2023).

1.4.3 Mesosystem

The mesosystem is another level that is suggested to have a significant impact on our understanding of ESNA and its occurrence. This is the system in which two or more microsystems are interconnected. In this instance, the mesosystem is the relationship between the YP, their parent(s), and the school staff. Research suggests a more positive outcome can be reached when there is a good relationship between the school staff and parents with open lines of communication so that they can work together to support the YP in both settings (Kelty & Wakabayashi, 2020). Additionally, Goodall and Montgomery (2014) explain that there is a difference between parental involvement and parental engagement; it is at the engagement level that there becomes a beneficial collaborative working relationship to help address the difficulties. This is further supported by Totsika et al. (2023), who found in their study of 500 parents, that the protective factor was the strong parent, student, and teacher relationship that supported the YP to attend school.

It is reported that bonds of trust between families and schools were broken following the Covid-19 pandemic which was not helped by the following strikes that occurred post-pandemic. A poll of 1,206 parents of children aged between 5-16 was undertaken by the Centre for Social Justice in December 2023. In this poll, parents reported that school was still seen as important, but the lockdown has impacted the perceived necessity of school attendance. Furthermore, a large minority of parents, particularly those with children in high schools, do not believe that they have a good relationship with the school their child attends, primarily due to a lack of communication. Parents also reported that they would like

more support from schools with 18% of parents not feeling confident that their child's needs are being met (Centre for Social Justice, 2024). One of the recommendations from this report was that the government should create a National Parent Participation Strategy which includes best practice guidance to help schools and parents to engage more meaningfully with each other, which should then positively impact their child's relationship and engagement with school.

1.4.4 Exosystem

The exosystem consists of wider systems that can influence a YP significantly, yet more indirectly. For example, government agencies, media and the wider social systems. Difficulties such as inaccessible services can be positioned in this system and inadequate communication between these systems is often quoted as being a frustrating factor in ESNA (Connolly et al., 2023). One factor within this system that is salient is the socio-economic status of the YP and their family which can impact the parent's ability to support and provide for their YP and can create inequality in access to services. This is becoming increasingly linked to ESNA and although recent government legislation has acknowledged the need for a more EST perspective, the rise in school fines that will be implemented in August 2024, in the current financial climate, has been argued as an unnecessary and punitive move which, as (Henshaw, 2024) explains, will hit the disadvantaged pupils the hardest.

1.4.4.1 Socioeconomics and the 'cost of living crisis'

It is well-documented that there is an association between children's socioeconomic background and school absenteeism (Attwood & Croll, 2006; Kearney et al., 2022; Klein et al., 2020; Klein & Sosu, 2024). The Children's Commissioner (2024) reported that 33% of children eligible for free school meals were persistently absent compared to 15.7% of children who were not eligible. Skinner et al. (2022) report that over 30% of children are living in poverty with the figure looking likely to worsen and a link between persistent absenteeism and low household income.

In addition, public services have been weakened by a decade of austerity which has impacted children and young people in education with cuts to education and health services. This has resulted in substantial waiting lists for SEND support and a lack of mental health support (Broadbent et al., 2023), meaning as the ESNA problems are increasing, access to support is becoming less easy for young people and their families.

School budgets have been cut and commodities such as energy and food costs have risen meaning that education providers are under pressure to stretch resources resulting in the withdrawal of extra provisions. Subsequently, there has been a difficulty in staff recruitment and retainment which has added difficulty through inconsistency of staff and the use of supply teachers (Weale, 2023). Furthermore, resources such as after-school clubs, subsidised school trips, and even support staff such as teaching assistants (TAs), pastoral staff and family liaison officers, who would previously have been active in a child's persistent absenteeism have been sacrificed to ensure the essentials are covered and the budgets are met (Martin 2023). Furthermore, the cost-of-living crisis coming straight after the COVID-19 pandemic has meant prolonged uncertainty, instability, distress and associated difficulties for the education sector and the children and families who use it (Hill & Webber, 2022).

1.4.5 Macrosystem

The macrosystem includes broader social and cultural factors which impact on all the other systems. The macrosystem differs in impact from the previous systems as it refers to the already established society in which the YP is developing and functioning. However, whilst this society is already established, it can be argued that social constructs are fluid (Burr, 2015), and this can impact on a YP's attendance. An example could be societal values and attitudes towards the LGBTQ+ society, Roma Gypsy community or racial attitudes which could insight bullying or othering known to impact ESNA (Lim et al., 2024).

1.4.6 Chronosystem

The final system in the EST is the chronosystem, relating to the shifts and transitions as well as unpredicted changes to a child's life. As Seddon (2023) explains, experiences like parental

separation, traumatic events, sudden changes in financial circumstances or even moving home, are all events that fall within the chronosystem which may impact a child's attendance. However, events such as puberty, transitioning to high school (which is a prevalent factor suggested in the research) and cognitive development are also elements in this system and whilst not unexpected or traumatic, can still impact attendance (Bagnall et al., 2022; Mumford & Birchwood, 2021; van Rens et al., 2018). One pertinent recent event that can be considered in the chronosystem is the COVID-19 pandemic which has had a significant impact on education (Nathwani et al., 2021; Taylor, 2021; Totsika et al., 2023a).

1.4.6.1 COVID-19 pandemic and ESNA

There have been unprecedented levels of disruption to young people's education due to the pandemic and this has impacted negatively on many areas from transitions to access to support both in and outside the educational setting (McDonald et al., 2023). It is reported that there are delays in children's speech and language development due to not being around others (Araújo et al., 2021), as well as a delay in other areas of young people's social development (de Figueiredo et al., 2021) with indications that there is a big increase in SEMH needs in children and young people potentially impacting a significant increase in children experiencing EBSNA since the return of schools during the pandemic (McDonald et al., 2023; Nathwani et al., 2021; Yasin, 2023).

In contrast, research by (Hamilton et al., 2023) also suggests that some children with SEND thrived during the lockdown with the introduction of online learning and the need to stay at home in a 'safe' and familiar environment. Despite the benefits some children experienced at the time, Nathwani et al. (2021) suggest this led some children to find it more difficult to return to the more formal classroom setting and the need to conform to the more formal school day. Furthermore, COVID brought about a new way of adults working with many parents still on hybrid working patterns from offices and a new era of technological ways of communicating such as Microsoft Teams and Zoom (Hill & Webber, 2022). Young people are witnessing their parents and carers being able to work from home and holding important

conferences or meetings online, adding to their questioning of why they must attend a physical place of education in which they feel uncomfortable when this is not being mirrored as it used to be in the adult working world (Taylor, 2021).

Those who benefitted from the environments during the lockdowns were typically, the young people who were only just managing to attend pre-pandemic, and those children who present with a neurodiverse profile (Granieri et al., 2023). As Masters (2023) explains, the removal of the formal school environmental pressures, policies, and social communication intricacies, created a pressure-free environment in which to learn and access education. The online learning environment suited them as they were in a place of safety and the triggers of anxiety were negated therefore letting them focus and engage with their learning without the physical and mental barriers caused by anxiety which is suggested to be an underlying factor in the majority of ESNA cases (Finning et al., 2019).

Additionally, the young people who were struggling with sensory difficulties were able to stay in the home environment that they are used to, with carers who can cater to their needs possibly more effectively than school staff (Taylor, 2021). As a report by Barnardo's (2020) explains, many of these young people will have been able to access a relational approach (a positive interaction between the child and adult) during the lockdowns that is not always mirrored in the classroom environment and will have been experiencing less pressure to conform and exceed in their academic studies. Furthermore, some young people were reluctant to start to mix with people again given the threat that social mixing had posed during the pandemic (Jungmann & Witthöft, 2020), and this raised some fears surrounding health anxiety which has also had its part to play in the rise in non-attendance.

Young people have been impacted hugely by the pandemic (Barnardo's, 2020; Masters, 2023; Nathwani et al., 2021; Taylor, 2021), and every age group has missed a substantial chunk of social developmental time alongside educational curriculum content (de Figueiredo et al., 2021). Many young people were not able to engage in the usual transition exercises that have been used previously such as face-to-face meetings, transition interventions, social gatherings, and physical visits to the buildings they will be attending. As Bagnall et al. (2022) discuss, these evidence-based strategies that have been used in the past to help young

people integrate had to be manipulated and reformed to enable some sort of transitional programme to happen. Pupils were unable to physically view their new school environment or meet new teachers and pupils. Often transitions were done online and if anything happened in person, it was often in the requested 'bubbles' set by the government and limited to a small number of pupils and one or two members of staff. This restricted the opportunity to make plentiful firm and meaningful friendships and relationships prior to full transition (Bagnall et al., 2022), and impacted the full experience that may be needed for a successful and smooth transition. Van Rens et al. (2018) argue that the smooth transition from primary education to high school education is paramount to the success of the placement. However, Mumford & Birchwood (2021) argue that the pre-transition phase is the important period that matters with a focus on relationship building (with both staff and peers) immediately before transition which these children have not been able to access.

1.5 Identification and intervention of ESNA

In order to be able to consider early intervention, it is essential for early identification of ESNA behaviours. Ingul et al. (2019) undertook a literature review to consider the likely signs and risks of emerging school refusal (as it was termed then). They found that the signs could be categorised into sections – characteristics relating to the YP, characteristics relating to the school setting, and characteristics related to the family situation. From this Ingul et al. (2019) developed a school-based framework for identifying early signs and risk factors, and a recommendation to form a dedicated attendance team in school. Further research has also found similar early signs and risk factors, and these are identified as:

- Isolation or bullying
- Separation anxiety
- Coping ability
- Difficulties with classroom routine
- Difficulties with peer/teacher relationships
- Low academic self-concept
- Exam pressure

The above factors can be considered as primary causes which are thought to also be compounded by secondary causes as Nuttall and Woods (2013) explain such as:

- Lack of monitoring of toilets, corridors and playground areas by staff
- School climate and pupil sense of 'connectedness' to the school community
- Authoritarian management styles
- Performance orientated classrooms
- Bereavement or illness of a family member
- Transition to a new educational environment

From this identification of risks and causes, Nuttall and Woods (2013) created an Ecological Model of Successful Reintegration (Figure 4), which is based on Bronfenbrenner's EST as described earlier. This is widely used and adapted by professionals to help to devise a reintegration package for young people experiencing ESNA.

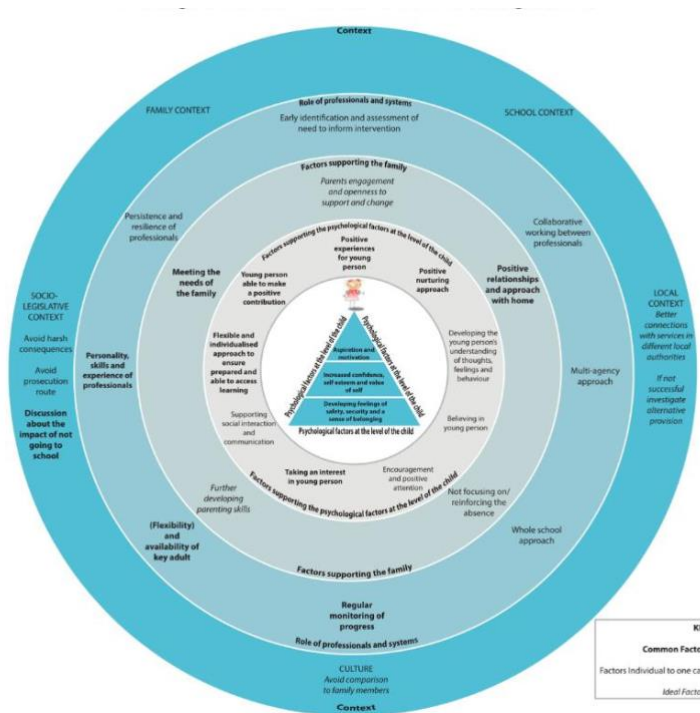


Figure 4. Ecological Model of Successful reintegration (Nuttall and Woods, 2013)

The Ecological Model of Successful Reintegration focusses on facilitating the return of students to regular school attendance after periods of non-attendance. The model emphasises a comprehensive, multi-faceted approach that addresses the individual needs of

students, the dynamics within their families, the support from school staff, and the broader community resources. Nuttall and Woods (2013) emphasise the importance of collaborative efforts, personalised support plans, and interventions that consider emotional, social and academic dimensions. The model aims to create an inclusive environment that fosters student re-integration and re-engagement, reduces barriers to attendance, and promotes sustained educational participation.

Historically, there have been various interventions and approaches to help in the case of ESNA, the majority of which were 'within child' focussed on therapies or interventions to correct the responses from the YP and subsequently reduce the avoidance behaviours. As identified by Blagg (1987), interventions such as psychodynamic approaches, graded exposure, and behavioural approaches have been used. More recently, interventions to help with the YP's emotional regulation and negative thinking have been used such as cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT). CBT has been the most popular choice to address ESNA to date (Maynard et al., 2015). However, whilst these approaches aim to try and help the YP in isolation, the evidence indicates that while there are often improvements in school attendance, these interventions do not always promote improvements in anxiety (Maynard et al., 2015). This then raises the question as to whether addressing attendance is an appropriate approach, or whether addressing the underlying anxieties should be the initial focus. Moreover, research (Connolly et al., 2023; Corcoran, 2023; Corcoran et al., 2022; Cunningham et al., 2022; Sawyer, 2022) also suggests that the full focus should not be on the YP and their behaviour, but also on adaptations to responses towards the child and the environment within the school to ensure their needs are met which in turn is likely to address triggers of anxiety and then enable the YP to re-engage with school.

More recently there has also been a move towards trauma informed approaches and consideration to the need of a respite and recovery stage before thinking about reintegration into school. Furthermore, there is a move from the 'push and pull' factors towards a broader 'risk and resilience' framework and considering the predisposing, precipitating and perpetuating factors (Holder, 2024). There is also a need for consideration as to when the interventions should be implemented (Heyne et al., 2022). As can be seen in Fig. 5 The multi-tiered model to promote school attendance and reduce school absenteeism,

there are three main areas in which to target intervention (Heyne et al., 2022). Historically and until very recently, many interventions have been ‘curative’ in their aims as such as CBT, so are delivered in tier three of the model. To ensure prevention, there needs to be an increase in intervention at tier one which will require a wider more systemic preventative approach

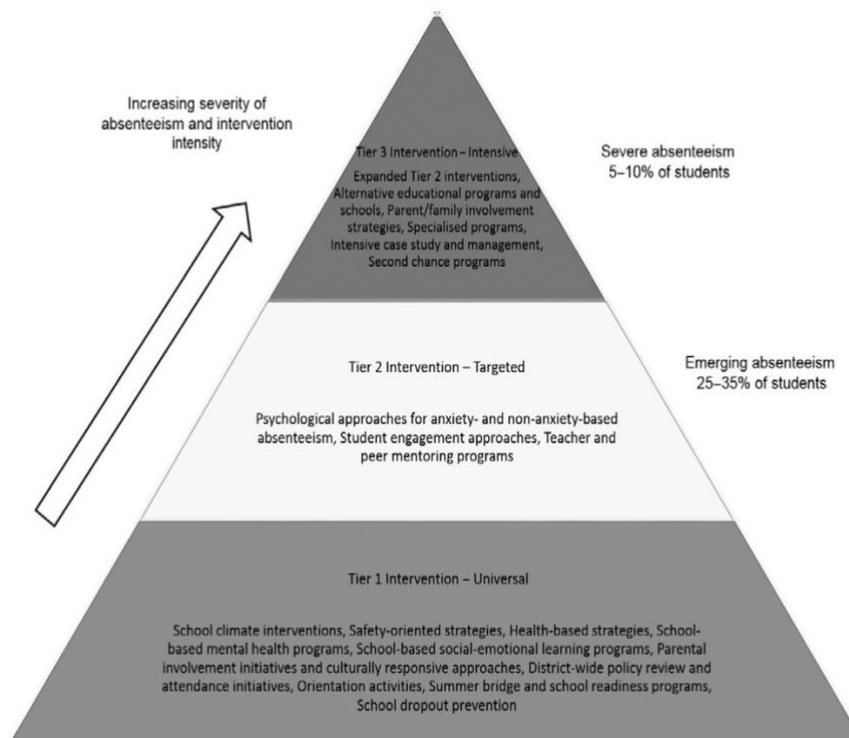


Figure 5. Multi-tiered Model to Promote School Attendance and Reduce School Absenteeism (Heyne et al., 2022)

Finally, there are likely to be many young people who need an interim provision or who cannot reintegrate into the school environment and for these young people it is essential that an alternative setting is sought so that they are able to engage in basic fundamentals of integration and preparation for adult life (Brouwer-Borghuis et al., 2019).

Alternative Provision can provide young people with a relational approach, adapted learning environments (safe space), structure, individualised approaches, flexibility, mentoring and a good level of parent, professional and mainstream collaboration (Preece and Howley, 2018 Brouwer-Borghuis et al 2019). Preece and Howley (2018), undertook a study of young people in the UK who attended a centre specifically set up to help them reintegrate back

into formal education. Due to the intensive support that they received, the adaptations made to their environments, and the fact that there was a robust and supported transition plan, all of the students reintegrated into the formal education environment. Brouwer-Borghuis et al. (2019) completed a similar study in the Netherlands with young people attending an alternative provision. In their study, none of the 30 young people reintegrated back into the formal educational setting however, they all engaged with education in some form enabling them to access support and learn life skills that would be important for their future adult life. This highlights the need for consideration of a different model for those young people who cannot cope with the mainstream environment but need an educational environment to learn life-skills and social integration.

1.6 Summary of the literature review

This literature review has explored the literature surrounding ESNA and considered the historical journey of terms and rhetoric as well as previous ways of identifying and addressing non-attendance problems. The heterogeneous nature of the phenomenon has been discussed as well as the shift from within-child perspectives to that of a more holistic view of ESNA. The current and topical changes in legislation have also been discussed. The significant impact of events such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the current cost of living crisis were highlighted and the relationships between ESNA and SEND has been explored. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) EST was subsequently used as a lens through which to synthesise the large body of literature on ESNA and approaches to identification, intervention, and support were reviewed.

A gap in the literature has been highlighted by illustrating that there is a lack of literature that considers the triangulated voices of the stakeholders within the situation (parent, YP, member of school staff), and therefore tends to lack one perspective. Furthermore, the literature from school-based studies focuses more on difficulties within the home and vice versa. There is also limited UK research into ESNA despite it being such a prevalent topic and growing concern. It is important to consider the phenomenon within the UK due to the differences in the education systems from other countries so that we can consider any factors unique to the system we are in.

The literature has highlighted that there is an importance for relationships around the YP to be strong and supportive. Moreover, the research has indicated that young people experiencing ESNA usually have common underlying factors such as anxiety yet need individual responses. However, this does not seem to be happening within professional practice, with blanket interventions often being the choice. Additionally, many of the studies have considered reintegration or retrospective cases whereas it is useful to study cases that are in process and consider the elements impacting from each angle. Due to this, the researcher wanted to explore the intricacies in more detail and illustrate how important it is to explore the experiences of different cases and stakeholders and the barriers they might experience. Therefore, to consider all perspectives and to look at as many details within the phenomenon as possible, a Reflexive Thematic Analysis methodology was chosen to include perspectives from the main stakeholders; parents, YP and school staff.

1.7 Gaps in the literature

Whilst the literature available has considered attendance difficulties from many perspectives, there is limited research considering the perspectives from all main stakeholders, the YP, parents and school staff as a triangulated exploration and considering the unique and individual differences combined with early signs of development of ESNA. The majority of literature focuses on one or two of the participant groups (often the adults) within the situation such as parents and teachers or outside professionals such as EPs (Corcoran et al., 2022; McDonald et al., 2023), with one adult sector and the child (Beckles, 2014), or with one particular group (Cunningham et al., 2022; Sawyer, 2022; Tamlyn, 2022). Furthermore, school-based research tends to locate risk factors more within the home environment (Chockalingam et al., 2023; Cunningham et al., 2022; Kelty & Wakabayashi, 2020) and parent-based research tends to locate the difficulties within the school environment (Connolly et al., 2023; Nordin et al., 2023; Sawyer, 2022). Additionally, with the rise in cases of ESNA linked to the COVID-19 pandemic (Bagnall et al., 2022; Nathwani et al., 2021; Totsika et al., 2023a) and the current cost of living crisis (Klein et al., 2020; Klein & Sosu, 2024), the researcher wanted to consider how these factors had influenced each

stakeholder within the perceived problem and if this could be a contributory factor within the area.

Chapter Two: Empirical Paper

1.0 Introduction

School attendance is a legal requirement in the UK with legislation stating that every child of compulsory school age (5-18) must have an appropriate full-time education (DfE, 2015) and that parents are legally responsible for their young person's (YP) attendance. However, despite this legislation, there is a significant number of children who are missing a substantial amount of education. The latest government data on school attendance reveals that three years on from schools reopening from the COVID-19 lockdowns, one in five children are still not attending full-time school despite being on roll. The Centre for Social Justice, (2024) noted that in the 2023 Autumn term, 1,407,802 children were persistently absent from school (i.e., they missed more than 10% of school time).

The importance of school attendance and the negative implications of non-attendance are well-documented in the literature, linking low and non-attendance with outcomes such as early school dropout and isolation (Ingul et al., 2019), as well as more long-term outcomes such as increased risk of unemployment (Garcia-Gracia & Valls, 2023), impaired social functioning (Maynard et al., 2015) and mental health difficulties (Thambirajah et al., 2008). Furthermore, as the Children's Commissioner (2024) reports, schools are places where children make friends, learn new hobbies, and build on ambitions for the future, therefore providing a setting in which many social and life skills are learned and developed with non-attendance limiting these opportunities.

There are various reasons for non-attendance, however, the current concern is that there are a growing number of YP who are not attending school due to emotionally based reasons linked with anxiety or emotional distress (Corcoran et al., 2022; Heyne et al., 2022; Ingul et al., 2019). Research also suggests that non-attendance can often be associated or triggered by traumatic events or significant transitions such as moving from primary to secondary/high school (Connolly et al., 2023; Pellegrini, 2007; van Rens et al., 2018).

1.1 Terminology

An appropriate term for the phenomenon is yet to be agreed upon. It has been conceptualised in a variety of ways over the years with terms such as school phobia (Berg et al., 1969) school refusal (Ingul et al., 2019), emotionally based school avoidance (EBSA) (West Sussex Educational Psychology Service, 2022), emotionally based school non-attendance (EBSNA) (Corcoran et al., 2022) and extended school non-attendance (ESNA) (Knage, 2023), all being used in research and practice in recent years. However, the heterogeneity of ESNA makes it difficult to categorise and conceptualise with the main concern being the implications of the terminology used with the placement of blame and level of autonomy on the YP. Recently there has been a parental suggestion that even the terms EBSA and EBSNA, which recognise the emotional reactions and distress of the child are blame-loaded (Morgan & Costello, 2023), therefore within this study, the term extended school non-attendance (ESNA) will be used to adopt a neutral position and to remain aligned with the current government guidance which has also adopted this terminology (Yasin, 2023). Heyne et al. (2019) and Kearney (2003, 2007) argue that inconsistency and ambiguity surrounding the conceptualisation need to be avoided due to standing in the way of scientific advancement and assessment/treatment. Furthermore, they argue that the field would benefit from a shared and well-defined terminology which can capture the phenomenon adequately (Knage, 2023).

1.2 An Ecological Systems approach

Despite the terminology issues, one useful theory that can be applied to better understand ESNA is the Ecological Systems Theory (EST) (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 2000) which can help to highlight and explore the various factors that impact at each level within the systems around the child. Much of the recent literature has used the EST to understand ESNA (Corcoran et al., 2022; El Zaatari & Maalouf, 2022; Sawyer, 2022; Seddon, 2023a; Tamlyn, 2022) using various stakeholders within their studies to consider the systemic levels and suggest at which level interventions can be implemented. This illustrates the shift from a 'within child' perspective of the phenomenon to a wider and more holistic perception of it, emphasising the importance of understanding the impact of the environment, systems, and societal

influences surrounding the individual. This facilitates a much more varied ways to address ESNA, subsequently increasing the possibility of reintegration (Preece & Howley, 2018; Sawyer, 2022; Seddon, 2023a) and allowing the implementation of individually tailored support plans to be devised.

In EST, the individual is positioned at the centre with the systems surrounding them. At the individual level, aspects that can impact ESNA are those such as individual differences, confidence, self-esteem and special educational needs (SEND) which have a strong link highlighted in the literature with unmet needs being a significant contributory factor (Baker & Bishop, 2015; Connolly et al., 2023; Cunningham et al., 2022; Heyne et al., 2022), with unmet needs being a significant contributory factor, especially neurodiversity. The Children's Commissioner's report (2024) states that children with an Education Health and Care Plan and those in receipt of SEND support were 34.7% and 29.9% respectively more likely to be persistently absent with 18.2% of children with no identified SEND being persistently absent over the same period. There is also a strong link between ESNA and YP suffering from mental health difficulties with 12.6% of YP with a mental health difficulty having missed more than 15 days of school compared with just 4% of those without (NHS Digital, 2022).

It is, however, the bidirectional relationships between the individual and the systems surrounding them that can be manipulated and altered to support or impede their school attendance. The microsystem is the system directly outside the individual and consists of the relationships that the individual has with the immediate systems such as peers, family, and school staff (Nuttall & Woods, 2013). Factors such as bullying, a lack of or negative relationships with school staff, and parent-child attachment difficulties have all been cited as impacting ESNA (Lewis et al., 2004; Zacharia & Yablon, 2022).

A further psychological theory at play within this level that can also contribute to understanding ESNA is sense of belonging theory (Baumeister et al., 2007; El Zaatari & Maalouf, 2022; Gallagher Deeks, 2023). Within the microsystem, a strong sense of belonging and acceptance within family, peer groups and school settings is directly associated with positive outcomes such as increased self-esteem, better academic performance, overall mental health and increased attendance (El Zaatari & Maalouf, 2022; Goodenow, 1993). In

contrast, a lack of sense of belonging can contribute to feelings of isolation, anxiety, and depression, which are significant factors in ESNA (Hughes et al., 2015).

The next system is the mesosystem which concerns the relationships that are salient between these systems without the individual directly involved such as the relationship between school and parents (Nuttall & Woods, 2013; Seddon, 2023a; Tamlyn, 2022). Research suggests that there is a correlation between parent's engagement in their YP's education and ESNA (Centre for Social Justice, 2024; Chockalingam et al., 2023; Goodall & Montgomery, 2014) highlighting the importance of these relationships between the systems around the YP. When parents and teachers collaborate effectively, they can create a consistent support network that reinforces the importance of education and can address barriers to education. Furthermore, strong parental support and involvement in the child's education can significantly enhance their commitment to school (Barnes & Harrison, 2017). Moreover, conflicts or lack of support within these relationships can lead to disengagement and possible attendance difficulties highlighting how fostering these positive relationships is essential (Wang & Fredricks, 2014).

Moving further out the next system is the exosystem, a more difficult system to implement change, comprising government agencies, media and the wider social systems that can have a direct impact on the individual in the case of ESNA. For example, inaccessible systems, high thresholds, and long waiting lists for support would be included in this system which is one of the significant difficulties for parents and young people (Connolly & Mullally, 2023). Furthermore, this system would also incorporate the socioeconomic climate and the impact of the current 'cost of living crisis', which is impacting schools and services with cuts in budgets as well as families with costs rising (Klein et al., 2020; Klein & Sosu, 2024). It is well-documented that there is an association between children's socioeconomic background and school absenteeism (Attwood & Croll, 2006; Kearney et al., 2022; Klein et al., 2020; Klein & Sosu, 2024). The Children's Commissioner (2024) reported that 33% of children eligible for free school meals were persistently absent compared to 15.7% of children who were not eligible.

The macrosystem refers to the larger cultural and societal context that influences an individual's development. This level includes cultural norms, laws, and social policies, which can have a significant impact and can be considered influential on aspects such as bullying due to societal attitudes and stereotypes (Lim et al., 2024). Furthermore, public policies and educational laws within the microsystem can impact attendance. Policies that support early childhood education, provide free or reduced-cost meals and ensure safe transportation to school can improve school attendance rates. In contrast, punitive attendance policies that fail to address the underlying cause of absenteeism and stringent behaviour policies that do not take account of individual SEND may also exacerbate the issue (Calabro-Pepin, 2020).

The final system to note is the chronosystem which relates to shifts and transitions as well as unpredicted changes to a child's life. As (Seddon, 2023) explains, experiences like parental separation, traumatic events, sudden changes in financial circumstances or even moving home are events that fall within the chronosystem which may impact a child's attendance. However, events such as puberty, transitioning to high school (which is a prevalent factor suggested in the research) and cognitive development are also elements in this system and whilst not unexpected or traumatic, can still impact attendance (Bagnall et al., 2022; Mumford & Birchwood, 2021; van Rens et al., 2018). One pertinent recent event that can be considered in the chronosystem is the COVID-19 pandemic which has had a significant impact on education (Nathwani et al., 2021; Taylor, 2021; Totsika et al., 2023) with many young people finding it difficult to reintegrate into the education system after the lockdowns. The young people reported to have been impacted significantly by the pandemic are those who were in the final year of their primary education which will have included the transition into high school and related events (Bagnall et al., 2022). This transition is an incredibly important stage in their life and needs to be handled sensitively and over a lengthy period, especially for SEND students (Mumford & Birchwood, 2021), which was unable to happen during the pandemic. Furthermore, COVID-19 and the different ways of engaging in education have shown parents and young people that there is an alternative method and that the classroom environment is not the only way to learn (Bagnall et al., 2022; Nathwani et al., 2021).

1.3 Gaps in the literature

Whilst the literature available has considered attendance difficulties from many perspectives, there is limited research considering the perspectives from all main stakeholders, the young person (YP), parents, and school staff as a triangulated exploration and considering the unique and individual differences combined with early signs of development of ESNA. The majority of literature focuses on one or two of the participant groups (often the adults) for example, parents and teachers or outside professionals such as EPs (Corcoran et al., 2022; McDonald et al., 2023). Alternatively, research focuses on an adult sector (parent, teacher, professional) and a YP (Beckles, 2014), or with one particular group such as girls with autism, primary school children, secondary/high school children, school staff or parents (Cunningham et al., 2022; Sawyer, 2022; Tamlyn, 2022). Furthermore, school-based research tends to locate risk factors more within the home environment (Chockalingam et al., 2023; Cunningham et al., 2022; Kelty & Wakabayashi, 2020) and parent-based research tends to locate the difficulties within the school environment (Connolly et al., 2023; Nordin et al., 2023; Sawyer, 2022). Additionally, with the rise in cases of ESNA linked to the COVID-19 pandemic (Bagnall et al., 2022; Nathwani et al., 2021; Totsika et al., 2023a) and the current cost of living crisis (Klein et al., 2020; Klein & Sosu, 2024), the researcher wanted to consider how these factors had influenced each stakeholder within the perceived problem and if this could be a contributory factor within the area.

Thus, while the literature available has considered attendance difficulties at the different systems levels, and from many perspectives, there is limited research considering and integrating the perspectives from all key stakeholders (i.e. the child, their parent, and the school staff involved in their case) as a triangulated exploration of ESNA. It is also important to recognise how the wider systems around the YP can impact the individual and microsystems, to fully consider the unique and differentiated experiences of ESNA and the factors that impact it, potentially enabling the identification of early signs of its development and facilitating the provision of individually tailored support.

2.0 Research aims and questions

This research aimed to address these gaps by exploring experiences of ESNA from the perspectives of the child, their parents, and the school staff involved in their support across two independent cases. Additionally, due to the phenomenon being fluid and the impact of wider systems and circumstances, such as COVID-19 and the cost-of-living crisis, this study aimed to consider these integrated perspectives in the context of EST to gain a holistic understanding of ESNA and the factors associated with it. The research questions are as follows:

Overarching research question:

- How is ESNA experienced by young people, their parents, and the school staff involved in their support?

Subsidiary research questions:

- What may be the early signs of ESNA?
- What factors might exacerbate experiences of ESNA?
- What might help young people, their parents, and school staff manage and cope with their experiences of ESNA?

3.0 Methodology

Having previously outlined the rationale, aims, and purpose of this study, this section will proceed to give an overview of the research design, justify the methodological approaches adopted, and outline the procedures used for data collection and analysis. All relevant ethical considerations will also be discussed.

3.1 Philosophical considerations

All research is underpinned by philosophical assumptions of ontology and epistemology, which in turn influences the researcher's choice of methodology. This research adopts a

critical realist (CR) epistemological approach stemming from the assumption that there is a real world and a truth that exists independently (Easton, 2010), but that these may be experienced differently by different people dependent upon their own experiences. Whilst the concept of ESNA could be considered a socially constructed phenomenon, the elements of the independent constructs of 'anxiety' and 'ESNA', and the assumptions that surround these constructs are highly relevant and cannot be negated. These constructs exist independently of the individual's perspectives of them. As Robson and McCartan (2016) explain, an important part of the CR perspective (in this instance) is that whilst these constructs exist, our individual experiences and interactions will impact our understanding of them. These constructs emerge from the interplay between the individuals' subjective experiences and the objective conditions of their environments, so whilst they are experienced differently by individuals, they are rooted in real, underlying mechanisms and structures, such as biological predispositions and socio-cultural factors. The CR perspective acknowledges the complexity of ESNA, advocating for an exploration of both the personal, lived experiences and the broader and often hidden systemic influences that contribute to the phenomena (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The CR position allows for a mix of exploration and explanation (Easton, 2010), which is consistent with the proposed use of methods within the Thematic Analysis methodology. The researcher hopes that through the CR lens, the experiences of the participants involved can be explored and acknowledged and a 'shared reality' uncovered that can be used to inform and influence solutions and implications for practice within the educational psychology field, whilst adding to findings in this area to develop a richer understanding (Corcoran et al., 2022).

It is important to note that the researcher understands that whilst there are wider shared truths, each participant's experiences will be individual in nature. Furthermore, in this study, the researcher's positionality, shaped by extensive personal and professional involvement with ESNA, may influence the interpretation of the data. The close connection to both the practical and emotional dimensions of ESNA, through roles as a support practitioner and a parent, means that there is an inherent familiarity with the subject matter. While this background allows for a rich, empathetic approach to the data, it also necessitates an

ongoing reflexive process to mitigate potential bias in the analysis as Braun & Clarke (2021) advise. The ways in which the researcher's positionality has been considered and addressed throughout the study are reflected in Chapter 3.

As (Braun & Clarke, 2006) explain, the participants' positionings and beliefs will influence the meanings they express, and the researcher's positioning and beliefs will impact their interpretation of the meanings, however, this can be seen and is recognised by Braun and Clarke (2006) as an important part of Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA), the analysis chosen to interpret the findings.

3.2 Design

To align with the above philosophical position, a Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) design was adopted. CR is particularly well suited to RTA research as it facilitates an in-depth exploration of the complex interplay between agency and structure. Easton. (2010) argues that RTA research is an ideal method for investigating real-world complexities, as they allow for a detailed examination of the contextual factors and mechanisms that influence outcomes. When applying the CR perspective to ESNA, RTA can reveal how individual experiences can be shaped by broader social contexts such as how a particular school's policies or cultural climate can contribute to a student's attendance difficulty and consider the mechanisms through which the factors interact with the YP's personal history and psychological state. This was achieved by using phase one to influence the development of stage two and then further analysis of the interviews. This therefore will give a more nuanced understanding of ESNA that can go beyond the surface-level observations to identify possible deeper and often hidden factors or 'causes' of the non-attendance.

Incorporating both qualitative and (very minimal) quantitative data, the primary focus and analysis is on qualitative data, with quantitative data providing a supportive, secondary role in a small part of the exploration. As Brown (2008) argues, whilst this methodology cannot serve to generalise as some other methods of research methodology can, it can provide rich and significant insights into events, perspectives and behaviours, which is important in understanding cases of ESNA. The aim was to triangulate the data to explore the

perspectives of all those involved and consider the challenges, barriers and wider social influences that had impacted the situation for all parties. Delving deeply into specific elements within a defined theoretical framework (i.e. EST) can offer a more comprehensive understanding of a scenario and can allow the context to be considered as well as the details of an individual (Brown, 2008; Crowe et al., 2011; Yadav, 2022).

3.3 Data collection

When exploring the complexity of how ESNA is constructed and experienced, using multiple samples, (YP, parents, school staff), is an effective way of triangulating data and considering the wider picture and multiple perspectives (Willig, 2001). Each perspective has different influences, barriers and considerations; therefore, it is important to include these within the research.

Further information was gathered for each case i.e. school policy documents (widely available on each school's website), and attendance figures (with permission from the participants). Participants were also asked to complete the Spence Anxiety Scale (Spence, 1998), and the Sense of Belonging Questionnaire (Barr & Gibson, 2013) at the start of the interviews. The Spence Anxiety Scale was used to consider the area in which anxiety levels were the highest and to see if these were similar in both young people. The Sense of Belonging Questionnaire was used to consider the areas that were low scoring within the interview conversation and to cross-compare the answers to consider any areas of similarity or differences. The primary source of data was semi-structured interviews as this provided the opportunity for participants in each group to explore topics and key issues that were pertinent to them and their situation (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021).

3.3.1 Participants

Following ethical approval, the participants were recruited via opportunity sampling by contacting the headteacher and SENDCo of the schools to which the researcher's placement

organisation had access. An initial email was sent, including information about the study and contact details, to pass on to potential participants (APPENDIX 1). The participants were identified from the table of inclusion criteria below:

Table 2. Table of Inclusion Criteria

Inclusion Criteria
Young person in Year 8, 9, 10
Young person who has experienced ESNA for at least the previous half term.
Young person whose parent would be willing to be interviewed.
A member of school staff who had been involved in the case and would be willing to be interviewed.

Three cases were identified by the headteachers and SENDCo in the schools contacted by the researcher. Information about the study and contact details of the researcher were passed to the parents/carers of the identified young people who were experiencing ESNA. Once the parents or carers had contacted the researcher, a date was arranged for an initial meeting and introduction. This was arranged to take place via Microsoft Teams. At this initial meeting, more information regarding the study was shared and a time and date for the face-to-face interview with the child and parent were arranged.

During the initial meetings with parents, the full details of the study were discussed, and the parents were asked to discuss this at length with their child before committing. At this point, one parent contacted me to say their YP could not communicate fully, and they would like to withdraw their interest. Several attempts were made to find another case by engaging the help of EPs in the service. However, despite repeated attempts and research timeline, finding another case was not possible. Therefore, the study continued with the two original cases.

The SENDCo of the schools determined the school staff members for each case, choosing the people who had been the most involved in each case. This resulted in four staff participants for case one and two staff participants for case two (please see the participant summary

table below for details of the staff titles), which gave a rich and detailed account from the staff's perspective.

The semi-structured interviews were undertaken at a mutually convenient time and place. Most interviews were held face-to-face with two interviews (both staff members from case two) being held online via Microsoft Teams meeting. All interviews were recorded using Microsoft Teams and they were automatically transcribed by the software (edited by the researcher afterwards to ensure they were verbatim).

Ethical approval was discussed with all participants, confidentiality was assured, and they were advised that they would be referred to via a pseudonym in any write-up of the study. Full consent was acquired, and parental consent for the young people was sought in addition (APPENDIX 2). The young people were also invited to bring an object or do a drawing to help them describe their perspective.

The young people were also asked to complete the Spence Anxiety questionnaire (Appendix 3) to explore in which area they were feeling the most anxiety and a small questionnaire on sense of belonging (Barr & Gibson, 2013) (Appendix 4).

The interviews were semi-structured and lasted between 45 – 60 minutes. Although the researcher had a prompt sheet with questions, the interviews were loosely structured, allowing the researcher the ability to ask questions on the points raised by participants and also reflecting the information provided in the sense of belonging questionnaire. Individually tailored interviews are crucial for case studies analysed using RTA because they allow for a deep and nuanced understanding of the participants' unique perspectives and experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Clarke & Braun, 2013). Tailored interviews enable the researcher to probe specific areas of interest and adapt their questions to the evolving context of the interview, fostering a richer, more detailed data set (Byrne, 2022).

Table 3 below summarises the participants' information. For confidentiality, pseudonyms have been used for the young people, and other participants are referred to by their role.

Table 3. Participant Summary

Name (Pseudonym)	Role	Case Number
Sam	Young person	1
Sam's mother	Parent	1
Assistant Head	Assistant Head	1
Attendance Officer	Attendance officer	1
HOY	Head of Year (current)	1
HOY 2	Head of Year (going into)	1
Poppy	Young person	2
Poppy's mother	Parent	2
Assistant SENDCo	Assistant SENDCo	2
Attendance Officer	Attendance officer	2

3.3.2 Interview procedure

Each interview was started with introductions, checking of consent, and a reminder of the purpose of the study. Participants were also reminded that the nature of the study could bring up some uncomfortable emotions, and they were reassured that they could stop at any time. The running order changed slightly for participants as below:

- Young people: The young person was asked to complete the Spence Anxiety Scale and the sense of belonging scale. They were asked if they would like to do this independently or if they would like help from the researcher. They were then asked if they had brought anything to help them talk about their experiences or if they would like to draw a picture to help them explain. The questions were then asked (APPENDIX 5), and the conversation was led by the young person with occasional guidance and questioning from the researcher.
- Parents and school staff members: The adults were asked a series of questions (APPENDIX 6). Although not prescriptive, the same information topics were visited but the conversation was led by the participants with gentle guidance and questioning from the researcher.

3.3.3 Analysis of phase one

Phase one comprised reviewing the schools' relevant policy documents, looking at the attendance figures, reviewing the scores from the Spence Anxiety Scale and the Sense of Belonging questionnaire and collating the background history and information for each case. This enabled the researcher to add a full, rich and robust background summary for each case and helped inform the progress and direction of the interviews. Synthesising different data types enables the researcher to obtain a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the research subject and context prior to completing phase two interviews.

3.3.4 Analysis of phase two

Phase two comprised analysis of the semi-structured interviews. The interview transcripts were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2021) reflexive thematic analysis based on the framework outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). The reflexive thematic analysis approach acknowledges the researcher's subjectivity and interpretation of the data, involving a process of critical reflection. Reflexive thematic analysis was used rather than IPA due to the thematic focus being across the data set rather than the unique details of each case alone.

The data was analysed to identify patterns of meaning and shared experiences across the full dataset to give a rich and deep understanding of the experiences of ESNA from all three perspectives. Braun and Clarke (2013), outline the seven steps:

- Transcription
- Reading and familiarisation
- Coding
- Searching for themes
- Reviewing themes
- Defining, and naming themes
- Finalising the analysis.

While the stages are listed above one by one, the analysis is not always linear and there can be many revisits to previous steps, therefore being a reflective and reflexive process. The analysis uses inductive and deductive thematic analysis to identify the themes that emerge from the data. It is suggested that inductive and deductive thematic analysis are not mutually exclusive (Braun & Clarke, 2021), but are more on a spectrum, which aligns with the ontological and epistemological position of the researcher. The data was coded inductively, with the resulting analysis completed 'by hand', situating the researcher as active within the process (APPENDIX 9). After the cyclical processes of producing, defining, and reviewing codes, the themes and sub-themes that best represented the data gathered were developed. Although an inductive approach was taken, EST was used as a lens to interpret the themes. These were then reviewed by referring to the original data extracts whilst considering the research questions. Given the subjective nature of the process, these stages were of the utmost importance to ensure that the researcher remained reflexive. These accumulative steps enabled the researcher to gain a fuller and richer understanding of the participant's perspectives and experiences of ESNA.

It has been argued that qualitative data should abide by a more stringent and structured approach to minimise the risk of researcher bias (Creswell, 2009), however, the researcher values the continual questioning and reflection of their assumptions when coding the data which allows for a more interactive, critical, and thoughtful process going beyond following instruction linearly. The diagram below shows the seven stages of reflexive thematic analysis followed in this study and what each stage comprised of, again it is important to note that this was not a fully linear process and there was a revisitation of stages throughout.

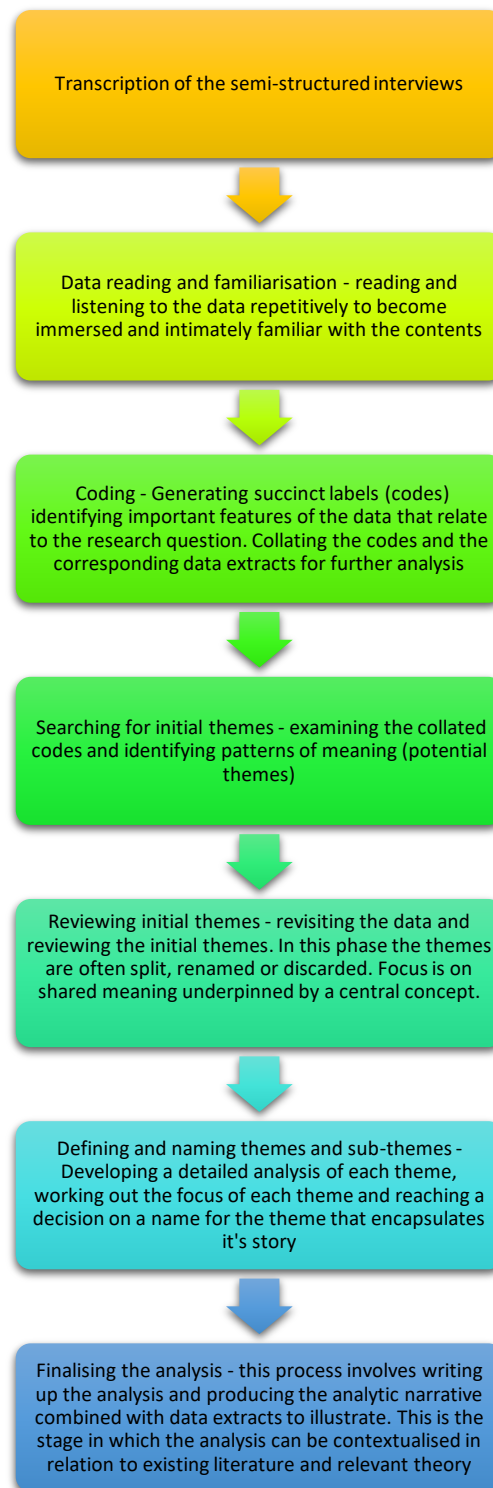


Figure 6. Phases of Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021)

Transcription, reading and familiarisation.

These steps are often amalgamated (making the six-step process). After the interviews, time was spent listening to them and checking that the Microsoft Teams transcriptions were verbatim. After this was done, the researcher listened to the recordings repeatedly while

reading the transcripts and started to become very familiar with the data, making reflective notes and initial interpretations (Appendix 10). This enabled immersion into the data and a deeper understanding of the participant's perspectives.

Generating codes

An initial coding process took place in which codes were developed and given 'labels'. This process was done by hand and highlighters were used to identify interesting items (Appendix 10). All interviews were coded this way, and repeated codes were highlighted in a specific colour which helped to gather them together when considering themes.

Searching for initial themes

Once the coding process was finished, it was time to look for themes across the data. This was initially done by putting the codes together into a table and colour-coding them. The interviews were listened to again while considering the groupings and on some of the codes, the context gathered from the relistening of the interviews changed the theme slightly. Themes are defined by Braun and Clarke (2022), define themes as shared meanings or conceptual patterns so this needed to be accurate across the dataset.

Reviewing themes

Once initial themes had been found, these were then refined by listening back to the interviews and reviewing the transcripts to ensure the correct shared meanings were gathered. Once the themes had been gathered and reviewed, they were numbered, and ready to name (Appendix 11).

Defining and reviewing themes

During this stage, once the groupings of codes had a theme name, it was then possible to reduce these into smaller groups and refine the themes into overarching themes and sub-themes. It was also clear to see that the themes could be attributed to different systems in the ecological systems theory so viewing them through this lens allowed a natural set of three overarching or core themes with sub-themes.

Finalising the analysis.

It was important to reflect on the research questions and ensure that the themes that had been generated from the data were relevant to what was being investigated. All the themes were relevant to both cases and experienced differently by each participant. The researcher decided that the write-up should further illustrate this, and this is why the findings are presented as a whole, and then the differences in the cases are reported as secondary. Throughout the process, it was imperative to consider personal reflections and the impact of the researcher's experiences, relevant knowledge and values and the impact this has on the analysis of the data, making the researcher a central and active part of the process of reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2022).

Summarising the process

The analysis began with an inductive approach, allowing the themes to emerge directly from the data. The researcher followed the steps described above, familiarising themselves with the data which enabled the participant's voices to be prioritised, capturing their experiences without immediately applying pre-existing frameworks. However, as the analysis progressed, a deductive approach became necessary to refine the emerging themes through the lens of EST. This shift was informed by the researcher's awareness that ESNA is not solely a within-child issue, but one that involves complex, bidirectional interactions between the YP and various systems, including family, school, and broader social structures (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994).

There are two primary approaches to reasoning in qualitative data, inductive, which begins with specific observations to form generalisations, and deductive, which starts with generalisations to test their applicability to specific cases. Incorporating formal deductive procedures, such as theory testing through pattern matching, can enhance the credibility of qualitative findings (Hyde, 2000). One key dilemma during this process was balancing the inductive insights with the application of ecological theory. For example, while some themes emerged directly from participant's narratives, such as the importance of parental support, these insights were further understood in relation to the mesosystemic interaction described in EST (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 2000). This integration allowed for a rich and holistic understanding of the data. Further tension came from allowing new patterns to emerge and ensuring that the analysis remained aligned with the overarching research questions.

Additionally, it was essential to reflect on how the theoretical grounding might shape the interpretation of the data and to ensure that the deductive application of theory did not override the inductive insights. This was addressed by iteratively revisiting the data, coding, and themes and maintaining reflective/reflexive notes (APPENDIX 10, 11 & 12) throughout the process.

Ultimately the combination of inductive and deductive approaches enabled the development of themes that were grounded in participants' experiences while being theoretically informed by ecosystemic theory providing a balanced and comprehensive analysis, which answered the research questions and gave a rich and holistic overview.

4.0 Ethical approval

This research was given ethical approval by the UEA's Ethics Committee (APPENDIX 7). The study was completed in accordance with the BPS Code of Human Research Ethics (BPS, 2021) and the HCPC Standards (2015). All participants received an information sheet (APPENDIX 8) and were verbally asked before commencing interviews if they had any queries, concerns or questions regarding this. The Young person's information sheets were designed to ensure that the information was clear and age-appropriate for them to understand. Consent was gained from all participants through the consent forms before the interview, and parents were asked to give consent for their young person to participate by completing the parental consent form. Before each interview, it was explained again that there would be a recording taking place and additional clarification was given regarding this with verbal permission gained in addition to the consent form. Verbal permission was also gained from the YP to ensure they were happy for their case to be discussed with the other participants, and they were informed of who the members of staff would be that were partaking in the interviews.

The process data collection process during this project was completed per the requirements of the Data Protection Act (2018) and the principles of the General Data Protection Regulation for which the researcher has had full training. Video recordings of the interviews

were stored in the encrypted University of East Anglia (UEA) OneDrive system as per the University's Data Storage Policy and were deleted after transcription. To ensure complete anonymity, each participant was assigned a pseudonym for the transcripts and for all communications between the researcher and the research supervisor. These were assigned randomly by the researcher.

5. Case overviews

5.1 Case one

5.1.1 Background

Sam is a 13-year-old boy who lives at home with his mum and older siblings. Sam's parents are separated. Sam is currently in year 8 of a mainstream high school. Sam's mother told me that Sam was always a little different from the other children when he was younger and wanted to stay relatively close to her instead of running off to play, occasionally having difficulty separating, but his behaviours were not of major concern. However, in year three, Sam had an accident where he physically hurt himself quite badly at school and this resulted in needing surgery and a lengthy period of absence and recuperation. Once Sam returned to school, the level of anxiety he was presenting with increased significantly. The school offered some emotional intervention to which Sam responded well. Nonetheless, Sam struggled to fully reintegrate with his friendship group and was very anxious when he had to join in with group activities or where his performance would be watched (e.g., sports days or assemblies). He started to become worried about attending school. Sam's mum explained that he also felt like this with football. He used to play for a team and would physically gag and be in pain on match days through fear and worry so he ended up stopping playing for the team. Sam would be physically sick and unwell when he was anxious and there were several occasions when Sam's mother needed to take him home from events at school. Sam was in Years five and six when the lockdown due to COVID-19 happened, and he coped with the lockdown well as he was at home in his safe space with little pressure. However, I am told that he struggled to access the schoolwork online. Sam's mother and the school have considered the possibility that Sam may be neurodiverse as he is showing many signs and experiences sensory aversions, such as a dislike for loud noises and busy places. A referral has been made to the neurodevelopmental service (NDS) for an assessment.

Sam was increasingly worried about transitioning to high school and only managed to attend one of the three transition days offered. Once Sam started at the high school, he was able to mask and comply for the first two weeks and then the drop in his attendance started to become apparent. Sam has had difficulty attending school ever since he transitioned from his primary school. This started with concerns about going in late. Sam has an older sister in a different education setting and if she made them late on a morning Sam would not want to walk into school after the bell. Sam would also explain to his mum that he felt sick and worried in the morning and could not bring himself to get ready and go in.

Sam was placed on a part-time timetable for a short period to see if this would help, and it seemed to work until there were negative comments from Sam's peers. The school referred Sam for medical needs help which would mean he could access online learning. This request was supported by the GP, but the application was turned down by the local authority. The school also referred Sam for mental health input, but he would have to be at school to access this, so this did not happen.

Sam's levels of attendance at the time of data collection were 37% for year 7 and only 3 days and two or three one-hour sessions for the autumn term of year 8. Sam is currently not attending school at all and is awaiting intervention from CAMHS and an assessment with the Neurodevelopmental service.

Results from the Spence anxiety questionnaire indicate that Sam is in the clinically significant range for:

'Separation anxiety' (98th percentile)

'Panic/agoraphobia' (91st percentile)

'Generalised anxiety disorder' (89th percentile).

The Student Questionnaire: 'A Sense of Belonging' was administered. The YP answers 15 questions with 1= do not agree, 2= agree, 3= strongly agree. The questionnaire is not diagnostic but is intended to highlight areas where the YP has a lower sense of belonging so that it can open up conversations with school staff and highlight areas to target intervention. The answers given suggest that Sam has a reasonable sense of belonging to the school on a

collective level (such as what the school has to offer and does for its students) but on a more individual level, he answered that he did not feel as though he was an important part of his classroom or an important part of his school. Sam also indicated that he did not feel he had a lot of choices in what and how he learned (question 13).

5.1.2 The school

Sam's High School is a state-funded co-educational academy school near the town centre. There are approximately 1650 pupils ages 11-18.

SEND Policy

The school's robust SEND policy states that they are a fully inclusive learning community which endeavours to ensure that the curriculum, environment, and all facilities are accessible to staff, students and visitors. The policy states that they work closely with the feeder primary schools and provide additional transition days and enhanced transition arrangements for those identified as SEND students.

Behaviour Policy

The school's behaviour policy states that the school is a fully inclusive school believing in the equal opportunity of all pupils. They recognise that not all students are the same and the school celebrates differences. The behaviour policy includes a section regarding bullying and the way the school addresses this. The policy states that when dealing with behaviour incidents of SEND pupils there may be differentiation in response and sanctions. The school houses an Internal Exclusion Unit (I.E.U) for serious sanctions.

Attendance Policy

The school has a clear policy outlining the expectations of pupils and parents and reporting the legal framework (section 7 of the 1996 Education Act). Whilst there is no specific EBSNA/ESNA policy, there is a section outlining the process in the case of a child having an emerging pattern of non-attendance, stating an attendance support meeting and if appropriate an early intervention strategy.

Wellbeing Policy

The school has two dedicated wellbeing officers to support the wellbeing needs of the pupils. There is dedicated 1:1 well-being support throughout the school day and the service is accessed through a referral form (six-week period, 45-minute session). In the school's wellbeing policy, they acknowledge the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on mental health and the current pressure on professional services.

5.2 Case two

5.2.1 Background

Poppy (pseudonym) is a 15-year-old girl who is in year 9 (although back-schooled in year 1, so would have been in year 10). Poppy lives at home with her mum and older sister and stays with her father regularly each week.

Poppy used to attend a private school from Year 1 to Year 8. Poppy was diagnosed with dyslexia when she started to attend the private prep school, and they requested that she repeat year 1 on entry due to her low academic level. Poppy did well in the private school and was a sporty girl who was competing for the school at a high standard in many sports. Poppy's parents separated and divorced (this was acrimonious), and due to financial reasons, she had to change schools and move to a state school. Poppy's older sister stayed at the private school because she was in her GCSE year and her parents had concerns that a move at this stage would be detrimental to her grades.

Since joining her current school, Poppy has found attending difficult and often feels unable to go in at all, comes in late or leaves early to go home. Poppy regularly feels tired and run down, but GP tests have not discovered any physiological reason for this. Poppy's mother has concerns that there may be a level of neurodiversity and has started to investigate this. Poppy also suffers from significant waves of anxiety and panic attacks which happen sometimes when she is in lessons. Poppy reports that she has difficulty with some areas of the school and has sensory aversions to loud noises, confined spaces, and overcrowded areas. Poppy explained that she thinks her level of information processing is slow and she often does not understand the work at school or finds that things move too quickly.

Poppy's mother told me that she had a similar experience with school when she was younger and that she left school early.

Poppy's mother states that her anxiety started during the COVID-19 lockdown. During the pandemic, Poppy became worried about going out anywhere and became very attached to her mother. Poppy continued schoolwork throughout the lockdown with her previous school providing full-time online learning. Poppy's attendance rate at her current school is 75%. At her previous school, it was 94.5% (with 80% lesson attendance)

Results from the Spence anxiety questionnaire indicate that Poppy is in the clinically significant range for:

'Separation anxiety' (86th percentile)

'Panic/agoraphobia' (98th percentile)

'Obsessive/compulsive' (98th percentile)

'Generalised anxiety disorder' (97th percentile).

The Student Questionnaire: 'A Sense of Belonging' was administered. The YP answers 15 questions with 1= do not agree, 2= agree, 3= strongly agree. The questionnaire is not diagnostic but is intended to highlight areas where the YP has a lower sense of belonging so that it can open up conversations with school staff and highlight areas to target intervention. The answers given suggest that Poppy has a reasonable sense of belonging to the school on a collective level (such as what the school has to offer and does for its students) and on a more individual level when considering her place within the school and classroom. However, Poppy answered that she did not think the teacher's cared about her or were concerned if she was absent. Poppy's answers also indicated that she felt she did not have autonomy over how and what she learned or that her teachers help her to understand her learning. Poppy also answered that she did not feel her teachers encouraged her to develop her interests or talents.

5.2.2 The school

A high school on the outskirts of a town (rural setting). The school is a large co-educational school with approximately 1500 pupils ranging from ages 11-18.

SEND policy

The school's SEND Policy is trust-wide and states that the vision is for truly inclusive schools in which all of the children's needs are met exceptionally well, including pupils with SEND through an inclusive, broad and balanced curriculum. The policy states that it works with feeder provisions and post-16 provisions to enable smooth gradual transitions where needed and that additional induction sessions can be provided for learners. A collaborative approach is indicated with an emphasis on parental inclusion.

Behaviour policy

The school fosters a 'culture of praise' and staff are encouraged to reward pride, passion and positivity. The pupils are expected to be ready, respectful, and responsible in school and in boarding houses. The school runs the internal exclusion within the student's 'house' or form rather than a communal internal exclusion space. All sanctions are clarified in the policy.

Attendance policy

The school has a detailed attendance policy which covers all details of attendance matters. This policy also includes details on ways that attendance is non-addressed and describes the function of part-time timetables, flexi-schooling, and intervention. There is also detail regarding how their main goal is to promote good attendance.

Wellbeing policy

The school does not have a dedicated well-being policy.

6.0 Findings

As a result of multiple cycles of grouping codes into themes and further refining them according to the process outlined by Braun & Clarke (2021) and described in the methods section, the following overarching themes were identified:

1. Individual level experiences, symptoms and reactions:
Individual/microsystem
2. Interaction between the individual, family and the school environment:
Microsystem/mesosystem
3. The impact of wider external systems and life events:
Exosystem/macrosystem/chronosystem

Each overarching theme has a number of sub-themes, as per the figure below:

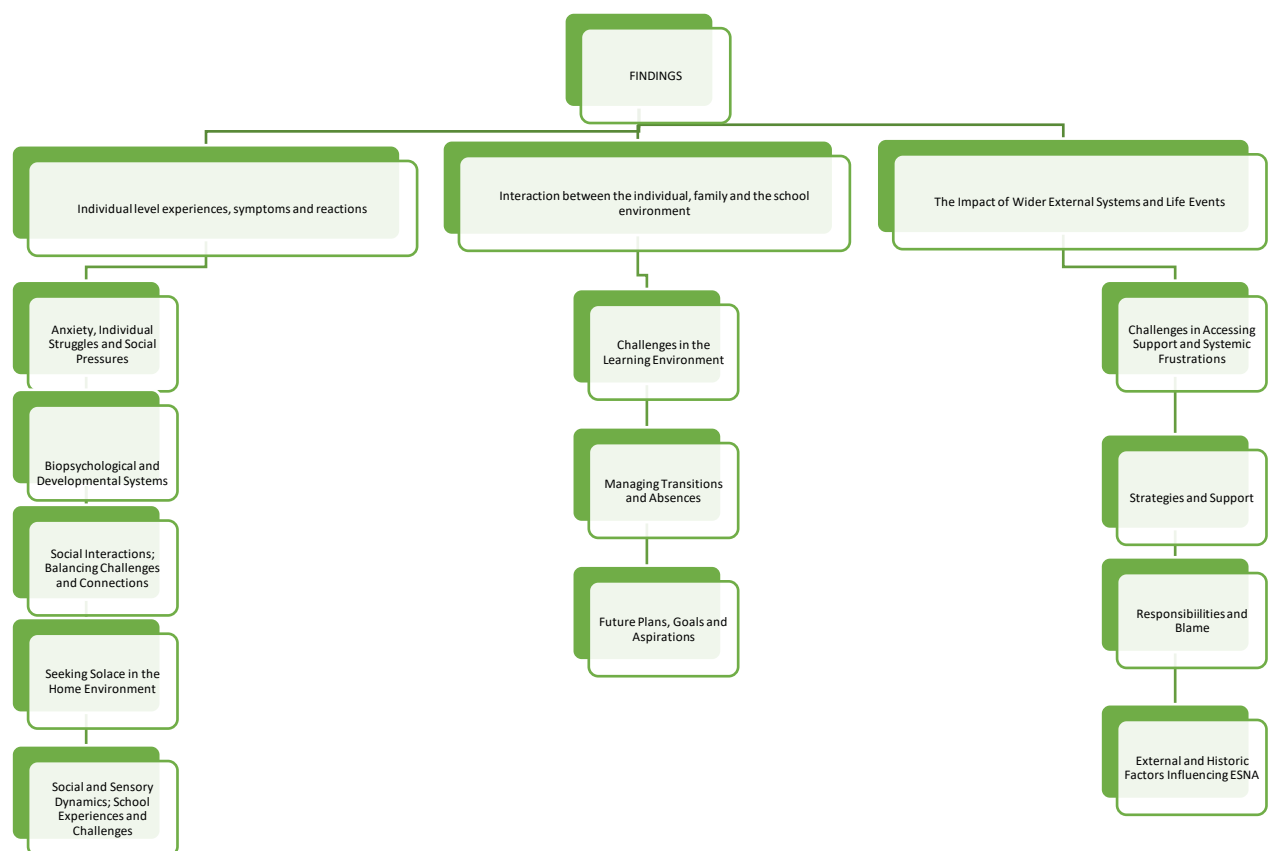


Figure 7. Thematic Map

The figure above shows the three overarching themes. Overarching themes can be said to organise the analysis as they provide the basic structure with a concept underpinning further themes. These overarching themes are rarely analysed in depth due to the thinning of the richness of data (Braun and Clarke, 2019). Each of the sub-themes is important to encapsulate the true richness of the data.

6.1 Theme one: Individual-level experiences, symptoms and reactions

This theme is related to the child or individual at the core of Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory (EST).

Participants verbalised the various challenges, symptoms, behaviours, and internal stages that they, or the YP they were discussing, experienced and how these impacted the ability of the YP to attend school, or for parents and school staff to provide support for the YP with attendance difficulties. This was a particularly dominant theme throughout the young people's accounts, with this being the subject they spoke about and reflected on the most. Within this core theme, there are five sub-themes.

1. Anxiety and social pressures
2. Biopsychological and developmental systems
3. Social Interactions: balancing challenges and connections
4. Anxiety: Seeking solace in the home environment
5. Social and sensory dynamics: school experiences and challenges

1. Anxiety and social pressures

As we know from previous research, anxiety is one of the main drivers behind ESNA and the literature suggests that it is the underlying cause in the majority of cases (Havik & Ingul, 2021; Heyne, 2018; Ingul et al., 2019; Thambirajah et al., 2008). In both of the cases explored in this research, anxiety was a central issue. With Sam, there was fear around the uncertainty of what the day would bring:

"The mornings are worst... I feel sick in the morning because I don't know what will happen that day. It just makes me feel like I can't go in. [Sam]"

The mornings are the most difficult for Sam as he describes the uncertainty of the day ahead and what might happen. The uncertainty and worry about the aspects of the school day take over and Sam feels like he cannot go in.

The mornings are also a difficult time for Poppy who shared a reflection about how she can be overwhelmed about the day ahead:

“My anxiety comes on in the morning, I’ll start getting dressed and stuff, but then I’ll be just thinking about, like how many people I have to talk to in a day and lessons I might have to do and it’s so much.” [Poppy]

The anxiety and worry felt at the beginning of the day were a significant barrier to both young people, but for different reasons. Sam is worried as he does not know what will happen in his day, the uncertainty is what is making him anxious. Poppy has feelings of anxiety but hers are more focussed on the things she knows she will have to deal with and the enormity of facing people throughout the school day. This highlights how the difficulties that the young people face can seem to present similarly but there are nuanced underlying anxieties that would need to be addressed in different ways. Sam, for example might benefit from clarity about what will happen in his day and clear routines and consistent support so that he feels able to face it; and Poppy might need the difficult things she knows she has to face made easier for her, for example a reduction in the number of lessons and social interactions required in each school day, so the thought of it is not so overwhelming.

The parents of both young people also spoke about the difficult mornings and their observations of the way that the anxiety manifests:

“She does flap a bit in the mornings, saying she can’t breathe and stuff you know like panic attacks. The mornings are definitely the worst. When she wakes up, she shouts up the stairs saying she feels really sick. What I think has happened is she has woken up and has that feeling of dread about going to school and then she starts thinking I wonder if I can go for half a day or so.” [Poppy’s mother]

Sam’s mother recounts a time on a morning when Sam managed to get up and get dressed and wanted to go to school:

“He got up, he had breakfast he put his uniform on and then when it was time to go, he just sat on his bed and cried. He was too anxious to go in and was disappointed in himself” [Sam’s mother].

Sam's mother's reflection indicates that Sam wanted to attend as he got up and got ready, but the anxiety was too much for him to go through with it. She went on to explain:

"Once he is in school, he seems fine...I just need help to get him there." [Sam's mother]

Participants spoke of the social pressures they felt. Other people's judgements and perceptions of them also impacted their anxieties and ability to attend school.

"You know people have their opinions of you, you don't know what they are like thinking and stuff." [Poppy].

"Sometimes the people can be really rude and stuff. Mainly the year above." [Sam].

Here the YP speak about the social aspects and again they differ in the way it impacts them. Sam speaks about how the older children are "rude and stuff" whereas Poppy speaks about the uncertainty of what people are thinking about her. For both young people, the social pressures in school exacerbated their anxiety and impacted their ability to attend.

There is also an element of anxiety and fitting in/social acceptance. Sam's mother explained that:

"If we are going to be late because my daughter has made us late, Sam will just not go in. He will be physically ill and have stomach pain as he will not walk in late in front of people. I have to bring him home." [Sam's mother].

The school also reflected on this and discussed the difficulty in putting things in place when the YP does not want to seem different to their peers:

"You know, she has a reader pen and we have spoken about a laptop and made provision for her to have touch-type lessons, but she hasn't accessed any of it which could be because she does not want to seem different to her peers which we often see in year 8/9 girls. They are always worried about other kids' perceptions of them" [Poppy's attendance officer].

In summary, this subtheme highlights the negative impact that anxieties and social pressures can have on ESNA, and the issues with generalising YP's emotional experiences and struggles. On the surface, it seems like it needs a similar response, yet the individual

concerns and elements of the anxieties are triggered by different, and sometimes even opposing worries.

2. Biopsychological and Developmental Systems

This sub-theme represents the recurrent theme of present biopsychological systems that occur for the individual. In the cases studied, both were reported as possibly being neurodivergent. Additionally, another impacting factor that was spoken about was reaching puberty. Both can have an impact on behaviours and are cited in the literature as being related to ESNA (Connolly & Mullally, 2023; Granieri et al., 2023; O'Hagan et al., 2022; Shah et al., 2022).

Both young people in this study were reported to show traits of ADHD or Autism and were being investigated for a neurodivergent condition.

“He is really rigid in his thinking and when there’s a plan in his head and it changes, he can’t cope.” [Sam’s mother].

This was reflected upon as part of Sam’s profile and the link to neurodivergence by his mother and fits with the research on the difficulty those with SEND encounter especially with neurodivergence when considering change, time and transition (Connolly et al., 2023). The rigid thinking of those with neurodiverse conditions can impact the anxiety they feel when they think about the day ahead, linking to the previous subtheme and the close relationship with anxiety and ESNA. Furthermore, unexpected changes without warning can also heighten anxieties (Granieri et al., 2023).

For Poppy, the traits of possible ADHD impacted differently, more in an inability to manage to focus all day making the day tiring for her:

“She has some ADHD tendencies and can find it really hard to focus which makes her more tired”. [Poppy’s mother].

Both parents spoke about the fact that their children masked while at school as far as they could and then this ended up just exhausting them and they could not do it any longer, resulting in the non-attendance.

“Sam masks a lot at school and always has done, which takes its toll and makes things worse” [Sam’s mother].

“She tries hard and doesn’t want it to show. She comes home exhausted and just wants to put her headphones in and shut down” [Poppy’s mother].

The participants also reflected on the role puberty played, and its contribution to the cases:

“What we tend to find with these types of cases is that you have a child that seems to be functioning very well at first. Quiet in lessons, studious, attentive, probably a little bit of a perfectionist and then puberty hits generally around year 8 and they have been containing that anxiety for a long period of time but then they run out of the ability to do that anymore.” [Sam’s Assistant Head].

“I don’t know if some of it is becoming a teenager and going through puberty. My eldest daughter also suffered a period of anxiety at a similar age.” [Poppy’s mum].

In summary, this subtheme revolves around the influence of biopsychosocial systems on individuals, particularly focussing on the potential neurodivergence and the onset of puberty. Both cases in the study suggested that the young people might be neurodivergent, which significantly influenced their behaviours and anxiety levels. Sam’s rigid thinking and difficulty coping with changes are highlighted, illustrating how unexpected events can heighten anxiety for those with neurodiverse conditions. Poppy, on the other hand, struggles with maintaining focus throughout the day, leading to exhaustion. Both YP masked their symptoms at school, which eventually resulted in overwhelming fatigue and non-attendance. The reflections were also inclusive of puberty’s role, noting that it often exacerbates anxiety as the YP transition into adolescence, particularly around the ages of 13-14, causing a possible breakdown in their previously contained anxieties or certainly making them seem less easy to manage and mask. The insights from the parents and school staff emphasise the compounded effects of anxiety neurodivergence and puberty on the young people’s emotional and psychological wellbeing and subsequently on their ability to attend school.

3. Social Interactions: balancing challenges and connections

This subtheme refers to the discussions from participants around social interactions. There are positive and negative experiences that were spoken about regarding this subtheme. The main discussions were about friendships. The YP in both cases have managed to retain

friendship groups despite a lack of attendance. In fact, for both young people, their friendships were their 'pull' factors towards the school and making them want to attend despite feeling unable to. However, being able to maintain friendships on social media and when gaming online, meant that it was not necessary to attend school to have these connections which could also then be perceived as an enabling factor.

"He plays with numerous of his friends on the PlayStation online, so he's maintained his friendships" [Sam's mother].

"She has a nice little group of friends ... that definitely doesn't seem to be the issue" [Poppy's mother].

Poppy talks about her friends positively, talking about how they are there for each other and that they see each other outside of school and have sleepovers at weekends.

"Yeah, we see each other outside of school and go shopping and have sleepovers and things at weekends" [Poppy]

When she was asked how they felt about her not attending she explained:

"Sometimes {friends name} will ask me to make sure I come in for some lessons because she needs me there and I will try and make sure I go for those....if I don't, sometimes I feel like I've let her down" [Poppy].

When asked what Sam missed the most about not attending school, he answered:

"Probably seeing my friends" [Sam].

Having a friendship group appeared to increase the sense of belonging within the school community so it is important for the children who are not attending to be encouraged and able to maintain friendship links.

The participants also discussed some friendship issues. Poppy for example explained:

"I think about how many people I will have to talk to in a day and it makes me feel anxious ...I find it overwhelming" [Poppy].

Poppy is referring to the interaction of relationships in school with the people she encounters and how it can be overwhelming. Poppy's reflections suggest she finds it more difficult on a wider scale and not necessarily with particular people being hostile towards her. For her it is more the general social interaction and the amount of people she needs to navigate. Poppy's experiences with the pressure of social interaction suggest that there is a need for more inclusive and supportive environments that can accommodate those with

high anxiety and that can recognise that for some students, the social demands of school can be a significant source of stress.

Sam has had some friendship experiences which have impacted his ability to attend:

“The part-time timetable was working well but then his mates started to get fed up that he was going home and so started to tease him” [Sam’s mother].

Sam’s mother reflects on the difficulties that Sam had when his friends reacted negatively to the part-time timetable. This was a strategy that was working for Sam but his friends having this reaction undermined his confidence and resilience. The teasing (although seemingly harmless) had a significant impact on his attendance.

“We looked to rebuild that resilience to coming in and it was working really well....but then all of a sudden I think because of some comments made by some of his peers he stopped and he’s then not come back” [Sam’s attendance officer].

“He doesn’t cope well with teasing, even with innocent teenage banter” [Sam’s mother].

Poppy and Sam both experience significant difficulties with social interactions at school, but these challenges manifest in different ways. Poppy feels overwhelmed by the sheer number of social interactions she must navigate daily, which causes her anxiety. Her struggle is with the general social environment rather than particular hostile interactions. In contrast, Sam’s difficulties stem from negative reactions and the teasing from his friends. Poppy and Sam’s experiences highlight the diverse ways in which social interactions can impact young people, emphasising the need for tailored support strategies. Poppy’s anxieties about the volume of social interactions suggest that she may benefit from structured and predictable social environments with smaller and more controlled interaction settings. In contrast, Sam’s experiences highlights the importance of fostering a supportive peer culture that discourages negative interactions and promotes a sense of belonging. Sam’s experiences also highlight the need for interventions that can build resilience and coping strategies to help with situations that arise.

4. Anxiety: Seeking solace in the home environment

The participants spoke about the way that the YP deals with the anxieties they feel, and one particular way was finding solace in the home environment. They considered this to be their ‘safe space’.

“I’ve made home nice because that’s his safe place ... I don’t want to take that away from him” [Sam’s mother].

“He’s always happy at home, he takes a lot of convincing to go out” [Sam’s mother].

Sam’s mother comments on the fact that she has made home a safe space for Sam, and she does not want to take that away from him.

“It’s just much easier to stay at home in your safe space than have to deal with it all” [Poppy].

Poppy speaks about staying at home as a solution to not having to deal with everything. In the sub-theme above, Poppy speaks about the anxiety she feels with the overwhelming nature of social interactions, here she refers to the home environment being a “safe space” where she does not have to deal with that.

However, it can be worrying for the parents sometimes as Poppy’s mother expresses:

“She always just isolates herself in her room” [Poppy’s mum].

Interestingly they view it differently with Poppy feeling it is her safe space and her getaway, but her mother is concerned that she is isolated.

Solace in the home environment was also spoken about in the context of COVID-19 and the return to school after the lockdowns:

“Children have had such a long time in that safe home environment, if they have any anxieties at all to reintegrate back that was probably quite difficult” [Sam’s HOY].

“Whenever we go round Sam is never downstairs, he always has to be called out of bed” [Sam’s attendance officer].

The concept of the home as a ‘safe space’ for Sam and Poppy highlights the dual role of this environment in providing both comfort and potential isolation. Sam’s mother’s efforts to create and preserve a safe home environment for him highlight the importance of having and creating a sanctuary where he feels secure and that can relieve his anxieties. This can be important for his wellbeing but may also pose a challenge as it discourages engagement with the outside world and subsequently his attendance at school. Sam’s reluctance to leave the home and his ‘safe space’ indicates a possible reliance on this reflecting his need for stability and predictability to manage his anxieties. Similarly, Poppy’s experiences demonstrate that

the home is a refuge from the social pressures. Her avoidance of overwhelming situations and interactions by staying at home also indicates that she uses this 'safe space' for managing her anxieties. However, Poppy's mother speaks of the potential isolation. The tension between safety and isolation is important to consider as while creating a safe home environment is beneficial it must be balanced with strategies to gradually increase the young person's engagement with the outside world. Furthermore, the impact of the COVID-19 lockdowns further complicated this balance, forcing the young people to stay at home in their 'safe space' and making the transition back to school difficult, especially for Sam. This subtheme indicates there is a need for individually tailored and specifically targeted support but also support that could include a family approach to enable parents to collaborate and work with the school to find that balance.

5. Social and sensory dynamics: school experiences and challenges

Some participants spoke of experiencing sensory aversions in their school environment.

"Everything and everyone is just so loud it's hard to focus ... Assembly is really horrible as it is 8 big tables and it's just like everyone is really squeezed in. I don't like that" [Poppy].

"The uniform can be really uncomfy, I wish we didn't have to wear a tie and have our top button done, it makes you feel really squished up" [Poppy].

"There are so many people, and the corridors are busy" [Sam]

Poppy and Sam speak about the sensory elements of the school environment that they find difficult and can impact their ability to focus and feel comfortable and relaxed. Added to an already anxious state, these can be a barrier to YP's school attendance. Whilst they both have sensory aversions; they experience these differently with Poppy experiencing it much more from an auditory anxious perspective and Sam from a kinaesthetic anxious perspective.

Another element that both the YP found difficult was the relationship with staff members, they found these inconsistent across staff and also when there were substitute teachers which seemed to happen quite often:

"Some teachers are ok like my head of house is nice, she gets me, and she knows I struggle. My Geography teacher doesn't, I had a panic attack in the class, and she wouldn't let me leave. My sports science teacher doesn't let me leave for a break like

I am meant to have, he says to catch up will take longer so I can't go out even if I use my GO card" [Poppy].

"Relationships are important, she had a bit of an issue with some members of staff not letting her use her GO card. They are inconsistent and there's been a few off sick so they have had subs and that's not helpful because they don't know the kids. Like they haven't had a food tech teacher for 3 months and just get different people" [Poppy's mother].

Here we see the importance of those bidirectional relationships. Research suggests that a pupil-teacher relationship is extremely important for engagement and success in the educational environment (Whitaker et al., 2015). Inconsistent relationships can undermine the sense of stability and the sense of belonging, making it harder for the YP to feel secure and understood in the school environment and hence adding to underlying anxieties. Additionally, the inconsistency in the relationships may lead to a lack of trust in the educational system.

The approach of the staff member was also commented on by Sam's mother:

"He really struggles with erm I think the aggressive nature of a lot of the high school teachers, because it is very shouty shouty, keep these teenagers under control, and there's no teaching assistants and they've got a class of 30 teenagers to control so that environment I think Sam struggles with" [Sam's mother].

Sam seems to have a different problem with the relationships with staff. Rather than inconsistency, he finds the approach of the staff members difficult as the high school staff are more authoritarian than he was used to in his primary school. This approach may be counterproductive towards pupils such as Sam who require a more nurturing and relational approach.

Another challenge within the school environment that the participants spoke about was the sense of belonging. YP, their parents and the school staff commented on this as in each case it was apparent but experienced differently.

"She plays sport at a high standard so we were excited to have her on our teams, but she isn't getting picked for these now as she isn't attending so this will be impacting that sense of belonging to the school" [Poppy's Attendance Officer].

"After he had been off for a lot of year 7, when he started back in year 8 they had moved him down a set so he knew no one in the classes and was separated from his

friends and all the teachers were different which just put another barrier in the way”
[Sam’s mother].

Sam is experiencing this from more of a peer community and Poppy from the way that she is integrated and valued in the sporting side and representing the school as she did with her previous school. The YP’s sense of belonging to the school community was thought to naturally decrease the less time that they spend in the school environment.

In summary, this subtheme highlighted the need for consistent relationships with staff, consideration of approaches to promote engagement, and the need to foster a strong sense of belonging to reduce barriers to learning.

6.2 Theme Two: Interaction between the individual, family and the school environment:

Microsystem/mesosystem

Theme two is placed within the microsystem and mesosystem within the EST. The term mesosystem is used to describe the interactions that occur between aspects of the microsystem, for example, between home and school or communication between other systems. Within this theme there are three subthemes:

1. Challenges in the learning environment
2. Managing transitions and absences
3. Positive aspects, parental experiences, and goals and aspirations.

1. Challenges in the learning environment

This sub-theme relates to how the YP conceptualise challenges within the learning environment that negatively impact their perception and experience of school. Participants spoke about their lack of autonomy over their learning and the fact that there are lessons that they do not believe have a value or a purpose. They also discussed their ways of learning and the needs they had.

“I wish they would get rid of lessons where it feels like we are not doing anything, and they are pointless. We are making flipbooks in creative arts, and I just don’t understand the point...also I feel they should not make us learn a different language if

we don't want to, I would be happy to do more maths or English or science and those kinds of subjects, but I don't want to learn another language" [Poppy].

"So yeah, I mean we talked about him only attending the subjects that he was comfortable in and that he saw the importance of but the way the timetables work, it would just be impossible for him to just go in and do maths and English" [Sam's mother].

Specific learning needs and ways of working were discussed by the participants. Poppy, in particular discussed the way in which she found it much more helpful to interact with peers in class:

"I think you should be able to discuss the work with people, like I didn't understand the question for geography, and I asked somebody, but the teacher just shouted and said get on with the work. It would be much easier to discuss it with people if the teacher isn't going to help" [Poppy].

This suggests Poppy prefers collaborative learning, but she feels that the teaching staff are unsupportive of peer discussions.

Sam struggled with aspects of lessons too especially being asked questions in class in front of everyone:

"We found a link to certain days that he was missing initially, and it was drama, because he didn't like to act out in front of everyone or be asked questions. So, we had a word with the drama teacher, and it stopped so he started going again". [Sam's mother].

There was also a theme about pressure in the environment. Pressures to conform such as discussed in the first overarching theme, and academic pressures. This was something that Poppy especially felt strongly about:

"All the teachers telling everyone that like if you don't do well in your GCSEs you're not going to get anywhere, so you feel a lot of pressure yeah" [Poppy].

Poppy speaks of the increase in pressure and the rhetoric she hears from school staff throughout the day.

This has also been noticed by Poppy's mum:

"Now that the workload has increased for GCSEs and the pressure is on, it is just all getting too difficult" [Poppy's mother].

Poppy's attendance officer however seems surprised that she has come from an environment that is perceived as more academic and therefore she may feel this would be a more pressurised environment yet, it did not have an impact on her attendance while she was there:

"She has come from a very academic school, so I don't know how she was getting by there, if they were teaching her differently or something" [Poppy's Attendance Officer].

Sam's mother speaks more of his fear of failure but also mentions the pressure he is feeling:

"He has a fear of failure and the longer he doesn't attend and the more he misses the less likely he thinks he will be able to manage...He has no confidence in his ability and the work is getting harder and the pressure is on" [Sam's mother].

This subtheme suggests that young people are feeling pressure not only to attend but increasing pressure to achieve, almost causing a vicious cycle of the less they are there, the less likely they will achieve. This fear of failure and lack of confidence seems to be fuelling the young people's disengagement and exacerbating the need for avoidant behaviours.

2. Managing transitions and absences

Managing transitions was one of the most spoken-about topics in the interviews with all participants mentioning them in some way. Not only transitions from primary school to high school but other forms of transitions such as from lesson to lesson or back into school after illnesses or holidays. Sam speaks of his initial transition into high school:

"I worried about going to high school all the way through the holidays" [Sam].

This was something his mother also reflected upon, especially the transition days preceding the main transition:

“He only managed one of the transition days out of three. He was just too overwhelmed” [Sam’s mother].

For Poppy this would have been a different experience as she was moving in Year 9 so she was already within a high school setting. However, she was also moving to a school where everyone else would have already been settled and not with a crowd of new people. Poppy’s mum speaks about her initial excitement but how this soon wore off:

“I think she was quite excited at first, you know, we got the uniform and stuff, but then the novelty soon wore off and she started to say it wasn’t as good, and the facilities were poor, and the teachers weren’t as good” [Poppy’s mother].

The school staff that were interviewed also spoke about the impact of the transitions from their perspectives:

“We work closely with our primary schools, but if the information hasn’t been picked up by them or shared with us, then we have nothing to go on” [Sam’s attendance officer].

“Sometimes there is nothing to share. Her attendance was fine at her last school, 94% and 80% in lessons, so that wouldn’t flag up really. The thing they did not share with us was if there were any particular ways that we could address learning needs that worked there” [Poppy’s attendance officer].

Here, the school’s perspective is centred on the passing on and sharing of information, and how important this is for the receiving school.

When asked if it was attending this school, or if any school would be the same, Sam told me:

“It would be any school, I quite liked primary school and I want to stay at {name of school} but I just feel horrible and can’t” [Sam].

Here, Sam vocalises that he wants to be at this school and that he would feel the same regardless of the school he was attending. Sam also says that he quite liked primary school even though he reportedly struggled with his anxiety towards the end due to the accident he experienced. This indicates that any school environment would be a barrier for Sam. Yet he refers to quite liking primary school, which suggests there are particular aspects of the high school environment that he finds difficult.

One of the elements of the high school environment that Sam finds difficult is the transition from lesson to lesson and classroom to classroom as his mother explains:

“When he was in the one classroom with one teacher in primary school and the people he knew he could handle that but moving from classroom to classroom and different teachers and different kids it’s too much for him” [Sam’s mother].

Poppy speaks of the difficulty of switching from subject to subject rather than the physical place and the teacher change.

“It’s too much having to change my head all the time. Going from like English to Spanish is really really hard” [Poppy].

Interestingly, when people think about transitions in school settings, they mostly think of the transition from primary to high school. However, this highlights that even these within-setting transitions can be problematic for young people.

Another aspect of the transition that was spoken about was the difficulty of returning after holidays or an illness.

“He was going in and doing short bursts in the library but then he had an ear infection, and he was off poorly and then just couldn’t go back in” [Sam’s mother].

Sam seems to find it difficult after an extended period of time and even though he had started to make progress with his attendance, a bout of illness set him back and made it difficult for him to come back in. This level of resistance was similar for Poppy although this happened after a period of absence for the school holidays as her attendance officer explains:

“Things seem to get worse after a school holiday period, so after Christmas we seemed to go drastically downhill again” [Poppy’s Attendance Officer].

In both cases, a period away from school seems to negatively impact the ability to return to school. This could indicate that disruption to routine negatively impacted the YP and made it difficult for them to return.

Both of the young people find it difficult to transition from home to school in the morning as mentioned in theme one. One interesting factor was that Poppy can transition on a morning if staying with her dad the night before:

“She always goes in when she’s been at her dad’s house so I can’t understand why she won’t go. It makes me wonder if she’s trying it on sometimes” [Poppy’s mother].

This could be due to her transitioning from a place different than her ‘safe space’ which she described as her mother’s house. There may also be an element of parental relationship and responses here. Poppy may respond by going to school and complying for a particular reason such as her father’s response if she does not.

Another aspect of transition was the discussion about returning to school after the COVID-19 lockdown. The young people managed differently during this transition:

“He found it a little difficult going back in after lockdown. There was definitely the beginning of resistance there” [Sam’s mother].

Interestingly, Sam’s mum mentions that there were the beginnings of resistance and early signs of reluctance when Sam went back to school after lockdown suggesting early signs before transitioning to high school. However, Poppy had a different experience and did not seem to mind so much:

“It was ok going back after lockdown, but I was going back to the same school, so it was familiar. I just remember being in big tents because we couldn’t all fit in the building” [Poppy].

When returning after lockdown, Poppy mentions that it was not so bad as she was returning to a familiar place, and she discusses the fact that although it was familiar, there were tents as, due to numbers, they could not all fit in the buildings. This could be linked with the discussion in theme one that Poppy had when she referred back to the busyness of the environment and due to the extra measures put in place due to COVID-19, this could have seemed quieter and less of a sensory pressure for her.

When speaking with the school staff about children returning after lockdown there were slightly different perspectives, and they spoke about the young people as a collective:

“I think one of the things they have struggled with is that if they had anxieties and challenges coming into school in the beginning, they have seen that there is another way of doing things now, and you can be educated at home because we have made them do it” [Sam’s HOY].

“I know I am more lenient if I have a work-from-home day and one of my own children resists going in” [Poppy’s Assistant SENDCo].

“The children who were a little bit anxious at the beginning before lockdown have been away for all that time and it was then really hard for some of them to get back to that full time” [Sam’s HOY].

“I found that the kids that were in lockdown in Poppy’s year just weren’t ready for high school. They just hadn’t had the transition, the celebrations, the endings and the chance to mature and become resilient enough to cope well with it all... there was also the problem of them being a slightly lower ability and so had much more academic stuff to catch up on” [Poppy’s Assistant SENDCo].

In the above quotes, the complexity of difficulty can be seen. The period away from school due to the pandemic impacted not only the anxieties the young people felt but also the fact that there were alternative ways of learning. The staff also highlighted the difficulties with not having proper closure and the important things that children look forward to from Year 6, such as special trips and goodbyes with other children and staff. It is also important to note here that this will have been a different experience for Poppy as she was in a school with a different system and, therefore, did not transition from school to school until Year 9 and will have had endings and closure.

Finally, the school staff speak about the academic impact, which feeds back into the previous subtheme and the element of pressure and being academically behind. If the young people are not ready for high school and the academic level of the work that it brings, the pressure and difficulty will feel much more intense.

In summary, this subtheme highlights the importance of transitions, not only the major ones but also the impacts of the smaller ones within the environment. Positive transition management is crucial for young people's well-being. Addressing anxieties and providing continuous support can help to mitigate the negative impacts of these significant changes.

3. Positive aspects, parental experiences and goals and aspirations

This subtheme reflects the discussions surrounding some of the more positive aspects of school experiences. For example, both of the young people spoke about previous positive school experiences in the past and could name some positive things about their current school:

"I quite liked primary school, I had a lot of friends too" [Sam]

In this quote, Sam speaks about positive peer relationships suggesting that he had a good sense of belonging at primary school with strong peer relationships.

Poppy speaks about the positivity of her accomplishments and playing in the school teams.

"I had a good time at my old school, I used to be in all the teams for sports" [Poppy]

Despite not being able to attend school, Sam is able to reflect on the subjects he likes and even comments that some are fun.

"I like maths and history and geography is fun" [Sam]

There are also positive aspects mentioned for Poppy:

"I really like sport and I like seeing my friends" [Poppy]

Poppy discusses her peer relationships again which seem to be a big positive for her at school.

Both the young people and their parents stress that they want to be in school and they want to do well, and the young people also mirror that opinion. Sam explains:

"I really want to go to school, and I try so hard but it's just so hard on a morning"

[Sam].

"I want him at school at the end of the day, in the nicest possible way, I don't want him at home, I want him to go to school and do well" [Sam's mother].

Sam and his mother both want the same outcome, for him to be at school and here Sam reflects again on how difficult the mornings are, as discussed in theme one. Sam's mother also recognises how hard it is for him and how she feels he sets his personal goals for attendance too high:

"He sets himself these goals and then can't go through with them, but it shows what he really wants to be capable of" [Sam's mother].

Poppy's mum also comments about wanting her to be in school and by whatever means possible:

"I just want her to go and get through it. At this point, let's just get you through using whatever means possible" [Poppy's mum].

Both the parents and the young people seem frustrated that they want the same thing but are unable to achieve it.

When asked about future goals, plans and aspirations, there was a mixed response:

One interesting factor about this subtheme was that neither of the YP had any strong future aspirations. Sam did not have any idea what he wanted to do when he left school:

"I have no idea what I want to do" [Sam].

Poppy's mum commented that Poppy had not discussed any future aspirations really until recently when she showed some interest in beauty and hairdressing.

"She just doesn't seem interested in anything. Recently she has shown some interest in beauty and hairdressing, and I was like, yeah, that's great, at least you are showing an interest in something" [Poppy's mother]

This means that there are no concrete goals for the young people to work towards which could help to provide motivation.

Another interesting element of this sub-theme was the discourse around the past experiences of parents and siblings. Previous experiences of their own or their other children's attendance were an influence. For example, Poppy's mum disclosed:

"I had a similar experience at school and refused myself, although I did not attend the same as she does... maybe that is why I am more lenient, a bit easier on her" [Poppy's mother].

Poppy's mother reflects on her responses to Poppy not wanting to attend and verbalises that she is lenient with her, and this may be because of her own experiences with school so she can empathise.

"His older siblings have had no problems attending and the anxiety just wasn't there so this is all new to me" [Sam's mother].

Sam's mother discusses how her older children have managed to attend. There is more of an element of this being an unusual experience that she is trying to navigate and understand.

Within this subtheme, are the impacts of past and current positive experiences, which can contribute to a sense of belonging and accomplishment. This could be used as a motivational point. Furthermore, there are parental influences which impact such as Poppy's mother's leniency which seems to be rooted in empathy due to her own experience.

However, Sam's mother's approach is shaped by a lack of similar experiences with her older children.

Both parents express a desire for their YP to attend school and have success but there is also a desire for the school to support by acknowledging individual family dynamics. There is also the element of considering future goals and aspirations. This could be a possible focus for intervention as planning for future goals gives the YP something to aim for. Overall, it is suggested that a supportive environment that fosters positive relationships, recognises individual struggles and encourages goal setting can significantly benefit YP and reduce barriers in non-attendance.

6.3 Theme three: The impact of wider external systems and life events:

Exosystem/macrosystem/chronosystem

This theme illustrates how the YP, their parent and their schools navigate the systems that they come in contact with, and how they deal with the impact of wider events and external factors. Reaching the outer layers of the ecological systems theory diagram, this theme incorporates the impact of the exosystem, macrosystem and chronosystem. This theme is comprised of four subthemes:

1. Challenges in accessing support and systemic frustrations
2. Strategies and support
3. Responsibilities and Blame
4. External and historic factors influencing ESNA

1. Challenges in accessing support and systemic frustrations:

This subtheme explores the frustrations of young people, their parents and their school staff's regarding the accessibility of support and the difficulties experienced when trying to access it.

"I just don't know where to turn, I am at a loss" [Poppy's mother].

"I'm new to this. I have never experienced this before, and no one seems to know who can help" [Sam's mother].

The parents in each case seem to feel lost and do not know where they are supposed to turn for help. There is a sense of desperation as they both want their young people to be in school and do not seem to know where they are able to access any support.

The school staff also discussed their similar frustrations with not knowing where to find appropriate and substantial help for themselves as a school and for the families affected:

"Schools in this situation need help because there is no clear answer. There's this path and this path, yeah, and none of them seem sufficient" [Sam's Assistant Head].

"There's nothing in that area for those children to access, the thresholds are just too high, so he becomes one of those invisible children" [Sam's Attendance Officer].

“Our staff can only do so much, they are not trained to deal with mental health issues that are so severe” [Poppy’s Assistant SENDCo].

The worry seems to be that there is a lack of clarity over where to access help and the help that exists is either inaccessible or inappropriate resulting in the possibility of the YP becoming invisible children in the system.

Whilst there seems to be a lack of support and confusing pathways to access things, some participants spoke of their frustrations when they try to access it but are refused. Sam’s mother spoke about how she tried to get her son some online learning to help so that he was actually able to do some learning:

“So, his GP said that he was not fit for school but then the council said he did not qualify for medical needs. I just don’t understand, they refused him online learning so now there is nothing and he’s just at home doing nothing. Even when you try to make an effort no one helps” [Sam’s mother]

Sam’s mother describes her frustrations at the barriers that she has encountered, and although she is trying to get Sam some sort of education, she feels she is being prevented from doing so by the systems that are supposed to help her.

Similarly, from Poppy’s mother’s perspective:

“I have asked for a part-time timetable for her, but school just don’t want to know. I think that would really help her” [Poppy’s mother].

There is a level of frustration as parents are trying to suggest strategies and help their young people, but they are faced with barriers from the places where they are expecting support.

The cost-of-living crisis, government cuts to school budgets, shortage of professionals (such as EPs) and lack of information sharing are also mentioned as having a negative impact.

“I can’t afford to pay for him to go private (therapy), so we just have to sit on the waiting list” [Sam’s mother].

The frustration of knowing that the YP needs professional help and the inability to access this help due to cuts in government funding is something that the families are feeling, and the inequality is hard to accept. The school staff also commented on the lack of professional resources:

“Simultaneously, while there is a great gap in social care and in outside agency provisions through the public services, what’s also going to happen is that schools are going to be contracting what’s available to them so taking the resources, and so where do these families sit then?” [Sam’s Assistant Head].

The problem the school has is that the only other route to go down is punitive, which they understand will not help the situation:

“I’m not going to punish that woman; she is doing her best with what is accessible” [Sam’s Assistant Head].

Poppy’s mother also comments on this:

“We would like to be able to get some private help for her but it isn’t possible with the way things are” [Poppy’s mother].

The school staff also commented on the threshold to get professional help:

“It isn’t just about the cost or cuts it is also about the threshold. As a cost-cutting measure, we have found that the thresholds have risen so children that would have been eligible for help are now being turned away making it even harder” [Poppy’s Attendance Officer].

To summarise, this highlights the frustrations that all participants are feeling as they cannot access the limited support that is available. The parents are frustrated that they are unable to access the support for their young people and they do not know where to turn and the school staff are also feeling the same frustrations due to cuts in services and a rise in thresholds.

2. Strategies and Support

This subtheme illustrates the strategies that have been put in place and that have worked and not worked. Furthermore, it touches on the perceptions of whether the families have

engaged in the strategies and the interplay between different systems (for example, parental influence on suggested strategies in school and vice versa).

“We made sure to put strategies in place very early on, within days. She had a key adult in school, and we let her just stay in-house to work so she was used to the environment. We tried to build her sense of belonging and she was coming in for parts of the day. Then it all went quiet, and she was doing well and then it all started again in June and then now we are into the 3rd bout and there’s very very low attendance since Christmas” [Poppy’s Attendance Officer].

Here Poppy’s Attendance Officer speaks of some of the strategies that have helped somewhat. There are important points to note within this quote. First, she explains that they put the strategies in early, so there was that early identification. Then there is the discussion around increasing the sense of belonging and also the reference to the part-time attendance. Furthermore, the environmental elements (working in-house), and the key adult to add the relational approach and nurturing support.

“When they put him on a part-time timetable it worked really well until his friends made comments” [Sam’s Attendance Officer].

“We let her stay off chapel as she wasn’t comfortable in the surroundings, then mum asked if she could go on a part-time timetable, and we refused as we need her in to engage with the support” [Poppy’s Attendance Officer].

Part-time attendance is a strategy that seemed to work in each case to a certain extent. However, the schools in both cases took a different approach to this. Sam’s school supported it, while Poppy’s school did not want to support a part-time timetable as they believed they needed her in school so that she was able to access the support that they could put in place for her. Interestingly, Poppy’s school states that flexi-schooling is one of their strategies when addressing attendance, yet they would not support it in this instance.

Parents also discussed strategies that they had tried at home:

“I have done it all, pulled him out of bed and tried to make him get dressed. Banned things, taken away electronics but then feel like I am isolating him further. I have tried bribing him with nice things just to try and get him there” [Sam’s mother].

“The system seems very rigid, like there’s no flexibility anywhere” [Poppy’s mother].

From these quotes, it seems that Sam's mother has tried various strategies some of which have not had a positive impact and some that have a potentially negative result (isolating him further). Poppy's mother also states that she feels the system is rigid, which was in the context of the part-time timetable.

When discussing the strategies that have been put in place, it seems that people are doing so in isolation which seems to be unsuccessful. A triangulated individualised plan seems to be the way forward in these cases as the data suggests and research tells us that ESNA is a heterogeneous phenomenon (Heyne, 2018).

3. Responsibilities and Blame

This sub-theme relates to the feelings of blame, and shame and with whom the responsibilities lie. The YP in the study both felt guilty that their parent may get into trouble which added to their anxieties:

"I don't want mum to get into trouble. I want my family to understand it is really hard and I am trying" [Poppy].

Sam also comments on the impact on his mother:

"I feel bad it makes me feel really bad that my mum gets into trouble" [Sam].

Both young people said similar things, which added an extra layer of pressure to them as they discussed not wanting their parents to get into trouble and feeling bad.

Parents also discussed the way that they feel responsible. Poppy's mother expresses concern that if she makes her go, she may be making it worse and wonders what she should be doing as a mum, reflecting that she feels she is responsible:

"I don't know if it is just me being soft. I don't know how anxious she really is and if I make her go will I be making it worse. A lot of this for me is what should I be doing as a mum?" [Poppy's mother].

Sam's mother speaks about feeling as though she is to blame:

“Some of the emails make me feel like it is my fault as they say basically, well, we have done what we can and ticked the boxes, but you are not engaging with the support offered. It isn’t that we don’t want to engage but he just can’t” [Sam’s mother].

The school also feels responsible and frustrated for different reasons, and the parental influence is also mentioned:

“At the end of the day, we are not educating him and that bothers us. That is our job and that is what we want to do but if he is not here and cannot engage with the support, we cannot do anything else” [Sam’s Assistant Head].

“She needs to be here. All we want is for her to be here so we can help and put things in place. It isn’t doing her any good texting home and her mum picking her up, we cannot help her then” [Poppy’s Attendance Officer].

There is a conflict here in that Poppy’s mother feels worried that sending her may make it worse and the school says she needs to be in school to access the support they are putting in place. Sam’s school staff expressed that they have tried to do what they can to ensure they are providing him with an education, but without him attending and engaging with the support, they cannot fulfil that responsibility.

There was also a discussion about responsibility and action. The parents in both cases felt that the schools were supportive and helped to a certain extent but also felt that there were times when meetings and discussions were held but without any actions from them:

“It feels like we have these meetings and talk but then nothing really happens. It feels sometimes like it is all tick box exercises” [Poppy’s mother].

Sam’s mother also agrees:

“The school were really supportive, but it just felt like a tick-box thing. Even with the mental health support they referred him for, you have to be in school to access the support, but I need the help getting him there” [Sam’s mother].

Both parents discuss that there is a sense of ‘tick box exercise’ occurring and that although the schools were supportive, there was an element of making sure they had fulfilled their

basic responsibilities. Still, they were not given the help and support in the right areas (such as helping to get Sam to school in the mornings).

In summary, there was blame and responsibility felt by all interviewed stakeholders, yet there were no clear realms of responsibility or routes for any of the participants to take. This subtheme highlights the frustrations, guilt, shame and disappointment felt by those involved.

4. External and Historic Factors Influencing ESNA

This subtheme reflects the impact of historical and adverse experiences that could impact ESNA. In both cases, there had been a parental separation however, in both cases, there were siblings who had gone through the same experiences but were able to manage to continue to attend school. In one of the cases, there was a physical trauma which happened at school, and this seemed to be a trigger for the anxiety. These influences that have happened historically or to others within the YP's lives. Sam's mother talks of the historical trauma that Sam experienced in the school setting and the impact this had:

"One lunchtime he had that accident, and he had to have surgery. He smashed all his teeth and knocked his jaw out of line ... he had to be off for a good few weeks and that is when it all really started" [Sam's mother].

There were also cumulative life changes that occurred for Poppy which could have impacted:

"There was a lot happening at once. Me and her dad split up and that wasn't pleasant, we don't get on. Then COVID-19, then we moved in as a blended family and then becoming a teenager and moving schools. There was a lot happening" [Poppy's mother].

Poppy's mother discusses that there were lots of things to deal with for Poppy that all seemed to happen together. There were lots of changes, ruptures and transitions, so it is difficult to determine what the underlying triggers or causes may have been. Parental separation is a significant experience to go through for young people, and of course, both young people have also experienced the COVID-19 pandemic.

Both parents also spoke about the male parent influence, albeit differently. Poppy goes to school every Thursday when she stays with her father on a Wednesday night. This caused Poppy's mum to reflect on whether it was her own previous experiences and relationship with school during her childhood that had influenced her responses and reactions:

"Maybe I am just a bit weak and because I had a similar experience with school, I don't want her to feel like that" [Poppy's mother].

Poppy's mother feels that her historic experiences of school attendance impact her response and may, therefore, exacerbate or enable the situation.

Sam's mother reflected on how things would be if there were a partner to share the difficulties with and compared the situation to how she expects it would be if it were one of Sam's friends:

"I have said to him, if this was your mates, their fathers would be marching them to school, they just wouldn't stand for it but it is just me on my own with it" [Sam's mother].

This subtheme illustrates that historical and external factors can significantly influence ESNA. Individual trauma, cumulative life changes and parental experiences all contribute to how young people cope with school attendance. Addressing ESNA requires a varied approach that considers historical experiences, current stressors, and parental attitudes.

7.0 Discussion

This discussion will review the findings through the lens of the 'Ecological Systems Theory' (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1992, 2000) and introduce the 'ICE' framework for support. The findings will be considered in relation to the research questions and to existing literature. Furthermore, it will highlight important implications for practice and suggestions for future research. Limitations to the research will be discussed with suggestions as to how these might be addressed, and ideas for future research also be presented.

7.1 Aims of the research

Building on previous research and findings, this study intended to look at the intricacies of how ESNA is experienced differently by YP, their parents and the school staff who support them. The findings highlighted the individual nature of ESNA experiences and the need for early identification and individualised empathetic intervention, which can help those in the position address difficulties for all involved. Collaboration between stakeholders and services was also emphasised.

Data was analysed by reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021) and the research questions are stated below. The subsidiary research questions will be answered individually to inform an answer to the overarching research question.

Overarching research question:

How is ESNA experienced by young people, their parents, and the school staff involved in their cases?

Three subsidiary questions:

- What may be the early signs of ESNA?
- What factors might exacerbate experiences of ESNA?
- What might help young people, their parents, and school staff manage and cope with their experiences of ESNA?

7.2 Sub-question a - What may be the early signs of ESNA?

In both young people's cases, there had been references to early signs of separating from their caregivers, which also supports previous literature (Ingul et al., 2019), with parents reporting slightly more emotional responses than their older siblings when being left at school. However, Poppy did not show any significant signs until the transition from the private setting to the state school, and they were immediately addressed by the school. Sam,

however, showed signs early on, which could have been triggered by his accident on the school premises (please see background for Case One). The accident can be classed as a trauma trigger (Kearney et al., 2004) Which influences the avoidant behaviours linked to the environment. Interestingly, despite Sam managing well whilst receiving SEMH support, the school withdrew the support before transitioning to high school (see theme two, subtheme two), which impacted him negatively. This supports research that young people require consistent support that continues through the transitional stage (Mumford & Birchwood, 2021; van Rens et al., 2018), to maintain emotional regulation and foster a sense of belonging through the building of relationships.

Another early sign of ESNA could have been when Sam found it difficult to go to school late (see theme one, subtheme one). This social anxiety or fear of being in the spotlight or being 'viewed' by others differently had a significant impact on his responses. This was similar to Poppy, who also expressed worries regarding what people thought of her. It was also evident in the staff's response for Poppy, who commented on young people not wanting to seem different from their peers, aligning with research into a sense of belonging and acceptance (Baumeister et al., 2007; El Zaatari & Maalouf, 2022; Schlesier et al., 2023). All of this suggests that the YP desires acceptance by peers and adults, therefore appearing slightly different causes them to feel social anxiety and vulnerability.

In both cases, the signs were a gradual decrease in the frequency of attendance. In Sam's case, little information was passed on to the high school regarding any difficulties with attendance, despite there being some resistance during the latter part of year 6 (see theme two, subtheme two). Poppy had no previous difficulty with ESNA until the transition in Year 9, so there was no need to communicate any issues regarding attendance. However, as soon as there were early signs, the receiving school acted quickly and put strategies in place, the importance of which is highlighted in the literature (Chu et al., 2018; Corcoran et al., 2022; Ingul et al., 2019). Importantly, this may be the reason that Poppy is still attending (albeit sporadically).

Sam's ESNA was not evident to school as quickly, due to his masking when he first transitioned. Therefore, it took time to address which may have led to further deterioration

and resulted in Sam being unable to attend at all. This supports the research that early intervention is crucial to the likelihood of successful reintegration (Heyne, 2018; Sawyer, 2022), and that once non-attendance becomes chronic it can be much harder to address or provide effective interventions that result in reintegration.

7.3 Sub-question b - What factors might exacerbate experiences of ESNA?

Similar themes emerged for the young people involved in the study, for example, the theme of anxiety was prominent in both, however, the way in which each theme was experienced by the YP was unique to them. Themes were varied and were consistent across the participants with some overlaps that could be related to psychological theory. Each theme was related to the EST (the overarching psychological theory), but were also considered in relation to other theories such as (but not limited to), the theory of sense of belonging (Baumeister et al., 2007; El Zaatari & Maalouf, 2022; Gallagher Deeks, 2023), attachment theory (Bowlby & Ainsworth, 1992) and self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985).

7.3.1 Anxiety

In both the young people's cases, there was a strong underlying element of anxiety (see theme one subtheme one), which correlates with the existing literature as being one of the most prevalent features of ESNA (Dalforno et al., 2022; Finning et al., 2019; Heyne, 2018; Heyne et al., 2022; Schlesier et al., 2023). The young people each felt anxiety in the mornings which is also another common theme in the literature, and one which is useful to note when considering interventions (Corcoran et al., 2022; Preece & Howley, 2018). The young people in this study completed the Spence anxiety scale (1998) with results indicating that they both had significant levels of generalised anxiety disorder which impacted their day-to-day ability to attend the school environment. Furthermore, they experienced anxiety in different ways, which supports previous findings suggesting that there should be an individualised approach to support (Connolly et al., 2023; Heyne, 2018; Knage, 2023).

7.3.2 Lack of school belonging

The sense of school belonging (El Zaatari & Maalouf, 2022; Gallagher Deeks, 2023; Korpershoek et al., 2020), can be used to consider one of the main findings in this section as the lack of sense of belonging was referred to as an exacerbating factor. For example, Poppy (see theme one subtheme five), was not being picked for school teams as she was not attending, and with Sam due to him being moved to different academic sets than his friends due to the gap in his learning due to non-attendance. These situations were both direct results of the ESNA, yet the consequences were not felt until trying to reattend, making it an added reason for reluctance and reintegration potentially exacerbating the avoidant behaviours (Tamlyn, 2022). Sawyer, (2022) introduces the SPIRAL framework in her study (a study focussed on supporting parents whose children are experiencing ESNA) and discusses the fostering of a sense of belonging as one of the most salient factors when considering addressing ESNA, suggesting that a strong sense of belonging will make reintegration easier and can go some way to preventing ESNA in the first instance. This is seen in the findings when Sam struggled with this aspect due to the teasing he experienced from his friends, and with Poppy not being included in the sports teams that she used to play in.

7.3.3 Negative or lack of peer relationships

The relationships that the young people have at school are important to their sense of belonging and this could be seen in the findings (see theme one subtheme three). In Poppy's case, her peer relationships were considered a pull factor with them being one of the main reasons she attended. However, whereas Sam's peers are an important factor, one of the reasons he stopped attending part-time was because of negative remarks from his peers, again showing different ways of experiencing ESNA. This supports the research that suggests that negative peer relationships can impact ESNA (McClemont et al., 2021; Schlesier et al., 2023), whilst positive peer relationships can help with reintegration (Sawyer, 2022; Seddon, 2023), and again highlighting the need for acceptance and belonging as aforementioned.

7.3.4 Negative or lack of student/staff relationships

The sense of belonging can also extend to the relationships with the staff in school. Negative relationships with staff were identified as an exacerbating factor in both cases. The staff in school were inconsistent in their approaches and allowances towards the young people and neither of them had built a strong trusting relationship with a key member of staff that they felt they could confide in (see theme one subtheme three). Research suggests that developing trusting relationships with adults who can provide a sense of feeling valued, understood and supported is key to any successful reintegration (Seddon, 2023a; Tamlyn, 2022; Wright, 2023), and can help in preventing avoidance. Furthermore, if a YP has a close trusting relationship with a staff member from the initial transition, early signs of ESNA are more likely to be noticed (Ingul et al., 2019). Moreover, the interventions that had been put in place such as Poppy's 'GO' card to allow her to leave the room if she was feeling overwhelmed, were not granted consistently meaning that there were times that she felt 'trapped' in the situation despite having strategies in place. This meant that the trust within the adult relationships would have been compromised and the inconsistent approach could have heightened the anxieties she was feeling adding to the reasons for the avoidant behaviours (Kearney et al., 2022; Seddon, 2023). In Sam's case, a similar theme was mentioned but more about the approach of the staff member, with Sam's mother explaining he did not respond well to the aggressive nature of some of the high school staff and especially the substitute teachers supporting the evidence that relational and nurturing approaches were needed to help reintegrate young people back into the school environment (Halligan & Cryer, 2022b; Seddon, 2023).

7.3.5 Trauma and adverse childhood experiences

As research suggests, traumatic incidents or significant ruptures in relationships or situations can be a contributing factor to non-attendance. Both young people had experienced a parental separation, and Sam had been in a significant accident on the school grounds. This supports the literature by Tanyu et al. (2020), who suggest that adverse childhood experiences such as these can disengage from the school environment more easily and will need a relational and individual response with help to identify and deploy resilience factors (theme three subtheme four).

7.3.6 Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND)

In both cases, there was mention of possible neurodiversity (see theme one, subtheme two), and Poppy already had a dyslexia diagnosis (see background Case Two), supporting the research that there is a link between SEND (particularly neurodivergence) and ESNA (Connolly et al., 2023; Granieri et al., 2023). The combined sensory and mental health needs of both the young people directly negatively impacted (although differently), their ability to attend and was a salient impacting factor.

Poppy talked of the sensory environment more than Sam as an exacerbating factor (see theme one, subtheme five), stating that she found the number of people, the busyness and the cramped spaces difficult supporting research that suggests sensory needs can negatively impact attendance (Connolly et al., 2023; Seddon, 2023; Totsika et al., 2023a, 2023). Sam found social anxiety more difficult with adults and peers, which aligns with previous findings that young people are motivated to avoid school to escape school-based situations which evoke negative emotional responses (Kearney & Albano, 2004; Korpershoek et al., 2020). It also aligns with the social and communication differences that may stem from a neurodivergent condition.

Additionally, staff and parents commented about both young people masking whilst in the school environment (see theme one, subtheme two) supporting the evidence by Connolly et al., (2023) who suggest that unmet needs are prevalent in those who are displaying school-avoidant behaviours. Masking can prevent the detection of difficulties and delay any intervention therefore; the YP is at risk of the situation becoming chronic, and the opportunity for reintegration is less likely. Sam's mother discussed how he struggles with the rigidity of his thinking and the impact of any unexpected changes that heighten his anxieties. This aligns with findings by (Granieri et al., 2023) and can be a triggering factor in ESNA. For Poppy, her masking results in a different response and makes her physically tired as she attempts to hide and mask her inabilities, especially regarding focusing on tasks and processing information. This highlights the importance of school staff understanding the individual's needs and being able to provide interventions and resources to help reduce any barriers to attendance (Connolly et al., 2023).

7.3.7 Academic pressures

Academic pressures and expectations were also discussed as exacerbating factors (see theme two, subtheme one). Whilst Poppy discussed more about how she felt under extreme pressure to do well, Sam's mother vocalised the difficulties that he experienced when he was moved down the sets at school and his lack of confidence in his abilities. Academic expectations and pressures combined with a fear of failure are discussed in many pieces of research concerning ESNA and these factors are reported to increase in significance the closer to GCSEs young people get (Kearney & Albano, 2004; Korpershoek et al., 2020; Smith et al., 2020). Self-esteem and self-perception are important here and can be considered an exacerbating factor that promotes avoidant behaviours (Korpershoek et al., 2020).

Furthermore, the lack of autonomy over work and subjects that the young people were interested in or could see the value of was highlighted as a contributing factor. This can be understood in terms of self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985, cited in Seddon, 2023), which states that humans are motivated by having a sense of autonomy, competence and relatedness. The young people in this study commented on how they felt that all three of these were thwarted: **autonomy** in terms of what they were made to study in the curriculum despite not liking it or seeing the value, **competence** in that there were levels of SEND and learning difficulties impacting their competence and their self-perceptions as learners/participants (e.g., Poppy not being picked for sports; Sam being moved down sets), and **relatedness** with the lack of relationships with peers and/or staff in the school. It is, therefore, understandable that their motivation to attend school would be low.

7.3.8 Transitions

In both cases, the young people viewed their home environment as their safe space (theme one, subtheme four), and this could have been the case even more so since the COVID-19 lockdowns. Aligning with findings from Nathwani et al., (2021) and Totsika et al., (2023), young people found it hard to return to their school environment after the lockdowns due to many reasons including social anxieties (likely in Sam's case), and environmental factors (likely in Poppy's case). Poppy did not find it so difficult to return to her original school as there were social distancing measures in place, making the environment quieter and calmer,

reducing this barrier and possibly making it easier for her to return due to sensory adaptations. Sam found it very difficult to return after lockdown. Furthermore, it was also mentioned that both young people found it difficult to return after extended absences such as holidays or illnesses supporting research by Corcoran et al. (2022) and McDonald et al. (2023), who discussed the longer the time young people were away from school the harder it felt to go back in (see theme two, subtheme two). The literature highlights that transitions are difficult for some young people and that transitioning from primary to high school is one of the main triggers for ESNA, particularly in the time of COVID-19 (Bagnall et al., 2022; Mumford & Birchwood, 2021; van Rens et al., 2018), when young people missed out on the physical and tangible aspects of the transition stage and building the key relationships that can be protective factors. Both young people in this research had difficulty after transitioning and showed resistance from the beginning, which aligns with the findings in this area (Kearney et al., 2023).

7.3.9 Parental experiences

The parents in both cases found that it was difficult to find support, and they discussed how frustrating they found accessing services with long waiting lists, such as CAMHS and the Neurodevelopmental Service (NDS), with socio-economic status not allowing them to access this privately (see theme three subtheme one). There were also frustrations with the lack of consensus between services for example, (GPs saying children are not able to attend school, but online learning denied by the LA) and lack of communication between services. Heyne et al., (2022) explain that services are 'siloes', as they work as separate systems with no interaction and collaboration to amalgamate systems and provide appropriate accessible services.

Furthermore, parents and teachers discussed what were considered 'tick-box' exercises and processes that schools had to go through to fulfil their responsibilities (see theme three subtheme two). This made the parents feel quite isolated in the situation feeling like they did not know where to turn. They explained it felt like the school were doing what they needed to do but there were no obvious clear next steps. This aligns with research by

Bagnall et al. (2022) and Chockalingam et al. (2023) who also highlighted the isolation and frustrations felt by parents.

Additionally, the parents spoke of the blame and shame they felt at points (see theme three, subtheme three). Poppy's mother spoke about feeling as though she was blamed because she is not as hard on Poppy as she should be as a result of her own past experiences and not wanting Poppy to experience anxieties about school in the same way she did. Poppy's mother also spoke of not knowing what she should be doing as a mother. This perspective was mirrored by Sam's mum, who spoke of feeling guilty trying all the strategies she could think of to get Sam to school but to no avail therefore feeling like a failure. This aligns with existing research by Sawyer, (2022) who also found that parents felt a sense of blame and shame.

Sawyer (2022) also reported that parents felt it important for them to be included in intervention attempts and emphasised that the communication between the school and parents was very important. Chockalingam et al. (2023) report that without collaboration with parents, it is very difficult to address ESNA and involvement is not enough, it is engagement that is needed (Goodall & Montgomery, 2014). Lastly, parents discussed that the schools had been supportive and had helped them in both cases and they both expressed gratitude for what the school had done whilst acknowledging its difficult position in adhering to government guidelines and legislation.

7.3.10 School factors

The schools that were explored in the two cases of this study were supportive of the parents but also expressed the difficulties they faced from their perspective and the factors that they perceived to exacerbate ESNA. For example, Poppy's school discussed that they needed her in school to be able to help with the interventions that they had planned, yet they felt the situation was not helped by Poppy being allowed to stay at home, come in late or be picked up early. Sam's school also could not implement the help that they had arranged to be given due to him not being at school to access this. The school felt frustrated that they were trying to help but were also limited in their resources and the punitive measures that they faced

and were expected to implement when not meeting targets supporting the research by Cunningham et al. (2022) and Finning et al., (2018).

Another salient point made by school staff was that it is difficult for them if information is not passed to them from previous schools or other professional services preventing them from being able to implement preventative measures or adequate intervention at an early enough stage before the ESNA becomes chronic.

7.4 Sub-question c - What might help young people, their parents, and school staff manage and cope with their experiences of ESNA?

There were elements mentioned by all the participants throughout the study that inferred that there were strategies that may have helped them. Referring back to theme one (Individual level experience, symptoms and reactions), and the subsequent subthemes; throughout the interviews, it became apparent that the young people experienced similar difficulties but in very different ways. This suggests that an individual response is particularly useful. For example, whilst both of the young people experienced anxieties, there were different elements underlying the anxiety therefore the responses needed to be different (see theme one, subtheme one). Sam needed help to cope with the uncertainty of the day so strategies such as incorporating fixed visual timetables, prior notice of any changes to lessons or members of staff and being met by a key adult on a morning with a settle-in period could have been helpful for him. Alternatively, Poppy needed strategies to help her cope with the fact that she would have to engage socially with a lot of people and deal with the day. Giving her strategies such as a safe calming space in school where she could go to when overwhelmed would help or alternative transition periods in which she could move around the school alone rather than have to communicate with others. Introducing these individualised strategies supports previous literature (Heyne, 2018; Maynard et al., 2015; Thambirajah et al., 2008) who discuss the importance of differentiated responses. This would need the school staff to understand the individual needs of the young people and to respond appropriately allowing interventions to be tailored to their individual needs.

Within the first theme, sensory needs were discussed and both Poppy's mother and Sam's mother suggested that these sensory needs were not well addressed due to the inherent dynamic of the school environment. As Martin et al. (2019) discuss, considering the sensory needs of those who find the school environment overwhelming, can provide a significant reduction in anxiety levels and avoidant behaviours. Regular sensory audits in classrooms and the wider school environment can allow for measures to be put in place that all students would benefit from not just those who may be neurodiverse. Strategies such as minimising displays and busyness of rooms, considering noise-absorbing materials in loud rooms such as dining halls or making sure that classrooms are as spaced out as possible can all help those with sensory aversions. Personalised sensory passports can also be used alongside pupil passports in schools to ensure that staff across the school are aware of the needs of their pupils.

Throughout the study, the participants reflected upon their experiences and discussed elements that they would have found useful to help them cope better with their situations. In both of the young people's cases, the parents mentioned the interactions between them, themselves, the young person and the school staff (reflected in theme two). Kern and Wehmeyer (2021) discuss how important school belonging is and how a good teacher/pupil relationship can foster this. Additionally, in reference to theme two, both parents discussed the importance of good relationships with themselves and the school, this aligns with existing research that suggests the positive relationships between staff and parents plays a significant role when coping with and addressing ESNA (Goodall & Montgomery, 2014; Kelty & Wakabayashi, 2020; Sawyer, 2022). The incorporation of parent drop-ins, regular contact and open-door policies for difficulties that arise can help facilitate the collaborative relationships with parents and school staff. Having a particular person to go to can also help some parents as they know they have an anchor in the school environment.

As discussed in sub-question b, a robust transition plan may be a key strategy to help young people, their parents and the school staff with cases of ESNA, not only to cope with it but also as Van Rens et al. (2018) suggest, a preventative measure. In both cases in this study, the participants had a transition difficulty and if this had been detected earlier, intervention could have been in place to possibly mitigate this. However, as the participants mentioned

(especially the staff from Sam's school), COVID-19 made this difficult. A good transition plan may increase the sense of belonging in school which would align with previous research (El Zaatari & Maalouf, 2022; Korpershoek et al., 2020), and indicate a strategy that may help young people, their parents and school staff. Furthermore, both Sam's mother and Poppy's school staff and mother, discussed the difficulties encountered when coming back into school from a period of absence. Transition plans for these situations may also be useful as a tool to aid all parties.

Early identification has been identified as a key element and crucial for successful reintegration into educational settings (Chu et al., 2018; Ingul et al., 2019; Kearney et al., 2023). Having the school staff trained and ready to identify elements that might suggest the beginnings of an attendance difficulty could help to ensure that the intervention is put in place early enough to prevent the situation from becoming chronic.

All participants discussed the problems that they had with the separation and segregation of the outside systems and agencies that they worked with (as found in theme three subthemes one and two). The schools both discussed the difficulties of not having information transferred to them that could have helped in the early stages suggesting that a more transparent and coherent way of sharing this information would help all the stakeholders involved. 'Silo systems', systems working in isolation (D. Heyne et al., 2022) are obstructing this from happening so consideration of making systems much more cohesive and collaborative was discussed as a factor which would have helped both the parents and the school staff not just cope, but also address the issues more effectively.

In conclusion, managing and coping with ESNA involves early intervention, strong effective collaboration and empathetic, personalised support for each young person.

Implementations can be made at each level and encourage strong interactions and minimise conflicts between the systems. By addressing these areas, young people may feel more supported, and parents and school staff are able to build strong cohesive relationships to allow for the possibility of successful reintegration.

8.0 The Role of the Educational Psychologist

As identified by Boaler and Bond (2023), EPs are well placed to support stakeholders within cases of ESNA and can interject at individual and systemic levels, working with schools, between schools and families and with the individual. The EP's background in child development and social-emotional wellbeing, and their understanding of how systems and interacting factors work help them to address ESNA and work with stakeholders in an empathetic and non-judgemental way to gain the best outcomes. Addressing attendance difficulties systemically can be difficult, yet it can be seen from the findings of this study, that a systemic and consistent approach can be beneficial. Robust training for staff is one way that this can be done, and that EPs can be involved with. The need for the relational approach of staff in the school is one aspect that was made clear in both cases, and training at a school staff level can help with this and highlight to staff the need for an empathetic and consistent approach as well as the need for strong trusting relationships with the young people involved. Training on the difficulties that young people with SEND might encounter during the school day is also a way of helping staff to accommodate these. Ultimately, training to spot the signs of ESNA early is also something which the EP can help with. As Cunningham et al. (2022) explain, it is considered the best way to address the problem and prevent it from becoming a chronic recurring issue. EPs are also able to help schools audit their provision to consider what implementations they might need to put in place and support them to do so.

8.1 Limitations and future research

This section will identify the limitations of the present study, the possible ways these can be addressed, and suggestions for future research based on the findings.

The first limitation of the study involves the difficulty in extrapolation and generalisation to the wider population. With only two cases (11 participants), this suggests the majority of views of those experiencing ESNA are not represented in this study. Furthermore, using a small participant set increases the risk of bias within the sampling methods despite efforts to mitigate these. The SENDCos and Head Teachers of the schools were gatekeepers and selected appropriate cases before approaching them, so the researcher had no control over this selection. Moreover, the parents were approached and whilst they were asked, the young people may have felt they were at liberty to comply.

It would have been useful to have included an outside agency that had been involved in the support of the YP and also the previous school setting to get an even richer data set and consider the voices of the multiagency approach and external support systems such as health colleagues, LA attendance teams, inclusion teams and family support staff to consider their expertise and their ability to contribute towards supporting the young people's families and schools in this position. Future research should consider these extra views to add to the tapestry of data, and longitudinal studies would be useful to consider approaches that have been successful and to follow the cases through a reintegration programme.

The data set in this study was analysed via RTA and subsequently, it is important to consider the role of subjectivity and the researcher's interpretation of the data set. Despite this not being considered a limitation (Braun & Clarke, 2021), some researchers have argued that it is very difficult to achieve academic rigour due to the researcher's active role in the procedure (Yadav, 2022).

This study highlighted the importance of parental engagement in the process and strong school and home collaboration. A future research suggestion is to explore communication systems between parents and schools and how this can be improved. Furthermore,

exploring the transition process to ensure full communication and a method of supporting young people at risk of ESNA to make good trusting relationships with key staff and peers before transitioning to a new school or setting would be a valuable addition to the current literature.

With the new legislation and guidelines coming into effect in August 2024 and the rise in fines, this impact on the ESNA situation would be a good focus for future practice. It could influence guidance further by considering what is working or not working from the new developments, especially the mentoring hubs. This would subsequently be able to inform a school policy and package that could be available for all schools in order to help them address any attendance problems they are having within their schools.

9.0 Implications for EP practice

The findings from this study have been included in the table below (Table 4), to demonstrate at which level of the EST they lie. The majority are within the levels that the EP can help target when working alongside school staff and parents. The mesosystem and microsystem are the main target areas and the levels open to influence and change. Despite things being situated in the wider systems and being more fixed, changes at the micro and mesosystem level could make a significant improvement for the YP experiencing ESNA and this is where the EP focus should fall.

LEVEL	ESNA FACTORS EXPERIENCED
Individual – Factors experienced at the individual level (the YP)	Anxiety Social pressures Physical symptoms (polyvagal) Neurodiversity Learning difficulties Puberty
Microsystem – Factors experienced within the direct and immediate surroundings (Bi-directional flow)	Friendships/Peer relationships with individual Staff relationships with individual Family relationships with individual
Mesosystem – connection between the structures of the microsystem	Family experiences and relationships with school Parent and school relationships Parent and school communication

Exosystem – Larger social system YP not directly involved but there is impact	Parent employment (busy house, childminding [Sam], available to collect [Poppy]) Inaccessible services Waiting lists for services Services not interacting effectively with each other
Macrosystem – Cultural and social values and norms. Laws and wider systems	Socioeconomic status Shame of not being able to get children into school (feeling like a bad parent) Attitudes Fines and punitive measures
Chronosystem – The dimension of time in relation to the YP’s environments and experiences	Puberty Parental separation Traumatic incident at school Transitions Covid-19 pandemic

Table 4. Findings organised in relation to Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory

Furthermore, the findings from this study have been and will be used further, to write a training programme for school staff. The researcher’s current placement has devised a training programme with ongoing supervision input to enable schools to identify and address ESNA, which is at the 2nd pilot stage. There will also be an implementation of the **ICE** framework (discussed below) into the researcher’s practice, and this will be developed further with the plan to devise a workbook to enable school staff to work with each stage, providing them with guidance and resources to identify, collaborate and respond with empathy and intervention.

9.1 Introducing the ‘ICE’ framework of support

The findings from this study suggested that addressing the following three main sections of need may have helped young people, their parents and school staff to manage and cope with their experiences of ESNA and possibly prevent it from happening or prevent maintaining the situation:

- **I**dentification and early intervention
- **C**ollaboration of Stakeholders and Services
- **E**mpathetic response and individually tailored support

9.1.1 Identification and early intervention

The findings of this study support previous literature that suggests the importance of early identification of ESNA (Chu et al., 2018; Ingul et al., 2019; Kearney et al., 2023). The earlier problems are detected, and interventions commenced the more likelihood there is of successful reintegration into formal learning environments and educational settings. One valuable party that needs to be involved at this level is the parents, as they are likely to be able to detect signs much earlier than the signs that are visible in school. However, it is important that the sole onus is not put on parents and that the school takes responsibility for this. Furthermore, consideration of parent information sheets or parent training on the early signs to spot may be useful. It would also help to foster relationships with key members of staff before the YP is transitioned into the school so that they have access to a trusted adult if and when needed.

9.1.2 Collaboration of stakeholders and services

Communication and collaboration are imperative among the main stakeholders (the YP, parents and school staff) to build relationships, maintain positive interactions, and communicate important information. Furthermore, communication between services is also vital such as between EPs, external support staff, health colleagues and other outside professional agencies in order to support all parties involved and react to any development swiftly and appropriately to ensure as much engagement with the educational setting as possible.

9.1.3 Empathetic response and individually tailored support

As can be seen in the findings of this study, the young people experienced ESNA differently, having circumstances that were unique to them but also experiencing similar factors very differently. As Heyne (2018) discusses in his special series, the heterogeneity of ESNA means that there needs to be many ways to address the phenomenon. The response for each YP needs to be considered very carefully, and what works for one YP and their family will not necessarily work for another YP and their family. As highlighted in the findings, the young

people in this study experienced ESNA differently and although both were anxious about elements of the school, they had very different individual needs suggesting the need for carefully considered and tailored interventions. In both of the cases, the YP experienced a variety of barriers to attendance with nuanced differences that may not be apparent on the surface and would need exploring by a member of staff who could build a positive and trusting relationship with the YP. As the literature indicates (Holder, 2022), most young people, and certainly the two in this study, want to attend and be at school with their peers' learning skills for their adult life, however, they feel they cannot attend which in turn requires an empathetic relational approach for them to build trust and feel able to reintegrate or increase attendance.

This framework has been developed by bringing together the findings of this study and considering the main areas of difficulty that were experienced by the participants, along with the consideration of how school staff and professionals can attempt to address ESNA in practice. Utilising the findings from this study and existing research that was examined within the literature review, the three main areas above were found to be most prominent and successful in addressing ESNA. Therefore, as the researcher has been involved in writing a training programme for the service, it was felt that the findings should be disseminated and incorporated within this. Frameworks offer a valuable guide for understanding complex phenomena such as ESNA however, their use in practice is not without limitation and the researcher acknowledges this. One of the key limitations is their potential to oversimplify the uniqueness of each case and the researcher acknowledges that it is hard to generalise or offer standardised explanations for behaviours. However, the researcher believes that using this framework can provide structure, consistency, and a shared language when addressing ESNA.

10.0 Conclusion

This study aimed to explore ESNA from the perspectives of parents, school staff and young people. Bronfenbrenner's EST was used as a lens through which to understand the phenomenon further and explore cases in depth. Additionally, more recent events such as

the COVID-19 pandemic and the 'Cost of Living Crisis' and the impact of these on each stakeholder within the cases was explored.

The current study has answered the research questions presented by exploring how ESNA is experienced by young people, their parents, and the school staff who support them across two rich cases. The research identified possible signs that could be used to support the early identification and early intervention, the importance of collaboration and communication between stakeholders and services, and the need for an empathetic response and individually tailored support for the YP and families involved (the ICE framework). This framework is supported by previous research and will soon be implemented in the researcher's practice.

Chapter 3: Reflective Chapter

1.0 Subject consideration

I knew before embarking upon the doctorate, the subject that I would focus on for my thesis. Prior to the doctorate, ESNA was a big part of my working roles. Firstly, I had spent two years as a Home Learning Support Assistant (HLSA) for young people who were not attending school as a result of medical needs related to mental health difficulties, and then moved on to work as a Team Leader in the SEMH team at the educational psychology service in my LA. During my time within the EPS, I spent a lot of my time with young people that were experiencing ESNA for various reasons and I could see the increase in cases day by day. After COVID-19, it was clear to me that this was only going to become a more prevalent issue. The reason I was also sure of this was because I had a personal interest. My own daughter was experiencing social communication difficulties and separation anxieties and had difficulty separating from me to go into school. It took me 3 years before she felt able to line up on the playground on a morning without becoming dysregulated. I was seeing the early signs of a 'school refuser' as people liked to call it at the time.

During my time at the EPS, I was studying for an MSc in Psychology and decided to write my dissertation on what was then termed EBSA, emotionally based school avoidance. It served three purposes for me; as a student who was researching, a practitioner who was delivering intervention, and a parent who was trying to grapple with the intricacies of ESNA, balancing a worried mum head with a frustrated and embarrassed mum head. I was asking myself the questions that the parents asked themselves in this study, 'why is my child not like the others? Why won't she just go into school? What have I done wrong? My sons went into school fine why can't she?' I realised then the disparity in perception. A parent looks upon and experiences ESNA totally differently than the member of staff waiting at the classroom door, and the young person experiences it differently again. Three completely different outlooks of the experience with three sets of consequences and challenges.

Throughout my roles, I have noticed that individual differences are so important to consider. Interventions and resources that work for one child and family will not always work for another. During my time as a HLSA I remember going to see a young person who had not attended school for months. She was in her GCSE year and her parents were desperate to get her back into school. She had been a highflyer with good grades right up until the transition to high school and then a couple of weeks into her first term and things started to fall apart. The odd tummy ache or headache meant a few days off here and there and then this became more frequent until she was not attending at all and explained to her parents that she felt she just could not do it. She did not want to meet me at all at first and ran from the house when she knew I was on my way to the home visit. I spoke with her parents and found a connection, she loved dogs. I left her a note and a picture of my service dog. She agreed to meet with me the next day provided I brought my dog! That was the connection that became the 'pull' factor and enabled me to build a rapport and work with her. I worked with her for 8 months (taking my service dog to each visit), she completed all her online work, and engaged with sessions. Eventually after building up her confidence, we managed to get her back in the school gates and she now has her GCSE's and has started her own business – dog training.

The one thing that struck me was how disconnected all the systems were which aligns with the recent research by David Heyne and his colleagues. The young person's mum constantly felt that she was blamed by the school and was fighting a battle to get the school to help her daughter and make some adjustments. The school staff also felt like they were fighting a battle but more around her inability to comply, the attendance officer was focused on reaching attendance targets. I also felt like I was fighting a battle, but my battle was more to get the systems aligned so we could work together for the one goal – to get her back into school so that she could receive an appropriate and adequate education. This case fed into my MSc dissertation which was concerned with looking at EBSA less as a within-child phenomenon and in a more holistic way thinking about how the disconnected systems all impact the individual but also the interplay with each other. My MSc was based on the literature at the time which has developed much further since. This was the springboard from which my thesis would be launched.

1.1 Conceptualising and clarifying the project

I asked myself what has changed 10 years on? My answer as far as I could see and the literature was telling me was nothing, apart from things have got worse and we view the phenomenon a little differently acknowledging the impact of outside factors and experiences. Since the writing of my MSc dissertation, we have had two major incidents, COVID-19 and the 'cost of living crisis', both of which have had a significant impact on ESNA. The number of children with ESNA has risen dramatically as have the number of children who are experiencing mental health difficulties. Since the majority of ESNA cases are underpinned by anxiety, it is not surprising that the number of mental health problems and ESNA numbers have risen together. Therefore, I wanted to find out how these young people experienced ESNA, did COVID-19 make it worse? Did they cope with lockdown? Was life easier at home? What was it about school that was so hard? What could we all do to help them? I had a lot of questions.

Initially, I wanted to find out what might be the early predictors of ESNA and to explore what support is useful and not useful to develop a resource to use in school. I wanted to find the correlations that existed and that we could work with. However, the more I tried to map out my study, the more I decided I needed to take a step back. Thinking about correlations and statistical answers was not the first stage, that would come later, I needed to know how these people were feeling and what they were experiencing. Also, a project looking at the correlations like this would fit much better with a longitudinal study but with the limited doctoral thesis time, this could not happen. Furthermore, holding a pragmatist worldview and believing every method has its strengths and limitations and no single perspective can present a full picture, the multiple realities of the stakeholders were needed leading me to consider a methodology of reflexive thematic analysis.

Through reading the literature, it became apparent that there were limited amounts of literature that included and triangulated the data with all three perspectives (YP, parent and school staff). There were a few but these were more concerned with the reintegration process or direct interventions (Nuttall & Woods, 2013a; O'Hagan et al., 2022; Tobias, 2019). It was also evident that school-based literature considered home factors to be the problem

(Adams, 2022; Cunningham et al., 2022) and parent-based literature situated the school as the problem (Brill, 2009; Havik et al., 2014; Sawyer, 2022). There was also a distinct lack of young people's voices in the literature and their personal experiences.

At this point I did consider whether I should be looking at a solution-based project as others had done, looking for the things that worked in a situation. However, I also realised that it is very important that we know the barriers and how the participants from each group were feeling about them and experiencing them. It was also important to consider how we could use this information to help which led me to the following research questions:

Overarching research question:

- How is ESNA experienced by young people, their parents, and the school staff involved in their support?

Sub Questions:

- What may be the early signs of ESNA?
- What factors might exacerbate experiences of ESNA?
- What might help young people, their parents, and school staff manage and cope with their experiences of ESNA?

1.2 The inherent difficulty with terminology

Choosing the topic of this thesis was relatively easy as it was one that is close to my heart. However, nearly all the literature that I read talked about the difficulty with conceptualisation and terminology (Corcoran, 2023; Heyne, 2018; Pellegrini, 2007; Totsika et al., 2020). I did not think that this would impact my research and initially used the term EBSNA, which is the term that we use within the EP service that I work with and the term I had always used when speaking about the phenomenon. However, after attending the Eastern Region Conference and listening to a presentation by somebody representing 'Square Peg' my opinion changed. The speaker was a parent of children with ESNA, and she spoke candidly about her and her children's experiences. When she spoke of the conceptualisation and the terminology surrounding ESNA it became clear how impactful the

consequences of a term could be. The blame, shame and responsibility behind the term is imperative to consider. This parent spoke of the need to acknowledge the strong emotions that ESNA can have for the child and parent but labelling the phenomenon EBSA or EBSNA still has connotations of autonomy and responsibility and takes a 'within child' perspective as it is detailing their responses. Once I had listened to this, I considered changing the term I would use. I took this to supervision and spoke at length with my supervisor about what I terminology I should use so that there were no assumptions or alienation of participants. During the time I was doing this, the new guidance for schools came out and the terminology the government were using was ESNA – extended school non-attendance. I decided to go with this due to it being a more neutral term that distances all parties from the responsibilities. However, despite changing to this term I do not actually agree that it fits the phenomenon. I think it is still important to note and acknowledge the distress that these young people are feeling when they are required to go to school. However, doing this without offence via the terminology is difficult. Furthermore, extended school non-attendance is quite ambiguous. For example, some of the cases I have been involved in may include a young person whose attendance is sporadic, for example, they will feel overwhelmed for a day and not be able to attend but the next day they are feeling better and can go in with this behaviour repeating itself. It left me thinking where would those young people fit in? They have not got the 'extended' non-attendance, just sporadic. Conceptualising or categorising this phenomenon is difficult and the discussions and suggestions are continuing.

1.3 Participant recruitment and ethical considerations

Gaining ethical approval for a study involving young people talking about potentially distressing subjects is not an easy challenge. The process was longer due to needing to gain parental consent as well as the YP's consent so additional forms needed to be generated. Additionally, there was also the consideration of how I was going to make sure that I was adhering to the BPS code of ethics and not putting them at harm by talking about their experiences of ESNA (BPS, 2021). I considered this carefully and at one point thought about interviewing only parents and school staff or interviewing those who had experienced ESNA

in the past. However, not including the child's voice would greatly reduce my contribution to the current literature and also do a disservice to the YP that I was essentially trying to help.

Recruiting the young people however, was harder than I expected. I had not thought about the difficulties, despite reading in the literature, that a high proportion of the children experiencing ESNA are experiencing mental health difficulties, and the prevalence of neurodiversity and social communication differences was high within this population. This of course meant that a lot of these young people may find it difficult to be interviewed and the prospect of a stranger recording them might be overwhelming. To address this, I decided to consider the use of participatory methods as a way of helping them communicate their contributions. I invited the young people to bring along something that might help them to communicate their thoughts or to draw a picture that represents something to do with their case. I also took with me some art supplies to the interviews so that the YP could use these if they preferred.

Recruiting the adults within the study was relatively straight forward and parents were eager to share their story but without the inclusion of the YP, the full case could not be explored. I asked my colleagues in my EP service to help me by approaching their schools to identify cases where they thought participation was likely. Eventually, I had two cases consisting of multiple perspectives which allowed me to answer the above research questions, although ideally, I was looking for four cases. Knowing the potential data set had been halved meant I would need to make sure that I collected rich data and also consider a later recruitment of more participants if I or my supervisor felt it was needed.

1.4 Analysing the data

Due to difficulty in recruitment, a participant dropping out of the study and the rearrangement of interviews, I did not collect my data until quite late and this was a stressful time. Once I had my data, I felt relieved yet apprehensive about the analysis. Having never undertaken a Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA), I needed to research it carefully and I listened to an extensive webinar as well as reading around the analysis to ensure I understood the process fully. My reasons for choosing RTA instead of Interpretive

Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) were that it allowed for flexibility and also the researcher's role and involvement to be considered. I also knew that this research would take on a realist position due to the consideration of mental health difficulties and anxiety as being existing 'truths' and the fact that 'ESNA' was a recognised and labelled concept. Additionally, my interest as a parent of a child with ESNA and my experiences of this would impact my subjectivity and rather than exclude this, I felt it was useful and important to acknowledge meaning RTA was the best choice for the information I wanted to explore. I also took the time to consider using discourse analysis. However, concentrating on the constructs made through the use of language would not give me the holistic results I needed or the ability to use the data in the way I intended.

Through each stage of the analysis, I would check in with myself on how I was feeling as this subject was emotive for me and there was a rollercoaster of reactions and emotions happening.

As I repeatedly listened to the interviews, it was hard not to instantly try and start linking things that the participants said straight to theories and trying to code too early. I am thankful that I had read around RTA and held back from doing this to make sure I processed my emotions and feelings before considering coding. I listened to the recordings so much that I knew my interviews almost word for word. Whilst listening, I found it useful to highlight the printed transcripts in different colours when I realised that they linked together with emerging concepts, and also to annotate the transcripts themselves (See Fig 9 below).

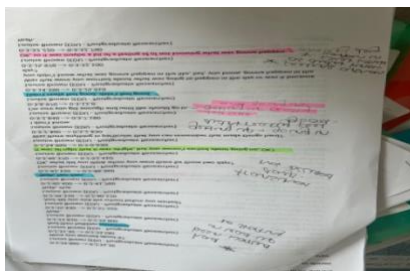


Figure 8 Colour-coded Transcript

This helped with my initial coding process and enabled me to get very familiar with the data. I found coding very difficult as I was consistently asking myself if I was doing it correctly and needed quite a lot of support from my supervisor through this process. Once I relaxed and immersed myself in the process, I began to enjoy it and was excited about my emerging

themes. Once I was at the theme sorting stage, I felt like I was nearly there however, this stage took quite a long time as quite a lot of the codes overlapped the initial themes that I had named.

I decided to use another manual method to help with this process after finding it difficult to do on the computer and so I wrote down each code and sorted by hand. (See Fig. 10 and 11 below).



Figure 9 Manual coding with post it notes



Figure 10 Sorting codes to themes

Once I had done this it became much easier to group them and for some reason, the cathartic nature of physical manipulation helped with the clarity.

Once I had added these to my notes on the computer and talked them through with my placement supervisor, she instantly noticed a pattern that mapped onto my chosen psychological model (Ecological Systems Theory), and we sorted the themes into the three main sectors with subsections (see methodology). This enabled the completion of the thematic map. Once the map was in place this made it much clearer to work with and I

finally felt as though I had a full set of themes that could be categorised and understood through the EST lens.

Once my themes were generated, I got very excited and started to feel passionate about my findings, especially as I had started this exploration with a bias toward the parent yet after interviewing the school staff and hearing their very open, honest and compassionate perspectives along with their frustrations and the barriers they faced, it made me consider how difficult it is for them as well, especially as they want to help but their hands are somewhat tied.

When writing up my analysis I struggled a little as I knew my data so well that I could almost recite the interviews. Knowing the interviews so well felt like a good thing however, when writing up my findings it was a hindrance as I took quotations and wrote within the context of the conversation without displaying the full quotation explicitly. This subsequently ended up with me analysing data that was not fully presented. From the feedback I received, I rewrote the findings section, making sure my interpretation was fully quoted in the write-up. Once I had redone this, the analysis was much easier to write-up. This whole process was much harder than I ever anticipated, and I am thankful I had the support that I did.

1.5 Reflective critique of the research study

Reflecting on my research study through Yardley's (Yardley, 2000; Yardley et al., 2014) principles for judging the quality of qualitative research; sensitivity to context, commitment and rigour, transparency and coherence, and impact and importance, helped me to better understand the strengths and limitations of this study. Considering how the research study was designed, conducted and how it contributes to the wider field has been a long but interesting process.

Firstly, considering the sensitivity to context; one of the main ways that this study conformed to this principle was through a thorough review of the existing literature, acknowledging both the historical 'within child' perspective and more modern ecological approaches. I also made a conscious effort to reflect on my positionality throughout the research process and

tried to limit and acknowledge any bias. This also allowed me to be aware of how my beliefs, experiences and background might influence the interpretation of the data, which Braun & Clarke (2021) emphasise as crucial in qualitative research.

The second principle is 'commitment and rigour'. I recognise that my work would have benefited from additional data sources and a wider pool of participants. Triangulating data with a wider set of professionals would have been useful and expanded the scope (medical professionals, mental health professionals or other educational psychologists for example). However, with restrictions on time and resources, this was not possible. Additionally, exploring alternative interpretations during the analysis process could have added rigour and depth. Nonetheless, I feel as though I was thorough in my approach to the boundaries of my resources. I used reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021), which required me to engage closely with the data, reflecting on emerging themes and refining them over time. This approach helped me to stay committed to the complexity of the data and gave me space to consider different interpretations.

Regarding transparency and coherence, I worked hard to ensure the research process was as transparent as possible detailing the methods I used, how participants were recruited, and the steps I took to analyse the data. This transparency was important for me to make sure that readers could follow how I arrived at my findings, which as Yardley (2000, 2014) points out is crucial in qualitative research. In terms of coherence, I felt that the use of EST provided a strong framework that aligned well with my findings and allowed me to present my findings in a coherent and accessible way. A limitation would be that I could have further discussed how the themes were interconnected to add to the strength and overall coherence.

Impact and importance is the final principle and the one that I think my study does well. I believe my study has important practical implications, especially in terms of helping colleagues and school staff to consider ways in which they can identify and approach addressing ESNA in their settings.

1.6 Contribution and future research

I believe this research has added to the field by presenting perspectives from various stakeholders involved in ESNA and considering the impact of global and national events such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis. However, due to the small nature of the study and the limited time and resources, there is a limit to how much it can add. I would like to use this research to inform future research and consider a longitudinal study in the field. The subject is currently receiving global interest so a link with other countries and a working group considering the development of practical resources and approaches that can be gathered, analysed and shared would be a useful and collaborative way forward. Investigations into the recent addition of the mentoring hubs by the UK government and the impact that they have on the attendance figures in the coming years would be an interesting and valuable piece of research which could add further and wider generalisable data to the existing pool.

Understanding the intricacies of ESNA is vital in addressing the challenges faced by students, parents and school staff. Psychological research plays a crucial role in unravelling the complexities behind ESNA and offers insights that can inform effective strategies and interventions. By encompassing perspectives from all three stakeholders, this research contributes a holistic view of the issue. This approach allows for a comprehensive understanding of the underlying factors contributing to ESNA and paves the way for tailored solutions that address the needs of each stakeholder group. Furthermore, considering the impact of global and national events such as the COVID-19 pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis aforementioned, provides a relevant context for interpreting the findings of the study. These external factors can significantly influence attendance patterns and could shed light on new challenges that need to be addressed in this field.

However, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of this study, particularly as it is small scale and has significant resource constraints. Whilst this study provides valuable insights, it represents a snapshot in time of a much larger issue. For this reason, using this

research as a foundation to inform future studies, particularly longitudinal studies, can offer a more in-depth and nuanced understanding of ESNA over time.

The global interest in the subject of ESNA underscores the significance of collaboration and knowledge sharing across countries such as in the case of the International Network for School Attendance (INSA). Establishing links with other nations and forming working groups to develop practical resources and approaches can facilitate a more comprehensive and multifaceted approach to addressing ESNA on a global scale. By pooling resources and expertise, researchers and practitioners can work together to develop effective interventions and strategies that can be adapted to different cultural contexts.

One area of research that I am potentially interested in is the impact of the new attendance hubs that are being introduced by the UK Government (Department for Education, 2024) in a new national drive to improve school attendance, on attendance figures. Investigating the efficacy of these hubs in improving attendance rates can offer valuable insights into the effectiveness of such interventions. By exploring the long-term impact of the mentoring hubs and their potential contribution to reducing ESNA, researchers can grow the existing pool of knowledge and enhance the understanding of best practices in this area.

Psychological research plays a pivotal role in advancing our understanding of ESNA and informing evidence-based interventions. By adopting a multi-stakeholder perspective, considering external factors, and emphasising collaboration and longitudinal research significant strides can be made in addressing ESNA and supporting the well-being and academic success of students.

1.7 Impact of the research journey

This research journey has been one of highs and lows but has been a fantastic learning experience. I have a framework that I am very proud of and that is original and can be used to help the people involved in cases of ESNA. I am also grateful that the subject I am so interested in is topical and the current legislation and guidance surrounding it is being reviewed.

I did find that there were some elements of the subject of ESNA that I found very contradictory during the time I have been studying it. For example, it delights me that there is now global interest and strong government interest nationally which is much more accepting of the difficulties that young people who are experiencing ESNA and their families face. However, although there are aspects of the new legislation and policies that are very good and are moving in the right direction, I felt huge disappointment that at the same time the government will be raising the cost of fines for parents and creating a more punitive response. I can understand this happening for some (lower-level management of the problem), and it has been made clear that the fines 'should' be considered on an individual basis however, there are some schools and trusts that take a punitive no-tolerance approach and due to this there will be families that will be targeted. My concern is that the number of 'ghost children' will rise as the risk is that the parents will need to avoid fines such as these, especially if they are struggling in the current financial climate which could result in them deregistering their child. This needs to be a point that is kept in mind by professionals and considered by those who can influence policy.

During the research, it was clear that the parents found the process both interesting and as one of them commented 'therapeutic'. It enabled her to consider the school staff's perspective as she was reflecting and the difficulties that they had when trying to help and address the problem.

One of the young people also took the opportunity and used a participatory method when working with me. She drew the following picture which helped me to understand the way she was feeling when she talked me through it (see below).

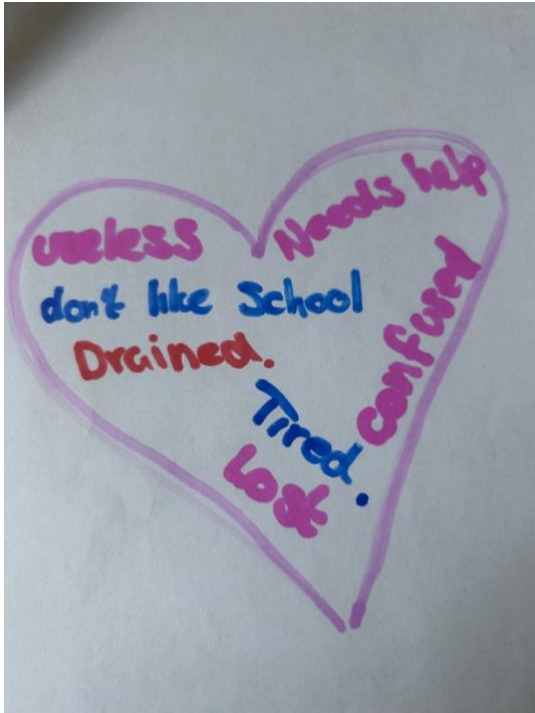


Figure 11 Participatory method for Poppy

This picture, despite being simple, conveyed a message to me of feeling lost and with no hope or energy to carry on but desperate for help. This is a feeling I got throughout this study from both young people, their parents and even some of the school staff. They seemed lost in a system and did not know how to make it right again. As adults, we have a responsibility to work together and help these young people navigate the systems around them, and this journey has made me even more passionate to contribute to enable this to happen.

I feel very grateful and privileged that the young people, their parents and school staff gave up their time and opened up to me to help me with this research. I feel they gave so much to me, not only their time, but they put their trust in me to hold their stories and make sense of them. Without them, there would have been no research journey, so I thank them for being part of that journey and enabling me to develop and grow from their contributions.

I feel that this journey has been a difficult (one of the most difficult) yet worthwhile one that has developed me as a researcher, a practitioner and a parent. It has enabled me to consider all perspectives on a much more equal basis and in a more empathetic manner.

This research journey has been one of the most difficult journeys I have been on both personally and professionally. There were many situations happening in my personal life that impacted my ability to navigate this process. There were significant family health issues as well as my own personal challenges. During my doctorate I have received a diagnosis of ADHD which has thrown up some very interesting concepts within this research journey. Not only because I have needed extra support but also that the young people participating in my study are also potentially neurodivergent. Some may argue that I am too close to my subject or topic and that my bias is likely to be significant. However, I consider this to be a strength. Hearing the young people discussing the difficulties that they face in the school environment and the complex nature of their emotional and physical reactions, made sense to me. I considered my own schooling and how I had managed whilst I was young. It made me then realise that I had just had to get on with it which makes me wonder how many young people were really struggling back then and how many young people were lost from the educational system just because they were considered 'naughty', 'useless', or 'distracting/disruptive'.

One of the significant aspects that has come from COVID-19 is that the young people have seen that it does not have to be like that and that there are alternatives to the way we need to learn or the way we can engage with education such as online learning. They can also often see their parents working from home online and I can understand their frustration when we are adamant that they should return to an environment in which they struggle to function. With the current interest globally in ESNA, I wonder if we are on a path to find more adaptable and appropriate alternatives. Additionally, more recently, the acceptance of mental health difficulties and neurodivergent conditions is much better in our society today, it was unheard of for anyone to have an ADHD diagnosis when I was at school, and it certainly would not have been thought to exist in girls. Therefore, I believe that this research journey has enabled me to make sense of things for myself as well as produce a piece of research that is useable within my professional role.

1.8 Disseminating the findings

The literature review and findings of this study have already influenced my practice as an EP and also as a parent and I want to be able to use this study as a springboard for further project development.

In the realm of ESNA intervention, exploring the tier-one part of David Heyne's strategy can provide valuable insights into identifying early signs, which we know from previous research, play a critical role in the prevention and addressing school attendance difficulties. Delving into the foundational aspects of prevention will enable researchers and practitioners to establish proactive measures that can be used to support students exhibiting potential signs of ESNA.

Within my EPS, the findings of this study have already been used to inform and contribute to the production of a brand-new training programme in my service – an EBSAS course. The training programme is offered to a member of the school staff (often a teaching assistant or attendance officer) to enable them to address ESNA in-house. I have worked with other EPs and an occupational therapist (OT) to develop the training programme which aims to support the members of staff to identify ESNA behaviours and signs early on, to work with parents and other members of staff and professionals and to implement individually tailored support and interventions through an empathetic lens (the ICE concept). Working with these other professionals has enabled me to learn even more about ESNA, especially from an OT perspective with the sensory issues in the school environment that could be further modified and adapted. Understanding these sensory difficulties well will enable the adults in the provision to provide tailored interventions which will consider individual needs and preferences.

The first training programme has already been delivered (in the spring term), and the next is booked to be delivered in the Autumn term. During the first training, this study was only partially complete so it will be nice to use the completed piece of research to alter and update the programme for the next delivery. It has also been useful and satisfying to hear from the members of school staff who completed the training, about how useful they found it, and how they had implemented what they had learned. Moreover, from feedback, we have heard how it has changed the way the delegates perceived and interacted with the

young people and their families and approached the difficulties with a much more empathetic and holistic viewpoint.

I will be further developing the '**ICE**' framework of support by compiling a document in the form of a collaborative booklet that can be used by schools at each stage which will be placed on the EPS website so that schools can access and utilise this when needed. I intend that this will contain strategies, links to evidence-based interventions, links to local support agencies, and a template individual working booklet that can be completed with the YP through their journey.

I have recently been contacted by a researcher for the BBC to contribute to plans for a documentary around ESNA for the CBBC audience which is a very exciting project. In future, I am also hoping to offer a workshop to appropriate professional forums to enable others to be able to incorporate and utilise the **ICE** framework. Finally, I am hoping to publish my study in relevant journals and use this initial study to inform future projects for myself and my colleagues.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Initial email

My name is [REDACTED], and I am a Trainee Educational Psychologist at the University of East Anglia (UEA). I am currently looking for participants for my thesis which is researching the experiences of children and young people (CYP) who are currently experiencing Emotionally Based School Non-Attendance (EBSNA).

I am specifically looking at CYP that are experiencing EBSNA and will be in year 8 or 9 in September 2023. I will also be looking at interviewing their parent and the teacher/SENDCo or pastoral worker who has been active in their case.

The inclusion criteria are below. Please ensure that the potential participants meet these to the best of your knowledge before approaching them to take part:

Inclusion Criteria

- CYP will be in year 8 or 9 at secondary/high school.
- CYP will be experiencing EBSNA i.e., not attending school due to emotionally based difficulties/anxieties associated with attending school.
- CYP will have been experiencing EBSNA for at least 1 term.
- CYP will have a parent and a member of the school staff (that has been involved in their case) also willing to participate.
- CYP will be on roll at a school within the [REDACTED] County Council area.

If you have pupils that meet these criteria that you think may be able to participate in my study, please would you get in touch with them and ask them and ask if they would consider taking part. Attached to this email is an 'Information for potential participants' document if they would like any further details. Could you please forward this to any potential participants and ask them to contact me at [XXXXXX](#) or ask if they would mind me contacting them on the details you provide?

My contact details are also provided in the information attached.

I very much appreciate your help with this recruitment process.

Best wishes.

[REDACTED]

Appendix 2: Consent form (SAMPLE)

PARENTAL/GUARDIAN CONSENT FORM (First Copy to Researcher)

I/we, [PRINT PARENT/GUARDIAN NAME], consent to my child [PRINT CHILD'S NAME] participating in this research.

In giving my consent I/we state that:

- I/we understand the purpose of the study, what my/our child will be asked to do, and any risks/benefits involved.
- I/we have read the Parental/Guardian Information Sheet and have been able to discuss my/our child's involvement in the study with the researchers if I/we wished to do so.
- The researchers have answered any questions that I/we had about the study and I/we am/are happy with the answers.
- I/we understand that being in this study is completely voluntary and my/our child does not have to take part. My/our decision whether to let them take part in the study will not affect our relationship with the researchers or anyone else at the University of East Anglia now or in the future.
- I/we understand that my/our child can withdraw from the study at any time.
- I/we understand that my/our child may stop the interview at any time if they do not wish to continue, and that unless I/we indicate otherwise any recordings will then be erased and the information provided will not be included in the study results. I/we also understand that my/our child may refuse to answer any questions they don't wish to answer.
- I/we understand that the results of this study will be used in the way described in the information sheet.
- I/we understand that personal information about my/our child that is collected over the course of this project will be stored securely and will only be used for purposes that I/we have agreed to. I/we understand that information about my/our child will only be told to others with my permission, except as required by law.

I consent to:

An audio-recorded interview of my child YES NO

Sharing my child's school report 2022-2023 YES NO

My child completing the:

Spence Anxiety Questionnaire YES NO

Sense of Belonging Scale? YES NO

Would you like to receive feedback about the overall results of this study? YES NO

.....
Signature

.....
PRINT name

.....
Date

ETH2223-1507

Appendix 3: Spence anxiety questionnaire

SPENCE CHILDREN'S ANXIETY SCALE

Your Name:

Date:

PLEASE PUT A CIRCLE AROUND THE WORD THAT SHOWS HOW OFTEN EACH OF THESE THINGS HAPPEN TO YOU. THERE ARE NO RIGHT OR WRONG ANSWERS.

1.	I worry about things.....	Never	Sometimes	Often	Always
2.	I am scared of the dark.....	Never	Sometimes	Often	Always
3.	When I have a problem, I get a funny feeling in my stomach.....	Never	Sometimes	Often	Always
4.	I feel afraid.....	Never	Sometimes	Often	Always
5.	I would feel afraid of being on my own at home.....	Never	Sometimes	Often	Always
6.	I feel scared when I have to take a test.....	Never	Sometimes	Often	Always
7.	I feel afraid if I have to use public toilets or bathrooms.....	Never	Sometimes	Often	Always
8.	I worry about being away from my parents.....	Never	Sometimes	Often	Always
9.	I feel afraid that I will make a fool of myself in front of people.....	Never	Sometimes	Often	Always
10.	I worry that I will do badly at my school work.....	Never	Sometimes	Often	Always
11.	I am popular amongst other kids my own age.....	Never	Sometimes	Often	Always
12.	I worry that something awful will happen to someone in my family.....	Never	Sometimes	Often	Always
13.	I suddenly feel as if I can't breathe when there is no reason for this....	Never	Sometimes	Often	Always
14.	I have to keep checking that I have done things right (like the switch is off, or the door is locked).....	Never	Sometimes	Often	Always
15.	I feel scared if I have to sleep on my own.....	Never	Sometimes	Often	Always
16.	I have trouble going to school in the mornings because I feel nervous or afraid.....	Never	Sometimes	Often	Always
17.	I am good at sports.....	Never	Sometimes	Often	Always
18.	I am scared of dogs.....	Never	Sometimes	Often	Always
19.	I can't seem to get bad or silly thoughts out of my head.....	Never	Sometimes	Often	Always
20.	When I have a problem, my heart beats really fast.....	Never	Sometimes	Often	Always
21.	I suddenly start to tremble or shake when there is no reason for this...	Never	Sometimes	Often	Always
22.	I worry that something bad will happen to me.....	Never	Sometimes	Often	Always
23.	I am scared of going to the doctors or dentists.....	Never	Sometimes	Often	Always
24.	When I have a problem, I feel shaky.....	Never	Sometimes	Often	Always
25.	I am scared of being in high places or lifts (elevators).....	Never	Sometimes	Often	Always

26. I am a good person.....	Never	Sometimes	Often	Always
27. I have to think of special thoughts to stop bad things from happening (like numbers or words).....	Never	Sometimes	Often	Always
28. I feel scared if I have to travel in the car, or on a Bus or a train.....	Never	Sometimes	Often	Always
29. I worry what other people think of me.....	Never	Sometimes	Often	Always
30. I am afraid of being in crowded places (like shopping centres, the movies, buses, busy playgrounds).....	Never	Sometimes	Often	Always
31. I feel happy.....	Never	Sometimes	Often	Always
32. All of a sudden I feel really scared for no reason at all.....	Never	Sometimes	Often	Always
33. I am scared of insects or spiders.....	Never	Sometimes	Often	Always
34. I suddenly become dizzy or faint when there is no reason for this.....	Never	Sometimes	Often	Always
35. I feel afraid if I have to talk in front of my class.....	Never	Sometimes	Often	Always
36. My heart suddenly starts to beat too quickly for no reason.....	Never	Sometimes	Often	Always
37. I worry that I will suddenly get a scared feeling when there is nothing to be afraid of.....	Never	Sometimes	Often	Always
38. I like myself.....	Never	Sometimes	Often	Always
39. I am afraid of being in small closed places, like tunnels or small rooms.	Never	Sometimes	Often	Always
40. I have to do some things over and over again (like washing my hands, cleaning or putting things in a certain order).....	Never	Sometimes	Often	Always
41. I get bothered by bad or silly thoughts or pictures in my mind.....	Never	Sometimes	Often	Always
42. I have to do some things in just the right way to stop bad things happening.....	Never	Sometimes	Often	Always
43. I am proud of my school work.....	Never	Sometimes	Often	Always
44. I would feel scared if I had to stay away from home overnight.....	Never	Sometimes	Often	Always
45. Is there something else that you are really afraid of?.....	YES	NO		
Please write down what it is _____				

How often are you afraid of this thing?.....	Never	Sometimes	Often	Always

Appendix 4: Sense of belonging questionnaire

Student Questionnaire: A Sense of Belonging

Respond with: 1 = do not agree; 2 = agree; 3 = strongly agree

1. My school is a place where people care about one another. _____
2. I feel that I really belong in my school and classrooms. _____
3. My teachers really care about me and are concerned when I am absent. _____
4. My teachers help me understand what I need to learn and how to be successful in my studies. _____
5. My school feels like a big happy family. _____
6. My classrooms feel like happy families. _____
7. I feel like I am an important part of my classrooms. _____
8. I feel like I am an important part of my school. _____
9. My teachers encourage me to join clubs and activities in the school and community. _____
10. My teachers encourage me to develop my interests and talents. _____
11. Our school has a large number of clubs and activities that I can participate in. _____
12. My school encourages me to explore all sorts of career opportunities for after I finish school. _____
13. I feel like I have a lot of choices in what and how I learn. _____
14. I feel like everyone at my school encourages me to stay in school, graduate, and go on to college or training.

15. I feel supported and respected in my school and classrooms. _____

Appendix 5: Copy of guide questions (YP)

Sample questions for CYP

1. When did you first start finding it difficult to come into school
2. What were the things that you found made you want to stay away
3. What did you do when you were away from school
4. What (if anything) did you miss about school?
5. Did you find it difficult during the COVID-19 lockdown?
6. Did you find it hard to return after the COVID-19 lockdown?
7. If you could have changed anything about school that would have made you stay or return, what would it be?

Appendix 6: Copy of guide questions (adults)

Sample questions for the parent

1. What were the first signs you can remember of your child starting to avoid school?
2. What strategies did you use to help?
3. Did you seek help from school?
4. How did you feel?
5. How did your child find the COVID-19 lockdown?
6. Did your child manage to access schoolwork during the COVID-19 lockdown?
7. Did your child find it difficult to return to school after the COVID-19 lockdown?
8. If you could have changed anything about the school that might have helped, what would it be?

Sample questions for school staff (SENDCo/teacher/pastoral)

1. When did you notice the CYP starting to have difficulties attending?
2. Did the child access schoolwork during the COVID-19 lockdown?
Did the child find it difficult to return to school after the COVID-19 lockdown?
3. What strategies did you use to help?
4. Was there anything that worked for a while?
5. How does EBSNA make you feel as a staff member?
6. If you could change anything that you think might help students, what would it be?

Appendix 7: Ethics approval

University of East Anglia

Study title: A multiple case study, exploring the intricacies of emotionally based school non-attendance (EBSNA) from the perspectives of young people, their parent/s and teachers: The need for early detection and individually tailored support.

Application ID: ETH2223-1507

Dear Louise,

Your application was considered on 17th October 2023 by the EDU S-REC (School of Education and Lifelong Learning Research Ethics Subcommittee).

The decision is: **approved subject to the following**

There are some minor comments on the PCFs that I would like you to action before beginning your study. Once you have made these changes and confirmed these to your supervisor your project will be approved and you can begin contacting participants.

You are therefore able to start your project subject to any other necessary approvals being given.

This approval will expire on **31st August 2024**.

Please note that your project is granted ethics approval only for the length of time identified above. Any extension to a project must obtain ethics approval by the EDU S-REC (School of Education and Lifelong Learning Research Ethics Subcommittee) before continuing.

It is a requirement of this ethics approval that you should report any adverse events which occur during your project to the EDU S-REC (School of Education and Lifelong Learning Research Ethics Subcommittee) as soon as possible. An adverse event is one which was not anticipated in the research design, and which could potentially cause risk or harm to the participants or the researcher, or which reveals potential risks in the treatment under evaluation. For research involving animals, it may be the unintended death of an animal after trapping or carrying out a procedure.

Any amendments to your submitted project in terms of design, sample, data collection, focus etc. should be notified to the EDU S-REC (School of Education and Lifelong

Learning Research Ethics Subcommittee) in advance to ensure ethical compliance. If the amendments are substantial a new application may be required.

Approval by the EDU S-REC (School of Education and Lifelong Learning Research Ethics Subcommittee) should not be taken as evidence that your study is compliant with the UK General Data Protection Regulation (UK GDPR) and the Data Protection Act 2018. If you need guidance on how to make your study UK GDPR compliant, please contact the UEA Data Protection Officer (dataprotection@uea.ac.uk).

I would like to wish you every success with your project.

On behalf of the EDU S-REC (School of Education and Lifelong Learning Research Ethics Subcommittee)

Appendix 8: Participant information sheets

Mrs Louise Brown
Trainee Educational Psychologist

Date: 04.10.2023

Faculty of Social Sciences School of Education and Lifelong Learning

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

Email: louise.j.brown@uea.ac.uk

Exploring experiences of emotionally based school non-attendance (EBSNA) with children, parents, and teachers.

PARENTAL/GUARDIAN INFORMATION SHEET

(1) What is this study about?

Tel: 07841038929 Web: www.uea.ac.uk

Your child is invited to take part in a research study about Emotionally Based School Non-Attendance (EBSNA; where a child or young person feels they cannot attend school due to emotionally based reactions). This study will look at the experiences of young people who are experiencing EBSNA alongside gathering the views of their parent(s) and a member of school staff who has been involved with their case. It is really important to gain the views of people who are involved and the things that led to EBSNA happening, what made it worse, and what could have helped or made things better.

Your child has been invited to participate in this study because they are currently experiencing EBSNA. Everyone's experience of EBSNA is different and it happens for different reasons. Your child's opinions, insights, and experiences will help inform us as to how might be best to identify EBSNA early, and what approaches may help children and young people and their families.

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

- ✓ •Understand what you have read.
- ✓ •Agree for your child to take part in the research study as outlined below.
- ✓ •Agree to the use of your child's personal information as described.
- ✓ •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: Mrs Louise Brown. Email: louise.j.brown@uea.ac.uk

This will take place under the supervision of Dr Kimberley Bartholomew. Email: k.bartholomew@uea.ac.uk

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(3) What will the study involve for my child?

Your child will have been experiencing EBSNA, which is where a child or young person is refusing to attend the school setting for emotional reasons. There are no additional screening procedures used to determine eligibility for the study.

Your child will be able to opt-in to the study, meaning they volunteer to be interviewed by me, Louise. At the start of the interview, I will ask your child if they are happy to complete two short questionnaires: the Spence Anxiety Scale and the Sense of Belonging Scale. They do not have to do this but it would be very helpful. During the interview your child will be asked to share their views, experiences, and ideas. The interview will contain questions about your child's personal experience, how things happened, what might have prevented things getting worse and what helped. The interview is semi-structured which means that there are pre-written questions but depending on your child's own experiences, the conversation we have may change as we progress.

Interviews will take place at a time and location that is convenient to you (e.g., a public library). There is also the possibility of doing the interviews online over Microsoft Teams if you or your child would prefer. The only people present in the interview will be your child and me (Louise, the researcher), unless they request to have somebody there with them, which is also fine. If you and your child are happy for me to audio record the interview, I will do that using a dictaphone if the interview is in person or via Microsoft Teams if it is online.

After the interview I will store your child's information and recorded comments under a FICTITIOUS name (a pseudonym) to prevent recognition or identification from anyone else. This is called anonymising the data which many research participants prefer as it means they can speak more freely. Any references to specific people, events, or places will also be anonymised or redacted to ensure your anonymity as much as possible.

After the interview has taken place, and after I have written up the interview, your child will be given the opportunity to look at their comments, which will be emailed to you both as a transcript. They can check whether they are happy with the record of what was said in the interview. If this is something your child would like to do then please tick the relevant box on the Consent Form at the end of this information sheet.

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

If you decide to consent to your child participating within this study, the subsequent interview including the completion of the questionnaires will take up to one hour. If you and/or your child decide to review the transcript, this will take a little extra time.

(5) Does my child have to be in the study? Can my child withdraw from the study once they have started?

Being in this study is completely voluntary and your child does not have to take part. If you decide to let your child take part in the study and then change your mind later (or they no longer wish to take part), they are free to withdraw from the study at any time and you can withdraw your consent up to the point that your data is fully anonymised. You can do this by emailing Louise.j.brown@uea.ac.uk.

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(6) What are the consequences if my child withdraws from the study?

Your child is free to stop the interview at any time. Unless you or your child say that you want us to keep them, any recordings will be erased and the information your child has provided will not be included in the study results. Your child may also refuse to answer any questions that they do not wish to answer during the interview. If you decide at a later time to withdraw your child from the study your information will be removed from our records and will not be included in any results, up to the point we have analysed and published the results.

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

Sometimes being involved in a research study like this may mean remembering upsetting experiences. I hope that you and your child will find the research interesting, but if your child does become upset by any of the topics or finds any part of the experience distressing, you or they may wish to speak with me in confidence. Please be aware that I work with young people, their families, and schools involved with EBSNA cases on a daily basis, so I am well equipped to help you with this.

If you feel some questions or aspects of the study triggered distress, talking to someone from a dedicated service may also help. Please note that the research team are not responsible for any of the services suggested below:

- Just one Norfolk (Health Advice & Support for Children): <https://www.justonenorfolk.nhs.uk>
- Samaritans (24 hour access): <http://www.samaritans.com>
- Kooth (online mental wellbeing community) <https://www.kooth.com>
- You might also find it useful to contact your GP.

You may withdraw from the study anytime up until the data is anonymised and analysed.

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

Your child may find being involved in this study helpful, it may let your child feel they are being heard and they can get their story across in their own words. Your child will also be adding to the current literature and an increased understanding of the difficulties young people and their families face when dealing with EBSNA. It can also inform us as to how we can best deal with the difficulties that are being experienced. Getting information from the people that EBSNA is affecting may give ideas and different ways that schools and families can address these difficulties.

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

Your child's personal data and any information you or your child provide during the study will be stored in a password-protected file on a password-protected computer. Only my supervisor and I will have access to this information.

Your child's 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

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Protection Act 2018 (DPA 2018) and UK General Data Protection Regulation (UK GDPR), and the University of East Anglia's [Research Data Management Policy](#).

Your child's information will be stored securely, and their 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 your child will not be identified if you and your child 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 child's name or any identifiable information about your child.

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

When you have read this information, Mrs Louise Brown (louise.j.brown@uea.ac.uk) will be available to discuss it with you further and answer any questions you may have about the study.

(11) Will my child be told the results of the study?

You and your child have a right to receive feedback about the overall results of this study. You can tell us that you wish to receive feedback by emailing Louise at: louise.j.brown@uea.ac.uk. This feedback will be in the form of a one page lay summary and will be available once the researcher's thesis has been completed, submitted, and approved by those marking it.

(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 Louise Brown
School of Education and Lifelong Learning University of East Anglia
NORWICH NR4 7TJ louise.j.brown@uea.ac.uk

If you (or your child) 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: Yann.Lebeau@uea.ac.uk.

(13) How do we 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 my child needs 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.

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In addition to the specific information provided above about why your child's 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 child's data protection rights at the [Information Commissioner's Office \(ICO\)](#).
- If you are unhappy with how your child's 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 am happy for my child to take part – what do I do next?

If you and your child wish to take part, please finish reading this Participant Information Sheet and then complete the Consent Form in the following section. Please keep the letter, information sheet and the second copy of the consent form for your information.

(16) Further information

This information was last updated on 04.10.2023.

If there are changes to the information provided, you will be notified by [REDACTED]

University of East Anglia Norwich Research Park Norwich. NR4 7TJ

Email: louise.j.brown@uea.ac.uk Web: www.uea.ac.uk



29.09.2023

Exploring experiences of emotionally based school non-attendance (EBSNA) with children, parents, and teachers.

Study Information Sheet

Hello. My name is *Louise Brown*, and I am a *Trainee Educational Psychologist* at the University of East Anglia.

I am doing a study to find out more about Emotionally Based School Non-Attendance (not attending school because it feels too difficult).

I am asking you to be in my study because your experience can help me to explore why this sometimes happens, and learn what helps or does not help, or sometimes maybe makes things worse.

You can decide if you want to take part in the study or not, it's up to you.

This sheet tells you what I will ask you to do if you decide to take part in this study. Please read it carefully.

If you decide you want to be in the study and then you change your mind later, that's ok. All you need to do is tell me that you don't want to be in the study anymore. We will remove any information you may have already provided. You or someone who looks after you can email me at louise.j.brown@uea.ac.uk.

If you have any questions you can speak to me during the study or someone who looks after you. If you want to, you can contact me at.

What will happen if I say that I want to be in the study?

If you would like to take part in the study, I will ask you to do these things:

- Come along with your parent/carer and meet with me so that we can introduce ourselves.
- Come to speak with me in an 'interview', which is a chat that I will audio record.
- The interview will either be online (Microsoft Teams), or in a quiet public place like a library.
- At the beginning of the interview, I will ask you to fill in 2 questionnaires that will tell me how you

feel about things.

- In the interview, it will be just the two of us unless you would like your parent or carer to be there too

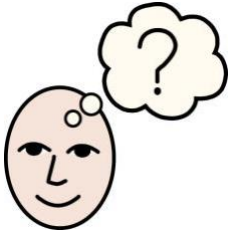
and that is okay.

- I will ask you some questions about what has happened at school and how you have felt about it. Also

who or what helped you and what made things difficult.

- Some people find it useful to bring something that might help them to explain things better. For

example, you might want to bring a picture or a photograph that we can talk about (you do not have to do this).



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When I ask you questions, you can choose which ones you want to answer. If you don't want to talk about something, that's ok. You can stop talking to me at any time if you don't want to talk to me anymore.

Will anyone else know what I say in the study?

I won't tell anyone else what you say to me, except if you talk about someone hurting you or about you hurting yourself or someone else. Then I might need to tell someone outside of the study to keep you and other people safe.

All the information that I have about you from the study will be stored in a safe place and I will look after it very carefully. I will write a report about the study and show it to other people, but I won't put your name in the report, and no one will know that you're in the study. I may also share your information with other researchers and use it for teaching and outreach purposes, but I will take out your name.

How long will the study take?

The interview – which will include the completion of the two short questionnaires – will take about 45 minutes to 1 hour.

Are there any good things about being in the study?

Sometimes it feels good to have somebody that will listen to your side of the story, so this might be a good thing. You will be helping me to complete research that can also help other children in the future. This is because you will have told us your story and helped us to understand things from your perspective.

Are there any bad things about being in the study?

Sometimes talking about things can make us feel sad or anxious and feeling like you cannot attend school can make you upset. Some of the questions on the questionnaire might make you feel sad or upset. If this happens, it is fine to tell me, and we can stop at any time. I have tried to make sure I have included questions that do not make you feel like this as far as possible.

Will you tell me what you learned in the study at the end?

Yes, I will if you want me to. There is a question on the next page that asks you if you want me to tell you what I learned in the study. If you circle Yes, when I finish the study, I will tell you what I learned overall about Emotionally Based School Non-Attendance (not attending school because it feels too difficult).



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What if I am not happy with the study or the people doing the study?



If you are not happy with how I am doing the study or how I treat you, then you or someone who looks after you can:

- Tell me during the study.
- Email me Louise Brown: Louise.J.Brown@uea.ac.uk
- Contact my supervisor Dr Kimberley Bartholomew: K.Bartholomew@uea.ac.uk
- Email my Head of School Professor Yann Lebeau: Y.Lebeau@uea.ac.uk

How do I know that this study is ok to take part in?

All research I undertake is checked and approved by an Ethics Committee at the University of East Anglia before I can start it.

What if I want to know more about the information collected on me in the study?

When we talk in the study, I will collect some information which is unique to you. I can only collect this information if I have a reason to do so. My reason for doing so for this study is because the study is in the public interest.

This information is stored by me within the University of East Anglia. They help me protect your information and look after it.

If you want to know more about the information collected about you, you can email me louise.j.brown@uea.ac.uk or you can email the University's Data Protection Officer dataprotection@uea.ac.uk who helps to protect your information. The Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) helps to protect everyone's information. If

you are unhappy with mine or the University Data Protection Officer's responses about your information, you can speak to the [ICO](#).

Further information

This sheet was last updated on 04.10.2023. I will update you if I make any changes to this sheet.

This information sheet is for you to keep.



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Participant Consent Form (First Copy to Researcher) If you are happy to be in the study, please:

- **write** your **name** in the space below.
- **sign** your **name** at the bottom of the page.
- put the **date** at the bottom of the page.

You should only say 'yes' to being in the study if you know what it is about and you want to be in it. If you don't want to be in the study, don't sign the form.

I, [PRINT NAME], am happy to be in this research study. In saying yes to being in the study, I am saying that:

- ✓ I know what the study is about.
- ✓ I know what I will be asked to do.
- ✓ Someone has talked to me about the study.
- ✓ My questions have been answered.
- ✓ I know that I don't have to be in the study if I don't want to.
- ✓ I know that I can pull out of the study at any time if I don't want to do it anymore, and it will possible

to remove any information I have already provided up until my data is anonymised and analysed.

- ✓ I know that I don't have to answer any questions that I don't want to answer.
- ✓ I know that the researchers won't tell anyone what I say when I talk to them unless I talk about being hurt by someone or hurting myself or someone else.

Now I am going to ask you circle 'Yes' or 'No' to tell me what you are happy to do or not do in the study.

Are you happy to answer some **questions in a booklet?**

Are you happy to **speak just to me?**

Are you happy for me to **audio record** your voice?

Are you happy for me to **look at** your 2022/23 school report? Do you want me to tell you what I **learned** in the study?

Signature Date

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Appendix 9: Coding table and framework

Code	Interview	Time stamp if available
Quite liked Primary school	Child 1	1.21
Good friendship group at primary school	Child 1	1.36
Start of the day is the most difficult	Child 1	2.02
Feels ok once in	Child 1	2.10
Was worried about transitions through the holidays	Child 1	2.33, 2.54
Getting up and going in felt hard	Child 1	3.12
Feeling anxious about what would happen in the day	Child 1	3.32
Not worried that is not in school	Child 1	3.58
When at home would lay in bed not feeling right	Child 1	4.18
If school had given work, would have done it at home	Child 1	4.29
Wants to be in school	Child 1	4.36, 23.31
Frustrated that cannot get to school	Child 1	4.52
Miss my friends but speak to them online on the PlayStation	Child 1	5.41, 22.40
Easier to talk to them on the Playstation	Child 1	5.10, 5.22

Found it easier in lockdown when at home	Child 1	6.16
Did schoolwork at home during lockdown	Child 1	6.25
A little difficult to go back into school after lockdown	Child 1	6.47
Lack of strong relationships with school staff (sense of belonging). No key person	Child 1	8.08
Likes some subjects – maths history and geography (fun)	Child 1	22.24
Finds it hard to talk to people especially adults	Child 1	23.37
Would still struggle if changed school. It is the 'going' to school, not the school.	Child 1	24.06
Transition from primary to secondary was really hard	Child 1	24.11
Older children are rude and horrid	Child 1	24.37
Feels bad and guilty that mum gets into trouble	Child 1	25.53
Has not spoken to friends about it being hard to go to school	Child 1 Sam	28.40

Coding Framework

1 – Friendships

2 – Anxiety (emotional and physical... performance anxiety, pressure – separate out into different codes?)

3 – Transition (separate out primary-secondary, returning from holiday, after COVID etc???)

4 – Strategic attempts (reduced timetables etc).

5 – COVID pandemic

6 – Relationships with staff

7 – Positive school experiences

8 – Family/parent relationships

9 – Learning needs

10 – Socio-economic status

11 – Sensory (combined with school env – 13 OR anxiety???)

12 – Physical reaction (go under physical anxiety??)

13 – School environment (combined with sensory – 11)

14 – Learning value

15 – Lack of autonomy

16 – Self-confidence

17 – Traumatic event (trigger) – description of case???

18 – Responsibility/Blame

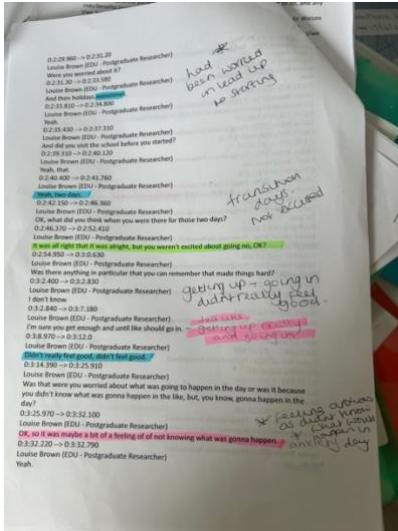
19 – Resilience

20 – Lack of accessible support

21 – Attendance

22 – Cross-agency/school/parent relationships

Appendix 10: Highlighted transcript examples



Appendix 11: Sorting themes



Appendix 12: Reflective diary examples

